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### Let's Get Out of the Starting Block on Generative AI!

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# Let's Get Out of the Starting Block on Generative AI!

A framework for Suffolk University on how to think about and respond to the technology that changes many different things very differently



## 1. Introduction and Method

From an administrative point of view, the tricky thing about Generative AI (GenAI) is that it will impact many different aspects of university life in a highly heterogeneous manner. Some impacts are immediate and require an urgent response. Others will take considerable time to materialize and unfold according to how the university decides to use GenAI. Some impacts can be foretold with a fair degree of uncertainty. Other longer-term impacts of this rapidly evolving technology are largely unknown.

The dynamic heterogeneity of GenAI's expected effects was driven home by the genesis of this report. The directors of the Center for Innovation and Change Leadership (CICL) asked the fellows of CICL, who are a group of younger faculty in SBS who work on innovation-related issues, to conduct research and develop perspectives on how Suffolk University at all levels could best respond to the challenges emanating from GenAI, especially in view of Suffolk's Boston location. Our "crowdsourcing" of ideas was meant to generate points of intersection between varying viewpoints as the basis for a reasonable prognosis and plan of action. Tellingly, there was little intersection because respondents focused on different things. A couple of respondents did examine the classroom impact of GenAI. But most had a different emphasis. One respondent focused on student skills sets and the labor market. Another looked at how GenAI could be adopted in university operations and in new types of educational offerings. A couple others considered mainly the way Suffolk could leverage its Boston environment to excel in GenAI.

Since all these viewpoints are valid, this report endeavors to provide a map of the territory more than a specific action plan. Nonetheless, one common concern expressed by CICL members concerned the crying need for Suffolk University faculty and staff to immerse themselves immediately and as deeply as possible in GenAI. **It is not a GenAI policy that Suffolk needs right away, it is individual and collective immersion in GenAI: we need to build up our on-hands knowledge about the technology. It is not so much the rules and regulations that Suffolk administrators should worry about right now, it is the lagging experience with GenAI on the part**

**of Suffolk faculty and staff.** This conviction was sometimes implicit, sometimes quite explicit in the viewpoints generously provided by CICL fellows for this report.

This report has two basic parts. We begin with a framework for organizing the university's response to the GenAI challenge. This gives the big picture of the short and medium term. We follow this up with some very specific notions about getting out of the starting block on GenAI. Both parts are united by a fundamental premise: Suffolk can and should build on its decentralized structure and heritage. A top-down approach to responding to GenAI is not very feasible, at least in the short to medium term, which is one reason we faculty at Suffolk and elsewhere have had generally little top-down guidance on the matter. All the more reason, then, for the bottom-up response to accelerate.

## **2. A Framework for Organizing Action**

CICL fellows all emphasized that GenAI is rapidly evolving and that the magnitude and nature of its effects are difficult to predict at present. While it is impossible to develop a real plan under such circumstances, one can nonetheless devise a framework to assist administrators in organizing the university's response to this massive challenge. Underlying Figure 1 (below) is the conviction that some sequencing of activities can be foreseen. If we estimate that the top administration may make its initial effort to define Suffolk's position within the GenAI educational landscape in about 9-12 months' time (with the proximity to the Boston business and tech community presumably playing a major role in this positioning), then one can reasonably foresee that certain other GenAI-related activities will commence before and others will materialize after this positioning.

Figure 1: A Framework for Organizing the University Response to AI



Figure 1 groups these activities accordingly. The various university activities necessitated by GenAI can be organized according to time frame (urgency) and hierarchical level of action (Figure 1). While the connecting lines are intended for readability rather than to suggest any necessary sequence, the diagonally connected activities do reflect a common time frame. The diagonal set of activities on the left are short-term priorities, to be undertaken as soon as possible. In contrast, the right-hand diagonal of activities reflects medium-term priorities. The direction of the diagonals reflects the decentralized, bottom-up approach at which Suffolk excels.

The consensus of CICL is that faculty and staff must be exhorted to immerse themselves immediately and urgently in GenAI technologies. The real competitive advantage of Suffolk University will be built at the bottom of the hierarchy – by the hands-on experience that faculty, staff, and students gain by plunging into the technology in an ad hoc but continual manner. Learning by doing and experimentation are key: it not so much workshops, seminars, and collaborative research endeavors that

will ensure proficiency in GenAI as simply faculty and staff diving into it. Moving up the hierarchy, academic deans and department heads play a pivotal role in disseminating GenAI-related information: **AI Pulse by Sawyer**, a new biweekly newsletter for undergraduate and graduate students (and for faculty and staff), blazes the appropriate trail.

In terms of formulating basic GenAI policies for classroom integration, Suffolk may prefer to allow the three colleges to elaborate separate policies for the time being, given our decentralized administrative heritage. The kind of useful policy that the Provost of Arizona State University promulgated at the university level (<https://provost.asu.edu/generative-ai>) could well be delegated to the college deans. As for the Suffolk provost, he or she could act to ensure a certain harmonization across colleges as needed.

As mentioned, CICL fellows emphasized that the future impact of GenAI is still largely unknown and the phenomenon of GenAI is very much in flux. This situation prevents Suffolk from committing itself to any specific positioning of the university as of yet. But as the foregoing processes crystalize and more about the future impact of GenAI becomes known, the President's office may take a first stab at positioning Suffolk within the evolving GenAI landscape (apex of Figure 1).

This positioning will likely involve the local business and tech community in an integral way. The upper administration of Suffolk University will want to orchestrate relations with the broader Boston community to capitalize on collaborative opportunities and facilitate knowledge sharing to become a hub of GenAI education. Engaging with local businesses, startups, and community organizations will foster dialogue on the societal, ethical, and economic implications of GenAI, positioning the university as a key player in the regional GenAI ecosystem, assuming such an ecosystem emerges. This endeavor should cascade into multiple levels of engagement within the university and external stakeholders.

Looking ahead (right-hand diagonal of Figure 1), medium-term priorities will center on curriculum revision and the integration of GenAI-assisted learning methodologies. Faculty-led initiatives to revise syllabi and develop GenAI-focused courses will reflect the university's commitment to embedding GenAI activities across

academic disciplines. Moving up the hierarchy, investments in technology infrastructure and educational resources can support the building of GenAI-assisted learning environments, enriching student experiences and preparing them for careers in GenAI-related fields. This requires coordinated efforts by academic deans and some department heads.

Eventually, the university will explore opportunities to deploy GenAI in operational contexts, streamlining administrative processes and enhancing student services. Collaborative efforts between college deans, the Provost, and other stakeholders could aim to identify and implement GenAI-powered solutions tailored to the unique needs of the university.

Clearly, the eventual reorientation of the Career Center to accommodate the evolving landscape of GenAI careers is imperative. Updated career counseling services and strategic partnerships with employers can facilitate new kinds of internships, co-op programs, and job placements in GenAI-affected fields, ensuring that Suffolk University graduates can seize opportunities in the GenAI-driven economy. This realignment is likely to become a personal priority of the President.

### **3. Getting Started: Immediate Action Required**

GenAI affects so many facets of university life that it is easy for Suffolk faculty to lose perspective and obsess about the wrong things. It is tempting yet a mistake for Suffolk faculty to think excessively about the disruption of their usual teaching and testing practices. They need to be reminded that all universities face struggles with GenAI and that Suffolk probably has a better hand to play than many other programs. In a GenAI world, online programs and campuses physically distant from employers are likely to face headwinds. In a GenAI world, universities emphasizing on-campus presence and proximity to potential employers using GenAI enjoy a better starting position.

To exploit its inherent superior competitive position, **immediate and sustained immersion of Suffolk faculty and staff in GenAI is what this report urges and what this report urges administrators to urge.** The exhortation of this report to exhort! Practically any slogan will do: Just do it! Act first, think later! If you come to a

fork in the road, take it! (Y. Berra) In other words, there is no substitute for experience and the only way to get it is to experiment with GenAI in the classroom and at home. This is the basic message we offer for now.

Here is one other possible message: **Think about what the parents of these kids want!** Prof. Arka Sarkar conducted an informal poll of Boston professionals on GenAI during the holiday season, and while their perspectives varied on how big they expected the impact GenAI would be, as parents they were all very supportive of initiatives to integrate AI into academic curriculum, emphasizing that the responsibility lies with educational institutions to ensure that their kids are AI-ready. In other words, the parents of our students are a lot less concerned about grade inflation on assignments than about the knowledge and experience that Suffolk students gain with GenAI.

Although nobody knows just what GenAI skills will be most in demand when students enter the job market, we can be certain that our graduates will have to be sufficiently knowledgeable about GenAI to make a favorable impression at job interviews. It is worth quoting from Prof. Sarkar concerning his informal poll of Boston professionals: *I then asked them about their recruitment perspectives. Specifically, I questioned if AI/GenAI skills were expected in new hires. Almost unanimously, the response was that AI/GenAI knowledge is now a critical, must-have skill. Yet, specifics on the required skills were vague, ranging from prompt engineering and programming to a broad awareness of current AI/GenAI trends* (email of Prof. Sarkar to CICL).

As mentioned above, the decentralized tradition of Suffolk could well be an advantage for responding to a technology like GenAI. It follows that incorporation of GenAI into courses will be a bottom-up process of professors taking their own initiatives for the next few semesters. Yes, there will be a hodgepodge, duplication, confusion, etc. But at this point, it may be better if Suffolk professors do too much than too little for at least the next year. It is time to take the plunge!



**Appendix: From Prof. Sarkar's Email**

- In the future, we may aim to categorize our courses based on the level of integration of artificial intelligence (AI). These categories will include:
  - Regular courses with minimal use of AI
  - AI-enabled courses
  - AI-immersive courses

We will need to establish specific criteria, and expectations for both instructors and students, as well as learning outcomes for each category.

- Students could be encouraged to take a healthy mix of all three categories of courses to get a good exposure to AI/GenAI.

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