RESEARCH BRIEF

The Emerging Multimedia Classroom: How AI Is Changing Course Design and Delivery

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See how AI is changing course design and delivery.

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The Emerging Multimedia Classroom: How AI Is Changing Course Design and Delivery

By Charlotte Matherly

Contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the emergence of generative AI in 2022, colleges have spent a good part of the past three years trying to dissuade students from relying on it, citing concerns about academic integrity and critical thinking.

But student use of AI tools has only grown — estimates vary, but one recent survey found that 85 percent of student respondents had used it for coursework in the past year. And while concerns over cheating remain high, students have found many purposes for it — uses that include brainstorming, tutoring, and advanced internet searching. At the same time, colleges and faculty members are beginning to make their own forays into the world of artificial intelligence, discovering new ways to improve teaching and learning.

They're experimenting with the technology — sometimes using AI-generated video, audio, and interactive materials — to make their lesson plans more engaging, accessible, and personalized. Generative AI, they say, helps cut down on the time and manpower required to prepare for their courses and create new assignments. At the same time, the shift raises questions about changing standards and workflows for colleges adapting to AI.

To learn more about how faculty on the front lines are testing generative AI in the classroom — and how colleges are grappling with regulating its use — *The Chronicle,* with the support of Zoom, administered a nationwide survey of more than 850 faculty members and academic and administrative leaders. *The Chronicle* also conducted interviews with digital-learning experts, instructional technologists, and faculty who use it.

Despite these early adopters, many faculty members are hesitant to jump on the generative-AI bandwagon, and indicate they feel unprepared to embrace the practice. Colleges, in many cases, provide little to no guidance and oversight.

This report examines the many ways faculty members are exploring generative AI as a teaching tool, as well as the challenges colleges face in governance and quality control of the technology as it is beginning to transform how instructional content is created and delivered.

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Flower Darby had a new course to build. Darby, an associate director of the Teaching for Learning Center at the University of Missouri at Columbia, set out to craft an asynchronous course for faculty members on using AI in the classroom. She researched, gave it a lot of thought, and then, when she sat down to synthesize the work she'd done, the idea struck her: There was a more strategic way to do it.

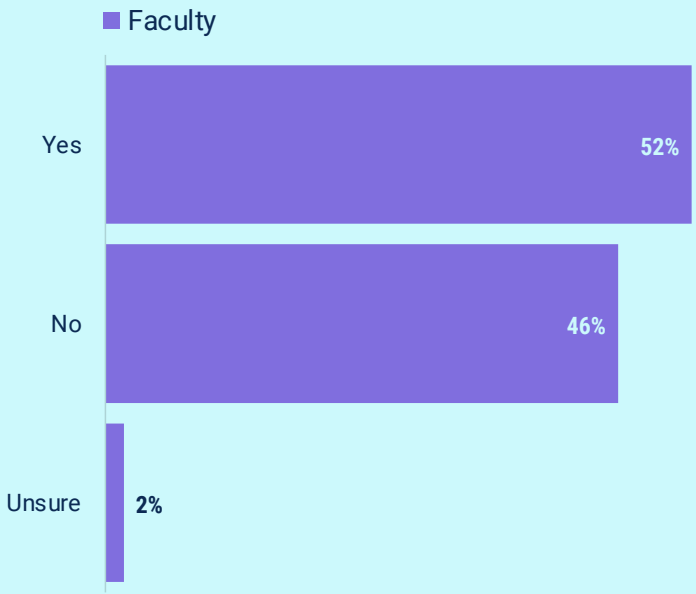
So, she uploaded her syllabus, schedule, module breakdown, and source materials into a generative-AI tool.

"In less than two minutes, I had an entire course written," Darby says. "If I had generated all that out of my own brain, it would've taken hours and hours and hours, and so it did streamline my process for sure."

Then, as she encourages everyone to do, she edited and refined it with more of her own expertise.

Darby has used generative AI in the classroom — both for faculty and student courses — for about a year now. She's asked the tool to complete a variety of tasks, such as compile lectures and brainstorm student icebreakers. She's hardly alone: According to *The Chronicle*'s survey, more than half of faculty members have employed generative AI to enhance their course materials and save time.

Have you used generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials?



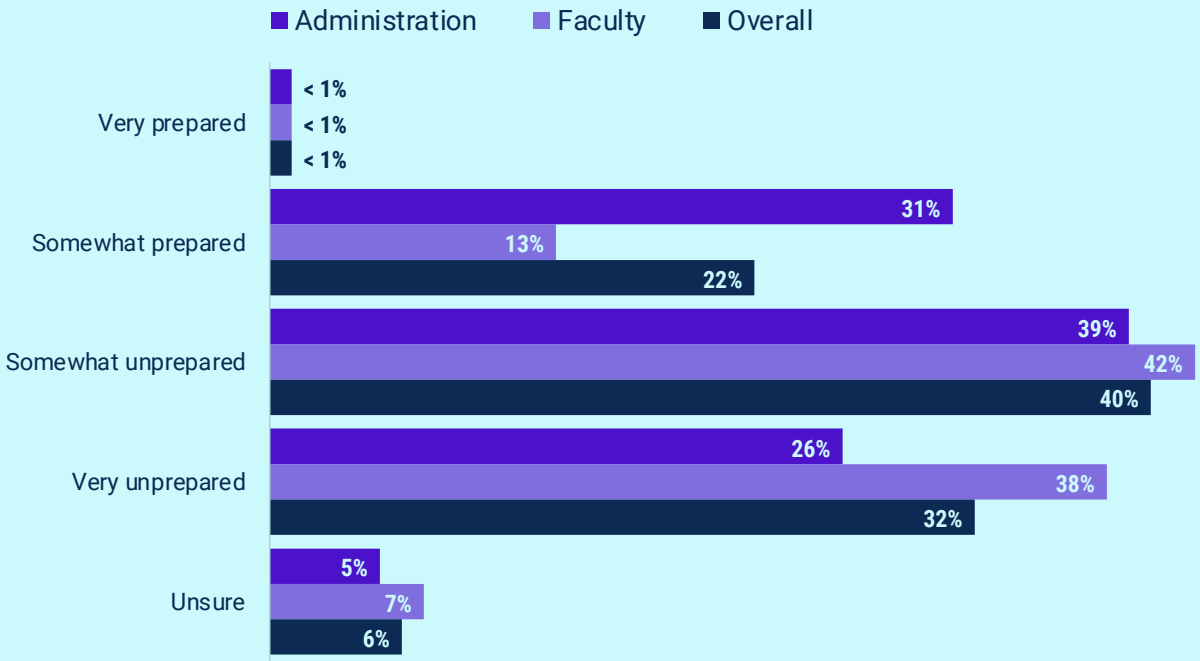
Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members
Note: This question was presented only to faculty.

Intense angst surrounding cheating and academic ethics has fortified the front lines of resistance to generative AI since its debut. Those concerns aren't going away — and rightfully so, experts say — but they are gradually being balanced by the recognition of the technologies' possibilities as the tools get refined and more people experiment with them.

Lawrence Cappello, who is a co-teacher of an AI workshop for faculty run out of the University of Alabama, says he believes the technology has also brought a necessary reckoning. What once sufficed as a thorough and relevant education is no longer, he argues, as AI's explosion has revolutionized learning possibilities and the job market.

"Everybody is now being forced to stop and look and re-examine teaching methods," Cappello says. "It's been far too long since that's happened. We're way overdue for that." Despite this growing acceptance of AI — especially from administrators, who tend to be bullish on the transition — many survey respondents said faculty, broadly, are unprepared to meet the challenge. Survey results analyzed by *The Chronicle* pointed to a sentiment among faculty that they are on their own to grapple with both the logistics of using the tools and their biggest questions and concerns — of which there are many.

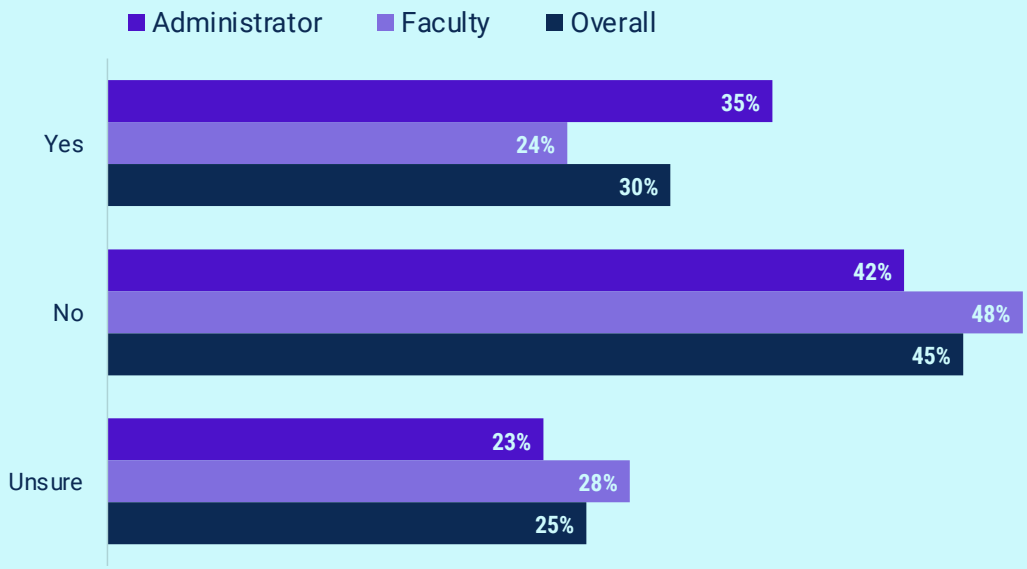
How well prepared do you think instructors on your campus are to use generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance classroom materials?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members
Note: Figures might not total 100 percent due to rounding.

While faculty members wrestle with how to implement AI into student assignments and their own work, many colleges have taken a backseat when it comes to regulating the tool. Nearly half of both faculty and administrators said their institutions don't have a strategy to use AI tools to improve teaching and learning. Those that do exercise any governance over AI usage favor suggested norms over clear-cut regulations, says Lee Rainie, director of Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center.

To your knowledge, does your institution have a strategy to use generative artificial-intelligence tools to improve teaching and learning?

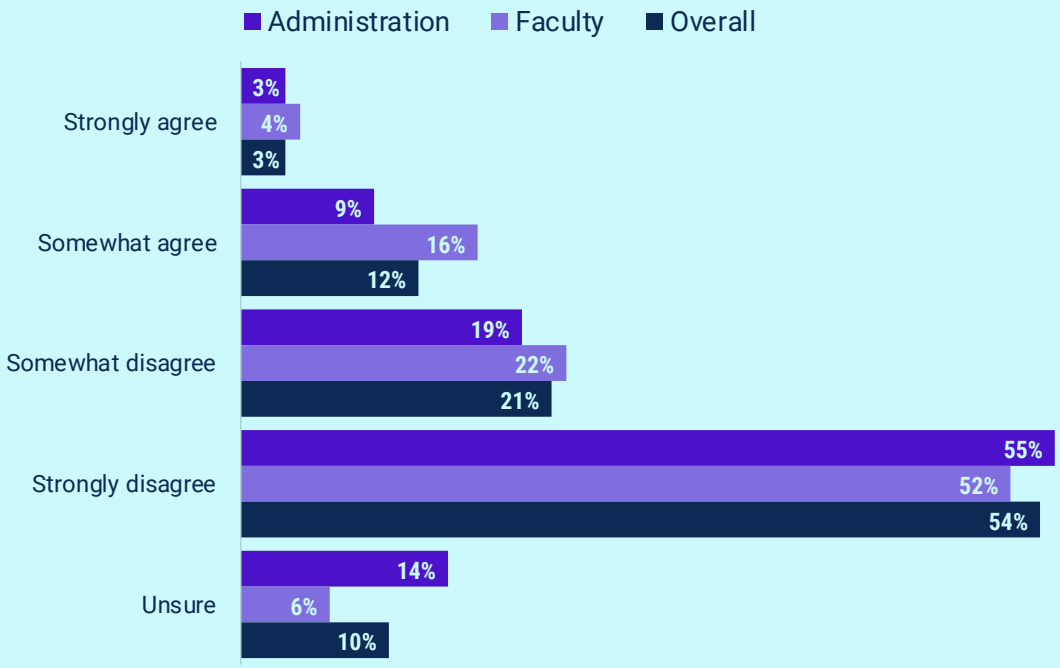


Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members

"Lots of schools are taking a sort of laissez-faire approach to this because they don't want to be high-handed. They don't want to alienate people," Rainie says. "Everybody knows that there's not a top-down answer that's going to work here, and so letting experimentation and even resistance flower is OK in lots of places."

This approach is supported by the survey finding that nearly three-quarters of faculty respondents somewhat or strongly disagreed with the notion that their institution was inappropriately pressuring them to learn and use generative artificial-intelligence tools.

How much do you agree with the following statement?
"My institution puts inappropriate pressure on faculty members to learn and use generative artificial-intelligence tools."



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members

Darby, who has now been using generative AI in her course design and curricula for a year, stresses that each faculty member will undergo their own personal journey with it. Though she was an early adopter, Darby says, with higher education caught in tumultuous times and many faculty members already overwhelmed by their workload, she's hardly surprised that more people haven't done so.

"We expect professors just to get in there and learn what they need to learn, or we offer workshops without acknowledging that it's extra stuff," Darby says. "We don't really provide good opportunities for people to learn new information, skills, tools, concepts, technologies … and then we wonder why faculty aren't always on board for changing. I don't think we are structured to facilitate that change very well."

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Emerging Uses, Ongoing Questions

Aside from faculty — an innately skeptical bunch — a large sector of the general public has a negative perception and concerns about generative AI. The technology has been known to hallucinate — spit out unverified or inaccurate information, or invent facts when something is uncertain, colloquially known as "AI slop."

Yet the promise and capabilities of AI are compelling, and experimentation and adoption are accelerating. More than half, 52 percent, of faculty members who responded to *The Chronicle*'s survey have used it to enhance their course materials *(See chart, p. 6)*. Experts and early adopters say they consider it a work in progress, used in pursuit of efficiencies and new ways of teaching, and that they never implement it without oversight, review, and final judgment.

"I am challenging my colleagues to think about what things we teach, and whether they have value in a world enabled by AI."

For Anne Jones, vice provost for undergraduate education at Arizona State University, it's not a question of bending quality standards to accommodate AI: "Why would the definition of quality change?" she asks. It's a question of shifting, on the most basic level, what is still relevant for students to learn in college.

For example, in the past she may have asked chemistry students to memorize the periodic table — an assignment that, with the internet and AI at students' fingertips, no longer holds the same advantage, she says.

"I am challenging my colleagues to think about what things we teach, and whether they have value in a world enabled by AI," Jones says.

Some faculty members use AI in its basic capacity, as a timesaver on menial tasks. Others engage it as a brainstorming partner, helping them refine ideas for the classroom.

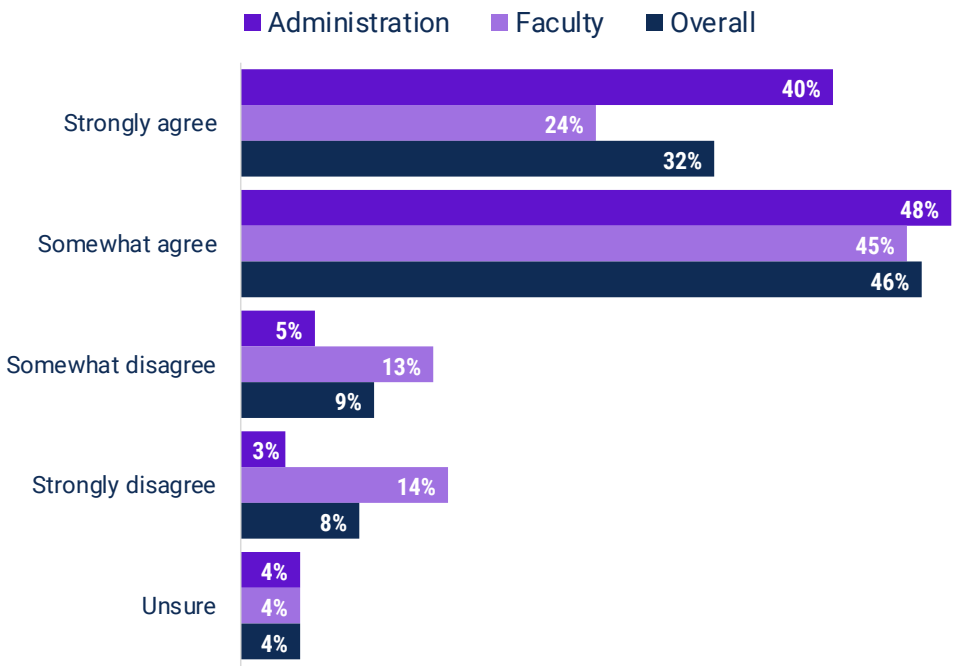
Gordon Govens, an associate professor of social sciences at Stillman College, in Alabama, does both *(See p. 30)*. He uses AI as a "thought partner" that, with his prompting, probes Govens with questions, helping him flesh out ideas. He also employs its help on more mundane tasks, like lecture slides, which has been a game-changer for his own originality in the classroom.

"It's freed up time for me. And therefore, particularly for the classroom, I can then spend more time on creativity and innovation," Govens says. "I can be more creative with my ideas in my pedagogy about how I want to teach the class. I can try different things."

There's another way faculty, including Govens, are making a splash: by deploying AI as an integral part of student assignments. This not only serves to make courses more interactive and individualized, but to train students on the tool's appropriate uses.

Among faculty, confidence in the technology's ability to enhance course materials and improve teaching and learning is not a given. Just 24 percent said they strongly agreed that it can accomplish that, while 14 percent strongly disagreed that it can help.

How much do you agree with the following statement?
"Generative artificial-intelligence tools can help enhance course materials to improve teaching and learning."



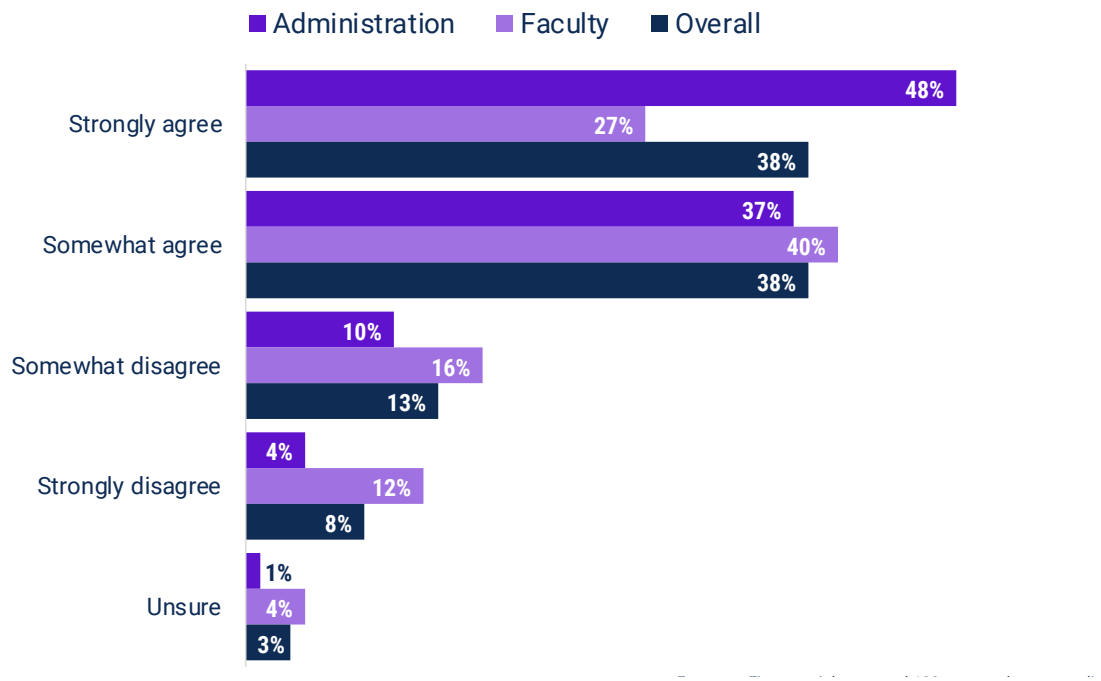
Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members

It's all about finding balance on a case-by-case basis and separating the experiences of faculty and students, says Derek Bruff, associate director of the University of Virginia's Center for Teaching Excellence. He gave an example: If a law professor uses generative AI to create fictional case studies for a course, it doesn't detract from learning because the professor is an expert in their field — he or she already knows how to write case studies. It's a different story for students.

Though many faculty still harbor hesitations, their administrative counterparts in general have a more gung-ho attitude toward the digital revolution.

When asked whether it's key to their institution's future to teach students to use AI, 48 percent of administrators said they strongly agreed, compared with only 27 percent of faculty. Interestingly, when the endorsement level changed to "somewhat agreed," slightly more faculty signed off than administrators — 40 percent of faculty versus 37 percent of administrators.

How much do you agree with the following statement?
"Teaching students how to use generative artificial-intelligence tools is key to my institution's future."

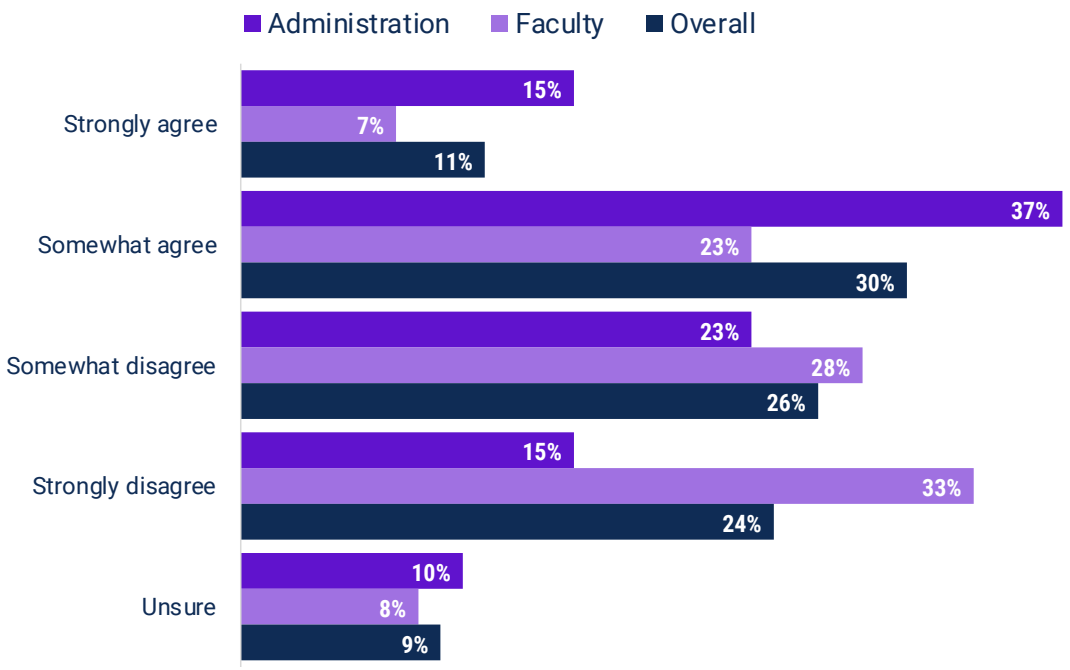


Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members

Rainie, of Elon University, says the divide isn't as vast as many might expect. "There aren't enormously toxic differences between faculty members and administrators. There's an intensity difference that's really interesting. Those margins matter, but it's not like they're completely heading in different directions."

At Arizona State University, faculty members and administrators alike have jumped on the AI train as early adopters. Not only has the university formed a partnership with a major AI company, but it has deliberately invited faculty to get creative and experimental with the tool, Jones says. Respondents to *The Chronicle* survey were almost evenly divided about such partnerships. Over all, only 41 percent strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that their institutions should collaborate with a tech company to enhance course materials. A slightly larger group strongly or somewhat disagreed — 50 percent.

How much do you agree with the following statement?
"My institution should collaborate with technology companies to use generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials."



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members

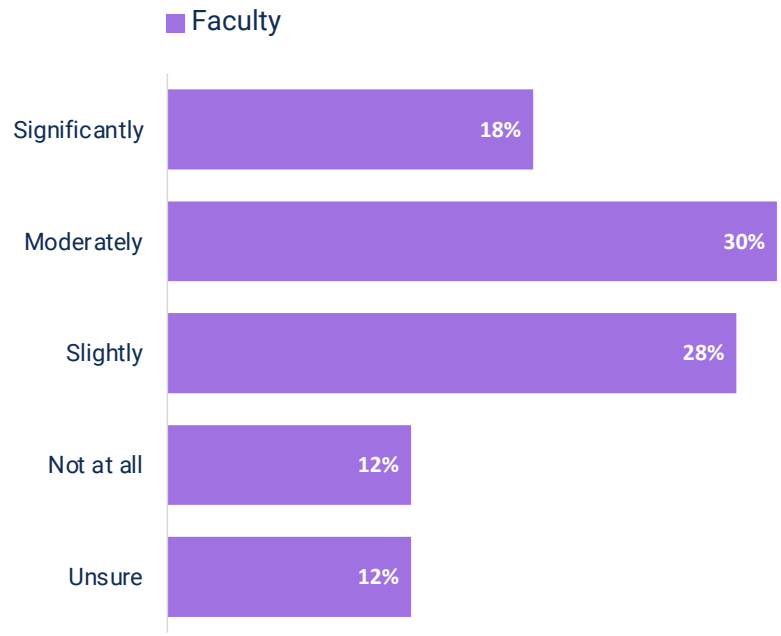
As part of ASU's AI Innovation Challenge, a group of faculty members created Language Buddy, an AI chatbot that helps students practice speaking foreign languages. For many of the institution's online students, finding someone to converse with can be tough. Language Buddy provides a platform for them to practice speaking with an endlessly patient, always-available partner at their fluency level.

In this way, AI can be a tool to make learning itself more equitable, says Gloria Niles, director of online learning at the University of Hawaii system. Because AI can cater to each user, she says, it can supply an individualized experience and a level of support that faculty may not always be able to provide.

AI tutors, for example, are readily available 24/7, giving students more flexibility over when and how they study.

"I think that is really going to be important in making learning more equitable and accessible to a wider variety of learners," Niles says, a sentiment that is reflected in the responses to *The Chronicle* survey, where nearly half the faculty members who use generative AI agreed that it at least moderately improves their ability to support diverse learning needs and styles.

To what extent do you feel generative artificial-intelligence tools improve your ability to support diverse learning needs and styles?

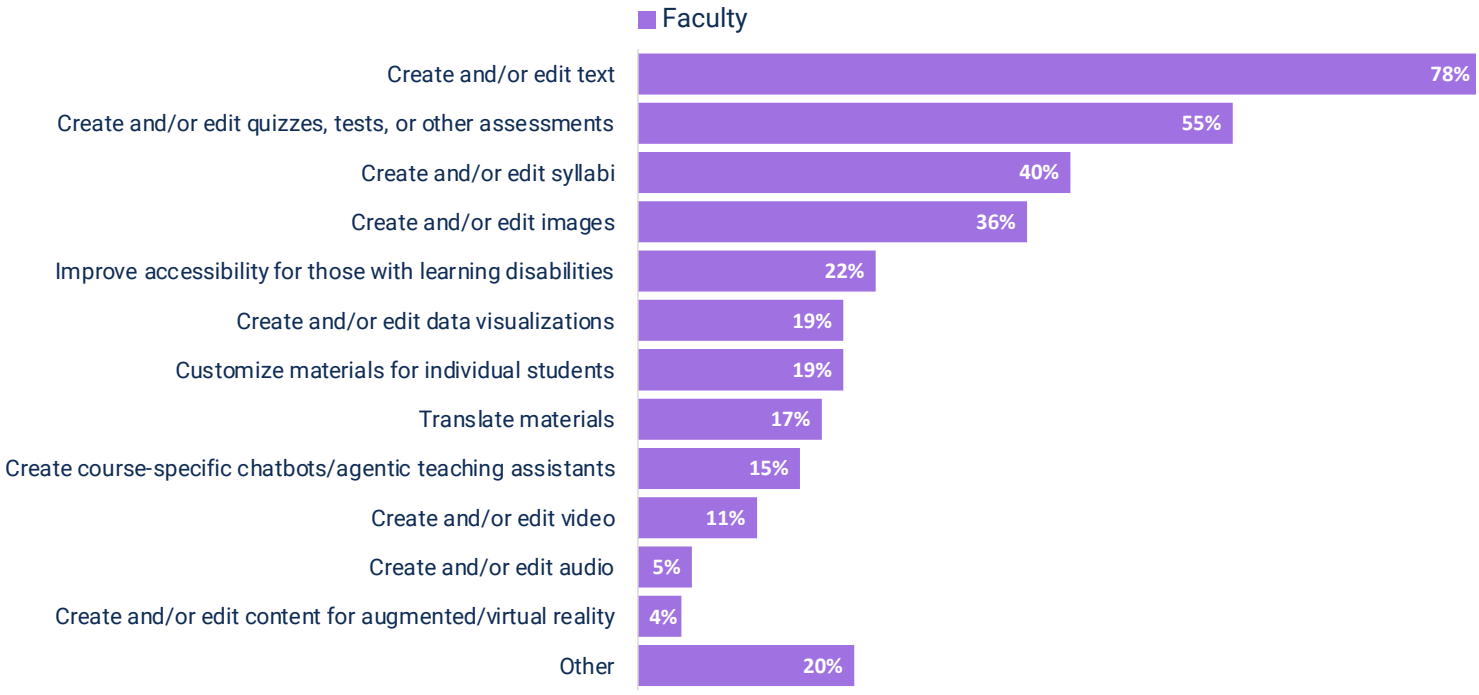


Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members
Note: This question was only presented to faculty who have used generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials.

AI can also help instructors make course content more accessible for students with different needs by using it to generate subtitles in multiple languages, convert text to audio, and make explainer videos.

In a multimedia world flooded more with images and videos than text, AI is still catching up. Despite its wide range of capabilities, it's most popular among faculty for its text generation, *The Chronicle*'s survey found. Seventy-eight percent of faculty who employ AI said they do so to create or edit text; 55 percent use it for assessments and 40 percent for syllabi. The text function is useful, but Katherine L. Chiou *(see p. 33),* an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Alabama who is a co-teacher of the institution's faculty AI workshop with Cappello, says its popularity outshines other up-and-coming multimedia

How have you used generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials? Select all that apply.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members
Note: This question was only presented to faculty who have used generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials.

forms of AI. Only 36 percent of faculty said they use AI to generate or edit images.

"I think there's been a hyper-emphasis on text, to the detriment of other ways of … knowing and information and teaching," Chiou says.

Those trends are exaggerated in some areas more than others. Using AI to create or edit video (11 percent) or audio (five percent) is far less widespread among faculty. Experts say that could be for a couple reasons, like cost barriers to more specialized software and less widespread knowledge about AI's video and audio capabilities compared to its writing.

After all, technology changes much faster than society — Cappello and Chiou update their multimedia workshop frequently as the technology progresses.

Everyday use of AI for multimedia purposes will catch up, they say, and several projects are already in the works. Some faculty members use AI to make up songs about course topics, accompany chatbots with avatars, and more.

"I think there's been a hyper-emphasis on text, to the detriment of other ways of … knowing and information and teaching."

"A lot of this is like the slow crawl to video," Cappello says, "which we know will be there eventually."

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A Need for Increased Institutional Support

By all indications, the use of AI is barreling ahead. For Valerie Riggs, however, its adoption can't come fast enough. Riggs, an assistant professor of teacher education and professional development at Morgan State University, says her institution is "smack in the middle" of the AI-adoption process.

There are hardly any specific policies at the industry- or institutionwide levels, she says, and the softer guidelines that many colleges favor have been slow to develop. The few hard-and-fast rules tend to be the fairly obvious ones, Riggs says, like banning the use of AI in faculty members' grant applications and promotional materials.

On the student-facing side, each school within the college has developed its own student AI policy to build consistency. That way, students, for the most part, don't have to navigate confusion over what's OK in different classes.

Riggs, who teaches a course on AI literacy and implementation for K-12 classrooms, doesn't blame fellow faculty members who might be slow to adopt the technology. Everyone is at their own level of use, understanding, technical ability, and innovation, Riggs says, and with no clear strategy or coordinated movement by institutions, their progress is based on individual aptitude and interest. Unless an institution gives financial incentives, extra time, or removes some of the load on their plates, many faculty members find it challenging to do extra work to play around with the technology.

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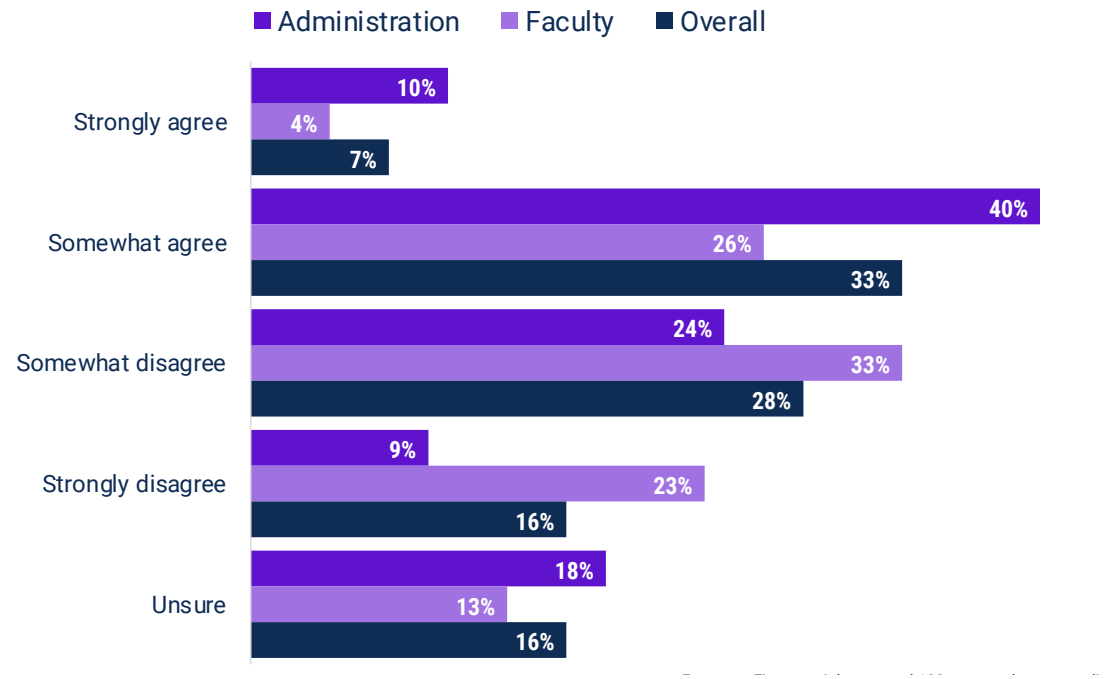
Higher education is split on how much students expect from their professors in the way of AI. Only 30 percent of faculty members reported to *The Chronicle* that students expect their instructors to be well-versed in the technology, compared to 50 percent of administrators. In Riggs's experience, however, most faculty members do sense that their students think it's important for them to keep up.

How much do you agree with the following statement?
"Students expect instructors to be well versed in using generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials."



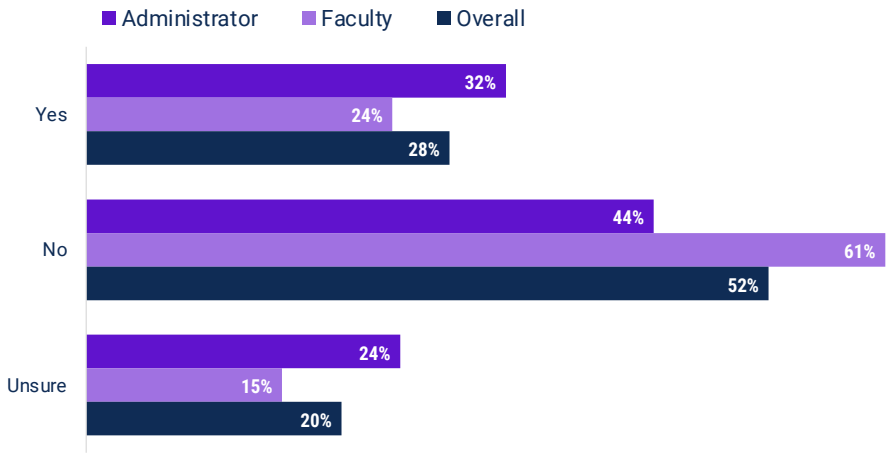
Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members

"They are feeling that students are kind of pulling on them to understand, or at least be open to its use," Riggs says. "Everything's not aligning. The students are more ready than the teachers."

The University of Hawaii system has been ready. Niles says it first implemented guidelines for faculty in November 2022, when AI's prevalence exploded, instructing faculty on when they could and could not use it. For example, Niles says, from early on faculty members were warned not to input into AI databases any personally identifiable or information protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). They also discussed potential biases and copyright concerns, like attribution and citation.

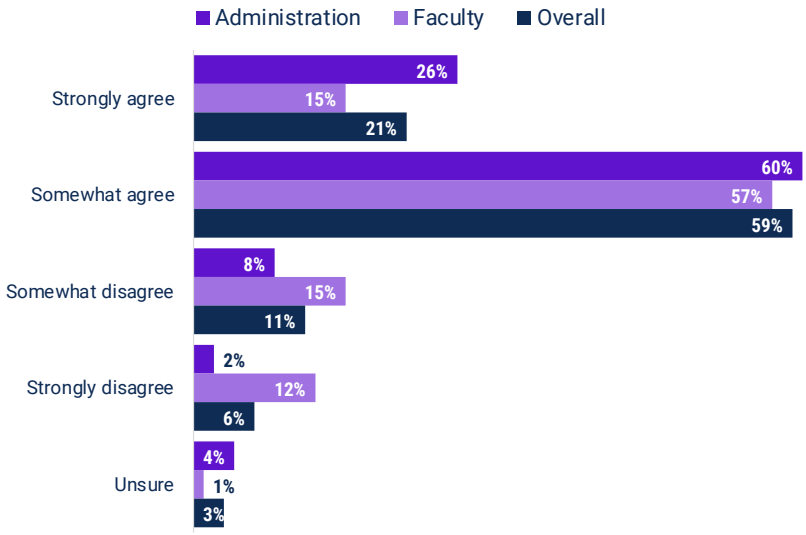
Hawaii may not be the norm. Only 28 percent of faculty and administrators reported to *The Chronicle* that they were aware of faculty AI guidelines at their institutions. Of those, 80 percent said the guidelines are helpful.

To your knowledge, does your institution have guidelines for how faculty members should use generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members
Note: Asked only of respondents whose institutions have a strategy to use generative AI for teaching and learning.

How much do you agree with the following statement?
"My institution has helpful guidelines on how faculty members should use generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials."



Source: *The Chronicle*
Note: Asked only of respondents at institutions offering workshops or training on using generative AI to enhance course materials.

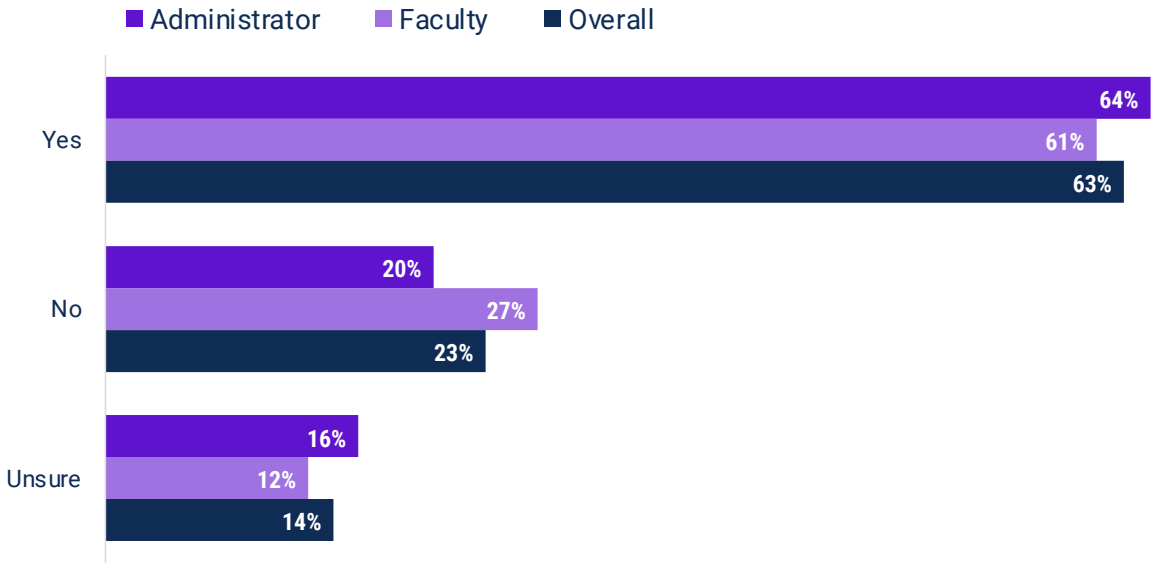
Despite that, Darby, the teaching-center associate director at the University of Missouri, says she was "pleasantly surprised" to see that more faculty members are using generative AI on their own. It's their responsibility, she feels, to guide students toward careful and conscientious AI use. But given higher education's innately sluggish pace, coupled with political and funding headwinds, she doesn't blame them for being slow to come to terms with the technology.

"Collectively, higher education, systemically, we are just not set up to deal with disruptions like this," Darby says. "I am disappointed but not at all surprised that faculty don't feel that there's adequate support to help them learn how to use these tools."

"Collectively, higher education, systemically, we are just not set up to deal with disruptions like this."

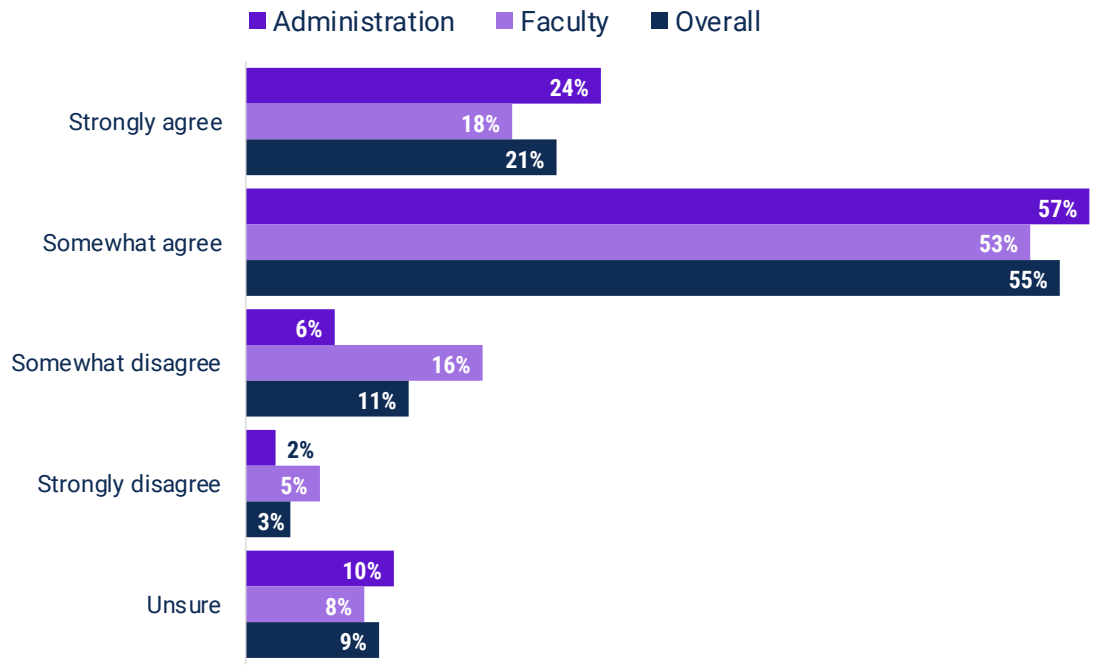
Sixty-three percent of faculty and administrators said they're aware of AI trainings and workshops at their colleges. Of that group, the vast majority, 76 percent, said they're helpful.

To your knowledge, does your institution offer workshops or training to teach faculty members how to use generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members

How much do you agree with the following statement?
"My institution has helpful workshops or training on how faculty members can use generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials."



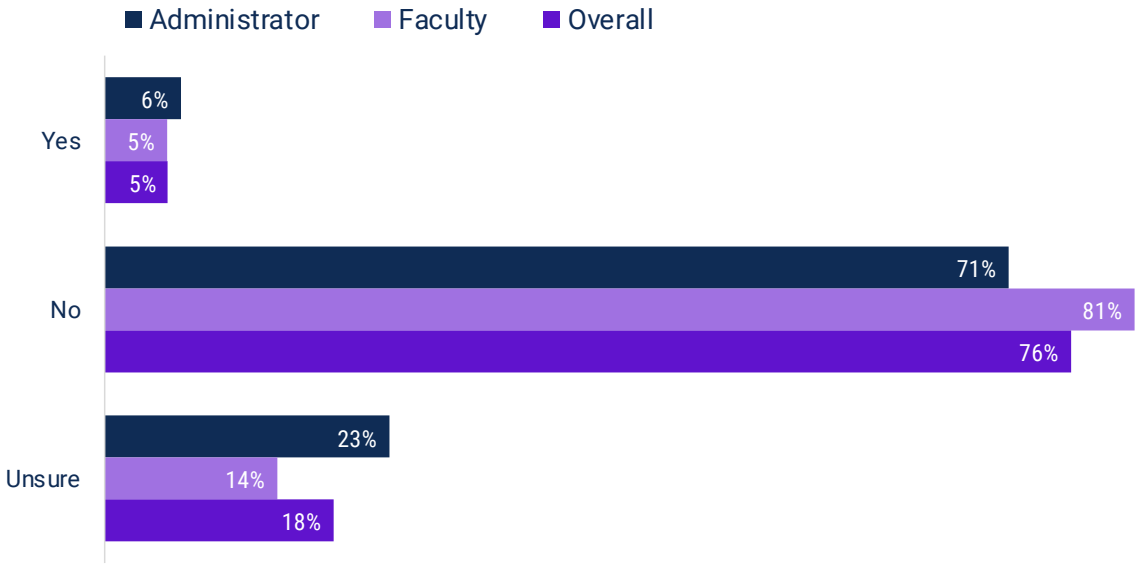
Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members
Note: Asked only of respondents at institutions offering workshops or training on using generative AI to enhance course materials. Figures may not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Experts say that colleges, broadly, want faculty to use this technology in their courses — whether to enhance their own lesson plans or actually teach students about it. But in a higher-education climate where academic and pedagogical freedom are highly valued, experts say colleges are wary of mandating a top-down approach.

So, what's the alternative? At the University of Hawaii system, Niles says 50 faculty members have been awarded a $1,000 incentive in exchange for using generative AI in at least one assignment in a course this year.

Not all institutions are investing in AI in the same way. Eighty-one percent of the faculty members who responded to *The Chronicle*'s survey said they weren't aware of any incentives at their institution for using AI — only five percent said they were.

To your knowledge, does your institution offer incentives for faculty members to use generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members
Note: Figures might not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Darby suggests that financial incentives, or even nonmonetary support like course-load relief, could move the needle, too.

"Leadership culture — like, 'This is important, let's get in there and learn it' — even that kind of messaging would be helpful," Darby says.

Ethical concerns and risks

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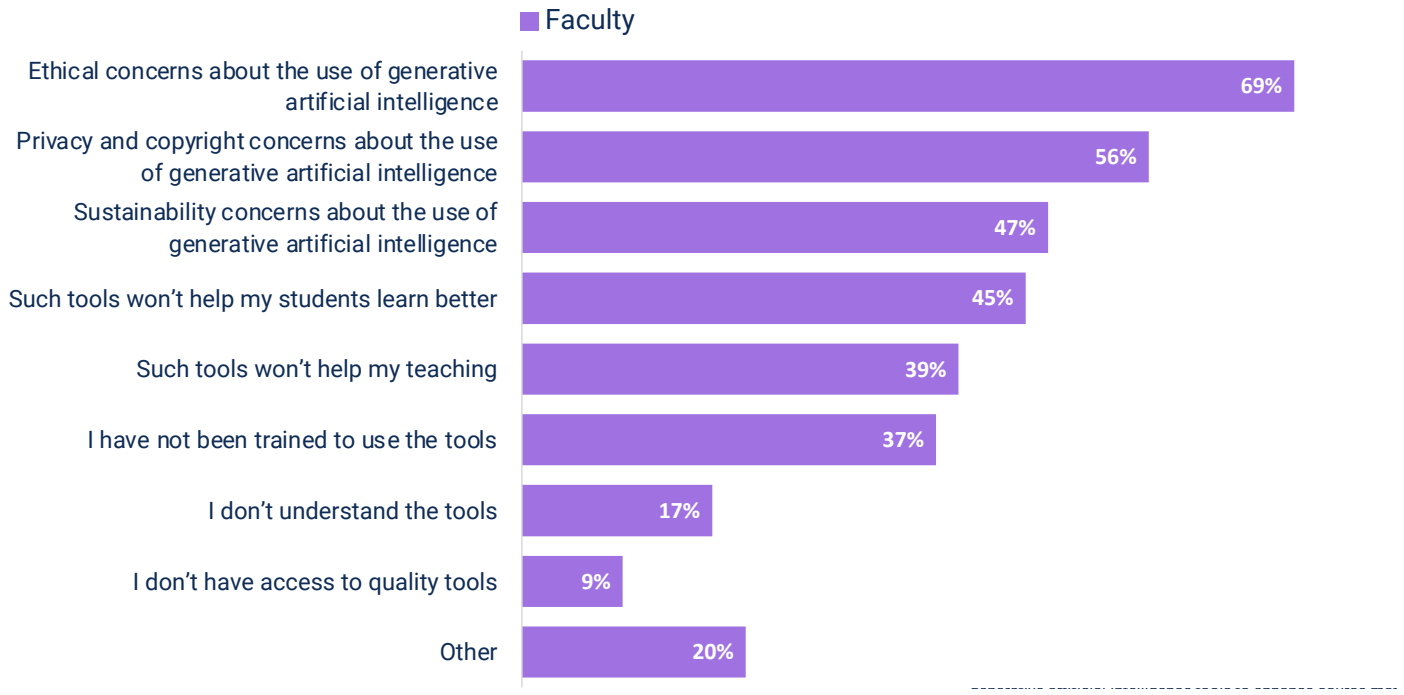
Most experts who spoke with *The Chronicle* said instructors are becoming more open to learning about and understanding generative AI, but as institutions hope to goad them to experiment, many faculty members harbor a litany of concerns — mostly hinging on the multitude of ethical dilemmas and risks that AI presents.

Lee Rainie, at Elon University, says faculty are fretting over everything regarding AI use, such as how to cite it, copyright infringement, and its environmental impact. Moreover, he says, many are afraid of the potential power dynamics AI companies could stand to create.

"Just the sheer amount of power they have around controlling language and intelligence and thinking processes, you know, that's the game for our species," Rainie says. "Institutions that have a lot of control over that just raise all kinds of suspicions."

Among faculty members who haven't used AI to enhance their course materials, 69 percent point to ethical concerns as their main reason for abstaining. Those worries are far from irrational, and the tools can have real consequences, so experts say it's important to use the technology responsibly.

Why have you not used generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials? Select all that apply



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 850 academic and administrative leaders and faculty members
Note: This question was only presented to faculty who have not used generative artificial-intelligence tools to enhance course materials.

One emerging best practice is to refrain from putting sensitive information into AI softwares, such as students' personal data and unpublished research. Large-language models, a form of artificial intelligence trained to understand and generate human-like language, are open-ended, meaning whatever goes in can be kept in the AI's database and used to inform its other outputs. Unless the AI software is created specifically by a college for internal use, the information entered is not secure.

"If I were to receive a paper from a student and just upload the file without removing their name and whatever else, that's very unethical to me, and yet I fear that some are doing it because it's a timesaver," Darby says. "That's just a problem with how we're set up in higher ed. We ask people to do a lot. It doesn't surprise me too much if people look for efficiencies."

Others have questions about copyright risks: Who owns the copyright for AI-generated content? How much can anyone trust the sources it provides, and how should they be cited? Those burning questions could be enough to scare anyone in higher education away from using generative AI. But the "light touch" that institutions have applied to AI guidance and policies thus far, Rainie says, is the best route forward for now. "I think the case law here is going to determine, eventually,

The "light touch" that institutions have applied to AI guidance and policies thus far is the best route forward for now.

what the rules of the road are," Rainie says. "As disciplinary bodies on campus, as honors systems kick in on this, that's how this stuff is going to be built — organically, rather than by a constitution created on Day 1."

The unavoidable hurdle for the environmentally conscious, such as the 47 percent of faculty members who told *The Chronicle* that's why they hadn't used AI, is its detrimental impact on Earth and its climate. Powering AI sucks up a massive amount of energy and water, with data centers in the United States consuming around 200 terawatt-hours of electricity last year — roughly the amount it takes to power Thailand for a year, according to an analysis by the *MIT Technology Review*.

As faculty members try to solve this puzzle — how to face the future while keeping their academic integrity intact — experts reiterated that there are ways to use the technology ethically.

For Darby, the most important thing is transparency — and it's a two-way street. If faculty members ask students for an explanation about when and how they use generative-AI tools in their work, Darby argues, they should afford their students that same respect. With all the uncertainties higher education already faces, students need to know whether faculty use it to help craft lecture slides or grade assignments, or has integrated the technology into the classroom.

Until the adoption of AI evolves to the next level, she says, honesty is the best policy.

"I think about this moment in time as being a moment in time," Darby says. "I don't think we're gonna be here forever, but right now, in this moment, I believe that we should be as transparent as we can with our students about how we're using AI."

Classroom Use Cases

ISTOCK

Gordon Govens

Gordon Govens, associate professor of social sciences at Stillman College, in Alabama, is a self-described geek when it comes to pedagogy and technology. When he got a taste of what generative AI could do in Chiou and Cappello's AI workshop in early 2024, he went full steam ahead.

"It was like somebody gave me a drug," Govens says. "When I started to see the benefits and the capabilities, not just of ChatGPT but all of the other AI tools that are out there, I was hooked. I immediately started to incorporate them into my classroom."

To try to connect with his Generation Z students, Govens turned to AI to make his courses more interactive by using music. After asking one tool to write lyrics encapsulating his lecture on the dimensions of power and race as a social construct, he input those lyrics into another tool and asked it to configure a rap song.

The request took 45 seconds to generate a snappy four-minute song that begins, "History books, written in lies and ink / Hiding the sins of race, that's the Kool-Aid we drink."

Govens blasts "We Got Played (Race Is an Historical Fiction)" in his classroom. Then, every few weeks, he turns the onus on his students, asking them to generate a song about what they've learned in class recently, making it a competition.

"They were creating their own songs, and the songs were amazing," Govens says. "They were jazz, they were folk, and they were incorporating the lessons of what they'd learned over the last three to four weeks. It's just brilliant, and it keeps them engaged."

Giving students an opportunity to approach AI as part of an assignment also teaches them how to use it appropriately, Govens says.

"The goal of Stillman is for the professors to get to know what AI is, how to work with it, and then use it," Govens says, "and then the professors to use their creativity and innovation to teach students how to use it responsibly as a tool and not as a crutch."

Travis Maynard

Like many early adopters of AI, Travis Maynard first approached it as a toy — a "neat thing" he hadn't seen before. Seeing all the technology could do, however, Maynard, an assistant professor of English at Elon University, knew a shift was coming to his specialty.

"It was less a matter of like, Oh my gosh, college writing is dead," Maynard says, "as much as, like, College writing is going to change again, and how can we really try to be deliberate and strategic about how to continue to evolve as the technologies do?"

So, he put it to work in his classroom — both behind the scenes to devise slides and activities and for student use in assignments. As part of his rhetorical-writing courses, Maynard tries to mimic the multimedia-writing process that students will encounter out in the "real world" after graduation, preparing them for how to write in any scenario.

Part of that is nailing down who their audience is. After the initial brainstorming process, students put AI to work to craft personas as examples of whom they are writing for.

The personas "don't actually exist, but it's kind of a composite of multiple demographic psychographics to let you know this is one of my ideal readers," Maynard says. "They have names. They generate sort of stock images using AI, so we know what this person looks like. They get a full profile."

After getting input from both Maynard and the AI-generated persona, the drafting process begins — but AI's role doesn't end there.

Sometimes he asks students to draft on their own, Maynard says, but he operates under the assumption that students will always use AI, even if he tells them not to. He favors the middle ground.

"Where I fall is using iterative prompting to get a lot of text, and then really encouraging students to then start picking out what they like," Maynard says. "They're kind of almost remixing or piecing it together and then drafting themselves. It's a blend of AI-generated text with prose that they are writing."

Nicole Mills

In Nicole Mills's beginning-French class at Harvard University, students look up at a 180-degree immersive screen to meet the avatar introduced to them as "AI Lee."

Based on a real 11-year-old boy living in Paris, AI Lee answers their questions in real time — about school, tennis, his family, and more — and students see snippets of his life through virtual reality. As students progress through the semester, AI Lee becomes a writing companion, helping them flag and work through their own mistakes.

Mills, a senior preceptor in Romance languages and literatures, and her team worked with a Parisian software company to build the AI tool, along with a virtual-reality experience that immerses students in French life.

In a study of how her students reacted to and worked with AI Lee, her team noticed that student enjoyment of the avatar chatbot affected their beliefs about their own writing and capabilities.

"We found that the more that the students enjoyed using AI Lee, the more that they enjoyed and valued the writing experience," Mills says.

AI Lee wasn't Mills's first venture into using this technology in the classroom. At Harvard, she had students prompt AI to create their own avatars, which were then placed into an AI simulation of a murder mystery at the Museum of Modern Art, in Paris. That way, she says, students not only got to create the characters but to talk with them during the investigation.

Instead of hand-wringing that "students always use AI to write their compositions," she says, "let's use students' composition to create an AI avatar, and then use that excitement and agency of seeing their own writing come to life and making them see how valuable their writing is."

Katherine Chiou

Katherine Chiou, who leads AI-training workshops with Cappello, became interested in multimedia AI as a path to engage students in a post-Covid classroom. Gen Z students' minds are constantly bombarded with short-form content, she says, and plain lectures no longer grab their attention.

As an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Alabama, Chiou finds that her students sometimes struggle to connect past and present. So to energize her course material, she experimented with AI to add color to the black-and-white images that don't always resonate with students — and tried other creative options.

"AI helps sometimes liven things by putting little faces on historical figures or helping us visualize certain moments that may not have been captured by photography," Chiou says.

For example, Chiou is a scholar of the Moche civilization, which flourished in the Andes region of Peru before the Incas. The civilization isn't "present enough in our public consciousness" for most search queries to surface in Google, Chiou says, so she asked AI to generate hypothetical images of Moche people gathering or feasting to help students form that bridge between past and present. It's not always accurate.

"It'll generate something that doesn't really fit what it is we're looking for," Chiou says.

Instead of scrapping it, Chiou seizes the opportunity to discuss AI with her students, prompting them to study an image and determine whether it looks accurate based on what they've learned. Because publicly available information about the Moche is relatively low, Chiou asks students: How do you know if the image is accurate? Where might AI be scraping the information it uses to generate that image, and what copyright implications might accompany that?

"Having them be aware and a little bit critical about how they see things is really interesting," Chiou says. "The fact that [AI is] not very good at its job is also a very useful pedagogical exercise."

Three years in, higher education is still muddling through how it wants to tackle AI. As college leaders and administrators charge full speed ahead, many faculty members continue to pull back, hesitant to dip their toes in with so much still unknown about AI's capabilities, practices, and real-world impacts.

For some experts, it's not a choice of whether to fully integrate AI or banish it altogether. It's not so black and white, all or nothing. It's about recognizing, through experimentation and careful thought, when it's appropriate and useful.

"At the end of the day, most faculty want students to learn well," says Bruff, the teaching-center associate director at the University of Virginia. "Whether you use it a lot or don't use it much at all, you still need to think about when is it going to be helpful for student learning and when is it going to be a problem for student learning."

For some experts, it's not a choice of whether to fully integrate AI or banish it altogether. It's about recognizing, through experimentation and careful thought, when it's appropriate and useful.

For anyone who takes on the tool, Darby adds, it can be a learning process to figure out one's own personal boundaries, develop preferred uses, and see what feels acceptable. "You have to test it out," she says, "and see what feels comfortable and what doesn't." Many faculty members are doing just that — experimenting with AI in a casual, low-stakes way as they figure out whether and how they want to employ it in their courses and in their own workflows.

Three years into the AI wave, though, some say the clock is ticking — and it's time to stop playing around.

Nicole Mills, the instructor at Harvard, says the time has come to progress from the early days of experimentation and start pursuing AI in a more intentional, strategic way.

"I think we have to move away from that phase of, Let's just experiment, to Let's thoughtfully curate a design according to pedagogical models that have been researched, that have been proven effective," Mills says. "How can we build upon that and enhance them even more?"

A great deal is still up in the air surrounding AI in instruction. Colleges are working to decide the most helpful ways to use it, when it's appropriate for student learning, and how to mitigate legal risks and ethical concerns, among other unknowns. One thing is clear, however: Higher education is moving toward a place of acceptance. With that in mind, experts say the waiting days are over. Now is the time to deal with the changes at hand.

"AI's not new, really, anymore," Cappello adds. "We're at the end of, I think, the beginning stages."

METHODOLOGY

Eight-hundred and fifty-six people responded to *The Chronicle*'s online survey, which was conducted between August 4 and August 18, 2025. The respondents included 431 academic and administrative leaders and 425 faculty members. Nearly all (95 percent) respondents hold a full-time position at a higher-ed institution.

Among administrators, directors made up 17 percent of the survey sample; assistant, associate, and vice deans, seven percent; deans, five percent; assistant, associate, and vice provosts, four percent; provosts, two percent; vice presidents, four percent, and presidents and chancellors, two percent. Librarians and department heads made up three percent, respectively, and other administrative positions made up five percent.

Faculty members were most represented by tenured professors (33 percent), followed by tenure-track professors and department chairs (two percent, respectively). Nontenured faculty made up 13 percent of the total.

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