EAB

The Future of College Graduates in the AI Workforce

Four Plausible Scenarios to Inform Strategic Planning and Student Success

Table of Contents

Executive **Summary**

The entry-level labor market for college graduates is being destabilized just as artificial intelligence becomes embedded in everyday work. Employers are automating junior tasks, trimming entry-level roles, and questioning the job readiness of new degree holders. Graduates face rising unemployment and underemployment as the skills they thought would be in demand are losing value or being shifted toward AI-mediated roles.

What will happen to future college graduates? Will they be pushed into career paths that are deliberately insulated from AI, or will they organize to demand policies that constrain its use? Or might they instead outpace the establishment, becoming the innovators and entrepreneurs who figure out how to harness AI most effectively?

Drawing on the University of Houston's Framework Foresight method, we outline four workforce scenarios for recent college graduates that could play out over the next 5–10 years. Here and throughout this paper, we use "recent college graduates" and similar terms to refer to individuals roughly 22–27 years old in the first five years after earning an associate's or bachelor's degree. "Entry-level" refers to the role recent college graduates traditionally fill at large corporations.

Please note that these scenarios are meant as planning tools, not formal predictions or forecasts. Presidents, provosts, and student success leaders are invited to use scenarios to stress-test current strategies, surface hidden assumptions, and identify best-bet investments. For each scenario, we invite readers to immerse themselves and feel what that future might be like. Futurists say that leaders who spend even a few seconds imagining unconventional futures are far better prepared to act when actual disruption arrives.

Because technology will increasingly determine how well institutions can execute these strategies at scale, the paper also outlines how student success CRMs, data warehouses, and outcomes data must evolve in each scenario.

> Institutions cannot put off strategic planning during turbulent times. By embracing strategic foresight and concentrating on no-regrets moves that add value across different scenarios, leaders can feel confident they are making plans and investments that will position their institutions well for the future.

Four Futures for College Graduates in the AI Workforce

Baseline

Back to Normal

- *Expanding opportunity*
- *Traditional employers dominate*

AI adoption proves slower and bumpier than expected. Large employers rediscover the value of human judgment and structured apprenticeship. Entry-level hiring rebounds, and demand grows for graduates who are both AI-literate and professionally prepared. Colleges double down on internships, co-ops, and integrated work experiences as the main bridge.

Transformational

Next-Gen Entrepreneurs

- *Expanding opportunity*
- *Nontraditional organizations dominate*

AI agents, copilots, and platforms drastically reduce the cost of starting and running a business. Many graduates build "portfolio" careers as founders, freelancers, and micro-firm partners, selling services to larger organizations rather than working for them. Institutions reposition themselves as launchpads and ecosystems for venture creation, teaching every student the basics of entrepreneurship, business formation, and AI-enabled value creation.

New Equilibrium

Copilot Corporations

- *Declining opportunity*
- *Traditional employers dominate*

Large organizations deploy AI deeply and concentrate on productivity in experienced workers using copilots. Entry-level openings shrink, especially in highly automatable fields. Graduates chase jobs in human-centric sectors such as health, education, and care work, while a smaller set competes for elite technical roles. Institutions must manage downside risk for students in AI-exposed majors and extend active career support to underemployed young alumni.

Collapse

Social Unrest

- *Declining opportunity*
- *Nontraditional organizations dominate*

Automation accelerates even as economic growth slows. Youth unemployment and underemployment reach crisis levels, and many graduates struggle to find work that uses their education at all. Debt stress, mistrust, and activism grow, with recent graduates becoming a visible political force. Colleges face enrollment and legitimacy threats and must integrate academic, financial, mental health, and career supports into a single, trust-building student success strategy.

Introduction to **Strategic Foresight**

Why Strategic Planners Need Strategic Foresight

Strategic plans are essential to clarify priorities, align resources with mission, and provide a multiyear roadmap for decision-making and accountability. In higher education, high-profile strategic plans are drafted by blue ribbon committees and often serve as the motivating force behind major student success initiatives spanning the institution. Equally important are mid-level strategic plans developed by student success leaders and their teams to guide their decisions and actions within their own jurisdictions.

At all levels, student success strategic plans prevent leaders and teams from jumping at every new crisis or opportunity, wasting resources and exhausting staff. A strong strategic plan serves as a stabilizing anchor. It guards against recency bias and provides leaders with the confidence to make expensive, multiyear investments that will make sense now and in the future.

Despite the value of planning, many leaders hesitate to commit to strategic plans during times of rapid change. The fear of spending time and resources to develop a plan only to "get it wrong" can paralyze leaders into postponing or abandoning strategic planning altogether.

Strategic foresight is one way to proactively address that fear. Planners who anticipate a diverse range of futures can intentionally create strategic plans that position the team and institution to do well no matter what happens. By centering on "no regrets" priorities, planners can act with greater confidence, knowing their plans will remain relevant under diverse conditions. Later in this paper, we outline 10 no-regrets strategies that exemplify this approach for student success leaders. The structured process futurists use to develop such resilient plans is called "**Strategic Foresight.**"

Planning for "Four Futures"

This paper draws on methods developed over the past five decades by the Foresight graduate program at the University of Houston. Foresight, also known as "Future Studies" or simply "Futurism," is a rigorous and widely used approach grounded in systems thinking, evidence-based analysis, and participatory learning. It helps organizations identify and interpret the forces shaping a system, examine long-term uncertainties, and design strategies that can be resilient across multiple plausible futures.

The main tools at the center of Houston Foresight's approach are multiple "future scenarios" (often shortened to "futures"). Future scenarios are plausible stories about what the future might look like 5 to 10 years or more from now. Planners partner with futurists to develop custom scenarios that can be used to inspire new ideas, test out strategies, and minimize blind spots.

Futurists develop scenarios by systematically layering the forces shaping a system to construct plausible visions of how the system might evolve. A typical planning exercise will develop four future scenarios, representing **four archetypes of change**:

Baseline

The current system persists without major changes to its structure or the dominant players.

Transformational

The current system gives way to a new system, with those who anticipate the change becoming the new winners.

New Equilibrium

The current system persists, but key shifts in the structure create new winners and losers.

Collapse

The current system unravels, conditions decay, and many former winners become losers.

Developing the Future Scenarios

Scenario development begins by identifying the key drivers of change within the system. Drivers are forces that have a heavy influence on the system and shape the direction of future outcomes. They should not be mysterious; rather, drivers should be intuitively discerned by those familiar with the institution or sector.

For futurist planners, the most useful drivers are those that exert strong influence on the system while allowing for a wide range of plausible future outcomes. Some drivers—such as declining birth rates—are important for shaping direction but do so in predictable ways that are easy to anticipate. The more informative drivers are those that could go either way, thereby revealing areas of uncertainty between opposing outcomes. For example, even though the demographic cliff is baked in, there is still genuine uncertainty around whether or not the supply of new college graduates will meet, exceed, or fall short of future market demand.

Drivers tend to be sorted into five major domains—**Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental,** and **Political**—collectively known as the **STEEP framework**. Futurists intentionally examine drivers from across all domains to reduce blind spots and add robust details that make scenarios feel more real. So, for example, this analysis of the future AI workforce naturally relies heavily on drivers from the **Economic** and **Technological** domains, but it also considers how rising unemployment might shape federal **Politics** or how public concern over the **Environmental** impact of AI data centers could influence **Social** attitudes toward AI.

Try it for yourself:

You probably already have opinions on which drivers will influence the landscape of early-career success over the next five years. Take a moment to think of one important driver from each of the five STEEP domains. Then read on to find out how your list of drivers compares with our list in the next section.

Six Drivers
Shaping the Future

We drew on our deep expertise in student success, higher education, and early careers to identify six major drivers shaping the trajectory of the entry-level labor market for college graduates over the next five years. Selecting drivers is necessarily somewhat subjective, and you should feel encouraged to add your own based on institutional context or emerging evidence. The goal is not to be exhaustive but rather to identify a set of forces that introduce meaningful uncertainty to the system and spark productive discussion.

DRIVER 1

Pace of AI adoption

Rapid advances in artificial intelligence and automation are changing how work gets done, redefining entry-level roles, and shifting the skills graduates need to stay competitive. However, AI also faces significant social, economic, and environmental headwinds that could slow down adoption.

Adoption Is Fast

1 in 5 U.S. workers already use AI on the job

A 2025 Pew analysis finds that about 20% of U.S. workers say they use AI in their current job, with usage highest among workers under 50 and those with at least a bachelor's degree.[1]

Implication: Competition for entry-level roles in desirable fields is heating up as employers automate junior tasks and replace positions with AI.

Adoption Is Slow

2% of job openings have AI requirements

A 2025 Stanford AI Index analysis using Lightcast data finds that AI jobs account for about 1.8% of all U.S. job postings, up from well under 1% a decade ago—still fewer than 2 out of every 100 postings.[2]

Implication: AI is widely used in workflows, but most roles still don't require prior expertise, complicating how colleges and students interpret "AI readiness."

DRIVER 2

Legacy work models

Organizations are restructuring teams and labor around AI to boost efficiency, but this often comes at the cost of reducing opportunities for the next generation of workers. Legacy workplace structures can slow down change, especially if AI productivity gains are not realized.

Entry Level Replaced

1 in 6 early jobs exposed to AI have already been cut

A 2025 Stanford Digital Economy Lab analysis finds that employment for 22–25-year-olds in AI-exposed fields such as software engineering, marketing, and customer service has fallen 16% since late 2022.[3]

Implication: Competition for entry-level roles in desirable fields is heating up as employers automate junior tasks and replace positions with AI.

Entry Level Persists

90% of employers plan to maintain or increase college hiring

National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)'s 2025 Job Outlook finds that 90% of employers plan to maintain (65%) or increase (25%) hiring for the Class of 2025, compared with 83% for the Class of 2024.[4]

Implication: AI is widely used in workflows, but most roles still don't require prior expertise, complicating how colleges and students interpret "AI readiness."

DRIVER 3

Popular opinion of AI

Sentiment toward AI in the media, policy landscape, and around the kitchen table will speed or slow the pace of adoption and workforce change. Public attitudes about AI will evolve as the public becomes more familiar with the use cases, benefits, and costs.

AI Is Cool

4 in 5 young knowledge workers already use AI

A 2025 Google Workspace/Harris Poll survey of U.S. knowledge workers aged 22–39 finds that over 80% are already using AI tools at work, and among Gen Z respondents, more than 9 in 10 report using two or more AI tools every week.[5]

Implication: Among young, college-educated professionals, AI use in the workplace is already quickly becoming the norm.

AI Is Scary

1 in 2 adults is worried about AI

National polling by the Pew Research Center shows that 52% of U.S. adults are more concerned than excited about the increased use of AI in daily life, while only 10% are more excited than concerned.[6]

Implication: Even as workers become more familiar with AI tools, many remain deeply uneasy.

DRIVER 4

Supply of recent graduates

Rising unemployment and underemployment rates suggest there are now more graduates than the labor market can sustain. Yet, the supply of qualified recent graduates could fall in coming years due to the Gen Z demographic cliff, the eroding career readiness of graduates, and the recent sharp downturn in international enrollment.

Oversupply

4 in 10 recent grads are underemployed

In Q2 2025, recent graduates (aged 22–27) faced an unemployment rate above 5% and a 41% under-employment rate in roles that typically do not require a college degree, according to the New York Fed.[7]

Implication: Either degree holders are widely mismatched to jobs, or there are not enough true "college-level" jobs for new degree holders to fill.

Undersupply

5% drop in high school graduates by 2030

WICHE projects that the number of U.S. high school graduates will peak around 2025–26 and then decline, falling about 5% by 2030 and roughly 12%–13% by 2040.[8]

Implication: Over the next decade, the pool of college graduates is expected to shrink, pointing toward potential shortages even as today's grads face crowded conditions.

DRIVER 5

Value of college skills

Students are graduating less prepared for the realities of the workforce, sparking concern among hiring managers. The arts and sciences face a crossroads, with a possible renaissance ahead if AI spawns demand for "human" skills such as creative thinking, intuition, and empathy.

Hot

$25,000 earnings boost for college grads

In 2022, 25–34-year-olds with a bachelor's degree who work full-time earned $66,600 vs. $41,800 for high school graduates—a 60% premium (ACS 2022; BLS 2023).[9, 10]

Implication: At the macro level, it still pays off big for young workers to have college credentials.

Not Hot

9 in 10 HR leaders avoid hiring recent grads

A 2025 Workplace Intelligence/Hult survey found that 89% of HR leaders avoid hiring recent college graduates, while 86% of employers in a YouScience report said entry-level hires need extra training.[11, 12]

Implication: Employers increasingly view recent college grads as underprepared, raising the risk that more entry-level work will be reassigned to AI.

DRIVER 6

Emerging AI careers

Across venture capital boardrooms and everyday offices, young entrepreneurs and innovators vie with established experts over who will benefit the most from AI. Recent college grads could be drawn to the gig economy for work, with some becoming start-up founders and new small business owners.

Gen X Advantage

Mid-40s is the average founder age at top start-ups

A major MIT/NBER study found that founders of the fastest-growing 0.1% of U.S. start-ups have a mean founding age of 45, and sector averages range from about 40 in software to about 47 in biotech.[13]

Implication: Gen Z founders are making noise, but high-growth entrepreneurship is dominated by Gen X founders.

Gen Z Advantage

2 in 5 Gen Z founders launch without investors

Stripe's 2025 Digital Entrepreneurship Report finds that 42% of Gen Z founders funded their first launch through online revenue streams—such as subscriptions, pre-sales, and crowdfunding—rather than external investors.[14]

Implication: Being able to bypass traditional venture capital opens the doors to millions more Gen Z founders, potentially upending the economy.

Understanding the Key Uncertainties in the System

Each of these six drivers introduces meaningful uncertainty into the system. To use them for planning, we must understand how they interact. Futurists do this with a tool called a **cross-impact matrix**.

A cross-impact matrix offers a disciplined way to answer two questions: *If one driver shifts, which others tend to move with it? And which drivers are most shaped by everything else?* By mapping these interactions, the analysis reveals the two or three forces that exert the greatest influence over the system. These become the **key uncertainties**—the variables that ultimately define the axes for scenario development.

To build the matrix, we list the same drivers down the left side and across the top. For each cell in the matrix, we ask: *If the driver on the left changes a lot, how much does it influence the driver on the top and in what direction?*

Cross-Impact Matrix
How does the driver on the left impact the driver on the top?

++ Strongly reinforces
+ Reinforces
+/– Uncertain
– Contradicts
–– Strongly contradicts
0 No interaction

	Pace of AI adoption	**Legacy work models**	Popular opinion of AI	**Supply of recent graduates**	**Value of college skills**	Emerging AI careers		
Pace of AI adoption		––	+/–	+/–	+/–	++	***Strong***	*Influence over other drivers*
Legacy work models	––		+	++	++	+/–	***Strong***	
Popular opinion of AI	++	–		+/–	0	+	*Weak*	
Supply of recent graduates	0	++	0		––	+	*Weak*	
Value of college skills	0	++	+	++		+	*Weak*	
Emerging AI careers	++	––	+/–	+/–	+/–		***Strong***	
	Weak	***Strong***	*Weak*	***Strong***	***Strong***	*Weak*		
	Dependence on other drivers							

For example, we anticipate that strong AI adoption would threaten legacy work models and accelerate new AI careers, so those cells are marked as strongly contradictory and strongly reinforcing, respectively. Meanwhile, strong AI adoption reduces the market value of some college skills while potentially increasing demand for others, so we feel confident AI will have an impact on the value of college, but we aren't sure in what way. By counting how many interactions (the total "+"s and "-"s) for each driver across its row and down its column, we can see which drivers are most influential over the system and which are most dependent on it.

In our analysis, we found that some of the drivers clearly do more "work" in the system than others. When we look across the matrix, **Pace of AI adoption, Legacy work models,** and **Emerging AI careers** stand out as the most influential drivers, while **Legacy work models, Supply of recent graduates**, and the **Value of college skills** emerge as the most dependent. Bundled together into two clusters, these drivers describe two big questions about the future:

> What **type of employment** will new graduates pursue, and how much **opportunity** will they have?

TWO KEY UNCERTAINTIES FOR NEW GRADUATES

Type of Employment

Traditional ⟷ Nontraditional

This uncertainty considers whether new graduates primarily enter traditional, full-time roles with established employers or pursue nontraditional work such as start-ups, freelancing, gig-based employment, or micro-enterprise. It describes the tension between old and new ways of working in an AI-enabled economy. A more traditional future emphasizes stability, hierarchy, and long-term attachment to a single employer. A nontraditional future emphasizes flexibility, entrepreneurship, multiple income streams, and project-based work.

Opportunity

Expanding ⟷ Declining

This uncertainty considers how easy or hard it is for graduates to secure stable, well-paying roles that match their skills. Will grads drive the AI economy or be left behind? An expanding-opportunity future suggests renewed demand for recent graduates, potentially powered by AI skills and adaptability developed in college. A declining-opportunity future suggests further contraction of corporate entry-level roles, rising underemployment, and the growth of alternative pathways for graduates who struggle to secure traditional jobs.

Building the Four Future Scenarios

The final step in the Houston process is to translate these uncertainties into narrative scenarios for planning. To do this, we set the two uncertainties as opposing axis to generate a two-by-two matrix with four boxes representing the full range of uncertainty in the system. Each quadrant is a "scenario" that tells a distinct story about how higher education, employers, and graduates might interact under different future conditions. The following section explores these four scenarios in depth with guidance on how to make use of them for your specific planning purposes.

Baseline

Back to Normal

AI progress slows, and the return on investment for automation plateaus. Companies rediscover the need for human judgment and mentoring, restoring demand for junior talent. Economic growth and retirements reopen entry-level pipelines, creating renewed opportunities for graduates.

Key Drivers

- Pace of AI Adoption
- Value of College Skills
- Legacy Work Models

Transformational

Next-Gen Entrepreneurs

AI drastically reduces the barriers to launching a business. Young entrepreneurs found AI micro-firms that push radical innovation and outcompete legacy organizations. Many recent graduates become independent contractors who collaborate freely with multiple corporate clients.

Key Drivers

- Emerging AI Careers
- Supply of Recent Graduates
- Value of College Skills

New Equilibrium

Copilot Corporations

Productivity becomes concentrated among experienced workers who use AI to amplify their output. Fewer entry-level positions exist, and graduates flock to careers that are less exposed to AI. Many graduates struggle to find professional employment that matches their degrees.

Key Drivers

- Pace of AI Adoption
- Value of College Skills
- Legacy Work Models

Collapse

Social Unrest

Economic growth stagnates even as AI automation accelerates. Unemployment among recent graduates skyrockets. As job scarcity grows, frustration among recent graduates turns into activism, and policymakers face pressure to regulate AI and protect employment.

Key Drivers

- Value of College Skills
- Supply of Recent Graduates
- Popular Opinion of AI

Four Scenarios for the **Future of College Graduates** in the **AI Workforce**

How to Use the Four Futures

Each scenario is a thought experiment about how the labor market for recent graduates might evolve, not a prediction of what will definitively occur. As you read, place your institution, your students, and your own role inside each future and note what feels most surprising, concerning, or promising—these reactions often point to hidden assumptions and strategic opportunities. A brief workshop guide in the appendix shows how to turn those insights into concrete next steps.

Look for the boxes labeled "future technology use case" throughout this section to see how higher ed systems may need to change, and learn how EAB's student CRM Navigate360 and data management platform Edify can help today.

For more on Navigate360 and Edify, see pages 24–26.

Baseline Scenario

Back to Normal

Expanding opportunity | Traditional employers dominate

Drivers Shaping This Future

Pace of AI Adoption

Cost, reliability, and corporate inertia slow AI adoption and bring back demand for human oversight over entry-level tasks.

Value of College Skills

To jump-start AI adoption, employers increase their hiring of graduates who demonstrate mastery of basic AI skills.

Legacy Work Models

Apprenticeship-style corporate models undergo a revival as companies recognize the value of developing future leaders.

In this future ...

Efforts to replace entry-level workers are stalled as companies confront the real-world limits of applying AI to business objectives. Low-quality AI output resulting in high-profile failures exposes the ongoing need for human oversight and contextual judgment. Pace of adoption is slowed down, and managers spend more and more of their time pushing their teams to use what was supposed to be a "time-saving" innovation.

As a result, companies that once downsized their junior ranks reverse course and begin to rebuild. Preference is given to candidates who demonstrate proficiency with mainstream corporate AI tools such as Chat GPT. Some early-career managers intentionally look to hire "AI ambassadors" who can help bring legacy employers up to speed. Organizations reinvest in apprenticeship-style mentoring and structured promotion pathways that enable early-career employees to gain experience and prepare to fill the leadership ranks of the future.

Colleges respond by redoubling their efforts to connect students with workforce experience. Student success leaders formalize clear, institution-wide definitions of career readiness that combine AI literacy with core professional skills such as communication and teamwork. They try to position their graduates as AI-fluent junior staff who can help legacy employers modernize workflows, using AI skills training as a bridge back to corporate talent pipelines.

Career-integrated learning such as paid internships, cooperative education, and industry-aligned capstone projects become standard features of all undergraduate programs. Through these experiences, students get firsthand experience using common corporate AI tools and techniques, dramatically shortening the learning curve for new hires.

Meanwhile, AI use in academic settings becomes more routine, with clear guardrails and guidelines established over several years of gradual adoption. The AI tools used by employers slowly become common in classrooms and laboratories as these technologies mature and faculty become more comfortable with them. Colleges become places where students go to perfect their AI skills using the latest technologies aligned with their career fields of interest.

FUTURE TECHNOLOGY USE CASE:

Scaling Apprenticeship Pipelines

In this future, institutions rely on technology that can support a high volume of structured, work-based experiences with traditional employers. The priority is a unified student-to-career CRM that brings together apprenticeships, internships, co-ops, capstones, applications, and hiring in one place, integrated tightly with the SIS and LMS. This foundation allows institutions to maintain visibility into student participation and progress in work-based learning while scaling employer partnerships and work-based learning.

How EAB can help right now:

- **Navigate360** can help faculty, advisors, and career services teams see which work-based experiences students are engaged in and track milestones across the experiential learning journey.
- **Edify** can support this work by integrating academic and experiential learning data into dashboards that surface students who are off-pace for hitting their workforce-related milestones.

New Equilibrium Scenario

Copilot Corporations

Declining opportunity | Traditional employers dominate

Drivers Shaping This Future

Pace of AI Adoption

Automation streamlines workflows and centralizes expertise within senior teams, dramatically reducing the need for entry-level roles.

Value of College Skills

College programs increasingly emphasize marketable "human" skills that protect graduates from AI displacement.

Legacy Work Models

Large companies eliminate early-career hiring, and the traditional corporate apprenticeship model unravels.

In this future ...

Large organizations integrate AI deeply into workflows, reducing the need for large junior cohorts. Experienced workers, aided by AI copilots, generate more output, creating teams that are leaner but far more efficient. Entry-level hiring declines sharply, with only the most technical or specialized roles remaining open to new graduates. HR teams shift toward just-in-time hiring, relying on contract workers to fill immediate gaps that emerge.

The traditional career ladder is shortened as firms reconfigure work around AI—at the cost of weakened talent pipelines. Without a steady influx of junior employees, companies struggle to cultivate future leaders and maintain institutional knowledge.

Meanwhile fields that are less exposed to AI become havens for students seeking stable careers. Employers in "human-centered" fields such as health care, education, and psychological services absorb the oversupply of recent college grads and benefit from the influx of less expensive, energetic labor.

Colleges realize that many of their academic programs simply cannot be asked to keep pace with the AI economy. Instead, they establish certificates and noncredit credentials that can be spun up and down at the speed of labor market evolution. Enrollment surges in programs that are aligned with "non-AI jobs" sheltered from automation because they require human interaction and judgment. New AI-adjacent programs emerge out of the arts and sciences to meet demand in emerging fields such as risk governance. A limited number of top students go into highly selective programs that teach AI technical expertise and proficiency needed to compete for the few corporate positions available, which in turn raises questions of equitable access.

In a world of shrinking entry-level roles, student success leaders actively map which fields are most exposed to AI and help students in those programs pivot toward safer or more promising alternatives before graduation. They build a dual-track career model: one track for a small subset of students pursuing highly technical, AI-intensive roles and another emphasizing human-centric skills for AI-resilient sectors such as health, education, and care work. At the same time, institutions extend robust supports for underemployed graduates—treating young alumni as an ongoing caseload for coaching, reskilling, and targeted outreach rather than assuming students are "finished" at commencement.

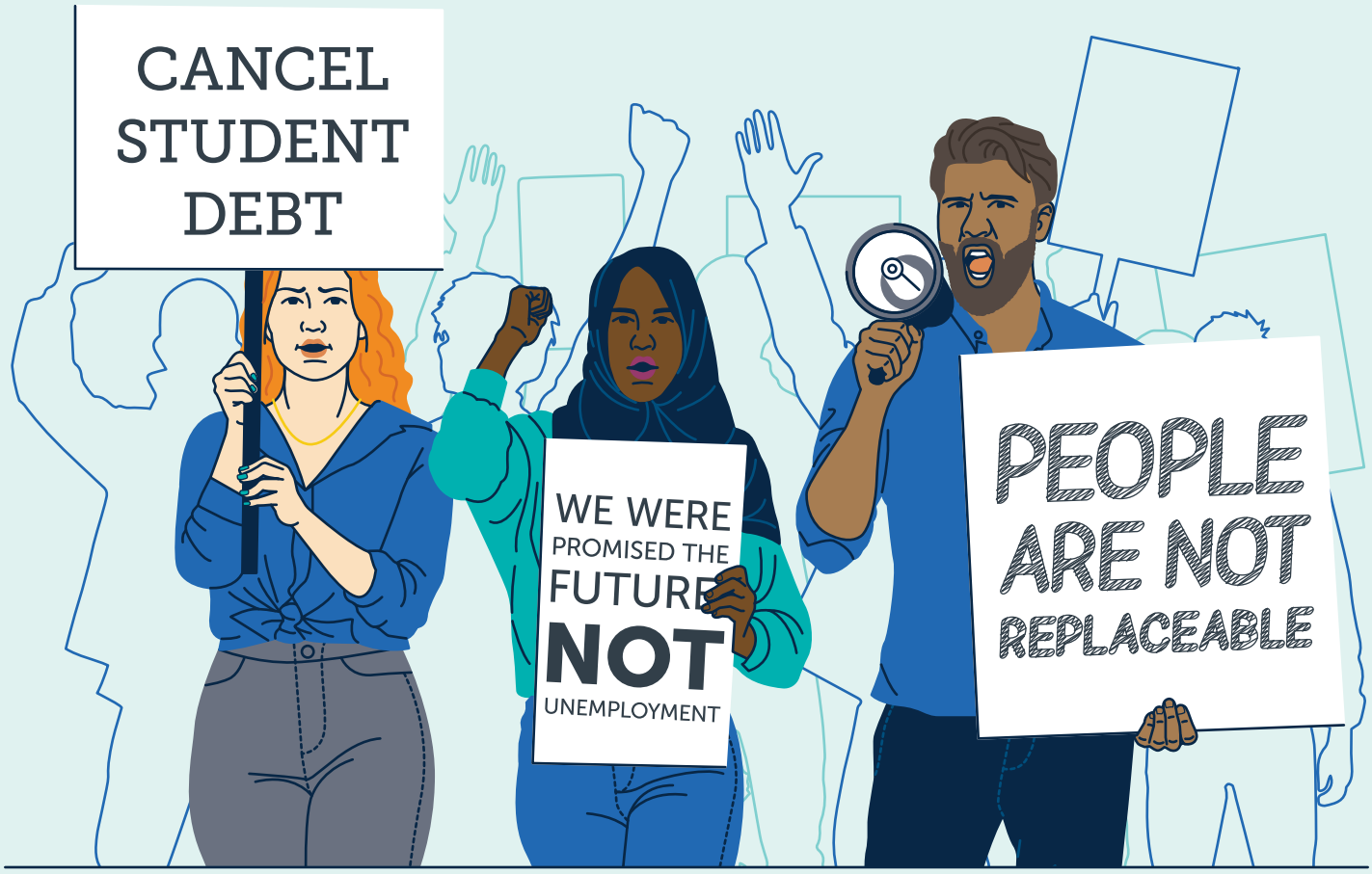
FUTURE TECHNOLOGY USE CASE:

Managing Risk in a Shrinking Market

In this context, future technology must help institutions manage downside risk for students in AI-impacted career pathways. The CRM becomes a risk-aware advising platform that identifies students and recent graduates in shrinking fields and guides them toward alternative pathways such as certificates and noncredit upskilling. Additionally, in this scenario, case management for new alumni becomes as important as it is for current students.

How EAB can help right now:

- **Navigate360** helps advisors and student support teams maintain shared visibility into student progress and risk indicators. AI tools reduce the time spent on clerical work, allowing advisors to focus more on discussing career aspirations with students and guiding them toward economically resilient programs.
- **Edify** can support this work by bringing together institutional and external data, such as job postings by region and sector, alumni employment status from surveys and third-party feeds, and participation in reskilling programs, to create a connected data foundation that enables colleges to case-manage new alumni.



Collapse Scenario

Social Unrest

Declining opportunity | Nontraditional organizations dominate

Drivers Shaping This Future

Value of College Skills

Market value plummets as graduates find it nearly impossible to find an entry-level job.

Supply of Recent Graduates

Huge and growing numbers of unemployed college graduates become a political force.

Popular Opinion of AI

Rising frustration with job loss and economic inequality fuels activism and political mobilization against AI and big institutions.

In this future ...

Unemployment among young workers rises into double digits as automation increasingly displaces entry-level jobs and new opportunities are stalled. Underemployment becomes the norm, and many recent graduates try for years to find their first "real" job. Eventually, the AI bubble pops and the resulting deep recession slows or stops hiring across all sectors. Older workers delay retirement, keeping positions from turning over and exacerbating the hiring crunch. Needing to cut costs, large employers with deep pockets make investments to massively accelerate automation, inadvertently worsening the employment crisis.

The growing mismatch between college credentials and labor-market value fuels public frustration. Confidence in college falls to all-time lows, driving down enrollment. As economic anxiety spreads, so does large-scale activism. Unemployed college graduates advocate for debt relief, job creation, and tighter regulation of AI labor. Social trust erodes as younger generations question whether higher education still delivers upward mobility.

Colleges are caught in the middle. Some become hotbeds of activism, drawing scrutiny from policymakers and donors. Others scramble to reinvent programs, rebuild trust, and create clear pathways into the few good jobs that remain. All institutions face mounting financial strain as enrollment falls and public support for higher education grows more volatile and politicized. Institutional trajectories diverge and specialize as overall college enrollment shrinks.

With unemployment, debt, stress, and anxiety all on the rise, student success leaders integrate academic advising, career services, mental health, and financial counseling into a single, holistic support structure. They pore over robust, disaggregated data on alumni career outcomes to identify hidden bright spots in the labor market where their recent graduates have found success.

Meanwhile, newly created pathways into public, nonprofit, and community roles offer students and graduates meaning, stability, and a productive outlet for civic energy—and help them translate activism and organizing into professional narratives. The success of these efforts helps colleges reclaim their identity as institutions for personal growth and social advancement, not just factories for producing future workers.

FUTURE TECHNOLOGY USE CASE:

Supporting Students amid Economic and Political Strain

In this future, colleges will need technology that provides a holistic view of academic, financial, and mental health risks while maintaining transparency and trust. Student success teams need an integrated case management platform supported by a data warehouse that includes employment outcomes, debt levels, financial aid status, and basic-needs indicators. High-frequency "pulse check" data, including short surveys, SMS check-ins, and engagement logs, can feed real-time and public dashboards that help surface mounting stress and mistrust. A unified student-support CRM must also track relationships with employers, nonprofits, public agencies, and community organizations. Paired with a connected data foundation, this approach enables institutions to respond quickly as conditions change.

How EAB can help right now:

- **Navigate360** enables institutions to conduct polls and surveys, manage ongoing student check-ins, and coordinate outreach across advising, financial aid, and student-support teams.
- **Edify** helps organize and connect data from across campus systems so institutions can support internal reporting and build the data foundation needed for transparent, public-facing dashboards.

Transformational Scenario

Next-Gen Entrepreneurs

Expanding opportunity | Nontraditional organizations dominate

Drivers Shaping This Future

Emerging AI Careers

AI agents and copilots spark a small business revolution by dramatically reducing the barriers for individuals.

Supply of Recent Graduates

Graduates frozen out of traditional entry-level jobs turn to entrepreneurship and launch their own ventures.

Value of College Skills

Colleges teach start-up methods, entrepreneurship, and self-employment skills to prepare students for independent career paths.

In this future ...

AI drastically reduces the cost and complexity of starting a business, opening access to millions of young entrepreneurs without the need for huge loans or outside investment. Freelancers, small teams, and independent founders use AI copilots for complex business functions such as coding, marketing, customer service, and data analysis. The start-up ecosystem expands rapidly, powered by digital marketplaces and new funding models that reward speed and creativity over scale. Economic energy shifts from legacy corporations to networks of agile micro-firms.

New graduates interact with legacy companies as clients or collaborators, not as traditional employers and employees. Corporations acquire or contract with small AI-driven start-ups to supplement internal innovation. The boundaries between employment, contracting, and entrepreneurship are blurred, with graduates moving fluidly between roles as freelancers and consultants.

Colleges respond by reimagining career development as venture incubation. They expand entrepreneurship centers, offer AI toolkits as part of every major, and integrate business formation skills into curricula. The most innovative institutions partner with accelerators and investors, positioning themselves as launchpads for micro-enterprises rather than talent pipelines for large firms.

In response to the new entrepreneurial economy, student success teams treat basic business literacy and comfort with self-employment as foundational skills for all students. Advisors help students build and narrate tangible portfolios—projects, clients, ventures, and micro-businesses—that demonstrate value to both traditional employers and potential customers. Career development and job placement shifts from managing a one-way "placement pipeline" to cultivating an ecosystem of mentors, accelerators, lenders, local partners, and digital platforms that students can tap throughout their early careers.

Higher education reasserts its traditional role at the forefront of innovation. Colleges become places that attract students who want exposure to the latest in cutting-edge AI technology and use cases. Alumni entrepreneurial networks incubate graduates' ideas and build lifelong loyalty, while advancement offices begin to cultivate a small but growing cohort of 20-something AI billionaires.

FUTURE TECHNOLOGY USE CASE:

Powering Venture and Portfolio Careers

In this future, more graduates pursue entrepreneurial and portfolio careers rather than moving directly into traditional employment. Institutions will need technology that recognizes venture creation and ongoing project work as central indicators of student success.

Student success leaders will also require a CRM with the ability to track mentors, investors, accelerators, corporate clients, and marketplace platforms as core relationship records. The data warehouse must capture nontraditional outcomes such as ventures founded, funding milestones, clients served, and intellectual property created. A skills passport and portfolio platform become central, allowing students to verify freelance work and micro-business activity. Priority data sources include redesigned first-destination surveys that capture multi-income streams, along with business registration, funding, and innovation space usage data.

How EAB can help right now:

- **Navigate360** can help advisors and career teams track experiential milestones, mentorship engagement, and career development activities.
- **Edify** brings together academic records, credential data, and alumni outcomes to better understand emerging career pathways and assess long-term impact as graduates move between education, work, and entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

10 "No Regrets" Strategies for Supporting Future College Graduates

Today's entry-level labor market for college graduates is undergoing profound change, driven by rapid advances in AI, shifting employer expectations, and uneven economic signals. Strategic planners can break through this uncertainty by concentrating on moves that add value to students in every plausible future. Instead of asking which scenario will come true, consider which investments, practices, and partnerships will strengthen your institution no matter how the labor market for recent graduates evolves.

The early-career labor market will not stand still while institutions debate their next move. By pairing scenario-based foresight with a focused set of no-regrets strategies, colleges and universities can move now on investments that will pay off across many possible futures.

1 Elevate the unique value of students as humans

Across all scenarios, graduates are better prepared for an AI-mediated workforce when they understand what uniquely human capabilities they bring to the table. In some futures, this means mastering the dynamics of human-AI partnership. In others, it means leaning into the interpersonal, ethical, and judgment-based skills that technology cannot replicate.

2 Embed AI and data literacy across the curriculum

Regardless of the scenario, graduates must understand how AI can be used to analyze information, automate routine tasks, and make sound judgments. Embedding AI and data literacy across the curriculum ensures that students develop both the technical comfort and the ethical awareness needed for the future ahead.

3 Connect students with workforce experiences

Guaranteeing high-quality work experience for every student reduces risk for employers, raises institutional credibility, and offers students clarity in a confusing job market. If hiring is tight, experience differentiates candidates competing for a shrinking set of openings. In entrepreneurial futures, project-based work doubles as portfolio development and customer discovery.

4 Create opportunities for students to gain entrepreneurial skills

Entrepreneurial capability travels well across all futures. In stronger job markets, these skills translate into intrapreneurship: students help established employers innovate, adapt AI tools, and redesign workflows. In weaker labor markets, entrepreneurial ability becomes a safety net, enabling graduates to generate income through freelancing and powering their capacity to collectively organize.

5 Improve the agility and quality of career guidance

In all futures, the labor market evolves faster than the traditional advising model anticipates. Skills that once took years to rise or fall in value now shift within months. Colleges need advising systems that help students navigate disrupted career paths, redirect them toward emerging opportunities, and build resilience in the face of rapid change.

6 Plug student success technology into a robust data warehouse

Academic affairs, career services, and alumni relations must operate from a shared data warehouse that combines academic records, advising notes, contact information, and postgraduation employment and earnings data. In turn, this system should feed the student success CRM to support both current students and recent graduates. A unified platform enables more coherent guidance and faster response to workforce shocks.

7 Strengthen relationships between colleges and hiring managers

Every scenario underscores the importance of rapid, two-way communication with employers. Colleges that understand—and respond to—shifts in workforce demand are better positioned to update curricula, advise students, and adjust programming. Even in more entrepreneurial futures, institutions must help student founders align their products and services with the needs of corporate clients.

8 Build young alumni career networks

Intentional network-building creates opportunities for students who otherwise would lack the social capital and connections. In futures where opportunity expands, strong alumni networks help students access higher-quality roles more quickly. In futures where opportunity contracts, social capital becomes a critical buffer, connecting graduates to informal pathways, hidden openings, and alternative work arrangements.

9 Extend career support to young alumni after graduation

Institutions that proactively reskill their alumni help maintain career momentum and strengthen trust in the institution's value proposition. Extending career support beyond graduation also helps colleges track emerging labor-market shifts earlier than traditional data sources, enabling faster program adjustments.

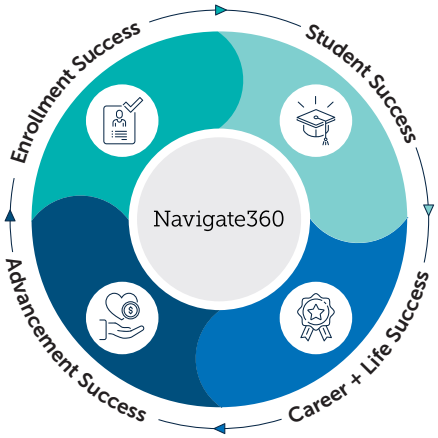
10 Intervene early with recent graduates displaced by AI

Many scenarios feature sudden contractions in fields such as software development and finance. Institutions should proactively identify recent graduates whose industries have shifted and offer targeted support to help them reskill, access continuing education, and reconnect with alumni hiring networks.

About Navigate360

Recruit, Retain, and Empower Students in College and Beyond

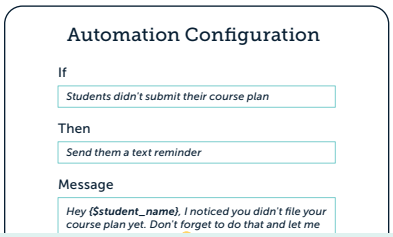
Navigate360 is the leading student CRM for higher education, a powerful technology that unites administrators, faculty, staff, and students in a collaborative network that supports the entire student experience, from recruitment to career. Navigate360 is powered by over a decade of student success research gleaned 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

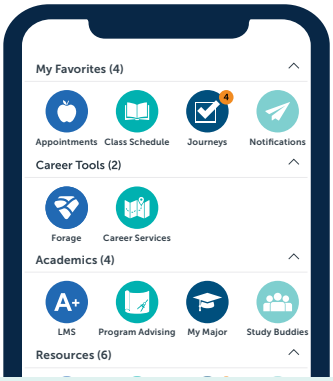
- Student Profile
- Coordinated Care Network
- Alerts, Cases, and Referrals
- Automated Workflow Builder
- Two-Way SMS and Email
- Campaigns and Template Library
- Appointments and Events
- Post-Appointment Surveys
- Notes and Attachments
- Faculty Progress Reports
- Email and Calendar Integrations
- AI Content Creation Agent
- AI Campaign Agent
- AI Student Insights Agent
- AI Task Agent
- AI Staff Knowledge Agent



Student Engagement Hub

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

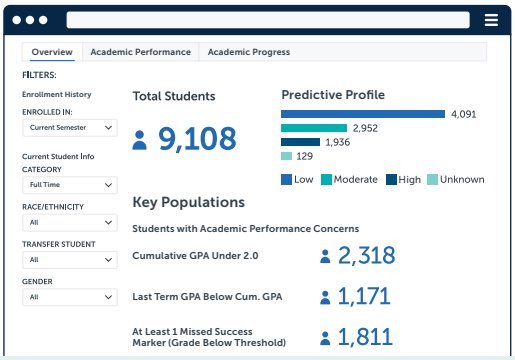
- Student Success Network and Campus Resources
- Document Center
- Appointments and Events
- Hand Raise
- Class Schedule
- In-App Notifications
- To-Dos and Journeys
- Quick Polls and Survey Builder
- Holds Center
- Study Buddies, Financial Planner, Program Explorer
- Knowledge Agent



Reporting and Analytics

Proactively identify opportunities for better student support

- Advanced Query Builder
- Data Visualizer
- Templated Reports
- Scheduled Reports
- Automated Workflow
- Population Health Analytics
- Activity Analytics
- Intervention Effectiveness
- Historical Trend Analytics
- Predictive Model
- Survey Analytics
- Student Milestone Analytics
- AI Report Agent



OUR PARTNERS

850+
Partner Institutions

10M+
Students Served

OUR IMPACT

3.5%
Typical improvement in graduation rate

5:1
ROI based on 500 partner value stories

Schedule a Navigate360 demo at eab.com/Navigate360.

EAB

Edify

Get Your Campus AI-Ready with Edify

Edify Is a Data Management Platform to Support Higher Ed's Biggest Decision

It's time to get your data ecosystem AI-ready.

Higher ed faces growing demands to improve both efficiency and student outcomes. AI can offer a lifeline by scaling personalized and proactive student advising, automating tedious tasks to save staff hours, and more.

But **effective AI adoption relies on connected and trusted data.** Schools must improve their data management practices or risk falling behind.

Meet Edify:

Edify is an **AI-powered higher education data management platform** that combines robust data warehousing with user-friendly analytics tools to deliver real-time insights, empowering you to make data-driven decisions with speed and confidence.

Edify's transformative approach lets you move quickly to expand access to trusted data across your campus.

3x Faster to deploy than a traditional data warehouse

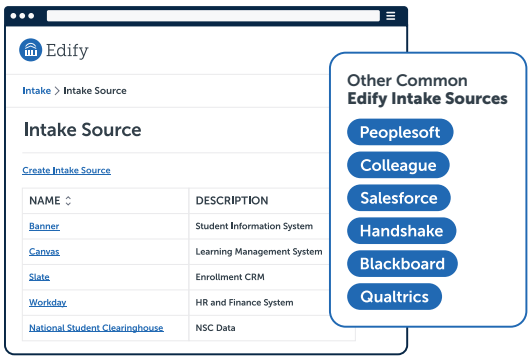
50% Average percentage faster to build reports with Edify data

*Scan this code to **watch a 1-minute video** about the Edify platform.*

Access, Warehousing, and Integration

De-Silo Your Data

Edify is a **vendor-agnostic, cloud-native data** lake and warehouse.



Edify can ingest data through a library of **20+ pre-built connectors** for common higher ed technology systems or **custom integration pathways** (e.g., ODBC, API, SFTP, S3).

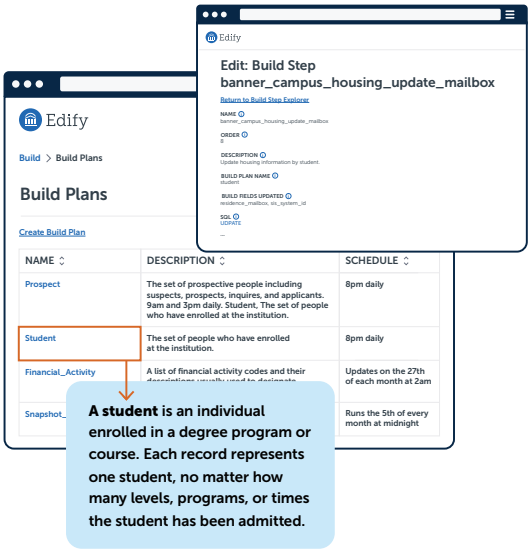
Edify also includes:

- Downstream data delivery
- Data transformation
- Snapshotting

Data Governance

Build Data Confidence

At the core of Edify is a recommended higher ed-specific data model with **200+ field-tested entities and AI-powered tools** to locate and generate data definitions.



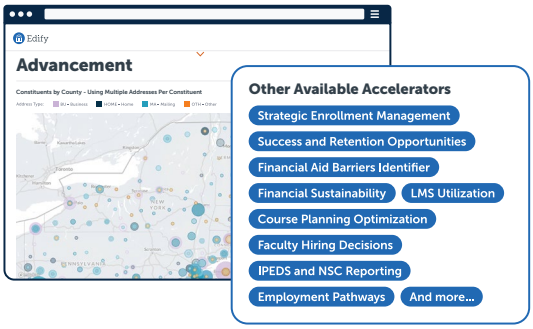
Edify's comprehensive data governance tools include:

- Data catalog
- Permissions management
- Data lineage tracking
- Entry validation
- Data processing logs and monitoring
- Data profiling and quality assessment

Edify Is Data Management **Designed for Higher Ed**

Make Confident Decisions

Edify supports no- or low-code data exploration, analysis, and operational reporting, as well as self-service predictive modeling and data visualization through your preferred business intelligence tools.



Edify's **pre-built and customizable analytic workspaces**, known as "accelerators," provide data on strategic priorities such as course planning and financial sustainability.

NEW: Edify now also includes a command center of 50+ "must-run" reports and dashboards for leaders in 10 key functional areas including enrollment, HR, and financial operations.

Embedded Agentic AI

Speed Up Data Access

Edify AI gives your team in-the-moment answers to their questions and empowers campus data consumers to make better decisions faster.

Find, act on, and monitor trusted data with Edify AI:

- Find the data and context you need using plain-language prompts. Ask Edify AI a question and it runs the numbers for you.
- Turn a simple prompt into data-rich reports without coding from scratch.
- Get easy-to-read explanations of SQL statements.
- Navigate the platform and get answers to Edify "how-to" questions.

*Scan this code to watch a short video about **Edify's AI features**.*

Professional Services

Expand Your Team's Capacity

Edify's experts meet you where you are, augmenting your teams and providing tailored services to simplify your data management.

Our experienced team of higher education data scientists, data architects, integration engineers, programmers, and business process experts understand your unique environment and goals and can reduce strain on your staff while delivering results.

Powering Data-Enabled Institutions

75%

Reduction in time required to submit IPEDS surveys

Mount Saint Mary's University-Los Angeles

$950K

State funding loss avoided on critical report, along with hundreds of staff hours saved

Northampton Community College

$78K

Reallocated to other priorities after sunsetting unneeded Tableau licenses

Gateway Technical College

> Edify is our **yes button**. I'm often in meetings, and people will say, *'It would be great if we could do this,'* and Edify really allows our team to say, *'Yes, we can. That is totally possible.'* "
>
> *Matt Nickodemus, Executive Director of Institutional Effectiveness, Utah Tech University*

Want to learn more? Here's how:

*Schedule a **customized Edify demo** for your institution.*

*Explore **videos of our partners** discussing their work with Edify.*

If you found the scenarios outlined in this paper compelling, the most productive next step is to convene a small cross-functional team, review as a group, and select three to five actions you are prepared to advance in the next 12–18 months.

Use the guide in the appendix to sharpen those choices, assign owners, and identify early indicators to monitor.

Appendix

“Futures Workshop” Agenda and Discussion Guide

Turning Four Futures into Action

The labor market for college graduates is changing faster than most institutions can plan. This guide helps a cross-functional leadership team translate the four futures in this paper into a short list of concrete, near-term actions that will benefit students in any scenario.

Who should use this guide

Student success leaders and cabinet-level partners from Academic Affairs, Advising, Career Services, Student Affairs, Alumni Relations, Institutional Research, Enrollment, Finance, and IT.

Time required

60–90 minutes

Outputs

- A shared understanding of the biggest risks and opportunities across the four futures
- A short list of **3–5 “no-regrets” priorities** for student success
- Named executive sponsors, 90-day next steps, and key signals to monitor

Step 1

Share the scenarios and purpose in advance of the meeting

A few days before the meeting:

- Send participants this paper and **ask them to read the four scenarios**
- Include a short framing question such as:
  "As you read, where do you see the greatest risk for our graduates, and where do you see the greatest opportunity for our institution?"
- Encourage participants to jot down quick reactions but assume the scenarios will still need to be reviewed together in the meeting.

Step 2

Read the scenarios together and frame the challenge *(15–20 minutes)*

Assume some participants have not reviewed the material in advance.
Begin by focusing everyone on a common challenge:

"How should we evolve our student success strategy so our graduates can thrive under any of these four futures?"

Ask participants to silently read or re-read all four scenarios in the room.
As they read, they should note:

- One **major risk** they see across the futures
- One **major opportunity** they see for the institution across the futures

After reading, do a brief round-robin asking for 2–3 volunteers to share their "risks" and "opportunities" with the group.

Step 3

Immerse in one future and personalize the impact *(15–20 minutes)*

Divide into pairs or small groups. Assign each group **one of the four futures**.

Ask each group to take a moment and imagine that their assigned future has fully arrived.
Sit with the thoughts and feelings. Then discuss each of these prompts as small groups:

- *"In this future, the big story for us is …"*
- *"In this future, my area's role will be …"*
- *"In this future, our students will need much more help with …"*
- *"In this future, I will count us successful if …"*

Each group reports out briefly so all participants can hear how each future plays out on your campus.

Step 4

Generate actions for each future *(15–20 minutes)*

Now ask the groups to convert insights about their future into concrete actions you can take now.
For their assigned future, they should consider:

- What will get harder for students, and what could we start now to soften that?
- What new opportunities appear, and how should we position ourselves?
- What would change in how we organize student success (roles, partnerships, technology, or processes)?

Each group drafts **3–5 specific actions** they would take now if they believed their future was imminent.

Step 5

Test actions across all futures and identify no-regrets moves

(20–25 minutes)

Bring the full group together. Create two columns on a whiteboard or shared screen:

- Column A: Actions that work for one scenario
- Column B: Actions that work for several scenarios

Do the following steps for each future scenario:

1. Each group presents their recommended actions one by one.
2. For each action, the group asks: "Would this help us only in this future, or would it help in two, three, or all four futures?"
3. Place actions in Columns A or B based on group consensus.

After all four futures are presented, review the actions in Column B. This is your short list of "no regrets" actions that hold value regardless of which future emerges. Prioritize as needed.

Step 6

Assign owners, first steps, and signals *(10–15 minutes)*

For each no-regrets action:

- Identify an executive sponsor, a cross-functional lead, and a technology lead.
- Determine one concrete step for the next 90 days.
- List the technology needed for that action (existing or new investment).

Choose 3–5 signals to watch that will help track which future is emerging. Examples:

- First-destination and underemployment trends
- Advising, career, and basic-needs service utilization
- Employer feedback on readiness
- Growth in entrepreneurial or nontraditional paths

Step 7

Closing the loop

Summarize decisions, sponsors, next steps, and signals. Schedule a follow-up in 3–6 months to review new information, assess progress, and adjust priorities.

Endnotes

1. Luona Lin, "About 1 in 5 U.S. Workers Now Use AI in Their Job, Up Since Last Year," Pew Research Center, October 6, 2025.
2. Lightcast via AI Index Report, "Share of Artificial Intelligence Jobs Among All Job Postings," dataset in Nestor Maslej et al., The AI Index 2025 Annual Report (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Institute for Human-Centered AI, 2025), as presented in Our World in Data, accessed December 12, 2025.
3. Stanford Digital Economy Lab, analysis of employment for U.S. workers aged 22–25 in AI-exposed occupations, 2025, summary figures reported by the Lab.
4. National Association of Colleges and Employers, Job Outlook 2025 (Bethlehem, PA: NACE, 2024).
5. Google Workspace, "The Young Leaders Embracing AI to Make an Impact at Work," based on a survey conducted by The Harris Poll of U.S. knowledge workers aged 22–39, 2024, accessed December 12, 2025.
6. "How Americans View AI and Its Impact on People and Society," Pew Research Center, September 17, 2025.
7. Federal Reserve Bank of New York, "The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates," data for Q2 2025 (unemployment and underemployment for graduates aged 22–27), accessed December 12, 2025.
8. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates, 10th ed. (Boulder, CO: WICHE, 2020), projections for U.S. high school graduates to 2030 and 2040.
9. U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, table on median earnings of full-time, year-round workers aged 25–34 by educational attainment.
10. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment," Employment Projections, 2023.
11. Workplace Intelligence and Hult International Business School, College Graduate Skills Study (Boston: Workplace Intelligence, 2025).
12. YouScience, 2024 Workforce Report: Fixing America's Broken Talent Pipeline (American Fork, UT: YouScience, 2024).
13. Pierre Azoulay, Benjamin F. Jones, J. Daniel Kim, and Javier Miranda, "Age and High-Growth Entrepreneurship," American Economic Review: Insights 2, no. 3 (2020): 65–82; originally circulated as NBER Working Paper No. 24489 (2018).
14. "Inside Gen Z's New Approach to Venture Capital and Funding," Bidaya, summarizing Stripe's 2025 Digital Entrepreneurship Report, published November 2025, accessed December 12, 2025.

The Future of College Graduates in the AI Workforce

Project Director
Ed Venit, PhD

Designer
Kelsey Stoneham

202.747.1000 | **eab.com**

ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with more than 2,800 institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and advancement. We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. **Learn more at eab.com.**

39911