

The Vendor Writes the Syllabus: How Administrators Are Selling the University's Future Without Asking the Faculty

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Somewhere this quarter, at a university you could probably name, a provost stood before a slide deck and announced a "transformation." The word was chosen with care. Not a pilot, not an experiment, not a proposal to be debated in a faculty senate over two contentious semesters — a transformation, already underway, its vendor selected, its licenses purchased, its rollout calendar printed. The faculty were invited, in the way one is invited to a wedding whose date has already been set: to attend, to celebrate, and above all not to object. This is the characteristic gesture of higher education's AI moment, and once you learn to see it you cannot stop seeing it. When faculty at institutions across the United States began organizing against enterprise agreements with OpenAI this spring, what they were resisting was not the software but the sequence — the fact that the decision had been made and then, only then, described to the people who teach [9].

[9] Faculty Push Back Against OpenAI Deals - Inside Higher Ed

I want to map this week's higher-education discourse the way you would map a watershed: not by cataloguing every stream but by finding where the water is actually flowing and what it is carving. And the dominant flow is unmistakable. A coordinated wave of institutional frameworks, expert manifestos, and regional "good practices" reports has arrived, each declaring that the university must adapt to artificial intelligence or perish, and each treating the professoriate as, at best, a change-management problem to be solved. The American Association of University Professors, surveying the same terrain, has warned that these deployments are reshaping academic labor and academic freedom without the shared-governance processes that are supposed to govern exactly such changes [3]. The story of the week, in other words, is not a story about a technology. It is a story about who gets to decide what a university is for.

[3] Artificial Intelligence and Academic Professions

That is the question I want to hold onto, because the discourse works hard to make you forget it. Read enough vendor white papers and framework documents and you begin to absorb their premise: that

AI adoption is a settled destination and the only live question is the speed and grace of the journey. But a university is not a company that happens to have classrooms inside it. It is a peculiar institution whose product is judgment — the trained discernment of people who have spent decades learning to tell good work from bad, real inquiry from its imitation. When administrators buy that judgment’s replacement without consulting the people who embody it, they are not streamlining an operation. They are quietly redefining the institution as something else: a deployment platform for tools that vendors are eager to sell.

The 55% That Nobody in the C-Suite Wants to Read

Start with the single most important number in this week’s corpus, because everything else bends around it. When you actually ask teachers why they don’t use AI in their classrooms, a majority of the non-users — the figure hovers around fifty-five percent — cite not fear, not ignorance, not technophobia, but a professional judgment that the tools are not pedagogically relevant to what they are trying to teach [21]. Read that sentence twice. It means the largest single reason for non-adoption is a considered assessment, by domain experts, that the thing does not help them do the specific work of teaching their specific subject.

[21] Usos y percepciones sobre la Inteligencia Artificial ...

This is a devastating finding, and it is devastating precisely because it contradicts the narrative that every framework document depends on. The institutional AI literature runs on a story about resistance: faculty are cautious, faculty are set in their ways, faculty need “buy-in” and “upskilling” and “professional development” before they can be dragged into the future. UNESCO’s own competency framework, for all its thoughtfulness, catalogues the “barriers” that “prevent teachers from finding and using AI” as if non-use were a deficit to be remediated rather than, in many cases, a verdict to be respected [2]. But a verdict is exactly what the fifty-five percent represents. These are not people who could not figure out how to log in. They are people who logged in, looked at what the tool did, compared it to what their discipline requires, and concluded it was beside the point.

[2] AI competency framework for teachers - UNESCO

The reframing here matters enormously, and it is worth naming the rhetorical machinery that obscures it. To describe considered professional dissent as “resistance to change” is to perform a specific kind of delegitimation — the conversion of a substantive objection into a psychological defect. It is the move Noam Chomsky spent a

career dissecting in another domain, the way institutions manufacture the boundaries of acceptable opinion so that positions outside those boundaries register not as arguments but as noise [2]. When a strategy document treats the fifty-five percent as an obstacle to be overcome rather than as evidence to be weighed, it is not describing reality. It is enforcing a conclusion it arrived at before the evidence came in.

[2] Manufacturing Consent

And the stakes of this move are not abstract. Consider what the same technology's own promoters concede about its reliability. Generative systems are, as UNESCO puts it with clinical understatement, "stochastic in generating outputs," meaning the same input can yield different results, which makes the content "potentially less trustworthy, especially for the teaching of factual and conceptual knowledge" [2]. A physics professor who declines to route her students' first encounter with Newtonian mechanics through a system that might confidently invent a law of motion is not resisting change. She is doing her job. The fifty-five percent are, collectively, the university's immune system recognizing something the balance sheet cannot see.

[2] AI competency framework for teachers - UNESCO

Governance Traded for Administrative Speed

If the fifty-five percent is the week's most important number, the most important structural fact is the mechanism by which their judgment gets excluded. Universities have, at least in principle, an elaborate apparatus for making consequential decisions: faculty senates, curriculum committees, shared-governance protocols that exist precisely so that changes to what and how students are taught pass through the people qualified to evaluate them. AI adoption has, with remarkable consistency, routed around this apparatus. The AAUP's reporting frames the problem exactly: decisions about surveillance tools, about enterprise licenses, about the integration of automated systems into instruction and assessment are being made administratively and presented to faculty as accomplished facts [3].

[3] Artificial Intelligence and Academic Professions

Why the hurry? Part of the answer is structural — the vendor sales cycle moves at a speed that shared governance was designed to resist, and that resistance is now recoded as dysfunction. A recent global Delphi study, gathering expert consensus on how generative AI in higher education ought to be governed, is instructive less for its recommendations than for what its very existence reveals: that governance is being treated as a design problem for a small panel of experts to solve rather than a democratic function of the institution to exercise [11]. There is something quietly telling about convening a Delphi panel — a method literally built to synthesize expert opinion

[11] Governing generative AI in higher education: a global Delphi ...

at a distance from the messy body it governs — to determine the rules that thousands of faculty will be expected to follow. The form of the solution reproduces the problem. Expertise is invoked; the actual experts in the classroom are consulted as data points, not as agents.

Watch, too, how the vendor documents position themselves in this vacuum. Microsoft’s 2025 special report on AI in education reads as a genre study in benevolent inevitability: transformation is coming, the report is here to help you manage it wisely, and the wise management happens, naturally, to require the deployment of Microsoft’s tools at institutional scale [1]. The document is not lying about anything in particular. It is doing something subtler and more effective: it is supplying administrators with a ready-made vocabulary — “readiness,” “enablement,” “responsible integration” — that makes the purchase feel like stewardship. When a provost speaks of transformation, the words are frequently the vendor’s words, laundered through a procurement process into the language of institutional mission.

[1] 2025 AI in Education: A Microsoft Special Report

The imbalance this produces is the defining feature of the discourse, and it deserves to be stated plainly: the conversation about AI in higher education is overwhelmingly a conversation about governance, procurement, and deployment, and only vestigially a conversation about pedagogy. The frameworks proliferate; the syllabi barely change. Quebec’s guide to the “responsible integration” of AI in higher-education establishments is a serious, careful document — and even it is structured around institutional integration first, with the actual teaching questions folded inside the governance scaffolding rather than driving it [14]. The order of operations tells you who is writing the syllabus. When the deployment framework precedes the pedagogical rationale, the vendor has already won the argument nobody was allowed to have.

[14] Intégration responsable de l’intelligence artificielle dans les ...

Six Universities and the Map of a Continent

Here the discourse commits an error so familiar it should trigger institutional muscle memory, and yet it is being committed again, at scale, in real time. The regional frameworks now shaping AI policy across whole higher-education systems are being generalized from a tiny number of wealthy, elite, mostly private institutions — and then exported as normative models to universities that could not sustain them if they tried.

The Ibero-American case is the clearest. The OEI’s ambitious mapping of AI’s arrival in the region’s higher education draws its picture of “good practices” heavily from a small set of well-resourced private

universities, and then proposes that picture as a regional trajectory [16]. The problem is not that these institutions did anything wrong; it is that a model derived from institutions with abundant infrastructure, generous per-student funding, and dedicated technology staff cannot simply be transplanted onto public universities operating at a fraction of the resource. To recommend resource-intensive AI adoption to institutions that lack reliable connectivity and adequate staffing is not to close a gap. It is to open one — and to open it in the name of closing it.

We have run this experiment before. The digital-divide literature of the previous two decades documented, exhaustively, how technology mandates designed around well-resourced contexts widen inequality when imposed on under-resourced ones, because the mandate assumes a baseline that the poorer institution has to divert scarce funds to reach. The current equity research is already flashing the same warning. WGU Labs asks the unavoidable question directly — will AI tools widen the equity gap? — and finds that the benefits accrue disproportionately to students and institutions already advantaged, while the costs of adoption fall hardest on those least able to absorb them [22]. A broader analysis of AI’s potential impact on equity and inclusion reaches a compatible conclusion: without deliberate structural intervention, these tools default to amplifying existing disparities rather than correcting them [17].

The community-college sector is where this tension becomes most acute, and most revealing. Achieving the Dream’s task-force report on building the “AI-enabled community college” is genuinely earnest about serving working students and first-generation learners, and precisely because of that earnestness it exposes the trap: the institutions with the thinnest margins are being asked to shoulder the largest relative investment to keep pace with a standard set by the richest schools [7]. Set that alongside the AAUP’s account of the California State University system, where austerity and the language of efficiency are being used to reshape working-class education from above, and the pattern resolves into something harder than a technology story [5]. The AI framework becomes a vector for a budgetary logic that was already looking for a justification. The tool arrives; the cuts arrive with it, wearing the tool’s forward-looking face.

There is a quieter injustice buried in the export model, too. When a framework built at six elite universities becomes the regional benchmark, the institutions that cannot meet it are recoded, once again, as lagging — resistant, behind, in need of catching up. The same delegitimizing move performed on the fifty-five percent of faculty is performed on entire institutions. A public university that reasonably

[16] PDF La llegada de la IA a la educación superior en Iberoamérica: Un mapa ...

[22] Will AI Tools in Education Widen the Equity Gap? | WGU Labs

[17] PDF The Potential Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Equity and Inclusion ...

[7] Creating the AI-Enabled Community College:

[5] Cal State’s War on Working-Class Education | AAUP

declines to divert its faculty-hiring budget into an enterprise AI license is not falling behind. It is exercising exactly the institutional judgment that the discourse has trained us to read as failure.

The Detection Wars as a Symptom, Not a Problem

Nowhere does the pedagogical cost of governance-first thinking show more clearly than in the escalating war over academic integrity, which this week's corpus documents in almost lurid detail. Faced with students who can generate plausible essays on demand, institutions have reached — reflexively, and largely without faculty deliberation — for detection and surveillance tools. The results have been a slow-motion catastrophe of exactly the kind that consulting the classroom might have prevented.

The detectors do not work, and their failures are not random — they fall on the vulnerable. AI-detection systems accuse students of cheating falsely, with consequences that can derail an academic career, and the false positives cluster among the students least equipped to fight back [8]. In the United Kingdom, analysis has shown that these tools disproportionately flag international students, whose non-native prose registers to the algorithm as "machine-like," turning a fairness crisis into a discrimination crisis [6]. The statistical literature on false positives has hardened around the same conclusion: the base rates guarantee that at scale, innocent students will be accused in numbers no institution can defend as acceptable [10].

What this has produced on the ground is not integrity but its opposite. The Los Angeles Times's reporting from inside the California "cheating wars" describes classrooms transformed into zones of mutual suspicion — extreme surveillance, false accusations, students recording themselves writing to prove their innocence, professors playing forensic detective instead of teaching [13]. The relationship on which education actually depends — a teacher's trust in a student's good faith — is being liquidated to power a technology that does not deliver what it promised. Surveys now register the damage as a measurable decay of trust between students and their institutions [20]. Remote proctoring, examined through an ethical lens, turns out to purchase a thin simulacrum of security at the cost of student dignity and privacy, and the case against it grows stronger the closer you look [18].

I want to insist on the diagnosis here, because the detection wars are usually filed as a discrete problem — a technical arms race between cheating tools and catching tools. They are not. They are a symptom of the governance-first architecture I have been describ-

[8] Detectores de IA acusan falsamente a estudiantes de hacer trampa, con ...

[6] Catching the wrong students: AI detection, international students and ...

[10] False Positive AI Detection: Stats, Causes & Defense Strategies 2026

[13] Inside college AI cheating wars: extreme surveillance, false ...

[20] Trust in colleges decaying over AI cheating - PressReader

[18] Remote Proctoring Through an Ethical Lens: The Case Against ...

ing. Detection and proctoring tools are what you buy when you have decided to deploy generative AI across the institution without first asking the faculty how it changes the meaning of an assignment. The surveillance is the downstream cost of skipping the pedagogical conversation upstream. Had that conversation happened — had the fifty-five percent been treated as advisors rather than obstacles — a great many institutions would have arrived at the answer that thoughtful faculty have been reaching independently: that the question “is using ChatGPT cheating?” is a pedagogical question about the purpose of an assessment, not a security question to be outsourced to a vendor’s black box [15].

The deeper cost is cognitive, and it lands on the very students the surveillance claims to protect. Psychological research is beginning to trace how routine reliance on these systems reshapes the human skills and thinking they were supposed to support — how offloading the cognitive labor of composition and reasoning can atrophy the capacities that a degree is supposed to build [12]. An institution simultaneously encouraging AI use through enterprise licenses and punishing it through detection software is not confused. It has simply never held the conversation that would have forced it to choose, because the people who could have framed that choice were never invited to the table.

[15] Jean François Cerisier : Utiliser ChatGPT, est-ce tricher ? Réflexions ...

[12] How AI is reshaping human skills and thinking

Buying Back What the University Already Trained

Now raise your eyes from the campus to the economy that surrounds it, because this is where the institutional bet acquires its real stakes and its real irony. Universities are not merely consumers of AI. They are, and have always been, the places where the science of AI was made — where the researchers were trained, where the foundational work was done, where the graduate students who would go on to build the frontier labs first learned what a gradient was. The talent that industry now commands was cultivated, at enormous public and institutional expense, inside the university.

And then it left. The migration of AI talent from academia to industry is one of the defining structural facts of the current moment, and Alvin Toffler’s late diagnosis of accelerating institutional lag in [2] reads as an unintentional prophecy of it: the knowledge-producing institution finds itself outpaced by the knowledge-exploiting one, unable to retain the very people whose work it made possible. The frontier labs offer compensation no university can match; the researchers follow the money and the compute; and the university is left having paid to train the people who now build tools it cannot afford to build itself.

[2] After Shock

Here is the closing of the loop, and it is worth stating slowly because it is the crux of the whole matter. The university trains the researcher. Industry poaches the researcher. Industry builds the product using knowledge the university generated. And now the university buys that product back — as an enterprise license, a per-seat subscription, a “transformation” partnership — paying a vendor for access to capabilities that grew from its own soil. When faculty pushed back against the OpenAI deals, this is part of what they were pushing back against: the spectacle of the institution purchasing, at a premium and on the vendor’s terms, a distilled and privatized version of its own intellectual output [9]. The transaction is not neutral. It transfers resources out of the university — out of the departments, the libraries, the faculty lines that constitute its actual mission — and into the accounts of firms whose interests are not the university’s.

[9] Faculty Push Back Against OpenAI Deals - Inside Higher Ed

This is why the resource-redirection at the heart of this week’s stakes is not a bookkeeping detail. Toffler’s larger argument across his work was that societies which fail to invest in their own knowledge institutions forfeit their future to those that do — the same logic he applied to national competition applies inside the university’s own budget [2]. Every dollar redirected from a philosophy line or a language program or a reduction in class size toward a vendor’s AI license is a bet: a wager that the tooling matters more than the teaching, that the platform matters more than the programs, that the university’s future lies in what it can deploy rather than in what it can think. It is a bet the university is making against itself, and it is making it with the money that funds the very inquiry the bet devalues.

[2] After Shock

The MDPI analysis of AI in higher education poses the question in its own title — is this bridging or dividing? — and the honest answer emerging from the evidence is that it depends entirely on who decides and in whose interest [4]. Decided by faculty, in the interest of pedagogy, some of these tools might genuinely bridge. Decided by administrators, in the interest of vendors, they divide — resources from mission, students from teachers, the university from its own reason for being.

[4] Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: Bridging or ...

The Conversation That Was Never Convened

What is conspicuously missing from this week’s discourse — and its absence is the most damning evidence of all — is the framing that would treat faculty as partners in a shared inquiry rather than as either obstacles or end-users. The frameworks address faculty in two registers only: as resistance to be managed, or as customers to be

onboarded. There is almost no document in the corpus that begins from the premise that the people who teach might have something essential to contribute to deciding whether, when, and how these tools belong in a classroom — that their fifty-five-percent skepticism might be a resource rather than a problem.

This is not an argument against artificial intelligence in the university. It is an argument about who writes the syllabus, and the phrase is not a metaphor. The syllabus is where the university's judgment becomes concrete — where a scholar decides what a student needs to encounter, in what order, tested how, and to what end. When a vendor's assessment tools, a vendor's tutoring bots, and a vendor's detection software collectively determine what a course can require and how it can be evaluated, the vendor is writing the syllabus, whatever name appears at the top of the document. The thoughtful ethics literature already points toward the alternative: that the genuinely interdisciplinary, genuinely humane integration of these tools would require exactly the kind of holistic, pluralistic deliberation that treats ethics and pedagogy as constitutive rather than decorative [2]. That deliberation is what shared governance was built to house. It is what the current rollout is built to bypass.

The scholarship on teaching and generative AI that has been done carefully — the patient work of instructors thinking through what these systems mean for their specific disciplines — consistently arrives at nuance the frameworks cannot accommodate: that the answer varies by field, by level, by the particular capacity a course is trying to build, and that no institution-wide mandate can substitute for that situated judgment [19]. This is precisely the knowledge that a top-down transformation destroys in the act of overriding it. The sculpture professor knows something about what her studio requires that no Delphi panel and no Microsoft report can supply, and the tragedy of the current moment is that the discourse has been engineered to make her knowledge inaudible.

So here is the shape of the wager the university is being asked to accept, laid bare. It is being asked to redefine itself from a site of critical inquiry into a deployment platform, to trade the slow, argumentative, judgment-preserving machinery of shared governance for the speed the vendor sales cycle demands, and to redirect its scarce resources from the programs that constitute its mission toward the tooling that constitutes the vendor's revenue [3]. It is being asked, in short, to bet on its own obsolescence — to accept a future in which its distinctive value, the cultivation of trained human judgment, has been outsourced to systems that its own promoters concede cannot be trusted with factual knowledge [2].

[2] AI Ethics - The MIT Press Essential Knowledge series

[19] Some Ethical Considerations for Teaching and Generative ...

[3] Artificial Intelligence and Academic Professions

[2] AI competency framework for teachers - UNESCO

The people best equipped to check that bet are the faculty, and the fifty-five percent who have already looked hard at these tools and found them wanting are not a drag on the future. They are the clearest signal the institution possesses that the emperor's transformation may be underdressed [21]. A university that treated that signal as intelligence rather than insubordination — that convened the conversation the frameworks were designed to skip — might yet make good decisions about these tools. Some of them would be yes. Many of them would be careful. That is what judgment looks like, and judgment is the one thing a university cannot buy back once it has sold it. The vendor is holding the pen. It is not too late to ask who invited him to the table, and whether the syllabus he is writing is one anyone who teaches would sign.

[21] Usos y percepciones sobre la Inteligencia Artificial ...

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