

Julie Schell, Assistant Vice Provost and Director of the Office of Academic Technology at the University of Texas at Austin, aims to educate faculty about how to use AI in the classroom.

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Colleges and Universities Offer Faculty Development for AI Use in the Classroom

Workshops, websites and other resources are helping educators enhance students' learning experience.

by **Erin Brereton** X
Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

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Eighty-six percent of college students now regularly use artificial intelligence tools in their studies, and 59% expect their university to increase the technology's use in teaching and learning, according to a Digital Educational Council survey.

However, more than half of the presidents, provosts and other higher education leaders who participated in an American Association of Colleges and Universities and Elon University survey, said a lack of faculty familiarity at their institution was posing a considerable challenge to the adoption of AI tools.

Instructors at some schools may have implemented AI functionality but are not yet using it to its full potential, says Matthew Leger, senior research manager for worldwide education digital strategies at IDC Government Insights.

"We're two years and some change into this AI revolution," Leger says. "The educational use cases like teaching and learning became prevalent early on; what really matters is does the faculty have the AI skills to be able to get that quality output out of whatever tool they're using?"

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Sampling AI Solutions Offers Insight Into Possible Uses

To prepare instructors to successfully integrate AI into their courses, schools are providing a number of resources.

In fall 2023, for instance, the University of Texas at Austin partnered with Grammarly for Education to investigate how to use generative AI ethically and effectively in the classroom.

Grammarly was willing to provide access to the generative AI capabilities embedded in its writing assistant platform for the data-driven evaluation without students' intellectual property being digested into its large language model, says Assistant Vice Provost of Academic Technology and Director of the Office of Academic Technology Julie Schell.

EXPLORE: Google Gemini has practical applications in higher education.

"Two years ago, we knew there was a real need to have balance between encouraging use but also being responsible in the adoption of AI on campus and providing support for our faculty," Schell says. "We were able to work through some testing on the implementation of it in an environment we felt reflected responsible adoption and protected our students' data."

Eighty-three percent of the university's pilot program participants said they had a positive experience with Grammarly's generative AI tool. Their input was used to create the "Faculty Guide to Getting Started with Generative AI," a handbook that contains instructional activities and lesson plans — and templates so faculty members can create their own.

"For the lesson plans, we're using a framework that is based on long-established principles of instructional design," Schell says. "For example, we know people learn best when their instructors know the learning outcomes that they want students to achieve. This toolkit is meant to help people engage with generative AI in a way that's based on the things we want to foster, like evaluating output for its alignment with the intention."

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Sharing Knowledge Can Strengthen AI Use

After the advent of generative AI raised questions about how the technology might impact teaching and learning, Wendy Howard, director of the Pegasus Innovation Lab at the University of Central Florida, and Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning Director Kevin Yee began conferring with colleagues from other universities about it.

"We said, 'I'm sure everyone's grappling with this; we need to provide a venue to come together and share best practices,'" Howard says. "We quickly jumped into pulling together something we could host on the UCF campus."

In September 2023, they held the first Teaching and Learning with AI Conference. Approximately 400 administrators, faculty members and other higher ed professionals attended the two-day event, which featured sessions on subjects such as using AI in instructional design and to support draft writing in class.

CHECK IT OUT: View the full "Faculty Guide to Getting Started with Generative AI" here.

In the conference's first year, attendees came from more than 150 colleges and universities; in 2024, participants hailed from more than 300.

While a number of education-related AI conferences center on the technology's technical development or back-end use to improve student outcomes, the Teaching and Learning with AI Conference focuses on how faculty members experience AI's use in the classroom, according to Howard, who co-chairs the event with Yee.

Idea exchanges have occurred during informal discussions that spill out of the conference's breakout sessions and continue over lunch; the topics attendees discuss, such as AI tools for video production, have become increasingly specialized, Howard says.



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Julie Schell, Assistant Vice Provost of Academic Technology and Director of the Office of Academic Technology, University of Texas at Austin

This year's three-day conference, scheduled to be held in Orlando in May, will include hallway kiosks, operated by conference committee volunteers, where participants can view how some of the tools being discussed in sessions work and try them out.

Programming has also been added to accommodate the influx of presentation proposal submissions; conference organizers received nearly twice as many as in 2024.

"We are introducing 10-minute lightning sessions," Howard says. "Because we couldn't accept some really great submissions for the 25-minute sessions, we're opening up the ballroom to have sessions that are TED Talk-style so we can get more ideas out there to generate conversations."

Written and Other Items May Help With AI Objectives

Faculty members at Vanderbilt University decide how they'll handle using AI in instruction; there's no institutionwide policy on why or when it can be used, according to Jennifer Ogg Wilson, director of the Office of Education Design and Development.

To support educators' efforts, the university's Institute for the Advancement of Higher Education (AdvancED) offers an online hub that houses generative AI resources such as information about accuracy concerns when using generative AI programs in research to visualize data.

Other materials include strategies for employing generative AI in course design and development and a chart that lists the role AI can play in teaching, along with the potential pedagogical benefits and risks.

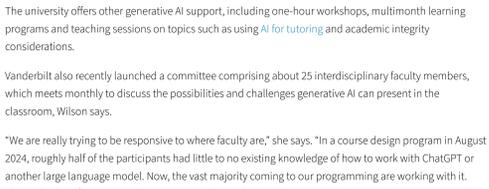
LEARN MORE: Institutions should craft generative artificial intelligence policies to regulate use.

"This has been a game changer for faculty in a lot of ways in their teaching, but also in their research," Wilson says. "We wanted to equip faculty with the information they needed to think about how they wanted to craft their own expectations and policies for students."

The university offers other generative AI support, including one-hour workshops, multimonth learning programs and teaching sessions on topics such as using AI for tutoring and academic integrity considerations.

Vanderbilt also recently launched a committee comprising about 25 interdisciplinary faculty members, which meets monthly to discuss the possibilities and challenges generative AI can present in the classroom, Wilson says.

"We are really trying to be responsive to where faculty are," she says. "In a course design program in August 2024, roughly half of the participants had little to no existing knowledge of how to work with ChatGPT or another large language model. Now, the vast majority coming to our programming are working with it. They're looking for more moderate or even advanced ways to lean into it in their teaching and research."



Source: Cengage, "At the Trailhead: The State and Future of AI in Higher Education," November 2024

Some Faculty Members May Need a Nudge to Adopt AI Tools

If instructors still haven't begun to use AI, receiving hands-on training from someone who demonstrates how the technology is effective can go a long way toward encouraging them to start, according to Leger.

"It feels like a lot of faculty are scared to make the leap," he says. "Starting with workshop-style training, then providing access to on-demand online trainings is important for ongoing support."

Schools may be able to incentivize educators to take advantage of available opportunities by offering paid training and certifications, Leger says, or making them part of performance evaluations.

"There are professional development performance management requirements educators have to follow through on," he says. "This can just be added as another one of those metrics."

With new AI capabilities constantly being introduced, Leger suggests making whatever type of training however it's done a continuous, ongoing process.

"Because education is not like you can just learn prompting skills exactly the way those skills are taught today and have it still work a year from now," he says. "Who knows what generative AI is going to look like in 12, 18, 24 months? Good prompting skills now might not be as good then. You need to be continuously learning new capabilities that come out."

A SAFE AI APPROACH

Privacy and data security, according to Digital Education Council research, is students' top concern about universities' use of artificial intelligence — which has also been a focus for institutions.

Vanderbilt University offers a walled-garden platform that requires university credentials to access as an alternative to more public generative AI options such as ChatGPT, says Office of Education Design and Development Director Jennifer Ogg Wilson.

"Anything that is input that's not going out broadly; it's residing within the Vanderbilt data system," Wilson says. "We encourage faculty to use the tool for that."

The University of Central Florida, which uses Microsoft products such as Copilot on campus, also promotes walled-garden system use, which Pegasus Innovation Lab Director Wendy Howard says can provide some control over data being shared with large language models.

Generally, Howard says, the school tries to create awareness so faculty members will use AI carefully and protect students' privacy.

"There are so many tools that faculty members, through academic freedom, are experimenting with," she says. "The ChatGPT free version is something we'll promote to use carefully; that's where we say that's a free tool you can make use of, but just be aware of privacy concerns, because that is not a walled garden."

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