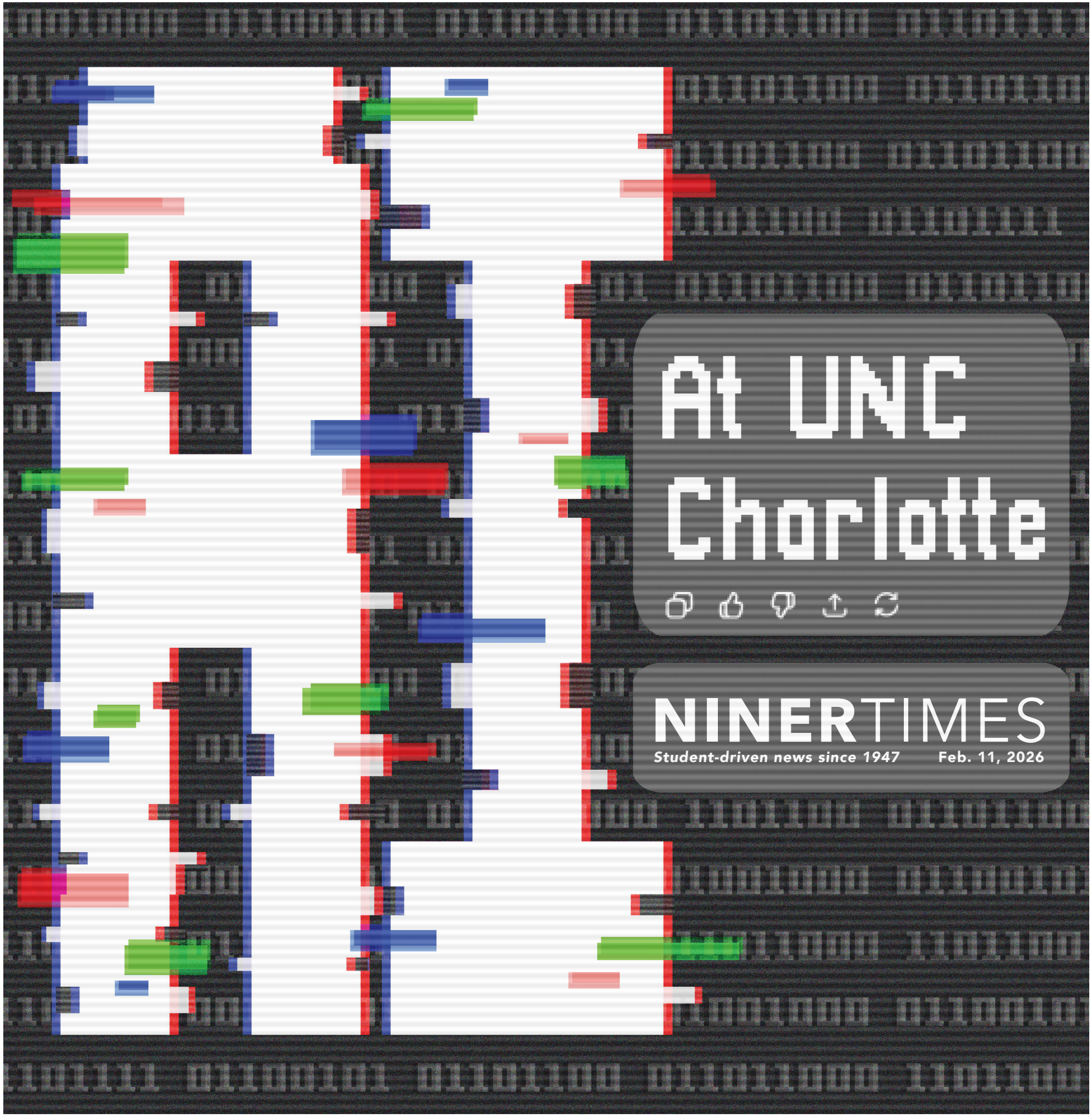

NINERTIMES
Student-driven news since 1947 Feb. 11, 2026

NINERTIMES

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The Niner Times is UNC Charlotte's student-run news publication founded in 1947 and has received both state and national recognition.

We cover campus happenings, news and events in the city of Charlotte and North Carolina and topics that are important to students.

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Ahmed Ahmed & Ali Thiam/Niner Times

UNC Charlotte events calendar

Wednesday, Feb. 11
Bears with BSU, Cone University Center 210, 6:30-8 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 12
A Majestic Valentine's Party, McEniry 117, 7:30-9 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 13
Valentine Cardmaking, Bioinformatics 301, 12:30-2 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 13
2016 Kickoff Party, Lucas Room, 7-10 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 14
Statement Making Fashion Show, STORRS Salon, 4:30 - 6:30 p.m.

Sunday Feb. 15
UNC Charlotte men's basketball v. The University of Texas at San Antonio, Halton Arena, 12 p.m.

From the UNC Charlotte police logs

Deonna Dickens | Staff Writer

The following are some incidents in the UNC Charlotte campus police logs from Jan. 23 to Feb 5. 2024.

Jan. 25
Investigate
A student at Wallis Hall notified the Police and Public Safety (PPS) department about his roommate becoming violent after consuming mushrooms. Officers and firefighters restrained the student until medics arrived.

Feb. 5
Loitering/Trespassing
Officers located a trespasser with a bleeding cut on their upper lip. Officers recognized the subject, arrested them and transported them to the police department, where the medic was called to evaluate them. Officers then transported the subject to Mecklenburg County Jail and charged them with second-degree trespassing, breaking and entering and possession of drug paraphernalia.

NOTES FROM THE NEWSROOM:

Defining terms and communicating clearly

Wes Packham | Writing Managing Editor

Artificial intelligence, deep learning, machine learning, AGI, large language models, model training.

From the advent of AI, these words have been thrown around constantly, and many people might not know exactly what they mean. Paired with the intense controversy surrounding AI, uncertainty with terminology can be a real problem.

Misunderstandings and misinformation can spread everywhere on the internet, and AI is no different. I'm a computer science student, so I have the privilege of being more knowledgeable on the subject. For the majority, however, the unfamiliarity and ambiguity of these terms can make it difficult to have a productive conversation.

Doing one's best to define terms can make a difference. Definitions for AI are often vague and ambiguous, varying from person to person. One person's AI may differ from the others, and when you're scolding your friend for their unethical use of AI, it's best to agree on what you are actually talking about.

Do your best to understand whether something is truly AI; it could be machine learning, deep learning, or a neural network, which all have their minor differences. Understanding the ethics behind data harvesting, model training and the power needed for cloud computing is vital to ensure your opinions are accurate and directed accordingly.

UNC Charlotte poised to launch UNC System's first AI and humanities program

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

Pending approval, UNC Charlotte will launch a new academic program in AI and the humanities that will launch in fall 2026.

The reason for the program's prospective approval is the following question: How does AI fall under a department such as the College of Humanities & Earth and Social Sciences (CHESS)? Director of the pending program, Justin Cary, believes the answer is that humans are the center of AI.

The proposed major would fall under CHESS's Office of Interdisciplinary Studies, offering students a human-centered approach to the study of artificial intelligence.

The program would introduce two new academic pathways, a major and a minor.

If approved, students would graduate with an interdisciplinary studies degree, with an AI specialization, combining coursework from the humanities, social sciences and applied technology. This will also be a unique program within the UNC System, as no other system institution currently offers this curriculum.

AI has already been integrated at UNC Charlotte both in and outside of the classroom.

Charlotte's AI Institute was launched on Feb. 3, 2025, just days before the University was awarded its Carnegie Classification of a Research Level 1 institution.

Since then, two different AI minors have been established: a minor in AI for non-computer science majors and a minor in AI, robotics and gaming specifically for computer science majors.

During the fall 2025 semester, the University announced that a new Bachelor of Science degree path in artificial intelligence will be available for students to pursue. If approved, there will be a secondary major involving AI, earning students a Bachelor of Arts degree.

The goal of the humanities AI major is to help students view AI through a different lens.

A human-centered approach to artificial intelligence

"This is really about putting humans at the center of artificial intelligence," Cary said. "We're not training students to build AI systems or code extensively. That's the role of computer science. Instead, we're preparing students to think critically and responsibly about how AI is used in society."

This approach differs from existing AI courses at UNC Charlotte, which focus on the technological and computational aspects of AI.

Cary, who has been serving as program director since Jan. 1, says the goal is to equip students with critical thinking, ethical reasoning and social awareness alongside technical literacy.

According to Cary, courses in philosophy, communication studies, sociology, history and other CHESS disciplines would form the foundation of the program, helping students analyze AI's societal impacts and ethical challenges.

Faculty involved in the proposal believe that graduates will be prepared for careers that increasingly require both "technical fluency and human-centered skills" through the program.

"The future workforce needs people who understand how to work with AI systems, not just build them," Cary said. "We need graduates who can ask the right questions, analyze outcomes, recognize bias and apply these tools responsibly in real-world contexts."

With humans and their interactions and effects on AI at the center of the program, the discussion of the ethics behind it all is pushing faculty to bring the program to life.

The ethical foundation

According to Cary, ethics has formed the backbone of the proposed curriculum as it guides students to use, but also critique and evaluate what AI is generating.

Cary connected the rise of AI to the early days of the internet when "www." began to outpace ethical frameworks.

"We're at a similar turning point," Cary said. "We can learn from past mistakes by embedding ethics into education from the start."

If the program is approved, students will explore issues such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, environmental sustainability and corporate accountability, all while developing the communication skills needed to advocate for responsible technology use.

Cary says this approach directly addresses growing concerns about AI's role in society.

Courses will also encourage students to explore why AI systems are created and how they are trained. Another component of the courses that Cary mentioned as vital to students' better understanding of AI is how it affects communities culturally.

The conversation of ethics in AI is not exclusive to UNC Charlotte. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published The Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, providing core values for AI use and guidance on developing a dynamic understanding of the technology.

The Enterprise Project reported that 65% of executives say that they are aware of discriminatory bias with AI systems, and nine out of 10 organizations are aware of at least one circumstance where an AI system resulted in ethical issues.

"Ethics is the 'why' question; ethics is the heart of this program," Cary said. "If you're not approaching artificial intelligence through an ethical framework, then you shouldn't approach it at all."

The work behind the program

The program's development has been years in the making. In 2023, as AI was taking over classrooms and workplaces, the University sought to position Charlotte as a model institution for AI use.

This effort moved forward when University Provost Jennifer Troyer formed the AI in Teaching and Learning Task Force in 2024.

The group brought in a representative from every college on campus to discuss how AI should be integrated not only in education but also in University policies.

"One of my goals was to make sure student voices were front and center," Cary said as a member of the task force. "I spent a lot of time talking with students, holding listening sessions, handing out QR codes at campus events and asking, 'What do you need from AI education?'"

Cary highlighted how it was the students who emphasized the importance of maintaining ethics and meaningful engagement for the program.

Student input remained central throughout the program's development.

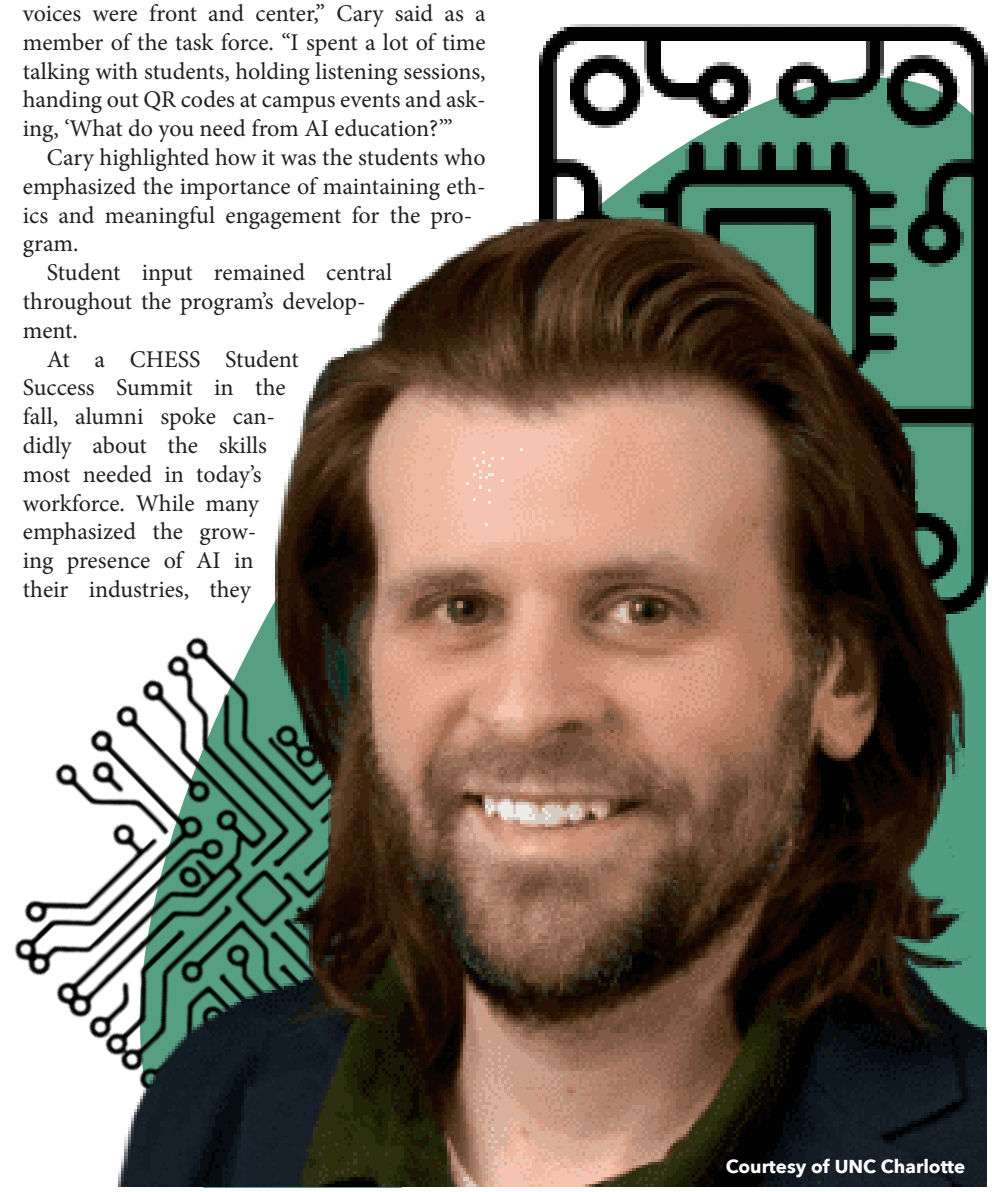
At a CHESS Student Success Summit in the fall, alumni spoke candidly about the skills most needed in today's workforce. While many emphasized the growing presence of AI in their industries, they consistently highlighted the importance of human-centered abilities.

"They talked about communication, creativity, collaboration, adaptability and critical thinking," Cary said. "And then they said, 'plus AI.' That combination really stood out."

The message, Cary said, was clear: students need both technical fluency and strong human skills to thrive in an AI-driven economy.

For Cary, if approved, the new program represents both a professional milestone and a broader educational mission.

"This is an invitation for students," Cary said. "We're offering a new way to think about artificial intelligence, one that's ethical, human-centered and grounded in real-world impact."



Courtesy of UNC Charlotte

Charlotte Artificial Intelligence Research Council builds guidelines on AI use in research

Kyle Boucher | Staff Writer

As AI becomes increasingly prominent, the AI Research Council at UNC Charlotte is developing a set of guidelines on how AI should be used ethically in research projects.

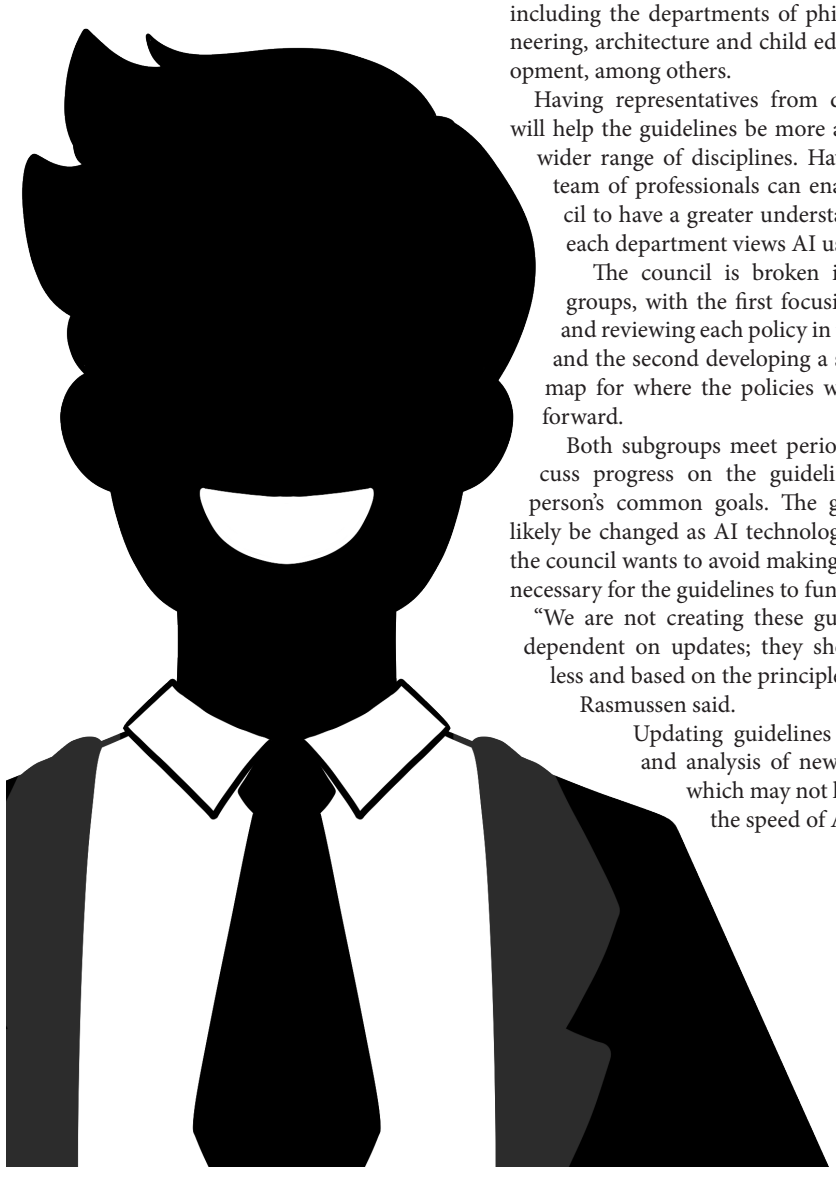
The council's purpose is to draft guidelines that advise researchers on how to effectively use artificial intelligence in research while minimizing its potential misuse.

The council was created in fall 2024 due to the rise of AI programs on campus, with the goal of advising researchers on the best ways to use AI while avoiding accidental or intentional misuse in their projects.

"We are creating guidelines in light of AI development and to help faculty protect research integrity," Lisa Rasmussen, professor of philosophy and co-chair of the AI Research Council, said. "It is a search for the truth using honest methods."

The council views AI as a tool for scanning through data or formatting. A general standard that the council has set for using AI with integrity is to never generate false information. Specific standards for ethical AI use will vary across departments, as each field uses AI differently.

These guidelines made by the council are not hard rules and will not be enforced with consequences, unlike Charlotte's official research policies.



What is Charlotte's Artificial Intelligence Research Council?

The AI Research Council is a committee within the Division of Research, composed of representatives from various departments on campus, including the departments of philosophy, engineering, architecture and child education development, among others.

Having representatives from different fields will help the guidelines be more applicable to a wider range of disciplines. Having a diverse team of professionals can enable the council to have a greater understanding of how each department views AI use in research.

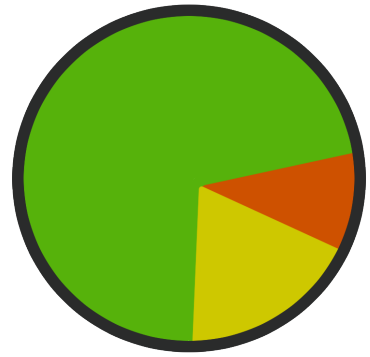
The council is broken into two subgroups, with the first focusing on writing and reviewing each policy in the guidelines, and the second developing a strategic roadmap for where the policies will go moving forward.

Both subgroups meet periodically to discuss progress on the guidelines and each person's common goals. The guidelines will likely be changed as AI technology evolves, but the council wants to avoid making these updates necessary for the guidelines to function.

"We are not creating these guidelines to be dependent on updates; they should be timeless and based on the principles of research," Rasmussen said.

Updating guidelines requires time and analysis of new technologies, which may not keep pace with the speed of AI advances.

Maya Wilson/Niner Times



Ethical and unethical uses of AI

Along with creating guidelines, the council devotes extensive time to determining the boundaries between ethical and unethical AI use.

To classify unethical uses of AI in research, the council first had to define what immoral research would look like without AI.

"Research misconduct is plagiarism, fabrication or falsification of data," Ray Hartsfield, digital integrity specialist and co-chair of the AI Research Council, said regarding standard conditions for unethical research.

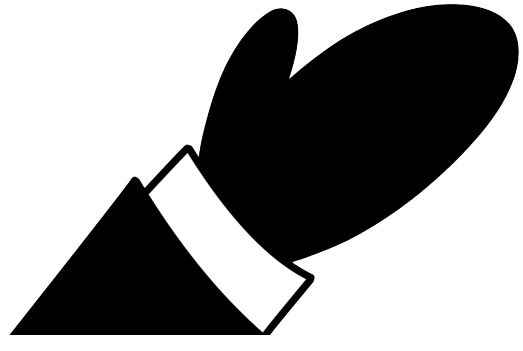
Once a definition for unethical research was established, any use of AI that resembled these misconducts was considered a violation of research integrity. However, a research violation may occur without the researcher's knowledge.

AI can generate fraudulent data sets or incorrect information, also known as phantom data. There are cases of AI doing this on purpose to make people feel satisfied with the results it provides.

"Sometimes, AI tries to make its user happy by hallucinating data that the researcher was looking for. This flattery is meant to keep the user engaged," Rasmussen said.

The council recommends that AI be used as a tool to find data sources, not create the raw data itself.

AI can excel at sorting through large quantities of data when given very specific instructions. The council hopes to outline effective methods for requesting information from AI while minimizing the risk of phantom data.



How these ethical decisions are being made

Every field uses artificial intelligence differently, and therefore, each department will have to define what is or is not ethical AI use. This means the guidelines must apply to all disciplines, leaving it to each department to determine how to apply them.

"When it comes to ethical use, that is going to have to have a nuance that comes from the field… a lot of that is going to depend on the ethical norms and standards within each discipline because each discipline has a very different experience," Hartsfield said.

Hartsfield gives an example of how a computer programmer using AI to generate code is often held to a different ethical standard than a writer using AI to generate text. The professional diversity of the council's members will help make the guidelines more flexible.

The council is still fairly early in its research, but once its guidelines are released, the responsibility will fall on researchers to uphold the ideals outlined.

How ‘cute’ delivery robots soften campus skepticism toward AI

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Sunnya Hadavi/Niner Times

It’s become a common scene on UNC Charlotte’s campus: students on their way to class or to their dorms, walking in step with little six-wheeled robots rolling about Charlotte’s red brick paths.

“I think they’re cute, I really like seeing them around,” Yasmin Huntley, a fourth-year student at UNC Charlotte, said.

Some students have even taken to aiding the boxy white robots in their journeys, lifting them over curbs too steep to climb or turning them right-side-up when they’re flipped.

“I feel bad when they get stuck somewhere,” first-year Jade Anita said. “One time I actually helped one out of a ditch.”

Huntley and Anita aren’t alone in their adoration.

Fleets of these robots deliver food to students at over 60 campuses across the U.S., including the Universities of Kentucky, Boise State and Minnesota. They hail from Starship Technologies, a company that specializes in autonomous delivery vehicles.

Some campuses have taken to naming their fleets. Students at the University of Texas at Dallas named their robots “Tobor” — robot spelled backwards. At the University of California, Irvine, students call their Starship robots “Zot Bots.”

The friendly face of AI on campus

At UNC Charlotte, robots deliver food from 19 on-campus dining locations and were first introduced in 2017.

UNC Charlotte has yet to name its fleet of 30 robots, but they are frequently featured in University promotions and have graced the cover of Niner Times editions multiple times.

Starship’s delivery robots use AI to perceive and understand their surroundings in real time. Through computer vision and machine learning, the robots can identify pedestrians, obstacles and terrain, make navigation decisions and continuously refine their behavior.

All robots are equipped with radars, ultrasonic sensors, neural networks and 12 cameras. Maybe most importantly, they have space for up to three shopping bags and an insulated interior to keep your Bojangles hot or Starbucks cold.

While the robots have captured the hearts of campuses around the U.S., they don’t have smiling faces or technology to make pleasant conversation with passing students. They are plain in design — white plastic with black trim and wheels — and generally soundless, aside from a slight hum as they roll to their destination or the occasional “thank you” to a helpful pedestrian.

Still, Annie Handrick, a senior partner marketing manager at Starship Technologies, says the robots are designed to appeal.

“Community acceptance is essential to Starship’s operations and long-term success, so creating an experience that feels friendly and approachable helps build comfort and trust,” wrote Handrick to the Niner Times. “For example, the robot’s voice is designed to strike a balance between human and robotic, creating a friendly, approachable tone.”

For some students, the technology is changing their perception of AI.

Both Huntley and Anita said the robots’ presence on campus has made them favor AI technology.

“I think it’s made AI more normalized, just to see robots going on campus,” Anita said. “They’re so efficient as well.”

Beyond delivery robots, AI has become commonplace at UNC Charlotte. Last year, the University launched an AI institute to advance AI research and development on campus. Following its launch came Charlie, an AI Service Assistant powered by generative AI in the University’s OneIT department and later, the announcement of an AI major coming to campus in 2026.

Despite AI’s ascension, opinion remains split on its application. A Niner Times survey found that 61% of the 85 students surveyed hold an unfavorable opinion of AI. The sample of 85 is far from representative of UNC Charlotte’s student body of over 32,000, but still demonstrates AI’s polarizing nature.

Neutralizing some of that campus polarization are Starship’s delivery robots.

Mandy Bidaut, a fourth-year student at UNC Charlotte, said the convenience the robots bring has swayed her to see the appeal in AI technology.

“It’s just so easy, I don’t have to drive or talk to anyone, and the robots are cheaper than DoorDash,” Bidaut said.

Why students grow attached

Convenience aside, Camille Endacott, an assistant professor at UNC Charlotte, believes that students anthropomorphizing robots and attributing human characteristics to them has led to some of the positive attention directed towards them. Endacott teaches in UNC Charlotte’s Communications Studies program and researches the development and use of AI technologies in relation to identity construction.

“There’s evidence to suggest that when we encounter things that are designed to seem human-like, our brains treat them as human,” Endacott said. “So we see them and are like, ‘Oh, they’re cute,’ or ‘They’re trying their best.’ That’s our brain’s natural reaction.”

Endacott pointed to other technologies that humans frequently interact with and anthropomorphize. It’s not uncommon for people to assign personality and a name to their car or hold a vendetta against an office printer.

‘Cute robot’

Starship robots even prompt users to assign human-like qualities through in-app feedback. After deliveries, users are asked to rate their delivery via an in-app pop-up. During the rating process, users are asked what they especially enjoyed about their delivery and can respond with “Cute robot” among three other options.

Handrick says she has seen Starship customers describe the robots as similar to pets and sometimes kneel to pet them. She described the “Cute robot” option as a “natural fit.”

“Cuteness is part of an intentional design approach to make the robots feel approachable and easy to adopt,” Handrick wrote. “Since the robots greet customers, say thank you when helped, and occasionally use different voices or accents for special occasions, ‘Cute robot’ reflects real customer sentiment and feels like a natural fit for a rating option.”

Endacott has some doubts about whether the “Cute robot” that the option describes is entirely a robot.

“My research has shown that humans are more involved in the direction of those robots than we would like to think. Often, there are people, usually in the Global South, who are like the humans in the loop there to step in when the robots can’t figure it out,” Endacott said. “My guess is that that’s happening more often than the company would want us to think.”

During a February U.S. Senate hearing, an executive from Waymo, the California-based company that has launched driverless taxis across the U.S., revealed that remote workers in the Philippines help pilot its cars.

In 2024, it was revealed that Amazon’s “Just Walk Out” markets that were advertised as using AI to monitor what customers left the store with actually used workers from India to review purchases.

“For so many of these startups, where it’s like, ‘Oh, it’s AI,’ yeah, maybe some of it, but a lot of it relies on hidden human labor,” Endacott said.

According to Starship, deliveries are “99% autonomous,” with remote drivers stepping in only when necessary.

Niner’s Comics: Hard work pays off

Caitlin Hanson | Staff Illustrator

AI chatbots prompt UNC Charlotte students to experiment with digital companionship

Bryan Chen/Niner Times

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Last year, Gray Solomonson was in a bad spot.

In her first year as a student at UNC Charlotte, Solomonson found herself feeling socially isolated and lonely. Living on campus, she said she felt like she was always in "school mode" and didn't want to take the time to make new connections.

So, she turned to AI.

After class, Solomonson would log in to the Character AI website and talk to AI chatbots programmed to respond like fictional characters or historical figures. The site features hundreds of characters, all with unique responses. Once logged in, you can chat with a bot programmed to help you practice for a job interview, have a conversation with Punxsutawney Phil or roleplay situations with celebrities. Solomonson was drawn to fantasy characters.

"It was more just like escapism than anything else. I was never talking about myself," Solomonson said. "I was just trying to really go really hard into this escapism of being like, 'I'm talking to a character from another world.'"

AI chatbots a growing source of companionship

Solomonson is just one of many who use or have used AI for companionship. Character AI reported roughly 20 million active users on its site in late 2025, a figure that still doesn't account for individuals who communicate with AI on other sites.

Whether they're using ChatGPT, Claude, Character AI or one of the many other AI chatbots publicly available, humans are increasingly turning to not each other, but AI for conversation.

For Solomonson, Character AI is no longer something she regularly uses. Information she saw regarding AI's water use caused her to stop, but she described some difficulty putting down the technology.

"It was an unhealthy coping mechanism," Solomonson said. "Like any addiction, it's really hard to put down because you've created this sort of emotional bond with this thing."

A year removed from her experience with Character AI, Solomonson says she still doesn't have a "crazy" social life, but is doing better socially. She's joined clubs, made new friends and killed her AI habit.

Of course, Solomonson isn't the only UNC Charlotte student to talk to AI. Some have less concern about AI's water usage and use it in their everyday lives as a companion.

Annamaria Colón, a first-year student who likes to play volleyball at the University Recreation Center and wants to be an FBI agent, talks to AI to help brainstorm for her creative writing.

Aiden Valentine, a fifth-year student majoring in physics and computer science, talks to AI to help him with his schoolwork and uses it to identify plant life on walks with his girlfriend.

Tim Karabet, a third-year student who enjoys reading and works at a local grocery store, talks to ChatGPT to find music that he'd like.

All say they use AI only a few times a week — less than Solomonson's frequency last year — and are just a glimpse of a likely growing population of UNC Charlotte students talking to AI.

Concerns around community and mental health

Researching interactions like these between humans and AI is Eileen Benedict, a lecturer and Ph.D student in the UNC Charlotte College of Computing and Informatics. Benedict's research interests include AI ethics and society, and computer science education research.

"I think there's so much potential for AI to be really helpful study partners," Benedict said. "But there are also concerns with loss of community. If it's so easy to go and talk to AI do I still make those study groups?"

"Are students still talking to each other?"

Benedict also expressed concerns about the "sycophantic" nature of generative AI chatbots. Research from Princeton University showed that large language models will provide false information or bend the truth to give the user positive feedback. More extreme examples of this involve the new phenomenon of "AI psychosis," which is not a clinical diagnosis, but describes cases in which AI models have amplified, validated, or even co-created psychotic symptoms with individuals through constant positive output.

Beyond AI psychosis — which remains more of a slang term than an actual condition — Benedict believes AI's positive tendencies raise red flags in its therapeutic application.

"It's not very good at critiquing," Benedict said. "Going to my therapist, sometimes I needed the critique of like 'Hey, that's not a really great way to word that.'"

A 2024 study published by the National Library of Medicine found that about 28% of respondents reported using AI for quick support or as a personal therapist.

Findings like these have fueled ongoing controversy around AI therapy tools since their introduction.

Last year, Illinois, Nevada and Utah all enacted laws restricting or banning AI from acting as independent therapists due to concerns that AI could give their patients inappropriate or potentially dangerous advice.

In January, Character AI settled with families who sued the company over alleged harm to minors, including suicides linked to its chatbots.

Still, researchers continue to test AI technology in the hopes that AI can one day become a positive tool for those suffering from poor mental health.

Benedict's current research involves developing an AI music therapy tool to recommend music to support rehabilitation for visually impaired children.

Despite her own involvement in AI therapy research, Benedict doesn't believe technology could ever fully replace a human therapist.

"I don't think it can replace a human," Benedict said. "However, I think there are a lot of benefits for those who can't access therapy right now, or those who can't are not in a safe space to do that, and they still need something. I think that AI could be a helpful something to get started."

Exploring AI therapy tools

While Benedict's research has come as part of her dissertation, others have experimented with AI therapy tools on their own terms.

Third-year student John Stewart has been building his own AI journaling tool since November 2025.

Stewart is currently studying social work and cognitive science. Before starting at UNC Charlotte, he worked in an ambulance and a psychiatric hospital. He currently works in a group home for mental health and intellectual disabilities. Once he graduates, Stewart hopes to become a full-time therapist.

In moments after class and between shifts, Stewart talks to his AI tool, which acts as a journal, transcribing his thoughts and emotions and sometimes providing feedback — similar to how a therapist would. Stewart says he uses his tool daily, and it once transcribed 16,000 words in roughly an hour — close to the average daily number of words spoken by men in the U.S.

"I feel comfortable sharing about 99.9% of my thoughts with it, with the only exception being certain intrusive thoughts that might set off a safety filter and aren't relevant," Stewart said.

When Stewart started his project last November, he said he felt depressed and isolated while fresh out of a breakup. Those feelings the Stewart felt — lonely, sad, siloed — are what he believes have drawn so many to talk to AI.

"We have a loneliness epidemic," Stewart said. "Despite being more connected than we've ever been before, we are more lonely than ever. "Those three hours spent on TikTok, in the past, you may have gone and hung outwith people."

Stewart was in therapy when he started journaling with AI and continues to attend sessions, but began journaling with AI to supplement that human-to-human care.

He's built his chatbot through "vibe coding," in which he tells an AI what to code, and it generates the code for him. His goal with the project is to "remove the friction of traditional journaling" and allow users to record their thoughts without physically writing. Advising Stewart as he works on his project is Charlotte AI Research, a student organization that connects students working on AI research and allows them to discuss their work.

"The project itself has given me meaning, like having something to work on," Stewart said. "But as far as how I feel after I journal, yeah, I feel better."

Access, availability and the case for AI therapy

For Stewart, the appeal lies in the possibility of an always-accessible therapist made possible by AI.

Human therapists can't answer 2 a.m. requests. Human therapists can't spend hours on end attending to a single patient. Human therapists aren't free.

"I think that a lot of therapy can be replaced with AI," Stewart says. "The relational part of therapy might never be replaced. But I certainly think people should have someone or something to talk to when their thoughts are getting the best of them. But at the end of the day, a therapist is only really available one hour per week."

Stewart acknowledges that the technology is not yet there to act as an independent therapy tool and continues to work out kinks in his own project — sometimes the tool generates inappropriate advice. But Stewart notes that human therapists can make errors too.

"Therapists are human, they're fallible too," Stewart says.

Maybe one day AI therapists will develop to a point where it can act without error. Maybe it won't. Either way, its development will continue as AI becomes increasingly embedded in daily life.

In the meantime, Stewart encourages people to engage with the technology and the discussions around it, regardless of their views on AI.

"You can either be in the room where these decisions are being made, or you can plug your ears and sit outside."

THE COMPLEXITY OF AI

85 students share how they use or justify generative AI

Sunnya Hadavi | Lead Writer

Artificial intelligence has entered nearly all aspects of modern life. At UNC Charlotte, AI offices and programs have been created to encourage ethical AI usage. In classes, professors decide whether students may use AI. Despite its implementation, many UNC Charlotte students are seemingly not on board with generative AI and large language models (LLMs).

Eighty-five students shared their thoughts on AI and how they use these tools with the Niner Times through a survey. Survey results do not represent the entire student population, but highlight perspectives among the student body.

The majority of surveyed students expressed an unfavorable opinion of AI (61%), but still believe it can be used positively and be a helpful tool (59%).

"We focus on the tool being the problem instead of the people using the tool," fourth-year UNC Charlotte student Samantha Ault said. "I don't blame the axe for deforestation, I blame the person using the axe to cut down yet another tree. If the people using AI were less greedy and lazy, I'm not confident it would be even half as controversial as it is today."

HOW STUDENTS SAY THEY USE AI

The majority of students surveyed use AI in some capacity (58%). Use cases for AI vary; some use it for brainstorming, completing assignments, personal advice or entertainment.

"I think it is important to engage with [AI] because of how prominent it is becoming in our society and everyday life. I think it is critical to understand its flaws and shortcomings, as well as be able to comprehend how it functions on a general level," fourth-year Morgan Tringali said. "I do not by any means believe that generative AI is good, especially in the ways that it is most commonly used."

42% of surveyed students said that they never use AI. These students explained that the negative effects on human intelligence and creativity are two of the reasons why they avoid it.

"I am boycotting AI for many reasons," third-year Ash Hérail said. "Using AI has been studied to reduce brain functioning, and the people I know who use it become incredibly dependent and are unable to do assignments or pass classes without it. I think AI is a sad mimicry of what the brain can do, with an easier method but slop results."

AI's effect on the environment is another reason why students avoid using it. 85% of surveyed students, regardless of how they feel about AI, are concerned about the environmental impact.

"Generative AI uses an insane amount of water to work, and it is killing the environment," third-year Kaitlyn Howard said. "Many people's water has become undrinkable because of this. I find it shameful to use generative AI when you know its consequences. We do not need it to survive."

AI IN ACADEMIA

A large portion of surveyed students believe generative AI does not belong in universities (48%) and students should not use AI on their assignments (64%).

"AI disengages students from critically thinking about a topic. A student using AI for an essay will not connect with the discussion or topic, a vital aspect of the college education," first-year Jackson Blair said. "Our purpose in higher education is to understand how to connect to our respective fields or general academics, and using AI in place of that does not provide any understanding into our academic and professional careers."

However, the line is seemingly drawn at studying, brainstorming, researching and proofreading their work for academic assignments. 48% of surveyed students shared that they often use it in these ways.

"When you're using AI as a learning or productivity tool, it's one of the single best we have available, but using it to cheat entirely defeats all of its benefits," fourth-year Cameron Dingle said. "I think there needs to be a shift in its use so that it is being used as the tool it is, rather than one to cheat."

Surveyed students shared concerns about cheating and unfair uses of AI among both students and faculty.

"If AI is continued to be used in academics, a degree means nothing for everyone, even those who avoided generative AI," first-year Annamaria Colón said. "If teachers are using AI to grade assignments and essays [or] using AI to create a curriculum, then the tens of thousands of dollars used for tuition is completely wasted."

Some students explicitly said that students using AI worries them about the future workforce.

"AI isn't foolproof. If it gives you wrong information, and you ingrain that in your brain, that false information could cause injury or even death," third-year Levi Jiang said. "When I get sick or hurt, I do not want someone who used AI to pass their medical school exams to operate on me."

SOCIETY'S RELIANCE ON AI

76% of surveyed students believe that people are becoming too reliant on AI as a resource.

When asked what they wouldn't use AI for, over half of the students said they would not use AI for casual conversation, venting or romantically.

"I have a friend who used ChatGPT as a therapist during a breakup with this awful guy. I understand that professional mental health care is a luxury to many people, but I think that creating that sort of reliance with this technology will put more people at risk," second-year Gray Solomonson said.

AI-generated images and videos are notably disliked by surveyed students. Of student responders, 74% expressed that they do not support this use case of AI.

KEY SURVEY RESULTS

61% Have an unfavorable opinion of AI

59% Believe AI can be used positively

"As an artist and creative writing major, it is a spit in the face," Howard said. "I have already seen AI posters on campus, and they immediately make me want to not support whatever they're promoting. It does not generate from scratch; it steals art and images to combine without any profit or credit for the original images."

These students are also frustrated about how often they see AI around them. The majority of surveyed students (76%) feel that too many apps, websites and businesses are implementing AI.

"I generally avoid engaging with any piece of online media that uses AI," second-year Austin Currie said. "Its current use cases online have destroyed any hope we had for decent media literacy in the near future."

LACK OF AI RESPONSIBILITY

Beyond their personal uses for AI, most surveyed students mentioned the harmful side of generative AI.

"AI has always been around. GPS is AI; Google Translate is AI; Spotify recommending playlists is AI. That isn't the problem," Colón said. "The problem is people who are using generative AI to create porn of children [and] of unsuspecting women. The problem is people lying about an image, song or idea being authentic."

In January, the Grok AI chatbot on X was used to generate sexualized images of women and minors. These images used original photos posted on the platform, and 1.8 million of the images sexualized women.

Some students are frustrated with how AI-generated content is being used by influential organizations and people.

On Feb. 6, U.S. President Donald Trump posted an AI-generated video on social media depicting former President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama as monkeys. The post was removed later that day, but it is not the first AI image or video posted by the administration.

"As an American, it is shameful to see the White House's AI posts, especially when it is to create harmful rhetoric or propaganda that harms a group of people," third-year Maddy Toth said.

Some students mentioned that regulations and limits are needed to curb AI misuse.

"AI-generated content should be limited to do basic tasks like helping out in designing flyers, or adjusting the brightness in an image," second-year Sumiran Juthuga said. "If people do want to use this advanced technology, they should get a license and be certified to use this tech responsibly."

Enforcing requirements for crediting AI uses is another common suggestion for responsible AI use.

"Always credit the designers, even if it's AI," first-year Emily Ung said. "For example, 'prompt written by and media generated by Google Gemini.' Give credit where credit is due."

As of early 2026, the federal government has not passed any AI laws or regulations. While local and state governments have been making strides to pass policies, responsible AI usage falls to individuals.

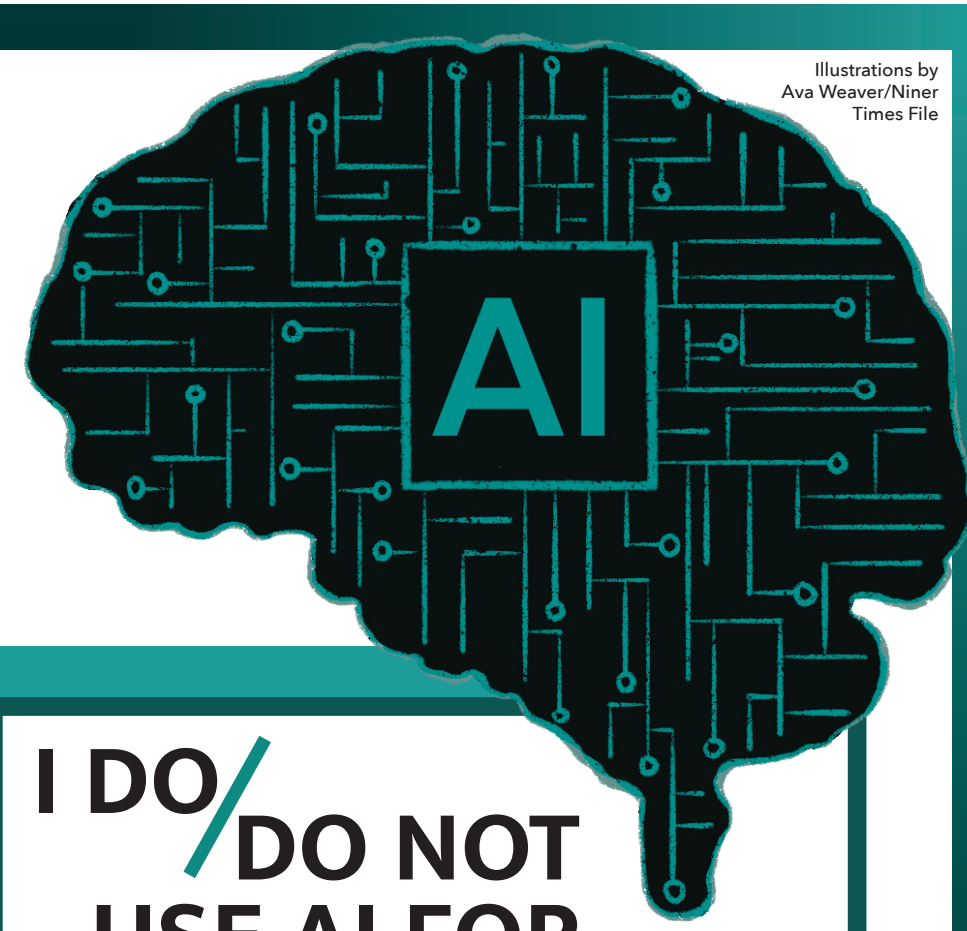
"Use AI responsibly. There is an environmental cost to its existence, which needs to be justified in the way we use it and power it," fourth-year Wyatt Smith said. "It can be a net good for humanity, but not if we're building massive data centers to plagiarize Studio Ghibli."

76% Believe people are too reliant on AI

74% Do not support AI generating images or videos

Out of 85 student responses

Illustrations by Ava Weaver/Niner Times File



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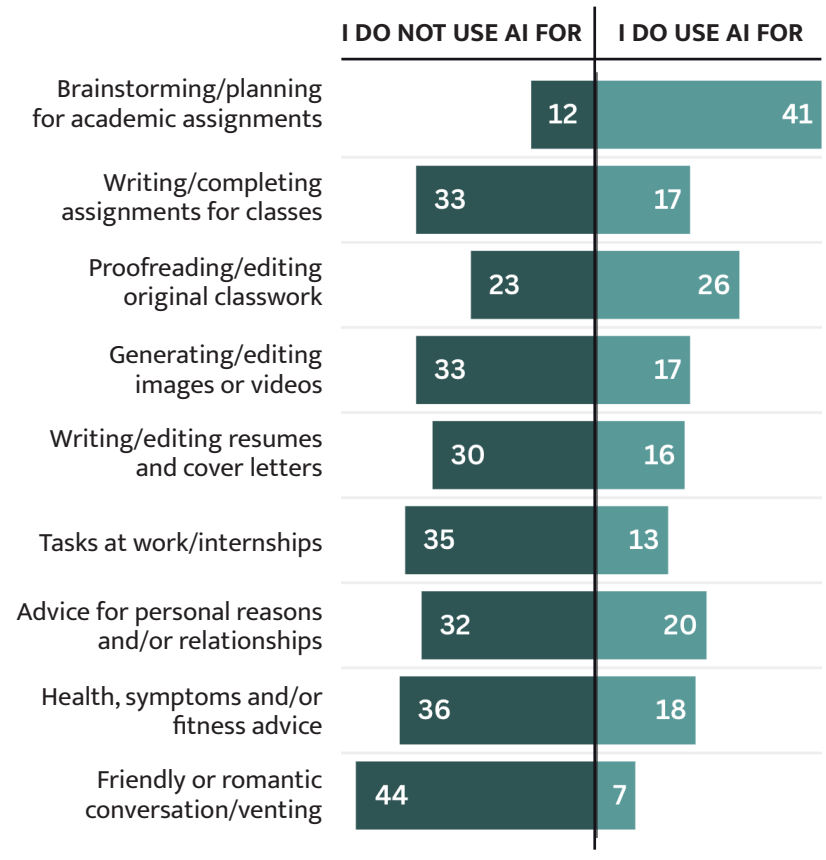


False AI use accusations leave professors and students with concerns for adequate academic integrity policies

Giselle Jimenez Del-Carmen | Asst. News Editor

With rapid speed, AI has made an entrance to academia, leaving professors and students at UNC Charlotte to pick up the pieces of a new academic reality. One particular obstacle invites discussion: How are professors and students addressing accusations of AI use?

AI has found a home with students through various popular generative AI tools, which are widely used to check grammar, summarize and paraphrase documents.

AI can also generate extended written texts, such as essays. This gives students the opportunity to use AI as a shortcut for assignments rather than writing them themselves.

The widespread use of generative AI among students, combined with its largely untraceable nature in coursework, has led professors to accuse students of cheating, accusations that can be either valid or unfounded.

The aftermath of an AI accusation

Bayan Ammar hadn't touched AI for one of her assignments, but still had to defend herself against accusations of AI usage.

Ammar, a second-year UNC Charlotte student, submitted an assignment for her journalism class and was falsely accused of using AI. While she didn't receive a zero, her score was lower than she expected, and the professor provided an explanation: it was flagged for AI usage.

She was unsure why. She put the assignment in an AI detection software, which highlighted a portion where she used an em dash.

Generative AI tools are known to rely heavily on em dashes in their writing, a stylistic habit that can raise flags in AI detection software.

"Unfortunately, assignments can be detected for AI if their punctuation is a little too perfect. I'm a journalism student, and using punctuation is half the work alone," Ammar said.

Since the accusation, Ammar has felt paranoid that her work may be flagged again and has developed the habit of running everything she writes through AI detection software to avoid another accusation.

"AI use in college isn't taken lightly, and I don't want to be accused of something I didn't do, especially if there is no way to prove myself right," Ammar said.

Ammar isn't alone, as Dallaz Daniels, a second-year student, was falsely accused of using AI on an assignment.

In a writing course, Daniels received a zero on his first assignment as his professor claimed he had used AI. He accepted the zero until he received two additional zeros for the same accusation, prompting him to speak with his professor.

Daniels explained that the professor lacked evidence for her accusation because she had based her claims on his activity recorded in Microsoft Word.

According to the professor, Daniels' timestamps were unusual given the time it took him to write the assignment.

"I felt disrespected that she couldn't take my word for it. I tried to prove that I didn't. I'm just a fast typer," Daniels said.

After the conversation, the professor reported Daniels for an academic integrity violation and offered him two options: he could accept the zeros and a remediation course, or appeal her decision to the court.

Daniels opted for the former and left the class dissatisfied with the professor. Ammar's case ended more favorably.

"I'm grateful that my professor pointed out the flagged portion of my paper and didn't get me in major trouble, but rather dropped the assignment grade slightly," Ammar said.

She believes that her professor pointing out potential AI use is preferable to failing a student.

Both students sought different means of preventing another false accusation, with Daniels using University-approved AI software provided by the Office of OneIT.

"AI detection software is in its early stages, where it can flag anything as AI. I think universities' policies rely too much on this software to catch someone, especially with how high the risk of a false accusation is right now," Ammar said.

The prevention of AI accusations

Inconsistencies in AI detection software that may lead to false accusations have prompted professors to consider students undergoing the development process of AI detection software and to identify strategies to address them effectively.

Justin Cary, a senior lecturer in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric & Digital Studies, believes that AI literacy is important for preventing false accusations and thus implements it into his courses.

"If you can present an AI literacy framework, which has to do with technical knowledge, application and ethics, it leads to agency," Cary said.

Cary believes it's important for professors to provide students with a space to discuss whether they have used AI on assignments, rather than students feeling afraid to explore and apply AI.

Gordon Hull, a professor in the Philosophy Department, advocates for a similar strategy. Hull believes AI can be beneficial in certain fields, such as computer science, but he doesn't see a role for it in philosophy, as most of it involves writing, a medium subject to AI generation.

However, he doesn't want to prohibit its use entirely; instead, he encourages students to ask him whether they may use AI on certain assignments, especially to avoid having their work flagged for AI use.

Hull has noted that AI frequently generates fake citations, among other fabricated texts, and believes AI detection software isn't always accurate.

"AI will often be very confident when it doesn't know what it's talking about," Hull said. "I would not accuse someone based solely on the software because I know how it works."

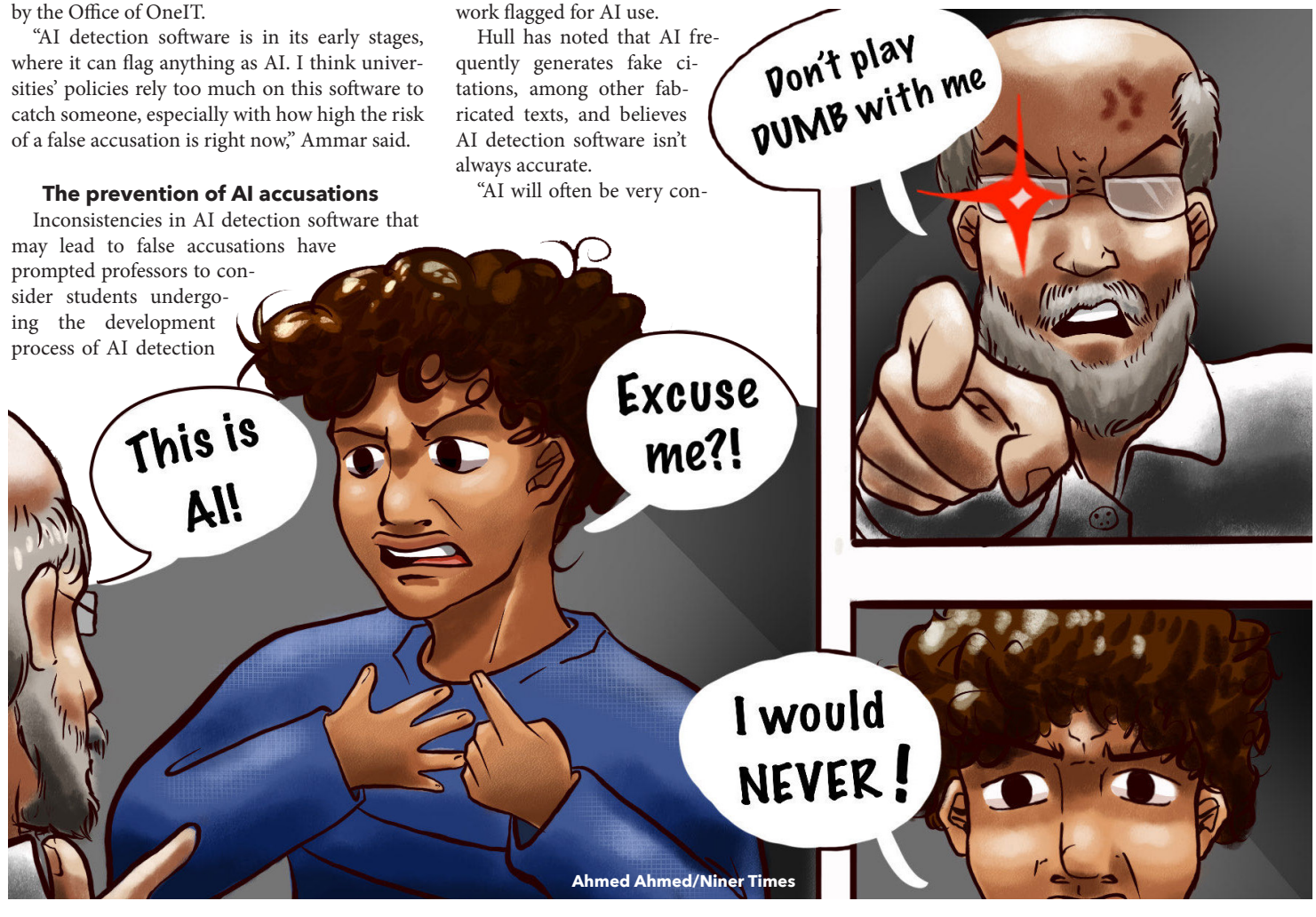
Cori Faklaris, an assistant professor in the College of Computing and Informatics, uses AI detection software for student assignments, but shares a sentiment similar to Hull's.

"We're going to have to evolve new social norms around accusations of AI use," Faklaris said. "I wouldn't accuse somebody of plagiarism just flippantly."

Faklaris argues that AI brings a generational shift in expectations and preparation for managing AI-related use accusations, which should extend beyond higher education.

Ultimately, she believes it's unfair for the current cohort of scholars who are caught in the "sandwich" between those like herself who entered academia before AI and those who will enter after AI's full establishment.

"You have to be the person who supervises the AI," Faklaris said. "To be a supervisor, you have to know how to do it yourself."



Ahmed Ahmed/Niner Times

The AI keeping Charlotte women's basketball modern

Evan Campos | Sports Editor

Behind every scouting report, film cut-up, rotation tweak and leap in player maturation for Charlotte women's basketball is a side of the program most fans never see.

That work runs through Jaylen Pointer.

In his first year as video coordinator for Charlotte, Pointer operates at the intersection of film, data, analytics and emerging AI technology while also working closely in player development. His role centers on turning a mass amount of information into something players can understand and apply, while giving the coaching staff clarity behind every decision.

In an era where college basketball is evolving rapidly, his position reflects how modern programs develop athletes not just through repetition or instruction, but through what Pointer calls "evidence."

"Once I got into it, I grew to love film," Pointer said. "It's evidence. You can show mistakes, and later, you can show improvement. That's powerful for development."

A modern toolbox behind the scenes

At the center of Pointer's work is a growing ecosystem of platforms that now define player development at the collegiate level. What once required hours of manual work can now be processed, organized and delivered in real time.

The sports video analysis and data platform Hudl serves as the engine.

Hudl functions as the program's central database, housing practice film, game footage, scouting clips and analytics in one location. Practices are recorded and automatically segmented, allowing coaches and players to access specific moments quickly rather than digging through extended footage.

"That film access, along with that analytical access, so you're not just looking at numbers, [allows you to] actually see what's being said," Pointer said.

That connection is especially important for younger players still learning how to process feedback. Efficiency metrics and usage data are attached directly to video clips, providing immediate visual context. For a coaching staff working through short turnarounds between games, Hudl can save time and make communication easier.

Integrated into that same Hudl network are FastScout and FastDraw, tools that modernize scouting.

Rather than relying on printed binders or paper scouting packets, reports and play diagrams are delivered digitally to players' phones.

"There's no excuse not to see it," Pointer said. "It's right there."

FastDraw allows coaches to diagram plays digitally and share them instantly through FastScout. The process removes friction and ensures everyone is seeing the same material, whether players are in the locker room, on the road, at home or in class.

Synergy Sports complements that system.

Another essential video-indexing platform, Synergy, plays a major role in game film sharing and league-wide access. Because nearly every NCAA program uses it, Synergy allows Charlotte to exchange film seamlessly with opponents while remaining compliant with conference and NCAA standards.

Charlotte's newest competitive asset

One of the newest tools Charlotte has implemented is ShotTracker's software program.

Stats are available instantly during games, providing live box scores, in-bound plays and advanced analytics tied directly to real-time game video. Coaches can use the information to adjust on the fly, communicate with players on the bench using live data, manage rotations and challenge calls during competition.

"We can appeal certain calls now," Pointer said. "We've had two or three appeals overturned because of it."

ShotTracker Scout adds another AI-driven layer. Pointer describes it as a ChatGPT-style assistant for basketball scouting. He can request brief summaries of opponents, identify which actions they score from most often and view key tendencies tied directly to video, serving as a powerful resource when evaluating both upcoming opponents and Charlotte's own performance.

Pointer emphasized that it is not a replacement for coaching or preparation.

"It's a supplemental tool for us building our own scouting reports," he said.

Progress players can see

Ultimately, all of this technology exists to help players improve.

Pointer believes its greatest value lies in removing ambiguity. Coaching feedback is no longer just verbal or subjective. It is supported by film and data that players can see for themselves.

"Some players are visual learners," he said. "You can tell them something on the court, but until they see it, it doesn't click."

Progress becomes trackable. Growth can be revisited. Improvement is no longer abstract. When mistakes and corrections both appear on film, accountability becomes clearer and more honest.

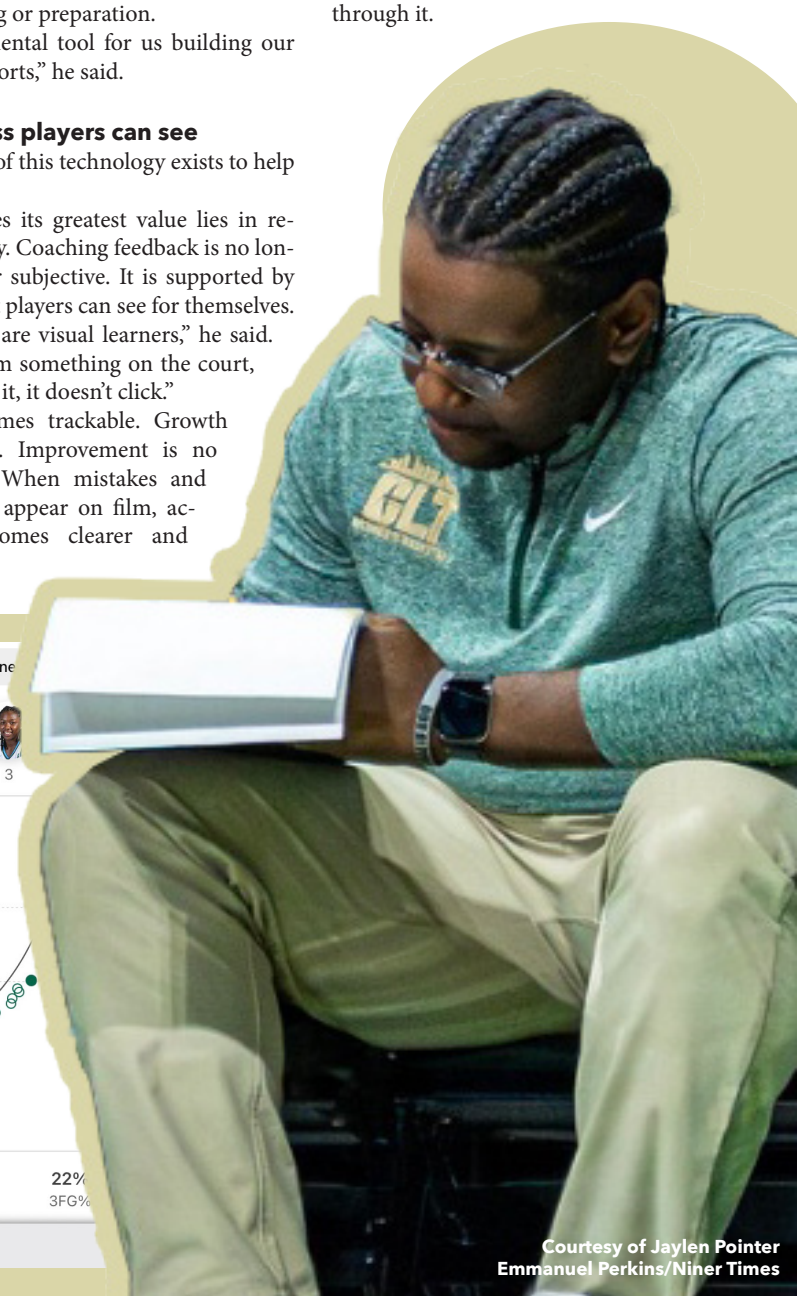
"If it's just words, someone can feel singled out," Pointer said. "But when you show the video and the data, it's not personal. It's proof."

Ten or even five years ago, this level of real-time information was rare at the college level. Now, it is becoming essential, especially for programs looking to maximize limited practice time during the season.

"Sports are turning into a business," Pointer said. "And it's turning toward AI."

For Charlotte women's basketball, these tools keep the program modern and efficient within the American Conference, in a landscape where falling behind technologically can quickly erase a competitive edge.

And at the center of it all is a video coordinator who understands that real player progression starts with visual learning and building trust through it.



Courtesy of Jaylen Pointer
Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

What my grandfather's life as an artist taught me about his AI obsession

Madeline Andrews | Arts & Culture Editor

I was raised in my grandfather's house.

Inside, a quilt made of soda cans hangs above the dinner table, watercolor mandalas sit in place of a living room TV, and shelves swell under the weight of countless photo negatives, all bookending his lifetime collection of work.

I would spend lazy Saturdays hunting in his studio, flipping through the negatives and putting them up to the light, trying to grasp at all of the lives he had lived before mine began.

He spent every passing moment creating — often doodling on the edges of my grandmother's discarded receipts, or one summer when he filled our garage with three-legged stools.

That was until he found AI.

Despite his artistic background, he has become enthralled with every aspect of the technology over the past 18 months. It started with a subscription to Perplexity, a popular generative AI app that he uses in place of Google search queries. Then, he started using it in his illustrations, turning his award-winning work into a distant relative of itself. Now, he uses it for medical advice.

His new obsession has led to a deep rift in our relationship.

I am vehemently against AI in virtually every use case. As someone tirelessly pursuing a creative career, AI use in the arts feels like trying to plant a garden in quicksand.

I've struggled to understand why an artist like him would find any interest in something I find so lifeless and shallow. He argues that it only enhances his work, while I think it cheapens it. We argue constantly.

A creative life

My grandfather, Stewart Todd Smith, is 79 years old. His parents were both artists — his father was a sculptor, his mother an art teacher. Their house was full of art, too.

During a family trip to the Guggenheim Museum in New York, he found the work of Kandinsky, one of the forefathers of abstract art. He became obsessed with trying to emulate it, playing with colors and shapes that could illicit the same feelings he had felt in the museum. He was only six years old.

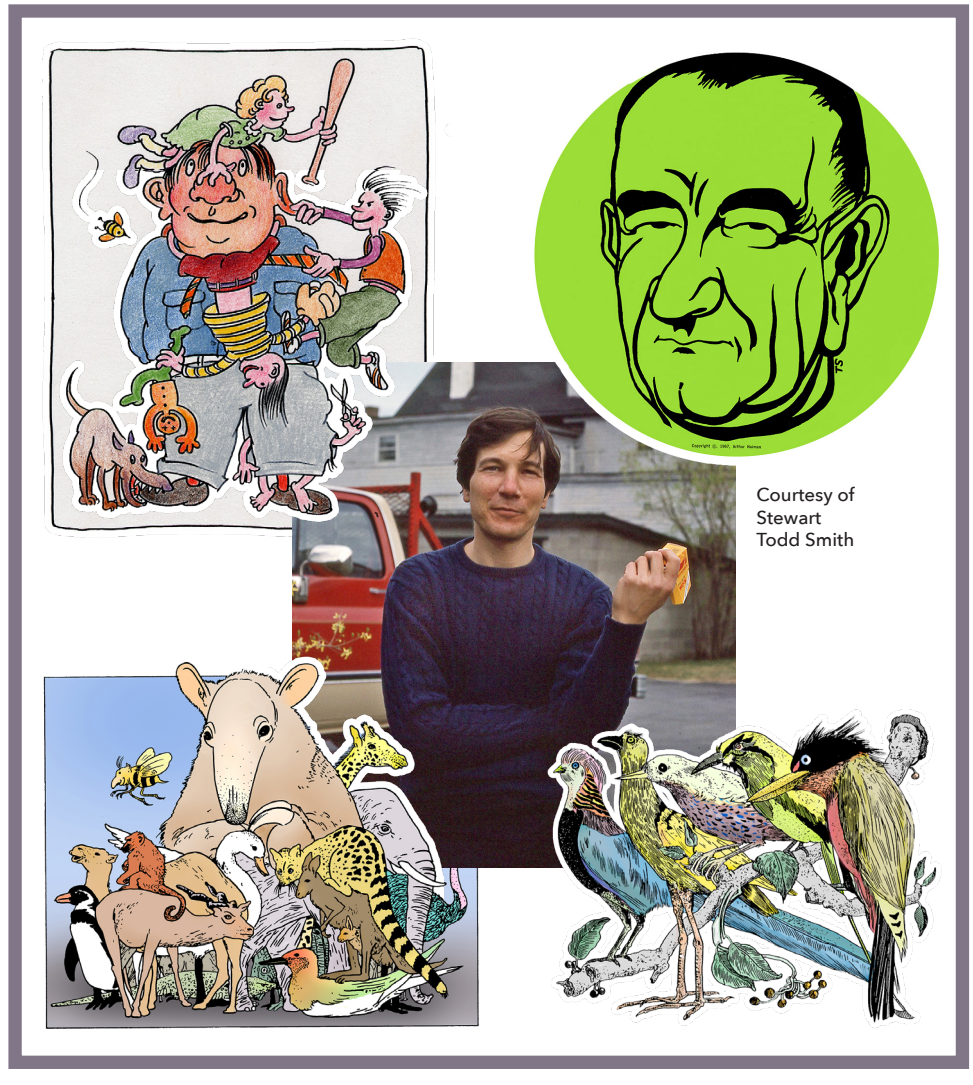
An obvious prodigy, he went on to receive a full-ride scholarship to the Pratt Institute, where he graduated in 1968 with a major in printmaking and a minor in photography.

He landed the first job he interviewed for, working at Channel 5 News in New York City.

His job was to draw directly onto pieces of film that would then be cast behind the newscasters during live broadcasts. It was quite manual work, and the technology was still young.

"A lot of mistakes were made back then. This was during the Vietnam War, and I remember this one time when a newscaster wore a green tie by accident, so the video of the battle played right onto it," he laughed.

After a few years with Channel 5 news, he transitioned to work in advertising. He designed everything from an American Airlines in-flight magazine to kids' cartoons on the backs of Post cereal boxes.



Courtesy of Stewart Todd Smith

Working in the '70s, my grandfather had no iPad or stylus to aid in his work. He hand-painted everything with gouache paint on boards, even designing the type font by hand.

His work is where the term 'copy and paste' comes from, the manual process of pasting down work with rubber cement onto trifold boards. The time to create one design for a cereal box could take upwards of a month on average.

He moved from company to company through the '90s. At one point, he worked for the son-in-law of a mafia accountant.

"That job was honestly like the office in 'Mad Men,'" he joked.

Later, he moved to New Hampshire and hit it big freelancing for local nonprofits.

"By that point, I am living across the street from the Capitol building. I don't want to brag, but I was kind of the resident graphic designer for the state of New Hampshire; it's a small state, it's not a big deal, but for me it was sort of cool," he smiled.

Technological advancement

But eventually his work became less necessary and more accessible.

"Gradually, there was less and less of a need for creative graphic design; the bureaucrats could just clone my work and have someone from within the company adjust it from there," he explained.

Still, as a freelancer, he felt Photoshop only enhanced his work. He could spend more time drawing and less time waiting for approval.

"But as things got more streamlined, the demands became more intense, companies expected things to be done yesterday when 30 years before they understood it would take a month," he explained.

After over 70 years as a creative, generative AI became popular right before he retired.

"The word AI didn't come into my vocabulary until much later; there were probably parts of Photoshop that felt kind of magical, but I didn't even think of it as AI," he recalled. "Once I started to do illustrations with it, I saw the power of it and thought, 'Oh my God.'"

After understanding his life and career, I began to realize that older people everywhere see AI as an accessible library of materials. For him, he isn't concerned with a machine scraping his work, because much of it is already the backbone of American design; he is used to being the blueprint.

However, just because he made his mark as an artist doesn't mean our generation will get the same opportunities. His artistic inspiration has become the driving force of Gen Z career anxiety, and many fear that wide adoption among elder artists will kick the ladder before the rest of us make it anywhere.

After I said this, he paused. For the first time in our year-long argument, he finally conceded that AI can't do everything.

"Using AI for everything is like playing a video game and just cutting to the end. Playing the game is the joy of life, if you don't allow yourself to have fun and be creative… It's sad, really," he claimed.

He wants young artists not to fear the rise of generative AI, because there have always been threats to the artistic status quo. To him, it's just the natural extension of a lifetime of exponential technological growth.

"I think AI is deadening to the soul, it doesn't feed your imagination, it just gives you a quick thrill, it's a quick fix, what is life about if not the thrill of the game and the hunt of the adventure," he said. "But I have already lived my life; for me, it's just the cherry on top."

Opinion: ChatGPT is not your friend

Lauren Simendinger | Staff Writer

Bryan Chen/Niner Times

Friends do not sell their friends' data. So why is ChatGPT allowed to do it?

College is stressful. Students must navigate not only schoolwork, but friendships, finances and independent life. Talking with ChatGPT may seem like a quick, easy and trustworthy source to vent to, but it's not.

What is ChatGPT?

ChatGPT is an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot by OpenAI. Users can discuss anything from the weather to their deepest, darkest secrets. This might seem harmless. After all, ChatGPT is designed to help users. It is free, easily accessible and provides an automatic response. But ChatGPT is not a person, and most certainly not a friend. It is a computer, and it only cares about the data it is given, not the person behind it.

When ChatGPT receives a prompt or question, it does not go into the void. It goes to OpenAI's cloud servers. This data is encrypted, but anyone at OpenAI with clearance can access the data or allow others to.

OpenAI's privacy policy states that it does not sell user data for advertising purposes, but reports, as recently as Jan. 28, indicate this is false.

Reports of data harvesting

"Industry analysts estimate that hundreds of millions of ChatGPT conversations have been collected by entities operating outside OpenAI's direct control," Albert Archibald of Media by MLTD writes, a United Kingdom-based news site.

Archibald explains that this harvesting goes on both on the general internet and the dark web. While there are laws and safeguards meant to protect against illegal data harvesting, the relative novelty of AI technology makes enforcement difficult.

OpenAI's privacy policy

"When you create an account with us, we will collect information associated with your account, including your name, contact information, account credentials, date of birth, payment information, and transaction history (collectively, 'Account Information')," states OpenAI's privacy policy.

It also reveals that it collects user data from any tools they use, and if they communicate with OpenAI outside of its platforms, such as email or social media. They also collect your location.

Under the "Disclosure of Personal Data" section of the privacy policy, OpenAI states it may provide data to vendors, service providers, government authorities, affiliates, other third-party users interacted with and in the event of a business transfer. What does this mean? The vendors and service providers work with OpenAI to keep it running, and if OpenAI is acquired by another company, they will still have access to the data. But what about the government?

OpenAI says it will work with government agencies to protect users, but what if the government agency is acting in bad faith? There is always the possibility that OpenAI will prioritize its safety over users'.

How clearly is this laid out? I am not tech-savvy at all, and it took me a good few times to grasp what the privacy policy says. Someone more knowledgeable may have an easier time understanding, but most people do not bother to read terms and conditions or privacy policies at all.

What OpenAI does make clear is that user data is used to train its own models. AI models are trained by people. People who can do anything they want with your data.

Who is buying your data?

Forbes' Zak Doffman reports that, according to Koi, an online security platform, multiple Google Chrome extensions harvested the data from AI chatbots, including ChatGPT. The extension operated via an 'executor' script that intercepted and collected the data. The only way to stop this is to uninstall the extension.

Archibald wrote there are four main buyers of chatbot data: marketing firms, competitive intelligence, data brokers and cyber criminals. The first three typically pay anywhere from £500 to £20,000 (approximately $684-$27,384). Cyber criminals will pay anything.

Do not let the machine use you

This may not seem like a big deal. Identity theft is a problem, but everyone on the internet harvests data. That is just how the internet functions at this point. But do you really want random strangers on the internet knowing your medical history? Your financial situation? The color of your truck? That your best friend killed themself when they were 13?

That is who ChatGPT users are talking to in reality. Not the void. Not an echo chamber. A real person, yes, but one who, like ChatGPT itself, does not care about the person providing the data.

Just what they are being provided.

ChatGPT is a tool. You are not. So use it to rewrite a sentence, solve a math problem or look up a recipe. But do not let it use you.

Opinion: I don't want to embrace AI and I don't have to

Ava Harris | Asst. Opinion Editor

"Get on board or get left behind" is a phrase I have certainly used many times in conversations about new lingo, trans rights, social issues, you name it. The increasingly widespread usage of AI, however, is something I will gladly be left behind on, no matter how globally ingrained it may soon become. Maybe I am too woke, but the consequences of habitual AI usage are too significant for me to turn a blind eye for the sake of convenience.

By now, most have likely heard about the immense amount of water and electricity wasted every time ChatGPT generates your 10th-grade-level email. Those prompts require ChatGPT to drink about three 16.9-ounce water bottles per email. A single data center can use as much as five million gallons of water per day. Data centers nationally used a record-high 183 terawatt-hours of energy in 2024. But not many understand just how significant the implications of this absurd amount of water and energy usage truly are.

Of course, this has a detrimental impact on the environment; extreme greenhouse gas emissions, destructive mining of rare elements and electronic (mercury and lead) waste are just a few things needed to oil the AI machine. Everyday generative AI usage is unarguably destroying any chance humans have of reversing the effects of climate change.

The lesser-known pitfall of generative AI water and energy depletion is its very direct human impact. Data centers are frequently placed in already heavily polluted areas, further exacerbating the health issues faced by those living there. Their daily pumping of toxic air pollutants like sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides is sure to be felt in the lungs of their neighbors.

Polluted water from sediment runoff is a serious concern as well, as we know from the movie "Erin Brockovich" that it can cause a variety of illnesses, diseases and cancers.

Water is not an infinite resource. Wherever these massive data centers are placed, water will be hard to come by. Millions of gallons are taken from the communities in which they reside. Water stops running through the plumbing systems, and drinking water becomes scarce, especially in areas that are already facing drought.

Laws regulating data centers are extremely limited as of now. Increased tax revenue from these plants put dollar signs over many lawmakers' eyes where they should be seeing outraged constituents. In any case, the large majority of data centers are built in lower-income areas, often rural, where the communities do not have the financial resources to fight these multibillion-dollar companies. This, in turn, disproportionately impacts minority communities, an issue deemed "environmental racism."

Companies want to take advantage of areas with lower energy costs, thereby increasing demand and driving up energy costs across the entire area. The same goes for water; when a single plant doubles a community's water usage, prices will increase all the same.

But how could the government possibly allow this? Well, as Mr. Krabs would say: money, money, money. Tax revenue is a factor, but another major issue is what I call good old-fashioned corruption. Multiple members of Congress and their families have purchased stock in AI companies while the president's inaugural front row was his close personal CEOs of OpenAI, Meta, Google and more.

Those same CEOs and their families were some of the largest contributors to his campaign as well, which could explain why the administration made a commitment to invest $92 billion in AI infrastructure. This investment includes $200 million in Pentagon contracts with OpenAI, Google, Anthropic and xAI. There will be no need to worry about those silly little people and their "human right to water" so long as the government and AI are in one another's pockets.

At the end of the day, all of this is a whole lot of problems for a whole lot of nothing in return. Humans went centuries managing to produce groundbreaking scientific discoveries, mathematical equations, essays, books, art, movies, emails and fanfiction without needing an industrial threat to humanity to do it for them.

So, no, I refuse to kill the planet, steal people's running water and put even more money into the pockets of billionaire oligarchs just to laugh at a picture of Jesus as Bart Simpson. Call me crazy, but please leave me behind.

Maya Wilson/Niner Times

Opinion: AI is not as bad as you think it is

Wes Packham | Writing Managing Editor

If you've spent any time online, you've probably seen countless posts and videos talking about how AI is bad in one way or another. It's easy to take these at face value; they've got hundreds of thousands of likes, and almost everyone in the comments is agreeing. But are these claims as accurate as they seem, and do they paint the whole picture of what is happening with AI?

This negative discourse surrounds nearly every conversation about AI. It sometimes seems impossible to have a balanced conversation about the topic and actually learn about AI's benefits.

The common issues

AI needs data centers. The billions of prompts that large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and Gemini receive daily need to host their compute somewhere. These data centers have been a particular sore spot for many people, notably for their impact on water usage and electricity costs.

It's commonly said that these data centers cause electricity costs to rise at exorbitant rates, but when adjusted for inflation, electricity costs have risen 14% over the last 20 years. Some even cite that the reasoning for the recent rise in electricity costs isn't data centers, but rather new energy legislation that prioritizes fossil fuel production over cheaper alternatives.

Water is another commonly talked about point. It is true that these data centers consume water, but it must be contextualized against other water uses.

That shower you took this morning: around 17 gallons of water. The steak you had for dinner the other night: 2,000 gallons. One ChatGPT prompt? One-fifteenth of a teaspoon.

Not to say that these comparisons are exactly the same; there are issues surrounding the evaporation of water and its departure from the local watershed, but these comparisons do help to bring some important context to the issue. Though it could be true that making the simple decision to have chicken instead of beef for dinner could be the difference of tens of thousands of LLM prompts.

Another common qualm is that AI is coming for your job, though current unemployment numbers can provide some peace of mind.

Unemployment rates are currently 4.4%, a number which has been increasing since unemployment hit its most recent low of around 3.5% during late 2022 and early 2023. While these numbers don't seem great, an unemployment rate of 4.4% either matches or is better than unemployment rates from 2001 to mid 2017.

There are risks, however, as the technology changes and as more industries adopt and implement AI into their workflows. Depending on the field of work, your job today could look different five or 10 years down the line.

Creative and cognitive

Outside of more concrete statistics, many find issues with how AI might be taking over in more creative fields or in its role in reducing cognitive function and critical thinking capabilities.

These categories are more subjective compared to the previously mentioned impacts that can be more easily measured by statistics.

I understand the frustrations that those working in the arts may feel when seeing others generate visual works in seconds. Within creative fields, it can take years to master the craft, and many express a feeling of intrinsic humanity through the creation of art.

But is it right to direct your frustration towards the tools and not the person using them?

A single person generating art likely wouldn't harm an authentic artist much. Rather, if a museum or gallery were to begin accepting AI-generated works, it would be more likely to damage an aspiring artist's livelihood.

That is to say, it's not exactly at the fault of those who created those tools, but how they are being used, and how people are reacting.

Within academic fields, if an individual is using generative AI to cheat on quizzes or complete assignments without batting an eye, whose fault would that be? Directing anger towards AI and saying AI is causing these problems would be inaccurate. The responsibility comes down to the individual.

Overlooking the positives

In the midst of all the negative discussions surrounding AI, I think it can be difficult to recognize some of the positive impacts that AI has had.

AI and machine learning models have been used to accelerate medical research, including advances in the interpretation of brain scans and detecting early warning signs of hundreds of different diseases.

Within finance, AI has been found beneficial for fraud detection and risk management, and in manufacturing industries, AI can offer predictive maintenance warnings and enhanced quality control.

It's easy to ignore these benefits or brush them off as less important, but when having the AI discussion, it's in bad faith to ignore the benefits AI can offer.

What does this all mean?

These points are not to say that AI doesn't have its faults. Rather, they are here to help contextualize the talking points that many people repeat online. AI is not this terrible, unregulated creation that is awful in every way, in the same way that it's not this magical technology that's going to completely change our world for the better. There are plenty of opportunities to use AI in a useful and ethical way.

These claims you've likely heard have some merit, but as with anything, the issues are much more nuanced than many make them seem. I would advocate for an investigation into claims, understanding the full picture and not taking everything you hear at face value.

It's probably not as bad as you think it is.

Megan Khor/Niner Times

Opinion: Creatives cannot pick and choose their AI use

Ava Weaver & Megan Khor | Design Editor & Asst. Design Editor

Have you ever become a fan of a musician, only to see them use AI-generated album covers? Do you have an artist friend who uses ChatGPT for all of their writing assignments but complains about AI in their industry?

This hypocritical nature of creatives — to stand against AI in their industry, but excuse it only when it benefits them — raises the question of what exactly the ethical use of generative AI in all creative industries looks like.

As artists ourselves, we have seen peers in the art community pick and choose when they accept or reject AI use. By having a hand in many creative mediums, such as art, music and writing, we have had our fair share of interactions with creatives making excuses for using AI.

If it is wrong in one industry, shouldn't it be wrong in all? If it is an attack on one medium, it's an attack on all of the arts.

A painter may spend hours on their craft, carefully creating their masterpiece. They hate AI and constantly criticize those who use AI to make images. Yet they find themselves with a creative writing assignment and suddenly say that they just "don't have time." They plug the assignment into ChatGPT without a second thought. The next day, they are back to berating a writer who used AI to generate images for a story they are working on.

From firsthand experience, we have seen excuses like these being made.

A musician friend has turned to AI to write lyrics when they couldn't find the words. At the same time, they insisted AI could never be used to create the beats of a song because those "come from the heart."

Other talented and deeply committed musicians in our lives now use AI to generate band logos and concert posters. Many local performance venues have followed suit, advertising shows with AI-generated posters and promotional materials.

These are people and places that should be fostering the arts, not replacing the work of other creatives.

Writers are subject to this as well. Writers in need of a quick visual aid may turn to AI-generated images as a quick fix. AI-generated illustrations have also become rampant in children's books, leading to inconsistent characters, environments and, of course, extra fingers.

Many creatives have fallen for this hypocritical mindset about what is and isn't okay to use AI for. People take so much pride in their craft, yet are okay with diminishing the value of someone else's. By not putting effort into all creative areas of a project, the overall value is greatly reduced.

The point of creating is the process, not the outcome. It's about the thought that goes into what you create, and the chance to learn, to grow and to fail. Using generative AI for artistic form is only cheating — exploiting your creativity and appropriating other artists' work.

Not only does using AI diminish the work of other creatives in their fields, but it also diminishes yours. By choosing to use it, you are giving away your credibility as a creative, your autonomy, your pride and your enjoyment of your choices and creative process.

Most consumers of the arts would rather see handcrafted works that show effort over something that is not entirely their own. Choosing to use AI in any capacity in your work not only alienates you from other creatives but also distances you from audiences who value authenticity.

One of the most rewarding parts of making art is the community you can build through it. Creatives can build strong connections with those whose craft they enjoy, and can improve their own craft along the way. By using AI, you lose the chance to connect with other creatives.

Taking the time and effort to learn a new skill can also improve one's own work, as you can find inspiration in a new creative process. You can learn so much just by being willing to try.

One of us came into this role with a strong background in illustration but little formal experience in graphic design. In moving up to design editor, I had to become comfortable with graphic design quickly. While those first few newspaper covers, page layouts and graphics were by no means the best, I chose to learn and have benefited from that decision.

Another one of us has a variety of experiences in journalistic writing, illustration, graphic design and video production. While not a professional in these areas, being skilled across multiple sectors of the arts has helped me find new ways to showcase my primary medium and broaden my perspective on artistic fundamentals.

We are design editors, not writers by trade. Still, we chose to write this. We chose to grow.

Choosing to create — even unsuccessfully — is far more valuable than automating your process to a machine. It allows you to take pride in pointing to your work and claiming that you really made it.

Art does not require mastery to hold worth; it requires effort, curiosity and vulnerability.

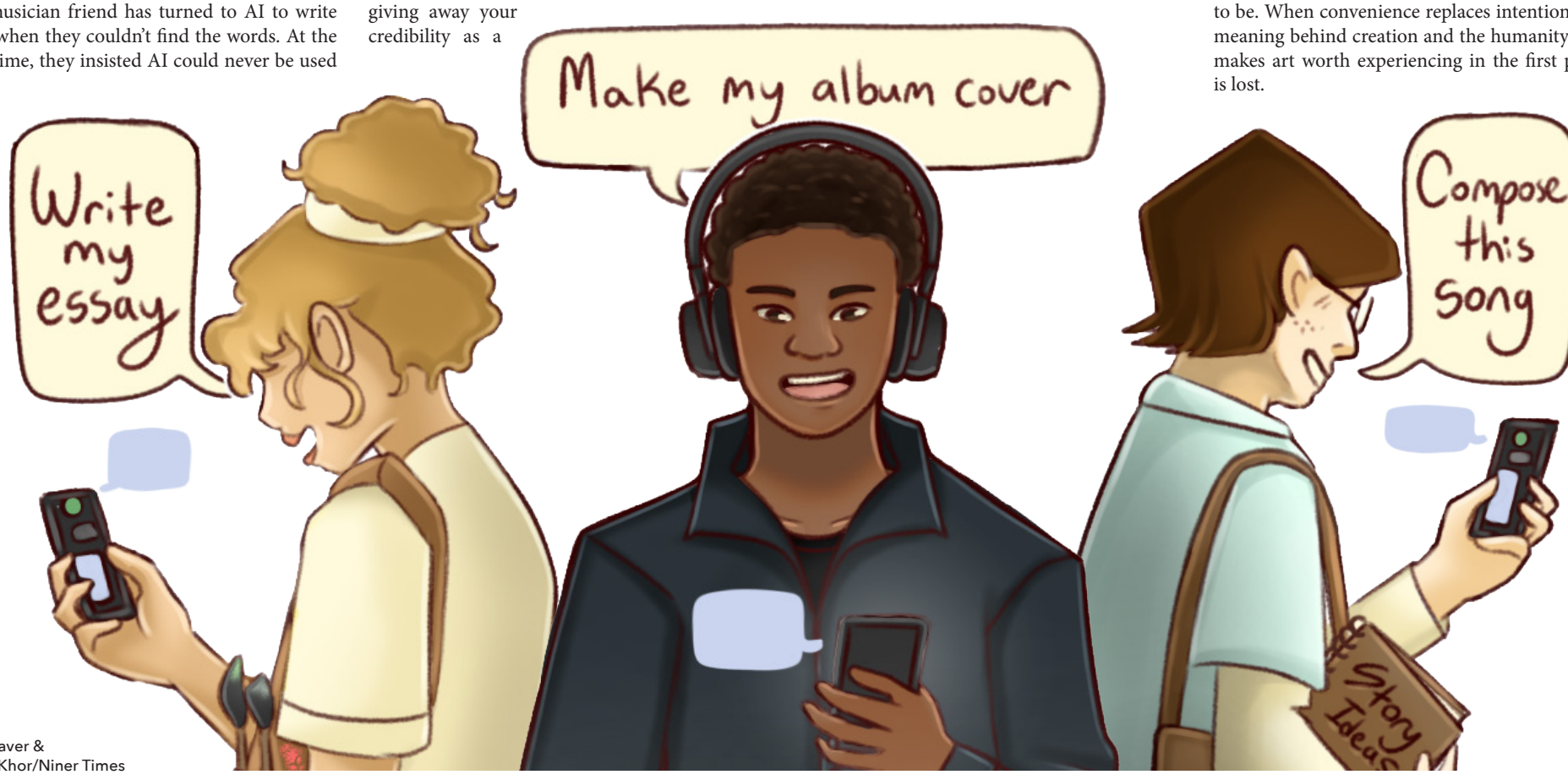
The art you create is a reflection of yourself, your ideas and your experiences. No machine can replace that, so why let it? You can describe the emotion and feeling all you want, but you are ultimately the only one who can convey it properly.

Slow down, enjoy the creative process and put yourself in the art you create. And take the time to explore another creative process; you never know who you might meet or what you might learn.

Creativity cannot be selectively protected without weakening the integrity of the arts as a whole.

It is not something that can be summoned at the click of a button; creativity must be lived, it must be inspired.

Only when we take the time to create ourselves can we learn to truly appreciate what art is meant to be. When convenience replaces intention, the meaning behind creation and the humanity that makes art worth experiencing in the first place is lost.



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Megan Khor/Niner Times