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Agents of transformation

Reimagining higher education with agentic AI

MAKING AN IMPACT THAT MATTERS since 1845

This is higher education's defining moment

Picture a university where every learner receives individualized guidance and boundless opportunity—where staff reclaim their time for true innovation and campuses rise above administrative gridlock. What once seemed aspirational is now within reach. They key? Agentic AI: autonomous, adaptable digital agents capable of driving real-world change far beyond today's automation.

Higher education stands not at a mere crossroads, but at a historic inflection point. Enrollment pressures, financial stress, and the rise of agile competitors demand not just efficiency, but reinvention. Incremental improvements can't meet the scale of today's challenge. The pace of technological and social change requires bold action—rethinking how institutions serve, support, and lead.

Agentic AI is already reshaping classrooms, advising centers, and back offices across the country. Institutions willing to pilot, learn, and grow with these technologies are redefining their missions—and unlocking performance at scales once unimaginable.

But make no mistake: transformation starts locally. Tight budgets, aging systems, and competing priorities demand practical, phased adoption. It's not about leaping blindly; it's about targeted, high-impact pilots—like automating transcript evaluation or supercharging student support. Even modest steps can build expertise, demonstrate value, and spark campus-wide momentum. Each move needs to be intentional, ethical, and aligned with stakeholder vision.

Yet the stakes couldn't be higher. Institutions that hesitate risk falling behind emerging student needs and losing ground to more adaptive rivals. Agentic AI can do more than just enhance routines—it can set new standards for leadership, relevance, and inclusive education.

This paper offers a field guide for action. We break down what agentic AI is—and is not. We chart the opportunities, risks, and first steps to help you shape, not just survive, higher education's AI-powered future.

Is your institution ready to lead the next era in education? The journey starts with understanding what makes agentic AI different—and why your choices now may define your institution for years to come.

Did you know that 86% of higher education IT leaders cite data privacy concerns as the single biggest barrier to deploying AI solutions on campus?[1]

What is agentic AI?

What does "agentic" mean in AI?

"Agentic AI" isn't just about creating digital agents or bots. The 'agentic' quality refers to AI systems that possess real agency: they can **act, respond, and interact independently** within defined boundaries, making decisions and initiating tasks without constant human instruction. It's the difference between having a tool that waits for a command and having an AI that senses, reasons, initiates, and adapts on its own. Agentic AI goes beyond automation—it is about intelligence with initiative, capable of collaborating, learning, and proactively driving outcomes in complex environments.

In other words, agentic AI stands out because it goes beyond passively processing instructions:

- **It takes initiative:** Acting on insights, not just waiting for explicit prompts.
- **It adapts:** Responding fluidly to changes in data, environment, or user intent.
- **It interacts:** Engaging in meaningful, ongoing dialogue with people and systems, rather than executing one-off commands.

Think of agentic AI as the difference between a helpful assistant who waits for instructions and tasks versus a trusted advisor who anticipates your needs, learns your preferences, and takes initiative to help solve emerging challenges.

How agentic AI differs from generative AI

Many people are familiar with generative AI—tools that can create content on request. These are reactive: They wait for a prompt, then generate a response. Agentic AI, by contrast, is proactive. It continuously monitors data, sets internal goals, and coordinates actions across platforms.[2]

For example:

- **Generative AI:** drafts a lesson plan when asked
- **Agentic AI:** detects disengagement in a class, recommends tweaks the curriculum, prompts students with tailored outreach, and organizes office hours automatically.

Agentic AI vs. generative AI

	Generative AI	Agentic AI
Role	Creative responder that produces content on request	Proactive collaborator that sets goals and takes action
Behavior	Waits for user prompts and instructions	Monitors, anticipates, and adapts without explicit input
Example task	Writes an essay or answers a question when asked	Detects student challenges, customizes outreach, schedules help
Initiative	Reactive and only acts when triggered	Proactive and acts independently to achieve objectives
Scope	Generates content	Coordinates actions across people, processes, and systems
Impact	Boosts productivity	Drives large-scale change across workflows and outcomes

Why this matters for learning

Neuroscience teaches us that learning thrives on *timely feedback,*[3] *adaptive support,*[4] and *personalized challenges.*[5] Agentic AI makes this possible at scale, tailoring interventions to each learner's unique journey. A struggling calculus student could receive targeted exercises, connect with tutors, and track improvement—all orchestrated by AI, mirroring the individualized support that helps boost mastery.

Beyond the classroom

Agentic AI's reach extends far beyond academics, reshaping the operational backbone of higher education. Imagine campus systems that don't just automate repetitive tasks—they actively hunt for problems and opportunities. For example, agentic AI might scan enrollment data, predict which students are at risk of dropping out, and automatically trigger a coordinated, personalized outreach from advisors and financial aid teams. As resource allocation fluctuates throughout the semester, the AI can propose real-time adjustments—bringing support where it is needed most.

This isn't simply efficiency. By automating routine communications and managing logistics across departments, agentic AI liberates faculty and staff to focus on innovation, mentorship, and strategic planning. The result: a culture that rewards creativity, responds rapidly to new demands, and positions your institution at the forefront of student success and organizational agility.

What's needed for success

Unlocking the true potential of agentic AI is less about acquiring shiny new tools, and more about building readiness from the ground up. Ask yourself:

- Do you have clean, structured and accessible data?
- Is there a governance committee meeting regularly and tracking progress?
- Have you identified a cross-functional champion—maybe in IT, advisement, or the registrar's office—to lead a first pilot project?

Institutions with agile leadership, an appetite for experimentation, and a culture of continuous improvement will likely move fastest.[6] However, the path is open to all: campuses that shore up data quality, enhance security, and make change management a priority can quickly start to see measurable impact. Even a well-scoped, targeted pilot can deliver measurable improvements in both administrative efficiency and student experience—even before the next admissions cycle.[7]

Acknowledging risks and tradeoffs

Bold transformation with agentic AI, as with any transformation, comes with its own set of risks. Poorly defined projects can squander resources and dampen enthusiasm. Weak governance may open the door to ethical lapses, cybersecurity threats, or misuse of sensitive data. Overreliance on automation can unintentionally marginalize human judgment,[8] edging out the valuable insights from faculty staff and students.

It is important to address these risks head-on. Develop clear policies, maintain transparent communication, and design broad processes that put ethics and equity at the forefront. Make space for human oversight, feedback, and adjustments in every AI initiative.

Tradeoffs are inevitable. Scaling agentic AI often calls for reallocating budgets, retraining staff, or even reengineering legacy systems. These decisions should be deliberate: shaped by diverse stakeholder input and guided by the institution's long-term vision. By navigating these challenges thoughtfully, campuses can lay the groundwork for innovation that is not only transformative, but sustainable and responsible.

Practical risk mitigation checklist for agentic AI

Before you begin:
This checklist draws inspiration from the NIST AI Risk Management Framework (AI RMF), a widely recognized standard for identifying, managing, and mitigating AI-related risks.[9] Adapting these principles to agentic AI can help you craft an approach that is aligned with industry leading practices for trustworthy, ethical, and robust deployment.

1. Establish clear governance
   - ☐ Define roles and responsibilities for AI oversight.
   - ☐ Set up an interdisciplinary steering committee (faculty, IT, legal, student reps).
   - ☐ Develop and regularly update AI policies and ethical guidelines.
2. Conduct risk assessments
   - ☐ Identify potential risks (ethical, operational, reputational, data privacy).
   - ☐ Map risks to specific use cases and stakeholder groups.
   - ☐ Prioritize risks based on likelihood and impact.
3. Ensure data quality and security
   - ☐ Audit data sources for accuracy, completeness, and lack of bias.
   - ☐ Implement robust data privacy and cybersecurity protocols.
   - ☐ Limit access to sensitive data and monitor for misuse.
4. Design for transparency and explainability
   - ☐ Require documentation of AI decision-making processes.
   - ☐ Provide clear communication to stakeholders about how AI systems work.
   - ☐ Enable users to question or appeal AI-driven decisions.
5. Pilot thoughtfully and iterate
   - ☐ Start with small, well-defined pilot projects.
   - ☐ Involve diverse stakeholders in pilot design and evaluation.
   - ☐ Collect feedback and refine systems before scaling.
6. Invest in training and change management
   - ☐ Provide staff and faculty with training on AI capabilities, limitations, and ethical use.
   - ☐ Offer ongoing support and resources for adapting to new workflows.
   - ☐ Foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement.
7. Monitor and evaluate continuously
   - ☐ Set up ongoing monitoring for unintended consequences or system drift.
   - ☐ Regularly review outcomes for equity, effectiveness, and alignment with institutional values.
   - ☐ Adjust policies and practices based on evaluation findings.
8. Engage stakeholders early and often
   - ☐ Involve students, faculty, and staff in decision-making from the outset.
   - ☐ Communicate openly about goals, risks, and progress.
   - ☐ Solicit feedback and address concerns proactively.

Agentic in action

Agentic AI doesn't just modernize campus operations—it becomes a catalyst for institutional growth. Early pilots and inevitable obstacles can be viewed as opportunities: as colleges and universities learn from initial setbacks, they develop the resilience and know-how required to innovate responsibly and adapt to future change. Investing thoughtfully today—anchored by strong ethics and a culture of ongoing learning—can help unlock meaningful advantages for students, educators, and the institution itself. In doing so, universities have a distinct opportunity to shape the direction of technological progress—designing tools that serve humanity's highest values rather than simply following paths set by others.

Agentic AI isn't just future talk—it's here now.

These systems are already helping campuses personalize learning journeys, streamline day-to-day operations, and accelerate new discoveries in research. And they do all this despite the familiar constraints: legacy systems, tight budgets, and ever-rising student expectations.

For students, agentic AI can finally overcome the fragmented experience caused by siloed edtech tools and disjointed campus systems. Instead of juggling portals and chasing down answers, learners experience clarity and confident support throughout their journey.

What comes next

The journey doesn't stop at vision and readiness. Agentic AI is ready to deliver real and measurable improvements across campus—especially in administration and, increasingly, in research. The following sections spotlight how universities can move past hype to harness agentic AI for operational and strategic advantage.

Today's learners often navigate a fragmented landscape of edtech tools and campus systems.

Current state
Today, a student must log into multiple systems to register for classes, apply for financial aid, and find housing. This fragmented approach can lead to confusion, frustration, and inefficiencies.

Future state
With agentic AI, a single interface guides the student through all steps, proactively answering questions and completing tasks. Imagine a student seamlessly navigating administrative queries, financial aid questions, and campus navigation through one unified interface.

This unified experience is possible today. For students, this means increased clarity and confidence. For institutions, it means augmented productivity, improved satisfaction, and a stronger foundation for long-term engagement.

To illustrate the transformative potential of agentic AI in higher education, consider **Zora AI™—*Deloitte's next-generation agentic platform.*** Imagine a CFO at a university leveraging Zora AI to streamline their finance operations. Instead of juggling multiple systems for procurement and subscriptions, they interact with a single intelligent agent. This not only simplifies workflows but also enables the CFO to gain proactive insights into key areas like expense management and profitability. With Zora automating routine tasks such as invoice processing and cash application, the CFO can focus on driving strategic initiatives and making informed, timely decisions. To learn more about Zora and its capabilities, **visit our Zora page**.

Administration: transforming campus operations

In an era of budget constraints and heightened expectations for service, administrative leaders are being asked to do more with less. Agentic AI isn't just about incremental gains—it provides a launchpad for reimagining the essential functions of higher education administration.[10] By automating repetitive processes and surfacing actionable insights, it frees staff to focus on high-impact priorities and, most importantly, student success.

Fast, measurable wins

1. ***Predictive analytics for enrollment & retention***
   - **Example:** Deploy agentic AI to analyze student data and forecast enrollment trends, identify at-risk students, and trigger timely outreach. Solutions like *Deloitte's Candidate360™* integrate institutional and proprietary data for targeted interventions.
   - **Impact:** Stabilizes tuition revenue and improves retention rates, measurable by reduced attrition and more accurate enrollment projections.
2. ***Student support bots***
   - **Example:** Implement a 24/7 AI advisor that consolidates administrative queries across all campus systems—covering financial aid, registration, and campus navigation. This is happening on campuses already: Georgia Southern University's agent GUS , for example, streamlines engagement and simplifies the student experience.[11]
   - **Impact:** Reduces response times and improves student satisfaction, tracked by helpdesk metrics and student feedback.
3. ***Automated financial aid assistance***
   - **Example:** Agentic AI automates routine financial aid tasks and analyzes each student's financial situation. It also provides tailored advice on available scholarships, grants, and loans in addition to offering real-time support for common queries.

- **Impact:** Frees up staff for complex cases while assisting more students in bridging the financial gap, measurable by reduced processing times and improved student satisfaction.

Challenging, high-impact innovations

1. **Resource optimization**
   - **Example:** Autonomous systems analyze historical and real-time data to optimize classroom scheduling, facility usage, and budget allocation—adapting plans as needs change.
   - **Impact:** Enhances resource utilization and augments productivity, tracked by efficiency metrics and cost savings.
2. **Integrated student journey management**
   - **Example:** Agentic AI creates a unified view of each student's administrative journey, proactively identifying barriers (e.g., registration holds, financial aid gaps) and coordinating interventions across departments.
   - **Impact:** Improves student progression and reduces administrative friction, measurable through faster issue resolution and higher persistence rates.
3. **Bias mitigation in decision-making**
   - **Example:** AI-driven standardization of financial aid and admissions processes, using data-driven algorithms to minimize human bias and strive toward fair outcomes for all students.
   - **Impact:** Promotes fairness and transparency, tracked by audit results and demographic outcome analysis.

Agentic AI is fundamentally reshaping higher education administration: streamlining daily operations; strengthening student support; and enabling data-driven, agile decision-making. These tools allow institutions to do more with less, freeing staff to focus on more strategic initiatives and creative problem-solving. As administrative functions become more adaptable and responsive, the benefits ripple across the entire campus ecosystem.[12]

With the foundations of administrative transformation in place, the next frontier is research, where agentic AI is unlocking new possibilities for discovery, collaboration, and impact.

Research: elevating discovery and impact with agentic AI

Research remains at the heart of a university's reputation, funding, and societal contribution. Imagine this: It's 11:45 a.m. and you type a breakthrough idea into an agentic research assistant. By noon, that AI bot has:

- **Scanned 40,000+ journal articles** to identify the precise scholarly gap your idea could fill.
- **Identified three open grant opportunities** that match your research focus and compliance profile.
- **Curated an annotated reading list,** and flagged both internal and external international collaborators with complementary data for partnership.

This is the new reality of agentic AI—an always-on collaborator that turns flashes of inspiration into actionable next steps, often within the time it takes to brew your next cup of coffee.

Why it matters now

Today's faculty are under pressure to publish, secure funding, and demonstrate societal relevance. Agentic AI can help ease these burdens by:

- **Accelerating discovery** (automating literature scans, citations, and exploratory analysis)
- **Matching proposals with funders** (scanning compliance and strategic fit)
- **Connecting research with real-world outcomes** (simplifying impact reporting for grants and public engagement)

Ultimately, agentic AI empowers institutions tell a more compelling story about the value, reach, and impact of their research, resonating with funders, policymakers, and the public.

Fast, measurable wins

1. **Tireless research assistant**
   - **Example:** Agentic AI automates labor-intensive tasks such as literature reviews, citation management, and drafting preliminary findings, freeing researchers to focus on analysis and innovation.
   - **Impact:** Accelerates research cycles and increases productivity, measurable by reduced time-to-publication and higher output per researcher.
2. **Automated compliance and grant management**
   - **Example:** AI agents monitor regulatory changes, flag compliance risks, and assist with grant application processes—facilitating submissions that are timely and complete.

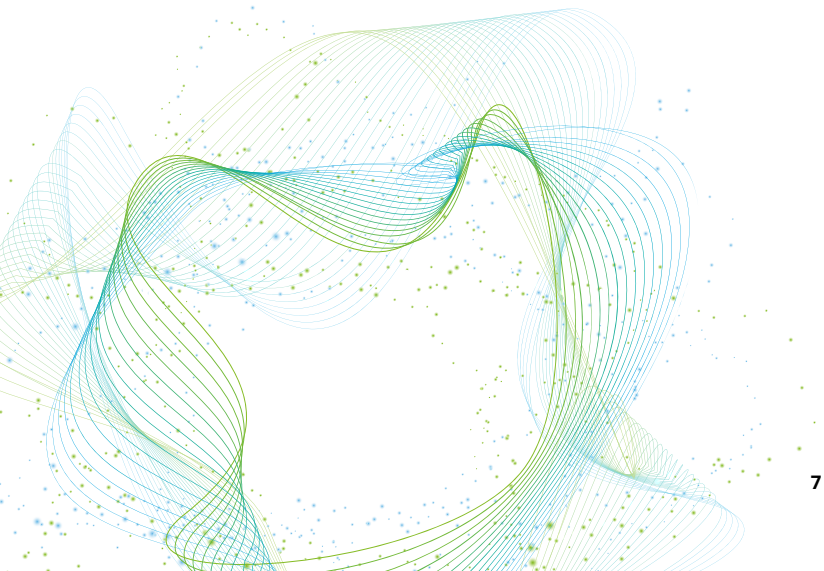
- **Impact:** Reduces administrative burden and improves grant success rates, tracked by compliance metrics and grant funding outcomes.

3. **Enhanced collaboration tools**
   - **Example:** Agentic AI identifies potential collaborators within and beyond the institution by analyzing publication records, expertise, and ongoing projects.
   - **Impact:** Fosters interdisciplinary research and expands collaboration networks, measurable by increased co-authored publications and joint grant applications.

Challenging, high-impact innovations

1. **Simulation and scenario modeling**
   - **Example**: Autonomous agents run complex simulations to support hypothesis testing, scenario planning, and impact modeling for strategic decisions (e.g., launching new research centers or pivoting focus areas).
   - **Impact:** Enables data-driven foresight and strategic agility, tracked by improved decision outcomes and successful new initiatives.
2. **Strategic research portfolio management**
   - **Example:** Agentic AI synthesizes insights from internal and external data to identify emerging trends, funding opportunities, and gaps in institutional expertise.
   - **Impact:** Optimizes research investments and enhances institutional competitiveness, measurable by portfolio growth and alignment with strategic priorities.
3. **Impact storytelling**
   - **Example:** AI systems connect research outputs to societal outcomes, helping institutions craft compelling narratives for funders, policymakers, and the public.
   - **Impact:** Strengthens reputation and funding prospects, tracked by engagement metrics and successful advocacy efforts.

By augmenting human expertise and bringing operational foresight, these systems help researchers navigate complexity and accelerate impact at every stage.



Practical incremental steps for agentic AI adoption

1. Assess institutional readiness
   - ☐ Conduct a needs assessment to identify pain points and opportunities.
   - ☐ Map existing technology infrastructure and data sources.
   - ☐ Gauge staff and stakeholder openness to AI-driven change.
2. Start with targeted pilots
   - ☐ Choose a specific area (e.g., admissions, advising, financial aid) for a small-scale agentic AI pilot.
   - ☐ Define clear objectives, success metrics, and boundaries for the pilot.
   - ☐ Involve end-users early to understand relevance and generate buy-in.
3. Build internal expertise
   - ☐ Offer training sessions and workshops for staff and faculty on agentic AI fundamentals.
   - ☐ Identify champions or a cross-functional team to lead adoption efforts.
   - ☐ Encourage knowledge sharing and lessons learned from pilot projects.
4. Focus on automation of routine tasks
   - ☐ Use agentic AI to automate repetitive, low-risk processes (e.g., scheduling, document routing, FAQ responses).
   - ☐ Monitor outcomes and gather feedback to refine workflows.
5. Ensure responsible use
   - ☐ Develop or update policies for ethical AI use, data privacy, and transparency using a tool such as Deloitte's Trustworthy AI™ framework.
   - ☐ Establish oversight mechanisms for monitoring AI performance and impact.
6. Measure and communicate impact
   - ☐ Track pilot results against defined metrics (e.g., time saved, error reduction, user satisfaction).
   - ☐ Share successes and challenges with stakeholders to build momentum and trust.
7. Iterate and scale gradually
   - ☐ Use insights from pilots to inform next steps and expand adoption to new areas.
   - ☐ Continuously refine processes based on feedback and evolving needs.
   - ☐ Plan for integration with broader institutional strategy as readiness

Key considerations for undertaking an agentic AI journey

The stories and outcomes described above are just the beginning. Every university has its own unique goals, pressures, and opportunities. Yet, one common thread unites all: the need to rethink how work gets done, how students are supported, and how decisions drive meaningful progress. The arrival of agentic AI challenges higher education leaders to envision new possibilities—not just in isolated pilots, but across the full university experience.

Agentic AI is not an off-the-shelf upgrade. Its true impact depends on a balanced approach across three dimensions: organization, technology, and culture.

1. **Organizational coordination: collaboration is key**
   - **Cross-functional teamwork:** IT, academic leaders, student services, and admin staff should jointly select and steward AI projects.
   - **Iterate and measure:** choose use cases that matter, track results , and adapt quickly based on feedback.
2. **Technical readiness: data as the foundation**
   - **Assess your data landscape:** where are your data sources? Who owns, manages, and validates them?
   - **Aim for accessible and trustworthy data:** perfection isn't required—but reliability and transparency are.
   - **Establish solid governance:** good data stewardship fosters both compliance and broad confidence in AI-powered systems.
3. **Cultural readiness: build understanding & trust**
   - **Proactively address concerns:** faculty and staff may worry about job impacts, academic integrity, or losing personal connections.
   - **Communicate with clarity:** share transparent examples of agentic AI delivering real value—for students, staff, and research.
   - **Foster open dialogue:** trust builds through ongoing, honest conversations, not just change management memos.

Big vision, collective action

Agentic AI delivers value when deeply woven into your broader strategy—whether modernizing operations, personalizing learning, or fueling new research frontiers. Treat it as a core driver of progress, not a side experiment or technical add-on.

Integrate agentic AI projects into your broader strategic plans, technology roadmaps, and student success metrics:

- Avoid duplicated efforts and silos.
- Maximize resource efficiency.
- Reinforce that AI is a purposeful tool for institutional growth, not a source of chaos or uncertainty.

Successful adoption is not merely about deploying the technology, but about empowering your entire community—students, faculty, staff—to shape new ways of learning, research, and decision-making. Begin with purpose, act together, and keep the vision aligned. That's the real journey.

In conclusion

The era of agentic AI in higher education is not a distant possibility—it's unfolding now, offering unprecedented opportunities to reimagine how students are supported, how institutions operate, and how innovation thrives across campuses. The central question is no longer if agentic AI will play a role, but how boldly and thoughtfully institutions will shape its integration.

Now is the moment for decisive action. Assemble convene cross-functional teams, launch ambitious pilots, and champion new standards for transparency, collaboration and ethical use. By leading from the front, your institution does more than simply adapt—you help define the possibilities for learning, partnership and leadership in this new age of AI.

The transformative journey begins with the decisions and commitments you make today. As agentic AI unfolds, those who act purposefully will set the direction—not just for their institution, but for the future of education itself.

Stay tuned for our upcoming paper, where we will dive deeper into the ideas and tangible impacts of agentic AI on the student experience—exploring how these technologies can empower learners, personalize support, and improve outcomes for students, educators and society at large.

Additional reading

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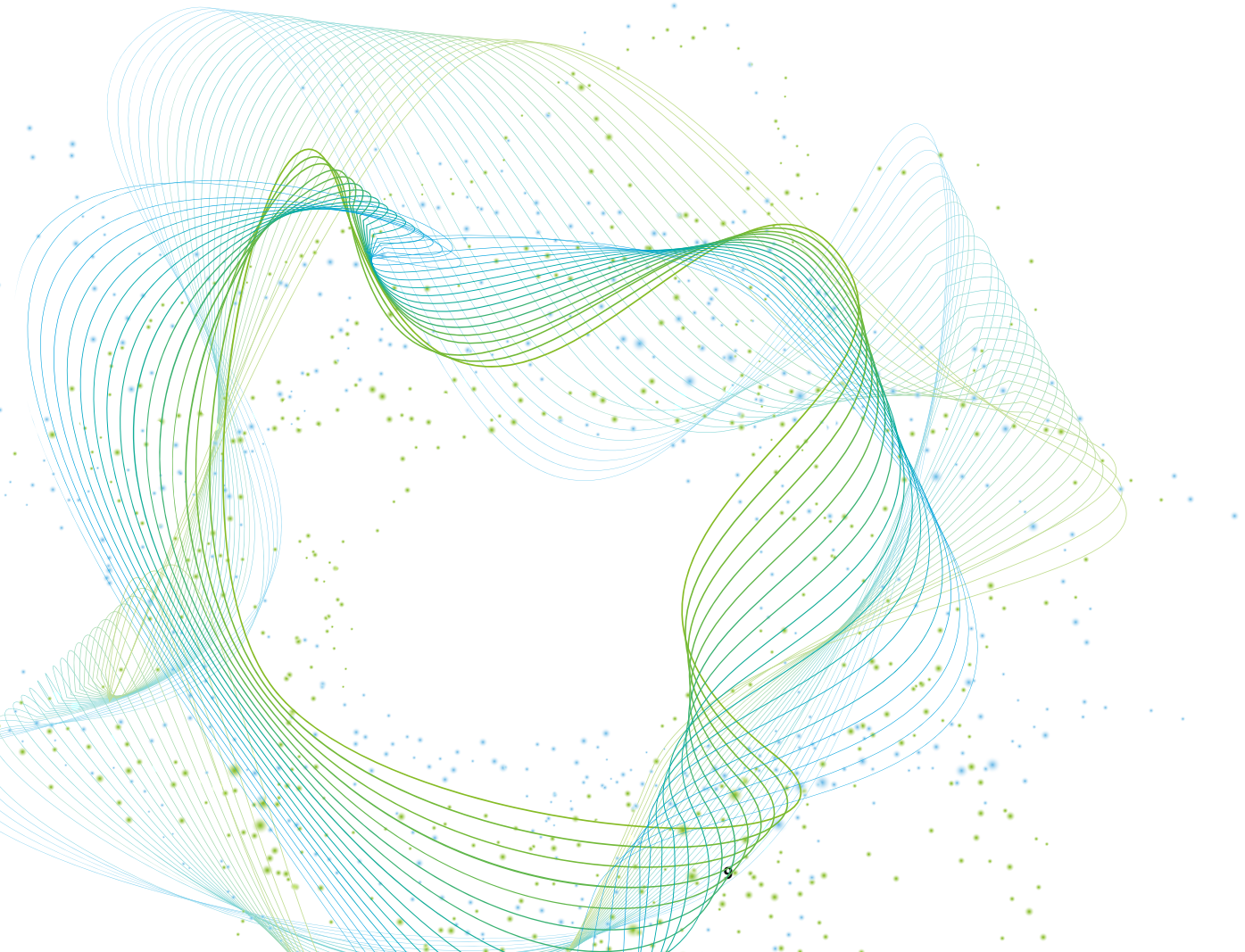

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