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Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity: Rethinking What it Means to Do One's Own Work

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COMMENTARY

Generative artificial intelligence has forced higher education to confront an uncomfortable question: **What does it mean for academic work to be genuinely one's own when machines can produce competent text in seconds?**

The simplest response is to prohibit AI. The more difficult—and arguably more educationally responsible—response is to redefine how academic integrity should operate in an AI-enabled environment.

Academic integrity has traditionally been associated with honesty, originality, proper attribution, and independent work. Generative AI complicates each of these principles. A student may use AI to brainstorm an argument, improve grammar, summarize a reading, generate an outline, or produce an entire essay. Treating all of these activities as equally dishonest would be unnecessarily simplistic. At the same time, allowing students to submit AI-generated work without disclosure can undermine the very purpose of assessment.

The central problem is therefore not **AI use itself**, but **undisclosed substitution of AI for the intellectual work that an assessment is intended to measure**.

This distinction should guide university policy.

Institutions should stop relying exclusively on prohibition and AI-detection software. Detection systems can neither replace sound assessment design nor establish a student's intentions with certainty. Instead, universities should make students demonstrate their thinking through drafts, oral explanations, reflections, presentations, practical activities, and authentic projects. Recent scholarship similarly argues for assessment approaches that preserve validity and require students to understand the work they submit.

Faculty members also have an important responsibility. If students are expected to use AI ethically, universities must explicitly teach them what ethical use means. Vague statements such as "AI is prohibited" or "AI is allowed" are inadequate. Students need clear guidance about when AI can support learning, when its use must be disclosed, and when it constitutes academic misconduct.

Ultimately, academic integrity in the AI era should not mean pretending that AI does not exist. It should mean ensuring that **students remain intellectually accountable for what they submit**.

The goal of higher education is not merely to produce written answers. It is to develop people who can think, question, evaluate evidence, solve problems, communicate ideas, and take responsibility for their decisions. AI can assist those goals—but it should never be allowed to replace them.

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The challenge before universities is therefore not to preserve an AI-free academic environment. It is to build an academic culture in which technological assistance and intellectual responsibility can coexist.

AI may generate an answer. Academic integrity requires that the student understand, evaluate, and stand behind it.

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