



INSIGHTS REPORT

Students and AI: Attitudes, Concerns, and What Colleges Need to Know



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Dear Higher Education Leader,

As AI moves from experimentation to everyday infrastructure, the most important question for colleges is not what the technology can do, but how students actually experience it. The Chronicle's report, *Students and AI: Attitudes, Concerns, and What Colleges Need to Know*, makes clear that student views are nuanced: curiosity and creativity sit alongside anxiety about environmental impact, learning quality, and an AI-disrupted labor market. Students are already using AI ahead of institutional guidance, but their enthusiasm is neither uniform nor unconditional.

At Workday, we see the same complexity in our own research. Students tell us they trust AI to synthesize their data and explain tradeoffs, yet they draw a firm line at irreversible actions, particularly financial ones. They want AI that can clarify the impact of dropping a course on aid and progress, not a black box that quietly submits transactions on their behalf. They welcome tools that simplify high-friction tasks like schedule building and add/drop, but only when AI is transparent, context-aware, and clearly distinguished from a simple chatbot.

This is a preview of the future of work. Tomorrow's graduates will expect intelligent systems that are collaborative partners—systems that explain, recommend, and help them make decisions, rather than automate that decision-making process away. Institutions that succeed will pair AI fluency with human guidance, close gaps in access and literacy, and design agentic boundaries where students retain control over the decisions that shape their education and financial lives.

I invite you to use this Chronicle report as a catalyst for campus-wide dialogue on what responsible, student-centered AI should look like—and how higher education can prepare learners for a world where working well with AI is a core career skill.

Sincerely,

Michael Hofherr
Senior Vice President, SLED Industry Product
Workday

Students and AI: Attitudes, Concerns, and What Colleges Need to Know

By David Wheeler



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Contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

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When Jeremy Van Hof, director of the Center for Teaching and Learning Innovation at Michigan State University, starts tutoring sessions to help professors adapt to using artificial intelligence in a class, he asks a question that might not seem related: “Why does this course exist?”

That question, he says, spurs faculty members to think carefully about what they expect students to learn and to consider if those learning outcomes are still relevant in the AI age. He has asked that question himself for a business-communication class he teaches. “Does it exist to create copywriters?” he asks. The course may have focused more on that in the past, he continues, but now he believes it should concentrate on creating human communicators who can use

their voice, written or spoken, to own a room, to feel confident in an interview, and to get their viewpoint across in a business meeting. In short, he believes the course needs to lean into the human part of communicating.

At Appalachian State University, in Boone, N.C., Quinn A. Morris, an associate professor of math, is having similar reflections. He is thinking, he says, not about how to police AI use but how to create assessments that are better than the ones he and his colleagues were using before. As a graduate-program director, he is responsible for teaching future math teachers at both the college and the secondary-school level and has been invited to speak about AI and teaching at Mathematical Association of America's meetings.

“Math isn't about computation; it is really about critical thinking,” Morris says. As AI tools strip away the computation involved in solving problems, critical thinking is more strongly revealed, he says.

A Gallup poll conducted in March found that enthusiasm for AI is declining and skepticism is rising among those from 14 to 29 years old, known as Generation Z.

The professors who are rethinking pedagogy face a generation of students with decidedly mixed attitudes about AI. Many professors report running into “conscientious objectors,” who for a wide variety of reasons do not want to use AI at all. Some have concerns about the impact of data centers on the environment. Others worry using AI will diminish what they will get out of earning an expensive degree.

A Gallup poll conducted in March found that enthusiasm for AI is declining and skepticism

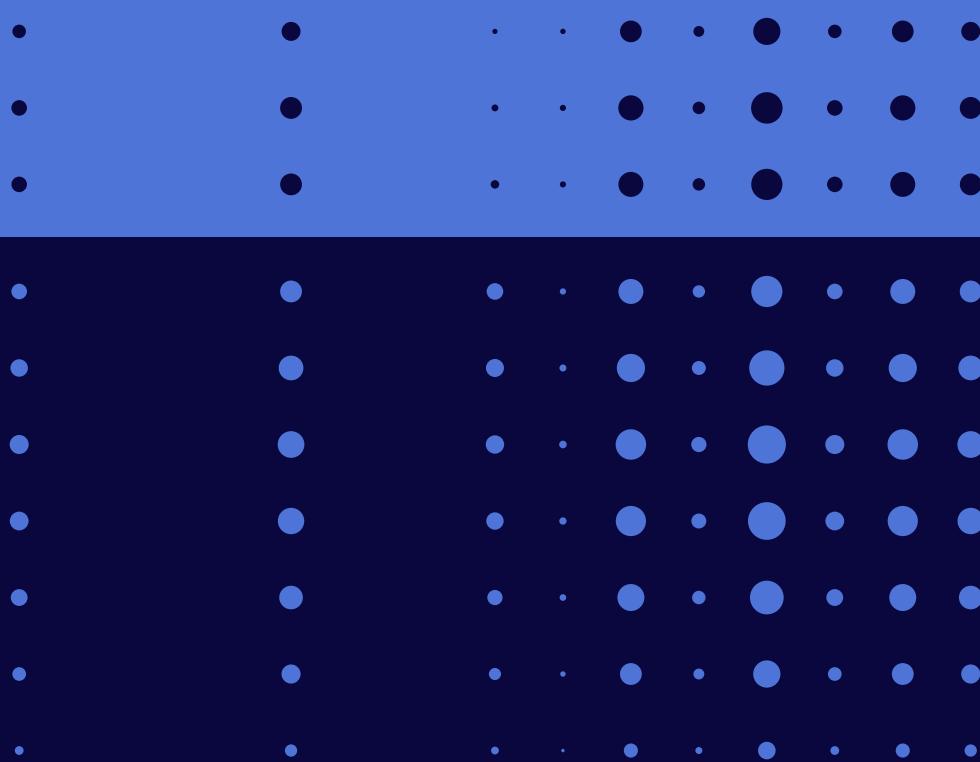
is rising among those from 14 to 29 years old, known as Generation Z. Eighty percent of those young people worry, the survey found, that using AI will “make it more difficult for them to learn in the future.”

Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, is best known as a technology-forward institution, with a strong computer-science department. But even there, faculty members report encountering strong AI skeptics among students. And they report a shift in faculty attitudes from worrying about cheating to seeing an opportunity to improve teaching.

As Carnegie Mellon professors reconsider what is being taught, how it's taught, and how to assess skills, two important questions are being asked, says Rebekah Fitzsimmons, an associate professor of communication at the university's Heinz College who has led a faculty advisory committee on generative AI. One is “Where can AI fit into this process?” and another is “Where do we need to warn the students that AI's going to hinder them rather than help them?”

This report will take a look at how faculty members and students are coping with the growing prevalence of AI, a world in which academics feel like sailors on a slippery, swaying deck. In particular, the report will explore how AI is making professors rethink pedagogy as they face students with a wide mix of AI sophistication, and how students' own attitudes and use of AI are changing.

Taking Students' AI Temperatures





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When faculty members and students are asked if they have seen a shift in student attitudes toward AI over recent years, they don't hesitate to offer opinions. But those opinions vary a great deal.

Over the past three years, Fitzsimmons says, she has been asking students when and how they use AI, and says she has seen a slow but steady uptick in the number of students saying they aren't using it at all.

One student told her that as a would-be policy analyst, "It's going to be my job to think outside of the box. I don't want to rely on a machine that's literally the box." AI agents only draw on the information entered into them, the student

reasoned, which makes them less likely to come up with original solutions to policy problems.

Some faculty members are fond of saying students come into college proficient in AI, and should be teaching professors how to use it. Others object to that perception. "The idea of digital natives is

"It's going to be my job to think outside of the box. I don't want to rely on a machine that's literally the box."

a myth,” says Lauren Craig Tilton, director of the University of Richmond’s Center for the Liberal Arts and AI. “They may know how to work with AI, but they don’t understand what it’s doing.” Even students’ understanding of how computers work has declined, she says. In digital-humanities, data-science, and computer-science courses, professors have to go back to teaching basics, Tilton says, such as how computers organize, store, and retrieve data.

A [2025 survey of students, faculty, and staff members](#) in the California State University system — billed as the most comprehensive AI data set in higher education — found that 53 percent of students reported using AI regularly. The survey also revealed some student ambivalence: Sixty-five percent of students said they were skeptical about AI in education, while 64 percent said that AI had positively affected their learning. Students may think that AI gives them a practical edge, survey authors said, while questioning if it improves the quality of their learning.

The recent Gallup poll asked different questions of a different population — 14-to-29-year-olds — instead of just college students. The poll’s report said negative emotions toward AI had intensified, and excitement about AI had dropped 14 points from an earlier poll. Those in Generation Z, the report said, are not convinced that AI will help them search for accurate information, come up with new ideas, and think carefully about information. But it also noted more positive attitudes to AI are more common among frequent users.

A [report by the think tank RAND](#) also looked at Generation Z attitudes to AI. It found that from February 2025 to December 2025, the proportion of youth who believed that the more students “use AI for their schoolwork, the more it will harm their critical-thinking skills” had grown from 54 percent to 67 percent.

When it comes to surveys, says David M. Goldberg, a professor at San Diego State University and a lead researcher on the California State survey, “There’s just more of every opinion out there. I haven’t observed that it’s gotten all more positive or all more negative. It’s almost as if the same students have more polar feelings in both directions.”

Oddly enough, say some academics, the skeptical students may have a career edge over the unabashed enthusiasts. The students who are asking hard questions about AI are exactly the kind of graduates that many corporate recruiters say they want to hire.

Goldberg said first-year students at San Diego State are required to earn an AI microcredential. The first thing instructors do in that course, he says, is to demystify AI. “We find that if you understand how AI works — under the hood — at a high level, you’re a more critical consumer of the output, and you’re more likely to rigorously verify the output.”

Cade Puzon has just graduated from Colby College, in Waterville, Me., with a double major in computer science and philosophy and is staying for a post-baccalaureate fellowship at Colby’s Davis Institute for Artificial Intelligence. His undergraduate years have coincided with the debut and

rise of large language models. Over that time, he believes many of his fellow students have become more hesitant to use AI for class work. They're unsure where the line is between proper and improper use of AI, he says, and find AI agents overly intrusive in trying to take over tasks.

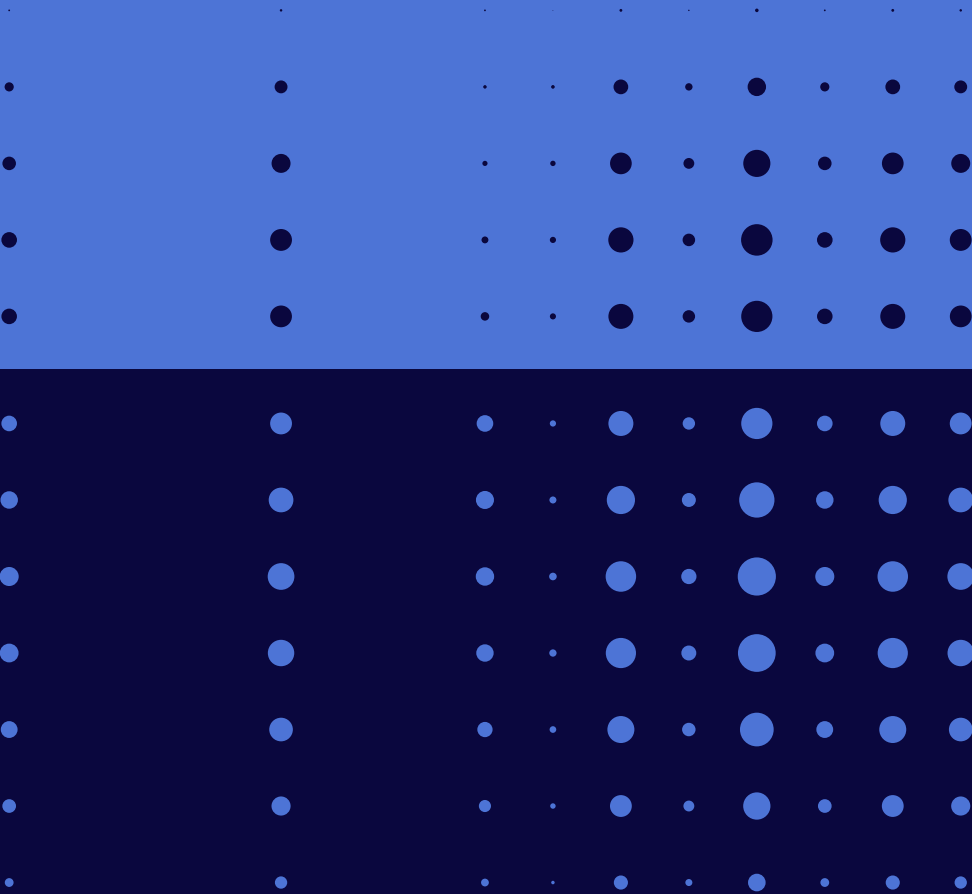
When deciding whether to use AI, he says, students should think about what they want to get out of the work. Are they trying to produce a product, or to learn from the process of making the product? While many students use AI to create outlines for papers, Puzon prefers thinking about where each idea should go, arranging his

arguments, and creating his own outline.

Oddly enough, say some academics, the skeptical students may have a career edge over the unabashed enthusiasts. The students who are asking hard questions about AI are exactly the kind of graduates that many corporate recruiters say they want to hire, says Lerzan Aksoy, the dean of Fordham University's Gabelli School of Business, in New York, which has started an AI Business Hub. The school's goal, she says, is to produce people who can lead with AI responsibly. "That requires them to question it first," she says.

SECTION 2

When AI Enters the Classroom





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Many colleges now rate how much AI use is permitted in a class or individual class activities. Instructors use symbols like AI rainbows, spectrums, and stoplights to indicate permitted AI use. Stoplights are the simplest: Red means no AI; yellow means caution, and green means anything goes.

Many faculty members focus more on reshaping assignments to adjust to AI than catching cheaters. At Austin Community College, Alex Watkins, a professor of technical communication and co-chair of an AI strategic-planning committee, says she doesn't pore over tests and papers looking for evidence of AI use. If a student does something egregious, like leaving a prompt for AI in a paper, she will ask the student to redo the work. The students are mostly harming themselves if they use AI shortcuts, she says.

"Teaching isn't policing," she adds. If students use AI cheats for assignments, she says professors should ask, "In what ways are we inviting students to see that what we're doing is meaningful, and in what ways have we adapted to make our assignments meaningful?"

Her goal, she says, is to produce students who can go into workplaces and guide conversations about effectively and ethically integrating AI.

In one of Watkins's courses called "Writing with AI," she shows students how to use AI to brainstorm, to analyze the audience for their writing, and to get AI to critique their work. In one exercise, students fact-check the output of AI research. Many decide that the trouble isn't worth it: They realize they could do their own research in less time than it takes to fact-check AI work and be more satisfied with the output.

Abel Rincon, who is working toward a bachelor's degree in software development at Austin Community College, took Watkins's class. He expected technical discussions but discovered it was "systems thinking for your brain." The class shifted his focus from treating AI like a vending machine that would spit out a product, he says, to learning how to work alongside AI.

At Carnegie Mellon, Sarah Young, a librarian, teaches a course called "Doing Modern Research." Students, often with few scholarly research skills, have heavy workloads, can face tight deadlines, and are tempted to use AI, she says.

At the University of Richmond, Tilton brings librarians into her classes to update students' research methods. "The ways that our students knew how to find things has changed overnight," she says.

The goal is not to discourage all use of AI, but to help students understand when it's useful and when it's not.

Leaning on AI for research has big risks. Young and others say multiple studies have found that AI trained on human-generated data inherits and intensifies human biases, including racism and sexism, and may even create new biases. A 2025 paper found that AI searches of research papers favor papers with shorter titles and fewer authors — hardly a neutral or useful stance.

Young has students use AI to summarize an article and then do a deep read of the same article. They analyze the summary for weaknesses and inaccuracies. The students often find that AI

summaries are flawed, and sometimes inaccurate. The goal, Young says, is not to discourage all use of AI, but to help students understand when it's useful and when it's not.

Young shows the students how to do traditional Boolean searches — such as including and excluding keywords, using logical operators, and using quote marks for exact phrases — in scholarly databases, which she says often yield better results than AI.

In classes, professors have to rethink how they measure students' learning. To help professors rethink assessments, Michigan State's Van Hof says that any test that emphasizes a single correct answer introduces the risk that the assessment could be done by generative AI. Rather than use methods to block AI such as lock-down browsers, device-free classrooms, or re-introducing exam blue books, he recommends moving to assessments that evaluate the process of coming to a conclusion.

He realizes AI tools can generate fake records of process, so that shift is not a panacea, but evaluating process over product and evaluating reflective and metacognitive behaviors are the major pillars of improving assessments, he says. In addition, he recommends measuring performance in human-to-human work: group work, peer-to-peer interactions, presentations that don't lean on devices, or student communication with an instructor.

In addition, Van Hof and other professors say faculty members can offer guidance to show students helpful ways to use AI in their disciplines. Students can use it to review complicated material or argue with chatbots to develop deeper understanding of material. In the same way that students used to employ roommates or friends to ask them questions about textbook material, students can now create AI agents to quiz them or even have AI create podcasts about the material they are trying to learn. To prepare for a debate

or presentation, students can ask an AI agent to ask skeptical questions or look for weak points in their arguments.

Multiple academics suggest using AI to create a product — anything from a poem to a business plan — that students critique. That creates a dual learning experience: Students think about the elements that make a strong sonnet or product pitch, but also learn about the strengths and weaknesses of generative AI. “That’s really deepening the cognition for students,” says Van Hof.

In a philosophy course called “Mind, Body and Machine” at Colby College, Ben Baker, an assistant professor, has students ask an AI agent to be an uncompromising defender of an extreme point of view. The students upload some of the course’s readings, add reading they have been doing on their own, and then debate the agent, asking it to clarify terms and come up with counter examples. The students try to catch contradictions in the chatbot’s reasoning, and after the debate, write a reflection on their conversation. Students find, Baker says, AI can offer quite fluent, reasonable sounding, confident defenses of the position it has been assigned. “It does quite a good job, and these are thorny philosophical positions,” he says.

“I really like that assignment,” Baker adds. “The students are pushing on AI, and it’s pushing on them instead of having it just do something for them.”

At Carnegie Mellon, Emily DeJeu is an assistant professor of communication in the university’s business school who also teaches many undergraduates. She held an AI fellowship at the university and has revamped the way she teaches an undergraduate communications course to adjust to AI realities. DeJeu’s teaching assistant felt she was spending way too much time grading assignments that appeared generated by AI. DeJeu reworked the class so that writing outside the class is only for low-stakes practice. Writing in the class that is graded with more weight is done

in proctored sessions with students working in locked-down browsers. “Everything I’m reading now is just from their brain and their fingertips,” she says.

More importantly, a major assessment is done as a series of device-free sessions that are simulations of business meetings. As students might have to do in a workplace, they make presentations and have to manage discussion, field tough questions, and keep dialogue diplomatic but substantive. DeJeu grades the students on how well they understand the idea they are advocating for, and for their ability to keep the discussion focused. This approach, she says, helps students to “think on their feet critically, riff in real time, while looking someone in the eye and trying to use the body language that would invite ongoing conversation.”

“We’ve heard from some of our recruiters and our alums,” she adds, “that these sort of unscripted interpersonal interactions are still really valuable at work, and students aren’t always great at them.”

At Rollins College, a liberal-arts institution in Winter Park, Fla., Daniel Myers heads the computer-science department. He believes AI will help cross-disciplinary collaboration among students that produce computer-dependent classroom projects. In the past, he says, computer-science students were often dominant on interdisciplinary teams because by writing all the code, they controlled the pace and final shape of the project. But working through AI, liberal-arts students can also influence coding.

He says computer-science students still need to learn to code. “What we found,” he says, “is that if you don’t really understand how programs work, then you won’t have the right mental model to prompt AI to interact with the code base.” As students progress, however, he gives them more freedom to use AI. In upper-division courses, he tests students about much higher levels of software development: Coming up with ideas, refin-

ing ideas, testing ideas. The coding, he says, can often be substantially automated.

Sometimes professors set up multiple learning pathways in which students can opt in or out of using AI. For a history of mathematics course, Morris at Appalachian State has students write a long paper that is a key part of their grade. Midway through the work, students can either trade papers with another student for critical feedback

The goal of teaching students AI literacy shouldn't be to teach them about AI tools, but to help them reach a deep understanding of how AI works. "There's an opportunity, if we lean into it, to steer AI the way we want to steer it, instead of being steered by it."

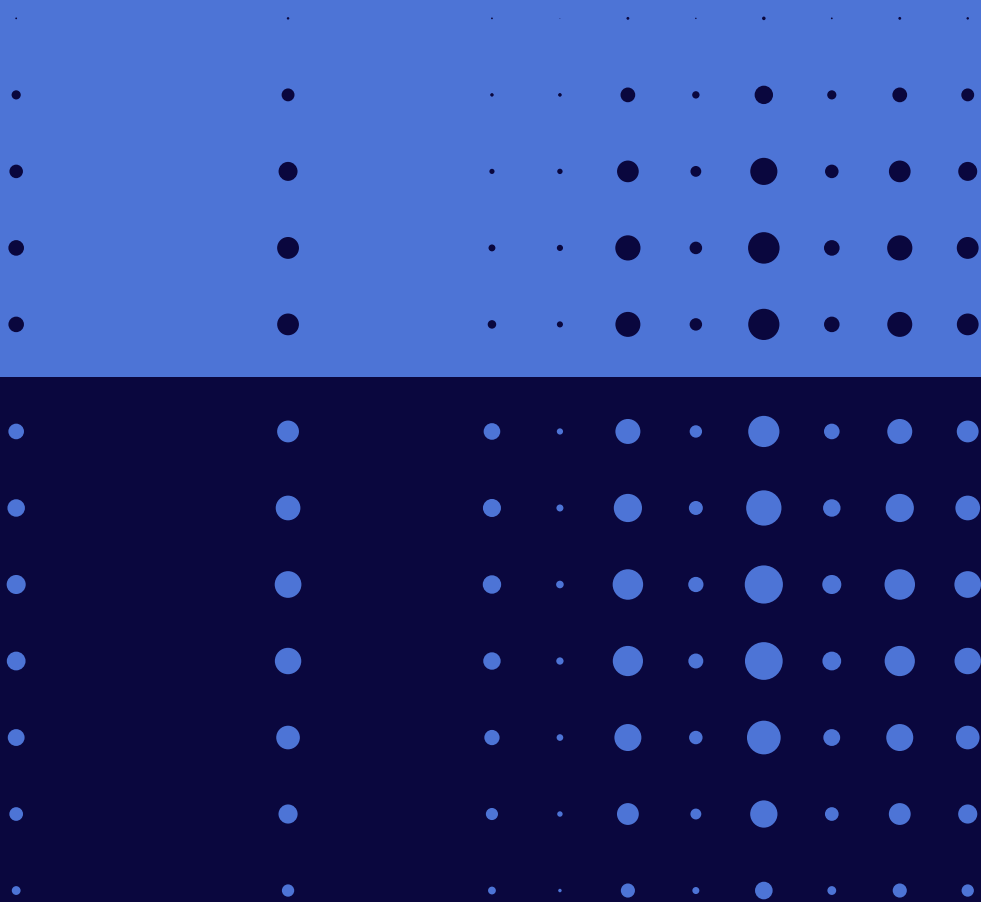
or use a chatbot he built to critique papers. Students often like the immediacy of the chatbot: There is no waiting around. "Ultimately," he says, students "are responsible for validating sources and for making intellectual determinations about what's important and what's not."

While many faculty members are integrating AI into their courses, some are ignoring it. Patricia McGuire, the president of Trinity Washington University, in Washington, D.C., says she believes each and every discipline needs to spend some time considering the influence of AI. Faculty members, she says, often teach how they were taught, and they teach what they were taught. They may stay on top of disciplinary developments, but the speed of AI developments has made it hard for faculty to pivot, she says. Faculty members, not just career centers, she suggests, need to look at how the work force uses AI in their fields.

David Watts, director of Colby College's Davis Institute for Artificial Intelligence, says the goal of teaching students AI literacy shouldn't be to teach them about AI tools but to help them reach a deep understanding of how AI works. "There's an opportunity, if we lean into it," he says, "to steer AI the way we want to steer it, instead of being steered by it."

SECTION 3

Coping With Career Fear





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In December, Fordham University's Gabelli School of Business hosted human-resource executives and talent recruiters from a wide variety of companies for a roundtable on how to create an AI-ready work force. Although the meeting was business focused, the takeaways apply to career prospects for a wide variety of disciplines.

Technical skills, the corporate visitors emphasized, are important but can be learned on the job. Recruiters seek well-rounded professionals who can guide a project from start to finish, beginning with scoping it and winding up with coherent recommendations. Talent executives said they are looking for workers with strong critical-thinking, problem-formulation, analytical-reasoning, interpersonal, and storytelling skills. Corporations are interested in professionals who will bring ethics, integrity, and responsible use to AI, and want college partners

who teach such qualities. Corporations want to partner with colleges on hackathons and capstone projects where students can get experience with real business challenges.

"It's the skill sets that students learn in the liberal arts that are becoming so important and prioritized when it comes to a world with AI," says Aksoy, the business school's dean. Watts, at Colby, came to the college from IBM, and is also talking to corporations who seek students with an interdisciplinary approach to AI.

But while technical skills are sometimes deemphasized, recruiters at the Fordham forum said a strong foundation in working with data would remain crucial in some roles. That need is echoed at other institutions. At Carnegie Mellon, Fitzsimmons said she had heard that corporate recruiters were checking coding skills by putting job candidates in digital environments where

they had no access to AI. Awareness of such testing, she said, motivates undergraduates to learn computer-science basics.

Myers, at Rollins College, says he expects a dip in undergraduate interest in computer science. But over the long term he predicts a resurgence. Companies are going to discover, if they haven't figured it out already, that AI coding and AI projects are very expensive due to the resources they use. Human leaders will need core software skills to match the right project to the right AI model, and to pose problems to AI as precisely as possible. Cost-benefit analysis will be necessary: "There are some problems in math where it would totally be worth spending \$10 million to run an agent to crack them, and other problems where it's really not worth that level of effort," says Myers.

Students, meanwhile, are using AI to explore career paths, research employers, polish résumés, and practice interview questions — but career centers are adopting AI faster than students. In 2025, the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that 76 percent of college career centers report using AI, whereas less than one-third of graduating seniors at four-year institutions said they used it in their job searches. The student respondents cited ethical considerations as a particular concern.

A widespread fear is that AI will eliminate jobs, not create them. Arie Brish, an adjunct professor at St. Edwards University's Bill Munday School of Business, in Austin, Tex., says that ever since the Industrial Revolution, there have been waves of

new technology where whole job categories have been eliminated. But new jobs have continued to be created, and productivity has risen. Companies will continue to want humans to oversee processes and ensure quality.

Human leaders will need core software skills to match the right project to the right AI model, and to pose problems to AI as precisely as possible.

Van Hof at Michigan State and his colleagues at the teaching and learning center work with more than a thousand professors, teaching assistants, and other instructors. He says he wants them to consider what it means to be a critically thinking human in their field, in the context of AI tools. Faculty members, he believes, need to get in front of their students and show them how to use AI to create quality outputs. It may be necessary, he says, to pull industry into the classroom and push classrooms into industry in ways that haven't happened before to enhance experiential learning with AI. Students could work with government, nonprofits, or companies, he says, to see how AI is being used outside of the "walled garden of the campus environment."

Adapting to AI will not be a one-and-done retrofit, but a continuous process, administrators say.

James Frazee, vice president for information technology at San Diego State, is a member of the California State University AI Workforce Acceleration Board, which seeks to bring industry and the university together to prepare students for the AI age. He sees adjusting to AI as an opportunity to take advantage of what is known about how students learn, to break them out of passive learning, and give them “more authentic, complex tasks that will mirror the world outside of school.”

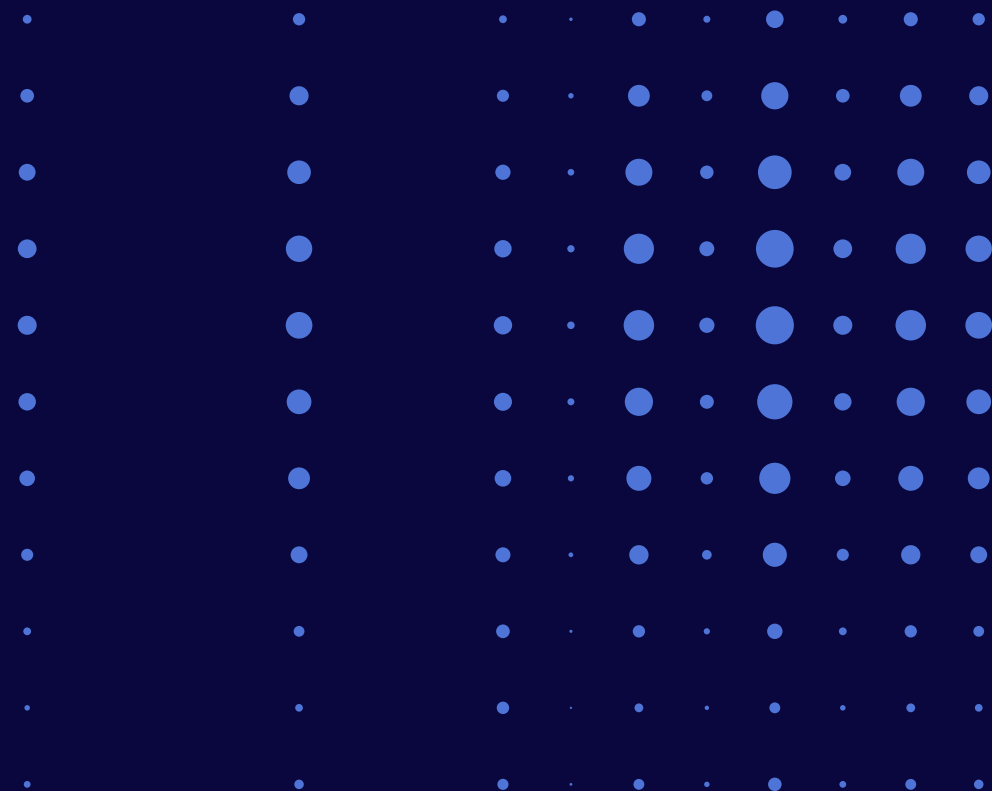
He wants students to work with one another as undergraduates in the same way that they'll be expected to do so in whatever organization they find themselves in after graduating. One of the conclusions of the CSU survey was to use AI “to enhance learning without losing what makes learning human.”

As academics confront AI, they often turn to thinking about the essence of their own disciplines. “Mathematics is a human endeavor,” says Quinn, at Appalachian State. “When I read a research paper, there's another human on the other end of it who's trying to communicate something.” While he can see technical documentation getting an AI assist, he has no interest in reading a novel

written by AI. Reading a novel is a relationship in which the author shares thoughts and emotions, he says. That won't be the same with AI: “I think that's true in math too, even though we don't think of it that way,” he says.

Adjusting to AI [is] an opportunity to take advantage of what is known about how students learn, to break them out of passive learning, and give them “more authentic, complex tasks that will mirror the world outside of school.”

Academics increasingly are encouraging students to think of AI as a brainstorming partner, a study buddy, an analyst that can attack certain kinds of highly complex, data-heavy tasks. But it is a very poor substitute for human judgment, creativity, teamwork, and research.



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