Apptega

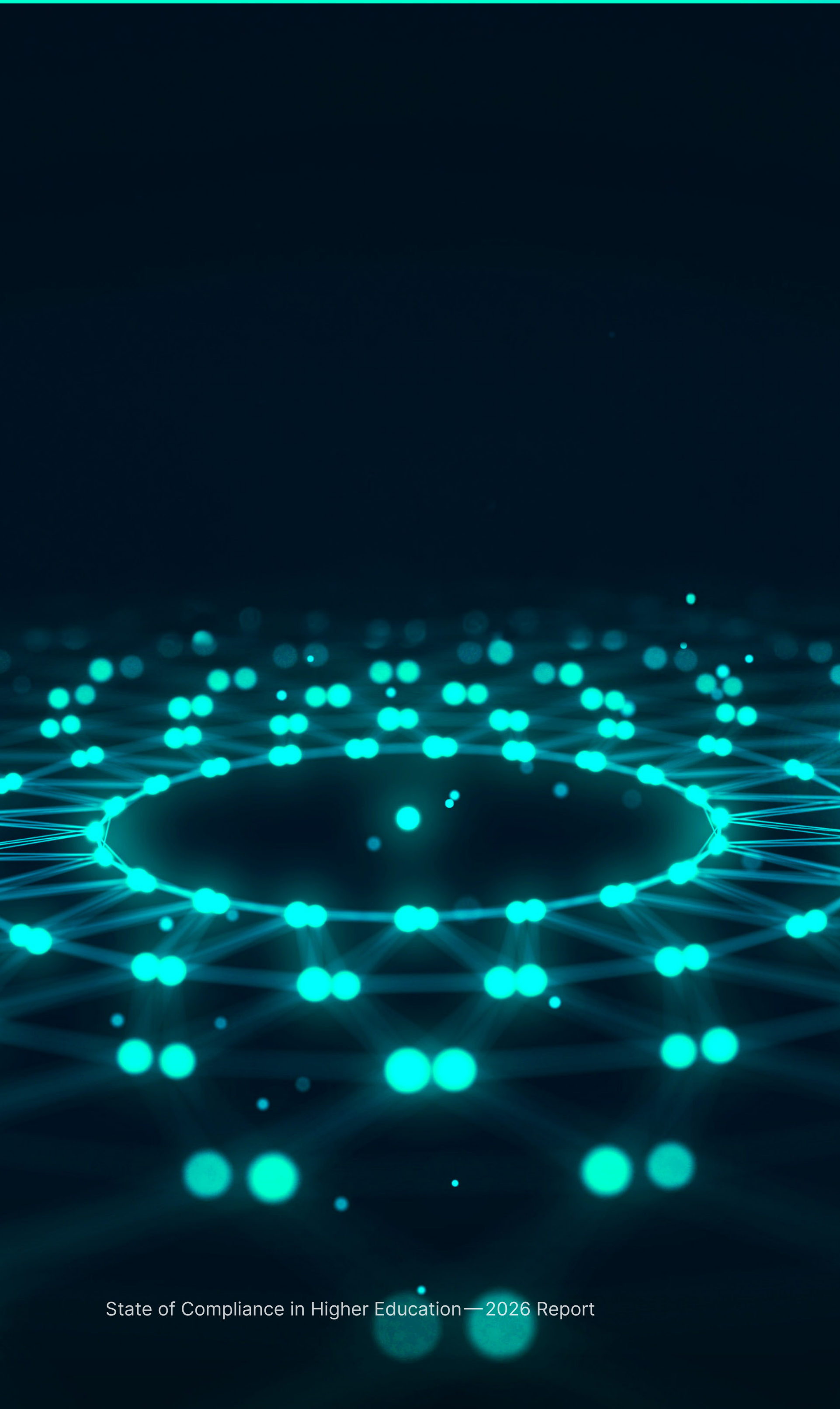
CAMPUSGUARD®

REPORT

# State of Compliance in Higher Education

2026 Report

# Contents



# Executive Summary

## Higher Education Compliance Has Reached an Operational Inflection Point

Higher education institutions have always operated in a complex regulatory environment. Today, however, that complexity is evolving at an unprecedented pace driven by multiple security and compliance vectors.

Cybersecurity threats continue to mature and expand, resulting in business disruption and risk exposure. Regulatory expectations continue to mature and expand. New privacy requirements, evolving security frameworks, audit demands, and institutional governance obligations have increased the volume of work required to maintain effective compliance programs. At the same time, colleges and universities are expected to accomplish more with limited resources, decentralized teams, and increasing operational pressure.

Compliance is no longer viewed solely as preparation for an annual audit or assessment. Increasingly, leaders see it as a continuous operational responsibility requiring coordination across people, processes, technology, and leadership. As compliance programs evolve, security and compliance are also becoming more closely connected, giving CISOs and risk leaders a more complete view of institutional risk exposure.

The inaugural 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey, conducted by Apptega and CampusGuard, gathered responses from 112 U.S.-based higher education security, compliance, IT, audit, and risk leaders. The findings reveal a clear tension: institutions are managing significant regulatory complexity, but many still rely on decentralized ownership, spreadsheets, manual processes, and audit-driven workflows. At the same time, the data points to a growing need for change as institutions evaluate how to improve efficiency, strengthen visibility, and build compliance programs that can keep pace with evolving demands.

**More than half of respondents actively manage four or more frameworks or regulatory requirements, and nearly three-quarters report moderate to significant overlap among them. Yet two-thirds rely on spreadsheets as their primary compliance system of record.**

This dependence on legacy tools is strongly associated within the survey sample with duplicated work, reactive audit preparation, and lower confidence in answering a fundamental question: **"Are we compliant, and how do we know?"**

The findings also show a pronounced maturity divide, but the differences extend beyond institution size or the use of external support. Across the survey, institutions with clearer ownership, more standardized processes, greater automation, and stronger operating models generally report better audit readiness and higher confidence. Institutions with decentralized or unclear ownership and less standardized approaches, by contrast, report substantially more manual work and reactive processes. External support can be one component of a stronger operating model, but the broader pattern points to the importance of how compliance is structured, managed, and supported across the institution.

**54.5%**

manage four or more frameworks or regulatory requirements

**67%**

use spreadsheets as their primary compliance system of record

**63.4%**

describe their compliance process as reactive or periodic

Leveraging external providers for managed security and compliance is not yet widespread across higher education. **More than six in ten institutions do not currently use one, although 43.8% of all respondents say they are considering it.** Cost and difficulty finding the right provider are the most common barriers. **At the same time, 75.9% say a provider's technology stack is very important or critical to their selection decision.**

Taken together, the survey results point to a challenge that extends beyond staffing or budget. As compliance requirements continue to expand, many institutions are working to coordinate people, processes, evidence, and technology across increasingly complex environments. With most respondents expecting compliance-related budgets to remain flat or increase only slightly, institutions will need to evolve how they approach compliance — using existing resources more effectively, minimizing operational disruption, and strengthening compliance as a core component of institutional risk management.

The greatest opportunity lies in reducing manual coordination, increasing visibility, and creating more consistent approaches to managing compliance across the institution — helping teams spend less time administering the process and more time on work that reduces risk and supports institutional priorities.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

# About This Research

Apptega and CampusGuard launched the inaugural State of Compliance in Higher Education research initiative to establish a new industry benchmark and give colleges and universities data-driven insights they can use to evaluate and strengthen their own compliance programs. The survey was designed to capture the current operating reality, not only which requirements institutions manage, but how ownership, staffing, technology, service-provider usage, and audit practices affect their ability to execute.

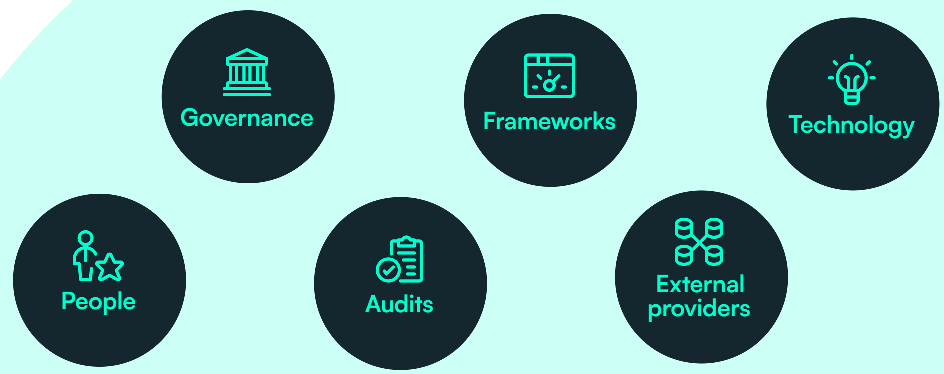
**The research focuses on five central questions:**

- How are higher education compliance programs structured and governed?
- How much complexity and duplication do institutions experience across frameworks?
- How much of the compliance process remains manual, and where do current systems fall short?
- How do institutions use external providers, and what do they value or question in those relationships?
- What separates more mature, continuously prepared programs from reactive ones?

The survey collected 112 anonymous responses from U.S.-based higher education institutions. Respondents included CISOs, Security Directors, GRC and Compliance Leaders, Chief Compliance Officers, CIOs, IT Risk Leaders, Internal Auditors, Privacy Leaders, and related operational roles. Institutions ranged from those enrolling fewer than 5,000 students to those serving more than 50,000.

The findings in this report should be interpreted as a directional snapshot of the survey sample rather than a conclusive representation of every higher education institution. Cross-segment comparisons are presented as associations, not causal proof. Institution size, ownership model, technology maturity, and provider usage frequently overlap and may influence one another.

**Research scope at a glance**




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

KEY FINDINGS

# Key Findings and Takeaways

Across the survey, one pattern emerges consistently: compliance complexity is structural, but the operational burden is not inevitable. Institutions that report stronger coordination, greater visibility into compliance activities,  and more standardized processes also report higher confidence in their ability to manage compliance effectively within this survey sample.

**54.5%** manage four or more frameworks or regulatory requirements

**72.3%** report moderate to significant overlap across frameworks

**67%** rely on spreadsheets as their primary compliance system of record

**61.6%** say their teams spend more than half their time on manual compliance work

**63.4%** describe their compliance process as reactive or periodic

**67.9%** are no more than moderately confident in answering whether they are compliant and how they know

**43.8%** do not currently use an external provider but are considering one

**75.9%** say a provider's technology stack is very important or critical

**52.7%** expect compliance-related budgets to remain unchanged over the next 12—24 months

SECTION 1

# Compliance Complexity Is Outpacing Institutional Capacity

Institutions are managing more requirements, more overlap, and more repeated work than their operating models can efficiently absorb.

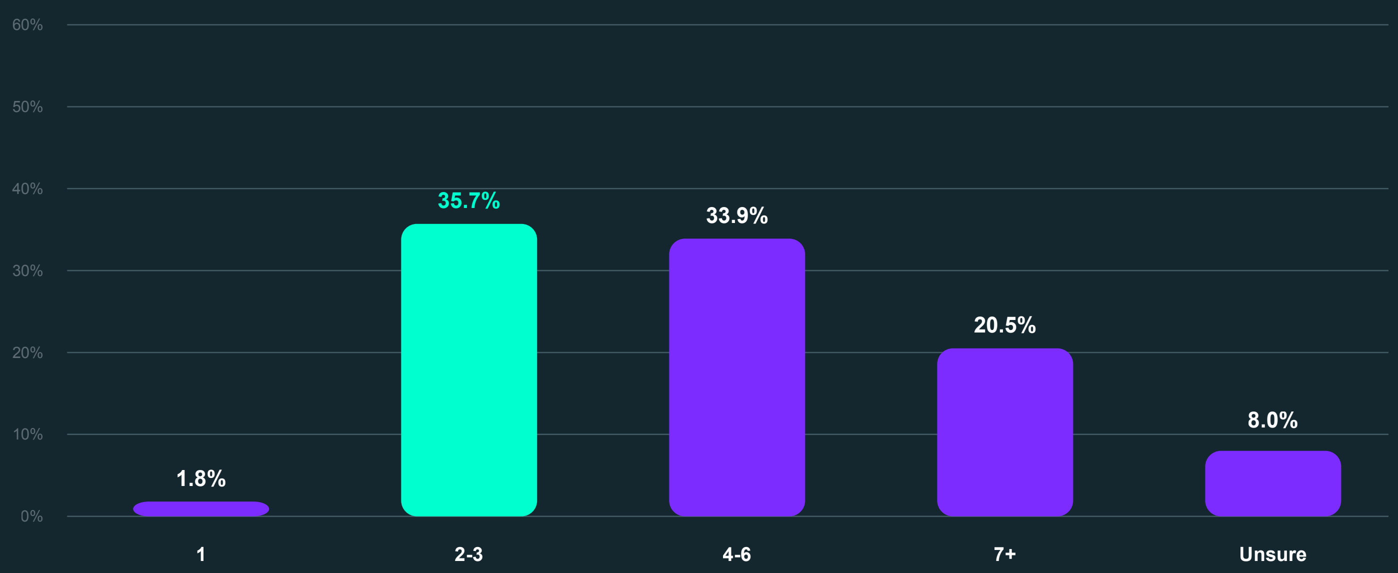
## More Frameworks Have Become the Norm

Institutions rarely manage one regulatory requirement in isolation. Their environments can include student records, payment systems, healthcare operations, research, financial aid, privacy obligations, cybersecurity standards, and contractual requirements. Each brings its own terminology, evidence expectations, and reporting cadence.

**More than half of respondents (54.5%) actively manage at least four frameworks or regulatory requirements. One in five manage seven or more.** FERPA is the most frequently cited requirement, followed closely by PCI DSS and NIST. CIS Controls and HIPAA are also prominent, reflecting the breadth of operational environments found across colleges and universities.

**Figure 1**

**Number of frameworks and regulatory requirements actively managed**




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

The number of frameworks alone does not fully explain the burden. Complexity compounds when institutions manage requirements through separate documents, teams, evidence repositories, or audit processes. While many frameworks share common control themes, fragmented approaches often prevent institutions from realizing those efficiencies, resulting in duplicated effort and inconsistent compliance activities.

**Figure 2**

**Frameworks and regulations most relevant to institutions**


Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112. Multi-select question.

## Similar Requirements Create Repeated Work

**Nearly three-quarters of respondents report moderate, high, or significant overlap among the frameworks they manage. Yet 55.4% say they constantly or frequently duplicate compliance work across frameworks or audits.**

**72.3%**

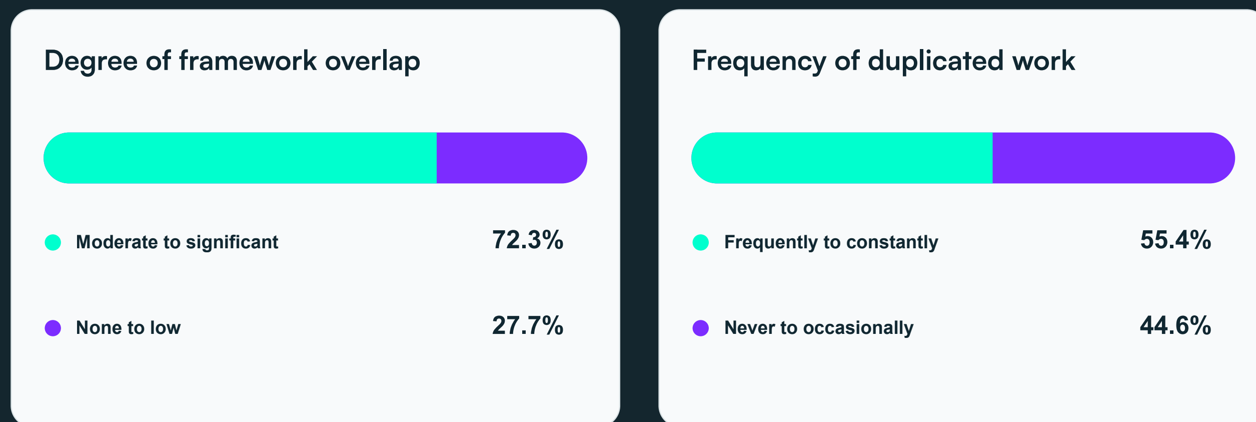
report moderate to significant overlap across frameworks

**55.4%**

constantly or frequently duplicate work across frameworks or audits

**Figure 3**

Framework overlap and duplicated work




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

Many institutions recognize the overlap across compliance frameworks but continue to experience significant duplication in how requirements are managed. This points to a broader process and operational maturity challenge, not simply a technology gap. When evidence, documentation, controls, and reporting are managed independently for different frameworks or audits, opportunities for efficiency can be difficult to realize. As a result, teams may spend considerable time on administrative activities without meaningfully improving their security or compliance posture.

Reducing duplication begins with a more coordinated approach to managing compliance activities across frameworks. Rather than treating each requirement independently, standardizing common processes, clarifying ownership, and reusing controls and evidence where appropriate can reduce administrative effort, improve consistency, and increase visibility across the compliance program.

"Managing one framework is challenging enough. But in higher education, we're often mapping the same controls across multiple frameworks while responding to repeated requests for the same evidence from different stakeholders. Much of our time isn't spent improving our security posture — it's spent organizing, validating, and reusing information that already exists."

**— Higher Education Compliance Leader**

SECTION 2

# Fragmented Operations Keep Compliance Manual

Decentralized ownership and spreadsheet-centered processes make enterprise-wide compliance harder to coordinate, scale, and maintain.

## More Than Half Of Institutions Lack Clear, Centralized Ownership

Higher education is inherently distributed. Academic units, research departments, finance, healthcare, IT, privacy, internal audit, and administrative offices may each own part of the compliance picture. Distributed participation is not itself a weakness. The risk emerges when **distributed execution lacks shared strategy, standards, accountability, and visibility**.

**One-third of respondents describe compliance ownership as fully decentralized, while 23.2% report that compliance ownership is unclear.** Together, more than half of institutions report a structure in which centralized direction is limited or absent.

By comparison, just **26.8% report a fully centralized governance model**, highlighting the decentralized nature of compliance management across many institutions.

Regardless of how compliance responsibilities are structured, clearly defined governance plays an important role in effective compliance management. Institutions benefit from clarity around strategic oversight, control ownership, evidence management, issue escalation, and progress reporting. Without clearly defined roles and processes, departments may rely on different approaches, duplicate work, and develop inconsistent views of institutional risk.

**Figure 4**

How compliance ownership is structured

| | |
|---|---|
| Fully decentralized | 33.0% |
| Fully centralized | 26.8% |
| Unclear ownership | 23.2% |
| Centralized strategy with distributed execution | 17.0% |

Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

## Spreadsheets Still Function As Compliance Infrastructure

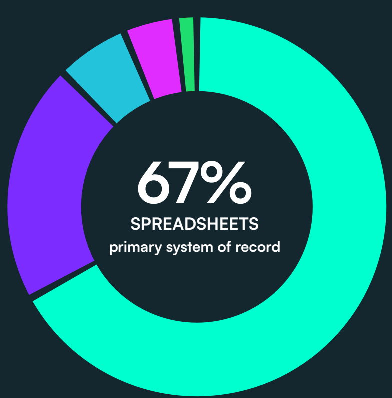
Spreadsheets remain deeply embedded in higher education compliance. **They are used by 72.3% of respondents in some capacity and serve as the primary system of record for 67%. Only 20.5% primarily use a GRC platform, while 6.2% primarily use a compliance automation platform. Another 4.5% report having no clear system of record.**

**2 in 3**

institutions use spreadsheets as their primary compliance system of record

**Figure 5**

### Primary system of record for compliance




| | |
|---|---|
| Spreadsheets | 67.0% |
| GRC platform | 20.5% |
| Compliance automation platform | 6.2% |
| No clear system | 4.5% |
| Homegrown solution | 1.8% |

Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

Spreadsheets remain a practical tool for many compliance activities because they are flexible, familiar, and easy to create. However, as compliance programs expand across multiple frameworks, departments, audits, and evidence sources, they become increasingly difficult to use as the primary system for coordination. Version control, ownership, reporting, and evidence tracking grow more complex over time, increasing administrative effort and reducing visibility across the compliance program.

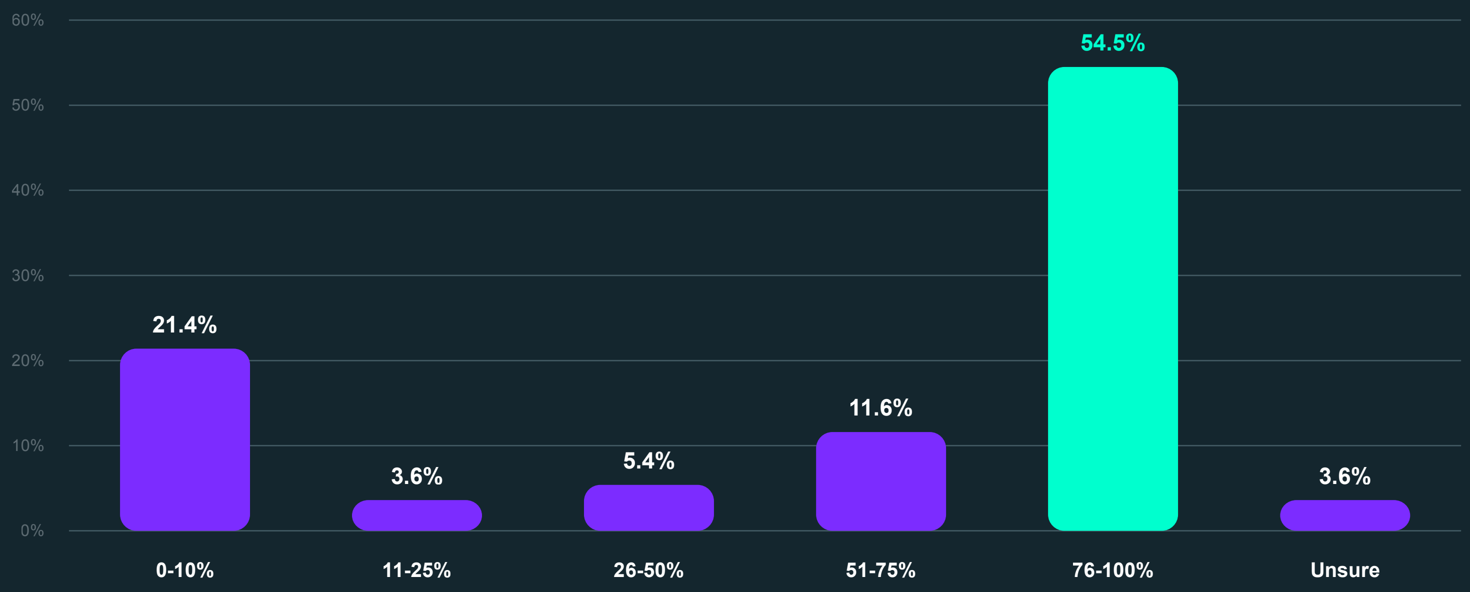
Within the survey sample, institutions relying primarily on spreadsheets consistently reported higher levels of manual work, more reactive compliance management, and lower confidence in their ability to manage compliance than institutions using a GRC/compliance management platform as their primary system of record. While these findings do not establish causation, they indicate a strong relationship between the systems institutions rely on to manage compliance and broader indicators of program maturity. These patterns are explored in greater detail later in this report.

## Manual Work Consumes The Time Needed For Strategic Progress

Manual effort is not a marginal part of the higher education compliance process. It is the dominant operating reality for many institutions. **More than half of respondents say 76% to 100% of their compliance management process is manual. Two-thirds say at least half of the process is manual, and 61.6% say their teams spend more than half their time on manual compliance work.**

**Figure 6**

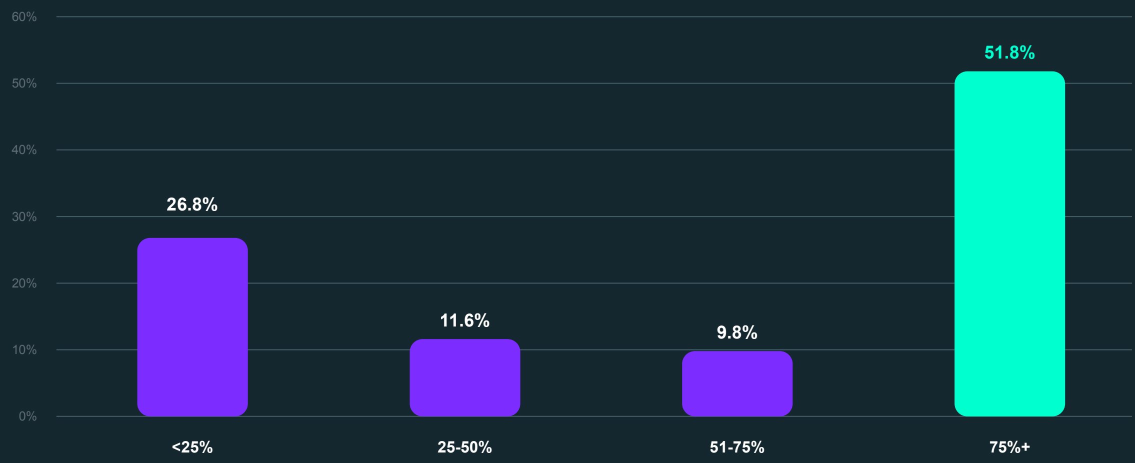
Percentage of compliance management that remains manual




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

**Figure 7**

## Time teams spend on manual compliance work




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

> "Our staff didn't need more work — they needed more capacity. As compliance requirements continued to grow, we realized that sustaining the same manual processes wasn't a long-term strategy."
>
> **— Director of Compliance, Public University**

The greatest challenge is not the amount of work required to maintain compliance, but the amount of time devoted to activities that do not directly improve institutional security or compliance outcomes. Administrative tasks such as collecting documentation, coordinating across departments, preparing for audits, and maintaining records consume significant capacity that could otherwise be directed toward risk reduction, remediation, and strategic program improvement.

The survey underscores a broader challenge facing higher education: compliance expectations continue to grow while institutional resources remain constrained. Building sustainable compliance programs will require approaches that allow teams to scale their efforts without proportionally increasing administrative workload.

SECTION 3

# Audit Readiness Remains Reactive

The consequences of fragmented ownership and manual work become most visible when institutions must prove compliance.

## For Most Institutions, Compliance Is Still Point-in-Time

Keeping compliance activities current throughout the year requires consistent ownership, timely evidence collection, ongoing control validation, and regular remediation. Many institutions, however, continue to rely on periodic efforts tied to audits, assessments, or regulatory deadlines rather than maintaining these activities as part of routine operations.

**63.4%**

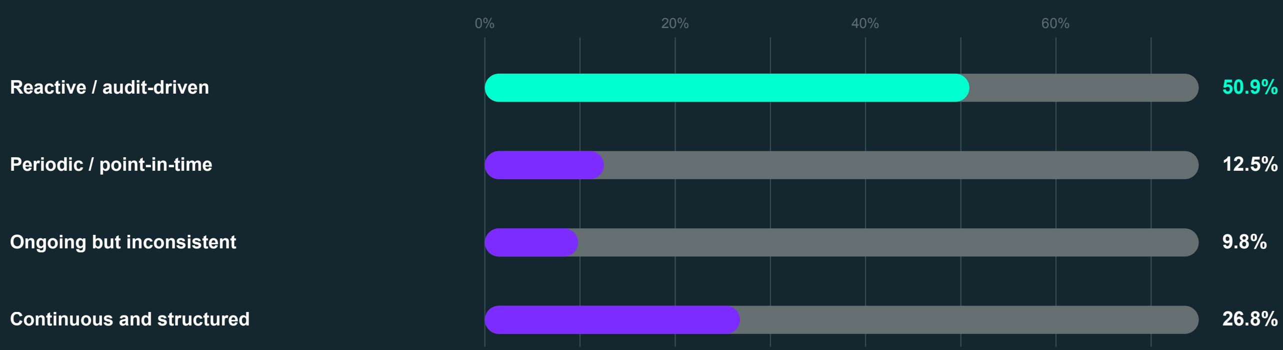
operate through reactive or periodic compliance processes

**Half of respondents describe their compliance process as reactive and audit-driven. Another 12.5% describe it as periodic and point-in-time. Only 26.8% say their program is continuous and structured.**

When compliance work activates primarily around deadlines, institutions have less opportunity to identify gaps early, maintain current evidence, track remediation, and demonstrate progress over time. The result is a recurring cycle: audit preparation consumes capacity, teams return to other priorities after the audit, and the next audit triggers another surge of activity.

**Figure 8**

### How institutions describe their compliance process

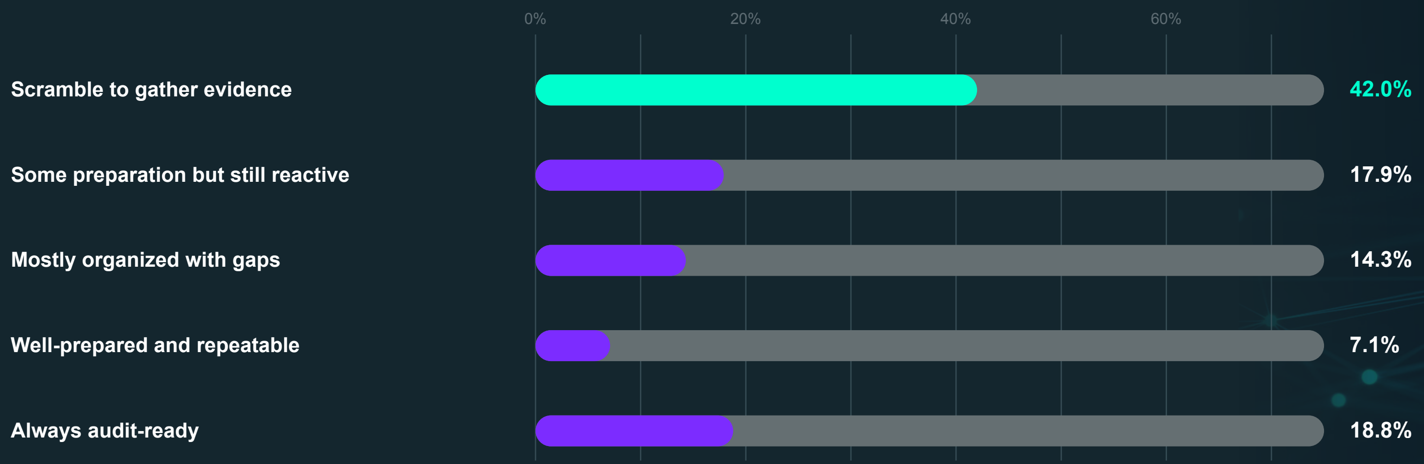



Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

## Nearly Six In Ten Institutions Remain Reactive During Audit Preparation

Audit preparation reflects the same pattern. **42% of respondents say they scramble to gather evidence, and another 17.9% say they conduct some preparation but remain reactive. Only 7.1% describe their preparation as well-prepared and repeatable, while 18.8% say they are always audit-ready.**

**Figure 9**
How institutions experience audit preparation

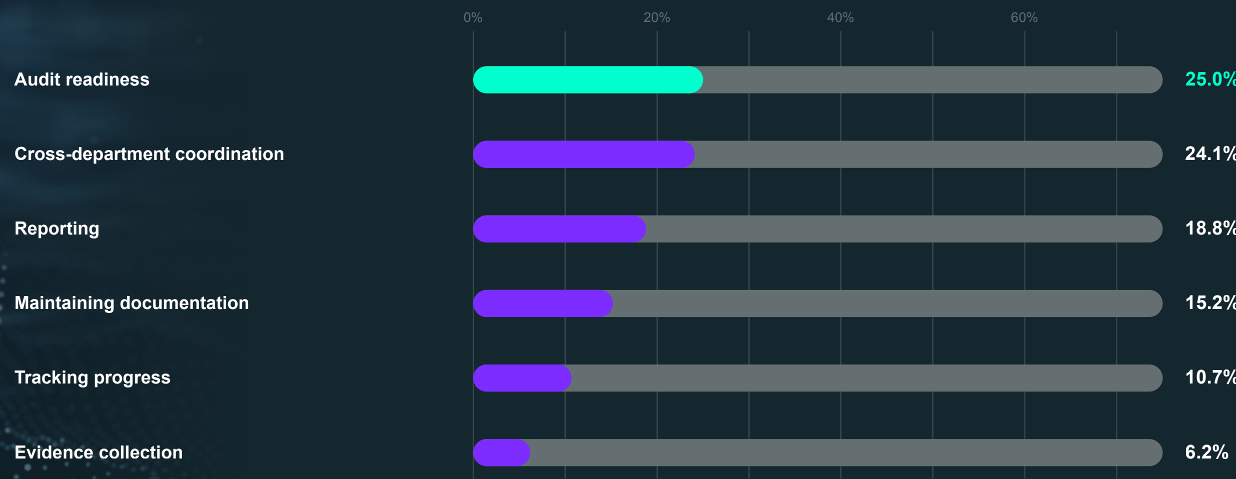



Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

Audit readiness is the most frequently cited challenge, yet the results point to a broader reality: institutions rarely struggle with audits in isolation. Instead, audit readiness reflects how effectively documentation, reporting, coordination, and ongoing compliance activities are managed throughout the year.

**Figure 10**

### Where the compliance process breaks down most often




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

## Compliance Work Is Happening — But Many Institutions Cannot Prove It

A mature compliance program should allow leaders to answer two questions with confidence: What is our current posture, and how is it changing? The survey indicates that many institutions cannot yet answer either question clearly.

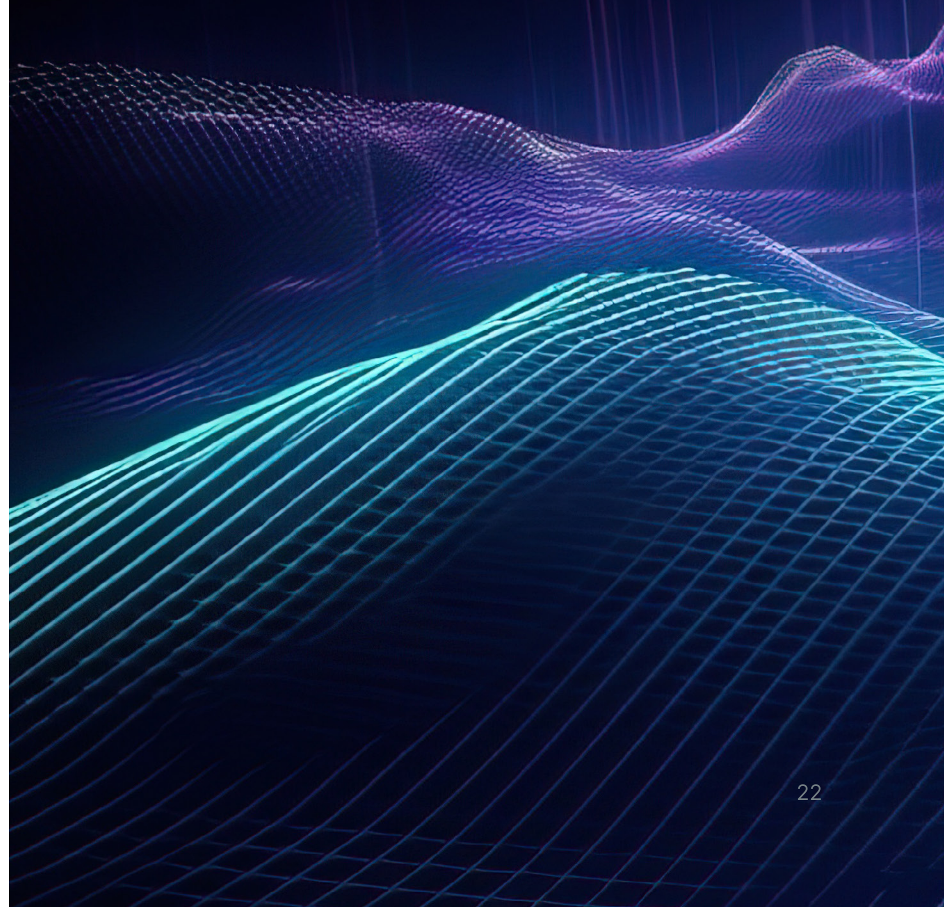
**Only 32.1% of respondents are very or completely confident in answering, "Are we compliant, and how do we know?" Nearly seven in ten (67.9%) report only moderate confidence or less, while 61.6% rate their effectiveness in demonstrating compliance progress to leadership as moderate or lower.**

**67.9%** are only moderately confident or not confident in answering whether their institution is compliant and how they know

The challenge isn't a lack of compliance activity; it's a lack of visibility. When evidence, documentation, and compliance efforts are distributed across departments and disconnected systems, institutions can struggle to develop a unified picture of their overall compliance posture. That limits their ability to confidently communicate progress, respond to audits, and support executive decision-making.

"Compliance isn't just about satisfying auditors — it's about giving institutional leaders the information they need to make informed decisions. When security, risk, and compliance teams can clearly demonstrate posture, trends, and progress, conversations shift from defending the program to planning its future."

— **Chief Information Security Officer, Higher Education Institution**



SECTION 4

# The Higher Education Compliance Maturity Divide

Institution size, ownership, technology, and external support are associated with markedly different outcomes.

## Compliance Work Doesn't Scale Down With Institution Size

Institution size plays an important role in shaping the compliance experience. Large public universities often manage more compliance frameworks, but they also report stronger governance structures, greater use of GRC/compliance management platforms, and more frequent engagement with external providers. Smaller institutions, by comparison, often have fewer people and less dedicated compliance capacity, even though many of the core responsibilities required to maintain a compliance program remain the same.

This difference is reflected in day-to-day operations. Among small and midsized public universities, **93.5% report that at least half of their compliance process is manual, with 96.8% reporting only low or moderate confidence in their compliance program.** While large public universities report comparatively stronger outcomes, **77.8% still manage at least half of their compliance process manually, and 74.1% report only low or moderate confidence**, demonstrating that these challenges persist across institutions of all sizes. Additional resources can improve operational maturity, but staffing alone does not eliminate the administrative burden of compliance.

The challenge is not simply the number of compliance frameworks an institution manages. Many of the activities required to maintain a strong compliance program — coordinating stakeholders, collecting evidence, preparing for audits, documenting progress, and tracking ongoing obligations — remain essential regardless of institution size. For smaller institutions, accomplishing that work with fewer people and less dedicated capacity can make maintaining a consistent, proactive compliance program significantly more difficult.

## Clear Ownership Is One of the Strongest Indicators of Compliance Maturity

How compliance responsibilities are organized may be just as important as the resources available to support them. Institutions with clearly defined ownership consistently report stronger operational outcomes than those with decentralized or unclear governance structures, regardless of institution size.

The impact of ownership structure is clear. Among fully decentralized programs, 97.3% report that at least half of their compliance process is manual, compared with just 13.3% of fully centralized programs. The same pattern extends across duplicated work, reactive compliance management, audit readiness, confidence, and leadership reporting, making ownership structure one of the strongest indicators of overall compliance maturity.

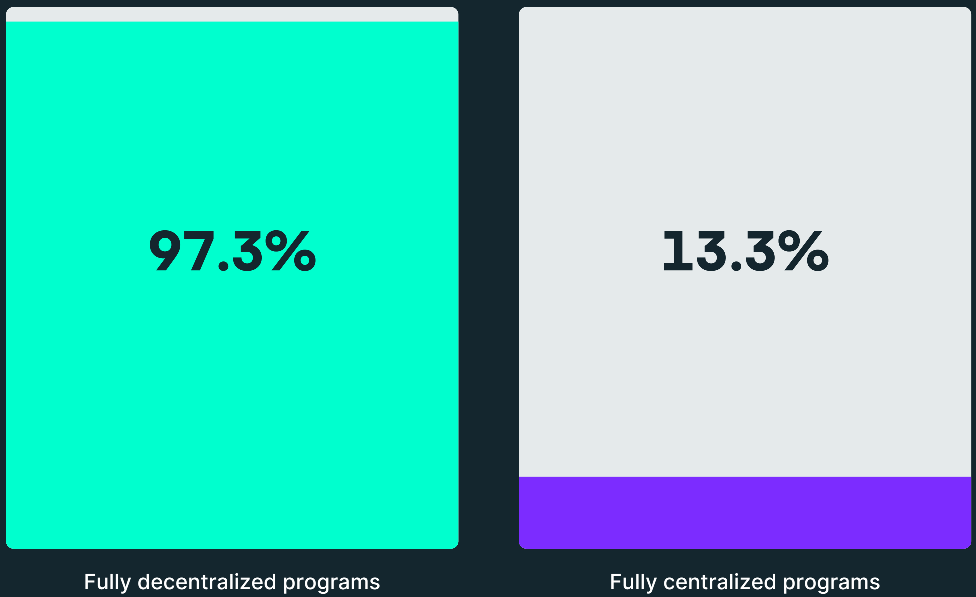
Compliance responsibilities naturally span multiple departments across a campus. The findings indicate that institutions with clearly defined ownership, coordinated governance, and centralized oversight are better positioned to manage those responsibilities consistently. Success is driven not by centralizing every compliance activity, but by establishing clear accountability and coordination across the institution.

**Figure 11**

**Ownership structure is strongly associated with the amount of manual compliance work**

97.3% of fully decentralized programs report that at least half of their compliance process is manual, compared with just 13.3% of fully centralized programs.

*% reporting at least half of their compliance process is manual*




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

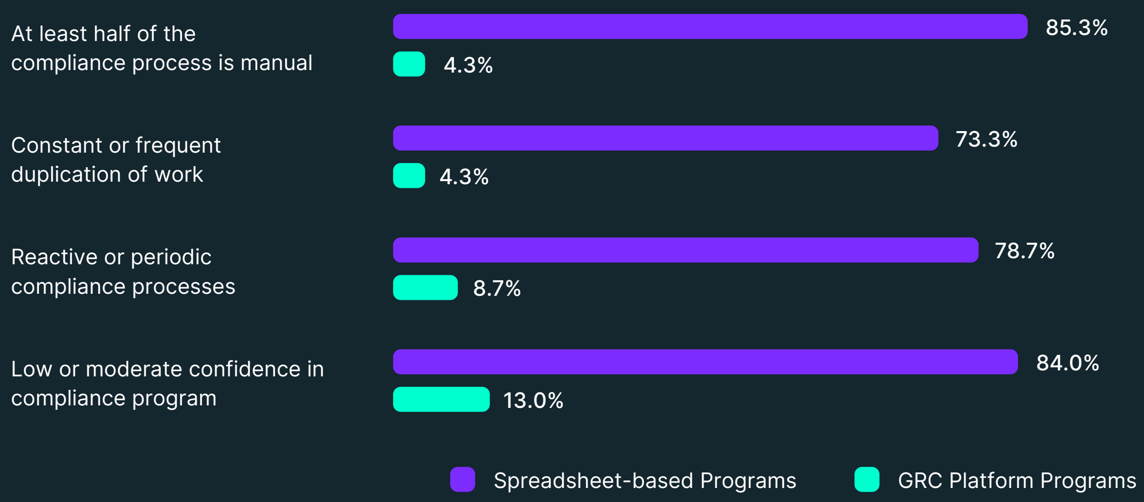
## Primary System Of Record Is Linked To Stronger Compliance Outcomes

The systems institutions rely on to manage compliance are closely associated with overall program performance. Institutions relying primarily on spreadsheets report substantially higher levels of manual work, duplicated effort, reactive compliance management, and lower confidence than those using GRC platforms.

Among institutions using spreadsheets as their primary system of record, **85.3% report that at least half of their compliance process is manual, 73.3% constantly or frequently duplicate work, 78.7% operate reactively or periodically, and 84.0% report only low or moderate confidence in their compliance program.** Among institutions primarily using a GRC platform, those figures are **4.3%, 4.3%, 8.7%,** and **13.0%,** respectively. The differences observed across the survey are substantial, although technology is only one of several factors associated with stronger compliance outcomes.

**Figure 12**

**Compliance outcomes by primary system of record**




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

Compliance performance reflects a combination of governance, people, processes, and technology. While no single factor determines program effectiveness, institutions using GRC platforms consistently reported stronger results across the operational measures evaluated in this survey. The findings suggest that technology may play an important supporting role within a broader, well-governed compliance program.

## External Support Is Linked To More Efficient Compliance Operations

The use of external support is associated with meaningful differences in day-to-day compliance operations. Across the survey, institutions using ongoing managed services consistently reported stronger results across every operational measure evaluated, while institutions without external providers—particularly those considering one—reported the highest levels of manual work, duplicated effort, reactive compliance processes, and lower confidence in their compliance programs. Institutions using ongoing managed services reported substantially less reliance on manual compliance work: **only 13.3% said at least half of their compliance process is manual, compared with 98% of institutions considering a provider.**

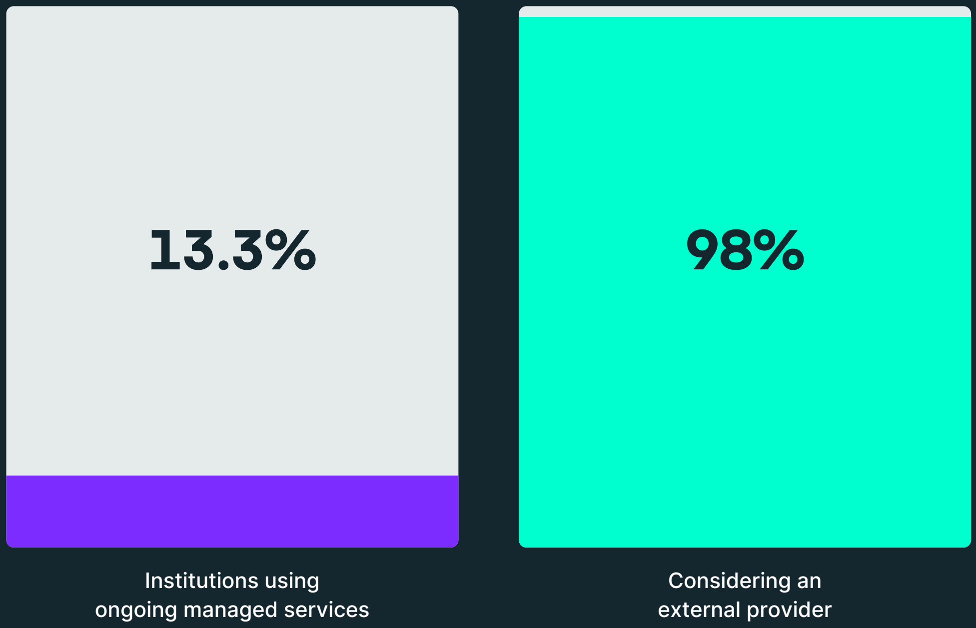
The relationship between external support and compliance performance should be interpreted as an association rather than evidence of causation. Institutions with stronger governance, greater resources, or more established compliance practices may be more likely to engage external providers, external providers may contribute to stronger operational performance, or both may be true. Regardless of the direction of that relationship, the findings suggest that external support is one component of a broader compliance operating model that also depends on strong governance, adequate resources, appropriate technology, and clearly defined internal ownership.

**Figure 13**

### Ongoing Managed Services Are Associated With Dramatically Less Reliance on Manual Compliance Work

Only 13.3% of institutions using ongoing managed services report that at least half of their compliance process is manual—compared with 98% of institutions considering an external provider.

*% with at least half of their compliance process manual*




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

SECTION 5

# The Path to a More Sustainable Compliance Model

Institutions are open to support, but they expect expertise, modern technology, transparency, and a clear path to value.

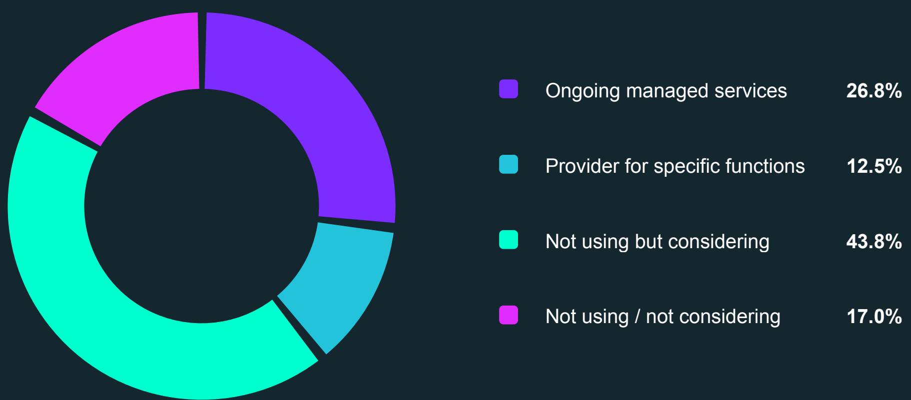
## Institutions Are Actively Evaluating External Compliance Support

External compliance support is becoming an increasingly important consideration for institutions. **39.3% of respondents currently use an external provider, including 26.8% using ongoing managed services and 12.5% engaging providers for specific functions. Another 43.8% of all respondents do not currently use an external provider but are considering one.**

The reasons respondents cite for not using an external provider are primarily practical rather than philosophical. Very few respondents prefer to keep compliance entirely in-house (3.6%), and fewer than 1% cite trust or control concerns. Instead, cost and identifying the right provider remain the most significant barriers to adoption.

**Figure 14**

### Current use of external compliance providers



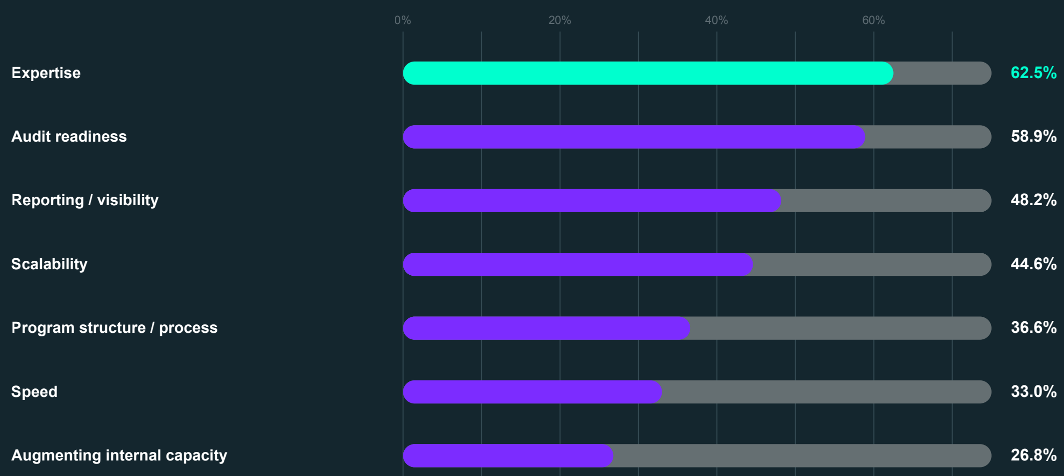

Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

## Institutions Expect Both Expertise and A Modern Delivery Model

Institutions place the greatest value on providers that bring specialized expertise and strengthen audit readiness. **Nearly two-thirds of respondents (62.5%) identified expertise as one of the most valuable benefits an external provider can offer, while 58.9% cited improved audit readiness.** Reporting and visibility, scalability, program structure, speed of execution, and additional team capacity also ranked highly. The priorities extend beyond completing compliance work. Institutions are looking for partners that can help strengthen compliance programs, execute efficiently, and demonstrate measurable progress.

**Figure 15**

**Where institutions see the greatest value from external providers**




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112. Multi-select question.

Technology is an equally important part of that expectation. **More than three-quarters of respondents (75.9%) say a provider's technology stack is very important or critical when evaluating external support**, while only 5.4% consider it not important or only slightly important.

**75.9%**

**consider a provider's technology stack very important or critical**

A provider's technology stack shapes how institutions experience the relationship—from tracking progress and accessing evidence to collaborating with internal teams and demonstrating program value. As institutions evaluate external support, they increasingly expect providers to combine deep compliance expertise with technology that improves visibility, supports collaboration, and enables more effective program management.

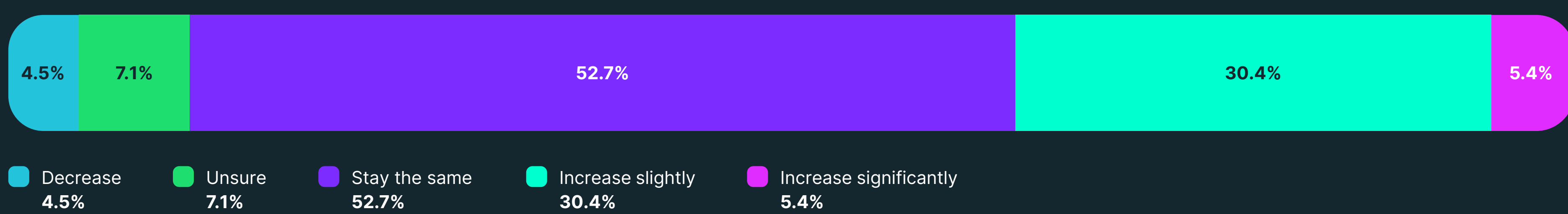
## The Future Of Compliance Depends On Doing More With Existing Resources

Institutions recognize the need to strengthen their compliance programs, but most do not expect significant increases in funding to support that work. **More than half of respondents (52.7%) expect compliance-related budgets to remain unchanged over the next 12 to 24 months, while another 30.4% anticipate only slight increases. Just 5.4% expect significant budget growth.**

At the same time, institutions recognize that compliance gaps can have far-reaching organizational consequences. **Respondents most frequently associate compliance gaps with reputational damage (44.6%), audit findings (42.9%), and operational inefficiencies (38.4%)**, with many also identifying security incidents, funding loss, and limited executive visibility as meaningful concerns.

**Figure 16**

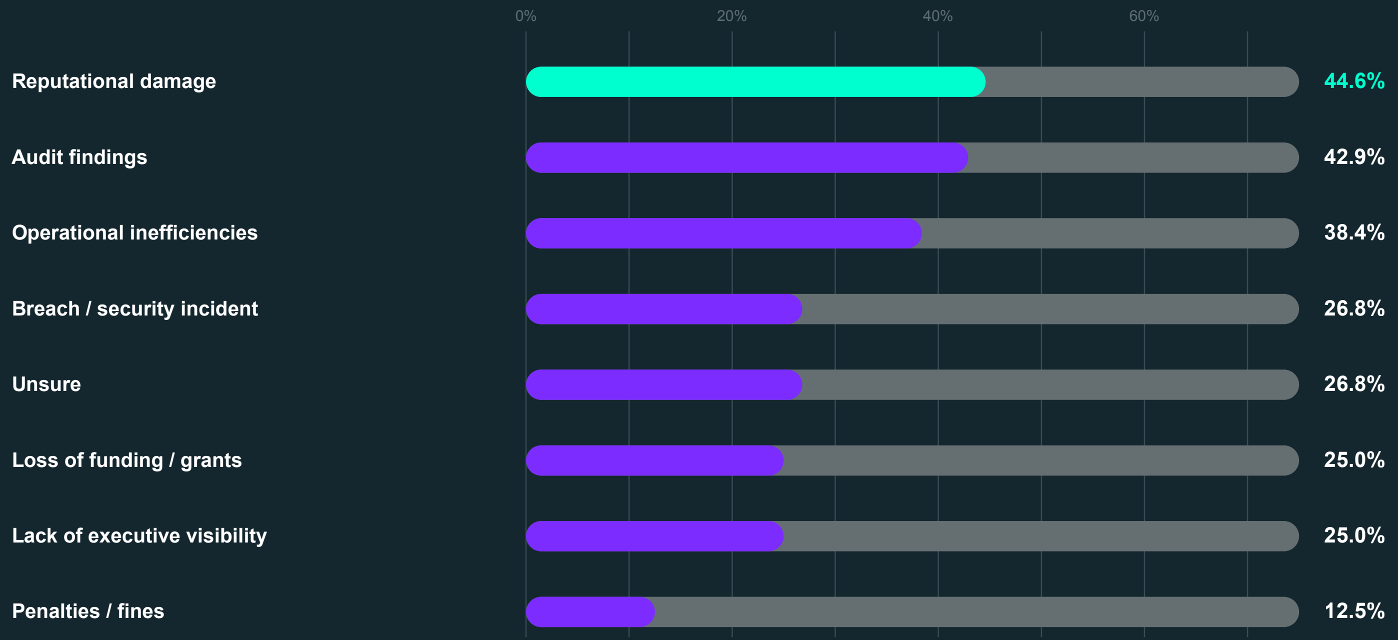
**Expected compliance budget change over the next 12—24 months**




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

Figure 17

Risks institutions associate with compliance gaps



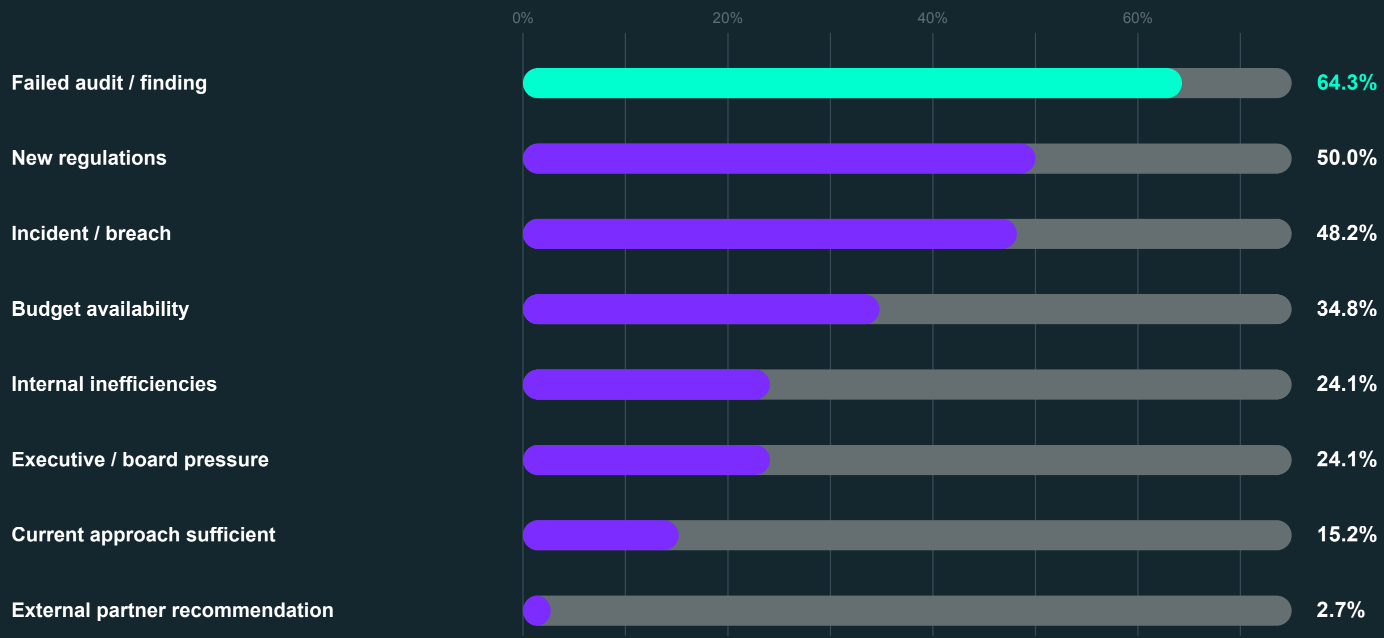

Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112. Multi-select question.

Despite recognizing these risks, meaningful changes to compliance programs are still most often triggered by external events rather than proactive planning. **Failed audits or major findings (64.3%), new regulatory requirements (50.0%), and security incidents (48.2%) are the leading catalysts for changing compliance approaches.**

This creates a difficult dynamic for institutions: compliance programs are expected to manage growing regulatory and operational risks even as budgets remain relatively constrained. Rather than relying on significant new investment, institutions may need to focus on making existing resources more effective and building greater readiness before an audit, regulatory change, or security incident forces action.

**Figure 18**

**Events most likely to drive a significant change in compliance approach**




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112. Multi-select question.

The challenge facing higher education is clear. Institutions recognize the growing importance of effective compliance programs and the risks of falling behind, yet few expect meaningful increases in available resources. As expectations continue to rise, future progress will depend less on expanding resources and more on strengthening governance, improving visibility, reducing administrative burden, and making better use of the people, processes, and technology already in place.

SECTION 6

# Recommended Actions for Higher Education Leaders

Seven practical steps can help institutions move from fragmented and reactive compliance toward a more sustainable model.

## Building A More Sustainable Compliance Program

**1. Establish clear ownership and accountability**
Define who owns institutional compliance strategy, which departments execute specific activities, how gaps are escalated, and how evidence and decisions are governed. Distributed execution can work, but only with shared standards and visibility.

**2. Build around common controls, not isolated frameworks**
Map overlapping requirements to a common control structure. Reusing controls, evidence, ownership, and remediation activities reduces duplication and makes new requirements easier to absorb.

**3. Reduce the highest-friction manual work first**
Prioritize evidence requests, control tracking, documentation maintenance, framework mapping, reporting, and task follow-up. Focus automation where it reduces repetitive work and improves consistency, allowing compliance teams to focus on analysis, governance, and informed decision-making.

**4. Move from audit preparation to continuous readiness**
Establish recurring processes to update evidence, review controls, track remediation, validate ownership, and report progress throughout the year. Audit readiness should become an outcome of normal operations rather than a temporary project.

**5. Improve executive visibility**
Create reporting that communicates current posture, top gaps, progress over time, major risks, resource needs, and institutional impact. Connect compliance to reputation, funding, resilience, and security, not only audit status.

**6. Evaluate providers based on long-term value**
Choose partners that demonstrate relevant higher education expertise, provide clear visibility into progress, and deliver measurable outcomes. The right partner should strengthen the institution's operating model, not create another silo.

**7. Build a compliance model that scales**
Design compliance programs that can adapt to growing demands without relying on proportional increases in budget or staffing. Strengthen governance, simplify processes, and make better use of existing people, technology, and external expertise to support long-term sustainability.

## Conclusion

### Higher Education Needs a More Connected Compliance Model

Compliance complexity in higher education is structural and unlikely to decline. Institutions will continue to manage overlapping security, privacy, financial, research, and education-specific obligations across decentralized environments. The question is no longer whether compliance requirements will increase, but whether institutional operating models can keep pace without turning compliance into a recurring administrative burden.

The 2026 survey shows that many institutions are not there yet. Spreadsheets remain the primary system of record. Manual work continues to consume valuable staff time. Ownership is often decentralized or unclear. Audit preparation remains reactive, and many institutions struggle to communicate their compliance posture or progress with confidence. At the same time, the survey points to an opportunity for institutions to evolve these approaches by strengthening governance, reducing administrative burden, improving visibility, and making compliance a more continuous part of institutional risk management.

The survey also makes clear that institutions with more mature compliance programs share several common characteristics. Clearer ownership, more standardized processes, better visibility, and stronger operating models are consistently associated with less manual work, less duplication, stronger audit readiness, and greater confidence. External support can be one component of that model, alongside effective governance, processes, technology, and internal ownership.

No single tool, consultant, or policy can solve every compliance challenge. The institutions best positioned for the future will be those that build connected compliance programs—bringing together governance, people, processes, technology, and external expertise into a sustainable operating model.
As expectations continue to grow and resources remain constrained, long-term success will depend not on doing more compliance work, but on building a program that is coordinated, scalable, and resilient.

**The opportunity**

**Move compliance from fragmented and reactive to connected, visible, and continuous**

## Putting the Findings into Practice

### Expertise For Higher Education. Technology For Continuous Compliance

The findings in this report consistently point to a common theme: institutions with stronger compliance outcomes combine effective governance, clearly defined ownership, repeatable processes, and greater visibility across their compliance programs. Achieving that level of maturity often requires both higher education-specific expertise and the tools to manage compliance in a coordinated, sustainable way.

CampusGuard helps institutions interpret requirements, assess current programs, and develop practical compliance strategies tailored to higher education. Apptega provides a centralized platform to manage compliance activities, documentation, reporting, and ongoing program visibility. Together, they support institutions seeking a more connected and sustainable approach to compliance management.

CAMPUSGUARD®

**Higher Education Compliance Expertise & Services**

IT Security & Compliance Assessments
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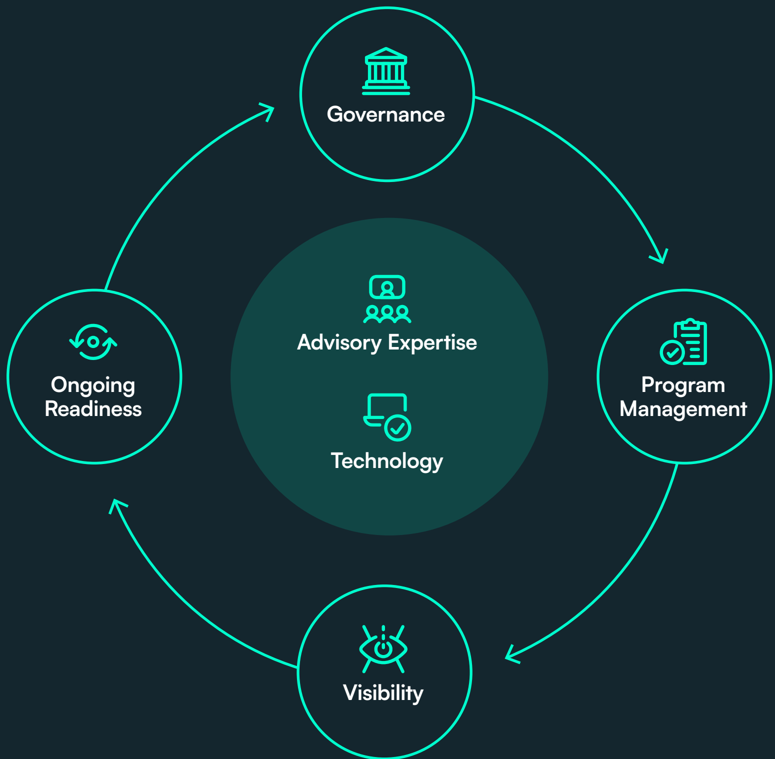
Client-Side Web Security
Incident Response & Tabletop Exercises

Apptega

**Compliance Technology & Program Management**

Centralized Compliance Management
Program & Workflow Management
Evidence & Documentation Management
AI-Powered Insights & Automation
Reporting & Program Visibility
Continuous Compliance Oversight

## A connected compliance model




The research throughout this report reinforces that sustainable compliance depends on more than any single policy, technology platform, or advisory engagement. It requires a coordinated operating model that brings together expertise, governance, repeatable processes, and visibility. CampusGuard and Apptega work together to help institutions build that foundation while supporting compliance efforts as programs mature and requirements continue to evolve.

"Too often, compliance becomes something institutions scramble to address when a deadline approaches. The real opportunity is building a program that's ready every day, not just when an audit is around the corner."

— CEO, Higher Education Cybersecurity & Compliance Provider

### Continue The Conversation

If your institution is evaluating ways to reduce administrative burden, strengthen governance, improve visibility, or build a more sustainable compliance program, we'd welcome the opportunity to discuss how CampusGuard and Apptega support institutions at every stage of their compliance journey.

**Book a Consult**

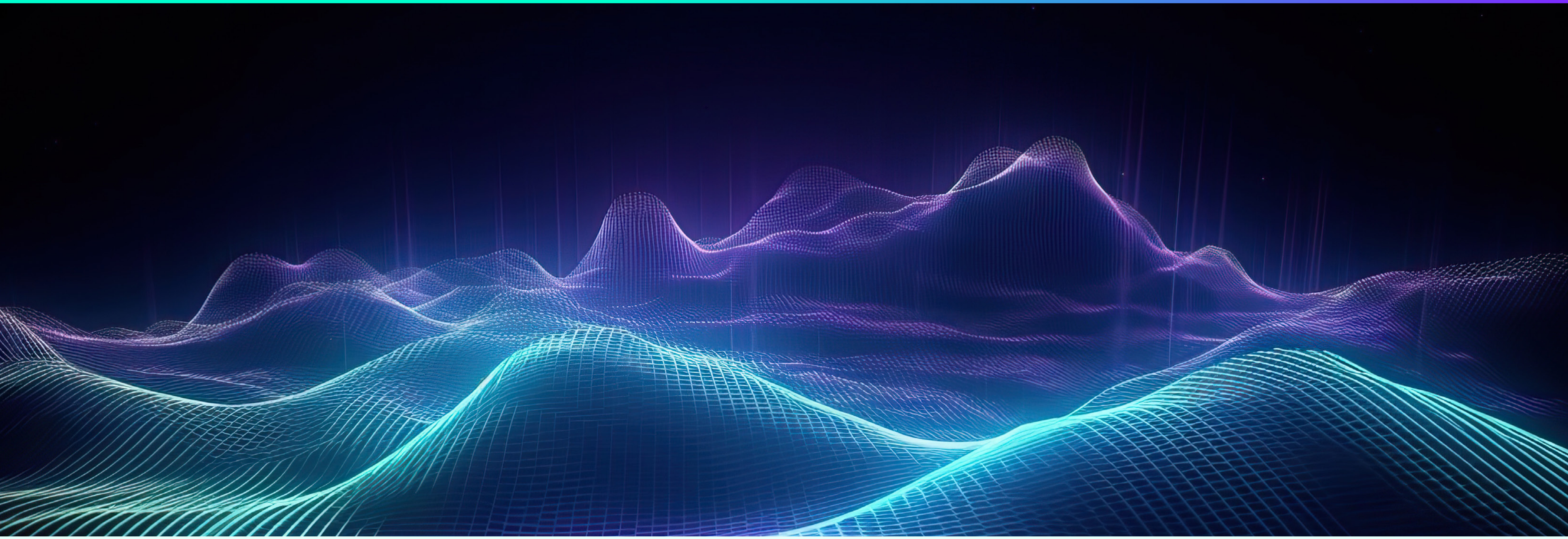
METHODOLOGY

# Methodology and Respondent Demographics

The 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education report is based on an anonymous survey of 112 leaders and practitioners at U.S.-based higher education institutions. The survey examined institutional characteristics and compliance practices, including governance, technology, service-provider usage, process maturity, audit readiness, business impact, and future priorities.

The research is intended to provide a directional benchmark and a snapshot of the survey sample. It is not intended to be conclusive or statistically representative of every higher education institution. All respondents are based in the United States, and large public universities represent half of the sample. Community colleges account for 4 responses, so their results should not be treated as a reliable standalone benchmark.

Cross-tab findings are presented as associations rather than causal conclusions. Institution size, ownership structure, technology maturity, compliance delivery model, and provider usage overlap within the sample. Multi-select questions are labeled because percentages may exceed 100%. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

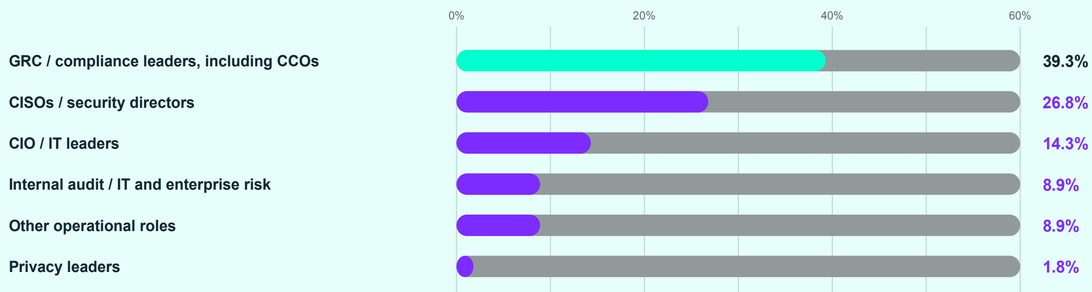


## Respondent Roles

The sample is strongly aligned with the intended audience. GRC and compliance leaders, including chief compliance officers, represent 39.3% of respondents. CISOs and security directors represent 26.8%, CIO and IT leaders represent 14.3%, internal audit and IT/enterprise risk leaders represent 8.9%, privacy leaders represent 1.8%, and other operational roles represent 8.9%.

**Figure 19**

### Respondents by role



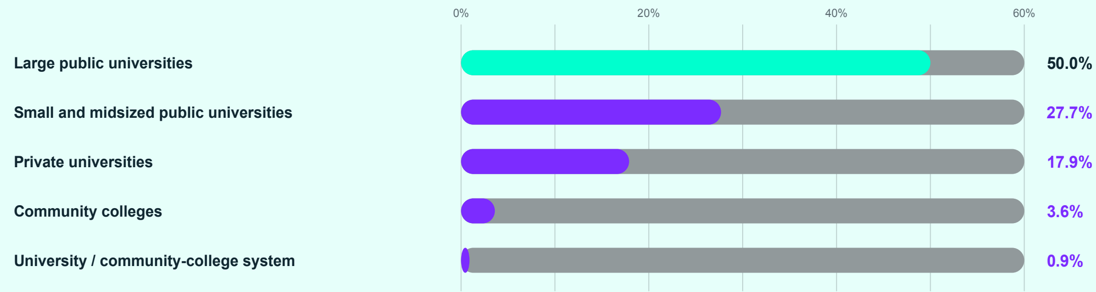

Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

## Institution Type

Half of respondents represent large public universities. Small and midsized public universities account for 27.7%, private universities 17.9%, community colleges 3.6%, and a university/community-college system 0.9%.

**Figure 20**

### Respondents by institution type



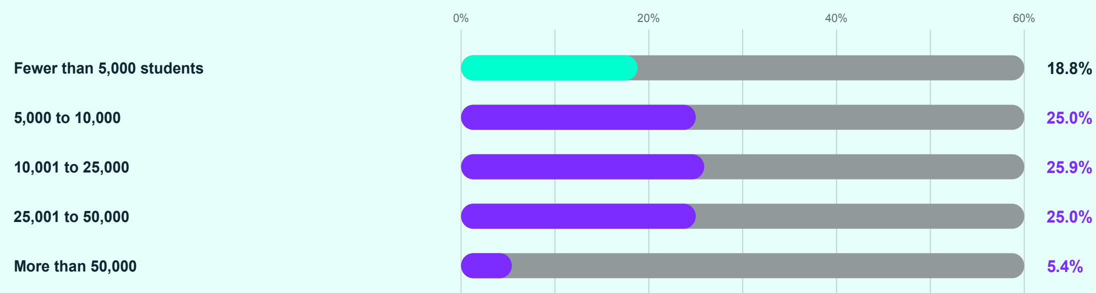

Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

## Enrollment

The sample spans a broad range of institution sizes: 18.8% enroll fewer than 5,000 students, 25% enroll 5,000 to 10,000, 25.9% enroll 10,001 to 25,000, 25% enroll 25,001 to 50,000, and 5.4% enroll more than 50,000.

**Figure 21**

### Respondents by student enrollment




Source: Apptega x CampusGuard 2026 State of Compliance in Higher Education survey; n=112.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH SPONSORS

## Apptega

Apptega is the end-to-end cybersecurity compliance platform that security-focused IT providers and in-house teams use to build, manage, and mature Managed Risk, Security and Compliance programs simply, quickly and affordably. A perennial G2 leader across various risk management categories, Apptega's solutions are trusted by hundreds of MSSPs, MDR companies and security-focused MSPs that are growing lucrative security and compliance practices, creating stickier customer relationships and winning more business from competitors.

To learn more, visit apptega.com

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## CampusGuard

CampusGuard is a leading provider of cybersecurity and compliance consulting and managed security services for higher education, healthcare, state and local government, fintech, and other industries. Since 2009, CampusGuard has helped organizations strengthen security, manage compliance, reduce risk, and protect sensitive data through strategic advisory, assessments, and ongoing program support.

To learn more, visit campusguard.com

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