2026 Presidents Institute

A Deeper Purpose

January 4–7, 2026 ▪ Signia by Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek ▪ Orlando, FL

The Council of Independent Colleges

List Presenters Below

- **Adam Pryor**, Senior Advisor for AI Strategy and Engagement, Council of Independent Colleges
- **Candice McQueen**, President, Lipscomb University
- **Laura Crawley**, President, Bethany College

Building the AI-Ready Campus: A Strategic Action Plan for Presidents

This session moves beyond general AI anxiety to provide specific, decision-ready action items for presidents. We frame the conversation temporally: **Past** (Foundational Repair), **Present** (Strategic Shifts), and **Future** (Infrastructure & Care).

Core Philosophy: We are moving from a "flight from necessity" (hype and fear) to the "Gravity of the Boring": focusing on the infrastructure, maintenance, and human care required to sustain an AI-enabled institution.

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Key Action Item 1: Automation
The "Low-Hanging Fruit

Identify

High-volume, low-value manual tasks burning human capital

Prioritize

Select one process for 90-day automation pilot

Execute

Deploy solution and measure time saved

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The Automation Imperative

Why This Matters Now

If you are still manually processing admissions forms, transcripts, or course registration conflicts, you are burning precious human capital on tasks that machines can handle flawlessly.

Ask your Cabinet: "What is one high-volume, low-value task we can automate in the next 90 days?" If they can't answer immediately, you have a visibility problem.

? "If I asked your Registrar for the most painful manual process they own, would they answer in 5 seconds or 5 days?"

Key Action Item 2: The "Shadow AI" Inventory

Bringing Hidden Technology Into the Light

The Context: Your faculty and staff are already paying for their own AI tools (ChatGPT Plus, Midjourney, Claude Pro) out of pocket, creating massive security vulnerabilities and equity gaps across your institution.
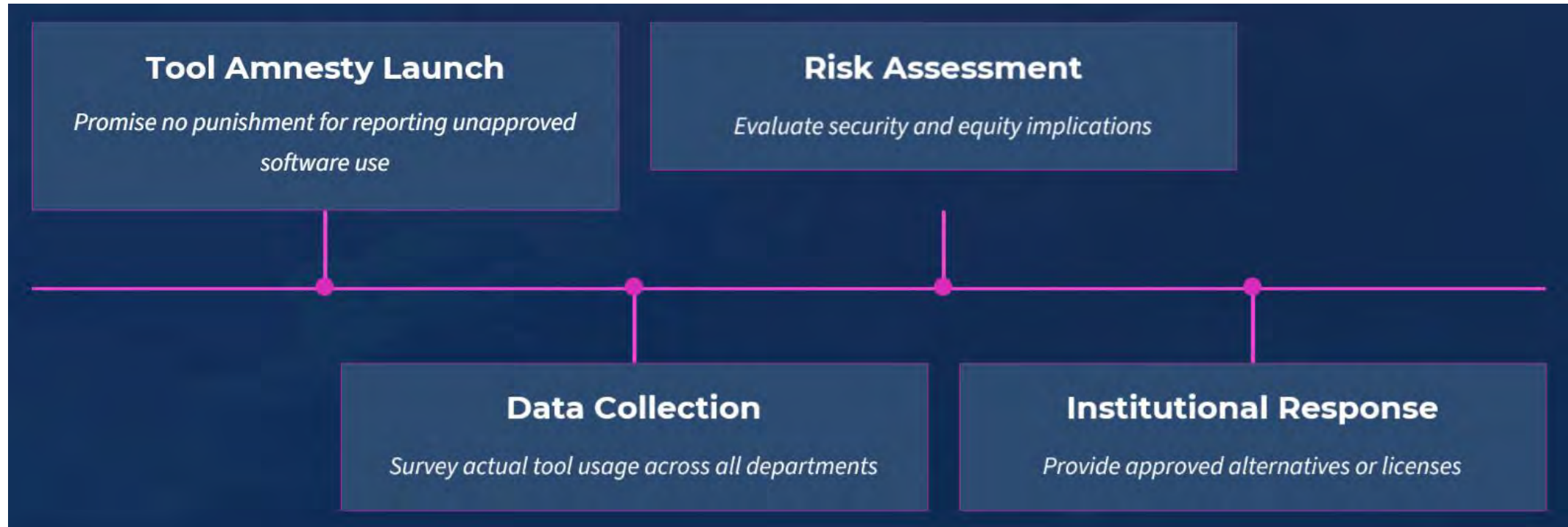
The Decision: Bring the "Shadow AI" ecosystem into institutional visibility.

The Action: Launch a "Tool Amnesty" program where faculty and staff can report what they're using without fear of reprimand. You cannot govern what you cannot see.

The Shadow AI Question
What You Need to Know

Tool Amnesty Launch

Promise no punishment for reporting unapproved software use

Risk Assessment

Evaluate security and equity implications

Data Collection

Survey actual tool usage across all departments

Institutional Response

Provide approved alternatives or licenses

Do you know what tools your faculty are paying for out of their own pockets right now? If not, you have a security blind spot.

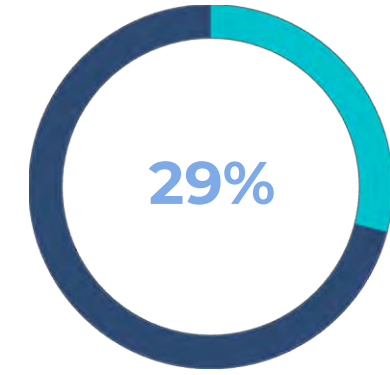# Key Action Item 3: From "Digital Filing Cabinet" to "Insight Engine"

70%
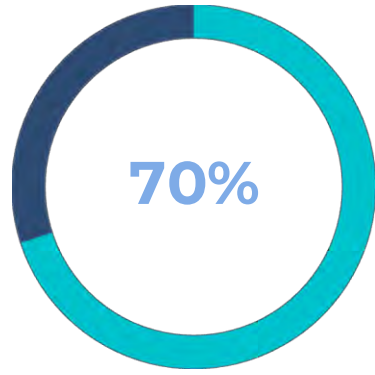
Weekly AI Usage

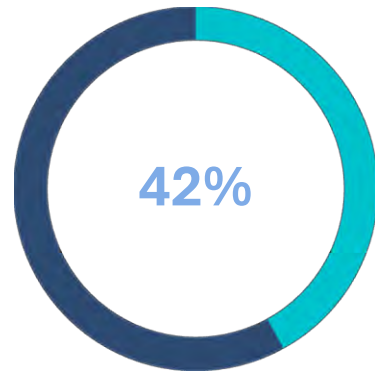This nearly doubles AI usage for work tasks since 2023

84%
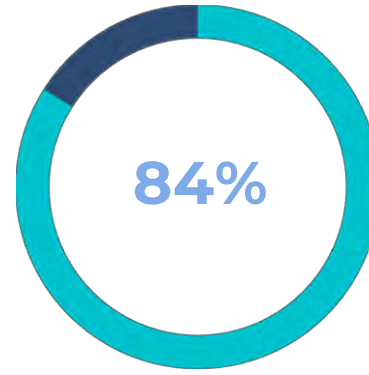
Digital Exhaustion

The percentage of workers that identify feeling exhausted by AI efficiency efforts
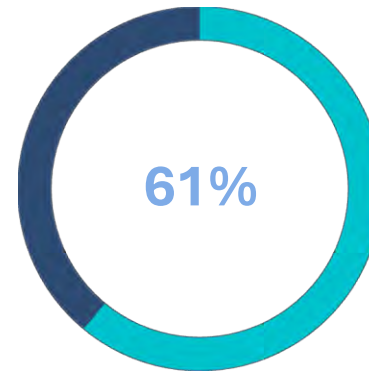
29%

Beyond Pilots

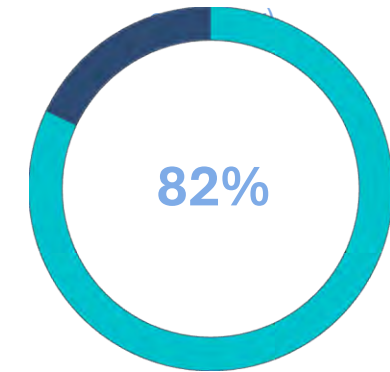Companies that Identify they have moved forward to scaling AI initiatives across the organization (up 22% in

42%

AI Scalers - Redesign Process

Compared to 12% of institutions at the pilot stage

61%

AI Scalers - Provide Training

Compared to 27% of institutions at the pilot stage

82%

AI Scalers - Treat AI as a critical infrastructure

Compared to 49% of institutions at the pilot stage

From Filing Cabinet to Insight Engine

Making Data Work for You

The Context: Most campuses collect enormous amounts of data; very few use it to predict student success, prevent attrition, or optimize resource allocation in real-time.

The Decision: Authorize the budget for a dedicated "Data Architect" role—someone whose sole job is to make institutional knowledge queryable, not just stored.

The Check: Ask your analytics team: "Do we have a 'Clean Data' pipeline with standardized schemas, or is our institutional knowledge locked in incompatible PDF silos and legacy databases?"
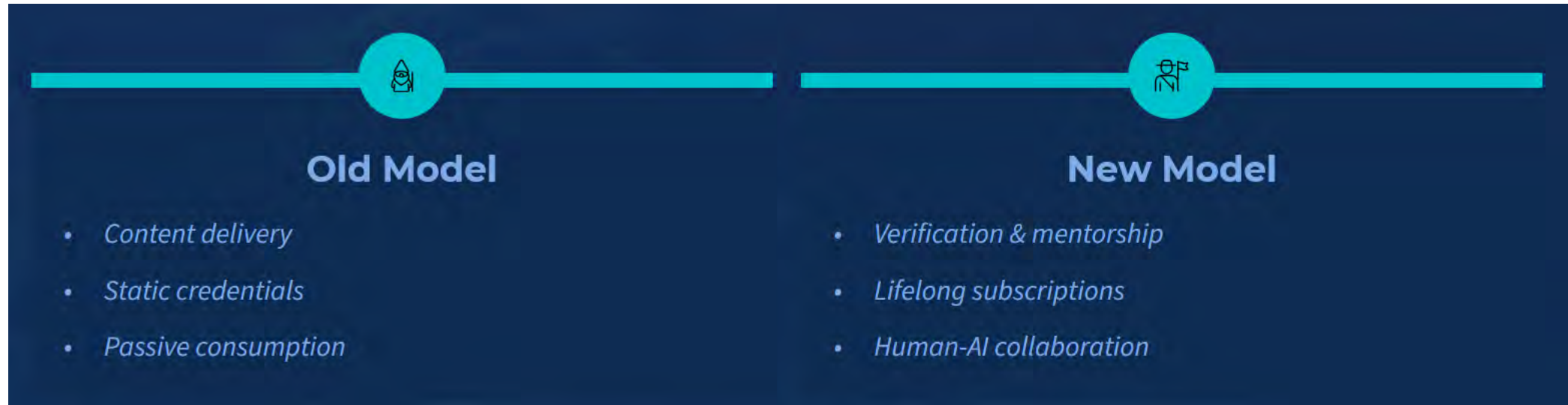
> ? "Can your institution answer a complex question about student success and retention in real-time, or does it require a 'data request' that takes two weeks?"
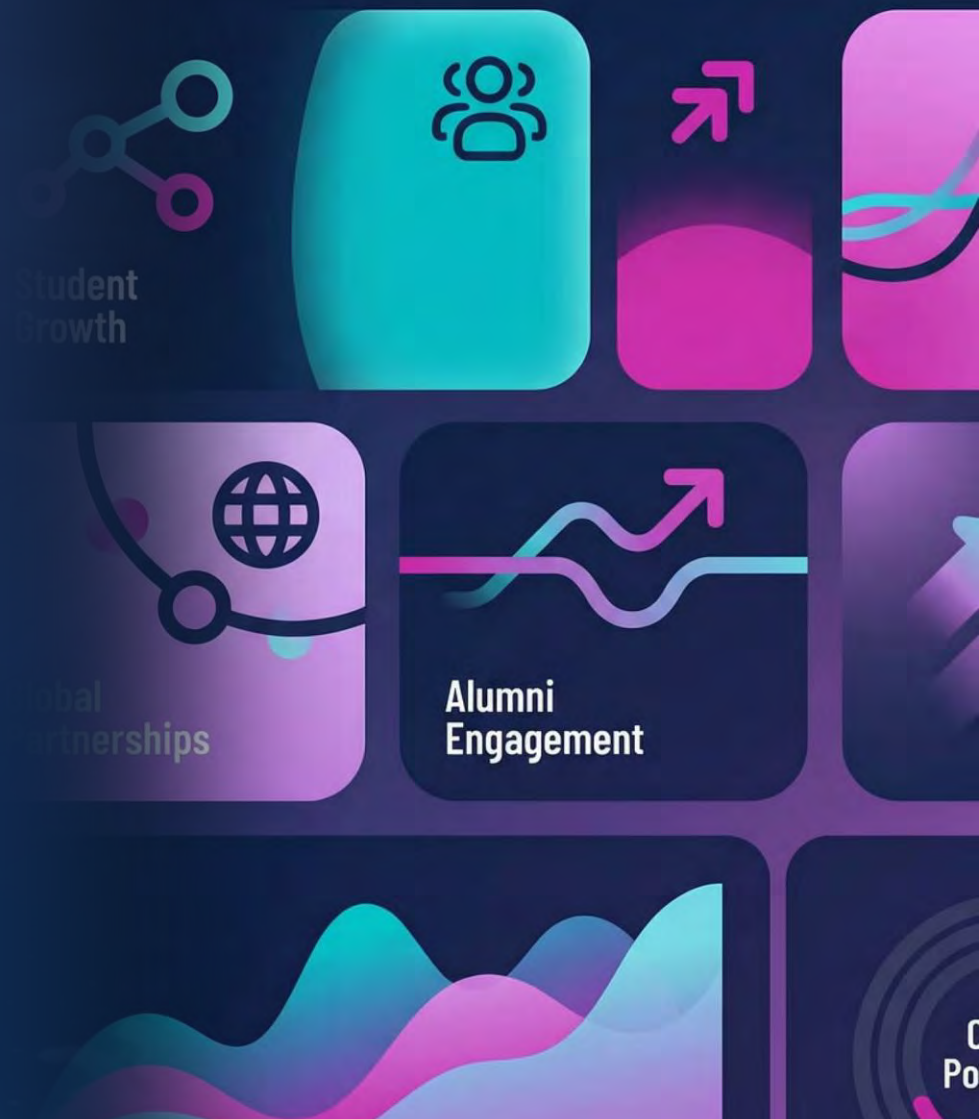
Key Action Item 4: Redefining Educational Value in the AI Era
From Content Delivery to Lifelong Verification

What is a university's value when AI tutors deliver content faster and cheaper, students offload thinking to machines, and skills become obsolete in 18 months?

Old Model
- Content delivery
- Static credentials
- Passive consumption

New Model
- Verification & mentorship
- Lifelong subscriptions
- Human-AI collaboration

Three Integrated Actions
Building the New Model

To address this fundamental shift in educational value, we must implement three integrated actions:

Compete on Verification

Launch competency-based credentials that allow AI-assisted learning for foundational content, but require rigorous human-proctored verification of mastery.

Prove Human Leadership

Implement portfolio assessments requiring students to document their process and critically evaluate AI outputs, demonstrating unique human insight and leadership.

Build Subscription Model

Develop a "Subscription to Relevance" program offering monthly micro-credentials for alumni, ensuring continuous upskilling and career support.

> ⑦ "If AI teaches faster, students offload cognition, and skills expire quickly—what are we selling, and how do we prove its worth?"

Key Action Item 5: Ecosystem Integration

Don't Do It Alone

The Context: No single university—not even the wealthiest—can keep pace with the computational requirements, model development costs, and specialized talent needed for cutting-edge AI infrastructure.

The Decision: Join or form a consortium for shared AI resources, procurement leverage, and knowledge exchange.

The Action: Identify peer institutions with complementary strengths and compatible values. Begin conversations about shared infrastructure investments.

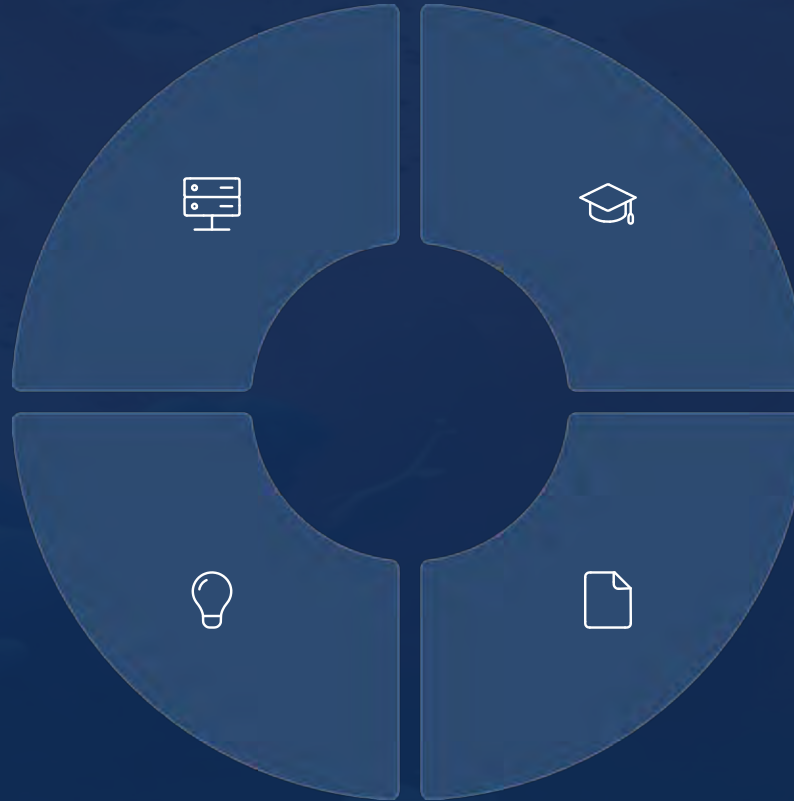# The Final Mandate: Care for the Plumbing

The Top Insight

Care for the plumbing, and the innovation will follow. The most transformative AI strategy is not the flashiest demo or the biggest vendor contract—it's fixing the boring, unglamorous friction points that exhaust your people and waste institutional capital.

Go back to your campus and **find the friction**. Ask your staff: "What manual process makes you want to quit?" Ask your faculty: "What policy makes you feel like you're lying to students?" Ask your students: "Where does the system feel broken?"

Then fix it. Fix one thing in 90 days. Then fix another. The compound effect of removing friction is the foundation of every successful AI transformation.

Listen
Find the pain points through structured conversation

Prioritize
Choose high-impact, achievable targets

Execute
Deliver visible improvements in 90-day cycles

Repeat
Build momentum through consistent wins

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