

Higher Ed CIO Trends Report

How IT leaders are navigating
the digital AI transformation and
modern enrollment challenges



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Introduction

Leading through complexity is the expectation for today's higher ed CIOs.

The role of Chief Information Officer (CIO) at higher education institutions has evolved immensely over the past decade. Today, higher ed CIOs are tasked with a large and wide swath of responsibilities, from cybersecurity and IP protection to developing internal talent and managing digital transformation. They do this all while also keeping faculty and students online and supported with the tools necessary to achieve success.

Over the past few months, Ocelot (now part of Gravyty) surveyed more than 100 higher education CIOs from across the country, both from private and public as well as two and four-year institutions, to better understand their top priorities, barriers to achieving success, and how they are working to overcome key challenges. This report summarizes our findings.



Priorities and pain points

Balance institutional demands with the urgent need to modernize campus systems.

We found the majority of CIOs are being measured on their ability to impact and meet institutional KPIs, including enrollment and retention numbers which are, generally speaking, declining across the nation. In doing so, however, they are tasked with overcoming a complex set of challenges, including resource constraints, employee retention, and lack of funding.

When asked what their key technology-led priorities are, most CIOs surveyed noted the growing need to secure data across campus and meet compliance standards. Many also pointed to efforts they are undertaking to improve the digital student experience by streamlining communications.

Resource constraints

52%

Employee retention

50%

Lack of funding

49%

Declining enrollment

45%

Declining retention rates

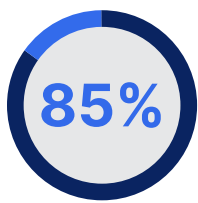
19%

Digital experience gaps

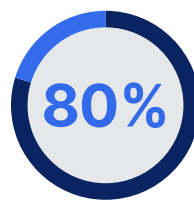
What communication channels does your institution use with students?

It's evident a positive digital student experience is central to meeting KPIs with nearly all those surveyed agreeing enrollment and retention depends heavily on it. Many higher ed CIOs have seen what can happen when the student experience is prioritized with 77% reporting past investments in advancing the student experience improved retention.

Despite investments' proven impact, institutions are struggling to provide the digital experience students want and need. **Only 16% of higher ed CIOs say students are getting the right personalized message at the right time across communication channels.**

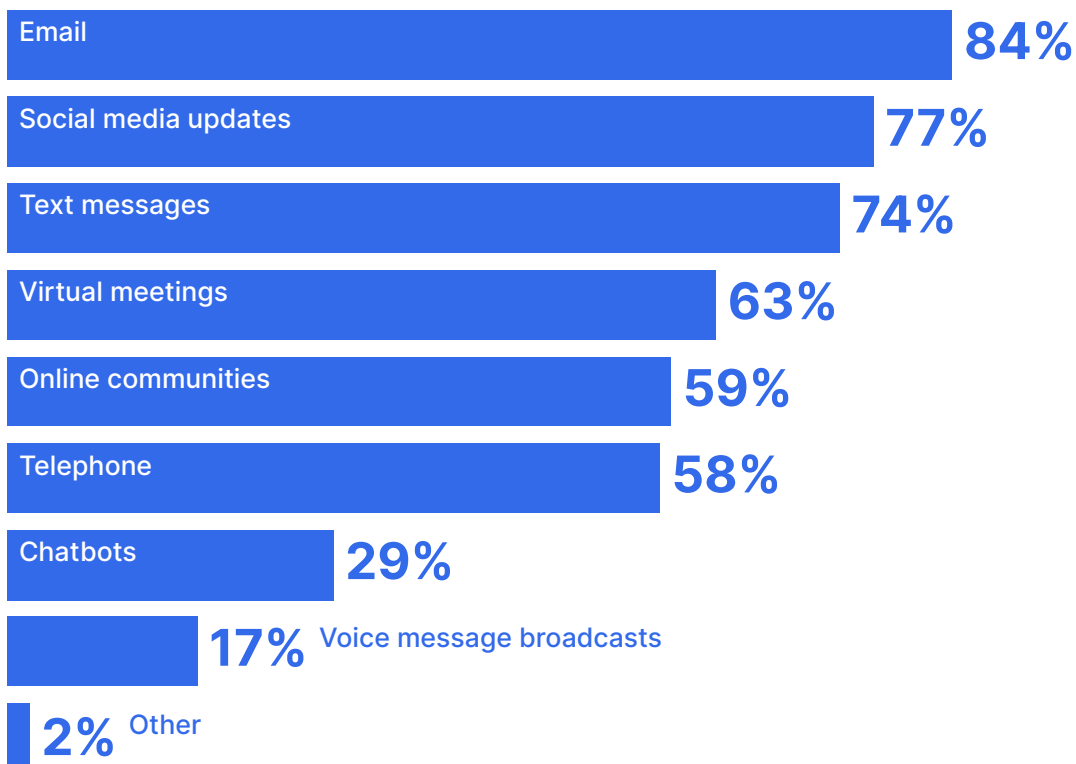


of higher ed CIOs agree enrollment and retention depends heavily on students having a seamless digital experience



say creating a digital student experience is a challenge for their institution

What communication channels do you use to engage students?



Barriers to achieving a seamless student experience

Unifying systems and messages is harder than it looks.

While it's clear CIOs understand what is necessary to meet their goals, streamlining systems and communicating a unified message to students has proven to be a difficult endeavor. When asked what is standing in the way of implementing a unified student experience, higher ed CIOs point to budget restraints, lack of integration expertise on staff, and siloed departmental goals and priorities.

An explosion of SaaS applications across campus, deployed at both the institutional and departmental levels, has created a complex web of systems that are challenging for school staff to manage. 65% of higher ed CIOs reported experiencing tech creep in the past 4-5 years, which they say has led to:

64%

stretched budgets

62%

Inability to support and use applications effectively

36%

redundant systems

Emerging AI-powered applications, each promising to expand capabilities while optimizing resources through automation, have also put pressure on CIOs. When it comes to AI, determining how to best protect IP and student data while also managing compliance and policy can be a challenge.



Address operational roadblocks

Make digital transformation possible, not painful.

Higher ed CIOs are expected to deliver a unified student experience across channels, but they're facing serious roadblocks. Resource constraints, integration gaps, and departmental silos make it difficult to streamline communication or modernize systems. Most CIOs report tech creep and tool sprawl as major issues—adding complexity instead of solving it.

66%
siloed systems

Fragmented tech stacks make it hard to deliver a unified brand or support experience to students.

65%
report tech creep

The explosion of disconnected SaaS tools has created budget strain, integration issues, and management challenges.

64%
tools underused

Without proper support and system integration, tools go underutilized and value is lost.

62%
budget pain

Cost constraints are limiting the ability to consolidate systems and simplify the digital experience.

Overcoming challenges with integrated AI

Transform complexity into coordinated action.

CIOs across public and private institutions are examining integration strategies to overcome the challenges associated with siloed data, resource constraints, and tech creep. Of these, 65% are either currently consolidating or plan to consolidate their stacks.

Public school CIOs are more likely to have integration strategies in place. However, 60% of private institution CIOs that do not have an integration strategy plan on investing in one in the next five years.

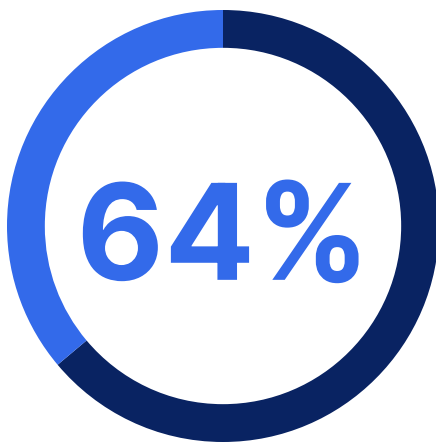


Solving with strategy, scaling with AI

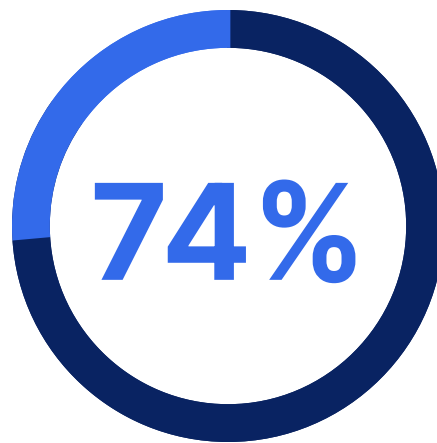
CIOs are turning to integration and AI to overcome their toughest challenges.

Most CIOs integrate systems to provide a consistent experience, no matter which system stores the data, while enabling cross-system reporting. More than half say a connected student concept focused on integration would solve their institution's pain points. It is no surprise integration is a critical piece of the puzzle given 85% of CIOs who are most concerned with declining enrollment say delivering a more personalized student experience across communication channels is a top priority.

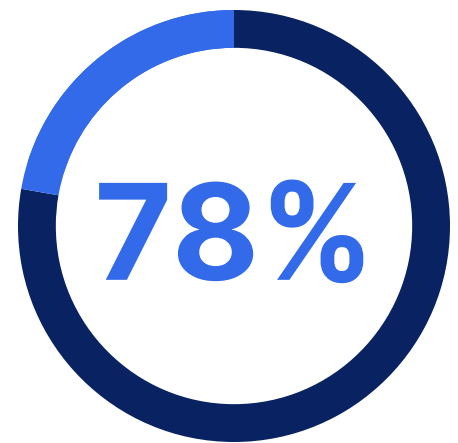
CIOs Investing in AI



of those who say resource constraints are a major pain point



of those who reported that systems and communications are siloed



of those who note creating a seamless digital experience is a challenge for their institution

Leadership that meets the moment

Turning complexity into progress through vision, commitment, and strategic change.

Higher ed CIOs are at the forefront of navigating a sea of changes across both cybersecurity and digital transformation, while supporting the critical mission of enhancing student success. In the realm of AI, it is clear from the survey results that strategic integration is paramount to success.

And that despite the hurdles that exist around resource constraints and tech creep, today's CIOs have an unwavering commitment to improving the student experience at their institutions. As schools look to solve for declining enrollment and retention, finding ways to improve the day-to-day lives of students is critical. Higher ed CIOs will be instrumental in shaping a future where technology not only meets but anticipates the needs of both students and faculty alike, ensuring the resilience and vitality of higher education.



See Gravyty in action

Experience how our unified platform helps higher ed CIOs tackle digital transformation, streamline student communication, and deliver personalized engagement at scale.

[Learn more](#) →