

AI-Care

It can be difficult to imagine Being the Change, particularly if life feels stressful already.

College students face unprecedented challenges negotiating complex ethical issues — human rights, democracy, climate change, war, work, health, and relationships. Among these challenges is a severe decline in mental health. The [CDC reports](#) that over one third of children aged 12-17 years reported feelings of sadness and hopelessness. That was in 2019. Since then, Covid has made things worse.

Counseling services at America's colleges and universities cannot meet student demand. One proposed solution is an app that offers personal counseling services. Imagine artificial intelligence "chatbots" responding conversationally to your questions and concerns.

Today clinical psychologists and IT engineers are testing AI programs that counsel people seeking help. Experts predict that AI text responses will soon be indistinguishable from human counseling. Already, users report feeling less alone after conversing with AI chatbots. Using deep learning algorithms, AI counseling can generate the "feel" of human connection.

Consider this hypothetical scenario: Your fictional university explores **AI-care**, a promising artificial intelligence counseling platform, as a practical and partial solution to the mental health demands on campus. The senior administration asks your team for student perspectives on this question: *Should the university respond to student mental health needs by providing AI-care?*

Before conducting your ethical analysis, several people want to speak to the issues. After you listen to what they say, use the issues of Fairness, Outcomes, Responsibilities, Character, Liberty, Empathy, Authority, and Rights to raise as many ethical questions as you can to help guide your decision process.

Administrator: Using **AI-care** to address the mental health needs of the whole student body is far from ideal, but it may be the best that we can do. Away from home and finding college life stressful, students are seeking help in record numbers from our counseling centers. Even if our university could afford to increase staff, there aren't enough professionally trained counselors available. AI-care is our best option to reduce the stress on the system. With voice accessibility features, customizable avatars, no limits on sessions, and no hidden or extra fees, *all* students will have access to immediate, consistent, and personal attention. Give **AI-care** a chance.

Faculty: Universities can't provide enough counselors, but they can offer alternatives such as **AI-care**, and therefore they should! **AI-care** effectively solves the problem of access. Protecting confidentiality is of course a critical liberty issue – there are stories of breaches – but our focus should be on increasing the mental health of our student population. That's the outcome we want, and here it gets interesting. Experiments show us that AI counseling is somewhat less effective than in-person counseling. If it's the case that the human connection is part of what makes in-person counseling more effective, maybe universities could justifiably allow the illusion that students are talking with a human clinician. The distinction between an AI program and a conscious human has become blurry anyway. Bottom line, universities that care about students have a responsibility to provide **AI-Care**.

Counselor: If too much social media and too little human connection causes anxiety and sadness, how can **AI-care** possibly help in the long run? Students need in-person, human interaction with professionals who listen and respond with emotion — that’s what makes therapy effective. Also, you can trust counselors to maintain confidentiality. What’s to keep **AI-care** from selling the data from the sessions to insurance companies or potential employers? For legal purposes, you have to store those sessions on a server somewhere, and they can be hacked and used for blackmail or sold to profiteers. This seems very risky. Students have a right to personal and professional counseling services. Universities shirk responsibilities and reveal their true character by replacing counselors with bots.

Parent: I am sending my child to this university because of its outstanding academic reputation and its commitment to students. Now I ask, what kind of university addresses the obvious mental health crisis with a robot? **AI-care** will damage the university’s reputation and increase risks to my child. What if someone faces an urgent psychological crisis? I want there to be a real human to help them. And yes, let’s talk cost. Given the price we already pay and the high stakes, it seems a small thing to have a trained professional who cares about what happens to my child available. It shouldn’t be an add-on luxury. If you ask me, **AI-care** is just another way for the university to say, We Don’t Care.

Student: Sometimes, I just need to share my worries with someone who is willing to just listen. Often, by the time you get an appointment with a person, the crisis has passed. I have friends who are using a counseling chatbot: they feel better after each conversation and no one has to know that they are struggling. My friends say every time they login the app warns if they talk about harming themselves or others, the chatbot sends an alert to trained counselors who follow up immediately. My parents are worried about security, but I have my bank and other really important things on my phone...if I lose that, so much more is at stake! The fact that the bot is learning about me, and will follow up, feels good. If the university provides **AI-Care**, it may be worth trying it out.

Use the Eight Key Questions 8KQ to generate as many questions as you can to guide your recommendation to the senior leadership team at your university. Being the Change starts with asking questions!