KEY TAKEAWAYS

What It Takes to Lead in the AI Era

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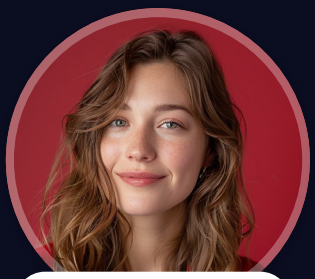

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What It Takes to Lead in the AI Era

Key Takeaways From a Virtual Forum
Presented by *The Chronicle* and Element451

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With tightening budgets, decreasing enrollments, and employees who often feel overburdened, many colleges see the advantage of turning to artificial intelligence to support their operations. But as campus leaders look to increase their use of AI tools to improve efficiencies — especially in areas like admissions, finance, and marketing — concerns persist about the risks of inaccuracy, ineffectiveness, or other harmful unintended consequences. And when it comes to classroom instruction, faculty members continue to be wary of the technology's effect on student learning.

A recent Chronicle special report, "Leading in the AI Era," examines what it takes for institutions to set clear guardrails for the technology while still leaving room for experimentation — and to navigate both its promises and its risks. The report was written by Jeff Young, an education and technology reporter who hosts the *Learning Curve* podcast.

To explore this subject further, *The Chronicle* held a virtual forum on December 4. The following comments, edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, watch the recorded webinar here.

IAN WILHELM: Jeff, you've been reporting on education and technology for many years, including as a former *Chronicle* reporter and editor. What's new about this moment, compared to previous technological turning points for higher ed?

JEFF YOUNG: There have been plenty of disruptions in the past, but a couple things stick out as different. One is just how many parts of a campus that generative AI could impact all at once. There are potential implications for teaching, for research, for administrative tasks, for just about everything.

It feels like there's a bigger existential threat posed by AI than by the internet, which made changes to the academy but didn't fundamentally alter things. It's also changing the job market for the knowledge work that colleges prepare students to go into — and that's happening so fast. If this feels different than the dot-com boom, that's because it is — and there's more money flowing into it. That's what accounts for how many new products are coming out.

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WILHELM: *The Chronicle* did a survey of administrators in higher ed for your report, and about half of respondents said they didn't have an institutionwide policy on AI use. What did you hear from experts about the pros and cons of establishing that kind of policy?

YOUNG: I was surprised by that finding in the survey. My sense, from talking to experts, is that in some cases, there are campus policies that might already cover it through guide-

lines or training. For example, one of the big concerns is about students misusing AI to do their homework and offload their own learning, but if they're doing that, they're already violating an academic-integrity policy. Also, fields like computer science and engineering might have different dynamics about whether AI is appropriate in the classroom than fields like history or English.

WILHELM: Almost a majority of our survey respondents also said their institution was doing a good job balancing experimentation with exercising caution. How are they approaching striking that balance?

"The strategy we came up with revolved around student success, faculty and staff empowerment, and the core pillars of a public university's mission."

YOUNG: People don't want their institution to push them around too much or to say "This is what everyone has to do." I sensed those differences between departments and disciplines on these issues. Some experts think colleges aren't doing enough, but the issue is how to balance not ignoring AI with not moving so fast that you feel uncomfortable and forced into something you're not ready for.

WILHELM: Amarda and Chris, as chief AI officers, how do you see your roles?

AMARDA SHEHU: The job doesn't come with a manual. There have been chief AI officers in government and industry, but higher education is quite different. I'm very thankful for our university president, who gave me a blank slate and complete freedom to think about the position.

The strategy we came up with revolved around student success, faculty and staff empowerment, and the core pillars of a public university's mission. We thought about what it would mean to integrate AI and create comprehensive guidelines to provide some clarity and a beginning point. We identified things we shouldn't do, things we maybe shouldn't do now or should be cautious about, and things we encourage as part of experimentation. We thought about giving students the skills they need to succeed in the work force. Then we thought about how all this would serve Northern Virginia and the nation.

CHRIS MATTMANN: I joined UCLA in 2024 after almost 25 years at NASA. I helped work on an executive order defining the role of chief AI officers — there were three types. Those in government would be focused on policy. Those in commercial industries would be prototyping systems, kicking the tires. The third type was a hybrid model. I'm more the first type, working with the UCOP, the University of California Office of the President.

As Amarda said, you get to write a bit of your own playbook. Different UCs have different needs. UC Riverside is hiring an executive director of AI who reports to the chief data officer. I report to the chief information officer. One question for chief AI officers is whether they're focused on policy or action.

Our strategy has three pillars. The first is doing a campuswide technology inventory to understand the debt, sprawl, risks, and opportunities of AI technologies. The second is AI literacy — how we upskill our work force. I don't mean turn them all into Ph.D.s, but everyone needs basic literacy. We've released modules on LinkedIn Learning, curated for different job disciplines. The administrator in the social sciences may need to learn differently than the person in engineering who's supporting high-performance computing resources on campus.

The last pillar is having an AI community of practice. I don't have a big team — I only have three student workers reporting to me — but I can collect the community of people working on AI on campus, create Slack channels, and get them discussing what they're doing.

WILHELM: How, in practice, do you best empower campus communities to work through these issues? What are the tricks to doing that?

MATTMANN: NASA has technology-readiness levels — a scale of 1 to 9 — that have been adopted in industries and even in some parts of academe. One to three is for early-stage research, developing ideas. Four to six is when you've deployed it operationally — it's more than a prototype. Seven to nine is when it's mature, multi-environment, and scalable. That's proven an effective framework for bringing people together — and for which types of people you need in which rooms.

WILHELM: Amarda, your institution created a task force to work on AI issues. Tell us about that.

SHEHU: Shared governance — getting together in the right space — was the reason for putting the AI visioning task force together. I didn't want it to be just my own views. I wanted to make sure I understood where our university community was. We did surveys of students, faculty, and staff, and we had at least one or two representatives from every academic and nonacademic unit on the task force. We talked about what guidelines should be, how to encourage AI literacy, and which vendors to talk to.

We have communities of practice focused on staff. We have communities of practice focused on instructors. For instance, some instructors say to other instructors, "Come engage with me for 60 or 90 minutes, and I'll show you how I use AI in my course." When there's a conference on instruction and learning, we do programming there. When there's a day for faculty and staff enrichment, we have activities. It's a peer-to-peer learning model.

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WILHELM: Chris, how does agentic AI — as distinct from generative AI — fit into this conversation?

MATTMANN: Agentic AI can communicate with services available in a digital ecosystem — your email, your drive with data and files. It can log onto websites, fill out forms, and pay bills, if it's given that power. The worry is that it's the next step toward creating the Terminator, but I think it's very important, and people should be experimenting with it.

WILHELM: I've heard some concerns about how students might use it, but also some admissions officers are saying, "It's great, because it does some of our work. It tells me who I need to send emails to — or just sends those emails."

SHEHU: There are potential security issues that can emerge, given what these AI agents can do. There are so many examples of agents failing or doing things their users didn't intend to be done. It's fine for experimentation, but when you're talking about linking systems

— email, messaging apps — and having AI doing these things, suddenly the effect of its hallucinations becomes very tangible.

We're keeping our experimentation to a small team of tech folks in our information-technology department. We want to better understand the opportunities, but we're proceeding very cautiously. We're a public university, and there are audits we have to respond to from our General Assembly, so we have to tread very carefully.

YOUNG: I'm hearing from a lot of colleges trying to make clear that their users should use tools the institution has purchased — or tools it has approved — so that information entered about students isn't being fed into a language model.

SHEHU: We need to think about the future of education and online learning — how we will teach computer science, writing, or rhetoric skills — as we face a radically different world in a few years.

MATTMANN: I'm excited about the potential use of AI in research, from pre-award research to post-award grant management. It could revolutionize the way that faculty get grants and do research, from early low-technology-readiness-level research all the way to the operational commercial transition. There's a big reckoning coming — and a big opportunity.

YOUNG: Colleges should be involving students in conversations about their AI efforts, too. AI affects the world of work they're about to enter. They have a perspective on this, and sometimes they have time and interest to explore it.

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This Key Takeaways was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.