

OUR SHARED FUTURE: A MISSION-ALIGNED APPROACH TO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AT USD

Core Beliefs → Intentions → Guiding Principles & Action Steps → Infrastructure

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Introduction

In this time of collective uncertainty, universities are being called to develop strategies to adequately address the artificial intelligence (AI) era. We take these calls seriously and agree that USD must have a plan. Yet, we wish to ground this plan in our mission and values as a contemporary Catholic university. Our plan will enable us to empower our people, and to respond to the rapidly-developing AI future in a manner that leverages our strengths as an intellectual enterprise.

A USD education has always been rooted in foundational elements that help students prepare for any kind of future. This is because, minimally, a USD education develops outcomes such as: the skill to think critically; the ability to understand complexities; the talent to write and express oneself clearly; the sensitivity to appreciate beauty and goodness; the humility to empathize, and work well, with others; the desire to be community-oriented and engaged, and to care for human dignity; an awareness of broader global challenges; and the capacity to nurture a life-long insatiable curiosity about the world. Our students also learn the latest within their chosen fields and disciplines. And, career placement data make evident that USD is preparing graduates for meaningful employment.

These educational and professional outcomes, and the high rankings given to USD by our own students, are the result of providing an educational experience grounded in our values and mission. As such, a values- and mission-based foundation is a solid place upon which to build a multi-faceted approach to addressing AI.

This document describes USD's overall approach to AI. It begins with an articulation of several core beliefs and intentions. This document then articulates nine guiding principles, and their many associated action steps, that specifically constitute USD's approach.

Core Beliefs Guiding AI at USD

The core beliefs guiding our approach to AI are rooted in our university's mission, vision, and values; and, in the wisdom inherent in the work and recommendations of our campus AI Steering Committee. As such:

- I. We believe a liberal arts education, grounded in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Catholic Social Teaching, positively impacts students studying across all fields and disciplines at USD. The liberal arts are the foundation for confronting many of humanity's challenges, including AI. An emphasis on holistic formation, values and character, critical and creative thinking, clear writing, and collaborating with diverse others is more valuable now than ever.
- II. We believe, because AI carries the potential to dramatically impact the world, our university has an educational obligation to help our students understand the moral and ethical dimensions of AI and its potential for positive impact while also developing the critical thinking skills and moral compass necessary to interrogate the many impacts of AI.
- III. We believe, as a contemporary Catholic university, that our approach to AI should also be informed by the Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas* of His Holiness Leo XIV. Specifically we agree with Pope Leo XIV that:
 - A. "In the era of artificial intelligence, when human dignity is threatened by new forms of dehumanization, ours is the pressing duty to remain profoundly human." (15)
 - B. "We must learn, then, how to exercise restraint in the use of AI and to protect our young people from the promise of the perfect machine, from that subtle temptation which renders human thought seemingly superfluous precisely when it is most needed." (140)
 - C. "It is necessary to support the ongoing formation of teachers throughout their professional lives, so that they can engage positively with new technologies, helping students to use them responsibly, critically and creatively, rather than passively succumbing to their influence." (145)
 - D. "If ... technology is integrated with a wise perspective, it can become an instrument of growth, justice and fraternity." (180).

- E. “We all need to learn how to engage with the digital world in a human way, as an integral part of our education in the faith and in a life lived according to the Gospel.” (238)
- IV. We believe in helping our students become wise and courageous architects of the future and, if possible, in striving to help them harness their intellectual talents and exercise their agency to not only challenge, but also transform, AI to make it a better servant of humanity.
- V. We believe in academic freedom, which is also supported by the richness of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

Intentions

Our approach to AI is rooted in the following intentions. Specifically, we intend to:

- Adopt an approach that empowers people. USD will offer guiding principles. And, USD will pursue, and assess the impact of, a set of mission-aligned steps that are derived from the recommendations of our campus AI Steering Committee.
- Enable our staff to explore their ideas and define whether, and how, AI might facilitate or ease aspects of their work. This is neither a mandate for AI adoption in business practices, nor a strategy to leverage AI to eliminate jobs.
- Encourage and incentivize faculty to pursue their ideas for how best to approach AI.
 - We have faith and trust in our faculty. We know many are already thinking about the implications of AI and are considering whether, and how, to address AI and its implications within their courses. And, several of our academic programs are presently discussing whether, and how, to incorporate consideration of AI topics into their curricula. We remain confident our faculty will help our students rise to the challenges of the AI era because our faculty are already oriented towards helping them become supremely well educated. Our faculty members care deeply about helping our students learn the latest topics within their chosen areas of study, while also developing into well-rounded, liberally educated, critical thinkers.
 - As a university grounded in the liberal arts, our undergraduates benefit from taking courses across a wide variety of fields and disciplines. We therefore have faith that, in aggregate, our students will experience a diversity of intellectual perspectives about, and approaches to, AI that will prepare them for the future they are inheriting.
 - And, we know that our faculty who teach graduate and professional students care deeply about preparing students to meet the training expectations and on-job demands of their intended career choices. As such, many faculty are already discussing how best to shape graduate and professional school courses, and curricula, in ways that responsibly address this AI era.
- Become a leader among Catholic colleges and universities in forming a human-driven approach to AI and emerging technologies.

Keeping the above intentions in mind, USD's approach to AI will be straight-forward and flexible. Specifically, our approach to AI will be organized within **three pillars**: (1) provide clarity and guidance, (2) incentivize ideation, and (3) foster ongoing dialogue.

The Three Pillars, Guiding Principles, and Associated Action Steps

PILLAR 1: CLARITY and GUIDANCE

The university will strive to provide clarity and guidance to students, faculty, and staff. The following guiding principles and associated action steps are aimed at beginning to accomplish this goal.

Guiding Principle 1: Course syllabi should provide clarity and guidance.

Faculty are free to develop their own approach to AI, but clarity and guidance should be provided to students. Faculty should use their syllabi as an opportunity to clearly communicate their AI expectations of students. Faculty should describe whether, and how, AI might be taught, addressed, or used within their courses; and they should describe their expectations for acceptable student use of AI. Faculty should also describe how they will grade or assess student work in the age of AI (e.g., the use of any AI detection tools, and any penalties associated with students not following course expectations regarding AI use).

Associated Action Steps:

1. In addition to continuing to provide access to the existing *AI Course Policy Studio* tool, USD will work with a representative faculty group to create a basic template for faculty to consider using when describing their expectations within a syllabus.
2. USD will also invite faculty members to contribute examples of ways in which they are addressing these issues within their syllabi, and gather those examples into a repository that allows fellow faculty to learn from their colleagues' approaches.
3. USD will invite faculty members to contribute examples of ways in which they are approaching assessment and grading of student work in the age of AI, and gather those examples into a repository that allows fellow faculty to learn from their colleagues' approaches.

Guiding Principle 2: Applicable policies should ensure sufficient clarity and guidance.

Because university policies may not adequately consider the implications of AI, deliberative review will be conducted with the goal of ensuring necessary updates are made.

Associated Action Steps:

1. The Provost's office, General Counsel, and University Senate will collaborate to review, and update as needed, Academic Integrity Policy 4.8.
2. The above group will also discuss whether any other relevant university policies need review and updates.

Guiding Principle 3: USD should develop guidance, training, and professional development for interested staff and faculty.

As an employer, the university is committed to providing clarity and guidance to faculty and staff on the use of AI in the conduct of their jobs at USD. The university also has an opportunity to promote faculty and staff professional development and learning about AI.

Associated Action Steps:

1. The Provost's Office will work with HR, General Counsel, and University Senate, to develop guidance that provides staff and faculty with clear expectations about the use of AI.
2. The Provost's Office will work with HR, and appropriate staff and faculty groups, to develop professional development opportunities for staff and faculty who wish to learn about AI, ethics, and other AI-related topics.

Guiding Principle 4: USD should develop and provide a mission-aligned, human-driven AI foundations and ethics experience for all students.

While classroom and discipline-level approaches will vary, as will approaches for undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, USD has an educational responsibility to ensure all students have a baseline understanding of what AI is, what it can and cannot do, how it should and should not be used, and what their ethical obligations are with respect to AI use.

Associated Action Steps

1. The Provost's Office will collaborate with Student Affairs, the Center for Educational Excellence, the Learning Design Center, a group of faculty, and other campus leaders on the development and piloting of an asynchronous online mission-aligned introductory training in AI foundations and ethics for all students in their first year at USD.
2. The Provost's Office will collaborate with the appropriate Deans, campus leaders, and the Core Curriculum Committee to stimulate a discussion about whether opportunities exist for addressing AI and ethics within the undergraduate core curriculum.
3. The Provost's Office will work with the Deans of graduate and professional schools and programs to stimulate faculty discussion about whether opportunities exist for addressing AI and ethics among graduate and professional students.

PILLAR 2: INCENTIVIZE IDEATION

The university will provide modest funding to stimulate faculty, staff, and student engagement in idea formation and development. The following guiding principles and associated action steps are aimed at beginning to accomplish this goal.

Guiding Principle 5: USD will offer grants to support faculty.

The Provost will fund a select number of individual faculty member proposals, and proposals by faculty groupings, to explore different approaches to the challenges that humanity faces in the era of AI.

Associated Action Steps:

1. USD will offer grants to support faculty to think about and explore how to respond to AI in the classroom, across a program, or across disciplines.
 - a. A diverse array of proposals will be solicited, and all perspectives spanning a range of ideas (i.e., AI-enabled, or non-AI-dependent; from no-tech, to low-tech, to full-tech) will be encouraged.
 - b. A request for proposals (RFP) will be developed that carefully describes the criteria to compete for a grant, and outlines how to make proposals mission-aligned.

Guiding Principle 6: USD will offer grants to support staff.

Staff report wanting to explore the use of AI to help reduce the burden of certain repetitive or cumbersome workflows, and to improve service. At the same time, staff also have ideas for exploring, or piloting, innovative low-tech or no-tech approaches that strengthen human interaction and can lead to deeper engagement with their work, and with others.

Associated Action Steps:

1. USD will offer grants to staff who have ideas for responsibly exploring AI-enabled, or non-AI-dependent, ways to reduce arduous, repetitive, burdensome, and even dangerous work; improve the service they offer the university; or, to increase collaboration.
 - a. A request for proposals (RFP) will be developed that carefully describes the criteria to compete for a grant, and outlines how to make proposals mission-aligned.

Guiding Principle 7: AI implications for research present a learning opportunity.

The faculty-student research partnership represents a high-impact practice that fundamentally improves the quality of student education. Because AI is shaping how research, scholarship, and

creative work is being conducted in every discipline, an opportunity exists for students and faculty to explore the implications.

Associated Action Steps

1. Faculty and students engaged in a funded or university-sponsored faculty-student research partnership will be encouraged to discuss how AI is shaping research within that respective discipline.
2. Where faculty believe AI can be an effective tool in advancing the research being conducted with the student, they will be encouraged to teach students the requisite skills, and associated ethical and safety guidelines, for use of AI as part of their research project.

PILLAR 3: FOSTER ONGOING DIALOGUE

The university will provide modest funding to stimulate campus engagement in ongoing dialogue about AI and its implications. The following guiding principles and associated action steps are aimed at beginning to accomplish this goal.

Guiding Principle 8: Inviting provocative AI thought leaders can foster cross-campus dialogue.

USD has a rich tradition of inviting provocative thought leaders to visit and stimulate cross-campus dialogue on a host of topics. We will broaden this tradition to include speakers who can expand our thinking about all aspects of AI.

Associated Action Steps:

1. USD will fund a limited number of provost-invited university-wide speakers on various AI facets and perspectives.
2. USD will enhance the ability of existing speaker series and programs across the university to invite speakers on various AI facets and perspectives, including those housed within academic schools and departments, divisions, and centers.

Guiding Principle 9: Department- and Unit-level conversations are crucial for discerning paths forward.

Universities are composed of many different groups and communities, often using different tools, and in pursuit of different ends. This heterogeneity is our strength. USD's focus on institutional stewardship, individual formation, human flourishing, and subsidiarity means different communities will develop different approaches to artificial intelligence, and this is a good thing. USD can enable academic departments to discuss what AI means for their disciplines, their teaching, and the conduct of research in their fields. And, USD can enable staff units to have conversations about what AI means for their respective communities.

Associated Action Steps:

1. USD will offer modest funding to support conversations within staff units and academic departments the theme of which would be, "What Does AI Mean for Us?"
2. The Provost's office will ask units or departments to offer a brief summary of any outcomes of such discussions; a report of these summaries will be published so that the campus can begin to develop a collective sense of how different collections of colleagues are thinking about AI.

Infrastructure

The Provost's Office will serve as the primary coordinating entity of USD's AI approach. Reporting to the Provost, the **Associate Provost for Research and Administration** (presently, Professor Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick) and two new **Provost's Faculty AI Fellows** (to be hired in Fall, 2026) will coordinate all aspects of the plan described above. This central coordinating group will be expected to confer with faculty, and other senior leaders, and will be advised by a new AI Advisory Group.

A new university-wide **AI Advisory Group** composed of faculty, staff, and students will be composed. The group will have two co-chairs, and will be charged by the Provost. This group will be asked to advise the above coordinating group on the following:

- Offer guidance on the implementation of action steps;
- Offer guidance on the proper assessment of the impact of all steps;
- Offer additional recommendations to the coordinating group;
- Offer additional perspectives in response to recommendations made by the AI Tools Review Committee, prior to recommendations being forwarded to the President's standing Advisory Team.

The **AI Tools Review** committee is a standing group formed in the past year that is responsible for considering the merits and security implications of various AI tools for possible use or adoption at USD, enterprise wide. This group will continue to conduct its work, with the charge of developing a mechanism for receiving and reviewing recommendations from campus colleagues about possible new tools for formal adoption by our entire enterprise. The committee will also consider how best to manage individual requests for use of AI Tools, and devise recommendations for guiding principles that allow for individual experimentation while protecting USD data. Recommendations of this committee will be offered to the AI Advisory Group for comment, and then offered to the President's Advisory Team for decision making.

General Counsel will continue to play a robust role advising USD on all legal matters pertaining to any and all issues related to AI.

Finally, the existing **AI@USD website** will be temporarily taken offline to allow for updates to be made. In its place will be a holding page that will describe USD's approach, continue to share some of the elements of that original site, and provide downloadable copies of this document and the AI Steering Committee's report. Later in Spring term, 2027 a new and improved version of the AI@USD website will go live.