

Case Study: Enhance AI Adoption and Operational Efficiency in Higher Education

20 June 2025 - ID G00831671 - 7 min read

By: Tony Sheehan

Initiatives: [Education Technology Insights](#)

The University of South Florida designed an AI enablement program to enhance AI adoption, operational efficiencies and service quality. Higher education CIOs should review how USF embedded GenAI into operations, empowered stakeholders and ensured ethical, appropriate AI use to drive AI change.



Company name: University of South Florida

Industry: Education

Headquarters location: Tampa, Florida, U.S.

Endowment: \$708,333,328 ¹

Employees: 16,280 ²

Students: Approximately 50,000 ²

Case Overview

Problem

- How to rapidly scale appropriate AI tools to deliver technological innovation while ensuring ethical governance and best sector practices
- How to balance the improvement of services and optimization of resources without significant additional technology investments
- How to ensure AI tools integrate seamlessly to enhance service quality across diverse university functions

Action

- Formed an interdisciplinary AI strategy development group to embed AI governance, strategy and communications from the outset
- Enabled M365 Copilot and developed custom AI chatbots to optimize services and improve efficiency
- Facilitated the use of high-performance computing resources for AI research, deploying fine-tuned large language models (LLMs) for innovative applications

Results

- Automated classification of 100,000 annual IT tickets, saving three to five minutes per ticket
- Extended IT chat support to 24/7 availability
- Enhanced service quality and accessibility, improving the student and employee experience and fostering ethical AI use
- Increased staff/student/faculty engagement, and cost savings from GenAI implementations

Problem: Embracing AI to Support Institutional Innovation

The University of South Florida (USF) had an institutional aspiration to rapidly scale AI to support technological innovation, while continuing to be a great place to work and learn. The university had to make a deliberate decision on the timing of AI investment and appropriateness of vendor partnership. However, the speed of AI innovation and need for widespread institutional exploration demanded a unique approach.

USF already had a foundation for technology innovation with a low-code application and integration platform accelerating the speed at which new services and capabilities could be delivered to the university community. Its ability to change was also facilitated by:

- An agile transformation strategy and culture within IT
- Strategic partnerships with key vendors
- Collaboration and partnership between the business and IT to foster a shared ownership in the solutions

- Governance processes to enable IT to focus resources, provide transparency and establish client buy-in on why and how technology changes would impact the university community
- An integration architecture to enable rapid new connections and reuse of existing connections to core systems of record

AI tools offered the potential to empower stakeholders across USF's campuses to create their own solutions and make new discoveries. However, this required a comprehensive strategy that both enabled AI adoption and ensured ethical governance and best practices. A goal was set to integrate AI in a way that enhanced service quality, provided equitable access and empowered stakeholders with the tools and skills needed to use AI ethically and responsibly.

Action: An Ecosystem of AI Initiatives

USF launched the AI Enablement program, a strategy to evaluate, evolve and progressively embed AI into the university's ecosystem. The program combined five key goals:

- **Coordinated strategy/guidance:** An interdisciplinary AI strategy development group was formed to establish ethical AI governance, best practices, future work needs and institutionwide communication via a shared GenAI information source. ³
- **Facilitate equitable consumption:** Enabled Copilot for all, created an M365 Copilot preview program and leveraged MS Security Copilot-enhanced IT security insights.
- **Embedding functionality into AI, where appropriate:** Integrated AI advisor note summaries and self-service platforms PowerBI, Power Platform and Dynamics 365 to improve efficiency.
- **Extend service functionality via data retrieval:** Developed/enabled client development of custom AI chatbots and AI-generated IT ticketing to optimize services.
- **Extended research capacity via fine tuning:** Facilitated researchers' use of high-performance computing resources, Microsoft Azure AI Hub and OpenAI Studio for developing AI and natural language processing applications, and deploying fine-tuned LLMs for research.

The AI strategy development group played a critical role in ensuring that AI adoption was consistently aligned and evaluated against USF's strategic goals and ethical standards. ⁴

USF deployed technology in a variety of ways:

- Out-of-the-box AI solutions (including M365 Copilot and Microsoft Security Copilot) were deployed for users to save time and boost creativity
- AI was embedded in familiar USF applications (for example, case management summaries, embedded in PowerBI for data analysis and selectively in other self-service platforms) to simplify existing working practices.
- AI was selectively used to extend solutions at USF with GenAI and data retrieval to drive efficiencies and improve services (such as IT help desk and Copilot Studio custom agents).
- Azure AI Studio was used to provide individual researcher and lab access to over 1,600 language models across text, audio, images and video.
- Infrastructure and tools can be made available for researchers to build new models. However, this is an early stage, as building new AI models consumes significant resources and may require the creation of a specialized computational AI cluster or substantial investment in cloud computing resources.

AI was selectively used to extend solutions at USF with GenAI and data retrieval to drive efficiencies and improve services (such as IT help desk and Copilot Studio custom agents).

Individual activities were targeted toward strong user engagement and IT support to accelerate AI adoption. USF's M365 Copilot program, for example, included a variety of methods to support adoption:

- A center of excellence team to support users
- "Coffee & Copilot" Q&A sessions
- Surveys to foster community and feedback
- A Prompt Buddy prompt library to enhance user engagement, knowledge transfer and learning

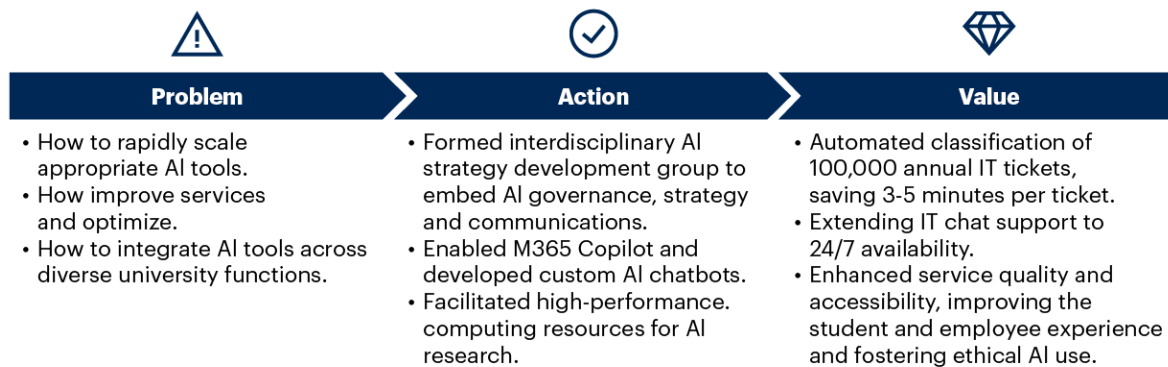
A student ambassador program for AI enablement was also launched as a collaborative initiative between USF and Microsoft to empower students with a combination of Microsoft tools, AI skills and real-world experience.

The critical role of data was recognised and addressed at an early stage. Necessary data is stored in diverse knowledge sources, making integrating these different file types into AI models challenging. Data security and privacy are critical concerns, especially when handling sensitive information in educational institutions. However, the integration into USF’s ecosystem enabled business technologists to rapidly develop AI chatbots within established governance frameworks. It spans from the medical school to student health services, and from academic to business units, creating an institutionwide collaborative environment for innovation. USF IT has also enabled AI across all IT functions: infrastructure, security, development, service management and communications.

The USF journey to accelerate AI adoption is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Accelerating AI Adoption at USF

Accelerating AI Adoption at USF



Source: Adapted From USF 831671_C

Value: Quantitative and Qualitative Measures of Success

USF’s AI journey connects AI ambition to institutional values and goals, and maintains a focus on data security, ethical governance and appropriate partnerships (between IT and business units and with vendors). To measure the success of USF’s AI Enablement program, quantitative metrics were used to capture operational efficiency, including customer effort scores, number of transactions automated, time saved and adoption rates. Examples include:

- Number of IT tickets automatically classified annually: 100,000
- Time savings per ticket with ticket summaries: three to five minutes per ticket
- IT chat support availability increased for clients from office hours to 24/7

Other metrics being monitored include:

- Number of client-created chatbots
- Time savings for advisors
- Time savings in document creation
- Innovation Index: New solutions or processes implemented due to GenAI capabilities
- AI-enabled service offerings
- Client engagement with GenAI tools
- Cost savings from GenAI implementations

Qualitative benefits include reputational score, student and employee experience perception, and workforce skills development.

Developing AI solutions at universities requires significant time, technical expertise and financial resources. AI adoption is still building, but with a focus on key institutional goals, attention to end-user skills needs and a blend of qualitative and quantitative metrics, it has been possible for USF to both articulate early stage AI value and maintain appropriate AI investment to support change.

Actions to Take

After reviewing this case study, higher education CIOs should:

- Accelerate AI adoption by reviewing their existing position, strategy and governance, ensuring key stakeholder involvement and collaboration between IT and business units to ensure the shared ownership of AI initiatives.

- Target investment by evaluating priorities and desired outcomes before evaluating appropriate vendor partnerships in key areas of need. Ensure a blend of quantitative metrics (such as time savings and adoption rates) and qualitative feedback (such as user experience) to assess success.
- Mature institutional AI adoption and insight by developing formal AI literacy programs, informal “coffee and Copilot”-like sessions, and libraries of content and prompts to enhance user engagement and empower faculty and staff to use appropriate AI tools in their own work context.

Evidence

This research is based on data and the submission provided by the University of South Florida in their entry for the 2024 Gartner Eye on Innovation in Education Awards. Gartner developed this Case Study to highlight how a blend of governance, technology innovation evaluation and communication are needed to accelerate AI adoption.

¹ [University of South Florida](#).

² [About USF](#), University of South Florida.

³ [Generative Artificial Intelligence](#), USF.

⁴ [USF Guidance for Ethical Generative AI Usage](#), USF.

Recommended by the Author

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

[Infographic: How Higher Education Is Organizing for Generative AI Governance](#)

[Generative AI Use-Case Comparison for Education](#)

[AI in Higher Education: Case Examples](#)

© 2025 Gartner, Inc. and/or its affiliates. All rights reserved. Gartner is a registered trademark of Gartner, Inc. and its affiliates. This publication may not be reproduced or distributed in any form without Gartner's prior written permission. It consists of the opinions of Gartner's research organization, which should not be construed as statements of fact. While the information contained in this publication has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable, Gartner disclaims all warranties as to the accuracy, completeness or adequacy of such information. Although Gartner research may address legal and financial issues, Gartner does not provide legal or investment advice and its research should not be construed or used as such. Your access and use of this publication are governed by [Gartner's Usage Policy](#). Gartner prides itself on its reputation for independence and objectivity. Its research is produced independently by its research organization without input or influence from any third party. For further information, see "[Guiding Principles on Independence and Objectivity](#)." Gartner research may not be used as input into or for the training or development of generative artificial intelligence, machine learning, algorithms, software, or related technologies.