

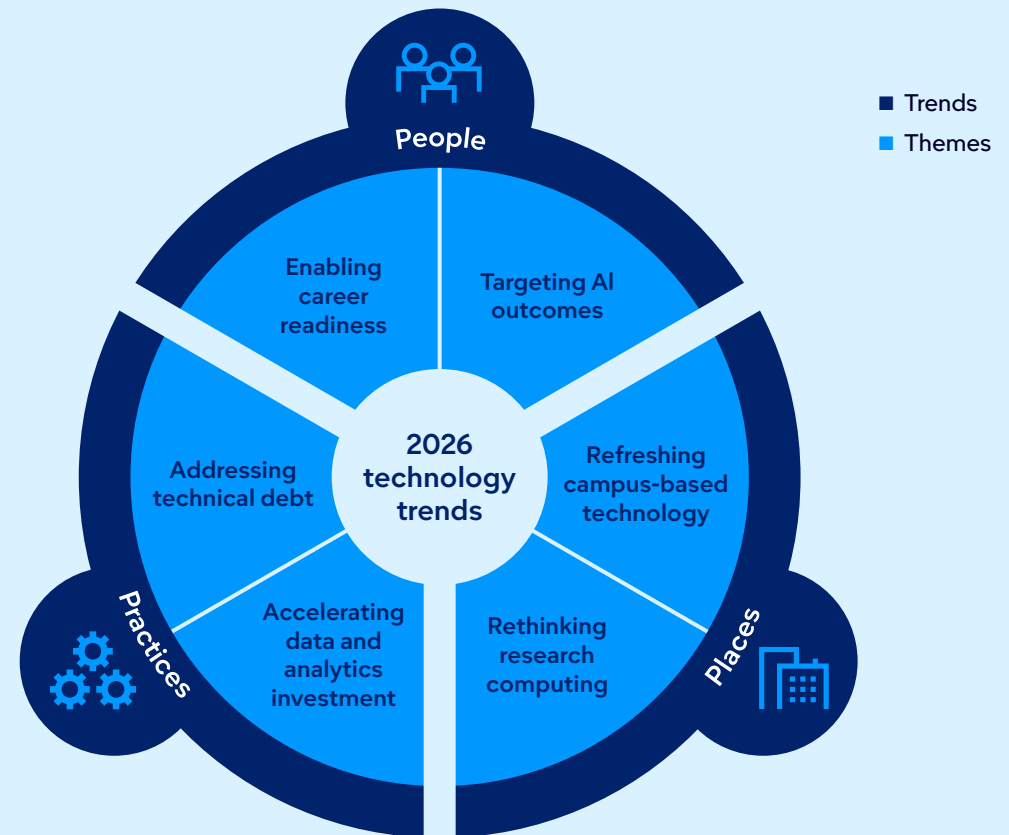
Responding to Disruptive Change in Higher Education

How can higher education institutions effectively respond to disruptive change — and why does it matter now?

Higher education is confronting disruptive change at a scale and speed unlike anything in its history. Shifting learner expectations, rapid advances in AI, demographic declines and new competitors are redefining what it means to deliver value.

Institutions that adapt with clarity and purpose will strengthen their relevance, resilience and impact. Higher education CIOs must lead with vision, drive intentional transformation and ensure their institutions are prepared to thrive in the future ahead.

Top technology trends in higher education for 2026



Source: Gartner

3 essential questions for navigating disruptive change in higher education

- 1 How can institutions build the agility needed to navigate accelerating disruption?
- 2 What strategic capabilities must CIOs strengthen to lead digital transformation?
- 3 How can technology investments drive resilience, relevance and long-term value?

What are the key stages?

This roadmap outlines five actionable steps for successfully responding to disruptive change in higher education. It highlights essential, proven practices that leaders can use to understand their context, set a clear direction, define and prioritize actions, communicate effectively with stakeholders and continuously monitor progress to adapt with confidence.

Understand context



Set direction



Define actions



Communicate to stakeholders



Monitor progress and adapt



Understand context

Key outcome: A clear understanding of the internal and external disruption drivers shaping IT priorities is identified.

Actions to take:

Review institutional strategy and sector research to gauge disruption impacts.

Identify demographic, regulatory and technological forces reshaping higher ed and their IT implications.

Assess the risks these forces create for academic delivery, student experience, research and digital operations.

Sample of associated Gartner client resources include:

Analyst Consultation

- [Develop an understanding of the strategic planning framework and the key components of an effective IT strategy to ensure alignment between technology initiatives and institutional priorities.](#)

Insights

- [Quick Answer: What's the Difference Between Strategy, Strategic Plans and Operational Plans?](#)
- [AI Shockwaves: What Higher Education CIOs Must Do Now](#)
- [Higher Education Vision, 2026 to 2035: Reset Strategy and Streamline Technology Decisions](#)
- [Evolve Higher Education IT Operating Models to Achieve Institutional Outcomes](#)
- [How CIOs Can Optimize Technology Operating Models in Higher Education](#)

- Webinar: Explore [Gartner Predictions for Higher Education](#).
- Attend a conference: Explore [education-specific sessions](#) at the [Gartner IT Symposium/Xpo™ conference](#).

Understand context



Set direction



Define actions



Communicate to stakeholders



Monitor progress and adapt



Set direction

Key outcome: A shared set of IT principles and priorities that provide clear direction is defined.

Actions to take:

Collaborate with academic, administrative and IT stakeholders to confirm strategic priorities and close gaps.

Define IT-strategic principles that guide decisions supporting institutional resilience and student success.

Establish clear behaviors and decision-making norms that align IT actions with the institution's mission.

Sample of associated Gartner client resources include:

Executive Partner Consultation

- [Discuss and review the strategy to ensure alignment with the institution's mission.](#)

Insights

- [Evolve Your Higher Education Classroom Technology Strategy](#)
- [How CIOs Can Optimize Technology Operating Models in Higher Education](#)
- [Quick Answer: Engaging Stakeholders When Creating IT Strategy](#)
- [3 Ways to Strategically Optimize IT Cost in Higher Education](#)
- [Top Technology Trends in Higher Education for 2026](#)
- [How Higher Education CIOs Should Use Data, Analytics and AI to Improve Student Success](#)

- Align institutional priorities and set a unified direction across multiple functions: [Gartner Digital Execution Scorecard™](#)
- Webinar: Discover [What's New in ERP for Higher Education](#).

Understand context



Set direction



Define actions



Communicate to stakeholders



Monitor progress and adapt



Define actions

Key outcome: A prioritized set of IT actions, outcomes and metrics for the institution is defined.

Actions to take:

Define IT strategic actions that strengthen institutional resilience and address priority capability gaps.

Identify the student, academic and operational outcomes IT will enable to close those capability gaps.

Establish metrics to monitor the impact of strategic actions on institutional performance and agility.

Sample of associated Gartner client resources include:

Analyst Consultation

- Discuss or review strategic actions and how to define metrics.

Insights

- [AI Shockwaves: What Higher Education CIOs Must Do Now](#)
- [Market Guide for Higher Education Learning Management Systems](#)
- [Roadmap to Accelerate AI Strategy for Higher Education CIOs](#)

- [Critical Capabilities for Higher Education SaaS Student Information Systems](#)

- [Building the Intelligent Campus: Why SIS Modernization Matters Now in Higher Education](#)

- [Evolve Your Higher Education Classroom Technology Strategy](#)

- [Magic Quadrant for Higher Education SaaS Student Information Systems](#)

- Explore the [Gartner Top 10 Technology Trends](#).
- Improve IT efficiency with [Gartner benchmarking tools](#).

Understand context



Set direction



Define actions



Communicate to stakeholders



Monitor progress and adapt



Communicate to stakeholders

Key outcome: A clear communication package that makes the IT strategy relevant and understood across the institution.

Actions to take:

Create a one-page visual summary that clearly communicates the outcomes enabled by the IT strategy.

Develop tailored IT strategy stories that resonate with key audiences across the institution.

Use the stories and one-page summary to make the strategy meaningful and actionable for all stakeholders.

Sample of associated Gartner client resources include:

Insights

- [AI in Higher Education 2026 — How to Reduce Three Barriers and Enhance AI Maturity](#)
- [CIOs: Develop an Effective IT Communications Strategy](#)
- [2026 CIO Agenda for Higher Education: Technology Priorities and IT Strategy Shifts](#)

Gartner Peer Community™

- Connect with other higher education leaders to gain perspective on strategy.

Discover [the art of the one-page strategy](#) and communicate with greater impact.

Understand context



Set direction



Define actions



Communicate to stakeholders



Monitor progress and adapt



Monitor progress and adapt

Key outcome: Ongoing visibility into strategy performance and the ability to adapt IT priorities as disruption evolves.

Actions to take:

Identify key contextual factors to monitor regularly.

Establish recurring strategy reviews to evaluate whether IT actions and execution remain aligned to needs.

Adjust the IT strategy and its execution to respond to emerging disruptions and institutional priorities.

Sample of associated Gartner client resources include:

Executive Partner Consultation

- [Discuss or review the strategic factors planned to be monitored and determine frequency of reviews.](#)

Insights

- Learn how to establish a continual scanning process and how to conduct strategy reviews: [Keep Your Strategy and Execution on Track to Deliver Success](#)
- [Use Adaptive Strategic Planning to Succeed Amid Complex Volatility](#)

Move from strategy to execution faster with [Gartner Accelerators](#).

Understand context



Set direction



Define actions



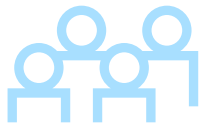
Communicate to stakeholders



Monitor progress and adapt

Who needs to be involved?

The most successful institutions establish cross-functional teams across technological, academic and administrative leadership to effectively respond to disruptive change in higher education. This roadmap outlines the recommended functions to involve and the roles they play to ensure strong progress toward key milestones.



Client Story

Accelerating AI Strategy: The University of Tennessee’s Success With Gartner

Mission-critical priority

The University of Tennessee wanted to accelerate the development and deployment of a robust AI strategy to enable innovation in higher education, ensure successful adoption and optimize investments in AI solutions.



How Gartner helped

Through Executive Partner services, Analyst Consultations and access to cutting-edge insights, Gartner guided the University of Tennessee in shaping its AI strategy, planning deployment and driving student adoption. Gartner also advised on cost-effective licensing and rollout of Microsoft Copilot while enabling the team to stay current on trends through collaborative analyst calls and research reviews.



Results

With Gartner support, the University of Tennessee successfully launched and scaled its AI initiatives, achieving broad adoption and efficient resource utilization. Guided by Gartner, the institution ensured that its strategies for AI, quantum computing and chatbots remained innovative and aligned with best practices — positioning the university as a leader in technology-driven education.

[View the full story ↗](#)



Actionable, objective insights

Explore these additional complimentary resources and tools for education leaders:

 Roadmap Technology Adoption Roadmap Drive informed technology investment decisions for your institution. Download Guide	 Webinar AI Agents: Strategic Imperatives for CIOs Position your institution for success by preparing your technology stack for AI agents. Watch Now	 eBook Strategic Cost Optimization Guide for Education CIOs Maximize the impact of your technology budget and improve educational outcomes. Get Started	 Tool Gartner BuySmart™ Optimize technology buying decisions to minimize risk and maximize value for your institution. Launch Demo
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