Preparing Talent for the AI Economy

Perspectives from Three University Presidents

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Introduction

TALENT: THE DEFINING AI ADVANTAGE

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Artificial intelligence is often described as a race for the most advanced models or the fastest chips. Those capabilities matter. But over the long run, the winners—whether individuals, organizations, or nations—will be those that develop the talent to discover, build, deploy, and use AI most effectively.

That reality places higher education at the center of one of the defining challenges of our time.

Universities have always prepared students for careers and advanced research that expands human knowledge. Today, the pace of technological change is transforming that mission. AI is reshaping not only what students need to learn, but how they learn, how universities operate, and how institutions partner with employers and government. The traditional model of earning a degree and relying on it for an entire career is giving way to a future in which continuous learning, adaptability, and human judgment become enduring competitive advantages.

These changes present extraordinary opportunities. AI has the potential to personalize learning, expand educational access, accelerate research, and enhance human productivity. It also raises profound questions about ethics, privacy, academic integrity, workforce disruption, and the uniquely human capabilities that education must continue to cultivate.

These questions formed the basis of the keynote panel at the 2026 NYU AI and the Workforce Conference held on July 9-10, 2026. I was privileged to moderate a discus-

sion with three distinguished university leaders: President Andrew Armacost of the University of North Dakota, President Pam Eddinger of Bunker Hill Community College, and President Todd Saliman of the University of Colorado. Although they lead very different institutions, they share a common conviction: higher education must embrace AI thoughtfully, prepare students for a lifetime of learning, and preserve the human values that give education its enduring purpose.

The pages that follow include both a summary of our discussion and reflections from each of the three presidents. Together, they offer complementary perspectives on one of the most important questions facing higher education today: How do we prepare people not merely to use artificial intelligence, but to lead with it?

As the conversation made clear, the future of AI will ultimately depend not only on technological breakthroughs, but on the people and institutions that shape how those technologies are used. Developing that talent is not simply an educational challenge—it is a strategic imperative for long-term competitiveness.

Mark Kennedy (Moderator), Pam Eddinger, Todd Saliman, Andrew Armacost

Preparing Talent for the AI Economy: Perspectives from Three University Presidents

America's colleges and universities drive the nation's innovation economy, providing the research and skilled talent necessary to maintain a global competitive edge.

However, the rise of artificial intelligence presents higher education with a paradox. While AI can expand educational access and personalize learning, it also generates deep concerns about job displacement, institutional inequality, outdated curricula, and data security.

To manage this paradox, campuses are already taking system-wide action across both classrooms and university governance. These efforts, complemented by closer private sector partnerships and robust funding, will help ensure successful adoption to maintain America's competitive edge.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

AI has the potential to make higher education more accessible. Personalized learning platforms can adapt instruction to different learning styles and schedules, helping the full range of traditional students, adult learners, working professionals, and underserved communities gain critical skills and knowledge. AI also enables immersive learning through simulations and virtual training environments.

"AI isn't ultimately a competition for the best models or the fastest chips. The winners—whether individuals, organizations, or nations—will be those that develop the talent to build, deploy, and use AI most effectively. That's why universities are at the center of the AI economy."

— Mark R. Kennedy

Universities can leverage these innovations to prepare students for a labor market that increasingly demands continuous learning rather than a single degree earned early in life. By enabling students to acquire new skills efficiently throughout their careers, institutions can ensure graduates are better prepared to adapt as technology transforms the labor market.

At the same time, challenges persist. The rapid rise of generative AI has left many students questioning whether their planned professions will be significantly automated before—or soon after—they graduate. This uncertainty can undermine motivation and raise doubts about whether the financial and personal investment in a college degree will continue to provide a strong return.

AI also risks widening existing inequalities across higher education. Building secure AI infrastructure, licensing enterprise-grade software, and training faculty require substantial financial resources. Wealthier institutions are better positioned to provide students with sophisticated AI tools and protected computing environments.

Beyond its applications to teaching, institutions are exploring ways AI can support administration, research, and student services. While these applications improve efficiency, they introduce risks involving intellectual property and sensitive student data. Protecting this information while responsibly adopting AI has become a central governance challenge.

"AI is 20% technology adoption and 80% change management."

— Pam Eddinger

STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Preparing for an AI-enabled future requires proactive leadership. Rather than waiting for the labor market to stabilize, many campuses are already pursuing three complementary strategies.

First, institutions are strengthening AI governance. AI has not changed the need to meet existing legal and ethical obligations, including protecting student records. Therefore, effective adoption requires clear policies governing data security and privacy.

"Hands-on instruction, including apprenticeships and internships, help students close skills gaps and open new opportunities."

— Todd Saliman

Second, universities are rethinking instruction and assessment. Traditional forms of assessment, like end-of-term essays, are no longer sufficient measures of learning. Faculty are shifting toward assessments that evaluate the learning process, using oral examinations, live problem-solving, and collaborative projects to encourage students to use AI thoughtfully.

Third, successful implementation depends on broad campus engagement. AI policies imposed solely from the top are unlikely to succeed. Faculty, students, and administrators must work together to develop shared expectations through transparent communication, professional development, and collaborative policymaking. Building trust is just as important as deploying new technology.

PREPARING TOMORROW'S STUDENTS

Institution and system-wide efforts are providing the necessary structures for effective AI adoption. At the same time, colleges and universities are developing new instructional techniques to ensure that students graduate with the capabilities needed to thrive in an AI-enabled economy.

"We are making an active effort to demystify what it means to teach in an AI world."

— Andrew Armacost

Experiential learning is increasingly valuable. Apprenticeships, internships, clinical placements, undergraduate research, and project-based learning help students develop skills that remain difficult to automate, including leadership, communication, teamwork, ethical judgment, and complex problem-solving. These experiences also help students understand where AI enhances human expertise rather than replaces it.

AI literacy is likewise becoming a part of core curricula. Students in business may need to evaluate AI-assisted market analyses, journalism students should learn to verify AI-generated content, and nursing students must understand both the capabilities and limitations of clinical decision-support systems. Graduates should leave with the ability to select appropriate AI tools, write effective prompts, critically evaluate AI-generated outputs, and recognize the ethical responsibilities associated with their use.

Achieving these goals requires stronger partnerships between higher education and industry. Universities need continuous feedback from employers to understand how AI is reshaping occupations and which competencies are becoming most valuable. More agile collaboration can help academic departments update curricula, expand internship opportunities, and better align educational programs with evolving workforce needs.

Finally, institutions are starting to rethink the traditional four-year degree as the sole pathway for workforce preparation. As technology evolves more rapidly, workers will increasingly need opportunities to reskill throughout their careers. Micro-credentials, professional certificates, and digital badges offer flexible pathways for acquiring new competencies without requiring a return to a full degree program. Rather than replacing bachelor's degrees, these credentials can complement them by supporting lifelong learning in a rapidly changing economy.

> ***"Students must understand the emerging technologies in the chosen fields… and that means greater AI literacy and more hands-on experience with AI tools."***
> — Andrew Armacost

LOOKING AHEAD

Adapting to the AI economy is neither fast nor free. The traditional academic curriculum review cycle takes years, making it fundamentally incompatible with a technological landscape that evolves month by month. At the same time, many public and mid-tier private universities operate on razor-thin margins and lack the capital required to build secure AI networks, hire top-tier data scientists, or continuously retrain faculty.

Despite the challenges, managing this transition remains essential. Effective adoption of emerging technologies is a fundamental customer service to tuition-paying students and a critical public service to society at large. If higher education fails to adapt, the workforce will face unprecedented disruption.

> ***"Getting education right is a public service…but if you love it, fund it."***
> — Pam Eddinger

To prevent this failure, higher education leaders must issue a collective call to action: success in the AI era cannot be achieved by universities acting in isolation. It demands federal, and potentially private, funding to subsidize the necessary transition in academic AI infrastructure and research.

It also requires new levels of integration with the private sector. Closer partnerships allow universities to receive real-time feedback from employers, ensuring curricula evolve at the same rapid pace as technological innovation. By integrating industry insights into the classroom, institutions can replace abstract theory with hands-on, experiential learning opportunities like internships and joint projects. This direct alignment ensures that graduates enter the workforce already possessing the specific, practical competencies that modern employers actively demand.

Preparing talent for the AI economy is not simply an educational challenge. It is a national competitiveness challenge. Universities, employers, and government each have indispensable roles, but none can succeed alone. America's long-term advantage will depend less on inventing AI than on preparing people to use it wisely.

> ***"The recent past shows us the opportunities for new job creation and opportunities for our students."***
> — Andrew Armacost

AI AND THE HUMAN ADVANTAGE

Andrew P. Armacost

President, University of North Dakota

"The future will not be determined by technology alone. It will be shaped by the important human choices we make together."

NYU's "AI and the Workforce" conference offered a timely and important opportunity to consider how we should prepare people and institutions for a future increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence. I was grateful to join fellow Higher Ed leaders Pam Eddinger and Todd Saliman for a panel discussion hosted by Mark Kennedy, and I appreciated the chance throughout the day to learn from consultants, policymakers, and pioneers in the AI industry. The strength of the conference was its breadth of topics and candid conversations that are essential as we navigate significant technological disruption.

For me, the conversation was both professional and personal. My academic background is in operations research, an interdisciplinary field that applies mathematics and computing to complex decision-making problems. It is closely connected to artificial intelligence and machine learning, and throughout my career I have worked on computational models and algorithms to address large-scale planning challenges in transportation and personnel systems. That experience has shaped the way I view the current growth in AI and machine learning. These are not simply new tools to adopt, but they are powerful methods for expanding how we generate ideas and expand human understanding.

At the University of North Dakota, our engagement with AI has been long standing. Well before the emergence of large language models in the early 2020s, UND faculty were applying machine learning in medicine, engineering, energy systems, autonomous systems, and other fields. That foundation allowed the University to move with purpose as the field accelerated. We launched undergraduate and master's programs in data science in 2019 and 2020, followed by a Ph.D. in artificial intelligence in 2025. We also strengthened faculty capacity through computational science cluster hires in engineering and the sciences. Just as importantly, we have recognized that AI is not solely a technical domain. We were excited to add faculty members in the digital humanities and the philosophy of human-machine interaction to help frame AI as a

human, ethical, cultural, and social challenge as much as a computational one.

That broader understanding is guiding our work through the UND AI Collective, or Co.AI, a ground-up, collaborative effort designed to encourage thoughtful experimentation across the University. Its co-chairs bring expertise in teaching and learning, course development, and information technology, and the collective is organized around several complementary goals to advance the use of AI in teaching and learning, to improve campus operations, to support research and discovery, to connect the conversation to questions of humanity and ethics, and to welcome the critique of AI. That final goal matters. Universities must be places where new possibilities are explored with energy, but also where hard questions are asked about consequences, fairness, trust, privacy, and the public good.

For students, the central question is not merely how to use AI tools, but how to think, judge, and lead in a world shaped by them. Science and engineering disciplines will see direct and continuing applications of AI, and, yes, computer science will remain vital. Yet the humanities, liberal arts, and social sciences are equally essential because they cultivate judgment, reasoning, ethics, communication, historical perspective, and a deeper understanding of human thought and behavior. Our students will need the capacity to understand systems, improve processes, ask better questions, and integrate computational tools responsibly into complex human organizations. That preparation requires technical fluency, but it also requires a strong sense of humanity. Universities and colleges are well-positioned to bring those dimensions together.

The conference reinforced the dual nature of this moment for me. AI and related computational technologies hold extraordinary promise to improve lives, strengthen institutions, expand human capability, and accelerate discovery. At the same time, they pose real risks in systems where error, opacity, or misplaced trust can have profound consequences, including in critical infrastructure, finance, health care, national security, and defense. The path forward will require universities, employers, and policymakers to work together with urgency, humility, and a shared commitment to the public good. The future will not be determined by technology alone. It will be shaped by the important human choices we make together.

LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH THE AI TRANSITION

Todd Saliman

President, University of Colorado

University of Colorado
Boulder | Colorado Springs | Denver | Anschutz

"Our task as a university is not to dismiss any of these perspectives, but to create a structure that acknowledges all of them while building broad agreement on how we move forward together."

Higher education has continually evolved to reflect and meet the needs of a changing world, and today we face another defining moment. As we consider the role of artificial intelligence in higher education operations, research and scholarly work, and, importantly, in preparing students and workers for success in an AI-intertwined economy, we must examine this issue through a multifaceted lens. The conversations about AI are complex, and we have a responsibility to thoughtfully consider the varying perspectives while ensuring our institution and students are prepared for the future.

At the University of Colorado, we recognize that addressing AI cannot simply be about adopting the latest technology. We must bring our entire organization along as we navigate this rapidly changing landscape. This means listening carefully to our internal and external constituents because there is a great deal of excitement, uncertainty and concern, all of which is understandable. We need systemwide conversations about how to engage with AI, and meet people where they are while creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue.

This is precisely why I brought together a small group of experts from our campuses and system administration in 2025 to focus on data security and ensuring fair access to AI throughout the CU system. What became clear is that we need a more robust structure to quickly engage on AI opportunities and risks. We recently developed such a structure in addition to an administrative policy governing AI use throughout the CU system.

The varying perspectives across the university mirror the broader public conversation. Industry leaders and employers consistently tell us that AI literacy is an essential workforce skill. They want graduates who understand how to use these tools

responsibly and effectively. Many of our students recognize the same reality. They are already incorporating AI into their learning, research and creative work, as well as their daily lives, and understand it can provide a competitive advantage in their careers.

At the same time, others are deeply skeptical of AI. Some worry about its environmental impact, its effects on critical thinking and implications related to privacy and surveillance. Many fear that widespread AI adoption could have unintended consequences for society. These individuals must be heard as well.

Our faculty have similarly diverse views. Many have enthusiastically embraced AI and continue to explore its enormous potential both in research and teaching. We recently honored faculty efforts in this space via two new programs: The President's AI Recognition Awards and Grants, which are focused on the areas of teaching and learning, and scholarly and creative work.

Other faculty remain cautious, however. They worry that AI may undermine learning, enable academic dishonesty or fundamentally and negatively impact the educational experience. Some also see AI as a challenge to traditional teaching and scholarship. Our task as a university is not to dismiss any of these perspectives, but to create a structure that acknowledges all of them while building broad agreement on how we move forward together.

None of us knows exactly what the endgame is when it comes to AI. It is advancing rapidly and many questions remain unanswered. What is clear, however, is that AI is here and it's here to stay. Vast numbers of people are using it every day in both their work and personal lives, and there is no turning back. Rather than denying that reality, higher education must help shape how AI is used responsibly and ethically.

We have an extraordinary opportunity to empower the people we serve by ethically embracing AI as a tool for innovation, creativity, discovery and problem-solving. Universities should be exploring how AI can help us operate more effectively while also preparing students to use these technologies ethically and wisely throughout their careers and personal lives.

At the same time, we must respect the core values of higher education. Our faculty retain authority over curriculum, classroom instruction and the expectations they establish for their courses. As a university, we must honor this academic freedom even as we encourage experimentation and innovation.

By balancing openness with thoughtful governance, we can ensure that higher education evolves in ways that prepare students to both succeed in an AI-driven economy and lead it responsibly.

KEEPING HUMANITY AT THE CENTER

Pam Eddinger, PhD

President, Bunker Hill Community College

"The future of AI is not principally a technological question; it is a human one."

The relentless predictions about artificial intelligence's impact on society and the future of work show no signs of abating. Over the past year, I have attended numerous conferences where predictions have swung widely, from dystopian visions of a future stripped of human judgment and the immediate elimination of entry-level jobs, to optimistic forecasts of employers leveraging AI for efficiency and growth, and colleges and universities rapidly integrating AI across curricula to prepare learners for the future of work.

What is rare is finding a convening where researchers, higher education leaders, policymakers, and C-suite executives engage in meaningful dialogue that is neither driven by hype nor fear, but instead grounded in research, data, and field observations. The NYU AI and the Workforce convening in Washington, DC, this July was just such an opportunity.

More than 100 experts gathered at the NYU Washington, DC campus to examine AI's impact through four distinct lenses: research, employer experience, education, and public policy. What struck me most was not the differences among these perspectives, but their remarkable convergence. Despite approaching AI from different vantage points, participants repeatedly returned to the same fundamental principle: the future of AI must be human-centered. Technology's greatest promise is not replacing human capability, but expanding human agency, creativity, and opportunity.

The research panel challenged one of the most persistent concerns surrounding AI: that entry-level positions are being broadly eliminated by automation. The evidence presented did not support that conclusion. While there are emerging shifts in AI-intensive fields, widespread displacement of entry-level employees cannot be attributed directly to AI. The transformation of work is more nuanced.

Joe Atkinson of PwC described this phenomenon as the "seniorization" of the entry-level worker—the elevation of expectations for new employees as AI tools be-

come embedded in professional practice. The issue is not that entry-level work disappears; rather, the competencies required for entry-level success are changing. People entering the workforce will need new forms of AI fluency, judgment, and adaptability alongside traditional occupational knowledge.

The discussion on apprenticeships and experiential learning provided an important bridge between research findings and employer realities. Apprenticeships accelerate the learning-to-career journey by combining on-the-job training with related technical instruction in the classroom. As AI reshapes workplace expectations, this model becomes even more relevant. The classroom and the workplace can reinforce one another, allowing learners to acquire complex skills earlier while developing the ability to apply knowledge in real work settings.

It was particularly encouraging to see apprenticeship, long associated with the skilled trades, being creatively adapted by professional sectors, including health care, advanced technology, and professional services. The future of work will require learning models that are more integrated, more experiential, and more responsive to rapid change.

The most revealing insight emerged when the employer and educator panels were considered together. Employers discussed how AI is accelerating research and development cycles, reducing routine and undesirable tasks, enabling new business models, and expanding the scale of existing enterprises. Educators described their efforts to engage faculty and students in thoughtful AI adoption: developing governance structures, reimagining teaching and learning, encouraging creativity with new tools, maintaining appropriate balance and restraint, and ensuring that education continues to serve the public good in both economic and moral terms.

In a conference focused on one of the most disruptive technologies of our time, the conversation ultimately returned not to technology, but to people.

The employer and educator panels arrived independently at an age-old concept: humanity must remain at the center of an AI-informed future. Good policy is not about replacing human work with automation; it is about helping workers and learners transition successfully into an AI-assisted environment. The goal is not simply efficiency; the goal is expanding human capability.

Welby Leaman, Senior Director of Global Policy Strategy at Walmart, illustrated this point through a powerful example from Walmart's workforce experience. Associates often dislike stocking in the backroom but value interactions with customers on the sales floor. By leveraging AI and other technologies to reduce the burden of routine backroom tasks, Walmart can enable Associates to spend more time engaging with customers, the part of the job where human connection matters most. The result is not simply increased efficiency, but greater employee agency, improved job satisfaction, and better service for customers.

The parallel message from educators was equally clear: provide faculty and learners with agency, resources, and support while ensuring that equity remains central. We should not prepare students for a fixed set of AI tools that will quickly evolve. We should prepare them with the skills, judgment, and human values that allow them to continually learn, evaluate, and collaborate with AI throughout their careers.

If AI accelerates the pace of workplace transformation, then education cannot be understood as a one-time preparation for employment. It must become a lifelong partner to work, supporting continuous learning, reskilling, ethical judgment, and human development across an individual's career.

For community colleges, this moment reinforces a mission we have long embraced: preparing people not only for their first job, but for a lifetime of adaptation and opportunity. As AI accelerates changes in the workplace, our role becomes even more essential—connecting learners, employers, and communities through accessible pathways to continuous learning. The future of work will require institutions that can respond with agility, and community colleges are uniquely positioned to serve as trusted partners in that transformation.

The NYU convening ultimately reinforced a powerful lesson: the future of AI is not principally a technological question; it is a human one. The institutions and organizations that thrive will not necessarily be those that adopt AI the fastest, but those that integrate it most thoughtfully: preserving human judgment, expanding opportunity, and advancing the public good.

Now more than ever, amid the noise and competing predictions surrounding AI, the message that continues to guide my thinking is clear: we must keep universal human values at the center, use technology as a tool to expand agency and creativity, and never lose sight of our shared responsibility to serve the public good.


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