

# OFFICE HOURS

## PODCAST

### **Knowledge on Tap: AI Policy, Pedagogy, and Admissions**

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (0:00 - 0:11)

Given how prevalent AI usage is, it's 90% of students, no matter their age, whether they're 18 or 64, are using AI in their academics.

[Marni Baker Stein] (0:13 - 1:00)

Welcome to Office Hours, where we're hosting candid conversations for a new era in learning. I'm Marni Baker Stein, and today we're talking about something every university leader is grappling with, but few feel they can speak openly about. AI isn't just changing how students learn, it's changing how institutions operate, how we assess, and even how we define expertise and authenticity.

I'm joined by Dr. Aviva Leggett, former admissions officer at Penn, Forbes columnist, founder of Edgenerative, and a Coursera instructor who's been right at the center of this tension between innovation and integrity. Aviva, welcome to the hot seat.

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (1:01 - 1:13)

Thanks, Marni, I'm excited to be here and again honored that I'm your first guest for this incredible series and excited to look at some challenges and opportunities with you in this space.

[Marni Baker Stein] (1:14 - 1:51)

Yeah, and we are so excited to have you. So let's start from where most leaders that you're talking to, you're working with, where most leaders actually are. Not in terms of their like emerging PDF policies or strategy decks, but in terms of the actual frictions they're facing on campus.

So my first question to you, like from your vantage point, and certainly it's a unique one, what is the real fear that faculty and institutions have about AI? Not their stated fear, but perhaps the one underneath.

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (1:53 - 3:56)

That's such a great question, Marni, and what I like to say about that is that I think the deepest fear here is that universities were once the hubs of knowledge and the center of knowledge, the center of

research, the center of teaching, the center of cultivating student learners, adults, helping professionals get to where they're going. AI is now a system where anybody anywhere has knowledge on tap. We've never had a knowledge on tap system where any anytime anywhere we can get the answer to the question.

So not to say that experts and university faculty are not valued. They are very much valued. They have unique vantage points, but I see this as a real threat because of this knowledge on tap phenomenon where this accessibility makes it feel threatening.

Not that it has to be, but I think all of us who have experimented with AI have been pretty floored at how well it does our jobs, whether it's sending an email, coming up with a brief, and it's like, wait, this did a better job than I did. I feel like that's so good about myself, so I can definitely understand it. I've experienced that myself when I've used it, and I use it heavily as you can imagine.

I've used all different kinds of tools. I understand and appreciate the fear, and I think that's the place to start from where this very powerful technology that we have is really upending everything, and it's hard to face that also. So it's hard to also face not only the fact that we feel a little threatened personally, but also the fact that this technology is transformative.

It is actively transforming the world of work. It is actively transforming education, and university leaders are stuck with, well, what does that mean for my institution? How do we move forward in the best way possible to preserve the best of what we have while activating something different into the future?

So those are the two big fears I see that underlie this AI technology and the integration of it.

[Marni Baker Stein] (3:56 - 4:58)

So I love that idea of knowledge on top. I think that's a great way to put it, and it is, I'd like to dive in a little bit into this notion of what seems likely to be the new era of sort of institutional transformation in light of knowledge on top being part of our new reality, right? And so I'm going to start with, I don't know if this is an easy one, but I'm going to start with something close to home, and then we're going to expand out from there.

So let's just talk about admissions in this context. You've worked in admissions where authenticity is everything. So how is generative AI and this sort of knowledge-on-top capability, this cognitive companion, this always-on coach, how has it fundamentally sort of broken or challenged the signals that institutions rely on for admissions specifically?

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (4:58 - 7:48)

That's a great question. And, you know, I think the challenge with the admissions process with or without AI is a student competing in a competitive admissions environment is only as effective as their story. And a lot of students struggle with writing.

And because of the pandemic and the advent of smartphones, their skills have gone down. Traditional students, I know this because I've been working with students from before the smartphone era into the smartphone era, and there is a fundamental change. And the pandemic also accelerated executive function and skill loss in young people.

And so I wrote an article about this actually in Business Insider about a student that I had that I was advising who, it was the year that Chad Chippy Teeth, you know, came out and we were right in the middle of that admission cycle. And all of a sudden the student who had a lot of difficulty finding his voice all of a sudden was writing prolific prose. Not as good as I'm sure it could have been today with today's models, but it was a lot more prolific than what he was writing before.

But it had a certain generic quality to it as well. So I, because I had been experimenting, I immediately identified this as AI writing. I approached the student, I said, you know, hey, I'm not happy with this.

And I even threatened, I was like, I don't want to work with you if you're going to do this. I was very unhappy with him. And to his credit, he dialed back on his use of AI.

But I also think once he, he found a better balance, he definitely had an easier time pumping out these essays, because he was able to talk through his thinking, get some help with outlining and putting it forward. So I think the challenge with using AI or not using it is, is there's a very big risk of over relying on it to write an essay for you. But at the same time for students who may be struggling with executive function issues or self expression issues, and that is a very common challenge with this generation, it can actually really help them.

It's definitely a mixed blessing. And why it's important that K-12 schools as well as universities are providing guidance of when can you use AI? When can you not use AI?

Which ways are most appropriate? What are the skills that students individually need to develop in order to become, you know, fully developed humans and adults who can contribute? So it's such a hard line.

And as a young person just playing with it, you know, how do you even know? And there aren't necessarily adults to guide you, especially when it first came out, and barely anybody had used it. So I don't, there's so there's a lot, I think, wrapped up into this question of authenticity.

But I would say the main points I would make is that I think AI can help someone to be more authentic, or it can take away from their authenticity if it's over relied on.

[Marni Baker Stein] (7:48 - 8:36)

Yeah, that's a really great point. And I do agree with you that it really, there there's, there can be a dark side of the way learners are using this, whether it's for missions or otherwise. But there can be a lot of positives as well, if harnessed effectively in terms of their, their executive skills, also their confidence,

and really building out that confidence by having a sort of, I should always on tutor, or writing coach who could be really assistive of the work that they're doing that they may not otherwise have access to.

So it's, it's quite a balance there. I'd really like to just given what you're talking about, does the essay, does the admissions essay remain a big part of the admissions process? Or does it get replaced by something else?

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (8:36 - 10:24)

That's a great question. I think theoretically, it could be or should be replaced by something else. I think the question it comes down to that each institution should think about is like, why were we having an essay in the first place?

Was it to assess students writing ability? Was it to assess their story? Because I think a lot of a student's story can be found in their activities list.

I don't think you need an essay to tell your story. I think it your recommendation letters can help to tell your story by showing how people perceive you. Of course, those could be written with AI.

But still, you would hope somebody is looking at it and, you know, signing it and actually having some authorship in it in some way. But there are a lot of ways you can assess a student's character by just knowing where they come from, what their academic performance is, what kind of extracurricular activities they were involved in, if they had any hardships. You don't necessarily need an essay to assess that.

And what I found when I was working in admissions is that the essay is really supporting admissions to understand a student's character. But a lot of the times it really wasn't that helpful because either the writing was weak or the story was unmemorable. So I don't know how useful the college essay is in short, even though I've spent many hours working with students on the essay.

So I don't want to say my time was wasted. But at the same time, I think it's a good opportunity for institutions to rethink why they're doing this essay, why they're asking students to write the essay. And if it is to assess their writing skills, then I think there are probably better ways to do that, such as, you know, Procter's writing assessments and so on, where you're going in person and having the student, like, literally write something in front of you.

So I think it's a great chance to rethink the essay because I don't think it's always so helpful.

[Marni Baker Stein] (10:24 - 10:44)

Yeah, thank you for that. I would tend to agree and I think that's good advice. So let's, like, sort of broaden our scope a little bit.

Like, what are you seeing leaders beyond admissions, like, what are you seeing campus leaders get wrong right now? Where are institutions either overreacting or underreacting? That's a great question.

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (10:45 - 12:58)

With the advent of AI, I think a lot of leaders are really drinking from the fire hose because there are so many implications of AI on different aspects of university life. So there are implications for privacy and security. How do we have to vet tools for our institution?

How do we incorporate the tools that students may be downloading on their computers and safeguard our networks and servers and our student information? So there's a privacy and security issue. There's just a question about who's going to oversee AI.

And only less than half of universities have had any kind of policy related to this at this point in time. That's the more recent statistic. But the numbers, I'm sure, are always going up.

And I recently surveyed a group of leaders. It was about 46 percent, so a little bit above 40, but still not high. So how do we regulate AI in our realm?

How do we adjust pedagogy to either say when AI can be used or when it cannot be used? Or do we need to transform assignments because of AI? And that's a question that professors and academic administrators are grappling with.

And some, of course, are holding firm to the traditional ways of doing things, which makes sense in a lot of different contexts. But given how prevalent AI usage is, it's 90 percent of students, no matter their age, whether they're 18 or 64, are using AI in their academics. It makes sense to have some kind of guidelines for how to use that.

And then, of course, there's operational questions. So a lot of institutions struggle with admissions, retention, financial aid administration, and so on. And AI has a lot of solutions for that.

And so finding ways to help the university run more leanly and cleanly while figuring out the pedagogy and the security and oversight. There are so many layers of AI and how it shifts and changes how higher ed delivers on its promise and what's possible for students working with AI on campus.

[Marni Baker Stein] (12:59 - 13:24)

I mean, it's just a lot of change, right? And campuses are not necessarily set up either from an operational infrastructure point of view or in terms of the actual curricular learning experiences themselves on campus to sort of evolve those quickly and radically, right? It's not necessarily what universities are built to do, right?

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (13:24 - 14:30)

Yes. And a lot of academic administrators are stuck in academic integrity hearings because their students are using AI without permission. But it's not necessarily, I'm not going to say it's not the students' fault for using AI, because, yes, a lot of them probably are using AI.

But if you don't give guidelines or say, hey, you have to disclose that you use it, then it's like, did they really make a mistake here or not? So are we really focusing on the right thing? And so what I found in this widespread issue at universities is that we are still looking at AI as an academic integrity problem.

I think the tides are shifting, but they're not quite shifted yet. And in order to move forward, we have to take an approach of acceptance of AI. So, yes, AI is here.

So then how do we move forward knowing that AI is here? How do we put the right guardrails on it? How do we support our students in learning how to use AI, but also support them to gain those fundamental skills of analysis, writing, evaluation, collaboration, all the things that they need to do whatever they're going to do in the future effectively?

[Marni Baker Stein] (14:31 - 15:38)

Absolutely. I am seeing the same when I'm out on campus. I'm wondering, you know, at some point, leaders at any level of the institution have to move from reacting to redesigning, from thinking of this as an academic integrity problem that must be solved to preserve what is, to figuring out how to harness this new technology that's here to stay, and perhaps, like, radically reimagine how education works on campus, how learning is personalized on campus or contextualized. So let's talk about, like, what you're seeing on this front.

Like, certainly there's some redesigners out there, some big thinkers who are pushing change forward. What are you seeing? Have you seen any great examples where leaders or faculty are seeing AI as a force that they can actually build into the design of their teaching or their programs?

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (15:39 - 17:46)

Absolutely. I'm seeing some really great examples out there. I have to always call out my friends over at Arizona State University, because they have done a phenomenal job integrating AI into the curriculum.

And they also have, I just spoke with their CTO yesterday, Lev Gonick, and he was telling me about Create AI, which is sort of a hub base that faculty and staff can create apps in a safe and secure environment with access to, I think he said, 30 LLMs to build all of different, all different things. So it's giving people access to models and tools for innovation. RIT is also, has also set up a lot of infrastructure.

They have a quantum computer, they have, you know, localized AI infrastructure. So they have hubs for students, as well as faculty and staff to experiment with their integrating AI into their curriculum and so

on. So those are a couple of great schools that are coming to mind that are just, they're doing a lot of, with AI, they're building it into their overall technological infrastructure and providing these kind of safe playgrounds for people to experiment with it and play with it.

I also recently had a chance to connect with a leader over at the California Community College System. And to my surprise, he said that in their offices, they are actually experimenting with OpenClaw, which is kind of this a little bit scary, I'm not gonna lie, you know about it, a little bit of a scary technology. So basically, they're taking just mini Macs that they're loading in with, essentially an avatar profile.

So they're not having, let's say, it's not my computer, your computer, where we're downloading it and using it, they're basically creating something on a blank computer with a blank identity on that computer. And then they're just seeing what happens and playing around with these technologies. So it's really neat to see that some of the campuses that are able to experiment and see how the technologies can be harnessed, because I don't think we should discourage people from using it.

I think people need to be given a safe environment to play with it, and then also get guidance on when to use it, when not to use it in more traditional work.

[Marni Baker Stein] (17:47 - 18:39)

I agree with you, right, creating safe environments for both faculty or operators, like staff or students themselves to play around with these capabilities in a safe space and understand how they, how they relate to their work and the tasks that they have to do, whether those are instructional or whether those are learning or whether those are administrative. I think that's really, really important. Have you, have you seen any concrete examples where this kind of experimentation has actually turned into institutions rethinking, like the classroom experience or the assessment experience, that in ways that harness these new tools in ways that harness this kind of power for personalization, always on tutoring, coaching?

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (18:39 - 19:42)

That's a great question. I would say the, the schools that I mentioned, they are all already, I think, inclined towards AI. And so all of these natural changes that pedagogy are happening, I think the challenge is more with institutions that have not quite accepted from an institutional lens that AI is here.

Those are the ones that are having a harder time pivoting to harness the technology effectively in all ways, whether it's pedagogical, operational, from a governance and infrastructure perspective, and so on. So in terms of who's listening to this, I'm imagining they're innovatively minded people. And perhaps some of those are at those institutions that are not yet as innovative as the people listening to this.

So if you can form an advisory committee or coalition, I'm working with the university now that has an

advisory council that's getting recommendations up to the upper levels, the cabinet level, you know, I would advise you to start something like that or work with other people who are innovators that you can start to help your university get ushered into the AI era.

[Marni Baker Stein] (19:42 - 20:20)

And like if you were going to help, or as you do help, this kind of council or advisory, or even like the president of one of these universities that's, that's kind of having trouble getting started, perhaps taking some time, and this isn't necessarily a bad strategy to to figure out what then should be done. Like, where would you advise that president or that committee to start? Would it be thinking about curriculum?

Would it be thinking about assessment, faculty enablement, like, or it's just generalized policy? Like, where, where's the best place to start?

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (20:20 - 22:55)

I think it's like a chicken and egg question. Because I don't think you can have effective policy without professional development, because it's hard to govern and manage something that you don't understand. And opening up a tool like a chat GPT or Gemini and typing a question to it doesn't mean that you're an expert in AI.

It just means that you know how to open up a tool and use some basic functions of it. But understanding how the AI transforms what you do, or how it could transform what students do, that's a higher level of fluency that a lot of campus leaders don't yet have. So it has to be professional development with policy, because without the professional development, you can't guide effective policy, that's really going to capture the breadth of experiences.

And in this process that I'm in with one particular institution, you know, we're gathering feedback from all different areas on the policies that we're putting forward. And also just backing up from, from the word policy, it's actually really hard to get policies passed at a lot of institutions or maybe different state parameters or governance parameters within the institution. And so setting up guidelines or framework is actually sometimes a more effective strategy when you're trying to start to drive some behavior change.

So I start with some professional development along with the initial set of guidelines that you can use. The guidelines, you need enterprise level guidelines, governing the safety and security. And then you also need student usage policy, faculty usage policy and administrative uses policy, because then this is how people will know what kind of AI use is appropriate, how to get new tools reviewed and approved by the university.

So if let's say an administrative office comes with a budget request, then the CIO or the CIO's office is

going to have to review that and approve it. And so they're going to need guidelines for how they can stand up these tools, because otherwise, people are just going to be downloading tools, and that could be a security risk. It's also really important for and I've got this question in a recent session that I did, for people to know that it's a really bad idea to put any kind of personally identifying information in to these tools, because it could be a FERPA violation.

So you can't put social security numbers, student names and so on, because that's a really big security risk. So it's really important for people to know that and also to know that it's important to choose tools that are FERPA compliant as well as SOC 2 compliant, because this is the highest level of security available at this time.

[Marni Baker Stein] (22:56 - 24:21)

Yeah, that is really, really good advice. On the technical front, there's so much to be aware of from a trust and safety point of view and a security point of view. That's so, so critical for leaders as they're grappling with all of this.

Do you think that another aspect of this that folks are grappling with has to do with mindset around personalization? Like what I've been seeing a little bit of a knee-jerk response to is the notion that as learners are using these tools in productive ways, I'm not talking about cheating, but rather as the example you gave earlier, rather using these tools to help them sort of unbundle sort of cognitive tasks, set up processes for learning, assist them in practicing or personalizing that learning in ways that really help each and every individual unique learner learn in their own way and in ways that are powerful to them. And I've been receiving a little bit, as I'm out there talking, a little bit of pushback to this idea that somehow that's spoon-feeding or somehow that's allowing learners to get around hoops that are critical in their struggle to learn and master certain subjects.

Have you been experiencing that mindset at all or is that just something that perhaps I've experienced?

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (24:21 - 25:54)

That's an interesting experience. I just haven't had anyone give me that feedback personally that they don't like personalization. I am with you.

I think personalization and education is always a good thing. I believe in, you know, the IEP, so to speak, whether that's metaphorical or real, where every student has their own unique strengths and challenges. And if we can use AI to better tailor instruction, I know you were mentioning the idea of tutoring bots within courses.

I think I know that Coursera has stood that up, which I think is amazing. And the scale at which you've done that. But I think the more personalization, the better.

But at the same time, I understand, for some courses, there may be a certain wisdom in how it's taught and the method in which it's taught. I can't personally think of an example, but one that's coming to mind would maybe be more like the trades where, or even a doctor where things are certain, there are certain procedures that are really important that you have to exactly follow. Otherwise, you know, the electric, the electric sockets get blown or the surgery gets botched.

But barring those kinds of examples where the procedure is just so critical, I can't imagine that a degree of personalization would, would impact the learning in a negative way, as long as that personalization was actually personalization and not just deviation from what was meant to be taught.

[Marni Baker Stein] (25:54 - 26:32)

That's a great answer to the question. And I do think, from my perspective, that ability to personalize and contextualize a learner's journey and progress and practice and mastery is perhaps, that's the true transformation that's going to come out of all of this if we can figure out how to harness it in high integrity ways. So last question, fast forward three to five years, or maybe even just 18 months at the pace that things are going, what does a modern institution actually look like if it fully embraces AI?

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (26:32 - 29:04)

Great question. I have to go back to Arizona State. I really wanted to write a case study with them.

I don't know if you want to put this on the podcast, but I really want to write a case study with them because they have really just transformed their whole institution and started before Gen AI. So it wasn't as though Gen AI came out and they transformed overnight. They've always had a very innovative mindset.

And I think in order to transform as an institution, each of these aspects needs to be examined systematically, the policy piece, the professional development, the student experience. And ultimately, institutions have to think really critically about what they are really trying to do as institutions in these coming years. So a lot of institutions struggle financially with enrollments.

The cost of college are going up. So does it make sense to use AI to try to cut those costs? Does it make sense to use AI to drive enrollment or personalize, as we were saying, that experience?

So how does it make sense to integrate AI into the operations of the university, I think, is a huge question. And then how do we import policy and practice in such a way that it's well understood and cohesive across the institution? And this is not a question that can be answered overnight, but it's important for university leaders to be grappling with this and to have coalitions, commissions, committees that are looking at this and actually acting on it and not just talking about it.

And that's the key. This technology is not waiting. There is a problem that we are seeing in the job

market of early career professionals not having access to the same opportunities as even graduates a few years ago.

So there's a college to career alignment problem. There are also federal pressures on institutions. There was just this ahead framework that came out that is essentially saying, you know, 70% completion, and we need the earnings to be the same or better than a high school graduate.

So the expectations for this new federal framework around work for ourselves are really, really high. So it's important for institutions to be aware that the expectations are changing, both from a public trust perspective, as well as from a federal policy perspective, and to move as quickly but thoughtfully as possible in order to support where the world is now, not where we hoped it would be or where it used to be.

[Marni Baker Stein] (29:05 - 29:27)

Amen to that. And that is a complex stack, and you've laid it out so beautifully. I thank you for such an incredibly candid conversation.

I think that's exactly what leaders need right now. You had mentioned, as we were talking just before this chat, about a sub stack that you're... Thank you.

[Dr. Aviva Leggett] (29:27 - 30:29)

Yes, I just came out with a new sub stack called the Higher Ed AI Playbook, so you can subscribe to that. And I have some free resources that I put on my LinkedIn, on my website. I have an open-source use case handbook, so if institutions are looking for use cases to put at their institution, how do we do this?

You can look at all the case studies that I've compiled. I also have a policy handbook that I just came out with, so I'll publish those on my sub stack. I publish those on my website, so I invite you to follow me on sub stack on LinkedIn.

Stay connected through my organization, Edge Alternative. We support university leaders in navigating AI adoption and support the curricular aspects, the policy aspect, and the technological aspect. So we'd be honored to work with leaders in this capacity because, as you can hear, this is so important to me personally, and I want to make sure that this goes as well as possible because this is the transformation of our lifetime for education and work.

[Marni Baker Stein] (30:29 - 31:29)

Absolutely. Thank you. I would encourage everybody to check out that rich array of resources as they're diving into the complexity around all the decisions that higher ed leaders are having to make in this moment.

I think if you take one thing from this conversation, it is this, that AI isn't just a tool to adopt, it's a force. It's a force that's going to require us to rethink how we design learning, how we measure capability, and how we build trust. To learn more about how institutions are navigating this shift, please visit us at [Coursera for Campus](#).

And if you want to go deeper, explore our resources on AI-powered learning and skills-based education, we'll have lots of resources there for you to check out. Thank you, Dr. Leggett, and thanks to all of you for joining us on Office Hours, where we have candid conversations for a new era in learning. We'll see you next time.