In tight times, colleges turn to AI to ease staff demands
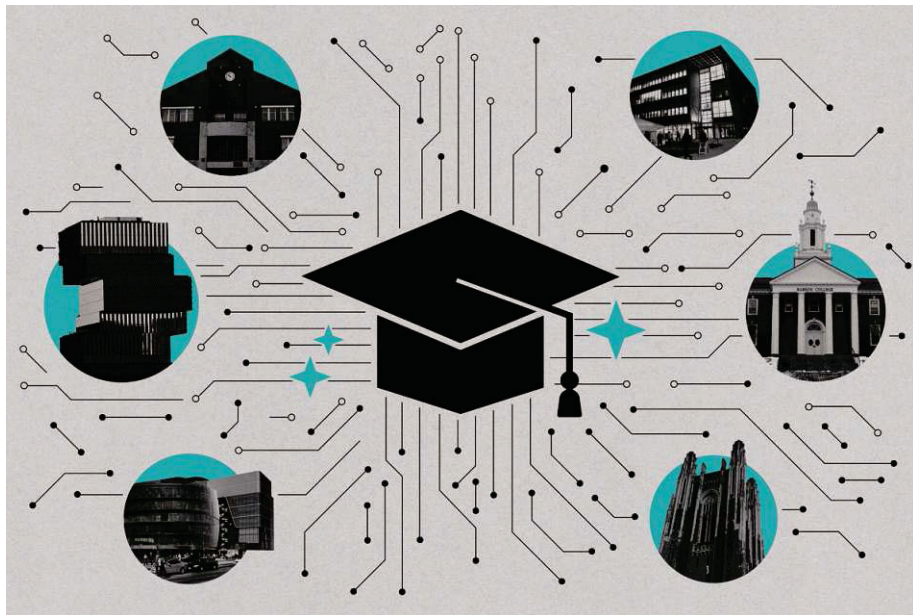

ILLUSTRATION BY CAMILLE MACMILLIN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By Diti Kohli

GLOBE STAFF

By this fall, students and staff at Roxbury Community College will be given a simple, one-word answer to inquiries about day-to-day life on campus: AskRoxie. Need to reset a password? AskRoxie. Questions about financial aid? AskRoxie. Figure out paid time off? AskRoxie.

AskRoxie is, of course, a chatbot.

The bot is not replacing staff in student services or IT at the fast-growing community college, but it will spare them from easy-to-answer queries that eat up their time, an administrator said.

It's just one example of how artificial intelligence has found a home at many New England colleges and universities. Administrators are using the technology to write content, run surveys, crunch data, and fill out repetitive paperwork.

Admissions officers are predicting future enrollment with AI. Money-minded executives lean on it to analyze tuition prices. IT employees use it to fight cybersecurity attacks, and on and on.

It marks a radical shift from the AI skepticism that pervaded higher education when ChatGPT first launched. Professors raged about a rise in cheating and worried AI would sap students' critical thinking skills. (To be fair, many still worry about this.)

Today, many colleges want to show "AI native" students that they can address those concerns and adopt the technology at the same time. Institutions are rapidly creating artificial intelligence courses. Even traditional liberal arts schools such as Bowdoin College in Maine are courting professors to research AI to "help bend its trajectory to-

In tight times, colleges turn to AI to ease staff demands

ward the common good," as president Safa Zaki wrote in a statement.

But while classroom uses of AI draw attention, the biggest benefits for schools puzzling over how to do more with less may reside in administration and student life. Broader use of AI tools is increasing retention and productivity among staff in marketing, finance, IT, and regulatory affairs, several university leaders said. It all equates to time and money saved.

Those savings have never been more valuable. An explosion of professional staff over the last quarter-century pushed up universities' operating costs and created a glut of highly paid administrators at some campuses. Federal funding is under threat during the second Trump administration. Enrollment is down almost everywhere.

"In education, there's a great opportunity for a win-win here," said Kartik Hosanagar, a University of Pennsylvania professor who has researched AI. "Right now, universities are constrained because of the cuts in federal funding and hiring freezes. In the midst of it all, universities are continuing to try to do more. How do you make it work? The only answer to that is to increase productivity of the workers."

At Roxbury Community College, for example, "AskRoxie" is part of a suite of AI tools that ensure the school can support thousands of new students from the state's free community college program, without adding an army of staff, said Robyn Shahid-Bellot, RCC's vice president of enterprise transformation.

"We would not be able to keep up with demand, unless we changed how we operate," she said.

Wentworth Institute of Technology also announced in the fall that it would use AI to identify at-risk students and develop strategies to improve graduation rates, in part to "enhance efficiency" and "reduce costs."

Artificial intelligence has streamlined the growth of new campuses at Northeastern University, too, which has in recent years developed outposts from London to Seattle. Before the college opens another satellite campus, it must submit hundreds of pages of paperwork on job placement data, market studies, and a comparative analysis of nearby universities to local regulators.

Now as the school expands its offerings in Toronto and New York, it is using Claude, an Anthropic-backed AI assistant that Northeastern licenses, to generate much of the framework in under 10 minutes, saving enormous staff time, said Mary Ludden, senior vice president for strategic initiatives at Northeastern.

"To do the work we're doing in 2025, we would have to add headcount," she said. "But we are having better quality work with the same amount of people."

Productivity is up at Babson

CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

At Roxbury Community College, AI tools help the school manage surging enrollment without major staff additions.

College, too. An employee survey found that 83 percent of staff members save up to five hours a week with Microsoft 365 Copilot, another digital assistant; 5 percent save even more. Over half the staff said their job satisfaction is up.

The Wellesley business college was among the first schools to publicly adopt artificial intelligence and later launched a faculty-run AI lab called The Generator. It trained half of professors on the technology and inspired discussions about AI use in the classroom. Babson employees are now spot-treating university marketing materials, perfecting search functions, and deflecting bot traffic from the college website — all with artificial intelligence.

"The reception [to AI] was more positive than even I expected," said Patty Patria, Babson's chief information officer.

"The use of alternative AI is already pervasive on campus. But we train staff to leverage it — not just to be a tool to make life easier, but to help you with ideas and innovation."

That said, just like in many other industries, fears abound that the technology could replace jobs at colleges. And even business-focused schools such as Babson have "conscientious resisters" among the faculty, said Erik Noyes, an entrepreneurship professor and one of nine faculty founders of The Generator.

Other professors see benefits. Babson's MathBot, for example, is open to freshman students seeking clarity on basic math topics and draws its knowledge from 10 textbooks. It has reduced the tutoring responsibilities for professors and peer tutors outside of class, as many college-age students struggle with math after the pandemic.

"We think of AI as a big tent, and we want multiple front doors to enter in and have the conversation," Noyes said. "We didn't want people at Babson to think AI is about ChatGPT only."

Not all colleges are eager to jump on the AI train or have the money to do so. Institution-wide licenses for generative AI chatbots can be expensive, and schools facing falling enrollment and bleeding budget may not be able to keep up. Nationwide, only 27 percent of colleges offer school-wide generative AI access, according to an April Inside Higher Education survey.

Still, a growing number are taking the leap, including Boston University, which acquired its own AI tools for its tens of thousands of students and staff and launched TerrierGPT this spring.

Brian Smith, associate dean for research at Boston College's Lynch School of Education and Human Development, said college staff's use of AI is a sign universities are moving away from the initial "panic" surrounding the technology.

"If college faculty and staff can offload, we can do the important work. The machines can do weird, silly things or burdensome, repetitive things. That's the history of computing," Smith said. "All of education is asking what the right answer is, and there isn't one. All colleges can do is try."

Diti Kohli can be reached at diti.kohli@globe.com.