

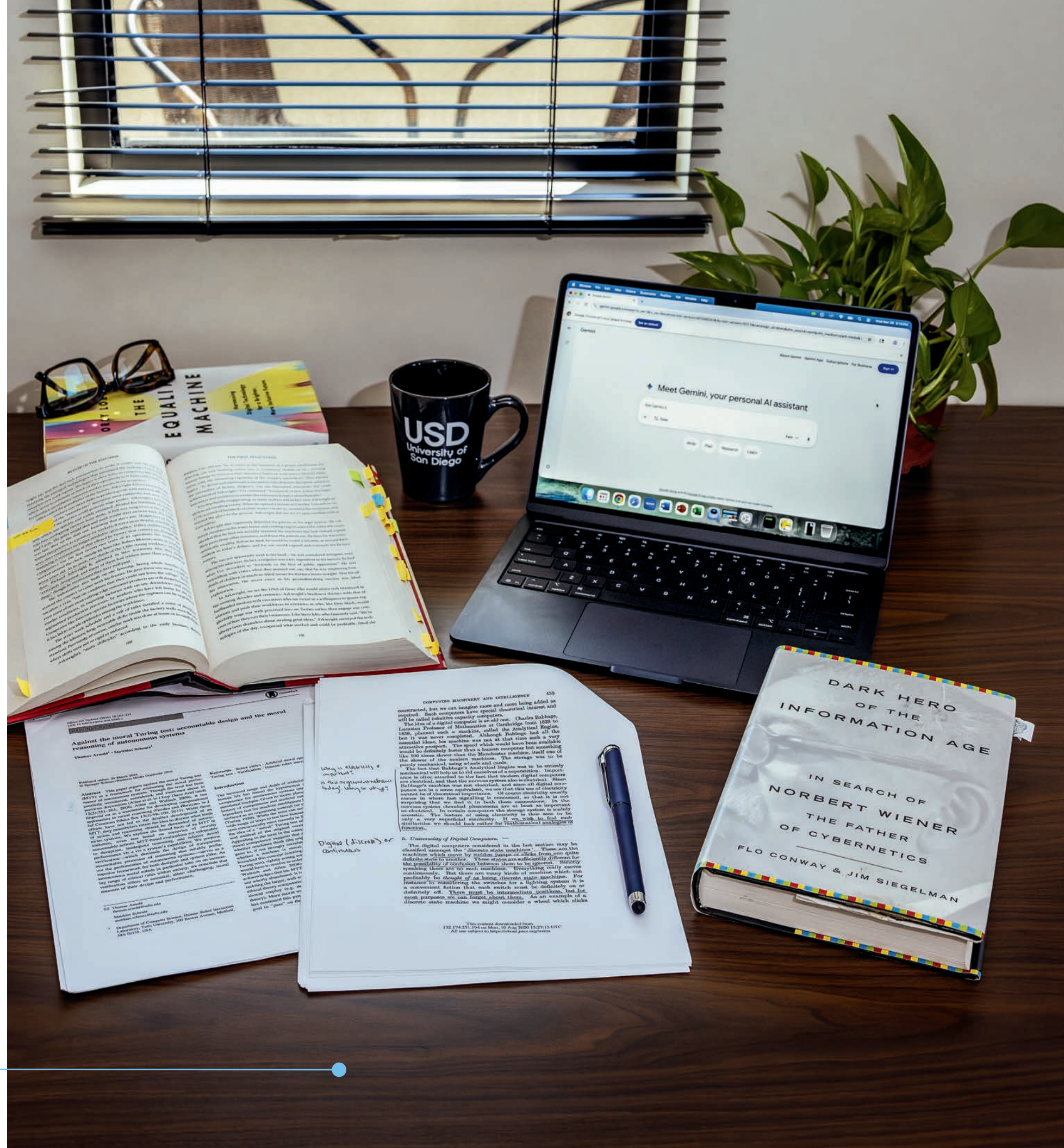
# Asking Better Questions *in* an Age of Easy Answers

HOW USD IS INTEGRATING AI WITHOUT LOSING SIGHT OF WHAT MAKES EDUCATION HUMAN

By Ben Peterson



How can AI enhance learning without outsourcing critical thinking?



**In early 2022, a computer science student stood before Darby Vickers' artificial intelligence (AI) ethics class to present on GPT-3,**

OpenAI's language model that was just beginning to capture attention beyond tech circles. When he demonstrated the tool on screen, generating increasingly sophisticated results after each prompt, the implications were crystal clear.

"That was a moment when I knew something big was coming," said Vickers, PhD, assistant professor of philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences. And it arrived quickly. By the time ChatGPT 3.5 launched in November 2022, faculty meetings were being convened almost immediately. The provost's office wasted no time in forming a steering committee to prepare for AI's evolving impacts.

"Over the last several years, we have jumped from intellectual abstractions about AI to concrete classroom conversations," said Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick, PhD, professor at the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies and USD's associate provost for academic strategy and growth. This ongoing transition is defining higher education's current relationship with artificial intelligence — moving from conference papers to everyday workflows, from theoretical concerns to pedagogical redesign.

At USD, the response has been neither panic nor uncritical embrace. Instead, the university has charted a distinctly human-centered path, one rooted in its Catholic intellectual tradition and commitment to educating the whole person.

**FROM DETECTION TO FORMATION**

The initial concerns on campus were understandable: How do you assess student learning when AI can generate passable essays in seconds? But Vickers noticed a change in faculty conversations about AI over time. "It's not so much about fear anymore," she noted. "It's about how we can shift and change to handle it. Now, almost everybody is thinking more about building the right kind of skills in the classroom."

Prioritizing efforts across campus would require less emphasis on policing plagiarism and more intention around a deeper, holistic institutional commitment to rethinking pedagogy. One thing is clear to Vickers: The question isn't whether students have access to AI — it's

whether they're developing the critical thinking skills that AI cannot replicate.

"There's a difference between technological enhancement, where we use technology to enhance what we're doing and make it even better, and cognitive offloading, where we're outsourcing some of those critical thinking skills to the technology," she explained. "So how do we help students have the discernment to learn what technological enhancement is?"

Some of the early lessons came from USD students themselves. In 2023, when Vickers' AI Ethics class discussed whether AI would undermine traditional universities in favor of certificate programs, students pushed back hard on the idea. "They said clearly, 'No, the most important thing is being in class with our professors,'" Vickers recalls. The conviction surprised her. These digital natives could have embraced a more transactional view of education, but they didn't.

That buy-in from students, combined with USD's small classes, mission-aligned vision and professors who serve as collaborative mentors rather than mere content deliverers, highlights the university's strategic advantages in an AI-saturated world.

**BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE FOR DISCERNMENT**

While some universities rushed to ban AI tools or mandate disclosure policies, USD took a more measured approach. After careful consideration, the university adopted Google's Gemini as its preferred AI platform to ensure compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) for sensitive university data. An AI@USD website was created as a hub for training resources and ethical guidelines. Working groups were established with different areas of focus: teaching and learning, research and scholarship, data and operations, the student experience and — critically — the Catholic intellectual tradition.

"Each one of those groups has different sets of puzzles, different goals and objectives," Choi-Fitzpatrick explained. "For example, some of the sticking points in teaching and learning are philosophical. They're about academic freedom. Should anybody be able to tell a faculty member what to do in their classroom? What is real learning in engineering versus law versus philosophy versus painting?"

Rather than mandate universal policies, Choi-Fitzpatrick has led a series of AI Learning Labs. He noted that these are not training sessions, but rather spaces for faculty to experiment, discuss and discern together. "Training is what you do when you roll out



**“How do we help students have the discernment to learn what technological enhancement is?”**

— Darby Vickers, PhD

new software,” he said. “Learning Labs are what to do when we don't quite know what this is going to look like.”

The demand has been overwhelming. Choi-Fitzpatrick has had to open multiple additional sessions, drawing hundreds of faculty and staff members. The response reflects both curiosity and a hunger for institutional support in navigating genuinely difficult questions.

“If we had pushed these as trainings, we'd have resistance, and if we had done nothing, there would be complaints,” he said. “I really do feel we're moving at the right pace of discernment and institutional culture.”

**THE LIBERAL ARTS ADVANTAGE**

That pace — neither racing ahead nor standing still — reflects a fundamental belief about what universities offer. “One of higher education's signal contributions to society is our capacity to equip people to lead with integrity in the world,” Choi-Fitzpatrick said. That capacity can't just be downloaded. It requires formation, practice and the slow work of developing judgment.

It's a vision that stands in tension with much of the current AI discourse, which tends to emphasize efficiency, scalability and labor market readiness. Those aren't unimportant. But they can't be the whole story.

“In a world of answers, questions become more important,” Choi-Fitzpatrick said. “We risk over-indexing on large language models' capacity to answer our questions really effectively but we spend less time cultivating really, really good questions.”

This is where USD's emphasis on the liberal arts tradition becomes not a limitation but a differentiator. Philosophy doesn't offer final answers. It teaches people to wrestle with complexity, to sit with uncertainty, to ask better questions. “It's not the seeking of wisdom or the finding of wisdom, but the love of wisdom,” Vickers noted, referring to the ancient meaning of philosophy itself.

Students pursuing a range of different majors and career paths are drawn to her AI Ethics class. She's noticed that engineering students are sometimes frustrated at first. They want clear solutions. But by the end of the semester, their thinking evolves. “They're able to say, ‘Oh, okay, I have these tools to be able to think things through, even if I'm not going to find a single correct answer,’” Vickers said.

That comfort with ambiguity and capacity for judgment may prove more valuable in an AI-saturated world than any specific technical skill.

### LOOKING FORWARD: AI AND HUMAN DIGNITY

USD's forward-looking vision is perhaps best embodied in a recent National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant awarded to Vickers; Choi-Fitzpatrick; Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies Susie Babka, PhD; Assistant Professor of Communication Sophia Baik, PhD; Assistant Professor of Philosophy Jennifer Tillman, PhD; and Professor of Communication Jillian Tullis, PhD. The \$53,700 grant will fund research on developing AI tools for individuals with disabilities, but with a crucial difference from most tech industry approaches.

"A lot of the tools that are being created for the disability community are not actually tailored to the needs of the community," Vickers explained, noting that many feel unsatisfied with what they see as band-aid solutions that don't actually work.

The project brings together philosophers, communication scholars and disability justice experts to create something different: white papers and guidelines developed in genuine conversation with the disability community, the tech industry and ethical scholars. It's an approach rooted in what Choi-Fitzpatrick calls "the Catholic intellectual tradition's commitment to human dignity and the public good."

Vickers finds guidance from Norbert Wiener's book, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, first published in 1950. Wiener argued that society stood at a crossroads. Artificial intelligence (or "cybernetics" as he called it) could be used primarily for war games and creating a techno-elite. Or it could be directed toward creating a more accessible world: better prosthetic limbs, hearing aids, tools that help everyone experience the world more fully.

"Even though he wrote that book so long ago, I feel like we still have that choice," Vickers said. "I think the NEH grant is positioning us to ask what it would look like to try to fulfill that vision of the more accessible world with this technology."

### THE MISSION AS NORTH STAR

Throughout the conversation about AI at USD, one thing is clear: how the university proceeds must be mission aligned.

"As a contemporary Catholic university, USD is perfectly positioned to strike a balance between educating the whole person and preparing them for a changing world," Choi-Fitzpatrick said. USD is seeking balance in many ways — between formation



How can AI help us create a more inclusive, sustainable and hopeful world?

### USD LAUNCHES MASTER'S DEGREE IN APPLIED ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Building on its commitment to ethical AI integration, USD will launch a new Master of Science in applied artificial intelligence in Fall 2026. The program offers both on-campus (16 months) and online (20 months) formats, emphasizing hands-on learning with practitioner faculty and real-world AI projects.

The new degree program reflects USD's measured approach to AI: First, establish robust pedagogical and ethical frameworks across campus, then scale that expertise through graduate education. Students will work on meaningful challenges in collaborative, supportive environments where technical skills are balanced with the ethical discernment that has become central to USD's AI integration efforts.



**LEARN MORE**  
about USD's innovative AI master's degree program.  
[sandiego.edu/ai-masters](https://sandiego.edu/ai-masters)

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