



The CIO moment: From institutional service to strategic power in post-secondary education

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Executive summary

Post-secondary education has reached a digital inflection point. Technology now shapes all elements of post-secondary education, from student experience and research capability to institutional resilience, workforce productivity, and public trust. But many institutions still govern, fund, and lead digital capability as though it sits at the periphery of the institution, rather than at its centre.

Technology is changing quickly, but that isn't the sector's central problem. It is that institutional authority, operating models, and investment logic have not changed fast enough to respond. Students expect seamless, personalized, and responsive services. Staff expect tools that reduce friction and support better work. AI is accelerating both expectations. At the same time, many universities and colleges still depend on legacy systems, fragmented data, outdated identity models, and governance arrangements built for a less rapid era.

This contradiction defines “the Chief Information Officer (CIO) moment”. CIOs and senior digital leaders are increasingly accountable for institutional risks and opportunities that extend far beyond IT. They are expected to guide choices on AI, cybersecurity, data, privacy, student experience, operational resilience, and transformation delivery. But many still lack the executive authority and investment influence needed to shape these outcomes.

Interviews with postsecondary sector CIOs, Chief Technology Officers (CTOs), and digital leaders across Canada and the UK, conducted by Nous Group between April and July 2026, show a consistent pattern. The institutions making progress are not merely investing in more technology, but are redesigning the conditions that allow technology to create value. They are elevating digital leadership, aligning digital strategy with institutional priorities, investing in capability, and treating foundations as strategic assets.

This shift matters because digital maturity is now an institutional design challenge. It requires Presidents, Provosts, Chief Financial Officers (CFOs), Registrars, academic leaders, boards, and CIOs to make shared choices about how digital capability is governed, funded and led. Institutions that continue to treat digital as a service function will struggle to meet rising expectations. Institutions that redesign their operating models around digital capability can turn technology from a constraint into a source of institutional advantage.

The next decade will test whether post-secondary education can make that shift. The CIO moment is a moment for institutions to decide whether they will give digital capability the mandate, investment, and leadership attention that their mission now requires.



The CIO role has outgrown its institutional design

There is an uncomfortable truth at the heart of the sector: **Universities are trying to deliver a 2030 digital experience on operating models designed for another era.**

As staff and student expectations continue to evolve, institutions are constrained by:

Deep seated legacy systems

Fragmented ownership of data

Organizational models that treat technology as a service rather than a driver

At the same time, the CIO is evolving rapidly from operator to strategist, from infrastructure owner to enterprise-wide change leader and from technical advisor to translator of emerging technologies like AI. CIOs are now expected to guide institutional choices in a rapidly changing technology landscape while balancing innovation with privacy, security, and ethical considerations in order to create safe environments for experimentation while managing risk.

Despite this increasingly instrumental role, many technology leaders remain structurally constrained. The CIO role has evolved but the institution around it has not.

The reality: Where the sector is today

Rising expectations and widening gaps

Across interviews, leaders consistently highlighted the gaps between expectations and reality. Students expect Amazon- and Netflix-like experiences, and staff expect integrated, intuitive tools. Institutions deliver these experiences in pockets but not consistently.

Core administrative systems remain a major constraint. They limit institutions' ability to create joined-up student journeys, reduce administrative burden and use data confidently. Many digital teams spend too much effort compensating for weak foundations and too little effort building the capabilities that will define the next decade.

Technology leadership is inconsistent

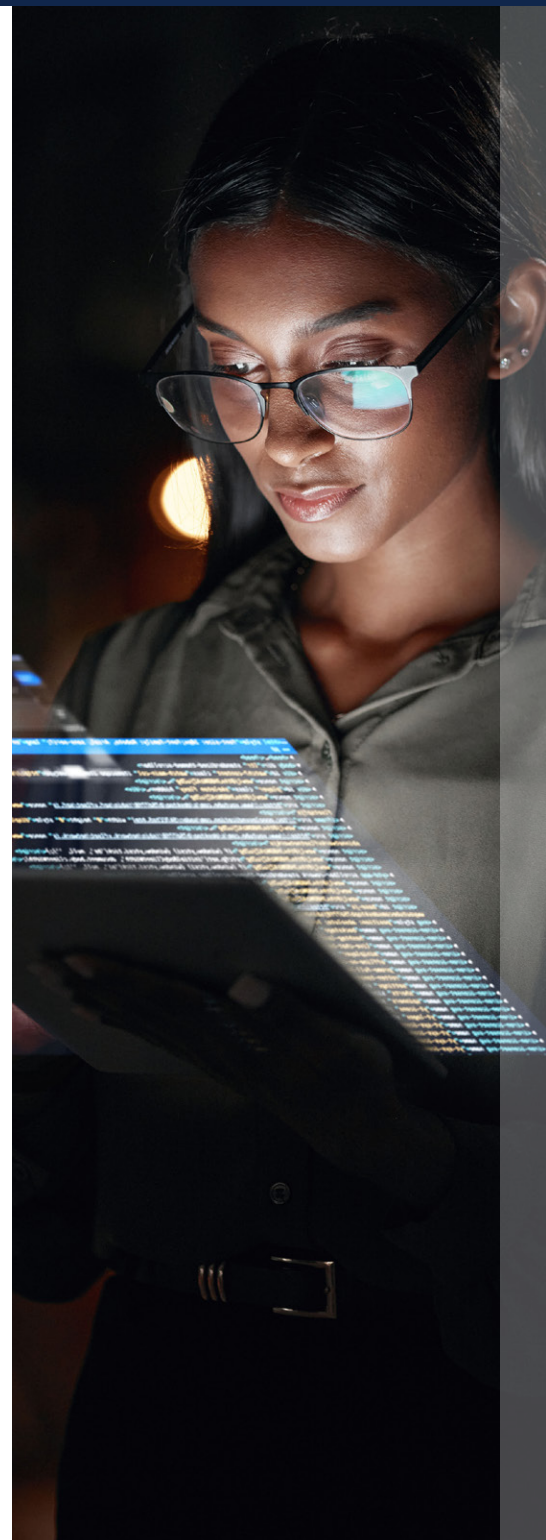
Technology leadership varies widely across the sector. CIO roles differ in title, scope, reporting line and influence. Some CIOs sit at the executive table and help shape institutional trade-offs. Others rely on informal relationships and late-stage consultation.

This inconsistency affects transformation. Institutions are unlikely to achieve enterprise digital outcomes when the people accountable for technology risk and delivery lack authority over enterprise choices. Relationship management cannot substitute for governance.

Investment pressure is intensifying

Institutions face a widening investment challenge. They need to address technical debt, modernize systems, strengthen cybersecurity, improve data quality and build AI capability. These demands are compounded by constrained budgets and rising costs for software, hardware, talent and security.

The sector has often deferred foundational investments because they are difficult to explain and politically unrewarding. That logic is weakening. Weak foundations now constrain student experience, AI adoption, operational resilience and decision-making.





The structural challenges

Digital transformation is less about technology and more about who is empowered to lead it

Digital transformation is less a technology problem than a leadership and authority problem. Institutions need to decide who can make enterprise choices, who shares accountability and how digital priorities connect to academic and administrative goals.

Where CIOs have executive influence, clear mandates and visible co-sponsorship, transformation is more likely to progress. Where CIOs remain outside strategic decision-making, institutions risk asking digital leaders to manage risks they cannot control.

More institutions are trying to innovate on foundations that actively resist change

Foundational weaknesses are no longer a matter of technical housekeeping. Aging ERP systems, fragmented data, weak integration, and outdated identity and access models now limit agility, increase risk, and reduce confidence in decision-making.

These issues also affect AI. Institutions cannot scale AI safely if they lack trusted data, clear governance, and modern controls. AI exposes institutional weaknesses rather than bypassing them.

AI is exposing the limits of current institutional models

AI is reshaping teaching, learning, assessment, research, administration and workforce capability. It creates opportunities for productivity, personalization, and the development of new service models. It also raises risks related to bias, privacy, ethics, academic integrity, cybersecurity and trust.

In addition to experimentation, institutions critically need governance, advisory support, literacy uplift, clear use-case selection and mechanisms to scale what works. AI maturity will depend less on access to tools and more on an institution's ability to absorb change safely.

The real constraint is organizational readiness

A critical finding across our interviews is that the barriers to transformation are primarily organizational, not technological. Challenges include fragmented decision-making, limited cross-institutional alignment, cultural resistance to change and insufficient focus on change management. Technology teams cannot solve these issues alone. Institutions need shared choices across academic, administrative and digital leaders. They also need operating models that make those choices visible, repeatable and enforceable. In this sense, transformation requires trust between academic and digital leaders, strong executive sponsorship and institution-wide alignment on priorities in order to succeed.

What leading institutions are doing differently

The institutions making progress are not the ones chasing the most innovation. They are the ones being most deliberate about mandate, alignment, capability and foundations. They are not simply “doing more digital”, but are instead redesigning the conditions under which digital change can succeed.

While many institutions are still asking technology leaders to deliver transformative change from the margins, stronger institutions are making digital leadership more explicit and institutionally shared. They are:

1 Elevating digital leadership from operational dependency to institutional authority

In stronger institutions, senior technology leaders are not peripheral service providers but are embedded in executive decision-making, brought in on strategic trade-offs early, and given a clearer mandate over enterprise-wide platforms, risk and change. This matters because digital transformation stalls when CIOs are expected to carry institutional risk without the authority to shape the conditions that produce it. Leaders that are making progress are reducing that gap by positioning themselves as executive peers, not downstream delivery leads.

2 Aligning digital strategy with academic and institutional priorities rather than treating it as a parallel plan

Where institutions are moving with greater coherence, digital strategy is built with academic and administrative leaders, visibly aligned to institutional priorities and used to signal shared accountability across the organization. In the context of transformation this kind of alignment creates consistency and reduces the familiar friction between academic autonomy and enterprise systems. In a sector where fragmentation is often normalized, visible executive alignment is itself a leadership intervention.



Having the CIO as an executive peer enables more effective co-sponsorship and leadership in transformation programs.

Senior technology leader at a leading Canadian college

Institutions that have this voice in the president's group/executive level will be more effective.

Senior technology leader at a leading Canadian university



Visible executive collaboration sets expectations for collaboration across divisions.

Senior technology leader at a leading Canadian college

3 Investing in capability

Leading institutions are recognizing that AI, automation and modern digital services do not scale through technology procurement alone. They require advisory models, literacy uplift, clear governance and support structures that help staff and students adopt new tools safely and productively. This is the shift from pilot enthusiasm and experimentation to institutional capability. Some are now explicitly moving from AI literacy to AI fluency and creating resource centres or structured support models that translate innovation into operational practice. This is a meaningful departure from the sector's more common pattern of fragmented experimentation and local workarounds.



Empower people to use it effectively
– move from AI literacy to AI fluency.

Senior technology leader at a leading Canadian university

The institution published early guidelines for academic and workplace use of AI and chose not to implement a ban on AI tools.

Senior technology leader at a leading Canadian college

4 Treating foundations as strategic assets

The most mature institutions are not pretending they can leapfrog weak foundations. They are confronting the fact that fragmented data, outdated identify frameworks and ageing core systems are now binding institutional constraints. What differentiates them is not that they have solved these problems, but rather that they have named them, prioritized them and connected them explicitly to future ambitions. This applies in all contexts where technology is a critical enabler: embedding AI, driving student experience and fostering institutional resilience. In this sense, leading institutions are not more optimistic than the rest of the sector, merely more honest about what readiness actually requires.



You need the core data, you need the processes to work, you need to do that before you can slap all this nice new stuff on top of it.

Senior technology leader at a leading Canadian university

Identity and access management frameworks at universities have not evolved much since the late 1990s, and current models constrain institutional ambitions.

Senior technology leader at a leading Canadian university





What this means in practice

Institutions do not need another digital strategy document. They need clearer authority, better sequencing, stronger foundations and an operating model that turns digital capability into institutional advantage.

Four actions matter most:

First, institutions need to evolve the operating model to become more intentional about where standardization matters

The most persistent barriers described by interviewees were organizational: fragmented decision-making and ownership, insufficient change management and cultures that reward local optimization over institutional coherence. In practice, stronger operating models will balance central governance with local flexibility and build change management into transformation rather than bolting it on at the end.

This means institutions should:

- set enterprise architecture standards for systems, data and integration;
- define shared service design principles for student and staff journeys;
- embed change management into transformation from the start;
- create academic-administrative co-sponsorship for major programs of work;
- clarify when academic units can diverge from enterprise standards; and
- strengthen governance forums so they make decisions, rather than only share information.

Universities and colleges will struggle to achieve enterprise outcomes if ambiguity remains the default mode of coordination.

Second, institutions need to reposition technology leadership around enterprise accountability

Institutions need to close the gap between what technology leaders are accountable for and what they are authorized to shape. This requires more than inviting the CIO into selected conversations. Institutions should:

- clarify the CIO or senior digital leader's mandate;
- formalize their role in executive strategy and investment decisions;
- define decision rights over enterprise platforms, data, cybersecurity, AI governance and major digital programs of work;
- establish co-sponsorship between digital, academic and administrative leaders; and
- make digital risk and investment trade-offs visible to the executive and board.

Where this authority remains informal, institutions are asking relationship management to do the work of governance.

Third, institutions need to fix the foundations they have spent too long working around

Institutions should make deliberate, long-term investment choices about their digital estate. This requires more than incremental remediation. Some institutions will need bold commitments to replace core systems, modernize identity and access management, strengthen integration and establish trusted data foundations. The sector's instinct has often been to defer these investments because they are hard to explain and politically unrewarding, but that logic is running out of road.



Students really expect an Amazon-style experience, a Netflix-style experience...They expect it to be seamless and digitally responsive.

Senior technology leader at a leading Canadian university

Institutions should:

- create a multi-year roadmap for core systems, data, integration and identity;
- fund foundational work as strategic infrastructure and not as discretionary IT spend;
- sequence investments against student experience, AI readiness, cybersecurity and operational resilience;
- establish data governance that reflects privacy, sovereignty and decision-making needs; and
- explain foundational investment in terms of institutional outcomes.

Foundational work will remain difficult to sell if institutions describe it as technical maintenance. It becomes compelling when leaders connect it to student experience, risk, productivity and institutional confidence.

Fourth, institutions need less experimentation and more operating discipline

Institutions should move from isolated AI experimentation to deliberate, structured AI adoption. They need mechanisms that help people use AI safely, ethically and productively.



AI is a part of the fabric of the world now. Can't treat it like another piece of IT.

Senior technology leader at a leading Canadian university

This means they should:

- define the institutional priorities AI should support;
- create clear governance for risk, ethics, privacy, assessment and security;
- invest in AI fluency for staff and students;
- provide advisory support for faculties and professional services;
- fund pilots that test value, adoption and risk before scaling; and
- use data and architecture standards to support responsible deployment.

Institutions can't afford to keep AI at the edges, it should become part of how institutions teach, research, operate and make decisions.

The next five years

The next phase of digital maturity will depend on whether institutions change the conditions that determine whether technology creates value at scale.

Many leaders understand the pressures. The problem is that many institutions still respond through operating models, governance structures, and investment practices designed for a different era. The next five years should therefore see a shift in focus from activity towards maturity. Institutions should move from fragmented digital initiatives to a more deliberate digital operating model. This will require action across three horizons.

HORIZON ONE

Establish authority and direction

In the short term (12 to 18 months), institutions should clarify the CIO's role and mandate. They should decide how digital leadership connects to executive strategy, academic priorities, investment decisions, and risk governance.

This horizon should answer four questions:

- What is the CIO accountable for?
- What decisions can the CIO shape or make?
- Which digital risks belong at executive and board level?
- How will academic, administrative and digital leaders share accountability?

This work sets the conditions for later investment. Without it, institutions risk funding technology projects without changing the authority model that limits their effect.

HORIZON TWO

Rebuild the digital estate

Over the next two to three years, institutions should address the operating and technical barriers that constrain progress while building the foundations required for long-term AI adoption and digital maturity. This includes legacy systems, fragmented data, weak integration, identity and access management, cybersecurity and inconsistent service design.

This horizon requires investment discipline. Institutions should sequence foundational work around the outcomes they need most, including student experience, AI readiness, research support, operational resilience, and productivity. They should also treat the digital estate with the same seriousness that they apply to the physical estate.

HORIZON THREE

Build frontier capability

Over years three to five, institutions should focus on converting digital capability into measurable institutional value. This means using data and AI to improve student support, personalize services, accelerate research, reduce administrative burden and strengthen resilience.

CIOs should be the champion in this shift, but they cannot own it alone. Frontier capability will require presidents, provosts, CFOs, registrars, academic leaders, boards, and digital leaders to make shared choices about mission, risk, investment and value.

The institutions that succeed will cease delegating digital transformation to the technology function and will rather recognize digital as part of the institution's core operating model. They will give it the mandate, investment, and leadership attention that this requires.

The CIO moment is therefore a broader institutional moment that reveals a simple truth:
Post-secondary education's digital future will be shaped less by technology adoption than by institutional willingness to change.

Nous Group is an international management consultancy working with clients across North America, Australasia and the United Kingdom.

A bigger idea
of success

600
PEOPLE

9
OFFICES

Our post-secondary sector capabilities

STRATEGY

Business and growth strategy
Cost reduction and productivity
Mergers, integration and alliances

DATA & ANALYTICS

Advanced analytics
Data strategy and capability

Nous Data Insights
Data products and benchmarking

DIGITAL & AI

Digital strategy and business cases
AI strategy and adoption
ICT architecture and solution requirements

DESIGN

Service design
Co-design
User research insights
Digital design

**LEADERSHIP
& CAPABILITY**

Leadership strategy
Assessment and development
Capability and learning

**TRANSFORMATION
& IMPLEMENTATION**

Transformation strategy and delivery
Implementation support and assurance
Process improvement and automation

ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Operating model
Culture
Workforce
Equity, diversity and inclusion

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