

AI on Campus: No Single Story

The first in a new series of post-workshop reflections

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In the week leading up to "Real Talk About AI on Campus," a faculty development workshop I led in my role as Assistant Director for the Center for the Advancement of Teaching (CAT) at Wake Forest University, I found myself thinking of Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's concept of the "single story." In "[The Danger of a Single Story](#)," Adichie's 2009 TED Talk, the author describes interactions with her American college roommate when she came to the U.S. to study: the roommate assumed Adichie did not know how to use a stove and treated her with "patronizing, well-meaning pity." When it came to Africa, Adichie says, the roommate had been taught "a single story of catastrophe." In her talk, Adichie provides a method for combating such stereotypes: listen to more voices, seek to understand the complexity of all people-groups, and resist the allure of a single, all-encompassing story.

Adichie's critique of the single story came to mind as I met one-on-one prior to the workshop with the student volunteers I had recruited. The meetings were packed with many and diverse stories. A self-described early adopter characterized generative AI as an indispensable "launchpad" for his own creative thinking and work. "When professors ban AI," I asked, "is it like working with one hand tied behind your back?" He nodded vigorously.

In a different conversation, a student described AI as "incredibly helpful in explaining concepts." This student had spent the summer as a subject in a research study about the potential for generative AI to teach students complex biology lab tasks. Despite her positive experience with AI's capabilities as a teacher, she shared that she uses it as little as possible in her schoolwork for fear of becoming too reliant on it. She described many peers at Wake Forest as similarly hesitant.

The two hours I spent with eight Wake Forest students and twenty-one faculty and staff members on September 19 reinforced the idea that there is no single story of the role of AI in students' experience of higher education. The workshop featured an hour-long student panel discussion. Half of the panelists expressed the techno-optimist perspective that AI enhances learning. As evidence, they pointed to AI chatbots as a source of nonjudgmental "tutoring" that could be tailored to a student's current level of understanding and to chatbots' ability to quickly synthesize uploaded class notes and slide decks into useful study guides. One student emphasized AI's usefulness in writing polished, professional-sounding emails. The other half of the panel expressed a techno-pessimism rooted both in doubts about the reliability of information generated by AI, as well as the long-term negative impact on learning that can stem from offloading cognitive tasks to AI.

Confirming many faculty's fears, students gave accounts of peers outsourcing assignments to AI, especially as a strategy for managing a busy schedule. For example, if a student has an exam to prepare for and a paper to write on a short deadline, they might delegate the paper-writing to ChatGPT and dedicate their own time to studying for the exam. Nevertheless, a number of panelists had a strong negative reaction to the suggestion that they might use generative AI to complete assignments for them. In one student's words, "It feels like it takes away from everything I've learned and been building for myself." Another student gave voice to mixed feelings: it was a relief to be able to turn to generative AI when he needed assistance with an assignment, but he was often anxious that an instructor might find his use of it—which from his perspective was genuinely to improve his grasp of course concepts—to be a case of academic dishonesty. A number of students shared that they were not clear on which uses of AI were permissible and which not.

The most spirited dialogue between faculty and students erupted when students weighed the value of asking an AI chatbot for assistance with course content against the value of visiting office hours. Students identified the 24/7 access they have to AI as a convenience of enormous value. If they are confused about a math concept at 11 pm, they now have a place they can go for help. They also value the ability to consult a source with infinite patience to explain and re-explain ideas (cheerfully!). Many hands in the audience shot up as faculty expressed deep concern over students disengaging from the relational dimension of the learning experience. A student echoed this worry, describing learning as lonelier now that students no longer rely on one another to fill in gaps in their comprehension. The first days of class used to be a "wild scramble" to get the contact information of classmates, this student reported. Now, "people have another option."

The earnest back-and-forth on this subject manifests the ambivalence that disruptive technologies awaken. There is something powerful, new, and exciting in our midst, opening a horizon of new possibilities and even new realities. Yet in the rush toward this dazzling, convenient, and (it must be said) enabling technology, something old and previously ubiquitous on college campuses threatens to be lost. That "old" thing is nothing more and nothing less than a human being at the other end of a question, listening, processing, and considering how best to respond in order to give rise to learning and understanding.

One difference between asking a question to a human being and asking that same question to ChatGPT is that a question posed to your professor or to the classmate sitting beside you might become (and on a college campus, often does become) the birth of a meaningful new relationship—a relationship that might even change your life. At the CAT, we identify relationships as a critical dimension of teaching and learning. We describe our mission as, among other things, "helping teachers foster meaningful relationships with students." Moreover, there is robust evidence that student-to-student teaching of the type that occurs in study groups supports student learning and success. What happens when students replace office hour visits with back-and-forths with Gemini? Or when students no longer see the value in intellectual engagement with peers, like the student from [Beth McMurtrie's article](#) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, who was rebuffed by a classmate when she suggested they exchange English papers and provide each other feedback. Explaining that she was too busy for such an exchange, the classmate pointed the student to Grammarly, an online tool that uses AI to provide feedback on writing.

What is the single story of AI widely circulating in higher education? It was made plain in the May 2025 headline in *New York Magazine*, "[Everyone Is Cheating Their Way Through College](#)," and many [similar articles](#) since. It is present, too, at Wake Forest, but students challenged it during the workshop by adding their voices and stories into the mix. A colleague subsequently wrote to me in an email, "Eight students, eight different experiences!! I had erroneously assumed all students were using ChatGPT all day, every day. I enjoyed hearing them so much that I took pages of notes on their conversations." This is not to say that all is well. A student panelist told me, in private, with a note of urgency and frustration in her voice, that unauthorized use of AI was "incredibly prevalent" in Wake Forest courses. We need to proceed with our eyes wide open, and we also need to hold multiple truths together. Some students are using AI to learn, but are afraid that they will be accused of using it to cheat. Some students are outsourcing assignments to AI. Other students will not, not ever, not even to get out of a terrible fix. Perhaps one way through the obstacle course we traverse as we aim to teach all of these different students, all with different stories, is to engage in more dialogues that allow us to understand the complexity of being a student in 2025. To teach well, we need to understand the multiple, conflicting stories of the students who sit before us each day.