AI Anxiety: Fear, Fiction, and the Future of Higher Ed

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I often find myself wondering what it is about Artificial Intelligence (AI) that makes people so uncomfortable and even fearful. Maybe our fears or anxieties abound from watching too many sci-fi movies where the machines take over. Recent studies have been done to try and find out why the anxiety exists. The answers are not conclusive – some say those with higher adversity to change are more fearful; others say it depends on your country of origin; and even some say it hinges on religion. In my opinion, there is something bigger that we are missing.

AI technologies are performing simple jobs and tasks generally reserved for humans. With more than 56% of higher education employees reporting they are *at least somewhat likely to look for another job in the next 12 months*, additional help in continuing operations will be welcomed. AI technologies will by no means take on the roles the colleges are unable to fill. However, it can be useful for filling institutional knowledge gaps and for managing small tasks when employees are limited.

Let me give you an example of how AI tools are being used to improve communities.

Think of a scenario where severe weather has downed many trees and powerlines. As you might imagine, reaching a 911 dispatcher quickly can become difficult with numerous non-emergency calls coming in simultaneously. In Alabama, AI is being used for those situations by taking non-emergency calls such as reports of downed trees. This ensures human dispatchers can quickly handle the most urgent emergency cases. It also ensures calls are automatically answered, prioritized, and no one receives the message that the "phone line is busy at this time."

There are great opportunities for applications in higher education. In much the same vein, AI can assist Emergency Operations Center (EOC) teams from becoming overwhelmed or inundated with information. The Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL) has been dreaming of the reality and has been developing a technology to organize and prioritize information as it comes into emergency operations centers.

Additionally, in April of 2024, the University of Albany, NY brought together students to compete in finding the best AI solutions for crisis management. FEMA announced in March, the launch of several AI applications, including AI to combat child exploitation and fentanyl detection to protect first responders. These great tools are just that – they are tools to enhance our work, not to do our work.

I anticipate many new AI technologies will be available in the next 2 years for use in improving campus life. That said, advanced AI tools have already been released this year and include AI assisted syllabi building, improved course content, recruitment tools, algorithm analysis to protect against cyber threats, firearm detection, and emergency operation content prioritization.

So don't expect AI to become your new coworker anytime soon but expect to see it assisting the colleges in continuous improvement in serving students.