Higher Education Risk
Outlook 2026

The Edge That Experience Can't Buy Alone

Building Essential Skills for University Risk Managers and other Personnel

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CBMI 2026, Louisville, KY

AGENDA

1. Welcome and Introductions

2. Polling questions

3. Higher Education Outlook – 2026
    a. Global Risk Report
    b. Higher Education Risk Landscape
        i. Projections from 2025 and where we are in 20226
        ii. Key Risks & Key Actions

4. Building Essential Skills
    a. The Data
    b. Core Essential Skills
    c. Effective Communication, Emotional Intelligence, Adaptive Thinking & Collaborative Leadership

5. Summary / Recap / Q&A

Who Are You?

What is your role and what department are you with?

Yes

No

Do you feel risk impacts you every day?

Do not edit
How to change the design

What is the biggest risk you face in your position?

ⓘ The Slido app must be installed on every computer you're presenting from

slido

What is the biggest risk you see evolving on your campus?

What We'll Cover Today

PART ONE

Higher Education Risk Outlook 2026

The converging pressures shaping risk in 2026 — demographics, federal policy shifts, cybersecurity, athletics liability, and financial stress — through the eyes of your key stakeholders.

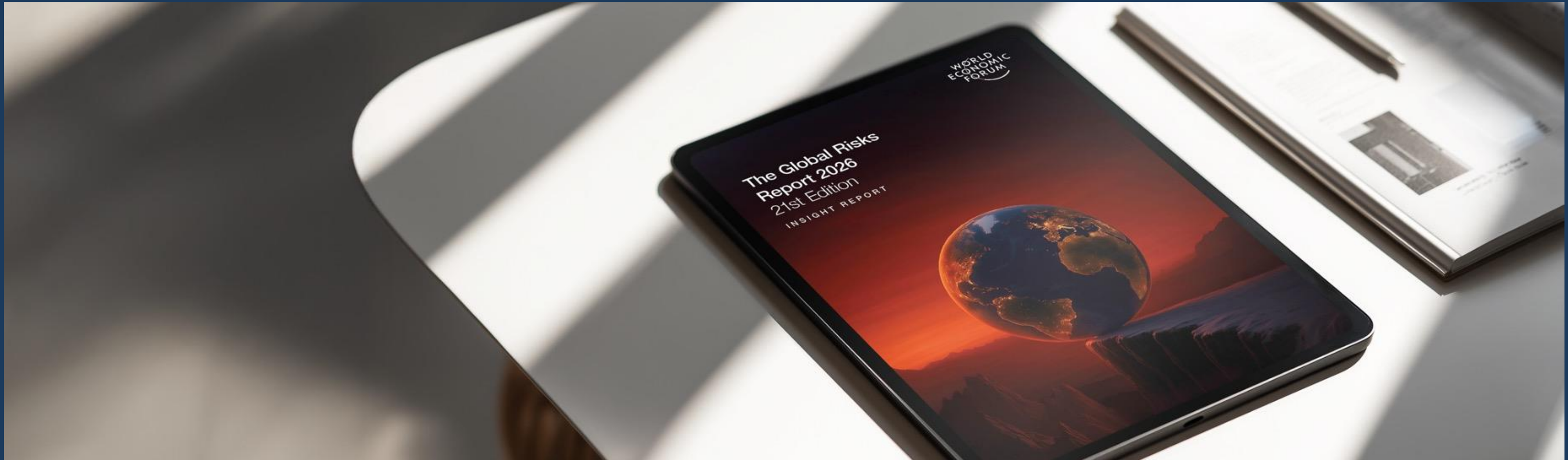
PART TWO

The Edge That Experience Can't Buy

The six essential skills that separate good risk managers from indispensable ones — and a practical roadmap for building them deliberately in your institution.

PART ONE · Global Risks Report 2026
Strategies for managing the new age of competition

Risk outlook for 2026 and beyond



Global Risks Report 2026

Overview: Content and context

1

An age of competition

- Geoeconomic confrontation
- State-based armed conflict
- Extreme weather events
- Societal polarization
- Misinformation and disinformation

2

Over the edge?

- Multipolarity without multilateralism
- Economic reckoning as debt rises and bubbles burst
- Values at war as polarization deepens
- Infrastructure at risk from age and climate factors
- AI impacts on labor markets, societies, and global security
- Quantum computing leaps and complacency

3

Coalitions of the willing

- Shared challenges still exist in a competitive world
- Collaboration on risk management approaches is essential

- 21st year of publication
- Rooted in a survey that tapped into 1,300 academic, business, government, and other experts worldwide (Global Risks Perception Survey)
- Additional views of 11,000 company executives on the leading risks to doing business in their country (Executive Opinion Survey)
- Plus insights from 159 subject matter experts

2026 top risk concerns by time-period

Near-term (2 years)

1. Geoeconomic confrontation
2. Misinformation and disinformation
3. Societal polarization
4. Extreme weather events
5. State-based armed conflict
6. Cyber insecurity
7. Inequality
8. Erosion of human rights and/or civic freedoms
9. Pollution
10. Involuntary migration or displacement

Longer-term (10 years)

1. Extreme weather events
2. Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse
3. Critical change to Earth systems
4. Misinformation and disinformation
5. Adverse outcomes of AI technologies
6. Natural resource shortages
7. Inequality
8. Cyber insecurity
9. Societal polarization
10. Pollution

- Economic
- Environmental
- Geopolitical
- Societal
- Technological

Note: WEF Global Risks Perception Survey 2025-2026
Source: World Economic Forum; Marsh analysis

What's Shaping 2026: Six Converging Pressures

1

Demographic Cliff

Fewer traditional-aged students, peak in 2025 then decline through 2041

2

Financial Stress

Shrinking margins, rising costs, and more volatile federal funding

3

Policy Turbulence

Title IX whiplash, accreditation scrutiny, and compliance uncertainty

4

Cybersecurity & AI

Ransomware exposure plus rapid AI adoption creating new liability

5

Student Wellbeing

Mental health demand, Clery and hazing transparency expectations

6

Athletics Liability

House settlement, revenue sharing, Title IX, and employment theories

Heightened uncertainty

Experts foresee a turbulent global outlook in both the immediate and long term. This pervasive uncertainty complicates decision-making for businesses and governments alike, requiring agile strategies to navigate evolving threats. Shocks in one area can quickly cascade, amplifying global instability.

Multilateralism is in retreat

Rising geoeconomic confrontations and state-based conflicts are undermining international cooperation. Nations are prioritizing national interests over collective action, weakening multilateral frameworks. This challenges the ability to address shared global issues such as climate change, economic stability, and security threats effectively.

Economic risks are intensifying

Economic downturns and inflation are growing concerns, posing significant threats to business and societal stability. Mounting debt and potential asset bubbles add layers of financial vulnerability that could trigger broader market disruptions.

Technological risks are growing, largely unchecked

Misinformation, disinformation, and cyber insecurity are intensifying, challenging trust and security in digital and physical realms. The rapid advancement of AI and other frontier technologies (such as quantum computing) introduces new risks that require proactive governance.

Societies are on the edge

Rising societal and political polarization is intensifying pressures on democratic systems, as extremist social, cultural, and political movements challenge institutional resilience and public trust.

Environmental concerns are being deprioritized

While environmental risks receive less short-term attention, their long-term impact, especially from extreme weather events, remains critical. Aging infrastructure and supply chain vulnerabilities increase exposure to climate-related risks. Ignoring them could lead to severe economic and humanitarian consequences in the coming decades.

A new competitive order is emerging

In this period of geoeconomic transformation, alliances are being reshaped, and the resilience of markets is being tested. Protectionism, strategic industrial policy, and active influence by governments over critical supply chains all signal a world growing more intensely competitive.

Is your institution prepared?

Fundamental questions

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Are you properly appreciating the new risk environment? What are the emerging threats that might surprise you?

What does resilience for these risks look like in today's operational context? And how can you sensibly work across your enterprise to achieve it?

Where do the opportunities for your institution lie in this risk environment?

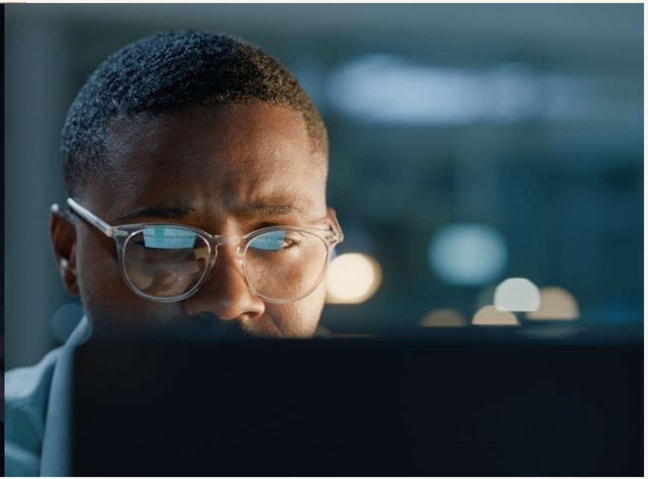
How would you rate your preparedness with regard to…?

Anticipating emerging risks	Embedding strategic agility
Coping with economic and market uncertainty	Managing supply chain disruptions
Assessing technology-led opportunities	Delivering major transition programs
Attracting and retaining key talent	Responding to political violence

From Reaction to Resilience: Why ERM is Mission-Critical Today

There are opportunities

- Take a longer-term view of risk
- Leverage a holistic and diverse view of risk to improve resilience
- Identify opportunities to collaborate
- Evaluate insitutional agility and empower leaders and employees
- Connect people, strategy, and risk and make needed shifts



PART TWO · RISK OUTLOOK

Higher Education Risk Landscape 2026

Six converging pressures through a cross-stakeholder lens

What's Shaping 2026: Six Converging Pressures

RISK OUTLOOK

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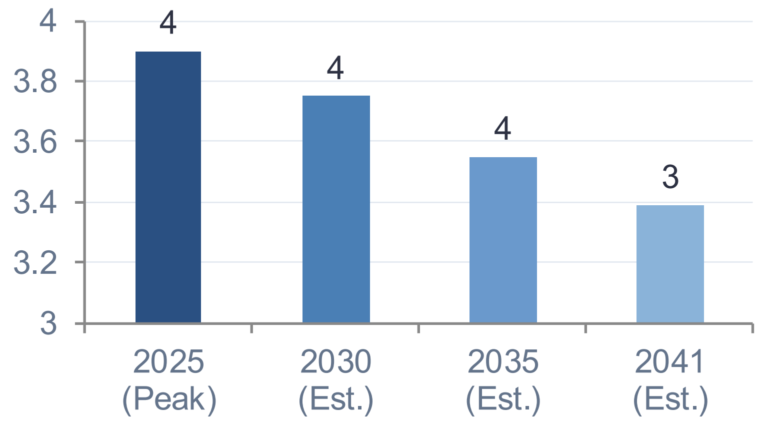
Demographics & Financial Stress: The Foundation Shifts

RISK OUTLOOK

THE DEMOGRAPHIC CLIFF



Peak 2025, then 13% decline through 2041. Intensified competition for traditional undergrads — especially in regions already losing population. Boards will scrutinize program portfolio and fixed costs.

FINANCIAL PRESSURE IN 2026

Rating agencies flagged FY2026 as another tough year — enrollment pressure, rising expenses, political headwinds

Federal loan caps and Parent PLUS changes take effect July 2026, shifting demand and discounting strategy

Hidden risk stack: cyber, legal, climate, and policy shocks hitting already-thin margins

Board question: which revenue assumptions break first in your 2026 plan?

Update: Where are we - challenges over the next two years

False information

Rapid acceleration in the disruptive potential of manipulated information, fueled by open access to increasingly sophisticated enabling technologies.

Mistrust in elections: Foreign interference undermining the real and perceived legitimacy of newly elected governments.

Societies divided: Widespread deployment by other actors for ideological, commercial, and personal ends triggering unrest.

Defining truth: The growth of government- defined truth and general digital authoritarianism eroding civil rights.

Rise in conflict

A growing propensity of countries to resort to military action in pursuit of strategic goals.

High-stakes hotspots: Possible escalation in Ukraine, Israel-Gaza, and Taiwan with major ramifications for global security and supply chains.

Conflict contagion: New and resurgent hostilities sparked by converging ideological, socioeconomic, and environmental trends.

North-South rift: Erosion of the guardrails to conflict containment as pivotal powers exploit opportunities in a multipolar world.

Economic uncertainty

New economic shocks may not easily be managed at a time of ongoing fragility in many countries.

Supply-driven price pressures: A slowdown in key industries and markets driven by continued high prices and cost-of-living concerns.

Demand uncertainty: Divergent challenges in the US and China affecting the calculations of key counterparties.

Debt distress: Debt distress in vulnerable economies and among SMEs amid persistently high interest rates.

Policy Turbulence, Cyber Threats & Student Wellbeing

RISK OUTLOOK

Policy & Regulation

- Title IX whiplash: 2024 rules vacated; institutions operating under 2020 framework + state overlays
- Accreditation scrutiny linked to federal funding — Title IV eligibility at stake
- Shifting federal priorities disrupting research grants and contracts mid-year
- Governance risk: policy debates landing on boards, presidents, and general counsel

Cybersecurity & AI

- EDUCAUSE ranks Collaborative Cybersecurity the #1 technology issue in 2026
- Ransomware remains common — measurable disruption across the education sector
- AI creates academic integrity, IP ownership, and data leakage risks in course workflows
- Quick win: tabletop exercise combining a data breach with AI misuse scenario

Student Wellbeing

- Demand for counseling and crisis support remains high and is tied directly to retention
- Clery Act reporting + Stop Campus Hazing Act amendments add disclosure requirements
- High-visibility incidents trigger rapid media cycles — transparent communication is now a core risk control
- Cross-functional care models are increasingly operationalized

Athletics Risk: Revenue Sharing, Title IX & Labor

RISK OUTLOOK

House v. NCAA settlement approved — direct revenue sharing began July 1, 2025. Expect more litigation, not less.

Governance Layers Multiplying

NCAA, conferences, new oversight entities, and state laws are creating an increasingly complex compliance map.

Gender Equity Flashpoint

Title IX obligations remain central as compensation models evolve — and 2024 rule vacatur adds more uncertainty.

Employment & Unionization

Employment theories for student-athletes create additional exposure institutions haven't fully priced.

Model Financial Scenarios

Before committing to new pay structures, model Title IX implications and financial sustainability.

Tighten NIL Contract Review

Booster and collective guardrails need real governance — informal arrangements don't survive litigation.

Build Decision Logs Now

Rebuild compliance calendars to include athletics compensation, reporting, and communications. Documentation wins cases.

Stakeholder Lenses: Same Landscape, Different Priorities

ACE *American Council on Education*

Focus: Sector-wide policy, research autonomy, civil rights, and federal funding stability

Key question: *Where are we most exposed to sudden federal policy changes? Do we have rapid-response governance?*

NAICU *Independent Colleges & Universities*

Focus: Student aid levels, endowment/nonprofit tax exposure, and compliance cost burden for smaller institutions

Key question: *How do graduate lending and Parent PLUS changes shift our pricing strategy and enrollment demand?*

NACUA *College & University Attorneys*

Focus: Title IX and civil rights litigation, House settlement implementation, cyber incident response, and governance documentation

Key question: *Are our investigation and documentation practices defensible under today's scrutiny?*

NACUBO *Business Officers*

Focus: Funding volatility, operating costs, workforce capacity, and proving the institutional value proposition

Key question: *Which revenue assumptions break first? Are cyber and compliance investments explicit budget lines?*

2026 Mitigation Playbook:
From Risk Lists to Risk Operating System

Enrollment & Market

- Build segment strategies: adult, transfer, grad, international
- Tighten retention playbooks — advising, mental health, academic support
- Refresh program portfolio with demand and margin data

Finance & Funding

- Scenario plan for aid/loan changes and federal funding volatility
- Codify triggers: when to freeze hiring or pause capex
- Audit indirect cost, contract, and grant exposure

Compliance & Legal

- Maintain a living compliance calendar: Title IX, Clery, hazing, athletics
- Standardize investigation and documentation practices
- Rehearse crisis comms + legal privilege boundaries

Cyber & Data

- Run joint tabletop exercises with IT, legal, student affairs, and comms
- Harden vendor management and identity access controls
- Publish AI acceptable use and procurement guardrails

Key Actions for Risk Managers

Adopt an ERM Mindset

- **Integrate risk management** into institutional strategy by building or refining an ERM framework that aligns with the university's mission, operations, and risk appetite.
- **Facilitate cross-departmental collaboration** to ensure risk ownership is shared across academic, financial, legal, and operational units.
- **Regularly update leadership** with dynamic risk registers that reflect emerging issues such as regulatory shifts, reputational threats, and litigation trends.

Strengthen Scenario Planning

- **Lead scenario planning exercises** with leadership teams, simulating potential impacts of evolving risks such as political interventions, social unrest, Title IX developments, or regulatory non-compliance.
- **Develop financial stress tests** tied to insurance market trends, legal liabilities, and potential funding cuts to help leadership make informed decisions about risk transfer and mitigation strategies.

Enhance Risk Communication

- **Provide clear, data-driven risk reports** that translate complex exposures into actionable insights for boards and executive leadership.
- **Act as a trusted advisor** by framing risks in terms of institutional priorities such as academic freedom, financial sustainability, student and employee well-being, and reputational integrity.

Key Actions for Risk Managers

Partner with Legal and Compliance Functions

- **Proactively engage with legal counsel** and compliance officers to monitor and interpret new legislation or executive orders that could impact institutional policies and insurance exposures.

- **Work jointly to review policies and procedures** related to discrimination, free speech, campus safety, and crisis response to ensure they reflect the current legal environment.

Build Insurance & Risk Financing Strategies

- **Conduct gap analyses** to ensure insurance programs are responsive to evolving risks, including increasing EPLI, D&O, and general liability exposures.

- **Collaborate with brokers** to explore alternative risk financing mechanisms such as captives and risk retention groups that may help offset market volatility and rising premiums.

Key Actions for Risk Managers

Develop and Champion a Risk-Aware Culture

- **Lead training programs** for faculty, staff, and students focused on risk awareness, reporting, and response, particularly in sensitive areas such as discrimination, harassment, free speech, and mental health.
- **Position risk management** as a value-add function, helping institutional stakeholders understand how proactive risk practices protect the mission and reduce long-term costs.

Monitor the External Environment & Anticipate Shifts

- **Stay ahead of evolving trends** by closely tracking regulatory, legal, political, and insurance market developments that may affect higher education.
- **Provide leadership with quarterly or ad hoc risk alerts on breaking issues** such as executive orders, legislative changes, and litigation precedents with recommended actions.

PART THREE · ESSENTIAL SKILLS

The Edge That Experience Can't Buy Alone

The six competencies that make university risk managers indispensable

Why Essential Skills Matter More Than Ever

The risk management landscape in higher education has never been more complex — or more human.

73%

of risk leaders say essential skills are now as critical as technical expertise

URMIA Member Survey 2024

2×

more likely to retain key institutional relationships when communication skills are strong

NACUBO Leadership Study

#1

competency gap identified by university presidents in their risk management teams

URMIA Member Survey 2024

Six Core Essential Skills for Higher-Ed Risk Professionals

1 Relationship Capital

Building trust with presidents, boards, faculty, and counsel before a crisis demands it

2 Communicating Risk

Translating complex exposure into language that resonates in a board room, not a policy form

3 Emotional Intelligence

Reading the room — especially when the room contains a traumatized campus community

4 Influence Without Authority

Moving decision-makers who don't report to you and don't want to spend money

5 Adaptive Thinking

Pivoting strategy when the market, the law, or the administration changes overnight

6 Collaborative Leadership

Leading cross-functional teams through complex claims, audits, and renewals

Skill Deep Dive: Communicating Risk Effectively

The real job isn't understanding risk. It's making others understand it — and care about it.

What Risk Managers Often Say	→	What Leadership Needs to Hear
Our aggregate excess tower has a gap in the $10M–$25M layer creating adverse selection concerns.		We're exposed to a single event that could cost us $15 million — and our coverage won't respond until after the first $10 million is gone.
Loss run trends show adverse development in the GL line with IBNR reserving concerns.		Claims we don't know about yet are likely to cost us more than what we've already set aside. We need to talk about that.
URMIA benchmarking shows our retention is below the median peer cohort by 2 standard deviations.		Compared to universities like ours, we're taking on too much risk ourselves. Most of our peers are better protected.

Relationship Capital & Emotional Intelligence

RELATIONSHIP CAPITAL

- Know your GC before litigation hits — not after. The relationship that matters in a crisis is one built before it.
- Volunteer for campus town halls and departmental presentations. Build your constituency, not just your leadership relationships.
- Relationships with underwriters translate into capacity when the market gets hard, especially in a tight excess environment.
- Join HR, Legal, and Finance initiatives. Be seen as a partner, not just a policy person.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

When a campus tragedy, regulatory investigation, or nuclear verdict strikes, your EQ matters more than your policy limits.

Self-Awareness:

Know how you react under pressure. Risk managers who panic project panic — and that travels fast.

Empathy:

A grieving campus doesn't need actuarial precision in the first 48 hours. They need to know someone is listening.

Emotional Regulation:

Holding a steady, calm presence across competing institutional agendas is a leadership superpower.

Social Awareness:

Reading stakeholder dynamics — who's frightened, who's angry, who's politically motivated — shapes every response.

Influence Without Authority & Adaptive Thinking

You rarely control the decisions that create the exposures. Your influence has to work through persuasion, credibility, and timing.

Credibility

Earned, Not Assumed

Bring peer benchmarks. Bring data. Show up with numbers that frame the decision — not opinions that invite debate. Credibility is your currency; spend it wisely.

Coalition

Find Your Champions

The CFO may be your ally on budget while the Provost owns academic program risk. Build relationships across silos so risk considerations enter conversations before decisions are made.

Timing

Pick Your Moments

A hard market renewal is not the time to introduce a new captive strategy. Know the rhythm of institutional decision-making: budget cycles, board calendars, accreditation timelines.

ADAPTIVE THINKING: The higher-ed risk manager is navigating a world that changes faster than renewal cycles

2020–21

Pandemic

BI, event cancellation, remote ops

2022–23

Capacity Crisis

D&O, GL, EPL markets contracting

2024

AI Litigation

Academic integrity & IP disputes

2025

Federal Shifts

Title IX, DEI, immigration on campus

Collaborative Leadership & Your Personal Essential Skills Roadmap

Collaborative Leadership: Leading cross-functional teams through complex claims, audits, and renewals

University risk managers don't manage in a vacuum — they lead across HR, Legal, Finance, and Student Affairs without formal authority. Building a cross-functional team identity is itself a risk control.

Phase 1 · Assess
Next 30 Days

- Take a 360° feedback assessment — ask peers, reports, AND leadership
- Identify your lowest-rated soft skill area and your highest
- Schedule a candid conversation with your VP or Provost about communication effectiveness

Phase 2 · Build
60–180 Days

- Enroll in a facilitated negotiation or executive communication course
- Volunteer to present at the next URMIA regional — it builds every soft skill simultaneously
- Join a cross-functional institutional committee outside your immediate scope

Phase 3 · Sustain
Ongoing

- Build a personal board of advisors — 3 people who will tell you what others won't
- Create an annual soft skills self-review alongside your performance review
- Mentor a junior risk professional — teaching cements every skill you've developed

The Bottom Line

Technical risk management knowledge opens the door. Essential skills determine how far you walk through it.

The institutions we serve are made of people — presidents who worry, faculty who resist, students who are vulnerable, and boards who need to trust someone to tell them the truth about what's at stake. The risk landscape in 2026 is more complex than it has ever been. And the professionals who will navigate it most effectively aren't just the ones who know the most. They're the ones who can communicate it, build the relationships to act on it, and lead the institution through it with steady, credible presence.

Your One Action This Week

Identify one person in your institution whose trust you haven't fully earned yet — and schedule coffee.