
CONVERSATION GROUPS

AI in the Theological Context

Reflections on Information Literacy and the
Students We Serve

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ABSTRACT As a hub for learning, the theological library facilitates the resourcing and delivery of academic material on campus. Within this setting, library staff serve at the forefront of curating content to support student objectives. The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) has led libraries to analyze anew the meaning of information literacy as students increasingly turn to this recent technology to research, analyze, and disseminate their knowledge. This conversation group examined how the rise of AI has impacted various seminary settings through the lens of the library, which is often tasked with developing and implementing new AI policy. An initial review focusing on student/faculty needs and AI policy development within the context of Columbia Theological Seminary led to subsequent discussion among the participants about the development of AI guidelines at their respective institutions.

BACKGROUND

An Assigned Project

In fall of 2023, we were tasked with drafting Columbia Theological Seminary's first-ever policy governing student use of artificial intelligence (AI) in academic work. We were not and are not AI experts or even aficionados, but our roles leading the Center for Academic Literacy and the library's public services lent themselves to exploring the implications of AI in our particular context. We focused our work on generative AI (GenAI), especially the large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT that were beginning to redefine questions around academic integrity, as they mimic human creative processes such as writing and thinking.

Over the course of months, we reviewed the literature, reviewed the policies of other institutions, solicited input from students at our own institution about their current and expected use of GenAI through the methods of focus groups and anonymous surveys, and invited faculty feedback as the policy was drafted. We ended up identifying three key themes around which to center our policy:

- Students need clarity from faculty about what usage is acceptable.
- Faculty need agency and flexibility.
- Our community needs a balance of broad principles for adaptability and details for applicability.

The resulting policy, therefore, was focused on ethical principles, contextual flexibility, and clear communication.

What Else We Learned

Yet those themes were not all we learned. The process itself taught us some essential lessons about institutional approaches to GenAI. For instance, GenAI's disruptive power had (re)revealed interconnections within the workings of our seminary and its functioning expectations and assumptions that led to cascading ripple effects—with each question it raised, several more were begged. What do we mean by “learning,” and what skills and practices do we expect to be a part of it? What learning practices does GenAI's involvement assist, and what practices does it impede? And if GenAI cannot be

reliably detected (which it cannot, at the time of this writing), how does that change pedagogical and assessment design?

Similarly, we found that the emergent and evolving qualities of AI as a whole can make it difficult to even know what questions to ask about its use and implications, largely because the proliferation of tools makes the definition of “AI use” a constantly moving target. And when we do find or develop answers to the questions we ask, those answers are, by necessity, contextual. Columbia Theological Seminary could not just copy and paste from another institution without giving thought to how GenAI affects our own specific context—its curriculum, its structure, its institutional politics, its student population, its infrastructure—in unique ways. To that end, then, conversation becomes essential to developing the nuance needed for effective response in our contexts. We must understand how people in different areas and functions are impacted, what their AI-related concerns and opportunities are, and how our institution is specifically positioned to respond in order to develop a shared approach that actually works.

It is this last point about conversation, pulling everything else together, that led to this conversation session.

BREAKOUT GROUPS

Reflections

After the brief introduction above, the remaining time was devoted to breakout groups which were tasked with responding to one of the following four prompts:

- How can you **identify attitudes toward GenAI adoption** (e.g., resistance, enthusiasm, indifference) among your students that can help your library shape its information literacy efforts? What considerations are important in your context when gathering this information?
- What specific **student-centered challenges** do you anticipate GenAI presenting in your context? What **constellation of strategies** and practices does your institution need in order to address each of these

potential challenges (e.g., policy/ides, educational best practices, formal initiatives, etc.)?

- How does the introduction of GenAI change what we understand **learning** to be and how we understand it to happen, particularly as it is related to **research, reading, and writing**?
- What is the **scope of your library's responsibility or role** when it comes to providing GenAI tools and literacy instruction to students at your institution, and what would that look like in practice? Are there other institutional **partners** who can support you in your efforts or cover ground outside your scope?

These questions were designed to obtain insights from the participants about the preliminary steps used to inform institutional policies under development or already in place, to determine how AI has affected learning processes, and the role that libraries play in disseminating information about AI tools at their institutions. The groups were provided approximately 20 minutes to reflect with another 20 minutes devoted to debriefing and concluding comments. It should be noted that not all of the groups returned the comments taken during their breakout sessions, resulting in some prompts not being answered.

Comments

In response to the question about specific student-centered challenges with the incorporation of Generative AI and the strategies that institutions used to confront such problems, several participants noted that both faculty and students had issues and expectations with the incorporation of AI at their schools. One group claimed that students at their institution relied on AI when they found themselves in desperate circumstances. Another group mentioned that students should be informed about those skills that are being overlooked when they rely on AI, and that faculty need to be trained in ways to integrate the new technology into their curricula as well as clearly specify on their syllabi whether AI is allowed and how it should be specifically used for their classes.

In terms of how libraries identify contextual factors important for their contexts to shape information literacy, the participants

responded by stating surveys, talks, listening sessions, and observations were useful. They also stressed the need for libraries to seek out student leadership to advise on matters of policy, especially if students were not forthcoming about their use of AI.

Two groups of participants addressed the scope of their libraries' responsibilities when providing generative AI tools and literacy instruction at their seminars. The members stated that the entire school population needed to be included when talking about AI and that the library should assume the primary responsibility for AI training with support being solicited at the very least from the upper administration. Such info sessions should suggest alternative AI policies for faculty to consider when writing syllabi or providing specific information about the various AI tools available. In some situations, the participants stated that libraries needed to ensure that students knew what AI was and that they should share their expertise about AI policy in the event of inadequate guidelines. Concerns surfaced about the need for libraries to continue to contribute to AI policy development and to continually update their skills to keep pace with the rapid changes occurring in AI technology.

Wrap Up

To conclude our discussion, the audience was invited to share their commentary and to reflect on the following questions going forward:

- What do you need to **learn more** about in order to inform your support of students trying to navigate this new technology? What types of resources might help you with that?
- What is one actionable (and attainable) **next step** that you could take to help your library respond constructively to GenAI in the next year?
- Who are your **potential partners** for your GenAI-related information literacy initiatives?

Our aim in holding this session was to provide a forum at Atla Annual 2025 in which participants could ultimately reflect on their institutions' preparation to implement and/or discuss the training that they provide for AI-enhanced technology. Given the information collected, we can provide some limited evidence for the role that

seminary libraries are undertaking to contribute to AI integration among theological institutions. By leaving our audience with the wrap-up questions above, we hope to continue this discussion in the future.