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ARTICLE

MODERNIZING OPERATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Colleges and universities are navigating one of the most complex operating environments in recent memory. Enrollment is declining, budgets are tightening, staffing is stretched, and students now expect the same seamless digital experiences from their institutions that they get everywhere else. At the same time, AI, cloud technologies, and new tools are creating real opportunities to operate smarter and serve students better.

The gap between where most campuses are and where they need to be is largely operational. Legacy systems weren't built to connect, decentralized structures make change slow and consensus dependent, print and digital workflows often run on parallel tracks, and compliance requirements add a layer of complexity that can't be ignored. These aren't new problems, but the pressure to solve them has never been greater.

The good news is that a clear path forward exists, and organizations don't need to tackle everything at once to start making meaningful progress.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY, AND WHY IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

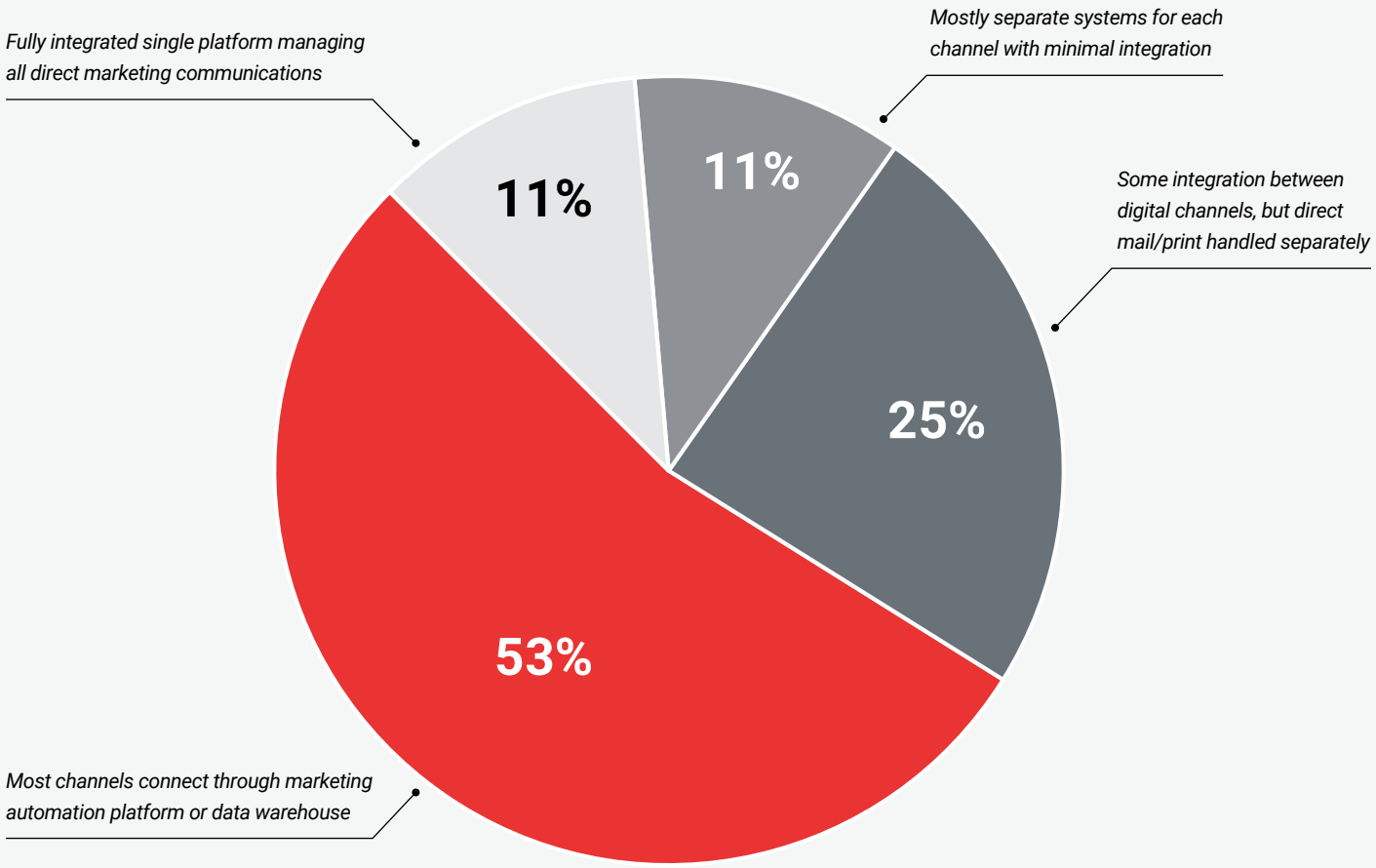
Every transformation journey looks a little different, but successful ones share a common starting point. Understanding existing workflows before investing in new technology is essential. The challenges below are ones that most of the higher education industry will recognize, and working through them, rather than around them, is what separates lasting change from isolated improvements.

Decentralized by Design and That's Part of the Challenge

Unlike many other industries, colleges and universities are often highly decentralized. Academic departments, admissions offices, financial aid teams, registrars, human resources departments, and advancement offices maintain distinct workflows and technologies. As shown in our research, this decentralization creates obstacles for workflow modernization. When survey respondents were asked about their marketing communications technology architecture, only 11% had a fully integrated platform managing all activities.

Figure 1: Marketing Communications Technology Architecture

How would you describe your organization's marketing communications technology architecture?



N = 45 Higher Ed Respondents
Source: Customer Communications Direct Marketing Business Survey; Keypoint Intelligence 2025

Even systems and processes that appear straightforward may involve multiple stakeholders, approval chains, governance structures, and technologies across the organization. Consequently, these initiatives frequently require extensive coordination and consensus-building. Before improving a process, stakeholders must first agree on how it should function, who owns it, and how changes will be managed. This can be particularly challenging in campus environments where departments value autonomy and have differing operational needs. Technology adoption often becomes as much an organizational and cultural challenge as a technical one.

Systems Work… They Just Don't Talk to Each Other

Many academic organizations still rely on decades-old systems that were built to last, not to connect. Over time, incremental adjustments have created collections of manual tasks, operations, and redundancies. When information lives in disconnected platforms, employees manually transfer data between them, which is inefficient and error-prone. Rather than enabling campus-wide improvement, technological investments often produce isolated gains that leave underlying inefficiencies untouched.

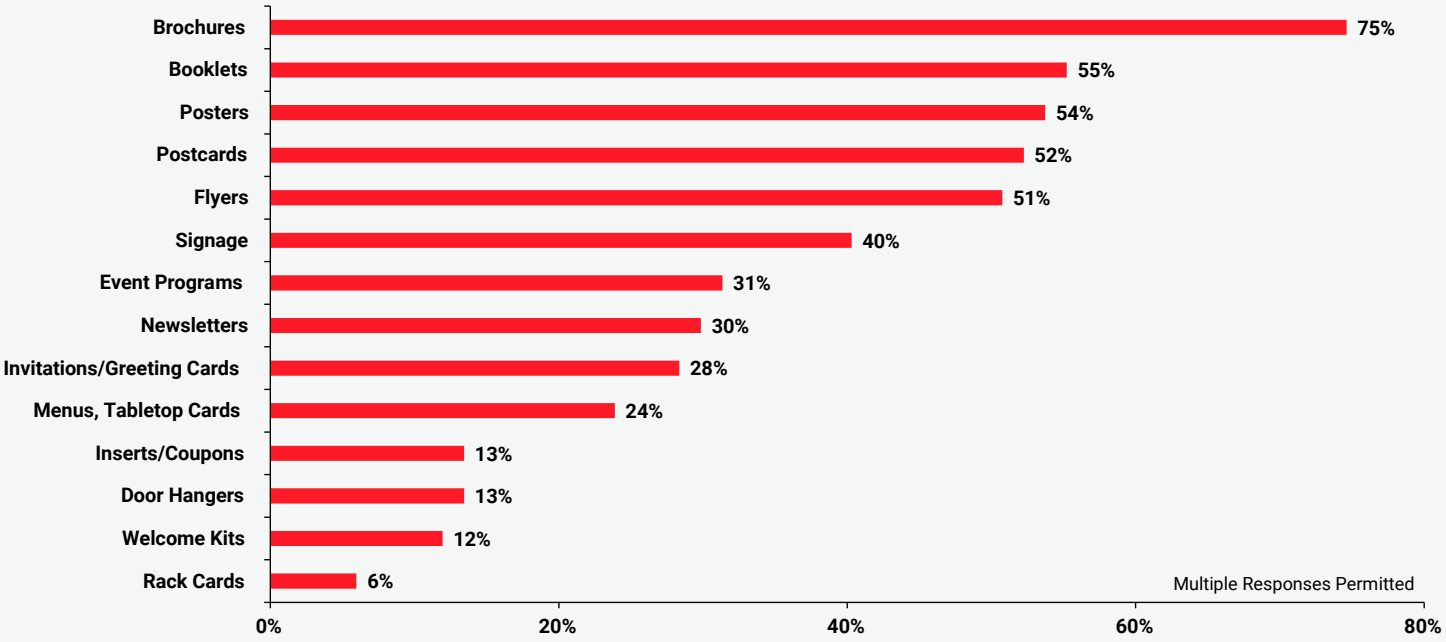
The campuses that are getting ahead tend to favor phased transformation over wholesale replacements. Connecting existing infrastructure through workflow automation, document management, and integration technologies enables campuses to improve efficiency without disrupting earlier investments. The greatest traction tends to come from high-impact areas like financial aid, admissions, student records, or procurement.

Where Print Fits in a Digital-First Environment

Print is easy to overlook in conversations about operational change, but colleges and universities continue to produce a significant amount of printed communications. According to research targeting higher education organizations, brochures, booklets, and posters are the most commonly produced materials.

Figure 2: Printed Marketing Materials

Which of the following types of printed marketing materials does your company purchase from others or produce internally?



N = 67 Higher Education Respondents that use printed marketing collateral
Source: United States Vertical Visions Multi-Client Study; Keypoint Intelligence

The ongoing demand for print reflects the diverse communication needs of higher education. For example:

- Admissions offices use recruitment brochures, direct mail, acceptance packets, and event materials to engage prospective students and families.
- Academic departments produce program guides, catalogs, and handouts.
- Alumni relations teams create printed newsletters, fundraising collateral, and donor reports.
- Across the campus, many parties use printed signage, wayfinding materials, posters, and informational displays to communicate with students, staff, and visitors.

Even as colleges and universities lean on digital channels, print remains relevant, particularly for prospective students that are weighing their options. A well-designed admissions package or program brochure communicates value in ways a website sometimes cannot.

The bigger issue is that the workflows supporting print are often the last to be modernized. Content gets created across departments, shared through email and network drives, and managed without consistent version control or branding oversight. Connecting print and digital production into a unified workflow is one of the more practical steps to take toward operational coherence.

Automation is the Goal, but Getting There is Complicated

Real progress has been made on the automation front. Online learning is now common, student portals have moved to the cloud, and data analytics inform institutional decisions. Even so, true end-to-end automation remains out of reach for most colleges and universities, often because the underlying systems were never designed to connect.

The benefits are well-understood. Intelligent document capture, automated forms processing, and workflow orchestration can reduce repetitive tasks and free staff for higher-value work. Campuses that are making progress lean in favor of starting small, focusing on high-friction areas like admissions, financial aid, or records management, and building from early wins rather than attempting broad transformations all at once.

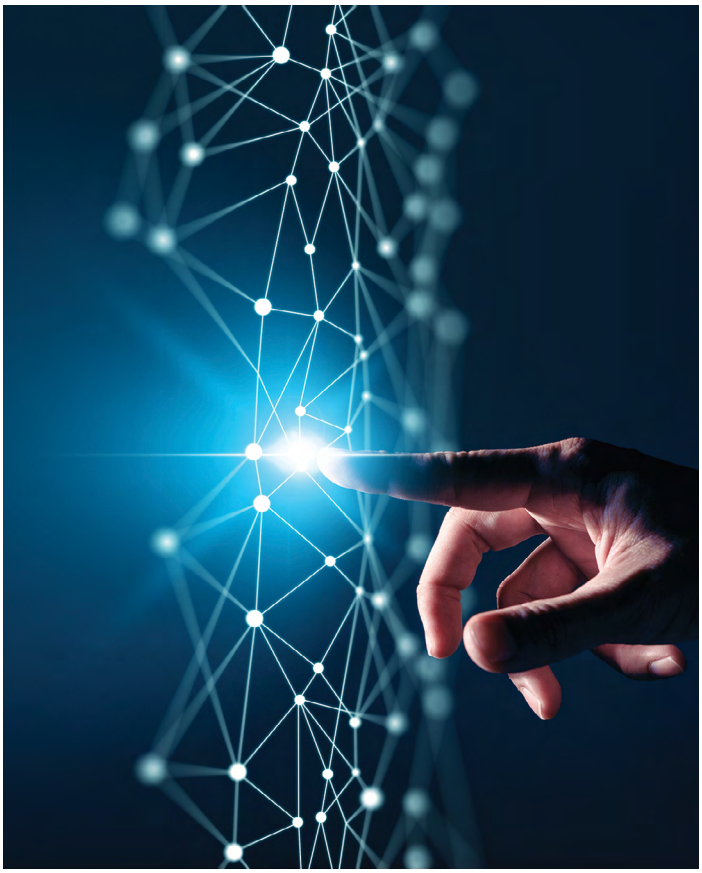
Institutions Move at the Speed of Consensus

Higher education values tradition, structure, and consensus. These qualities matter, but they can also slow progress. Employees may worry that innovation will eliminate jobs, reduce institutional knowledge, or weaken personal connections with students. Those concerns deserve to be taken seriously, not managed around.

Entities that navigate this best treat change management as part of the project rather than an afterthought. Clear communication about what is changing, why, and what it means for staff goes a long way. When the people who are most affected get a seat at the table early on, things tend to move faster and stick better than when change is handed down from above.

Compliance isn't the Obstacle, it's the Foundation

Student records, financial information, research data, and employee information are all subject to stringent privacy regulations. Treating compliance as an afterthought tends to stall progress or create new problems. Effective governance requires understanding how information is captured, stored, and accessed throughout its lifecycle, and building that understanding before (not after) new systems go in. Robust information governance and document management tools can provide greater control over sensitive content while still meeting compliance and security requirements.

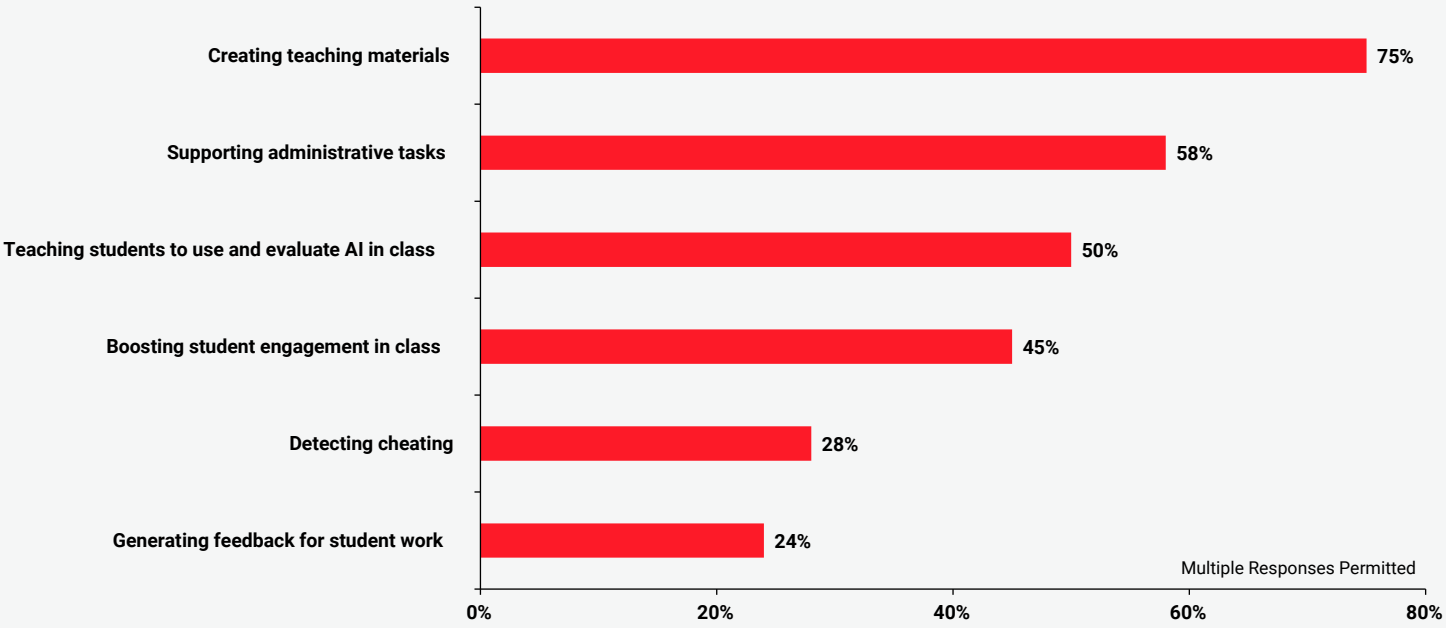


Adoption is Accelerating, and Governance is Still Catching Up

Faculty members are already using AI, most commonly for creating teaching materials and handling administrative tasks, and broader operational adoption is accelerating. People who are most affected get a seat at the table early on; things tend to move faster and stick better than when change is handed down from above.

Figure 3: Using AI in Higher Education

How are you using artificial intelligence tools for teaching?



N = 1,681 Higher Education Teachers
Source: Digital Education Council Global AI Faculty Survey; Digital Education Council 2025

AI-driven automation ranks among the top long-term priorities for many higher education leaders. The tools to pursue it without sacrificing compliance already exist. Broader adoption, though, depends on something less exciting than the technology itself. Clear policies for data access, content management, and regulatory compliance must be in place before expanding AI initiatives. Starting with lower-risk administrative processes builds confidence, improves outcomes, and refines governance practices before scaling. The goal is not to slow adoption, but to ensure that it holds up over time.

The Path Forward

Higher education doesn't need to solve everything at once, and the most successful efforts don't try to. The campuses that are making real progress tend to be less focused on which technologies they've adopted and more focused on how they've approached the work.

Campuses that start with process mapping rather than technology selection get further faster, because they understand where the actual friction is before they invest. Those that focus early energy on high-impact areas like admissions, financial aid, and records management can build momentum and organizational confidence that enables broader change. Rather than slowing things down, governance and compliance frameworks that are established early tend to accelerate progress because decisions get made with clarity rather than caution.

The best efforts almost always bring the most affected staff members into the conversation from the beginning, rather than forcing change from the top down.

The tools to support this kind of work exist today, across print and digital production, information management, workflow automation, and AI-assisted processing. The campuses that see results aren't necessarily the ones with the biggest budgets or the most aggressive timelines; they're the ones that have aligned people, processes, and technologies around shared goals and are committed to continuous improvement rather than one-time fixes. This isn't a distant goal… It's well within reach today.

If you're ready to take the next step, connect with Canon to explore what's possible for your organization.

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