

Shaping the AI Revolution

Since generative AI (GenAI) tools like ChatGPT stormed through the hallowed gates of higher learning, much has been written about their threat to critical thinking—the very hallmark of a liberal education—and the irreplaceable nature of human intellect and judgment. Yet, as a college president who regularly utilizes these tools, I don't perceive them as a threat. They are transformational assets that amplify the intellectual rigor we cultivate at our institutions.

These innovations are not designed to supplant the human capacity for knowledge construction or critical analysis. Instead, they offer complementary tools that augment our ability to tackle complex tasks and unravel intricate problems.

Whether it's the arrival of the calculator as a harbinger of the death of quantitative reasoning or the accessibility to the world wide web as the mark of a student body of cheaters and plagiarists, colleges and universities always have a complicated response to new technology. But just as the introduction of the personal computer revolutionized data analysis and expanded research capabilities in the 1980s, today's AI technologies are poised to similarly transform how we gather, interpret, and apply knowledge across disciplines.

Generative AI's emergence into our daily academic lives mirrors the evolution of technologies from the past. The computer didn't supplant the computational abilities of humans, but accelerated problem solving and automated repetitive tasks. The rhetoric surrounding the rapid emergence of AI not only reflects behavioral norms (fear of change, or a blissfully ignorant embrace of what's new) but, more importantly—and too often overlooked—underscores a pivotal moment for teaching and applying critical thinking skills.

It behooves us to embrace these tools, understand their capabilities and boundaries, and equip our students with a holistic skill set that prepares them for a future intertwined with AI.

Because it's not going away.

Recently, during a classroom debate using AI-generated content as a stimulus, a student remarked, "It's not just about finding answers quickly; it's about understanding which questions to ask". And I thought, "Yes, that's precisely the point."

GenAI are tools that allow us to explore differently, to refine our understanding by developing the skills to ask the right questions. That is very much what liberal education is all about, encouraging students to be comfortable with complexity and curating the insight needed to develop a range of implementable solutions. At Ursinus College, our [core curriculum](#) is framed by asking and answering essential questions across disciplines. We even have a research lab on our campus [that blends these questions with using new technologies](#). And we aren't alone. colleges across the country—and those centered in the liberal education tradition (a.k.a. liberal arts)—are purpose-built to cultivate the acumen necessary to design, use, and improve technologies like GenAI.

We stand at a juncture where the relevance of higher education and its capacity to foster critical thinking alongside technological proficiency is paramount. This moment should be seized as an opportunity to reinforce the significance of liberal education's contributions to developing well-rounded individuals capable of navigating the complexities of a digitized world.

As critical thinkers, our objective cannot be to diminish the value of these tools due to their perceived

shortcomings. Instead, we must reaffirm the crucial importance of human oversight and interpretative skills when working with any technology, not just generative AI.

GenAI shouldn't be seen as a threat to traditional educational values. Instead, we should view these tools and their design features as the impetus to enhance and broaden the scope of these values. As we harness these technologies, colleges grounded in the liberal education tradition need to also lead a national, if not global, conversation on revolutions in the liberal arts that prepare students not just to face the future but to shape it.

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