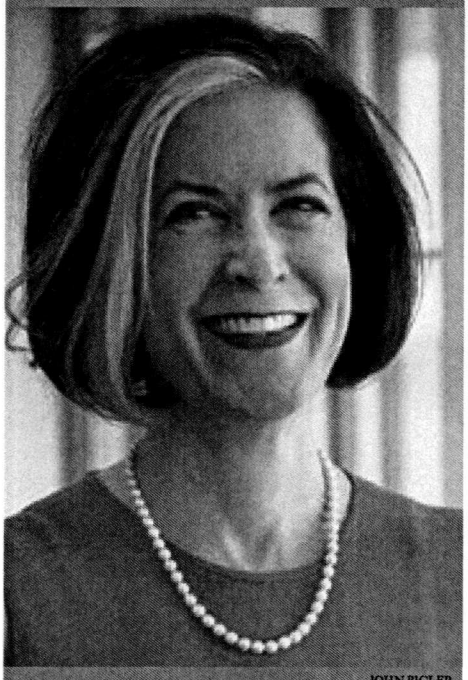
AI Will Play a Surveillance Role in Higher Ed



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That may be a good thing.

By HOLLIS ROBBINS

TOP UNIVERSITIES are at the top not because the faculty members and students are smarter but rather because the administrators are smarter. Top research universities in 2035 will have succeeded in utilizing the powers of AI in the smartest ways. Art, music, and film schools that have embraced AI in their curriculum will also thrive. Institutions that have not adapted to AI will struggle or close. Colleges and universities are already facing a public skeptical of what appears to be higher ed's political and social-justice mission, and those that prioritize a social rather than educational mission may

also dwindle in number. Universities whose leaders seize the opportunity to redeem and reclaim higher ed as the stronghold of verifiable knowledge production will succeed.

TAKEAWAY

The value proposition of a college education – access to reliable information – will be far easier to see in 2035 than it is now.

Artificial intelligence is already changing higher ed in multiple and contradictory ways. The new AI large language model technologies (ChatGPT, Anthropic) were largely developed outside the university setting. Recognizing the need to catch up, universities are scrambling to invest in AI research, building AI systems and products on one part of campus even as leaders on another worry about the validity of contributions by AI chatbots to the work of faculty members, staff, and students. The threats of AI misinformation and hallucination are far more of a problem for higher ed than they are for industry, which means universities must guard as well as innovate.

By 2035, thriving universities will maintain walled gardens of uncontaminated information, a guarded vault of verified facts and current knowledge tended by professors and researchers for the benefit of students and the university community. Universities will realize that they are the holders and producers of two increasingly valuable assets: reliable scholarship that AI researchers are willing to pay for and reliable information for the public. Universities will produce and sell content for public consumption, filling the void left by the collapse of global news organizations and strong regional newspapers.

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KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

University researchers are already lagging behind industry and independent research groups in using AI technology. In a decade there will be increased incentives for top academic scientists to leave universities for AI-driven research laboratories.

Accordingly, two key roles for administrators at research universities in 2035 will be to stay on top of AI knowledge production and capabilities outside of academe and to ensure the integrity of existing stores of knowledge, current scholarship, and teaching in an era when information is increasingly unreliable. This role will mean developing new layers of scrutiny of faculty publications for veracity, originality, reliability, and replicability. Publications will need to be screened before entering libraries and joining the archive of established scholarship. This will be an enormous task, sifting scholarly wheat from chaff, performed by scholars with AI assistance.

As a result of careful screening, a great deal of existing academic research and scholarship will be marked with an asterisk, indicating that it is unverifiable, unreliable, and of little significance. Currently libraries do not make distinctions about scholarly worth. AI will allow and perhaps force these distinctions.

The fundamental reorganization of university library holdings into reliable and unreliable works may also result in new dis-

ciplines, subdisciplines, or in some cases disciplinary homogenization. Currently there is a great deal of quantitative behavioral scholarship that could fall under economics, psychology, communication, sociology, or epidemiology, for example. These historical categories may disappear as AI proposes new groupings without disciplinary bias.

A not-insignificant percentage of faculty members will lose their current positions at research universities when their work does not survive rigorous vetting and scrutiny.

> By 2035 there will be two kinds of universities: political and nonpolitical.

Beyond ensuring the integrity of research and teaching, administrators at large institutions (or consortiums of smaller ones) will also draw on AI to better understand what is growing in their own walled garden. AI can scan and absorb all papers, publications, and works in progress across a given institution and offer up a clear and detailed picture of the range of research produced by its faculty and graduate students.

The world outside of higher ed does not realize how deficient the internal communication and collaboration infrastructure is at most universities. In a large research flagship, for example, there may be 50 to 100 faculty members and grad students working on a topic, say, Brazil — botanists, economists, anthropologists, epidemiologists, mining engineers, language scholars, marine scientists — each without a clue about the work of the others. Odds are most have never even heard of one another. The trend in institutions forming "interdisciplinary hubs" over the past decade is in part meant to resolve these challenges to internal communication and collaboration. Historically, universities have been decentralized and disorganized.

AI will give administrators a clearer picture of the overlap and potential for collaboration among labs and faculty members, and will allow for more efficient institutional support for faculty research. Administrators will be able to perceive new clusters and nurture them. Those who work alone, outside the gravitational pull of past or future groupings, will be at risk of increased invisibility or precarity. In those cases, administrators will also have a role in assessing the viability of research that may be truly innovative — like mRNA technology — or a dead end.

AI will likely play a surveillance role in higher-ed hiring, too. While current platforms like Academic Analytics are widely used but infamously unreliable at capturing scholarly work outside traditional channels (and are biased in favor of elites, not including scholars or researchers at non-R1 universities or at HBCUs), new AI applications could be more capacious in apprehending a much broader and more inclusive forest of scholarship and scholars.

TEACHING

Teaching is another area in which AI will likely play a surveillance role. Administrators will also be responsible for ensuring the integrity and veracity of information taught

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to students. Curricula will be carefully maintained, updated, and decontaminated. Access to this uncontaminated information (rather than the unsound and unreliable information available in the wider world) is what students will be paying for. The value proposition of a college education will be far easier to see in 2035 than it is at present.

While AI technology has been touted as producing new teaching tools like chatbot tutors, the primary teaching paradigm at top research universities in 2035 may very well be old fashioned seminars where small groups of students discuss knowledge production and acceleration with top scholars, whether in physics, history, literature, geography, astronomy, or other fields. The key questions will be: How do we know what we know? What remains unknown? What needs seeking out?

TAKEAWAY

New scrutiny of research means many faculty members will be let go and whole disciplines may disappear.

At major research universities, a not-insignificant percentage of teaching faculty will lose their current positions if their teaching does not survive rigorous vetting or if teaching veers into advocacy or politics. The goal of research universities will be research, not advocacy.

That is, by 2035, there will be two kinds of universities: political and nonpolitical. Successful research universities will have moved political activism off campus. For students and faculty at these universities, politics may be a topic of research, but political activity as a normal part of academic life will be frowned upon.

The successful institutions in 2035 that remain sites of political activity will most likely be liberal-arts colleges and art schools. Creative arts, music, theater, and film majors will use AI in their creative endeavors.

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION

As AI gives university administrators a clearer picture of the work being supported across an institution, questions of how to capitalize on this work will emerge. The patent and intellectual-property infrastructure that turns innovations into products and revenue streams already exists. By 2035 it will be more efficient and the successful research universities will collaborate with progress-driven companies outside of higher ed, delivering trained graduates to AI clean energy innovators, space-exploration companies such as SpaceX, and others.

Perhaps sooner, however, universities will also recognize that they are leaving tens or perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue on the table by not platforming the news of their own creations and research findings.

Currently, the market from science news alone is hundreds of millions per year. Science websites such as Phys.org, SciTechDaily.com, ScienceDaily.com, LiveScience.com, ScienceAlert.com, and others each claim $5 million to $15 million annually in advertising revenues. The business model: Find a recently published scientific study, summarize it for a lay reader, get a quote from one

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of the authors or an expert in the field, select an illustration or two, and give the piece a snappy headline. The editorial staff are largely former academics who know where to find original research and who can teach paid writers to synthesize.

As AI assists universities in recognizing and better appraising the news value of the research they have supported, the logical next step will be for universities to claim for themselves the value of that news delivered directly to readers, bypassing the existing secondary market for this news, which may not always present information reliably. Universities are already stockpiles of information that the outside world has never seen. If the advertising model will still, in 2035, fund the delivery of reliable, interesting knowledge to the world, universities will finally enter this market.

Legacy media, long the professional home of college-educated journalists who held firm to notions of truth and integrity, is dying. Newspaper science sections, book reviews, and substantive arts and politics sections are few and far between. The universities that are able and willing to assign sufficiently clear property rights to researchers whose work will attract public attention and ad revenue will win this market. While the misinformation ecosystem of 2035 is difficult to predict, a university guarantee of information reliability will undoubtedly be of increased value.

In short, AI may help universities enter the news industry by surveying and establishing the market value of research content (science, anthropology, geography, history, global literature, and all other realms). Who will do the writing? Some combination of paid professional writers and student journalists. Student media already covers local news — nightlife, movies, student theater, crime — with some competency. In the last two years student newspapers at Stanford, Harvard, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Chicago have stepped up to become the sites of forceful investigative journalism. With the decline of local and regional news outlets, platforming student journalists with access to verifiable data makes even more sense. Administrators currently have little idea that faculty research has a market value for readers and advertisers. In 2035, determining and protecting that value will be part of the job.

TAKEAWAY

Turning research and innovation into revenue will be easier — and higher ed may even displace other industries.