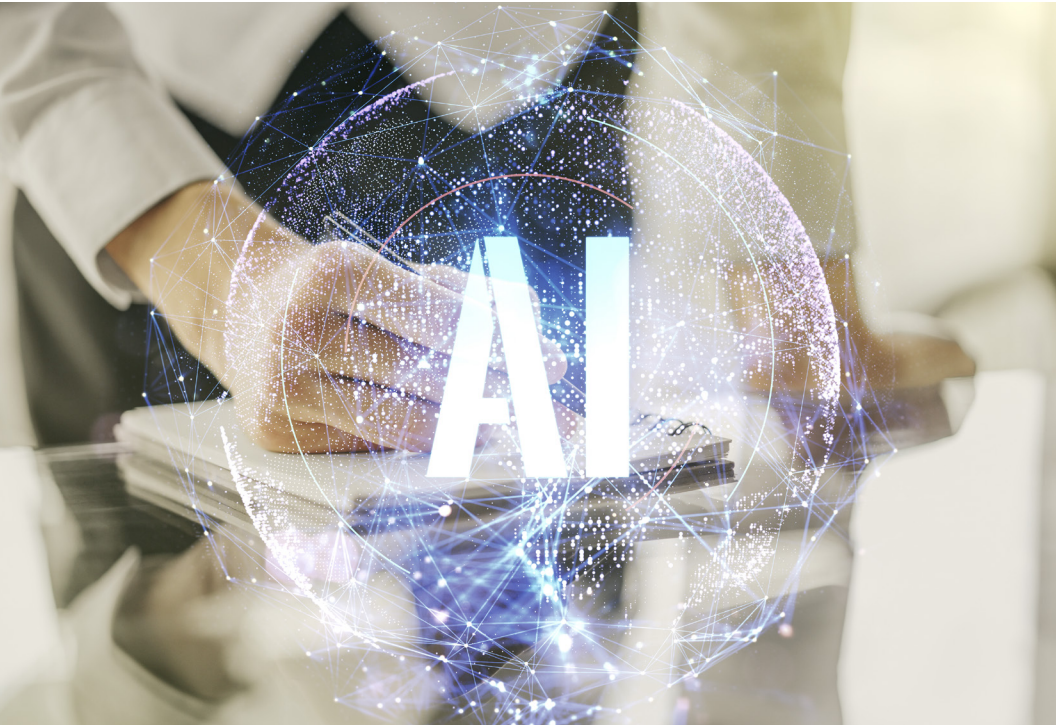


# Boards and Bots

A Guide to Artificial Intelligence for College Trustees

by Kyle Beltramini



*Perspectives on Higher Education*

American Council of Trustees and Alumni | Institute for Effective Governance®



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# Boards and Bots

## A Guide to Artificial Intelligence for College Trustees

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Despite being centers of intellectual, cultural, and technological innovation, colleges and universities have themselves been stubbornly resistant to change. Historically, education has been ranked among the least digitized sectors of the American economy. Before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, institutions spent less than 5% of their total budgets on information technology (IT).<sup>1</sup> Although this percentage has risen somewhat, higher education continues to direct a disproportionate amount of IT spending toward maintaining legacy systems rather than developing new technological capacities.<sup>2</sup> This mindset of maintenance over innovation has led colleges to accrue a large *technical debt* in the form of outdated hardware and software that require constant upkeep, thus preventing university IT departments from thinking proactively.<sup>3</sup>

The consequences of this limited investment were revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when institutions were abruptly required to develop and deploy remote learning at scale. Although publicly available video conferencing tools had attracted millions of users by the mid-2010s, only about one-third of all college students had taken an online course before 2020.<sup>4</sup> The transition from in-person to remote instruction was often chaotic; many instructors reported that they lacked experience teaching online and noted that their course designs and pedagogies proved far less effective at keeping students engaged in remote settings.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, professors were not prepared to use this technology, and their institutions offered few resources they could turn to in order to close this knowledge gap.

Innovative new teaching methods emerged not industry-wide but within individual classrooms and departments, thanks to the efforts of small groups of dedicated faculty.<sup>6</sup>

Now institutions find themselves in a similar position, as new developments in artificial intelligence (AI) powered by large language models (LLMs) threaten to further disrupt the industry. This technology is neither new nor novel, as the first publicly available version of OpenAI’s ChatGPT debuted in 2022 and surpassed 100 million monthly users just two months after its launch.<sup>7</sup> Despite this explosion in use, colleges have been slow to adapt, suggesting that higher education’s reactive posture to remote learning was not an aberration but the status quo. Yet again, professors find themselves forced to alter the way they teach to adapt to this new technology, and yet again they too often lack the institutional support they need. **Colleges must apply the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to this new technological challenge, and they must do so quickly.**

Artificial intelligence is already widely used on campus—approximately 85% of students and 84% of faculty and staff report having used AI over the past year—and has the potential to influence every aspect of higher education. As such, university governing boards will necessarily play a role in regulating it. While trustees should not expect to be involved in setting classroom policies, shared governance cannot be an excuse to delegate away board oversight. Moreover, as public fiduciaries, governing boards are charged with answering big-picture questions that affect the whole of the institution, such as: What responsibilities do we have to engage with AI to advance our institution’s mission? When should we be wary that it might compromise our institution’s integrity and mission?

Over the past 40 years, colleges and universities have needed to adapt to the advent of the personal computer, the internet, smartphones, and social media. Each has brought immense opportunities and challenges to education.<sup>8</sup> This guide equips trustees for this pressing task by providing a

brief overview of what AI is, how it affects students and faculty, and why boards must respond to its rapid adoption.



## What Is AI?

Over the past decade, tech companies have gathered ever more granular data on individuals and fed this information into complex algorithms designed to predict what content will be most appealing to each person. These equations have become shockingly effective, and they determine much of what you see while browsing the internet today, including products in online storefronts, search results, and social media posts. AI is essentially the next evolution of these formulas.

Whereas early iterations of these algorithms were written by (or at least understood by) teams of savvy computer scientists, modern AI models are primarily trained by specialized tools using an unfathomable amount of data. For example, it is estimated that OpenAI's ChatGPT 4 was trained on a dataset of approximately 10 trillion words and that the formulas that drive it have over 1.8 trillion variables.<sup>9</sup> Training these AI models involves modifying their underlying equations trillions of times, a task largely

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performed by other models. The sheer scope of this procedure renders it impossible for any one person to fully comprehend what was done and why.

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emergent rather than planned behavior: We know these tools are useful but cannot fully articulate or understand why a specific program acts the way it does. Not surprising, then, are the profound philosophical and moral questions surrounding how colleges and universities, businesses, and even sovereign governments should regulate this powerful force, and to what extent.

This complexity can also obscure what these generative AI models are doing, as leaders of AI companies frequently suggest that LLMs are already thinking in much the same way that humans do. For instance, Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, has asserted that his company’s aim is to create a “magic intelligence in the sky” that will surpass human understanding. Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei predicts that AI will be “smarter than a Nobel Prize winner” by 2027.<sup>10</sup>

That said, present-day AI may not be quite as mysterious as one might believe. Many independent studies suggest that while LLMs certainly *appear* to reason, they lack the stable frameworks needed to do so causally and instead rely on sophisticated pattern recognition skills to simulate what we call thinking.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this skepticism is shared even by those working to develop these tools. A 2025 survey of AI scientists found that 76% do not believe that LLMs will ever achieve true intelligence.<sup>12</sup>



## AI In Higher Education

Somewhere between the wild claims of tech CEOs and the pessimism of scientists lies the reality that higher education needs to grapple with: AI tools are ubiquitous, useful, and problematic. Their adoption is not limited to college-age learners, as most teachers and students in K–12 classrooms also reported using AI in the 2024–25 school year.<sup>13</sup> Resources that merely discuss the *potential* AI has to reshape higher education are thus outdated.

**Each subsequent freshman class is likely to be more familiar with—if not reliant upon—this technology.**

The reality is that this has been the case for years, as AI began to shift behaviors at the individual level nearly immediately. One survey found that 90% of college students had already used ChatGPT a mere two months after its release.<sup>14</sup> Because institutions have been several steps behind students in adopting AI on campus, care must be taken to develop policies that incorporate and regulate this technology. This need not be an entirely

unwelcome development, as AI-driven initiatives can dramatically increase student engagement and amplify instructors' effectiveness.

Nearly a decade ago, Georgia State University (GSU) began supplementing its recruitment efforts using AI chatbots, resulting in a 21% decrease in the number of high school graduates who failed to matriculate.<sup>15</sup> GSU had previously demonstrated the value of using counselors and automated text messaging to reach students, but these programs were difficult to operate at scale. The university leveraged chatbots to provide personalized messages to, for example, remind applicants about important deadlines, highlight resources for struggling students, and assist with access to financial aid. The outcome was a 50% reduction in students who withdrew with a balance, a 33% increase in engagement with their financial aid team, and a 10% increase in early registration.<sup>16</sup>

*[A]nalyzes that suggest AI can lead to learning gains often involve careful, structured engagement led by instructors using AI models specifically designed to facilitate student learning. When students are left to use commercially available tools to complete assignments as they see fit, they are less likely to engage with coursework in ways that prompt deep reflection or encourage critical thinking, which can negatively affect learning outcomes.*

Apart from facilitating administrative tasks, AI has already begun to reshape classroom instruction.<sup>17</sup> Some studies have shown that purpose-built AI tutors can help students learn more in less time compared to traditional classroom instruction. Given that many college courses have large class sizes that limit the ability of instructors to dedicate time to each student, it is not surprising that students frequently turn to AI tools to better understand their lessons.

However, analyses that suggest AI can lead to learning gains often involve careful, structured engagement led by instructors using AI models specifically designed to facilitate student learning. When students are left to use

commercially available tools to complete assignments as they see fit, they are less likely to engage with coursework in ways that prompt deep reflection or encourage critical thinking, which can negatively affect learning outcomes.<sup>18</sup> These findings highlight the importance of carefully considering how and if AI should be integrated into the classroom.

AI also poses an existential threat to traditional teaching pedagogies. Whether working on coding prompts, research papers, or take-home exams, students can (and often do) feed a prompt into a chatbot, which will generate a passable response they can tweak to maintain a veneer of legitimacy. And faculty are woefully unequipped to combat this malfeasance, with one study finding that 97% of AI-generated submissions go undetected.<sup>19</sup> While tools do exist to aid teachers in detecting AI-generated text, they are often more trouble than they are worth. These AI detection programs sometimes flag oft-repeated text as suspect. For example,

*Generating text is among the most common ways these tools can be used to subvert assessment, but it is far from the most pernicious. Newer AI models capable of operating as autonomous agents have been used to log into remote learning environments and participate in a course while impersonating a student.*

reporter James D. Walsh found that one of these tools flagged the Book of Genesis as “93.33 percent AI-generated.”<sup>20</sup> OpenAI notoriously shut down its own AI Text Classifier a half year after it released ChatGPT due to its “low rate of accuracy.”<sup>21</sup>

Generating text is among the most common ways these tools can

be used to subvert assessment, but it is far from the most pernicious. Newer AI models capable of operating as autonomous agents have been used to log into remote learning environments and participate in a course while impersonating a student. These *agentic* models are marketed to students for their ability to “watch lectures, read essays, write papers, participate in discussions, and submit your homework—automatically.”<sup>22</sup> Beyond simple deception, these tools allow students to use AI to automate tasks that are fundamental to college-level learning, including summarizing assigned

readings, outlining essays, performing research, and even taking notes during class. This trend of *cognitive offloading* can limit the development of critical thinking, problem solving, and analytical skills.<sup>23</sup> In addition, instructors face a difficult dilemma: They must either trust their gut and deal with the administrative fallout that can come with accusing a student of plagiarism or adopt more permissive assessment metrics that pass all but the most incompetent plagiarists.



## What Boards Can Do

Colleges and universities have been slow to respond systematically to the issues raised by AI. This reality was reflected in a 2025 survey by the American Association of University Professors, where respondents lamented a lack of “guidance on how to deal with the onslaught of AI in their professional lives.”<sup>24</sup> Further, 90% of participants noted that although their institutions had launched various AI-related initiatives, clear policies on implementation and use had yet to emerge.<sup>25</sup> Because this technology has the potential to disrupt every aspect of higher education, boards have a clear and essential role to play. Below are several steps boards can take to ensure that AI policies are being developed and implemented appropriately

- 1. Take stock:** Identify whether policies are being developed and who is responsible for implementing them.

Does the institution have a general AI policy, or does each department have its own? Were these policies established proactively by informed campus members, or were they written in response to emerging crises?

- 2. Form a team:** Create a new standing committee on technological affairs led by at least two board members and invite key faculty, administrators, and students to participate. Task this group with updating the board on its activities at every full meeting.

Provide clear goals and a detailed timeline to ensure that this team understands its responsibilities. The reports it provides should inform board policy going forward.

- 3. Facilitate collaboration:** Bring different members of the campus and relevant business communities together to assess existing policies, highlight effective and innovative practices, and identify areas where siloed decision-making is hindering a complete range of perspectives.

Because trustees rarely have the day-to-day knowledge of the effect and enforcement of their policies, it is vital to establish productive partnerships with a diverse range of community members. Take care not to rely only on information provided by the administration, and put effort into verifying the concerns of other groups.

- 4. Identify pain points:** Conduct interviews and campus surveys to determine whether each campus constituency's needs are being met.

Here the board's unique role in shared governance is of vital importance. Because trustees represent the institution as a whole, it is their task to carefully consider the (often conflicting) concerns of each individual constituency and weigh them against the university's mission.

- 5. Create a policy framework:** After the committee has reported its initial findings, the full board should adopt a resolution that clearly states its priorities for the implementation of AI on campus.

The institution's mission, vision statements, and strategic plan should guide this framework. Carefully consider how—and if—this technology can be incorporated in ways that benefit students

and faculty without eroding the quality of research and education. Signal to the committee what its priorities should be going forward.

- 6. Develop minimum policies:** With the full board's backing, the committee should oversee the development of policies on AI use and disclosure that can be adopted and modified throughout the institution.

Care must be taken to respect the academic freedom of individual instructors and recognize the disparate needs of individual departments. The committee should aim to produce not a comprehensive rule set but rather resources that clearly articulate the minimum standards to which students, faculty, and staff should adhere.

- 7. Oversee implementation, adoption, and education:** When proposals are approved by the full board, faculty and administrators should provide regular updates on how these plans are being carried out.

Boards should establish a concrete timetable for university-wide adoption. As with any new rule, education is key. Ensure that AI policies are incorporated into freshman orientation, new employee training, and department syllabi. Provide tools to faculty, staff, and students to increase AI literacy. Ensure that faculty have updated their pedagogies to safeguard academic rigor.

- 8. Be proactive:** Once these policies have been implemented, the technological affairs committee should shift to addressing the institution's technical deficits and identifying developing trends that may require the board's response.



## Conclusion and Next Steps

Ultimately, AI governance *is* governance. Boards cannot afford to be bogged down with the intricacies of AI theory. Instead, they should focus on ensuring that their institutions are responding to this technological development in a systematic, mission-driven manner. Institutions can no longer afford to be blown forward by the winds of change. The longstanding culture of stability and comfortable passivity must be replaced by one that supports innovation and forward-looking leadership.

As you begin to develop your approach to AI oversight, ACTA and our Institute for Effective Governance® stand ready to serve as a resource and sounding board. Drawing on a broad network of higher education experts, IEG provides information trustees can use in making decisions for their institutions, including best practices from across the country. IEG also offers a wide range of services including orientations and retreats, board management seminars, institutional assessments, and presidential searches and evaluations, at little or no additional charge.

It is also our hope that you can be a resource to your fellow board members at other institutions. If your college or university has developed a novel approach to this issue, we want to hear about it. Active trustees and administrators can serve as a motivational force to others nationwide, and ACTA will enthusiastically highlight successful innovations in this area.

We can be reached online at **BoardServices@GoACTA.org** and via our website **GoACTA.org**, or by phone at (202)-467-6787.



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