

August 26, 2025

## **Assembly Joint Hearing Higher Education and Privacy and Consumer Protection**

Good afternoon Chair Fong, Chair Bauer-Kahan, and members of the committees. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is **Elaine Villanueva Bernal** (they/them). I am a Lecturer in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry at CSU Long Beach, and I serve on the Board of Directors of the California Faculty Association as Associate Vice President of Lecturers South. I am also proud to be the first Filipino person to serve as a board officer in CFA's 43-year history. Filipinos have a deep and powerful history in California's labor movement, and I carry forward that legacy of collective struggle for dignity, equity, and justice. CFA represents 29,000 faculty across the CSU: professors, lecturers, counselors, librarians, and coaches, serving half a million students every term.

I speak to you today with both the lived experience of a faculty member in the classroom for nearly twenty years, and with the responsibility of representing the collective voice of our union.

In chemistry courses for non-STEM majors, I see students arrive anxious, convinced they do not belong in science. Chemistry is one of the most historically difficult courses, with high failure and drop rates, and nearly every student has heard a cautionary tale about it. But in my own classroom, we have already been using AI thoughtfully, with ethics, equity, and accessibility at the center. When framed this way, students begin to connect chemistry to their own fields, from art to business to health to communication. They discover confidence and ownership in a subject they once thought was closed off to them. If students can find that agency in chemistry, one of the most challenging courses in higher education, then AI has the potential to help every CSU student feel capable and included.

But AI also risks undermining critical thinking. If students come to believe they can outsource analysis and reasoning to an algorithm, they lose the very habits of questioning and reflection that are the core of a university education.

**One lesson I carry from my work is that true student success depends on autonomy and agency, on students having the ability to shape their own learning experiences. Protecting privacy is the foundation that allows students to trust the system, take ownership of their education, and engage fully as partners in the learning process. The same is true for faculty: our success and academic freedom depend on professional agency in teaching and mentoring, supported by tools and policies we can trust.**

I know this not only from my classroom but also from my research. My doctoral work on CSU's Course Redesign with Technology program found that the most meaningful improvements did not come from simply adding tools. They came when faculty collaborated, redesigned intentionally, and used technology to deepen rather than replace human teaching. Those

redesigns led to measurable GPA gains. When both student and faculty agency were supported, innovation worked. When either was ignored, it failed.

That is why this AI initiative raises alarms. It was rolled out without consultation with faculty, campuses, or our union. Workplace conditions are part of our collective bargaining agreement, and any change in workload is a mandatory subject of bargaining under HEERA. The Chancellor's Office has a legal obligation to meet and confer with us. Instead, this initiative was imposed unilaterally.

The dollars are staggering. CSU has already spent \$17 million on this initiative. At the same time, Sonoma State faced a \$24 million deficit that led to the largest layoff in its history, with faculty cut, departments closed, and athletics eliminated. This juxtaposition reveals CSU's budget priorities: flashy tech and corporate partnerships over the livelihoods of workers and the stability of our campuses. Faculty and students deserve better. And legislators deserve budget transparency.

The CSU has also invested \$3 million in competitive grants, with awards of \$30,000 to \$60,000 each, to spark faculty innovation. That is an important step, and many colleagues have developed creative projects through this opportunity. But grants like these are the beginning, not the end, of what is needed. California's workforce will not be shaped by a handful of pilot classrooms; it will be shaped by every CSU graduate. The challenge now is scaling those promising models across all 23 campuses and disciplines. And this is where the Chancellor's Office falls short: presenting competitive grants and vendor partnerships as if they constitute a systemwide strategy. They do not.

We are also deeply concerned about job security. Managers have already tried to roll out AI tutoring bots that hallucinate and misadvise. Our union had to intervene to shut them down. Bots cannot replace faculty, counselors, coaches, or librarians.

There are also risks around data privacy and intellectual property. It would be naïve to believe corporations provide AI access for pennies without extracting value in return. What they want is our data: student queries, assignments, and faculty teaching materials. As Ethan Mollick points out in *Co-Intelligence*, AI companies are running out of high-quality data to train on, which makes our classrooms especially attractive sources. What looks like a partnership can also be data extraction. These systems can also be weaponized for surveillance of what faculty assign and teach, especially those of us teaching about race, gender, or power. That is a direct threat to academic freedom.

**And let us be clear about bias. AI does not just make random errors; it reproduces structural racism. As scholar Ruha Benjamin reminds us in *Race After Technology*, these systems are not neutral. They encode inequality, including anti-Blackness, into their design. CSU's students, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, immigrant, queer, trans, first-gen, disabled,**

should not be handed tools that reinforce the discrimination they already face in society. As a queer Filipino faculty member, I know these inequities personally.

The environmental toll is also real. Generative AI consumes staggering amounts of electricity and water. Every query draws on server farms cooled with water diverted from communities already facing scarcity. Data centers now account for more than 4 percent of U.S. electricity usage, much of it still fossil-fuel powered, and training a single large model like GPT-3 can consume up to 700,000 liters of fresh water. CSU proclaims a sustainability mission, yet this initiative accelerates environmental degradation. Training the next generation is meaningless if they do not have a sustainable future to inherit.

AI is also creating more work for faculty. We are redesigning assignments, rethinking exams, adjusting classroom policies, and double-checking work with unreliable detectors, all on top of existing responsibilities, with no added support.

### **That is why CFA is calling on CSU managers to:**

1. **Consult faculty and staff first.**  
When AI changes how we teach, grade, or advise, it changes our working conditions. CSU must meet and confer with our union, as the law requires.
2. **Provide funded, optional training at scale.**  
If faculty are to integrate AI thoughtfully, they need time and resources: stipends, release time, professional development. Not unpaid labor.
3. **Keep humans at the center.**  
Students come to CSU for mentorship, guidance, and care. AI can supplement but must never replace this.
4. **Protect privacy and academic freedom.**  
No faculty materials should be uploaded into corporate systems without consent. No student data should be mined or sold. Protections should meet the standards of the **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** in Europe and California's own **Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA)**.
5. **Require equity and bias audits.**  
Independent audits must be mandatory before CSU deploys any AI tool. Communities most at risk are the very students CSU is meant to serve: Black students, Indigenous students, Latinx and immigrant students, queer and trans students, and students with disabilities.
6. **Mandate transparency.**  
If CSU signs contracts with tech companies, those contracts must be public.

7. **Tie AI budgets to human support.**

Every dollar spent on AI must be matched by investments in human capacity: faculty hiring, advising, counseling, student support.

8. **Ensure budget transparency.**

Legislators, faculty, and students must see exactly how AI dollars are being spent.

**\*\*Other institutions are already adopting safeguards like these. CSU should too. Faculty and students must not be treated as beta testers for corporate tools. If AI is truly to empower, it must reduce inequity, respect privacy, and put humans at the center.**

If my non-STEM students can find confidence and ownership in chemistry, a course with one of the highest failure and drop rates, a course nearly every student has heard stories of struggle about, then every CSU student should be able to find that same sense of agency in their education. The question before us is simple: will AI help us build that future, or will it erode it?

True innovation in public higher education is not measured in contracts or pilot projects. It is measured in whether every student and every faculty member is empowered to succeed. That is the standard CSU should meet, and that is the standard California deserves.