# From Intrigue to Impact: Leveraging Artificial Intelligence to Reimagine a Multimedia Assignment in an Introduction to Higher Education Course

Brian McGowan
*American University*

The rapid evolution of technology is reshaping every aspect of our lives, and higher education is no exception. As AI began to make its mark, I found myself observing its growing influence in real time, prompting me to rethink how I, as an educator, could respond. Over the years, I've experimented with course design, played with new pedagogical approaches, and reimagined assignments to meet students where they are. It was during one of my many semesters away from the classroom, serving as Associate Director at a teaching and learning center, that AI began to surge onto the academic scene. At first, I noticed faculty members expressing concerns about academic integrity or pondering how these emerging tools might transform writing assignments. Over time, however, the conversation grew louder. Colleagues began engaging in debates about policy, while students casually shared how they were already incorporating AI into their workflows, using it to prepare for class, summarize readings, or generate ideas for their projects. I was equal parts intrigued and unnerved.

I found myself advising faculty on how to engage with AI thoughtfully, encouraging innovation while cautioning against overreliance. But privately, I was stunned by what the tools could do. Their capabilities far surpassed what I had expected. And yet, for all my talk and consulting, I hadn't yet integrated AI into my own teaching. I made a commitment to myself that the next time I taught a course, I would integrate AI. However, I didn't want to simply sprinkle AI into a lecture or mention it in passing. I wanted to design a learning experience that engaged students critically and creatively with the very tools they were already using.

## My Approach to Integrating AI in the Classroom

From the beginning of my graduate course titled, *Introduction to U.S. Higher Education: Liberating or Constraining Opportunity*, I approached AI in my class with the assumption that students were already using it, whether or not that was actually the case. I wanted to integrate AI into both my experience as an instructor and theirs as students. Before the final assignment, students completed a group project that required them to research a specific institutional type and student subpopulation. They presented their findings in a 15-minute presentation and created a one-page handout for their peers. As I graded these projects, I took detailed notes on each group's strengths and areas for growth, then experimented with

plugging this information into AI to see how it might help generate initial drafts of feedback. The results weren't perfect, but they were promising. AI offered quick responses that I could then revise and personalize, saving me time while still preserving quality. Of course, any feedback generated by AI needs careful review for accuracy and relevance, but I see great potential here. I view AI not as a shortcut, but as a way to enhance the learning process, and I encourage students to use it ethically and thoughtfully.

**The Final Assignment**

In previous iterations of the course, the final assignment gave students a choice: they could write a 12-page research paper or create a 15 minute video, both of which required engagement with course themes and critical reflection grounded in their own lived experiences. Each format was research-based, and students presented their work informally during our final class session. I knew this was the assignment where I wanted to incorporate AI in a meaningful way. I wanted to meet students where they were not just in terms of technology, but in terms of how they were already navigating this new terrain. Rather than defaulting to a paper or a basic video, students now developed a 15- to 20-minute multimedia presentation, either a video or a narrated slide deck, on a topic of their choice related to the course. They could explore themes like access and equity, student affairs, policy, diversity and inclusion, or the history of higher education. But this time, AI was part of the process from the beginning. Students used AI tools to help brainstorm topics, summarize research, organize ideas, and experiment with different formats. They were still expected to conduct rigorous academic research and ground their work in credible scholarship, but they also had to reflect on how AI supported (or complicated) their process.

Each student submitted a short-written reflection alongside their presentation, documenting the tools they used, how AI shaped their thinking, and the challenges they encountered. I approached this assignment with a clear philosophical stance: AI shouldn't replace critical thought, but it can enhance it if used with care and intention. The assignment became as much about the process as the product, inviting students to think deeply about their relationship with AI.

**Student Wins and Teaching Takeaways**

Students genuinely enjoyed this assignment, and it was clear in both their engagement and their final submissions. Several shared that it helped them build confidence in using AI in a structured, intentional way, rather than simply as a shortcut. Others noted how much they appreciated the opportunity to think visually and creatively about their topic, especially those who had never made a video before. A few even mentioned that this was the first time they truly felt ownership over their final project, not just as a paper to submit but as something they could be proud of and potentially use beyond the class. One unexpected success was incorporating peer feedback. Students evaluated each other's presentations using a rubric co-developed with AI, which not only modeled how AI could support evaluative thinking but also led to thoughtful peer-to-peer dialogue. Specific items in the rubric that were done well or not adhered to became questions during the Q&A.

That said, I did run into a few practical issues. The presentations ran long, partly because I wanted to preserve space for conversation, and partly because the discussions were so rich that I hesitated to cut them short. Moving forward, I plan to either shorten the required length of the videos or build in time for Q&A within the overall presentation window. I also realized I need to be more structured with timing, something I've typically resisted in favor of organic discussion, but which may be necessary to support pacing and equity across the board. What surprised me most was how reflective and intentional students were in using AI. Many described using ChatGPT to brainstorm ideas or get unstuck while outlining. Some used visual design tools that incorporated generative AI to enhance the visual appeal of their projects.

In their reflections, students grappled honestly with questions of authorship and originality. One student wrote about her initial temptation to use AI more heavily but decided to pull back when she realized it made her feel disconnected from the material. Another shared how AI helped organize her thoughts but couldn't replace the depth of her lived experience and analysis. These reflections demonstrated the kind of metacognitive learning I hoped for. Students weren't just using tools; they were thinking critically about their relationship to them. To say I was excited to read these comments is an understatement. This is what I envisioned when redesigning the final assignment.

The format also allowed students to create more engaging, dynamic presentations. Rather than a final paper, the projects were engaging. We watched videos that used storytelling, visuals, and even music. And because they knew they'd be presenting to peers, students seemed more invested in making their work accessible and compelling.

**Summary**

Integrating AI into my course wasn't just solely about testing a new tool; it was about creating space for students to engage critically with the technology in the research process. It was also a way to meet them where they are while pushing them to use these tools with greater intention, creativity, and reflection. The assignment was far from perfect, and I'm still figuring out how to balance structure with flexibility, innovation with intellectual depth. But this first attempt was a meaningful beginning. Moving forward, I plan to refine the assignment, deepen its reflective components, and possibly expand the use of AI into earlier parts of the course to support ongoing fluency. I've come to see AI integration not as a one-time shift but as an evolving practice that will require continual experimentation and humility. On a personal level, this experience reminded me that I'm not just guiding students through content, I'm learning alongside them, continuously adapting to the ever-evolving landscape of education and technology.