

2025 Extension Foundation *National AI Report*

Our intent for this report is not merely descriptive. Rather, it's strategic, aiming to offer actionable insights that can guide institutions in thoughtfully responding to the rapid evolution of AI technologies across education, research, and local engagement.

Background:

Navigating The AI Frontier In Extension

This report synthesizes the initial phases of a comprehensive national effort to understand and strategically engage with the evolving landscape of artificial intelligence within the Cooperative Extension System. This initiative underscores the Extension Foundation's long-standing commitment to fostering innovation and technological readiness within our network, building on work in this space since 2019, through the development of essential tools, infrastructure, and services deeply rooted in Extension's core values and mission.

Authors

Aaron Weibe, Ph.D.
Extension Foundation
aaronweibe@extension.org

Dhruti Patel, Ed.D.(c)
University of Maryland Extension
dhrutip@umd.edu

David Warren
Extension Foundation &
Oklahoma State University
davidwarren@extension.org

Mark Locklear
Extension Foundation
marklocklear@extension.org

Purpose of the AI Landscape Exploration

This landscape exploration was designed with a threefold purpose:

- **To evaluate the alignment of institutions' strategies with AI developments.** We aimed to understand how current organizational goals and frameworks intersect with the rapid advancements in AI.
- **To assess the organizational readiness for AI adoption.** This involved gauging the preparedness of our institutions—in terms of infrastructure, skills, and culture—to integrate AI effectively.
- **To capture emerging or active AI use cases within our network.** We sought to identify real-world applications and innovative approaches already being explored or implemented across Extension.

Phase 1 & 2: Initial Convening Efforts

- **Quantitative Investigation of the AI Landscape in Extension:** This comprehensive survey was conducted prior to the first day of the AI convening. Its purpose was to gather broad data on current AI perceptions, readiness, and applications across the nationwide Extension system. The results of this investigation were then presented to the convening cohort to provide a foundational understanding for subsequent discussions.
- **Focus Groups with Extension Leaders and Administrators on AI Strategic Exploration:** These sessions were conducted on the first day of the AI convening. They provided rich qualitative insights, delving into critical areas of discussion:
 - **Where are we now with AI?** This explored current awareness, existing AI initiatives, perceived challenges, and immediate opportunities within Extension.

The second and third session is planned for September 2025 and will cover the following two areas of discussion:

 - **Where are we going?** Discussions focused on anticipated future impacts of AI on Extension's various functions, potential long-term trends, and aspirational uses.
 - **What could we be doing?** This segment facilitated brainstorming around actionable strategies, necessary resources, and collaborative approaches to proactively leverage AI for Extension's mission.

This report specifically provides a synthesis of the AI Landscape Survey and Part I of the National AI Convening.

Quantitative Investigation of the AI Landscape in Extension

Survey Demographics

Our quantitative investigation garnered **47 responses** from Extension professionals across **29 states**, representing a varied cross-section of roles.

A significant majority, 67% of those surveyed, held leadership positions, including Deans, Assistant Deans, and Directors.

Breaking down the role distribution further:

34% Directors

27% Executive Leaders

17% Professional Staff

15% Managers

AI-related Strategic Planning and Institution Stakeholder Engagement

- When surveyed about their institution's leadership's general outlook on Artificial Intelligence, **a resounding 73% of respondents characterized it as either enthusiastic or cautiously optimistic.** This indicates a prevailing positive sentiment towards AI's potential within Extension.
- The survey revealed a high level of **decentralization and an absence of formal, institution-wide strategies.** Only 17% of respondents reported collaborative, cross-unit efforts regarding AI initiatives. Furthermore, 32% noted that some units are moving ahead independently, suggesting a fragmented approach. In 18% of cases, leadership in AI is emerging organically from faculty rather than being driven by top-down directives.

This shows that while enthusiasm for AI exists, comprehensive, system-wide strategies are still mostly lacking.

When efforts are scattered, it can cause duplication of work, inconsistent methods, and missed chances for collaborative growth across the larger Extension system. This highlights the need for a clear, central vision to effectively integrate new technologies within large organizations like ours.

Influential Stakeholders and Bottom-Up Dynamics

- Our investigation reveals that **peer institutions and networks** are identified as the most significant stakeholder group **influencing AI strategy within institutions, explicitly named by 25% of respondents.** This suggests that observing and collaborating with similar organizations plays a crucial role in shaping strategic direction.
- The survey data also highlights a prominent bottom-up dynamic in AI adoption. **47% of respondents affirmed significant faculty autonomy in choosing AI technologies,** indicating that individual educators are often empowered to explore and implement AI tools as they see fit. Furthermore, 43% reported a growing interest among faculty in integrating AI into their teaching practices.
- **40% reported that AI is a stated strategic priority.** The most commonly reported implementation strategy is training targeting faculty, staff, and students.
- This combination suggests a scenario where interest and experimentation are growing naturally among faculty members. While external peer influence shapes broader strategy, the internal motivation for AI assimilation is largely driven by individual faculty initiative and enthusiasm. **This dynamics can lead to rapid grassroots innovation, though it also highlights the need for some coordination to maximize overall impact.**

Funding Models and Areas of AI Involvement

- When examining funding for AI initiatives, a notable degree of uncertainty was reported by respondents. **Only 26% reported relying on external grant funding, while 14% cited internal institution resources.** A significant knowledge gap was reflected regarding the financial framework for AI initiatives. Specifically, 27% of respondents were unaware of how AI projects are funded within their institutions.
- Regarding the main areas of AI involvement, extension, teaching, and learning were the most frequently reported strategic areas, cited by 53% of respondents. This high percentage probably reflects the professional focus of the survey participants, as most held extension leadership positions.
- Engagement from other critical areas was reported less frequently:
 - Research: 36%
 - Business Operations: 33%
 - Data Analytics: 32%

This distribution indicates that while AI is actively being considered and integrated into Extension's core programmatic areas, there may be untapped potential for greater involvement from research, operational, and data-focused units.

A more robust, cross-disciplinary engagement could lead to more comprehensive and sustainably funded AI strategies.

AI Policies and Procedures Adoption by Leaders

- Surveyed leaders expressed widespread uncertainty concerning their institutions' preparedness regarding AI policies and procedures. **A significant 52% were unsure about the overall direction of their institution's AI-related policies,** indicating a lack of clarity regarding the strategic direction or even the existence of such frameworks.
- The data indicates a significant need for greater clarity regarding institutional cybersecurity. **A total of 53% of respondents were uncertain whether current policies adequately address the risks associated with AI.** Furthermore, 30% did not know which institution policies, if any, had been updated in response to AI, suggesting a disconnect between policy development and awareness among leadership.
- While some policies may exist, their perceived effectiveness is also a concern. 14% of leaders believed existing AI-related policy was ineffective, and 13% viewed it as overly restrictive.

This dual perception indicates that even when policies exist, they might not effectively fulfill their purpose or could hinder innovation.

Overall, these figures highlight a significant gap in the development, communication, and perceived effectiveness of AI governance within institutions.

Ethics, Privacy, and Restructuring

- Concerns regarding the ethical implications of Artificial Intelligence are prominent among respondents. The top AI-related concerns identified include ethical governance, algorithmic partiality, and data security. These areas represent critical challenges that institutions must address as AI assimilation progresses.
- The survey indicates that while these significant concerns about AI exist, organizational restructuring to address this evolving landscape has been limited. This is reflected in the lack of new roles or redefined responsibilities among institutions.
 - 94% of respondents reported no new leadership positions specifically designated for AI oversight or strategy.
 - 91% indicated no new staff or faculty roles created to manage or develop AI initiatives.
 - 87% confirmed no restructuring of existing leadership responsibilities to formally incorporate AI-related duties.

This stark contrast between high levels of ethical and privacy concerns and a minimal organizational response suggests that while the risks are recognized, institutions have yet to formalize the necessary structural changes to effectively manage these challenges and guide AI adoption strategically.

The absence of designated roles may impede the proactive development and implementation of robust ethical frameworks and best practices for AI within Extension.

Risks and Opportunities with Stakeholders in the Next Two Years

- The analysis of the survey measure on stakeholder perceptions revealed a positive trend regarding improved ease of access and program efficiency stemming from the future impacts of AI. Our data shows a **positive outlook on AI's potential to enhance access to Extension programs overall, with 44% of respondents expecting such improvements.** Notably, 41% foresee AI tools specifically increasing access for individuals with impairments, highlighting an understanding of AI's role in improving access to Extension efforts.
- 64% reported a strong positive indication regarding the use of AI tools for program reporting.** This suggests a recognized opportunity to streamline administrative tasks and improve data management within Extension.
- While several opportunities have been identified, uncertainty remains about AI's ability to ease operational burdens. **36% of respondents were unsure if AI tools would effectively cut down workload,** emphasizing the need for clearer demonstrations or proof of efficiency improvements in this area. These results point to both promising possibilities for AI use and areas where more clarity and development are necessary to fully harness AI's advantages within the Extension system.

Quantitative Survey Inference

- A pervasive enthusiasm and acceptance of AI is evident across the surveyed leadership. However, this positive sentiment is juxtaposed with numerous logistical and procedural unknowns concerning the comprehensive diffusion and assimilation of AI technologies throughout institutions.
- The data further indicates that current AI initiatives are characterized by decentralized efforts, with limited evidence of system-wide adoption in institutions. This suggests that while individual units or faculty may be exploring AI, a unified strategic approach is not yet widely established.
- Overall, the identified AI priorities and critical needs underscore that AI literacy is a key concern among faculty and staff. There is a clear demand for enhanced understanding and skills related to AI to effectively leverage its potential.
- Finally, the data strongly suggests that the most effective approach to providing AI support is through peer networks. This implies that fostering collaborative learning environments and facilitating knowledge exchange among Extension professionals could be a highly impactful strategy.
- Consequently, more targeted efforts in this area may be warranted to enhance AI capabilities across the system.

Qualitative Investigation of the AI Landscape with Extension Leaders

Following the dissemination of the quantitative survey, a qualitative focus group investigation was conducted during the first AI convening virtual meeting with Extension leaders and administrators. One hundred and six individuals representing 41 universities were in attendance.

The following themes emerged from the focus groups.

1. Uneven Preparedness and Organic Adoption

Most institutions are in the nascent stages of AI assimilation. Efforts are frequently driven by individual faculty, team, or unit initiatives rather than being guided by a comprehensive institution-wide strategy. While a limited number of universities have begun formalizing their AI strategies, the majority are still in the exploratory phase, seeking entry points or conducting internal assessments to understand current AI usage.

2. Lack of Training and Organizational Infrastructure

A recurring concern among participants was the conspicuous absence of systematic training and guidance for AI tools. Current AI adoption predominantly relies on “self-taught” methods or informal peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, with few institutions offering structured professional development programs or dedicated support mechanisms. This observation aligns with findings from the quantitative survey, which indicated a reliance on peer networks and professional associations for AI literacy support among Extension faculty and staff.

3. Fear, Resistance, and Misunderstanding

A segment of staff perceives AI as a potential threat, particularly concerning job security or the traditional face-to-face models inherent to Extension work. These apprehensions can manifest as resistance to or avoidance of AI technologies.

4. Fragmented Policy and Ethical Concerns

Institutions largely lack clear, overarching policies or definitive guidance regarding the appropriate and responsible use of AI. Specific areas of concern include compliance with regulations such as FERPA, intellectual property rights, questions of AI authorship, and broader ethical boundaries for AI applications.

5. System-wide Constraints: Capacity, Resources, and Knowledge Silo

Intrinsic challenges significantly impede progress in AI assimilation. These include budgetary constraints, a shortage of staff proficient in AI, and the adverse effects of siloed knowledge, which collectively hinder cohesive advancement.

6. Strong Interest in Shared Resources and Communities of Practice

There was a broad consensus among participants regarding the critical need for shared resources. This includes standardized training and onboarding materials, clear policy templates, easy-to-access case studies illustrating responsible and effective AI utilization, and the establishment of cross-state learning communities or collaborative working groups to foster shared learning and best practices.

Summary of Qualitative Findings

- The qualitative investigation with Extension leaders reveals a complex, yet promising, landscape for AI assimilation. While a prevailing enthusiasm for AI exists, its practical adoption across **the system is largely decentralized and organic, driven more by individual or unit-level initiative than by top-down strategic planning.** This grassroots interest is a testament to the adaptability of Extension professionals, despite some significant intrinsic vulnerabilities.
- A critical finding is **the pervasive lack of formal training and robust organizational infrastructure to support AI adoption.** This void forces reliance on self-taught methods and peer sharing, which, while indicative of strong internal networks, cannot substitute for structured professional development and clear guidance from institutions. Furthermore, the presence of fear, resistance, and misunderstanding surrounding AI, particularly concerning job security, underscores an urgent need for transparent communication and educational initiatives to demystify AI's role in augmenting, rather than replacing, human expertise in Extension.
- Compounding these challenges are **fragmented policies, significant ethical concerns (e.g., data privacy, algorithmic partiality), and system-wide impediments** such as budget constraints, limited AI-literate staff, and knowledge silos. These factors collectively hinder a cohesive and ethically sound approach to AI.
- Despite these hurdles, the consistent **demand for shared resources and vibrant communities of practice presents a substantial opportunity.** The strong desire for standardized training, policy templates, case studies, and collaborative learning environments indicates a readiness among Extension leaders to engage in collective action.

Implications and Opportunities for Extension

- **Strategic Alignment Imperative:** The decentralized nature of AI adoption highlights the critical need for a centralized, system-wide AI strategy. This strategy has the potential to leverage existing organic efforts while providing overarching guidance, resources, and policy frameworks to ensure consistent, ethical, and practical adoption.
- **Prioritization of AI Literacy and Training:** Addressing the deficiency in training is paramount. Developing and delivering systematic professional development programs—potentially leveraging existing peer networks—would be crucial for building AI literacy, mitigating fear, and empowering faculty and staff.
- **Proactive Policy Development:** There is an immediate need to develop clear, comprehensive policies addressing AI use, ethical considerations, data privacy, and intellectual property. These policies must be communicated effectively across all units to foster responsible innovation.

Triangulation (overlapping themes between Quantitative and Qualitative findings) of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings on Current AI investigation in Extension.

