UConn students to advise on new AI course

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STORRS — Eight University of Connecticut students received an invitation to advise on the development of a new graduate-level artificial intelligence course following a debate over the use of AI at UConn on Thursday in the Rome Ballroom.

The new course, Foundations of Artificial Intelligence, serves as the only required introductory course for UConn's 12-credit AI Graduate Certificate in Business. The program, offered online and in person at UConn's Hartford and Stamford campuses, aims to teach students how to use generative AI to increase productivity, conduct statistical analysis and responsibly apply the technology in professional settings.

Professor David Bergman, UConn's provost's special adviser on AI and head of the university's AI Council, attended the debate and announced the course at the end of the event. Bergman asked panelists interested in advising him on its development to raise their hands.

Although the panelists disagreed over AI's role in education and society, they generally supported teaching students how to use the technology responsibly. Yasmin Rensch, an economics major, discussed her experience with Connect.AI, a UConn program that teaches students the fundamentals of artificial intelligence before allowing them to apply those skills to assist small businesses.

Rensch said the program helped her better understand how to approach AI in her work and expressed interest in seeing UConn offer more educational opportunities involving the technology.

Much of the debate focused on whether AI enhances students' educational experiences or undermines the development of creativity and critical thinking skills. Patrick Minnerly, a political science and English major, argued that large language models rely on existing knowledge, making them potentially detrimental to the brainstorming and creativity involved in the writing process.

Colin Hamilton, an English and environmental studies major, discussed how UConn's English department has increasingly required handwritten assignments and in-class essays to discourage students from using AI to complete their work.

Lucas Erikson, an individualized major in artificial intelligence, challenged restrictions on technology, arguing that efforts to prevent AI-assisted cheating create a surveillance relationship between professors and students.

Erikson raised concerns about student data collected by tools such as Respondus LockDown Browser and GPTZero, which professors use to monitor students during exams and identify potentially AI-generated assignment submissions.

Jack Parkins, a statistical data science major, distinguished dependance on AI to complete assignments from its use as a tool to improve efficiency. Parkins argued that students can benefit from AI when organizing their thoughts, editing their writing and checking grammar without relying on technology to complete their assignments.

Erikson also described how AI has enabled him to complete projects that would otherwise have required considerably more time, including developing a video game and creating a neural network simulation for members of UConn's AI Club. He argued that AI could democratize access to education by providing personalized tutoring to students who cannot afford private instructors.

An audience member challenged this argument by referencing Allison Pugh's book, "The Last Human Job," raising concerns that adopting AI primarily because of its lower cost could create a two-tiered educational system. Under such a system, lower-income students could become increasingly dependent on AI resources while wealthier students retain access to human instructors.

The panel also discussed AI's potential risks to health care, mental health and national security. Several participants expressed concerns about using AI for therapy, particularly the tendency of large language models to affirm users' statements, even when doing so could reinforce harmful behavior.

However, Erikson and moderator Eliyahu Cohen, a business analytics major and founder of Connect.AI, emphasized the potential benefits of AI in expanding access to medical information. Cohen described using ChatGPT for assistance after suffering a concussion when he was unable to reach UConn Student Health and Wellness to schedule an appointment.

The discussion also turned to the potential dangers of increasingly advanced AI systems. Minnerly referenced prominent AI researchers who have left their positions and warned that artificial intelligence could pose an existential threat to humanity within the next decade.

Erikson acknowledged the risks but compared AI development to an international arms race, arguing that the United States must continue developing the technology to remain competitive with other countries.

"If we refuse to keep developing AI, our competitor countries will advance it, you know, regardless of pretty much how it will impact everything. So, I think that we need to go forward, and we need to be smart about how we do it," Erikson said.

Panelists also disagreed over the environmental consequences of widespread AI adoption. Hamilton raised concerns about the placement of data centers in disadvantaged communities, arguing that their operation can negatively affect residents' quality of life. He also discussed the substantial water consumption associated with data center cooling systems and the potential for thermal pollution to harm aquatic ecosystems and local drinking water supplies.

Parkins countered that an average individual's annual AI usage consumes less water than producing a single hamburger, arguing that the technology's environmental impact should be considered in comparison with other everyday activities.



A multidisciplinary panel of students and professionals discusses the various implications of AI use on Thursday. AI For Impact is one of many events "Bridge the Gap" hosts to fill the divide between typically staunch perspectives on contemporary issues.

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Despite their disagreements, the panelists returned to the question of how universities should prepare students for the growing presence of artificial intelligence in the workforce. Erikson and Parkins argued that UConn should provide students with opportunities to develop AI skills, emphasizing that familiarity with the technology will become increasingly important in professional settings.

Minnerly cautioned that although AI is likely to remain part of society, the industry could be experiencing a speculative bubble. He argued that universities risk overemphasizing AI education at the expense of students' independent critical thinking skills.

The debate concluded with Bergman's invitation for students to contribute their perspectives to the development of Foundations of Artificial Intelligence, offering panelists with differing views on the technology an opportunity to help shape how UConn teaches it.

Editor's Note: Patrick Minnerly is the Opinion Editor and Colin Hamilton is a Weekly Columnist at The Daily Campus.



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