

Presidential Vision in AI: Leading Your Campus Thoughtfully, Strategically, and Practically

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P R E S I D E N T S
C O R N E R

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer a speculative concept. It is now a defining force in higher education today. From research and institutional operations to student learning and community engagement, AI is reshaping how colleges and universities fulfill their missions. In this transformative moment, the role of a university president must be both visionary and actionable. Wear your bi-focals (metaphorically): what do you need to do right now so that your institution is successful long into the future? Presidents, and the emerging academic leaders who follow them, share a profound responsibility to ensure that AI is adopted ethically, effectively, and inclusively across their institutions.

Thought Leadership: Envisioning Institutional AI Futures

Envision AI as Mission-Centered Innovation

Presidents must not merely oversee AI adoption—they must lead it. Together with senior leadership, presidents should frame AI as a mission-centered innovation: one that strengthens institutional values, operational efficiencies, and strategic goals. Marvin Krislov, writing

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”

in *Forbes*, urges higher education to “shape [the AI revolution]” by embedding AI literacy across curricula and making it a core component of both undergraduate and graduate education. This framing empowers AI to serve the institution’s purpose rather than define it.

Ground AI Strategy in Ethical Governance

Innovation must always be guided by ethics. Stanford University’s Advisory Committee on AI, for example, recommends piloting AI in “safe spaces,” allowing faculty experimentation within ethical guardrails rather than through rigid mandates (*Forbes*). Similarly, the State University of New York (SUNY) system promotes “fairness by design,” emphasizing adaptability, privacy, and accountability. These models demonstrate how governance can balance creativity with responsibility.



Embrace Interdisciplinarity for Societal Good

AI influences every field, from the humanities to the health sciences. Emory University's AI.Humanity Initiative, with its cross-departmental hiring and research collaborations, illustrates how AI can serve as a catalyst for interdisciplinary learning, research, and social good (*Forbes*). Presidents can draw from such examples to cultivate institutional cultures that leverage AI to expand human understanding and address complex societal challenges.

The President as Ethical Champion

As we know, Presidents are the moral and ethical stewards of their institutions. MIT's former president, Rafael Reif, captured this role by advancing the idea of students becoming "AI bilingual"—technically fluent and ethically grounded. Through the creation of the Schwarzman College of Computing, Reif ensured that ethical reflection was embedded across MIT's computing and engineering disciplines (*Wikipedia*). This is a model of presidential leadership that integrates innovation with integrity.

From Vision to Practice: Turning Strategy into Action

Translating vision into institutional practice requires deliberate structures, collaborative leadership, and sustained commitment. Below are a few examples of where and how that has occurred.

Establish Governance Structures and Ethical Frameworks

Create an institution-wide AI governance committee that includes faculty, staff, students, IT leaders, legal counsel, and members of the Board of Trustees. **Angelo State University**, for example, grounded its AI efforts in transparency, digital fluency, and cross-functional oversight (Chief Learning Officer). Such structures enable institutions to balance innovation with accountability.

Empower Vice Presidents to Integrate AI Thoughtfully

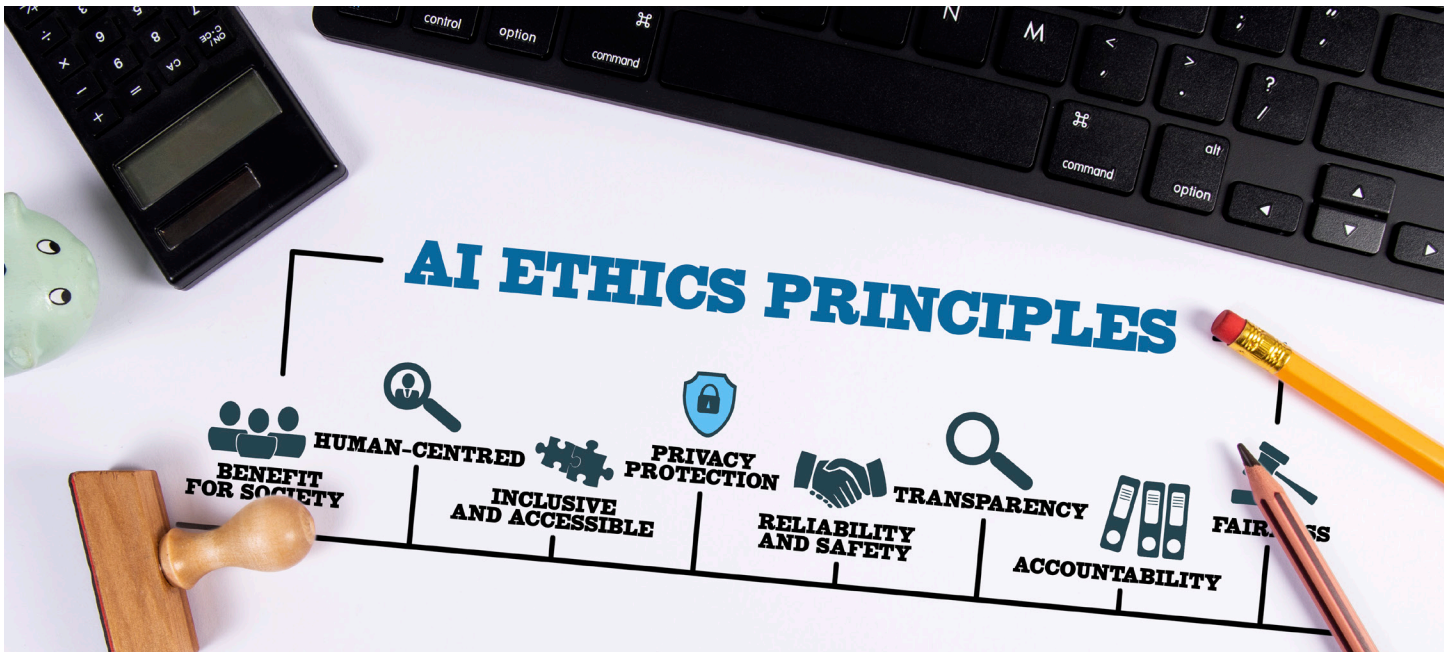
Encourage vice presidents to explore AI applications that directly enhance their areas of responsibility. For instance, Advancement or Foundation offices can use AI to strengthen alumni engagement by analyzing historical data, identifying shared experiences, and crafting more meaningful outreach. Generative AI can be an indispensable tool in this area. When aligned with institutional values, these tools amplify human connection rather than replace it.

Build 'Sandbox' Environments for Safe Experimentation

Stanford University demonstrates the power of creative experimentation through its "sandbox" AI environments—spaces where faculty and staff can test new ideas within defined ethical and technical parameters while safeguarding data integrity (*Forbes*). Such environments foster innovation without compromising institutional trust.

Prioritize AI Literacy for All

AI literacy should be foundational across all campus roles. At Pace University, Marvin Krislov reports that students engage in core AI coursework and capstone seminars that build both technical and ethical fluency (*Forbes*). Similarly, Karen Cangialosi, writing for *Every Learner Everywhere*, emphasizes that AI literacy helps combat bias, inequity, and misinformation—building transparency and trust across institutions.



Ensure Equity and Access

Equity must remain central to AI adoption. Elon University reminds us that “people, not technology, must be at the center.” Its approach highlights digital inclusion, experiential literacy, and responsible research as essential components of institutional AI strategy. Presidents should lead with this human-centered lens to ensure technology enhances, rather than erodes, access and opportunity.

Adopt Collaborative and Differentiated AI Strategies

A *Microsoft Education* analysis identifies six pillars for effective AI integration: institutional differentiators, ethical guardrails, collaborative culture, vendor partnerships, training and change management, and strong leadership. Institutions that partner with technology organizations while maintaining their mission and identity model the balance between innovation and integrity.

Emerging Academic Leaders and AI

Emerging leaders, division heads, early-career deans, and faculty innovators, play a vital role as the connectors between presidential vision and institutional practice.

They serve as advocates, educators, and ethical stewards for their campuses. Here are a few suggestions for executive team leadership and AI:

- Form cross-functional task forces to establish clear generative AI guardrails, as Bart Caylor recommends (*Medium*).
- Champion learning across silos, following Babson College’s “Generator” model, where interdisciplinary faculty labs foster hands-on AI exploration and ethical reflection (AACSB).
- Promote understanding over policing, echoing *Every Learner Everywhere* and its call for responsible and transparent AI adoption.
- Lead with humility and experimentation, launching small-scale pilots, sharing lessons learned, and co-creating institutional strategy.

For those who have not yet chosen to understand or engage with AI, now is the moment to begin. AI is rewriting the rules of higher education—but *who* writes the future matters most.

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Presidents must lead as both visionaries and strategists, anchoring AI initiatives in ethics, pedagogy, and their institutional mission. Emerging academic leaders stand at the bridge between promise and practice, responsible for nurturing an AI culture that is responsible, inclusive, and innovative. And, educating the board about how AI can enhance, support, and help the institution, is part of the President's leadership role.

By combining broad strategic thinking with grounded, actionable leadership—rooted in transparency, collaboration, equity, and critical engagement—higher education can ensure that AI becomes a tool that elevates the academy and strengthens its enduring values.



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Dr. Devorah Lieberman joined The Phoenix Philanthropy Group as a senior consultant. She also serves as senior advisor to the president of the American Council on Education, consultant to the International Association of University Presidents, executive coach to institutional presidents and others who aspire to be presidents, and sits on multiple for-profit and not-for-profit Boards.