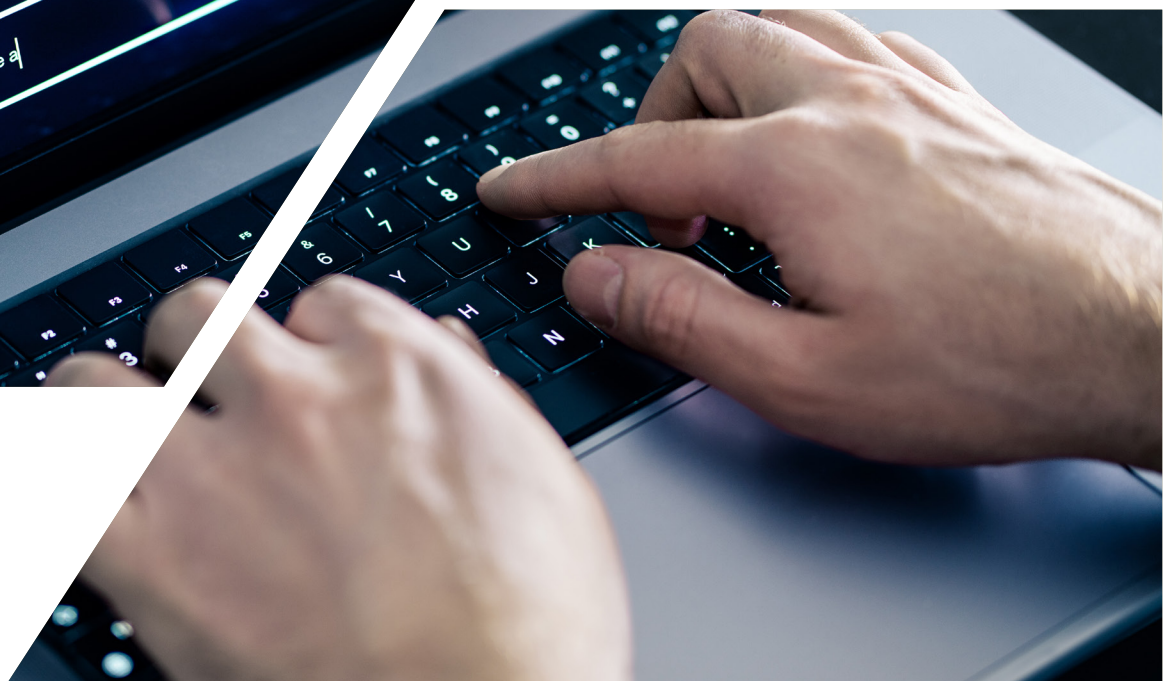




EFFECTIVELY LEVERAGING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING



OVERVIEW

Public and land-grant university communications and marketing leaders face an array of questions and challenges when thinking through how to safely leverage AI to increase the effectiveness of their divisions. With the recognition that the landscape of AI tools is rapidly evolving, this playbook aims to provide communications and marketing leaders with a framework for exploring the opportunities and limitations of AI for their teams and divisions.

SETTING GUARDRAILS

For many communications and marketing divisions, setting guardrails for the use of AI is the first step for leveraging the technology. Some institutions choose to outline very specific use cases that are off limits in their AI policies, such as not using AI for wholesale image or video generation. Other institutions look to add greater nuance to their policies — allowing, for example, the removal of a water bottle in an image that’s partially obstructing the view of the primary subject of a campus photo.

Disclosure of when and how AI has been used can also provide greater confidence and acceptance of using AI tools. Regardless of an institution’s approach, setting clear policies around the use of AI is key to providing clarity to staff who are interested in leveraging the technology.

Setting guardrails is rarely a communications decision alone. The specifics will vary by institution, but policies may need input from IT and information security on data handling and tool vetting, legal counsel on regulatory exposure and public records, as well as brand leadership on voice and approved use cases. Where shared governance is strong, faculty senate or similar bodies may need to weigh in, particularly when policies touch intellectual property or student data.



A simple decision matrix can turn these principles into something staff can use day to day. The example below is illustrative rather than prescriptive (each institution will set its own thresholds), but a grid like the illustrative one below answers the question staff actually have: can I use AI for this, and what do I owe before I do?

Scenario	Allowed?	Conditions	Approval Needed
Drafting a press release or news story	Yes	Human review and source-checking before release	None
Entering FERPA- or HIPPA-protected data into a public model	No	Prohibited; use only vetted, contracted tools with appropriate data protections.	Legal/IT
AI image editing, such as removing a distracting object	Limited	Disclosure per policy; no alteration of newsworthy content	Supervisor
AI-generated or AI-altered quotes	No	Fabricating attributed statements is prohibited	—

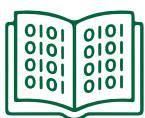
WHATEVER AN INSTITUTION CHOOSES TO ALLOW, A SHORT LIST OF RED LINES KEEPS THE BOUNDARIES UNAMBIGUOUS:



Never fabricate quotes, attributions, or statements and present them as real.



Never create or alter documentary or news imagery in ways that misrepresent what actually happened.



Never publish AI-generated research findings, data, or citations without independent verification and attribution.



Never use AI to imitate a real person's voice, likeness, or identity.

STRATEGIC VISION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Stop waiting for permission and start with responsible experimentation. Many higher ed Marcom teams are stalled by unclear policies, IT hesitation, or fear of getting it wrong.



Marcom must own the institutional narrative. Central comms, preferably. If communications teams do not shape the AI story, someone else will and it may become too technical, too fear-based or too disconnected from the people the institution serves.



Connect AI adoption to students and workforce readiness, “Close the gap.” AI adoption is not just about internal efficiency; it is about communicating with students in the world they already live in and preparing them for the workplace they are entering.



Marcom is the connective tissue of the institution, so there is an opportunity here that no other team has. Marketing and communications professionals work with leadership, IT, faculty, students, staff, donors, media and the public, etc, making the function essential to AI alignment across campus.



Protect human judgment behind the work. AI can produce a press release celebrating a research breakthrough, but it won't know the lead researcher just announced a move to a competing institution. It can draft a fundraising appeal name-checking a major gift without knowing the donor passed away last month. The institutional knowledge, relationships, and contextual judgment that catch these gaps are what humans bring — and what AI cannot replace.

CREATING A CULTURE OF AI ADOPTION AND USE

Senior marketing and communications leaders demonstrating their interest in leveraging AI professionally, both in their own roles and as a division more broadly, can make staff more open to using AI. Additionally, institutions may wish to charge a more-junior leader within the division to lead a formal or informal group on leveraging AI to cultivate greater staff openness to the use of AI. Leaders at all levels can also set aside time during check-in meetings for each participant to share how they're using AI to spur wider adoption.



Building genuine adoption also means engaging directly with the concerns staff bring to the conversation. Communications and marketing teams include writers, editors, and designers whose professional identities are tied to the craft AI is now performing, and many will have informed concerns: job displacement, AI trained on uncredited creative work, environmental impact, and the erosion of skills that make staff effective in the first place. Leaders who acknowledge these tensions openly, rather than treating skepticism as resistance to be overcome, can build more durable adoption. A culture of adoption is not the same as a culture of unanimous enthusiasm.

LIMITATIONS OF AI

The limitations on AI use in communications and marketing fall into three broad categories:

1

Institutional readiness. A lack of clean and accurate data for AI to draw on, combined with imprecise or ill-crafted prompts from staff still building fluency, slows what AI can usefully deliver. Both are addressable through investment in data hygiene and training.

2

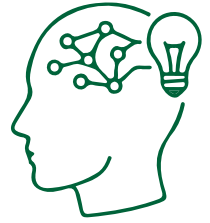
Regulatory and compliance constraints. Public models cannot be used with FERPA- or HIPAA-protected information. And at public institutions, prompts, chat histories, and AI-generated drafts may be subject to public records requests — meaning anything typed into a tool could become discoverable in some cases. Institutions should consult legal counsel on retention, discoverability, and tool compliance before adopting AI at any meaningful scale.

3

Tool limitations. Certain functions, such as agentic AI, have yet to mature to the level of usability, effectiveness, and scalability needed for production use. AI can require persistent redirection when its responses are off-target or needlessly sycophantic. And widespread enterprise deployment can be costly, particularly as adoption expands across a division.

AI AS A THOUGHT PARTNER

Given its current capabilities, one of the greatest opportunities for AI is as a thought partner. AI can help provide frameworks for how to think through tackling challenges the marketing and communications division is facing, provide ideas for the structure for outlines or memos, assess human-generated documents for effectiveness and omissions, help generate anticipated questions for public speaking engagements such as faculty senate hearings or testimony before the state legislature. It can also provide feedback on a set of related human-written documents for internal consistency — such as speeches, press releases, FAQs, and other documents — to ensure message alignment.



AI can also leverage human-written content in new ways, such as taking approved content and creating a first draft of a multi-email drip marketing campaign. Additionally, institutions may find it useful to develop internal custom AI personas for senior leaders or even an institution's brand voice based on prior communications to inform development of future communications.



LEVERAGING AI FOR INTERNAL USES

- Institutions may find the use of AI easier for internal and operational use cases such as drafting meeting agendas, summarizing action items, creating focus group transcripts, identifying how peer institutions have addressed similar challenges your institution is grappling with, and providing constructive feedback to work products in a way that employees are receptive to.
- AI can also generate internal FAQs from existing policy documents, translate dense source material into plain-language briefings for staff, and prepare leaders for internal meetings by surfacing likely questions and relevant context from prior communications.
- By loading university research news stories into internal AI models, institutions can also assess the breadth of coverage, identify gaps in coverage, and generate ideas for topic areas to explore in future news stories.
- Additionally, AI can assist with data analysis and provide novel questions to ask about datasets, including thinking of more granular segmentation of marketing lists, and associated communications, for more targeted and effective communications across campus.

VERIFYING THE VALIDITY OF AI OUTPUT

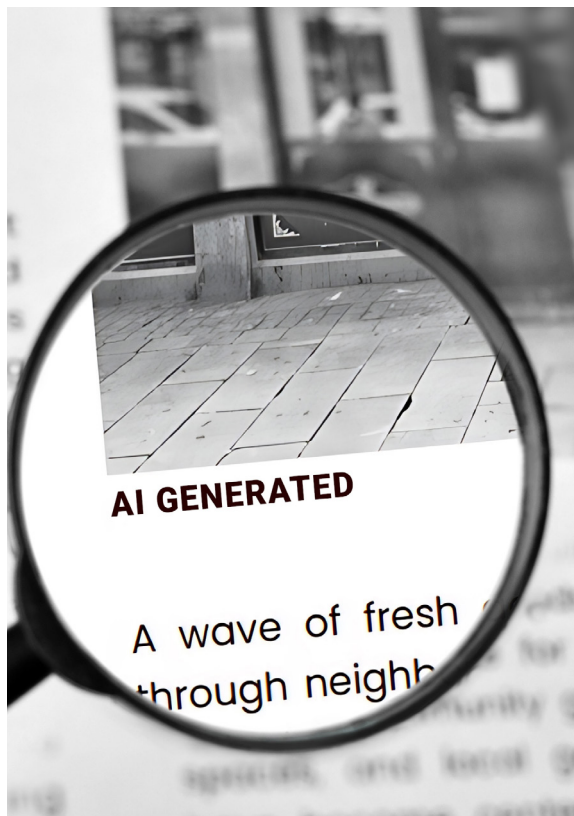
Even for low-stakes internal documents, divisions of marketing and communications should aim to elevate best practices on how to ensure the validity of AI output. A useful starting point is to define tiers of review based on stakes and audience.



- **High-stakes** external communications — press releases, donor-facing materials, statements from leadership, anything citing data or naming individuals — warrant human-only drafting or, at a minimum, line-by-line human verification with source documents in hand.
- **Lower-stakes** internal materials may be appropriate for AI-assisted drafting with lighter review, provided someone is named as responsible for accuracy before the document is shared.

Verification itself should be concrete: source-checking any factual claims AI generates, spot-checking data analysis against the underlying numbers, confirming names, titles, and affiliations, and watching for plausible-sounding but fabricated citations, quotes, or statistics. For documents touching multiple stakeholders or institutional positions, a second human reviewer is often worth the time. Clear accountability matters as much as the review itself. When AI-assisted output is shared with errors, institutions should know in advance who owns the correction and the post-mortem.

COMBATting DEEPPAKES AND MISINFORMATION



The same tools that help communications teams also lower the cost of attacking them. Public universities are increasingly exposed to deepfake audio or video of leaders, fabricated statements circulated under the institution's name, synthetic impersonation of faculty or officials, and AI-accelerated misinformation around research or controversy.

These are communications problems before they are anything else, which means the division should not wait for an incident to decide who responds. It's worth establishing in advance a fast path for verifying or debunking suspected synthetic content, a named owner for the response, working relationships with platforms and legal counsel for takedown requests, and pre-drafted holding language that can be adapted under pressure. The institutions that weather these moments tend to be the ones that rehearsed them.

ACCESSIBILITY

Public and land-grant universities carry obligations to audiences that commercial AI tools were not built to serve, and those obligations do not pause for AI-assisted work. Models can reproduce the biases in their training data, underrepresent or stereotype communities in generated visuals, and produce output that fails the accessibility standards staff are otherwise required to meet. At the same time, the technology offers real gains, with faster and higher-quality translation for multilingual communications, alt-text and caption drafting at scale, and plain-language versions of dense material. The throughline is the same as everywhere else in this playbook: AI can extend reach, but a human remains accountable for whether the output actually serves the full audience it claims to.



AI TOOLS

Before adopting any tool at scale, institutions should verify enterprise availability, SSO support, FERPA and HIPAA posture, contractual data-use terms, and pricing structure with their IT and legal teams. AI Tools Institutions currently report using for Marketing and communications **Efforts include:**

BEST FOR STRATEGY & ANALYSIS

ChatGPT	General-purpose drafting, brainstorming, thought partnership; enterprise tier available with data protections
Claude	Long-form drafting, editorial feedback, document analysis; enterprise tier available with data protections
Gemini	Native integration with Google Workspace for institutions already on that stack
NotebookLM	Synthesizing and querying across a defined set of source documents

BEST FOR RESEARCH & WRITING

NotebookLM	First-draft presentations and one-pagers from prompts or outlines
Perplexity	Web research with cited sources
Writer	Enterprise AI writing platform with trained brand voice and governance controls; designed for organizational use

BEST FOR VISUALS & MULTIMEDIA

Canva (Magic Studio)	In-platform image editing, resizing, and template generation for teams already using Canva
Adobe Firefly	Commercially safe image generation for institutions with Creative Cloud licenses
Claude Design	Conversational design for slides, prototypes, one-pagers, and marketing collateral; can apply an institutional design system from existing files; exports to Canva, PDF, and PPTX
Napkin AI	Turning text into quick diagrams and visual explainers
Descript	AI-assisted audio and video editing with transcript-based workflows; useful for podcast and video production
ElevenLabs	Voice generation for podcasts, video voiceover, and narrated accessibility content
Synthesia	AI-generated video with on-screen avatars; useful for internal training and scalable student-facing video
Adobe Express	Template-based social graphics, flyers, and quick edits with Firefly generation built in; fits institutions already in Creative Cloud who want a lighter-weight alternative to full Adobe apps

BEST FOR PRODUCTIVITY & OPERATIONS

Microsoft Copilot	Native AI assistance inside Word, Outlook, Teams, and PowerPoint for institutions on the Microsoft 365 stack
Zoom AI Companion	Meeting summaries and action item capture within Zoom
Otter.ai	Platform-agnostic meeting transcription, searchable archives, and shareable summaries
Grammarly	Copy editing and tone refinement at scale

THANK YOU TO

Chris Nelson and Seth Bracken (The University of Utah), Jonathon Taylor (University of Alaska), Melissa Connolly (University at Albany, SUNY), and Tina Miller (Arizona State University) for providing the on-campus insights that informed this playbook.