

Using AI to Strengthen Student Relationships

How prioritizing human connection transforms the way we deploy AI in higher education

Guest: Chadd Engel, AI and Learning Systems Leader; PhD Candidate, DePaul University

Institution: Waubensee Community College / Chicagoland

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TRANSCRIPT

Katy Oliveira 00:00

Today we're tackling a topic that is currently shaking the foundations of our industry: the practical and ethical integration of artificial intelligence. While some see AI as a giant earthquake for the workforce, our guest today views it through a unique lens — one that prioritizes human connection above all else. He argues that if an AI use case doesn't ultimately lead to more human-to-human interaction, we need to scrutinize why we're doing it.

Joining us is Chadd Engel, an AI and learning systems leader whose work spans generative AI pedagogy and data infrastructure across both K-12 and higher education. Chadd is currently a PhD candidate at DePaul University, where he is defending his dissertation on the framework of AI and community college instruction. From his time designing futuristic libraries to his current role managing outcomes and initiatives, Chadd has given over a hundred presentations on how to maintain human values in a machine-driven world.

Today we're going to discuss how to filter out the noise of the AI explosion, the cultural hurdles standing in the way of student persistence, and why curiosity — not dominance — is the key to surviving the greatest economic disruption in human history. But before we dive in, take a moment to subscribe to the show to stay up to date on the latest data-informed approaches to student impact.

Chadd, welcome to Next Practices. Before we dive into the main topic, I'd love for you to tell us a little about yourself and the work you do to impact student success.

Chadd Engel 01:57

I got into education through K-12 spaces. I was originally a public school teacher and evolved through doing a lot of different career technical work — offering career pathway opportunities for students starting with touchpoint experiences in third grade and mapping those all the way through first- and second-year college experience to ensure students can access earning a living wage. That's been the basis of my work over the past 15 years.

Within that, I've always been a computer science for all advocate. When I saw AI launch — and specifically ChatGPT in 2022 — I was like, 'Oh wow, this is going to fundamentally change everything.' And it has, and keeps evolving. What I'm doing now in my community and in the greater Chicagoland area is advocating for dialogues around upskilling needs and how we need to evolve together as people — building communities of practice around those conversations.

ON FILTERING AI HYPE THROUGH A HUMAN CONNECTION LENS

Katy Oliveira 02:58

A lot of the work AI plays involves upskilling and changing the shape of how higher ed operates — not only in what students need to know, but how we as practitioners use AI to better support them. With the current AI explosion, I know it can be difficult to distinguish between meaningful tools and hype. You've mentioned that a worthwhile AI use case should ideally lead to more human-to-human interaction. How can leaders use that lens to filter out the noise and prioritize strategies that actually strengthen the bond between students and institutions?

Chadd Engel 04:05

A good example that allows people to come into the conversation is using AI as a filter to find common parallels in data sets. If you're working in advising from a student-centered perspective — or in financial aid, or in re-engagement — being able to pull those data sources and use tools to remember and follow up on conversations that others at the college had is enormously valuable.

What's uniquely different with the tools available now is that we all authentically care about each other's stories. When you're meeting with a student, there might be a personal anecdote — maybe they're from a one-parent household, or they're a cat person, not a dog person. Those little details matter. But when you have a caseload of a hundred-plus students, those connection points are hard to remember. AI can help us surface that context in a communication piece so that when we follow up with a student who's fallen behind, we can open with something personal. That's going to help with student persistence and build community within the institution.

Instead of a follow-up being solely focused on financial aid or student accounts in a business-centric way, what if the full story is there? If you're not familiar with those processes and there's no personal connection, you may not reach out. AI helps us build a better picture of the whole student.

Katy Oliveira 06:40

One way we think about it is that AI allows for a holistic understanding of what impacts student success beyond traditional metrics — personalizing support not just at the individual student level, but at the institutional level: the mix of things an institution can offer at a particular moment in a student's experience.

Chadd Engel 07:09

And something you said made me think about how we'll be able to take information in more real time. If there's something in the system that draws a parallel to work we've done in the past — if we notice a trend in the courses a student is taking and ask, 'Has anyone had a career pathway conversation with this student?' — that's a system alert piece. We'll be building better capacity to respond in real time based on those trends. Students who identify a career pathway or a path to success have a much greater rate of completion than those who don't.

ON CULTURAL AND OPERATIONAL HURDLES TO AI ADOPTION

Katy Oliveira 07:59

Beyond the technology itself, what do you see as the primary cultural or operational hurdles preventing higher education from using AI effectively to improve outcomes like persistence?

Chadd Engel 09:03

More often than not, AI is introduced without a purpose, with very little context or dialogue. There's a fear of loss of professional agency within that, and a general mistrust of these tools because of concerns about surveillance — which all of us share. When these things get introduced, they tend to fragment people, especially if the leader hasn't had the opportunity to think through how these systems have an overarching impact on an entire college.

And it's not fair at this point in time to expect our leaders to be well-versed in these conversations, because we're venturing into largely the unknown. In many of the spaces I'm in, there are maybe two or three people within a group of twenty who understand both the full system backend and the student implication piece. I've attended conferences where even the engineers of major AI platforms acknowledge they don't fully know what their tools do. That only heightens the fear component.

Without clear governmental expectations for ethical use, escalation, and accountability, that just leads to more questions and more fragmentation.

Katy Oliveira 11:09

The hesitancy, the concern, the fundamental misunderstanding about the use case — I think the primary fears are: we're being surveilled, we can't trust this information, or I'm going to get replaced. Those are legitimate concerns. But they emerged in other technology transitions too. The way we view it at Civitas Learning is that these are tools that allow human beings to do the really meaningful work — to increase capacity, efficiency, and accuracy, much the same way machine learning or workflow technologies did ten years ago.

Chadd Engel 12:25

As you were sharing that, one thing that comes to mind is that the last Civitas Learning event I attended in Chicagoland was designed as an open dialogue for human connection. That's a great model for how we need to venture into this space. What I offer to many different audiences is a dialogue model — fundamentally different from a Western-style debate where you seek to dominate or win a conversation. In a dialogue model, you remain curious, you openly listen, and instead of being solution-oriented, you offer up a curious question and let the dialogue lead you toward creative and innovative use cases.

AI tools are creation and innovation tools — they're not primarily fact-finders. A lot of the misunderstanding occurs when people see an error. I push back against the idea of 'hallucination' because: when you use a tool, you own your outputs. If your outputs have error, that comes with you. You need to maintain human agency and ownership over the machine.

ON RAISING THE FLOOR — NOT JUST REDUCING TIME

Katy Oliveira 14:33

The technology is only in control if you relinquish that control. You have agency over your inputs, your outputs. There should always be a human in the loop — this is meant to ease the process, just like a vacuum eases cleaning.

Chadd Engel 15:11

I also push back against the idea of 'reducing time on task' as the first goal. Your first focus should be raising the floor on quality of your work. If you wholly focus on that, you'll find potential value — and then that value, as you become attuned to the tools, has the potential to result in reduction of time on tasks. But when you gain that time back, the real question is: how do you repurpose it for further human-to-human connection?

Katy Oliveira 15:58

That's really powerful. It's not just that you can produce higher volume of mediocre things — you have the capacity to produce higher quality things more frequently. That's a very different shift in mindset.

Chadd Engel 16:33

If you're an advisor and you're leveraging these tools to improve the quality of your work, the individual value you're creating for yourself in those moments — feeling more confident and prepared when you follow up with a student, being able to remember those personal anecdotes — that matters enormously. All of us who work in these spaces have lives, families, children. We're balancing many things and doing our best to stay centered. Anything that eases the burden of building rapport while keeping us human in the conversation is extremely important.

ON IDENTIFYING HUMAN-CENTERED AI TOOLS

Katy Oliveira 17:35

What should our audience be looking for to ensure an AI tool is actually human-centered and adaptable to their unique campus culture?

Chadd Engel 17:48

I'll use a social media analogy. We all know doom scrolling — you open an app and stare at your phone, not really engaged with anyone. One small thing I do with my own son, who watches basketball TikToks: instead of him staring at a phone, we airplay it to the TV and watch together as a family. That becomes a human connection point. I bring this up because when you go into a space where you think AI can help support an outcome for your institution, really think about how you set up the dialogue. I encourage these conversations to be in person, as human as possible, with follow-up curious questions rather than solution-orientation.

A practical move: have everyone come into the space, let them know you'll be doing an audio transcript recording — using Zoom, a voice memo, whatever works — then export that transcript to a plain text file and engage with an AI tool to pull out highlights and parallels between what you're trying to accomplish and what your conversation surfaced. Ask it: what are our next talking points? Some will be good, some won't, but it allows you to iterate faster. Anyone familiar with design thinking will recognize this: build empathy, then iterate, iterate, iterate.

ON GETTING STARTED — AND THE UPSKILLING IMPERATIVE

Katy Oliveira 23:07

For leaders who might be feeling overwhelmed by the technology requirements of AI — what is the best first step to take on campus?

Chadd Engel 23:44

Going back to that conversation about upskilling: that's really the way you have to view it. You're trying to upskill your institution. Even a small step makes a difference. At Waubensee Community College, when I share a new system or tool with someone, I ask that person to share it with two other people — internal, in the community, or at home. You're trying to build a grassroots movement, because we're not at a point where we can just bring in a fleet of AI experts. It's a never-ending story right now.

You have to figure out how to encourage the conversations at your own institution — ask curious questions, model that dialogue for your employees, staff, faculty, students, and the community you're working with. There are good resources out there. The Department of Energy recently released an AI literacy framework as a starting point for thinking about what a literacy framework could look like.

My own personal value proposition, and one we've adapted at Waubonsee: if your AI use case leads to further human-to-human interaction, it's worthwhile to pursue. If it reduces human-to-human interaction, you need to heavily scrutinize it. That's the frame of mind you need in these conversations.

Katy Oliveira 26:10

This is really upskilling — and you've got to get out there and start doing, because in higher education we sometimes get stuck in committees figuring out how to pilot something, and this is moving really quickly. By the time your committee decides how it's going to govern AI, AI has moved on.

Chadd Engel 26:33

Anecdotally, most institutions are two to three years behind — and that's a hard thing to accept. We're still largely focused on generating text, when there are so many other powerful use cases in media generation, multimodal applications, and voice. We're heading to a space where a student can speak their first language — any language — and it can accurately translate or code-switch in real time to another user's first language. Biology is not bound by the English language. That's very exciting, especially for institutions predominantly serving students who are second-language learners.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Katy Oliveira 27:58

Before we close out — is there anything we didn't touch on that you'd like to share?

Chadd Engel 28:09

The future of AI within upskilling in higher education isn't necessarily about smarter systems. It's about building stronger human relationships. If we really focus on building these tools with the human in the loop — with stronger connection points that allow us to be more human in general — we'll be able to use these tools in a way that is better for one another as a whole. That matters most when these conversations are at their most urgent: retooling and upskilling for our economy, our workforce, our communities.

We need to do our best to be open to those conversations. It's going to hit fast and furious, and there will be moments where it feels painful due to the disruption. But if we maintain our human piece to that — if we dialogue with one another and prepare for those changes together — I think we can find ourselves on the right side of it. But we really need to engage.

Katy Oliveira 29:20

Thank you, Chadd, so much for coming on. I really appreciate it and I look forward to continuing this conversation in the future.

Chadd Engel 29:28

Thank you.