



Survey shows:

# **Students and profs prefer interactive AI learning vs. traditional methods**

**We surveyed hundreds of professors and students to discover how they leverage AI in higher education and the benefits they are experiencing. In this ebook, we present our findings.**

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# Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing many industries, and higher education institutions are also beginning to harness its potential. A recent OECD paper states, "When integrated with other technological advancements, generative AI tools [...] could possibly redefine teaching and learning." This integration promises to reshape how education is delivered and experienced, paving the way for innovative teaching methods and enhanced student engagement.

This ebook presents the findings from surveying hundreds of professors and students, highlighting the transformative impact of AI in higher education, with a special focus on Second Nature's AI learning application.

Second Nature provides a user-friendly AI application with role-play personas for authentic conversations on any topic such as interview preparation, second language comprehension, communication skills, selling and marketing skills, and presentation feedback. These realistic avatars are always available for practice, delivering timely, useful feedback in a private setting. In short, it offers a new way to train, coach, rehearse, and grade students

# The benefits of AI in higher education

Tools and platforms that utilize AI, machine learning (ML), and generative AI (GenAI) offer numerous benefits to higher education institutions.



## Case Study:

**Easing the burden on professor  
at University of Houston with AI**

1,300 students at the University of Houston's Bauer School of Business take a course in sales skills every semester. Each one practices and is graded on four different types of sales conversations, creating an enormous amount of material for professors, lecturers, and teaching assistants to review and score.

Introducing Second Nature into the course program freed up faculty for other tasks while delivering immediate feedback to students. Their reaction was overwhelmingly positive, with 9 out of 10 students agreeing or strongly agreeing that practicing with Second Nature would enable them to master new messaging faster than current practice methods, and the same number agreeing that they felt more confident after practicing with Second Nature.

**"It was quite easy to use, and it was helpful in bettering my communication skills and my sales pitch," said one Bauer student. "It's so easy to use. I love it so much when it comes to practicing these role plays," said another.**

**Here are some of the key advantages of using an AI learning platform like Second Nature for higher education.**

## AI offers a safe space for practice

Unlike human role play partners, AI personas are judgment-free. They are endlessly patient and don't mind having the same conversation repeatedly until the student's confidence has increased. Students will experiment in conversations with an AI persona, because they aren't self-conscious about being embarrassed in front of others.

**"You're going to have people who are just not as comfortable on a live one-on-one role play, and they need the iteration and the practice that they will get by using an AI," said Michelle Lane, lecturer at Indiana University's Kelly School of Business.**

This willingness to take risks translates into increased confidence and faster language and soft skills acquisition. Second Nature users agreed, saying **"I like these because they don't put pressure on me when I'm just trying to practice"** and **"...helpful when overcoming nerves."**





## Case Study:

**The University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire,  
gives students the freedom to make mistakes**

The University of Wisconsin Eau Claire integrated Second Nature into its courses on selling skills. Students appreciated being able to practice sales role plays for their sales competitions, and gain sales skills in a safe space.

“It’s much less intimidating to practice with an AI partner. It’s one thing to make a mistake with a bot. It’s a different thing to make a mistake and not know what to say when you’re with the professor,” observed Lenita Davis, executive director of University of Wisconsin Eau Claire sales management program.

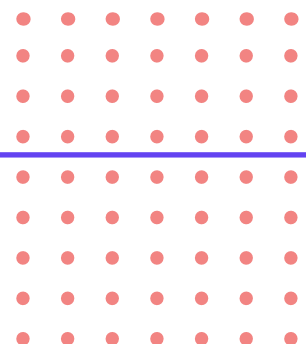
“I think the AI had a very human thought process. It gave me a lot to work with. It gives me something to bounce ideas off of rather than me making up what someone might say,” said a Wisconsin student.

## AI successfully teaches soft skills

Soft skills – which are so important in sales calls, management, communication, and interviews – are best mastered through repeated role plays with knowledgeable partners. The same is true for learning new languages, which require extensive practice alongside learning vocabulary lists and grammar rules.

One Second Nature user commented that  
**“it helps me better prepare myself for real events.”**

Overall, 85% of college students surveyed felt that practicing with Second Nature would enable them to master new messaging faster than current practice methods.





# Students score internships with stellar soft skills

Professor Sterling Bone, professor of marketing at Utah State University and executive director of Huntsman Pro Sales, observed that his students who used Second Nature won prestigious internships to leading companies, and at an earlier stage than expected. "We placed a record number of freshmen as interns with the same companies where we normally place juniors and seniors," he said, adding "We've been delighted to see how it's accelerated their learning and their readiness."

At other colleges, professors seized the opportunity to teach difficult capabilities like critical thinking and ethical AI use. Davis says **"we teach them how to use the tool so they can be effective contributors, because you've got to be able to critically analyze. And that is the value that they bring, the ability to judge and the ability to critically analyze."**

## AI platforms are always available for feedback and practice

Unlike human role play partners, mentors, and teachers, Second Nature's AI-powered personas are awake, alert, and ready to help the student at any time of the day or night, so they can practice their skills and knowledge as often as they like. Since it is cloud-based, Second Nature can be accessed from a variety of devices, no matter where the student is located.

**"A lot of students are used to playing games, and as they see their score go up and the feedback get better, it becomes like, oh, I'm going to do it again. It provides that tool of continuous repetition, which is really important,"** noted Lane of Indiana.

Additionally, AI education platforms deliver scores and feedback instantly, so that students can learn quickly from their mistakes, plus it can offer hints during the conversation. Students can immediately incorporate this feedback, which helps prevent bad habits and strengthen good ones.

In this way, universities remove the barriers that hold their students back from achieving their potential. At the Bauer College of Business at the University of Houston, Amy Vanderveer Novak, senior professor of practice and marketing, saw a non-native English speaker repeat a role play 19 times, elevating their failing grade to an A.

**"There's no other way that the student ever would have learned and had the repetitions to practice and improve not only their sales skills, but how you communicate and how you present yourself, which is our job to convey."**



## Case Study:

**Xavier University, Louisiana, aces sales competitions with timely feedback**

Xavier University (XULA) in New Orleans, LA, is a historically black university with a popular selling skills course. Amanda Helm, assistant professor of sales, was struggling to grade and return evaluations on practice conversations, and students weren't able to practice often enough to improve their skills.

**"Second Nature freed up time, because the grading was a nightmare," Professor Helm said. "I'd get 6-7 role plays from each student each semester, and I have to watch every video. This class brings a heavy grading load."**

XULA adopted Second Nature's AI platform for students to practice sales conversations and prepare for an annual inter-college sales competition. XULA students loved the platform and appreciated receiving timely feedback.

With the help of Second Nature, all the students reached the competition's semi-final for the first time ever.

# AI delivers trusted evaluations and insights

AI scoring algorithms are objective and consistent in assessing student abilities and progress. The academic leadership has full control to adjust the scoring algorithm according to their educational goals, such as weighting grading between style and content.

Once the grading system has been defined, the algorithm scores all students in the same way, without bias or prejudice. This ensures feedback that is trusted by students and professors alike.

## Students love the feedback...

"I really learn from the feedback given after the fact, and can apply it to my future simulations," said one student user of Second Nature. Another student said, "I can tell whether or not I'm doing a good job with the responses I get."

Unlike humans, scoring models are never influenced by any other factors. Students are fully aware of this, and it makes them more receptive to feedback. Overall, 80% of university students surveyed felt that feedback they received from Second Nature's AI platform was helpful, with one student saying **"the AI was really responsive, with answers that made sense."**



**“They look at their scores. They look at how many filler words they use, the level of energy they gave when they did the role play. They really pay attention to the numbers as well as the text feedback they got from the bot,” said Davis, of the University of Wisconsin.**

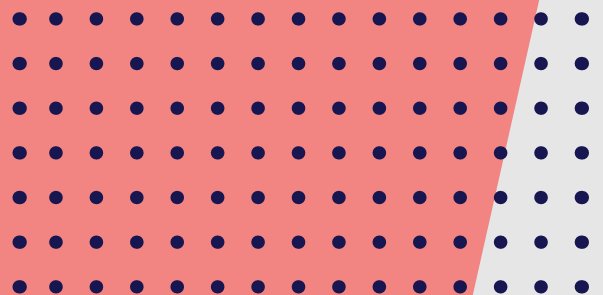
### **So do the professors...**

According to the professors we surveyed, it makes a big difference to know that Second Nature’s trustworthy AI engine has their backs.

**“Students expect great feedback and consistent feedback. As a professor, I can pop a lot of gummy bears and keep myself positive as I’m giving feedback, but when I’m at my 150th role play review on a semester basis, I worry that I have maybe lost my positive mojo. To have a consistent, edifying, encouraging amount of feedback is very valuable,” said professor Bone of Utah.**

With the help of AI data insights, professors can more accurately identify top-performing students who would benefit from advanced studies, and underperforming students who need extra support.

**Novak of the University of Houston said: “We were able to use it as a kind of data tool to identify the best and brightest students for our advanced sales program. The feedback wasn’t just a five-minute role play, it was quantitative. As a professor, or as a potential employer, you are getting not only the best of what they’re showing up with, but you get all the data from all the different practices. And I think that that information is really kind of groundbreaking.”**



# AI supports personalized learning and better lesson planning

Second Nature's AI learning platform constantly collects and analyzes data about the students. It produces insights into each student's individual needs, learning preferences, skill level, knowledge base, strengths and weaknesses, and more. Faculty can then use these insights to generate tailored learning paths that are customized to each student, and continue to adapt them as the student's skills and knowledge improve.

**"It's really hard to be able to provide a different, unique learning path for each and every student. Second Nature lets us go through [each student's practice] simulations, and say, okay, your objection handling needed help. Here's some recommended content to help you work through those," said Indiana's Lane.**

## Professors gain visibility into student needs and capabilities

Professors use Second Nature's data insights to constantly improve the teaching they deliver. With AI-powered data insights, professors can make real time adjustments to lesson plans and curriculum, so that they better meet the needs of the current cohort of students.

**Lane said: "seeing that analysis about where our students are having the biggest struggles will help us iterate our curriculum a lot more effectively."**

## AI frees professors to focus on their core tasks

AI can serve as a copilot for professors and faculty members. Insights from AI algorithms help them adjust their lesson plans to be more effective, focusing on what students need, and Second Nature's intuitive editor interface makes it easy to produce new sessions on different topics.

With the AI scoring engine, professors gain more time to focus on teaching and connecting with students. They don't have to listen to hundreds of pitch recordings or practice conversations, which take them away from their core tasks of supporting students.

# AI makes learning fun

AI platforms make it possible to offer an interactive and engaging learning experience, no matter what the topic is. Practical learning leveraging conversational practice is enjoyable, and AI is seen as cool technology, helping attract students who might not otherwise dedicate energy to improving their skills. As a result, students spend more time learning and practicing. Second Nature users agreed, with 84% of people surveyed saying they prefer interactive simulations over webcam recordings in the future. **“This is a really fun new experience. I’ve never used a simulation like this,”** said one user.

## 84% of Second Nature Users prefer interactive simulations over webcam recordings

**“[My students] love the fact that the AI persona would throw them questions and objections that they hadn’t thought of, and the fact that it was different every time they did it. They couldn’t just memorize a script. It really caused them to dig in on their product knowledge,”** said Wisconsin’s Davis.

**“It puts you on the spot and you have to react like how you would in real life,”** said one Second Nature user, and another, from University of Houston, said that using Second Nature **“there are more unexpected situations that I can practice on.”**



## Case Study:

**Utah State University delivers a more engaging learning experience**

Utah State University's Jon M. Huntsman School of Business introduced Second Nature into its undergraduate Sales Business class. Students used the platform to practice positioning, discovery calls, and sales presentations, while teaching staff utilized it to assess student progress.

Students welcomed the fun and enjoyable learning experience, saying: **"this is a really fun new experience. I've never used a simulation like this,"** and **"it's the way of the future!"** 86% of Utah State University students agreed or strongly agreed that practicing with Second Nature would enable them to master new messaging faster than current practice methods.

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## Students share their perspectives

76% felt more confident after practicing with Second Nature

85% feel AI helps them master new messaging faster

80% feel that the AI feedback is helpful

84% prefer interactive AI simulations over webcam recordings

**Data represents 600 students surveyed across three different universities**



## 9 tips for implementing AI in higher education

Based on input from hundreds of professors and students, we've gathered 9 tips for successfully applying AI in higher educational institutions.

### 01 Introduce AI incrementally

Everyone has different comfort levels with new technology, so introduce it gradually. For example, one college began by offering Second Nature as an optional practice tool for national sales competitions. Then they implemented it for practice for certain classes, and finally used it as part of the students' final grade.

## 02 Turn your existing curriculum materials into AI learning sessions

Using Second Nature makes it easy to create engaging and effective learning experiences from the teaching materials that you already have. One professor commented that they took their existing rubric and put it into Second Nature to create and test new sessions.

## 03 Apply AI for inter-college competitions

Many colleges and universities used Second Nature's AI platform to successfully prepare students for national sales competitions. Davis of Wisconsin said: "we usually do fairly well in big national sales competitions, but this year [after using Second Nature] we won one competition, for the first time that we can remember, and placed in the top 10 in all major competitions."

## 04 Tap into AI-powered insights for data-driven decision making

Several professors spoke about the value of using AI data insights to improve their curricula and teaching methods. They appreciate being able to tap into real-time feedback about where students are struggling during the course, to iterate teaching strategies more effectively.

## 05 Work with corporate partners to create realistic AI role play scenarios

Professors at many colleges have built relationships over the years with corporate partners. They used those relationships to gain information about the companies' products, target audience, competitors, and more, and then applied that information to create authentic role play simulations in Second Nature that their students could use to prepare for real world sales conversations. It has been much more effective than relying on other students to play the role of the corporate buyer.



## 06 Ramp up visibility into student abilities and progress

AI data insights give teaching faculty a clear understanding of each student's capabilities, learning styles, and progress. This allows them to redirect their resources to help weaker students to catch up before they fall too far behind, and to recruit top students into advanced courses.

## 07 Empower students to succeed in interviews

Many colleges and universities used Second Nature's AI platform to successfully prepare students for national sales competitions. Davis of Wisconsin said: "we usually do fairly well in big national sales competitions, but this year [after using Second Nature] we won one competition, for the first time that we can remember, and placed in the top 10 in all major competitions."

## 08 Treat AI as a companion learning resource for students

After testing out Second Nature's AI learning platform, many colleges decided to incorporate it into their stock of teaching materials. They either offer it alongside their existing textbooks or have completely replaced their textbooks with Second Nature's AI solution.

## 09 Prepare students for AI in the real world

Students will encounter AI in the workforce. Teaching them to use it responsibly as a student prepares them to use those tools in ethical and responsible ways. Learning about AI in the college setting provides a framework for critical thinking and analysis.

# AI has much to offer to higher educational institutions

Professors, faculty members, and leading educators are discovering AI's potential as a copilot in delivering engaging educational experiences. Conversational AI platforms like Second Nature bring engaging learning experiences and valuable data insights to higher educational institutions. Personalized learning, unlimited practice, timely and objective feedback, and a safe space to gain skills are all possible with AI in education.

