OPINION | TECHNOLOGY & LEARNING

AI Is Already in Your Classrooms. Now Comes the Harder Work.

The debate over whether artificial intelligence belongs in higher education is over. The debate over how to govern it is just beginning—and institutions are already behind.

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Artificial intelligence is no longer an emerging issue in education—it is already embedded in everyday practice. Tools such as ChatGPT are now part of how students research, write, and study, regardless of whether institutions formally acknowledge their use. The question is no longer whether AI should be allowed in higher education. The question is whether institutions will govern it thoughtfully—or simply react to it after the fact.

That distinction matters more than most administrators currently appreciate. A reactive posture—banning tools, updating honor codes, chasing policy to meet practice—cedes the initiative to the technology itself. A governance posture, by contrast, treats AI as what it is becoming: infrastructure. And like any infrastructure, its impact depends entirely on how it is designed, regulated, and used.

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THE PROHIBITION TRAP

A full prohibition on AI use is neither practical nor effective. Students will continue to use these tools, often in ways that remain invisible to instructors. Blanket bans do not eliminate AI use; they drive it underground, where it operates without any of the

transparency, accountability, or pedagogical intentionality that might otherwise accompany it.

At the same time, unrestricted use poses its own risks. The core concern is not that students will use AI—it is that unrestricted use risks outsourcing the cognitive work that education is fundamentally designed to develop. Critical thinking, analytical writing, independent synthesis: these are not incidental to higher education. They are the point. Any governance framework that fails to protect them has failed at the foundational level.

This creates a genuine and underappreciated tension. Institutions that ban AI sacrifice relevance and push use into invisibility. Institutions that permit it without structure risk hollowing out the intellectual demands that justify the credential. Neither extreme serves students, faculty, or the broader public interest in credentialed higher education.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US

Research from UNESCO and the OECD highlights this dual reality. On one hand, AI can significantly enhance personalized learning—providing adaptive feedback and differentiated support at a scale that traditional instructional systems cannot easily replicate (Miao & Holmes, 2023; OECD, 2023). Adaptive platforms can identify knowledge gaps in real time, adjust pacing to individual learners, and provide the kind of iterative feedback that faculty cannot sustainably deliver at scale. For students with disabilities, language learners, and those from underserved educational backgrounds, these affordances are not trivial.

On the other hand, the same systems introduce meaningful risks. Algorithmic bias in grading and placement tools can amplify existing inequities rather than correct them (OECD, 2024). AI-generated content can spread misinformation with confident fluency. And overreliance on AI outputs—without the critical literacy to interrogate them—produces learners who are increasingly dependent on tools they do not understand and cannot adequately evaluate.

Scholars such as Neil Selwyn have argued persuasively that AI in education is often framed as a technological solution to what are ultimately social and pedagogical

challenges (Selwyn, 2019). That framing matters. When institutions treat AI as an efficiency mechanism—a way to do more with less, to automate feedback, to scale instruction—they risk misunderstanding both the problem and the tool.

A GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK GROUNDED IN PLANNING THEORY

Recognizing that critique does not, however, mean accepting paralysis. If AI in education cannot be treated as a purely technical problem, the response must be an institutional one—rooted in governance frameworks that are adaptive, transparent, and grounded in the purposes education is meant to serve.

From a governance perspective, this is not a new kind of problem—it is a familiar institutional challenge. Educational systems have repeatedly had to integrate transformative technologies without compromising foundational learning goals. The transition from oral to written examination. The introduction of calculators. The rise of the internet and open-access research. Each represented a moment in which institutions faced a choice between prohibition and thoughtful integration.

Planning theory offers a useful lens here. The incremental approach to policy development—associated with Charles Lindblom's concept of 'muddling through'—emphasizes iterative, responsive governance over rigid, top-down control (Lindblom, 1959). Rather than attempting to achieve a comprehensive solution at the outset, incremental governance involves pilot programs, feedback loops, and policy revision in response to observed outcomes.

Applied to AI in education, this suggests not a single universal policy, but a framework of principles that institutions can adapt to their specific contexts—disciplinary cultures, student populations, resource constraints, and pedagogical philosophies. The framework should be directive without being prescriptive, and evaluative without being punitive.

THREE PRINCIPLES FOR INSTITUTIONAL ACTION

Three principles should anchor any serious institutional approach to AI governance in higher education.

The first is transparency. Students should be required to disclose how AI was used in the production of their work—much as they cite sources, acknowledge research assistants, or disclose data collection methods. This is not about policing use; it is about intellectual accountability. An AI disclosure norm, embedded in syllabi and assignment instructions, creates a culture of transparency rather than concealment. It also gives instructors actionable information about how their students are working.

The second is literacy. AI should be treated not only as a tool but as a subject of instruction. Students need to understand how large language models are trained, what kinds of errors they characteristically produce, how to evaluate the reliability of AI outputs, and what the societal implications of widespread AI adoption are (Miao & Holmes, 2023). Critically, they should be asking foundational questions: Who trained this model? What data was used? What biases might be embedded in its outputs? Treating AI literacy as a core competency—parallel to information literacy or statistical literacy—is not optional. It is a prerequisite for responsible use.

The third is assessment redesign. This is where the governance challenge becomes pedagogical. If existing assignments can be completed adequately by an AI tool, the honest response is not to ban the tool—it is to redesign the assignment. Assessments must evolve to emphasize process documentation, iterative drafting, in-person defense of written work, contextual application of disciplinary knowledge, and original synthesis that cannot be replicated by a model trained on existing text. This is not a diminishment of academic standards. It is an elevation of them.

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THE EQUITY DIMENSION

Any governance conversation that does not address equity is incomplete. AI adoption in education is not happening evenly (OECD, 2024). Students at well-resourced institutions, with reliable broadband access and familiarity with productivity technology, are already integrating these tools in ways that give them material advantages. Students without

consistent device access, from under-resourced secondary school backgrounds, or navigating institutions that have banned AI use entirely, are not.

This asymmetry matters. If AI becomes a de facto competitive advantage in higher education—and the evidence suggests it already is—then governance frameworks that ignore access are not neutral. They actively reproduce inequality. Institutions must address the infrastructure layer: device availability, network access, multilingual tool interfaces, and accommodations for students with disabilities. Equitable AI governance is not a secondary concern to be addressed after the policy framework is built. It must be built in from the start.

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GOVERNANCE IS NOT A ONE-TIME EVENT

Perhaps the most important thing institutions need to understand is that AI governance is not a policy problem with a solution. It is an ongoing management challenge that requires sustained institutional attention.

This means establishing cross-functional governance structures—committees that include faculty, instructional designers, IT professionals, student representatives, and administrators—charged not only with developing initial policy but with reviewing and revising it on a regular cycle. It means conducting audits of AI tools used across the institution for bias, accuracy, and compliance with student data privacy regulations such as FERPA. It means investing in professional development so that faculty have the conceptual vocabulary and practical experience to integrate AI into their courses intentionally rather than reactively.

It also means being honest with students. When institutions adopt AI tools for administrative functions—advising, financial aid processing, early warning systems—students deserve to know. When AI-generated content is used in course materials, that

should be disclosed. The transparency norm that institutions rightly demand of students in their academic work should apply equally to the institution itself.

THE STAKES

AI is not simply a new tool—it is becoming part of the infrastructure of higher education. Adaptive learning platforms, AI-assisted grading, intelligent tutoring systems, and AI-powered administrative functions are not peripheral features. They are being woven into the operational fabric of institutions in ways that will be difficult to reverse.

The analogy to physical infrastructure is instructive. We do not build roads and then ask whether they will affect transportation patterns. We do not deploy electrical grids and then wonder whether they will shape how people live and work. Infrastructure decisions have long-term consequences that outlast the immediate decisions that produce them. The same is true of AI in education.

Institutions that act now—that build governance frameworks with transparency, literacy, and equity at their core—will be better positioned to shape how this technology develops in their context. Institutions that wait, or that address governance reactively as problems emerge, will find themselves managing the consequences of decisions they did not make.

The responsibility lies with institutions to ensure that the integration of AI into higher education strengthens, rather than diminishes, the core goals of learning. That is not a technological challenge. It is a governance challenge. And it is one that institutions of higher education are uniquely positioned—and obligated—to meet.

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NOTES

1. The framing of AI as embedded infrastructure—rather than a discrete tool or external threat—draws on broader debates in science and technology studies about how technologies become normalized within institutional practice. The governance challenge is analogous to earlier debates about the internet in education, where early prohibition policies gave way to integration frameworks as the technology became unavoidable.

2. UNESCO's 2023 guidance represents the first major international policy document specifically addressing generative AI in educational contexts. It is notable for its emphasis on human-centered design and its explicit acknowledgment that equity and access must be foundational rather than supplementary concerns.

3. The OECD Digital Education Outlook (2023) provides comparative data across 18 member nations on emerging regulatory approaches. As of early 2024, no OECD member had enacted specific binding regulation on generative AI in education; policy responses have primarily taken the form of non-binding guidance, reflecting the incremental approach described by Lindblom.

4. Selwyn's argument is not simply that AI is oversold, but that the technocentric framing of educational problems forecloses more productive discussions about pedagogy, equity, and the social purposes of schooling. This critique applies with particular force to the current moment, in which AI is frequently positioned as a solution to teacher shortages, equity gaps, and assessment inefficiencies—problems with structural causes that no algorithm can resolve.

5. Lindblom's incrementalism has been critiqued for its conservatism—its tendency to favor marginal adjustment over transformative change. That critique is noted here. The application to AI governance is not an argument against ambition, but against the illusion that comprehensive top-down policy can anticipate and manage a rapidly evolving technology. Iterative governance can coexist with ambitious goals.

6. FERPA (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) governs student data privacy in the United States. Its application to AI tools—particularly those that process student work, behavioral data, or performance metrics—remains an active area of legal interpretation. Institutions adopting AI tools for instructional or administrative purposes should conduct vendor compliance reviews as a baseline governance step.

7. The Tronsoft governance framework addresses AI governance in school-district and K–12 settings with a particular focus on Nebraska communities. While written for a practitioner audience, its emphasis on cross-functional governance committees, AI audits, and equity of access aligns with the academic governance literature reviewed here (see Glomb, 2026).

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