EXPLAINER

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What Is Agentic AI?

By Aaron Mok

Since ChatGPT was launched in November 2022, higher education has been scrambling to figure out how to integrate generative-AI tools into classrooms, admissions, research, and administration. But just as colleges start to set some ground rules, a more advanced version of artificial intelligence is slipping in: AI agents.

An AI agent is a bot that can perform complex tasks autonomously — or semi-autonomously — with minimal human direction. Unlike an AI chatbot, which responds to prompts with text, AI agents go beyond conversation. Agents can take action toward goals, breaking them down into multistep tasks on their own, reasoning, and interacting with other systems to achieve the desired outputs.

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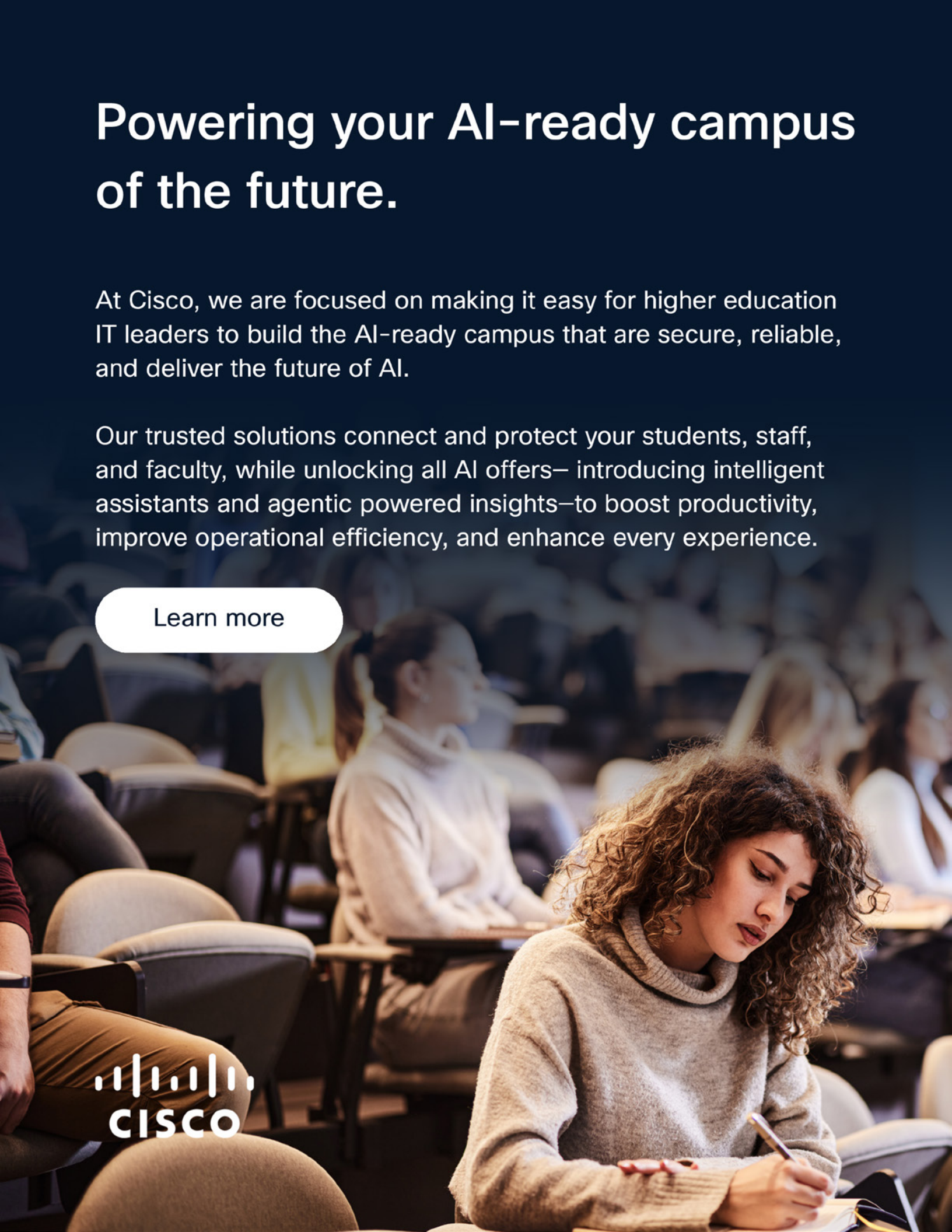

Emma Zone, senior director of academic affairs at D2L, an ed-tech firm, puts the distinction this way: "Chatbots are typically designed as conversational with more limitations. A co-pilot is capable of more sophisticated engagement, yet it still requires the human actively prompting the level of output and complexity. An AI agent acts more independently and can proactively engage to solve problems."

When applied to higher education, AI agents have the potential to boost administrative and student support by automating rote, labor-intensive tasks. According to a Salesforce study, 83 percent of college administrators said they were open to using agents to reduce their workloads. One out of three higher-ed students said they would have used an AI agent for faster admissions, program discovery, and standardized-testing support when applying to college.

What can colleges gain from AI agents?

Agentic AI offers higher-ed institutions the potential to rethink how work gets done. From instruction to operations, AI agents wouldn't just respond to prompts but would act on their own and anticipate next steps. If trained on particular tasks, agents could be a way to alleviate heavy workloads: saving time, reducing bottlenecks, and improving staff capacity.

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Faculty and administrators are beginning to explore where agents could be most effective.

Christine Anne Royce, a STEM-education professor at Shippensburg University, in Pennsylvania, who uses genAI tools in her teaching, sees promise in agentic AI's abilities to enhance student learning.

Royce envisions an agentic math tutor that could predict parts of the curriculum where students may lack understanding and suggest follow-ups before an instructor intervenes. She also imagines agents that could ask challenging questions that prompt students to think more deeply, tailor curriculums to classroom demographics, and personalize lessons based on student performance.

Valerie Bennett, an assistant professor in the department of curriculum and instruction at Clark Atlanta University, points to agentic AI's potential to lighten cognitive load. She describes these tools as "an additional technical brain" — systems that might eventually automate routine tasks like monitoring grades and flagging students at risk of failing through early alerts.

In Bennett's view, agents could handle the bulk of that work, allowing faculty members to focus on higher-level instructional decisions. She also sees room for AI to assist in tailoring assignments to students' interests and analyzing behavior in teacher-training simulations, surfacing patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Admissions is another area where agentic AI could help reduce strain. As application numbers rise — the Common App processed more than 10 million in 2025 alone — staff shortages and tight budgets are driving offices to find novel ways to make decisions more efficiently.

AI agents trained for admissions tasks could assist by pulling key data from applications, flagging low-fit or incomplete submissions, and generating applicant summaries. In theory, they could also create department-level reports that reveal enrollment trends, like increases in particular majors, to guide strategic planning.

Babson College has started to explore agentic AI's potential in IT and finance, according to the college's chief information officer, Patty Patria. She says that agents could help automate expense reports and invoice processing, eliminating "heavy manual work" and freeing up staff to focus on more complex challenges.

Babson's advancement team is looking to deploy agents that could generate acknowledgment letters to donors and "briefing bios" prior to fundraising events. "The real value-add is time savings," Patria says. "At the end of the day, [agents] free them up to do higher-level work in different areas."

For Bryan Alexander, a futurist and senior scholar in Georgetown University's learning, design, and technology program, the bigger potential for agents lies in drawing strategic insights for college leaders. Chief information officers, for instance, could deploy swarms of agents to crawl different data sources, including enrollment numbers, investments, graduation rates, and classroom usage. Using that data, agents could generate comprehensive reports that offer a bird's-eye view into how the college is doing.

That report could then be used to determine budgets, reassess licensing agreements, and hire staff, revealing patterns administrations might not spot on their own. "AI agents, in theory, could make it easier to make better, more informed decisions," Alexander says.

How are colleges using AI agents?

So far, colleges have approached agentic AI cautiously — if at all — testing its potential through pilots rather than sweeping deployments.

While industries like tech and finance have moved quickly to adopt agentic AI, higher ed is lagging behind. A recent KPMG study found that 42 percent of organizations had implemented some form of agentic AI in the third quarter of 2025, up from just 11 percent two quarters earlier. But according to a report from Greenice, a strategy firm, only 3.1 percent of 542 tracked-agent projects are in education, most focused on tutoring bots or study aids.

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Still, some institutions are beginning to deploy them. In February, Alvernia University, in Reading, Pa., launched an AI-powered recruiter agent built to streamline admissions. Prospective students could call the multilingual agent via phone to answer questions like what materials are needed for the application, or how to file for FAFSA. Once students submit their applications, the recruiter agent autonomously reaches out to them with reminders to follow up on missing transcripts and invite them to upcoming events.

So far, the results have been promising. Since its launch, the admissions agent has sent nearly 194,000 emails to more than 16,000 prospective students, boosting email open rates by 36 percent and contributing to a record enrollment of 475 new students this year, says Bret Krotee, associate vice president of admissions at Alvernia. He estimates that the tool has saved nearly 10,000 staff hours during the recruitment cycle, allowing counselors to focus on more tailored, one-on-one conversations. “We do see the return on investment,” says Krotee.

Other campuses are exploring similar tools. Georgia Southern University has introduced an AI agent designed to improve student engagement and streamline

internal operations. The agent boosted the institution's student enrollment, reduced administrative burden, and expanded access to university services 24/7, freeing up staff capacity across departments.

At the University of Texas at Austin, the rollout of a personalized AI tutor reflects a dual-purpose approach. The university claims in a blog post that the AI tutor supports students by supplementing classroom learning while simultaneously acting as a curriculum-development assistant for faculty. Faculty members can customize AI tutors by establishing guidelines on what students need to know and uploading resources into the agents so students can ask questions about the material.

What are the challenges?

Despite the promise of agentic AI, implementing it across a college campus is far from straightforward.

Marc Watkins, assistant director of academic innovation at the University of Mississippi, and Alexander of Georgetown University, point to data infrastructure as one of the most immediate barriers to adoption. Agentic systems rely on access to data from multiple campus platforms, including learning-management systems, library databases, and enterprise software. But most institutions still operate in silos, meaning these systems don't communicate easily. That could limit the agents' ability to function efficiently or collaboratively. "When it comes to higher ed, we're not ready for this," Alexander says.

Even for institutions that are technically savvy, building the infrastructure needed to support agentic computing can be overwhelming. It's a complex, time-consuming process, Alexander says, and often exceeds the capacity of campus IT teams. After all, says Watkins, many institutions are still learning to navigate basic generative-AI tools, making agentic deployment an even more daunting task. He notes that demos of agentic tools often fail, revealing how far the technology has to go before it becomes reliable at scale.

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Financial constraints compound the challenge. Alexander points out that agentic-AI systems come with costs — licensing fees, professional development, and often expensive monthly plans for full-feature access. He says that with many colleges already facing budget cuts, it's difficult to justify broad investment in tools that are still maturing. Bennett, of Clark Atlanta University, adds that the pricing of premium plans — sometimes ranging from $20 to $200 per month — creates the risk of uneven access, allowing better-funded departments or students to receive

more advanced tools, potentially widening institutional inequalities.

Culture and governance impose additional hurdles. Many universities lack a comprehensive policy framework to guide AI adoption. As a result, faculty and departments are often left to decide how and when to use these tools on their own, leading to trial and error and uncertainty.

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What are the risks?

As higher ed begins experimenting with agentic AI, faculty members say institutions must also consider the broader risks associated with these systems.

Chief among them are data privacy and security. Because agents require access to sensitive records — from student academic data to employee health information — they introduce new vulnerabilities. Agents can be exposed to prompt-injection attacks, a type of security breach in which malicious input manipulates the AI's behavior. They can also leak sensitive data.

Additionally, as campuses grow more dependent on external technology partners, they face the risk of instability if vendors pull back, fold, or shift direction during what Alexander calls an "AI winter," in which the promised benefits of their agents don't pan out.

Academic integrity and trust are also at stake. Watkins notes that if faculty members use AI to fully automate grading, feedback, or communication, they risk weakening the relationship between student and instructor. Inaccuracies in AI-generated content remain an ongoing issue, and failure to fact-check or disclose AI use can erode student confidence — especially if feedback turns out to be wrong. Some tools are still known to "hallucinate" — produce inaccurate facts or references. Royce adds that without faculty transparency for when they've used AI, that damage may be hard to repair.

At the institutional level, the greatest risk, experts say, may be adopting AI without a clear strategic plan. When AI is deployed reactively — without a well-communicated instructional or operational purpose — it can create confusion, introduce tools that don't solve real problems, and generate more complexity than value. Without transparent goals, governance, and training, the promise of agentic AI could quickly be squandered.

How can colleges start to adopt AI agents?

Higher-ed officials and faculty members say successful implementation depends on more than just turning on a tool. Here are experts' recommendations for getting started:

Begin with strategy, not hype

Before introducing AI agents, institutions should align their efforts with long-term goals like growth, retention, or student support. That means asking whether agentic AI genuinely serves the college's mission — and if so, where. Leadership teams should develop a comprehensive strategy that covers curriculum, student experience, and operations. Clear policies and governance structures are also essential to address risks, guide usage, and ensure ethical alignment.

Build intentionally and iteratively

Pilot programs work best when grounded in real problems. Higher-ed leaders recommend starting small, testing quickly, and being prepared to course-correct. "Don't be afraid to fail," Patria says. Additionally, institutions should avoid the temptation to deploy AI indiscriminately. Systems should also be built with human oversight, especially early on, to monitor how agents behave and improve their accuracy. Infrastructure and security planning must come first, particularly in systems handling proprietary student data.

Engage communities early

Inclusive, campuswide conversations help reduce fear and build trust. That means involving faculty, staff, and students in planning, and being transparent about where and how AI is being used. Training is key. Activating a tool without support will almost certainly lead to confusion or misuse. Some institutions now require faculty to disclose their AI use in course syllabi, modeling ethical and responsible practices.

Plan for the long term

Finally, institutions should be thinking not just about efficiency, but about student and administrative support. AI agents should evolve to help identify and serve individual student and faculty needs. And as more campuses work with vendors, partnerships should be customized to fit a college's specific context and goals.

"What Is Agentic AI?" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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