



INSIGHT PAPER

Pushed to the Brink

How Rapid Enrollment Growth Is Creating a Student Success Challenge at America's Elite Universities



Abstract

America's most highly ranked universities are experiencing rapid enrollment growth even as the broader landscape of higher education contracts. Amid this growth is a lurking student success challenge as existing services and legacy technologies are called upon to serve more students and meet new expectations for support. These institutions, historically known for their academic rigor and high graduation rates, must now evolve to meet the needs of a more diverse student body. Failure to adapt to these changes could harm institutional reputation and create operational inefficiencies. This briefing grew out of conversations with dozens of student success administrators at some of the most selective and elite universities in the country. In it, we explore the pressures and risks these administrators face as they adapt to the challenge, including the opportunities offered by artificial intelligence.



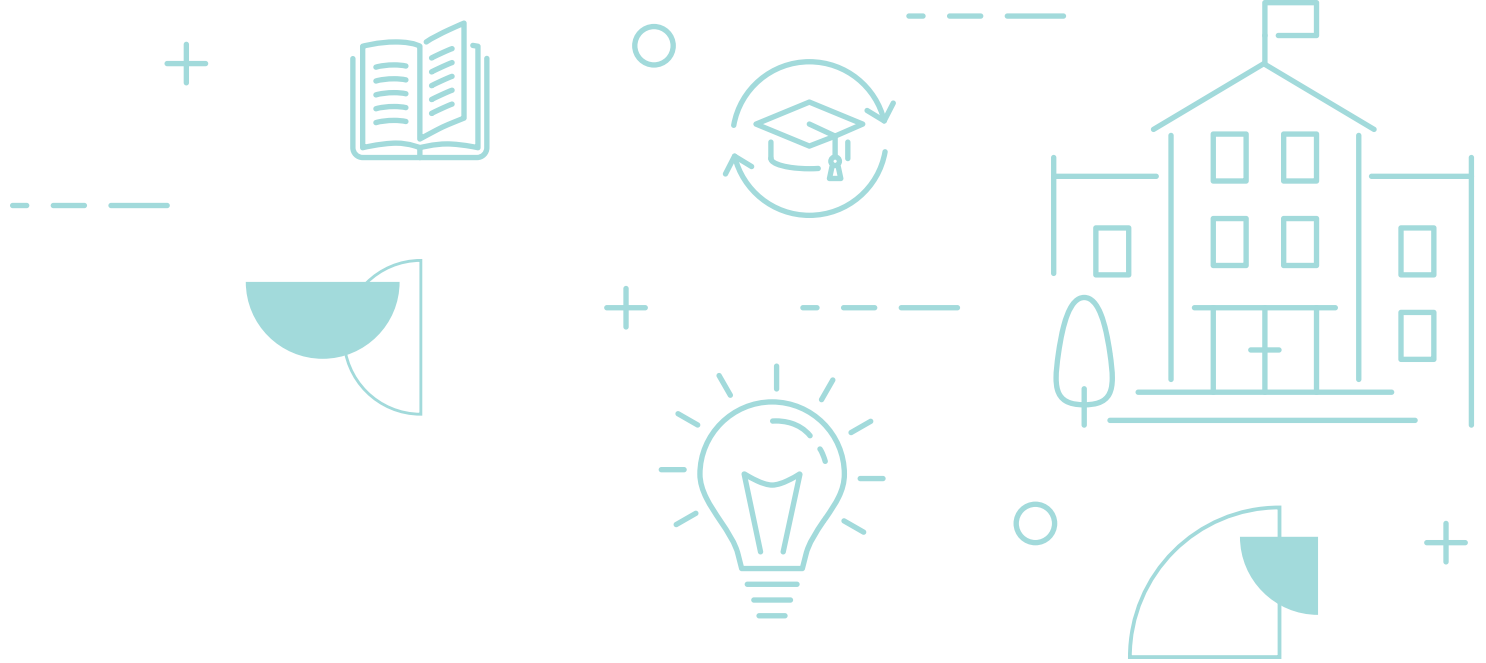
Introduction 2

Growth Is Straining Limited Resources, but That’s Only the Beginning 6

Eight Hurdles to Meeting the Demand for Student Success Services 9

Preparing for the Future of Artificial Intelligence 11

Conclusion 15



INTRODUCTION

Elite Colleges Are Prospering amid a Rapidly Changing Higher Education Landscape

College enrollment in the United States has fallen in recent years. A combination of factors has contributed to this trend, including public skepticism about the value of a college degree and a shrinking number of high school graduates choosing to go directly to college after finishing high school. Moreover, the pipeline of K-12 students is also contracting, forecasting even fewer college attendees by the end of the 2020s. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the situation, with its lasting impact on student mental health and academic preparedness. As students struggle to cope with these challenges, many are reconsidering their college plans, leading to further enrollment declines.

Yet, many of the most selective and wealthy universities are bucking the trend and expanding their class sizes. (Figure 1) Test-optional policies, introduced in response to the pandemic, have broadened access to these institutions, attracting a wider pool of applicants. One of the most significant reasons for this growth is the increasing preference among students for “brand name” colleges. Many students view these elite institutions as a guarantee of value and future success. As a result, students are applying to elite colleges in record numbers, and these institutions are admitting more students than ever before. Some of these top universities are opening new campuses in different cities or absorbing the infrastructure and resources left

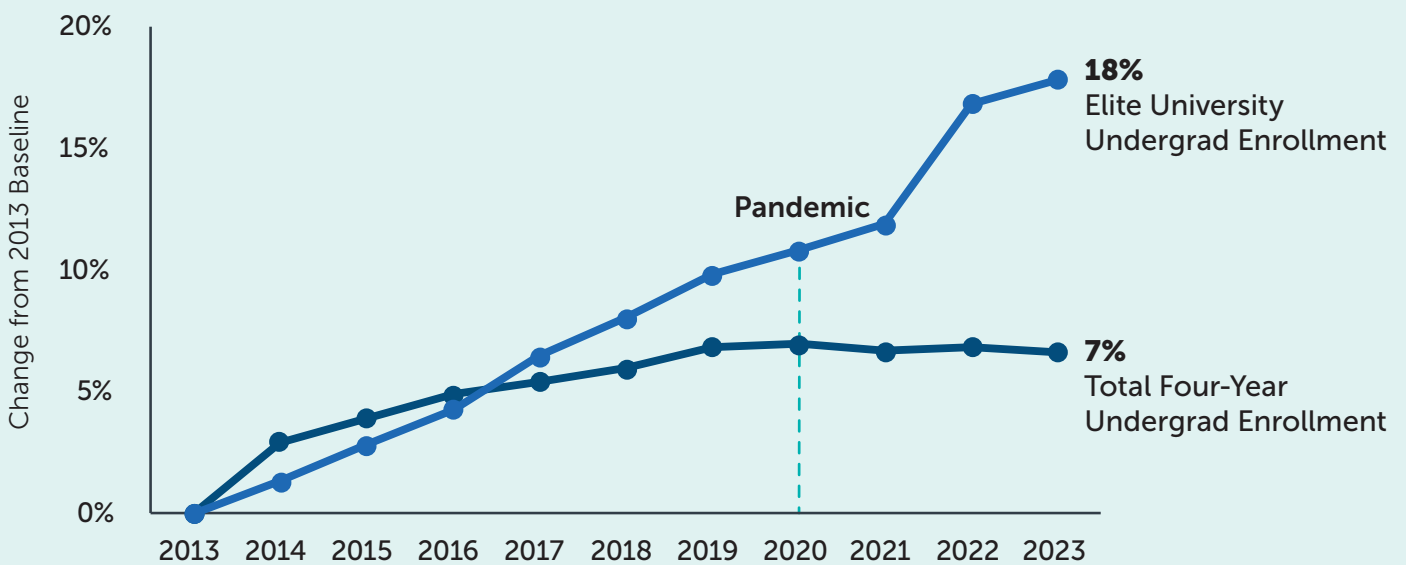


behind by smaller institutions that have closed their doors. This approach has allowed these universities to grow not only in terms of student numbers but also in terms of physical capacity and prestige.

However, all this growth comes with growing pains. Student success services, such as advising, academic support, and career services, are being stretched to their limits as they serve more students than ever before. We spoke with over

two dozen student success administrators at elite universities to learn more about the changes they are seeing and the challenges they face. Most spoke under an assurance of anonymity, thus we have compiled their feedback here into a summary report. We hope sharing their experiences will help others adapt quickly to this new environment and maintain an outstanding track record of student outcomes.

FIGURE 1
Undergraduate Enrollment Change, 2013–2023



Source: IPEDS, National Center for Education Statistics; EAB interviews and analysis.



What Do We Mean by “Elite University”?

There is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes an “elite university.” However, for the purposes of this report, we define an “elite” institution as one that meets at least two of the following criteria:

- ▶ Retention rate over 90%
- ▶ Endowment of over \$1 billion
- ▶ Ranked among the top 100 national universities in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings

110+ US colleges and universities meet these criteria

24% of undergraduate students” attend an elite university

Source: IPEDS, National Center for Education Statistics; EAB interviews and analysis.

BACKGROUND

A History of Strong Students Leaves Many Elite Universities with Room to Grow Their Student Success Strategies

Historically, elite universities have delivered exceptionally high graduation rates and strong career placement outcomes. Much of this impressive track record is driven by the caliber of students these institutions can attract. Elite colleges typically admit top-tier students, many of whom come from affluent backgrounds and high-performing high schools. These students often require little in the way of academic or financial assistance and can more easily weather disruptions that might derail others on their way to graduation.

What's more, students who leave elite institutions often transfer to other top schools and graduate. This fosters an environment where a student departure isn't necessarily seen as a bad thing. Instead, it is perceived to be driven by student preference rather than a deficiency in the institution that needs to be addressed. Faculty and administrators know that most students who leave will be fine and may even thrive elsewhere, making it hard to build urgency around the challenge.

This isn't merely a case of privilege begetting privilege. Studies show that elite institutions are among the best at enabling socioeconomic mobility for students from

the lowest earnings brackets. Those who go to elite universities graduate at higher rates and are much more likely to have a high-paying career than their peers who attend other schools. That said, most elite universities enroll disproportionately fewer students from underserved communities. This means that while elite universities can nurture student talent with the best possible support, this support is concentrated on a relatively small share of students and limited in total scope when compared to other institutions.

As a result, elite institutions have been able to generate strong outcomes without the extensive student success networks seen at other colleges. Student success, while still considered important, has never received the same degree of strategic attention at elite universities as it has at other institutions over the past two decades. Many elite universities have comparably few full-time staff dedicated to student success. Budgets and physical space are also comparatively undersized. This is creating a challenge as these teams strive to serve a greater number of students, many of whom have evolving needs that the institution is not yet equipped to handle.





CHALLENGE

Growth Is Straining Limited Resources, but That's Only the Beginning

Rapid enrollment growth at elite colleges is stretching their support resources thin. As these institutions absorb more students, growing pains emerge, especially in supporting students from diverse and underserved backgrounds. Larger classes and higher support needs are overwhelming existing capacity. Nearly every contact we spoke with highlighted the urgent need for scaling support resources to match rising demand.

Four Other Trends Stretching Student Success Resources at Elite Universities

While describing their growth challenges, contacts shared **four other trends** that are stretching the capacity of their teams. These changes are compounding the resource challenges and need to be addressed alongside scaling support. Some require new thinking, skills, or technology.

1 Increased Student Diversity and Support Needs

The demographic makeup of elite universities is shifting toward more diverse and less affluent students, which brings new challenges. Schools are seeing more Pell Grant recipients, rising levels of food insecurity, and increased need for financial support. One institution cited students' financial instability as the top challenge for their student success efforts, noting that "no amount of advising can overcome a non-tenable financial position."

2 Impact of Unfinished Learning and Pandemic Effects

The academic preparedness of incoming students has declined due to the pandemic, and elite universities are not exempt from this callout (Figure 2). Faculty are increasingly concerned about students' readiness for college-level work, particularly in STEM fields. Many of our contacts shared that faculty feel they need to cover high school-level material before addressing college content. The move toward test-optional admissions policies may also be masking this issue, as students are more likely to report higher scores, giving a skewed view of academic readiness.

3 Elevated Demand for Customer Service

Many parents are deeply involved in their students' education, and this seems especially true of students at elite universities. These parents understand they are paying a lot in the way of tuition, and they often expect a commensurate level of customer service from the teams working to support their students. While often well-meaning, parent interactions can occupy a disproportionate amount of staff time and even drain morale in some cases.

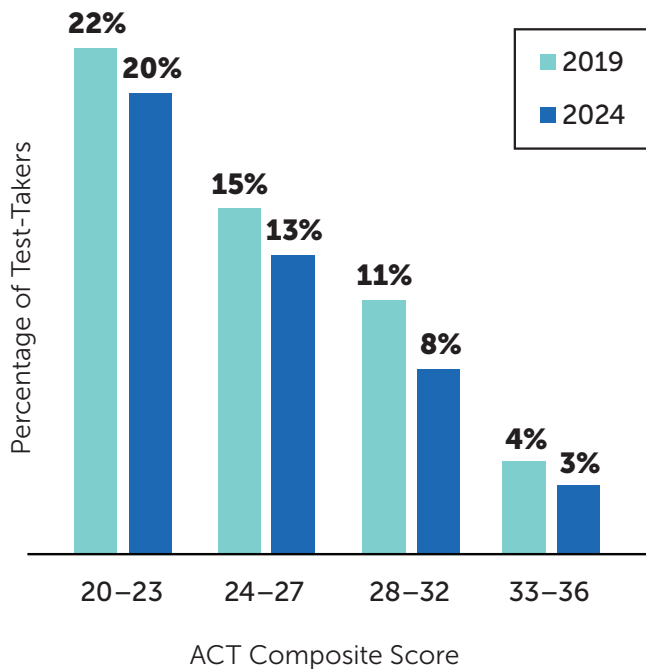
4 Focus on Financial Value and Career ROI

Students at elite universities are increasingly focused on the return they get from their investment of time and money. Many are now entering college with clear career goals and less interest in a broad liberal arts education. This shift has prompted elite institutions to embed experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, across the curriculum. However, the growing demand for career advising and internships has created a strain on available resources.

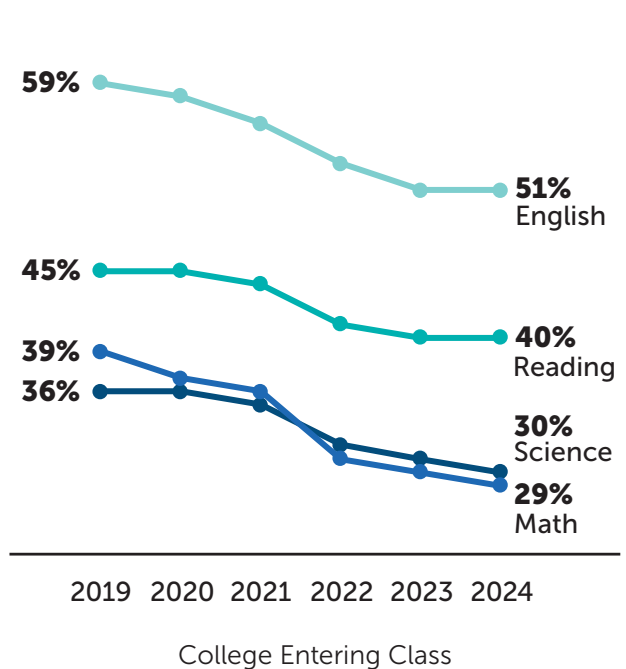
FIGURE 2

Academic Readiness Eroding Before Our Eyes

Trend in ACT Composite Scores



Students Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks



Source: ACT Research, U.S. High School Graduating Class Data; EAB interviews and analysis.



A New Threat to Institutional Reputation

The Carnegie Foundation, in collaboration with the American Council on Education (ACE), is expected to launch a new rankings system in early 2025 with the aim of assessing how effectively colleges and universities enable social and economic mobility for their graduates. If successful, it could redefine how institutional effectiveness is measured: not just on research output but also on economic impact. This classification could play a role in influencing the distribution of government grants, foundation funding, and other resources potentially redirecting support toward schools with strong access and outcome records.

► Key Features of the New Classification

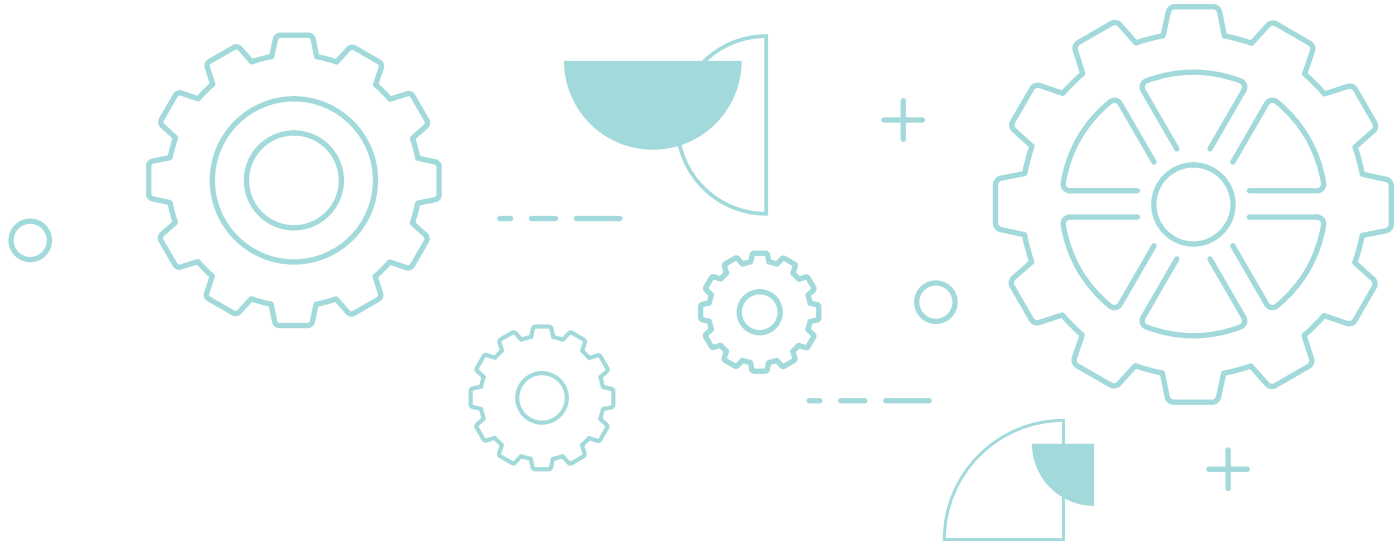
The Social and Economic Mobility Classification will focus on two main components: **access and economic outcomes**. The “access” metric will evaluate the socioeconomic and racial diversity of enrolled students, comparing institutional demographics with those of the region it serves. The “economic outcomes” component will analyze postgraduation earnings for students who received federal financial aid, adjusting for variations in job markets.

Instead of a single ranking, this system will create peer groups of like institutions, thus enabling more meaningful comparisons. Doing so will highlight schools that excel at using their available resources to enable upward mobility for the community they serve, while providing aspirational targets for other schools that want to improve.

► Implications for Elite Colleges

This new classification could bring several shifts in how institutions are viewed and funded, potentially influencing traditional elite colleges in notable ways. Unsurprisingly, several of our contacts brought up the new rankings and talked about the potential for competition with one another. Some worried that they might not grade out well and speculated on how they might be perceived among leadership or the broader higher education community. Others shared that a shortfall were already preparing by taking a new look at innovation in career services.

All contacts agreed that the new rankings would likely add urgency to their work as their institutions enroll more diverse students and have higher expectations of outcomes. Some were optimistic that this could provide a window to increasing their leadership’s mindshare around student success and advance investment.



ASSESSMENT

Eight Hurdles to Meeting the Demand for Student Success Services

Our contacts described several strategic hurdles they face when doing this work. Not everyone reported these barriers, and no one reported them all. Nevertheless, we thought it would be useful to the reader to have a compiled list of these challenges so that they might consider the relevancy and solution to each within the context of their own institutions.

- 1 Low Executive Mindshare.** Several contacts shared that their biggest barrier to improvement is leadership mindshare. Leadership attention at elite universities can easily be directed away from undergraduate education and towards other high-profile areas such as research and athletics. Without an executive sponsor, it can be hard for student success leaders to get the access needed to make their case for new resources.
- 2 Limited Executive Influence.** Other colleges and universities have focused on student success for over a decade, and many now have cabinet officers for whom this is their primary responsibility. In contrast, “chief student success officers” at elite universities are often lower on the org chart, with limited span of control and budget. Contacts report it can be difficult to get a seat at the table when decisions are being made.
- 3 Underinvestment in Human Capital.** Student success positions at elite universities are often underpaid, leading to high turnover. This constant cycle of hiring and training new staff negatively impacts morale and adds psychological weight to the already demanding work. Without stable and adequately supported advising teams, it is difficult to deliver consistent student support, further exacerbating retention challenges.
- 4 Administrative Turnover.** Frequent administrative turnover poses a significant risk to ongoing student success initiatives. When key leaders depart, any progress made on these efforts can be lost. To mitigate this, universities must hardwire student success initiatives into their strategic plans to ensure continuity regardless of leadership changes. On the positive side, many new presidents are arriving from institutions where student success was a priority, bringing this mindset with them.

5

Cultural Misalignment. Elite colleges have a history of serving affluent students, and their institutional structures reflect this. As student demographics shift, there is a growing mismatch between the identities of students and how they perceive faculty and administrators. The Gen Z student body is racially and culturally diverse, while faculty and leadership often remain predominantly White and older. This cultural disconnect can result in a misalignment of student support services, which were not initially designed for this new generation of students.

6

Decentralized Approaches. Elite universities are often highly decentralized into colleges, with each college taking its own approach to student success. This makes coordination of student success efforts difficult without the backing of a high-level central authority. Communication challenges arise not only within the main campus but with new campuses that spring up in other cities. Different regions and countries have varying local rules, regulations, and procedures, creating further complexities in providing cohesive student support.

7

Faculty Engagement. Some faculty at well-funded research universities will naturally prioritize scholarship over anything else. This makes faculty buy-in for student success strategies harder to secure at elite universities than it might be at colleges where undergraduates are the primary or sole focus. Unique approaches are needed to reach faculty who see their role as researchers first and teachers second, with student success efforts falling lower on their list of priorities.

8

Underdeveloped Technology Infrastructure. Elite institutions often lag in implementing the technology necessary to support modern student success efforts. At a minimum, institutions need a customer relationship management (CRM) system for student communication, scheduling, and alerts, as well as an analytics platform to identify trends and opportunities. Some elite colleges are still relying on manual processes, such as spreadsheets, to track student retention, which hinders their ability to intervene early and efficiently support at-risk students.

Technology Gatekeepers and Data Fragmentation

Technological barriers remain a significant issue for elite institutions. Gatekeepers can prevent access to critical data, and the decentralization of databases across global campuses makes it difficult to create a unified student record. A comprehensive and consolidated technology platform is necessary to enable effective student success strategies, especially as artificial intelligence increases in importance.



FUTURE-PROOFING

Preparing for the Future of Artificial Intelligence

Student success teams at elite universities are increasingly exploring how to use artificial intelligence (AI) to improve how they teach, assess, and support students. The integration of AI into higher education is poised to change many aspects of student success, from advising to academic operations. While some of these changes may seem foreign at first, the adoption of AI is expected to become more normalized as institutions adjust to the evolving landscape of education technology.

One of the primary reasons student success teams are embracing AI is the high rate of staff turnover, which is particularly problematic for small teams. Elite institutions, despite their prestige, are not immune to the challenge of keeping talent in place. Many teams find themselves in a constant cycle of hiring and training new staff, which disrupts their ability to provide consistent support to students. This shortage of advisors and support personnel has made it difficult for universities to maintain the high levels of student engagement they aspire to, driving a push toward using technology and AI to fill these gaps. AI can take over some of the more repetitive and time-consuming tasks, allowing staff to focus on higher-order student needs.

A survey conducted by EAB found that one-quarter of student support staff are already using AI at least once a week. (Figure 3) Most commonly, they rely on publicly available AI such as ChatGPT or enterprise AI such as Microsoft Copilot. The top three uses for AI among these staff are to generate personalized messages to students, answer frequently asked questions via chatbots, and assist with career advising, particularly in helping students with resume writing. Additionally, some teams have started using AI to write grant proposals and apply for academic conferences. Before integrating AI, many did not have the time to create high-quality applications or presentations, so AI tools are enabling them to achieve more visibility and success in academic circles.

At elite universities, there is growing curiosity and optimism around the use of AI to support students. Several of our contacts spoke about how they need to evolve to be more “student-ready” and how AI tools are expected to play a key role in that. There is also recognition that staying competitive in the higher education market requires keeping up with peer institutions, and very soon this is going to include the sophistication of your AI adoption.

Many leaders at elite schools feel pressure to adopt AI because falling behind in this area could negatively impact their reputation and status within the academic community.

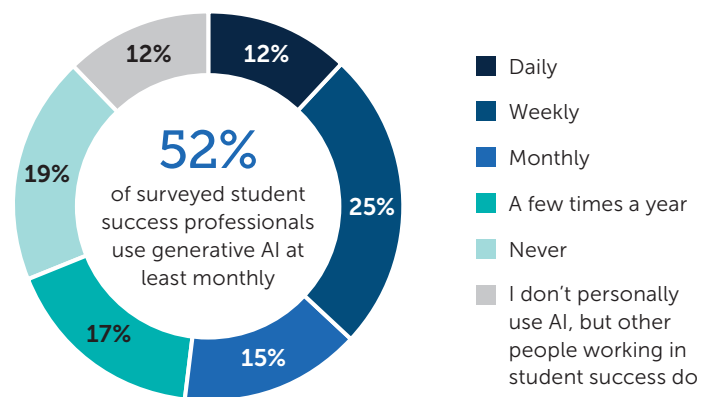
However, despite the enthusiasm, there is still significant foundational work to be done in terms of bringing faculty and staff up to speed on AI technologies. Many university employees are still learning how to use AI effectively and ethically, and institutions are grappling with decisions about what kinds of AI use are appropriate. One of the challenges in integrating AI is that of gaining faculty buy-in, as some are hesitant to change long-established academic practices. Nonetheless, the pace of change at elite institutions suggests that AI adoption will continue to move forward quickly.

The adoption of AI by student success teams at elite universities is well underway, though there are still hurdles to overcome. As AI

becomes more embedded in academic life, these institutions will likely continue to innovate, using technology to meet the evolving needs of their students. With ongoing training and a focus on integrating AI into both academic and administrative functions, universities are positioning themselves to stay at the forefront of higher education in an increasingly digital world.

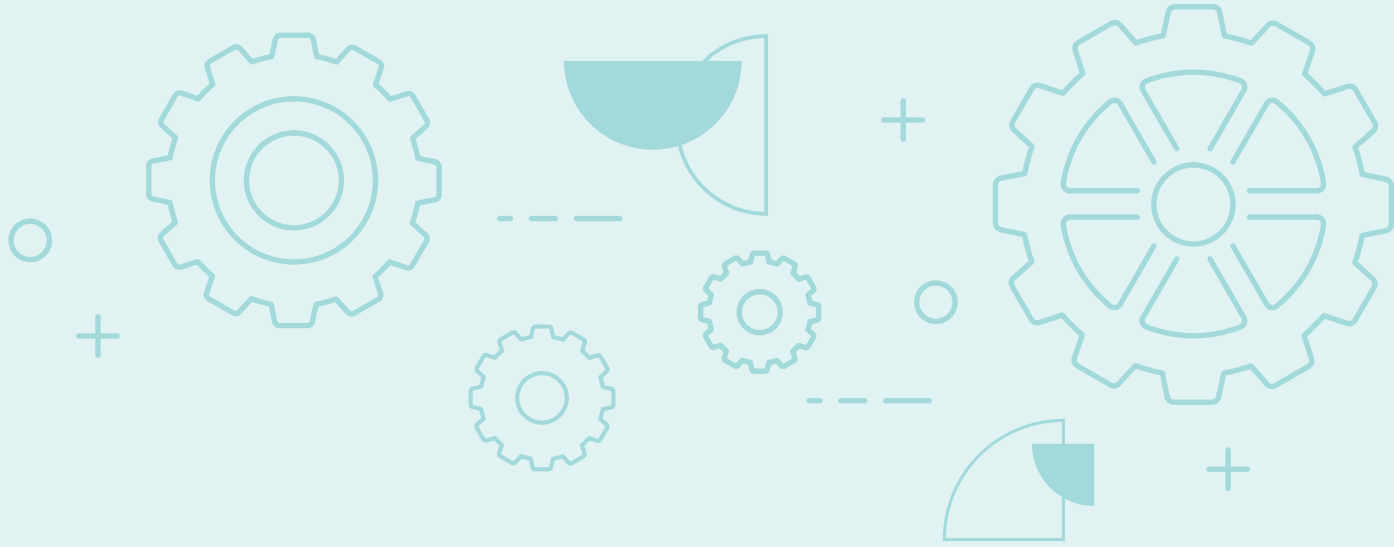
FIGURE 3

How often do you personally use AI in your role?
EAB survey of student success professionals, n=221



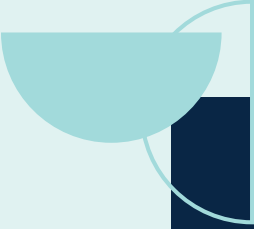
Syracuse University recently appointed Jeffrey Rubin as their first-ever Senior Vice President (SVP) for Digital Transformation, with a mandate to oversee the adoption of AI across the institution. Rubin will work closely with the Chief Information Officer (CIO) to ensure that AI is effectively integrated into both academic and operational functions, with a focus on aligning these technologies with the institution's core mission of teaching and research.

Rubin is an SU alumnus, a faculty member, and a successful entrepreneur. As such, he brings a unique perspective to the role, combining technical expertise with an understanding of academic culture. His background gives him credibility among the faculty and offers assurances that these new technologies will enhance the educational experience rather than disrupt it.



What Technology Do You Need?

Technology offers a path forward for elite colleges facing rising student needs and resource strain. Comprehensive platforms for early intervention, academic advising, and predictive analytics allow colleges to centralize student data, better predict student support needs, and intervene before they face academic or personal crises.

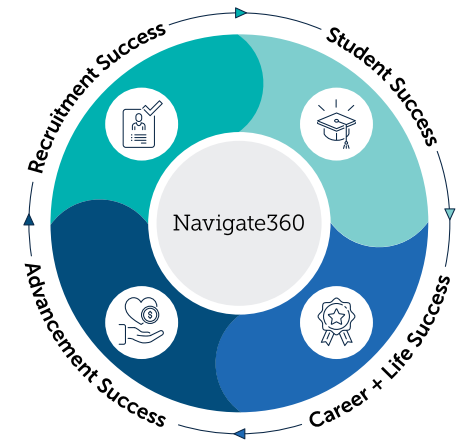


EAB's technology platforms are designed with the specific needs of colleges and universities in mind. Navigate360 enables your team's efforts supporting student academics, finances, wellness, and career development. New artificial intelligence features help staff increase their reach and impact by personalizing messaging and improving access to student data. You can learn more about Navigate360 on the following page.

About Navigate360

Recruit, Retain, and Empower Students in College and Beyond

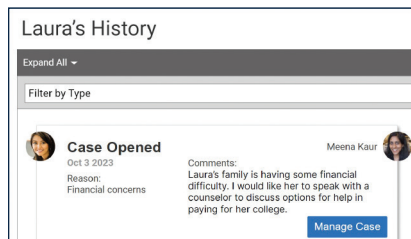
Navigate360 is the leading student CRM for colleges and universities, a powerful technology that unites administrators, faculty, staff, and students in a collaborative network that supports the entire student experience, from recruitment to career. Navigate360 is powered by over a decade of student success research honed from billions of student interactions—and now, it's also amplified by AI.



Staff Workflow and Automation

Empower staff to proactively engage with prospective and current students

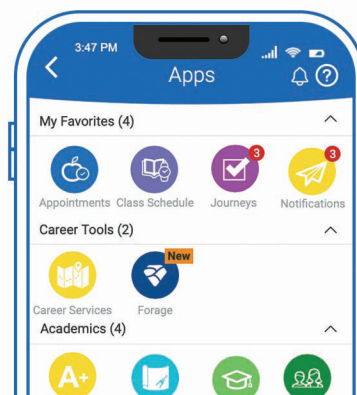
- ▶ AI-Powered Messaging
- ▶ Complete Student Profile
- ▶ Coordinated Care Network
- ▶ Cases and Referrals
- ▶ Automated Alerts and Messaging
- ▶ Two-Way SMS
- ▶ Campaigns and Template Library
- ▶ To-Dos
- ▶ Appointments and Surveys
- ▶ Events
- ▶ Notes and Attachments
- ▶ Faculty Progress Reports
- ▶ Prospect Application Management



Student Engagement Hub

Provide your students with a one-stop shop for self-service resources

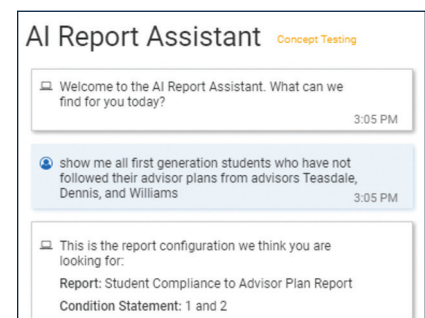
- ▶ AI-Powered Knowledge Bot
- ▶ iOS and Android Apps
- ▶ Student Success Network
- ▶ Campus Resources
- ▶ Appointment Scheduling
- ▶ Class Schedule
- ▶ In-App Messaging, Notifications, and Surveys
- ▶ Career Match and Journeys
- ▶ Study Buddies
- ▶ Financial Planner
- ▶ Prospect Portal



Reporting and Analytics

Proactively identify opportunities for better student support

- ▶ AI-Powered Report Builder
- ▶ Advanced Query Builder
- ▶ Data Visualizer
- ▶ Templated and Scheduled Reports
- ▶ Automated Workflow from Reports
- ▶ Population Health Analytics
- ▶ Activity Analytics
- ▶ Intervention Effectiveness Analytics
- ▶ Historical Analytics
- ▶ Predictive Model
- ▶ Analytics Data Exports



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Conclusion

As elite universities experience rapid enrollment growth, they face new and complex challenges in supporting a larger and increasingly diverse student body. The lingering impact of the pandemic on student readiness compounds the problem. Historically, elite institutions have thrived on the strength of their student inputs and enjoyed high graduation and career placement rates with minimal need for intervention. However, this changing landscape requires elite colleges to adapt their student success strategies to keep up with demand on services.

Elite universities must act now to address the challenges posed by their expanding enrollments and evolving student needs before outcomes begin to suffer. Technology will be essential to scale student success efforts, deliver value, and protect reputations. Artificial intelligence will be a big part of the solution, equipping student success teams to manage workload more effectively and improve support services while keeping up with the technology expectations of tomorrow's students.

Speak to an Expert | Ed Venit, PhD | Managing Director, EAB



EAB's team of experts is available to discuss this insight paper with you and your campus leaders. If you would like a virtual presentation or meeting to discuss how your campus can prepare for the future of student success, please email EdVenit@eab.com.

► To learn more, visit us at eab.com/Navigate360.

Project Director

Ed Venit

Contributing Consultant

Grace Anderson

Designer

Joy Drakes

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