THE HERRON GROUP LLC

The Hammer and the Nail

What to Know Before You Build an AI Degree
And Faster Ways to Pivot

A Brief for Smaller Universities, HBCUs, Community Colleges, and Tribal Colleges

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The Signal: Students Are Already Moving

Nearly half of all college students in the United States have thought seriously about changing their major because of artificial intelligence. One in six has already done it. This is not a prediction or a thought experiment. It is happening now, confirmed by six independent data sources.

The Lumina Foundation and Gallup (2026) surveyed 3,801 students in October 2025. They found that 42 percent of bachelor's degree students and 56 percent of associate degree students had considered switching their major because of AI. Sixteen percent had already made the switch. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2026) found that computer science enrollment at four-year institutions dropped 8.1 percent in fall 2025, the steepest decline of any field. The Computing Research Association (2025) surveyed 133 departments and found 62 percent reporting declining enrollment. Handshake (2025), a career platform used by millions of students, found AI concern among graduating seniors jumped from 44 percent to 62 percent in just two years. Attridge (2025) reported that computer science majors were the most pessimistic about their career prospects, with 28 percent describing themselves as very pessimistic, a 10 percentage point increase from the prior year's graduating class.

The pattern is consistent across every source. And it is not evenly distributed.

Associate degree students are more anxious than bachelor's degree students and more likely to have already switched (19 percent versus 13 percent). **Male students** are more likely to have changed majors than female students (21 percent versus 12 percent; Lumina Foundation & Gallup, 2026). **Technology students** are the most anxious at 70 percent. Healthcare and natural science students are the least anxious (Palmer, 2026).

Two peer-reviewed studies add depth. Duan et al. (2026) found that AI anxiety directly undermines students' ability to make career decisions well, not just what they decide, but how well they decide. Deng and Sun (2026) found that first-generation college students are more concerned about AI's career impact than their peers.

The students most affected, associate degree seekers, first-generation students, those at smaller institutions, are the ones with the least access to advising, career guidance, and labor market information. They are making major life decisions based on fear, not evidence.

The Perception Gap: Anxiety Does Not Match Reality

Here is something the data reveals that most institutions are missing: the students who are most anxious about AI are not the ones whose fields are most affected by it.

Technology students report the highest anxiety, at 70 percent considering a switch (Palmer, 2026). That makes intuitive sense. They can see AI writing code and automating tasks they are being trained to do. But healthcare students are among the least anxious, even though AI is transforming diagnostics, clinical documentation, treatment planning, and administrative

workflows throughout their field. Humanities students are anxious, but the skills their programs develop, critical thinking, written communication, ethical reasoning, and contextual analysis, are the ones employers consistently say AI cannot replace.

> *The anxiety tracks with media coverage and cultural narrative, not with actual labor market vulnerability. Students are reacting to what AI feels like it threatens, not what it actually threatens.*

This perception gap is dangerous because it drives misallocation. If 16 percent of students are switching fields based on perception rather than evidence, some are leaving strong programs for crowded ones. Some are abandoning fields where human skills will become more valuable as AI advances. And some are piling into AI-adjacent fields that may be saturated within a few years, especially as every major research university launches new AI degree programs at the same time.

No institution we have found is systematically tracking whether these major changes are producing better or worse outcomes for the students making them. The instruments to measure decision quality in the context of AI-driven career anxiety simply do not exist at most schools. That is a measurement problem, and it is solvable.

The Wrong Response: Higher Ed's Degree Reflex

When higher education encounters a new phenomenon, its default response is to build a four-year degree program around it. Dot-com boom: computer science degrees. Cybersecurity panic: cybersecurity degrees. AI anxiety: AI degrees.

> *When your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Higher ed's hammer is the four-year degree. But student AI anxiety is not a nail.*

The degree reflex is already in motion. Since Carnegie Mellon launched the first AI bachelor's degree in 2018, dozens of institutions have followed. MIT, the University of Pennsylvania, UC San Diego, and the University of South Florida all offer dedicated AI majors. The University of Wisconsin-Madison is creating an entirely new College of AI and Information, set to open July 2026. USC, Columbia, Pace, and New Mexico State are all launching AI degree programs this fall (Silberstein, 2026).

These are massive institutions with deep pockets, large faculties, established industry partnerships, and active research programs. They can build a new college and fill it with 3,000 students in a semester.

If that is not you, their strategy should not be yours. Here is why.

The Graduation Problem

A four-year AI degree program designed today will graduate its first students in 2030. The AI tools, frameworks, job categories, and ethical questions of 2030 will bear almost no resemblance to what we are building curricula around right now. A student who starts an AI degree this fall is betting that the specific technical content they learn in years one and two will

still be relevant in years three and four. That is a bet most working technology professionals would not take.

Microcredentials, certificates, and modular courses can be updated in weeks. A degree program takes years to redesign through faculty governance, curriculum committees, and accreditation review. That structural lag is not a bug. It is the system.

The Resource Problem

Building a new degree program requires faculty with active AI research expertise, lab infrastructure, industry partnerships, and accreditation approval. Smaller universities, HBCUs, community colleges, and tribal colleges may not have these at the scale required to compete with schools that have a decade head start and billion-dollar endowments. Attempting to replicate their model creates underfunded programs with outdated curricula that graduate students into a market already flooded with AI degree holders from better-resourced schools.

The Saturation Problem

If every institution launches an AI major at the same time, the market floods with AI degree holders from schools with vastly different levels of quality and industry connection. Graduates from smaller programs will compete against graduates from MIT and Carnegie Mellon for the same entry-level roles. That is not a fight smaller institutions can win on those terms.

The Wrong Diagnosis

The degree reflex assumes students need a new destination. But the data suggests something different. Students do not actually want to become AI specialists. They want to know their current field will still matter. That is not a degree problem. It is a curriculum problem.

Look at the evidence. Healthcare students are the least anxious (Palmer, 2026). Why? Because healthcare programs already show students how AI fits into clinical workflows, diagnostics, and documentation. AI is not a separate scary thing looming over their career. It is already embedded in the work they are learning to do.

> *The anxiety is lowest where the integration is highest. Students are not running toward AI. They are running away from programs that have not shown them how AI extends what they are already learning.*

The Right Response: AI as Extension, Not Destination

The institutions that will navigate this moment successfully are not the ones that build the best AI degree program. They are the ones that show every student, in every program, that AI is already part of their field and that they are already learning to work with it.

That does not require a new department. It requires three moves that are faster, cheaper, and more effective than a four-year degree.

Move 1: Embed AI Fluency Across Every Existing Program

Do not create an AI department. Bring AI into every department.

Show the education major how AI-powered tutoring systems work and how teachers design learning experiences around them. Show the business major how AI transforms financial analysis and customer strategy. Show the social work major how AI is reshaping benefit eligibility systems and case management. Show the criminal justice major how predictive policing algorithms work and why they need people who understand bias and accountability.

When AI is woven into the discipline, it stops being a threat and starts being a tool the student already knows how to use. The anxiety drops because the student can see themselves in an AI-augmented version of their field, not displaced by it.

This is not about turning every professor into an AI researcher. It is about giving faculty enough fluency to integrate AI into their teaching the way they previously integrated the internet, spreadsheets, and databases. The technology changed. The discipline adapted. The students graduated prepared for the world they were entering, not the one their professors entered.

One institution is already showing what this looks like in practice. In April 2026, Florida A&M University became the first stop on Google's national Gemini campus tour, a 35-institution engagement bringing AI learning experiences to campuses across the country. FAMU did not build an AI degree program. Instead, the Division of Academic Affairs led a campuswide rollout of Google Workspace with Gemini and NotebookLM, making AI tools available to every student and faculty member across every discipline (Williams, 2026). The provost framed the initiative as a strategic commitment to preparing students to engage "thoughtfully and confidently with emerging technologies." FAMU also launched a student survey on AI experiences during the event, building baseline measurement into the rollout from day one. That is the embedded fluency model in action: led by Academic Affairs rather than IT, reaching every program rather than creating a new one, and measuring the impact rather than assuming it.

Move 2: Build Microcredentials and Certificates That Generate Revenue Now

A 20-hour AI literacy certificate priced at $200 serves current students, working adults, and community members. It can be updated every semester as tools change. It stacks toward a degree if the student wants to go further. And it generates revenue without the multi-year, multi-million-dollar overhead of a new degree program.

The demand is clear, but institutions are not moving. A February 2026 study found that while higher education leaders continue to recognize the value of microcredentials for workforce development, institutional adoption and perceived fiscal impact have stalled (UPCEA, 2026). The gap between recognizing the value and actually building the programs is where most institutions are stuck.

The institutions that have moved are proving it can be done. Purdue's AI microcredential series earned ABET recognition, the first in the world (Purdue Today, 2025). The University of British Columbia built an AI Skills Accelerator for its own staff as a year-long microcredential with over

230 employees enrolled (EDUCAUSE, 2025). These models demonstrate that institutions can act quickly, at low cost, and with measurable results.

Starting July 1, 2026, Workforce Pell makes short-term credential programs eligible for federal Pell Grant funding for the first time. For community colleges, tribal colleges, and smaller universities, this opens a revenue stream that does not exist today. But only for institutions that have programs ready to go.

> *The question is not whether your institution can compete with MIT's AI degree. The question is whether you can launch a high-quality AI literacy certificate by fall 2026. That is a question within your control.*

Move 3: Deploy Career Guidance Tools That Replace Fear with Evidence

The missing piece at most institutions is not curriculum. It is information. Students are making major decisions based on headlines and anxiety, not labor market data.

A student who comes to a career counselor and says "I want to leave my education major because AI is going to replace teachers" needs more than reassurance. They need data. They need to see what AI-augmented teaching actually looks like, what employers are hiring for, and how their existing skills transfer across roles. If the institution cannot show them that, it is just processing paperwork for a decision the student made out of fear.

Career guidance tools that show students how AI is actually being used in their field, what skills are in demand, and what the career landscape looks like can turn a panic-driven major change into an informed career strategy. This is especially critical at institutions where counselor-to-student ratios make individualized guidance impossible at scale. Institutions should evaluate AI-powered career guidance platforms that integrate labor market data, skills-transfer mapping, and personalized pathway planning into the advising workflow.

Who Needs to Hear This

Presidents and Provosts at Smaller Institutions

If you do not have MIT's resources, you do not need MIT's strategy. Your advantage is agility. You can embed AI literacy into existing programs faster than a research university can navigate faculty governance to launch a new college. You can launch a microcredential in one semester. You can deploy a career guidance tool in weeks. The question is not "should we build an AI program." The question is "how fast can we show our students that AI makes their current program more valuable, not less."

Academic Deans and Department Chairs

Your faculty are the key. If they can show students how AI functions inside their discipline, inside nursing, education, business, criminal justice, and social work, the students stop leaving. This is not about adding a course to the catalog. It is about integrating AI into the courses you

already teach, as a tool within the discipline rather than a separate subject that must also be learned. Faculty development and support, not new hires, is the first investment.

Career Services Directors

You are fielding the anxiety every day. You need tools, not just training. When a student comes in saying they want to abandon their major because of something they read about AI, you need labor market data, skills-transfer mapping, and career pathway information that is current, specific, and grounded in evidence. Without those tools, you are limited to encouragement and paperwork.

Funders and Foundations

If you are investing in HBCUs, tribal colleges, or smaller institutions, pay attention to how your funding is being used to respond to AI. If it is going toward building a new four-year AI degree program at an institution that does not have the infrastructure to sustain it, you may be funding a losing strategy. Fund AI integration across existing programs. Fund microcredential development. Fund career guidance infrastructure. That is where the return on investment is highest, and where your funding reaches the students who need it most.

How This Plays Out Differently by Institution Type

HBCUs

The identity-survival tradeoff is already in play. In April 2026, the Kentucky General Assembly passed legislation converting the state's only public HBCU, Kentucky State University, into a polytechnic institution. The House voted 90-1 after amending the bill to honor the campus' legacy (Horsley, 2026). Students and alumni continue to ask whether the university will survive by becoming something else entirely. Building an AI degree program at an HBCU risks compounding that tradeoff: scarce resources flow into a program that competes on purely technical terms with schools that have ten times the budget, while diverting attention from the programs that define the institution's identity and mission.

But there is another model. In the same month Kentucky State's future was decided by the legislature, Florida A&M University chose its own path. FAMU became the first stop on Google's national Gemini campus tour, rolling out AI tools across every discipline through Academic Affairs, without building a new degree program and without waiting for external pressure to force a response (Williams, 2026). The contrast is instructive. Kentucky State's direction was defined by lawmakers. FAMU's was defined by the institution itself.

The stronger path is to demonstrate that an HBCU education, with its emphasis on community, service, cultural identity, and whole-person development, produces graduates who can integrate AI into human-centered work in ways that technical-only programs cannot. Embed AI fluency into the programs that already make your institution distinctive. FAMU is showing that this is not theoretical. It is already happening.

Community Colleges

Fastest to move, most exposed if they do not. Associate degree students are the most anxious group in the data (Lumina Foundation & Gallup, 2026). Community colleges can launch microcredentials faster than any other institution type. Workforce Pell opens a new revenue stream starting July 2026. The play is speed: get AI literacy credentials into the catalog now, embed AI into existing workforce programs, and give students a reason to stay and add skills rather than flee to a four-year institution that may not serve them any better.

Tribal Colleges

AI integration must be culturally grounded. The Cherokee Nation's 2025 AI policy offers a model: it establishes guidelines for responsible AI use while protecting Cherokee language and culture (Cox, 2025). Tribal colleges that embed AI into programs through a sovereignty and cultural preservation lens, rather than importing a generic AI curriculum, will serve their students and their nations better.

Career guidance at tribal colleges must account for place-based decision-making, community responsibility, and cultural value, not just labor market data. A student leaving a tribal language or cultural program because of AI anxiety represents a loss that cannot be measured in earnings alone.

Regional Public Universities

Caught in the middle. Too small to build a new AI college. Too large to pivot as quickly as a community college. The embedded fluency strategy is your best path, paired with microcredentials that serve both traditional students and the working adult population in your region. You are the institution that serves the most people who will never attend MIT. Make sure your programs show them that AI is a tool they can use, not a force that makes their degree irrelevant.

How The Herron Group Can Help

The Herron Group works at the intersection of measurement, systems, and AI to help mission-driven organizations navigate structural shifts like this one.

Measurement Design. Most institutions can tell you how many students changed majors. We help you build frameworks that capture why they changed, whether their decision was informed, and whether outcomes improved. We design instruments that track AI integration across programs, not just whether it exists, but whether it is working.

Systems Strategy. Embedding AI across existing programs is a systems redesign challenge, not a technology challenge. We help institutions map how advising, curriculum, career services, and employer partnerships need to change simultaneously so that AI fluency is woven into how the institution operates.

AI Implementation. We deploy practical AI solutions that fit how organizations actually work, including Careervo (careervo.io), our career guidance platform designed for the students and institutions most affected by the trends described in this brief.

The Bottom Line

The institutions that survive this moment will not be the ones that built the best AI degree program. They will be the ones that showed every student, in every program, that AI is already part of their field and that they are already learning to work with it.

That does not require a new department. It does not require a four-year degree. It requires a faster, sharper, more honest response to what students are actually afraid of.

They are not afraid of AI. They are afraid their program is ignoring it.

Fix that, and the students stay.

What Comes Next

This brief names the problem and the direction. The companion brief from The Herron Group, Fix the Process Before You Automate It, applies Lean and Six Sigma evaluation methodology to help your organization determine whether any process is ready to automate, before you commit resources to a technology solution. It walks through a structured framework for evaluating process quality, identifying waste, and knowing when deliberate is fast enough. An accompanying Process Readiness Checklist provides a hands-on tool for making that assessment.

If your institution is weighing its AI response and wants to move with discipline rather than reflex, contact The Herron Group.

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