Higher Education Leaders Navigate AI Disruption
New Survey Highlights Challenges and Opportunities in Teaching and Learning

The spread of artificial intelligence tools in education has disrupted key aspects of teaching and learning on the nation's campuses and will likely lead to significant changes in classwork, student assignments and even the role of colleges and universities in the country, according to a new **national survey of higher education leaders.** The survey was conducted Nov. 4-Dec. 7, 2024, by the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) and Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center.

A total of 337 university presidents, chancellors, provosts, rectors, academic affairs vice presidents, and academic deans responded to questions about **generative artificial intelligence tools (GenAI)** such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and CoPilot. The survey covered the current situation on campuses, the struggles institutional leaders are navigating, the changes they anticipate and the sweeping impacts they foresee. The survey results covered in a new report, **Leading Through Disruption**, were released at the annual AAC&U meeting, held Jan. 22-24 in Washington, D.C.

Access the full survey data here.

Current situation

- **High student adoption of GenAI, lower faculty uptake:** Most of these higher education leaders say GenAI use by students for coursework is prevalent, with 89% estimating that at least half of students use the tools. In the meantime, most

say that much smaller numbers of faculty use GenAI as part of their jobs, with 62% estimating that fewer than half of faculty use the tools.

- **Some 83% of the academic leaders in this sample say they use GenAI tools** – and a portion of them are power users who use GenAI for a wide range of activities. The most common uses by these executives were for writing and communications, information gathering and summarization, idea generation, and data analysis.

- **Unpreparedness:** Majorities of these college and university leaders believe their institutions are *not very or not at all* ready to use GenAI for such things as: preparing students for the future (56% say their schools are not prepared for this); preparing faculty to use GenAI for teaching and mentoring (53% feel unprepared); and helping non-faculty staff use these tools for work (63% feel unprepared). Some 59% believe last spring's graduates were not prepared for work in companies where skill in using GenAI tools is important.

- **Cheating increase:** 59% of these leaders report that cheating has increased on their campuses since GenAI tools have become widely available; 21% say it has increased a lot.

- **Detection of GenAI content isn't great:** More than half of these leaders do not think their faculty effectively recognize GenAI-created content. Some 13% believe their faculty are "not at all effective" in spotting this kind of content, and 41% think their faculty are "not very effective."

- **Peer comparisons:** 38% perceive their own institutions as about average in using GenAI for teaching, learning, and other activities, while 28% say their schools are below average, and 7% say they are far behind.

- **Challenges to making progress:** Large majorities of these leaders cite specific hindrances to GenAI adoption and integration at their schools. The challenges most often mentioned include faculty unfamiliarity with or resistance to GenAI, distrust of GenAI tools and their outputs, and concerns about diminished student learning outcomes.

Most of these leaders say their institutions have taken some steps to adjust to the rise of GenAI. Some 69% report their schools have adopted **written policies about appropriate and inappropriate uses of GenAI tools** in learning and teaching. In addition, **44% report they have created new classes** specifically devoted to AI, and a **fifth have created majors or minors in AI**.

"The overall takeaway from these leaders is that they are working to make sense of the changes they confront and looking over the horizon at a new AI-infused world they think will be better for almost everyone in higher education," said Lee Rainie, director of Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center. "They clearly feel some urgency to

effect change, and they hope the grand reward is revitalized institutions that serve their students and civilization well.”

"While our survey reveals significant growing pains as colleges adapt to AI – from concerns about cheating to gaps in faculty preparedness – there's a clear recognition that we're at an inflection point in higher education,” said C. Edward Watson, vice president for digital innovation at the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). "The fact that 44% of institutions have already created AI-specific courses shows both the urgency and opportunity before us. The challenge now is turning today's disruption into tomorrow's innovation in teaching and learning.”

Changes ahead

Asked to assess the impact of GenAI tools on students' academic lives, these leaders expressed optimism mixed with concerns. The **positive outcomes** they foresee include:

- **Enhanced learning:** 91% think GenAI tools will enhance and customize learning, including 47% who believe there will be a lot of impact.

- **Improved research skills:** 75% think the tools will improve student research skills, including 29% who believe they will have a significant impact.

- **Better student writing:** 69% think the tools will increase students' ability to write clearly and persuasively, including 27% who believe they will have a strong impact.

- **Increased creativity:** 66% say the tools will increase student creativity, including 21% who believe there will be a lot of impact.

The **negative consequences** include:

- **Concerns about academic integrity:** 95% of these leaders say the spread of GenAI tools will affect students' academic integrity, including 56% who believe there will be a lot of impact.

- **Dependence on GenAI:** 92% think GenAI tools will lead to students' overreliance on them, including 44% who think there will be a significant impact.

- **Greater digital inequities:** 81% of these leaders think GenAI will impact digital divides, including 36% who think there will be a lot of impact.

- **Decreased attention spans:** 66% think GenAI will diminish student attention spans, including 24% who think the tools will greatly impact this.

Some key findings about other changes that will occur at their institutions:

- **Changed teaching model:** 95% of these leaders say the teaching models at their schools will be significantly or to some degree affected. Nearly half (48%) believe the change will be significant.

- **Classroom focus on ethical issues raised by the rise of GenAI tools:** Strong majority of these officials believe it is necessary to focus classrooms on major issues tied to GenAI, including privacy issues, hallucinations, misinformation, bias, data breaches, and the alignment of the tools with human values.

Future impacts

- **Better learning outcomes:** A fifth of these academic leaders (21%) say GenAI tools will improve student learning outcomes at their schools in the next five years, and another 46% think the change will be somewhat for the better.

- **Students' lives will be positively affected:** When asked about GenAI's impact on students, 50% of these academic leaders say the impact will be more positive than negative in the next five years, compared with just 12% who believe the impact will be more negative than positive.

- **Assignments, teaching, learning, and research will get better:** 70% of the leaders in this survey say the quality of assignments to students will get a lot or somewhat better because of the use of GenAI tools; 68% think the tools will relieve faculty of routine work they now face; 68% think the tools will help faculty research. Another 54% think the quality of lectures and lessons will improve thanks to GenAI, and 51% say the quality of feedback and grading of student performance will improve.

A persistent concern on campus relates to jobs. These college and university leaders say some reductions in employment levels could occur, but it will mostly be minor: 29% say they expect reductions in the number of staff at their schools (only 3% say it will be major), while 11% expect reductions in faculty and teaching assistants (only 1% say it will be major). In both cases, about a fifth of these respondents say they do not know yet what the impact on staffing levels will be at their schools.

The results reported here are from a non-scientific survey of academic leaders known to the American Association of Colleges & Universities and a supplemental list of key officials in higher education compiled by Elon University. In all, 337 college leaders responded to at least some portion of the survey conducted between November 4 and December 7, 2024. The sample is diverse in key respects, including the size of the undergraduate population and the schools' geographic distribution. Still, the results are not generalizable.

About Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center
Imagining the Digital Future is an interdisciplinary research center focused on the human impact of accelerating digital change and the sociotechnical challenges that lie ahead. The center's mission is to discover and broadly share a diverse range of opinions, ideas and original research about the likely evolution of digital change, informing important conversations and policy formation. The center was established in 2000 as Imagining the Internet and renamed Imagining the Digital Future with an expanded research agenda in 2024. It is funded and operated by Elon University, a nationally ranked private university in central North Carolina.

About AAC&U
The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is a global membership organization dedicated to advancing the democratic purposes of higher education by promoting equity, innovation, and excellence in liberal education. Through our programs and events, publications and research, public advocacy, and campus-based projects, AAC&U serves as a catalyst and facilitator for innovations that improve educational quality and equity and that support the success of all students. In addition to accredited public and private, two-year, and four-year colleges and universities and state higher education systems and agencies throughout the United States, our membership includes degree granting higher education institutions around the world as well as other organizations and individuals.