# TEACHING AND LEARNING SPOTLIGHT

**Newsletter of Eastern's Center for Teaching, Learning, & Assessment**
Issue 20 • February 2026

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## Upcoming Workshops and Events

### Teaching with Open Educational Resources: A Faculty Panel Discussion
### (An Open Education Week event)

**Thursday, March 5, 12:30 – 1:45 pm**
President's Dining Room in Hurley Hall (Lunch provided by the CTLA)
*Panelists include Michael Kerr (Physical Sciences), Stanislaw Kolek (Psychological Science), Chantal LaRose (Mathematical Sciences), Joel Rosiene (Computer Science), and Nicolas Simon (Sociology)*

Many faculty are engaging students in Open Educational Resources (OER), which are teaching and learning materials that are in the public domain or licensed to permit no-cost access, reuse, revision, and re-distribution. Using OER materials in class reduces (or eliminates completely) textbook costs for students—and can provide other benefits. In this panel discussion, faculty from different disciplines will describe the different ways they are using OER, why they use them and the benefits they see for students, and their advice for other faculty interested in getting started.

No registration is required for this event.

This discussion is part of Open Education Week 2026. The week will include the following opportunities for students and faculty to learn more about Open Education, Open Pedagogy, and Open Educational Resources (OER):

- Keynote session by OER expert Kevin Corcoran on "GenAI, Gen Alpha, and OER: Why the Future of Learning Demands Openness, Adaptability, and Agency" (March 4, 3 – 4 pm, in the Johnson Room)
- Exhibition showcasing Open Educational Resources currently used by Eastern faculty in their courses (March 2 – 6, 2nd floor of the library)
- Several student-facing events and activities

For additional information about OER Week, contact Nicolas Simon at simonn@easternct.edu.

## Liberal Arts in the Age of AI Colloquium

**Tuesday, March 24, 8:45 am – 5 pm**
Student Center (various locations)
*Multiple presenters and panelists*

The **Liberal Arts Education in the Age of AI** colloquium will help faculty navigate the challenges and opportunities in teaching, creative activity, and research that have arisen from artificial intelligence. The event will also provide opportunities to hear a range of perspectives about generative AI use from Eastern faculty and students, industry leaders, and K-12 school teachers. Faculty are encouraged to bring their classes and to urge students to attend.

The anticipated schedule for the day is below—participants may attend specific presentations/ panels or the entire day. Watch your email for more detailed information, including presentation titles and descriptions, speaker and panelist names, room locations, and registration information. Everyone in the Eastern community (faculty, staff, students, and administrators) is welcome to attend!

### *General Schedule*

| | |
|---|---|
| 8:45 am | Welcome |
| 9:00 am | Keynote presentation (Dr. Lew Ludwig) |
| 10:00 am | Parallel sessions: Teaching and research presentations |
| 11:00 am | Student panel |
| 11:50 am | Faculty panel |
| 12:30 pm | Lunch and roundtable discussions on a range of AI topics |
| 1:30 pm | Parallel sessions: Teaching and research presentations |
| 2:20 pm | Faculty panel |
| 3:00 pm | Industry & professional panel |
| 4:00 pm | P-12 educators panel |
| 4:55 pm | Closing remarks |

## SAVE THE DATE - Fostering Respectful Dialogue in the Classroom: A Faculty Panel Discussion

**Thursday, April 9, 12:30 – 1:30**
President's Dining Room in Hurley Hall (Lunch provided by the CTLA)

> During the week of April 6 – 10, a series of events will be held on Eastern as part of a campus-wide Free Speech Forum. These events are being organized by Karl Stocker in the Political Science, Philosophy, and Geography department. As part of the Forum, the CTLA is sponsoring an interdisciplinary panel discussion about how faculty can foster a classroom environment and build student capacity to engage in respectful dialogue in the classroom. More information will be coming soon. (If you are interested in serving on the panel, please contact Julia DeLapp.)

# New Free Resource for Individual Faculty Development

## Coming Soon: ACUE Commons

Courtesy of the CSCU system office's engagement in an *Excellence in Teacher Residency Project*, faculty at Eastern will soon have free access to ACUE Commons. ACUE describes this resource as "a faculty community designed to help all educators stay current on the latest teaching practices" through access to their Quick Studies Library. The library includes one-hour "Quick Studies" on topics such as generative AI, career guidance, cultivating civic skills, and supporting students with varied needs. Stay tuned for information on how to access these resources.

# Meeting Blackboard Accessibility Requirements
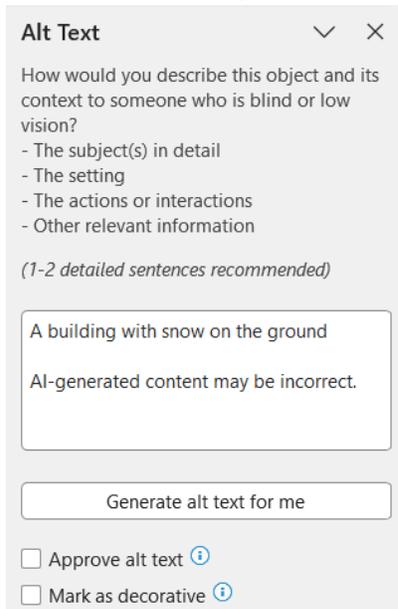
## Ensuring All Images Have Descriptions/Alt Text

One of the most common accessibility issues in documents, on web pages, and on Blackboard is images that lack descriptions—also known as alternative text, or "alt text." Alt text is a brief description that communicates the content and purpose of an image, and it's crucial for individuals who rely on screen readers. Alt text is also helpful when an image isn't rendering or doesn't load properly (due to slow internet speeds or other technical issues).[1] Missing alt text constituted 29% of all accessibility issues on Blackboard in Fall 2025.

Fortunately, adding alt text is relatively simple for most types of images.

### *Adding Alt Text to a Document*
In Microsoft Word or PowerPoint, you can right-click on an image and then select "View Alt Text." Typically there will be AI-suggested text, which you can approve or overwrite. There is also an option to mark the image as "decorative." (See screenshot to the right.)

In a PDF, you can add alt text by selecting the "Prepare for Accessibility" tool and then selecting "Add alternate text." (Note that if you are planning to create a Word document and then save it as a



> Alt Text ∨ ✕
>
> How would you describe this object and its context to someone who is blind or low vision?
> - The subject(s) in detail
> - The setting
> - The actions or interactions
> - Other relevant information
>
> *(1-2 detailed sentences recommended)*
>
> A building with snow on the ground
>
> AI-generated content may be incorrect.
>
> Generate alt text for me
>
> ☐ Approve alt text ⓘ
> ☐ Mark as decorative ⓘ

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[1] Alt text can also improve the searchability of a website, as search engines will include alt text when searching for relevant text on websites.

PDF, it is generally more straightforward to add all the accessibility components **before** converting the document to a PDF.)

### *Adding Alt Text Within Blackboard*

In Blackboard Learn Original (the version of Blackboard most faculty are currently using), you can add alt text to an image in a WYSIWYG text box by right-clicking on the image, selecting "image," and entering text under "alternative description" (see screen shot). When adding a stand-alone image using the Create Content menu, you get the option to add alt text on the image upload page.

If you are using Blackboard Ultra, you will be prompted to "edit file options" when you upload a new image, and there is space to type in alternative text on the last page of the image upload interface.[2]
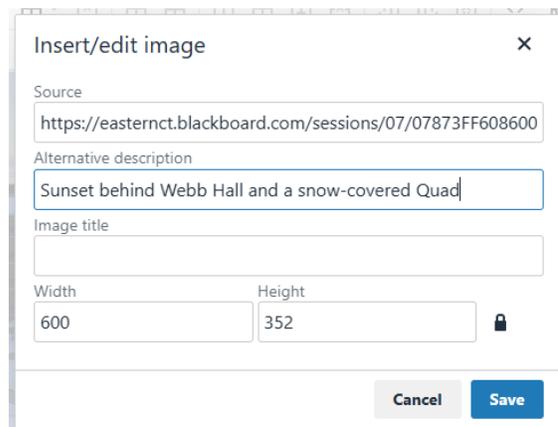
### *How to Describe Images*

The alt text you include will depend on the purpose of the image. For example, this newsletter includes an image of a sunset over Webb Hall. If the image were part of a story about how the weather has been affecting classes, the alt text might say something like, "Snow covering the Quad on campus." If the image was meant to illustrate a story about safe lighting on campus, the alt text might read, "Exterior lighting outside of Webb Hall and on the Quad." Because the context is such an important part of deciding how to describe an image, it's critical to review any AI-suggested alt text (if you choose to use it at all). AI suggested "A building with snow on the ground" for the image on the first page of this newsletter. While that is technically an accurate description of the image, it's not an especially meaningful description for the target audience of this newsletter.

> *One tip: Avoid including the phrase "picture of" or "image of" as part of your alt text—a screen reader will automatically tell the user that it's an image, so someone using a screen reader will hear that information twice. It **is** appropriate, however, to mention if the image is a painting, illustration, cartoon, or logo.*

### *Alt Text for Charts and Graphs*

Charts and graphs present special challenges for alt text, as they often contain a lot of information—and lengthy alt text is not recommended. Depending on how the graphic is being used, it may be best to add a link to a long description of the data posted elsewhere—or to provide an accessible table with the data used to make the graph. The University of South Carolina's Office of Digital Accessibility offers detailed advice on writing alt text for charts and diagrams.

### *When to Mark Images as Decorative*

Not all images require alt text. When an image provides no new information or context to the rest of the information, it should be marked "decorative." For example, page 6 of this newsletter includes an image of the book *The Opposite of Cheating.* All of the pertinent information in the image—the title and the authors—are included in the text next to the image, so the image is only there to add visual interest.

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[2] Thanks to Kate Rasimas in CIT for assistance with Blackboard instructions.

Someone using a screen reader doesn't miss any useful information if there is no alt text. In fact, if the title and authors of the book were included as alt text, an individual using a screen reader would hear that information **twice**. Note that you must actually check the box to indicate that the image is decorative—if you don't check the box and don't add alt text, a screen reader may read aloud the filename of the image.

### *For Additional Tips and Information on Alt Text*

The U.S. General Services Administration provides detailed guidance on writing meaningful alternative text, with a variety of examples.

### Accessibility Policies and Requirements

Including appropriate alternative text is one of the requirements of the updated rule of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The updated rule requires that public universities meet accessibility standards (WCAG 2.1 Level AA) for all digital content on websites, social media accounts, and course management systems by April 24, 2026. Alternative text is also required by the CSCU Accessibility Policy for Electronic Information and Technology, which was approved by the BOR in October 2020.

### Learning More About Creating Accessible Documents

Dr. Lauren Tucker, an Assistive Technology Specialist and Associate Professor of Special Education at Southern, is offering several free virtual training sessions through the CT Tech Act Project, beginning in March. The 2-session training provides accessibility tips for Windows, Apple, Microsoft Word, Powerpoint, and PDFs.

## Recordings from Previous Workshops

Couldn't make it to a CTLA workshop of interest? The CTLA Sharepoint site has information you may find useful. The site includes handouts, slides, and (when available) recordings from previous workshops. Recent workshops for which you can find materials include:



Four New Ways to Think About AI — Challenging Our Assumptions to Become AI Educators

1. **Informed skepticism** is a critically important faculty perspective on AI
2. **Human interaction** is the key to addressing unethical use
3. A nuanced **adoption spectrum** from AI-proof to full AI is necessary for classroom learning
4. **Free and easy-to-use resources** can save you time in teaching and learning with AI

- Cultivating Classroom Belonging by Madeleine Fugère and Tanya Moorehead (1/15)
- Microlearning as a Tool to Enhance Student Learning and Engagement by Barbara Murdoch (2/2)
- Changing the AI Conversation: What GenAI Means for Higher Ed and the Future of Work by Jon Rice at EAB (2/2) – See sample slide above

# Reflections on The Opposite of Cheating
### *Contributed by Nancy Castro, Computer Science*

*On February 11, the CTLA hosted a book discussion on [The Opposite of Cheating: Teaching for Integrity in the Age of AI](#) by Tricia Betram Gallant and David A. Rettinger. Twenty faculty participated in the in-person discussion, which was facilitated by Caitlin Vasquez-O'Brien. Another 16 read the book independently, including Nancy Castro, a part-time faculty member who teaches in the computer science department while working as a Data Analyst in East Hartford. Nancy wrote the following reflection about her key takeaways from the book.*

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"If people say so on Reddit, it must be true." (p. 1). Fortunately for us all, it is not. In a world that is changing rapidly, *The Opposite of Cheating* encourages us to be the change we hope to see by preparing ourselves and our students for the lives they will live as professionals. This starts by creating new ways to teach with thoughtful and intentional choices that enhance learning and academic integrity.
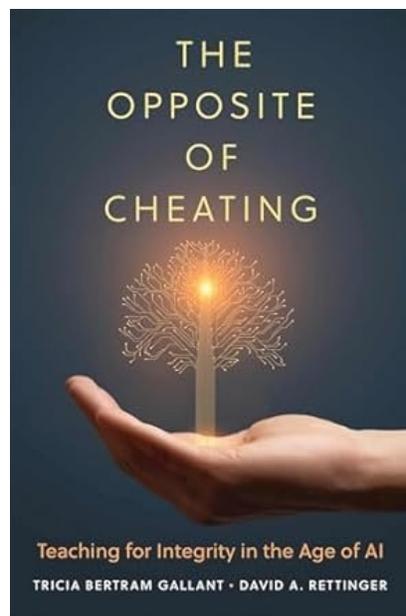
## Key Takeaway: Learn Why Students Cheat

The book includes several chapters with tremendous insight for faculty and institutional leaders on how to apply baseline principles to effectively engage and poll students on academic fraud. One important takeaway is that we can learn why students cheat by asking them outright. If we simply ask, we can then know where a student's moral disengagement was and if it was due to lack of understanding about what constitutes cheating, fear that they're not capable of doing the work without help, panic over an inflexible deadline, denial of personal responsibility, an issue in the student-professor relationship, or opportunity. Learning why will help to then design a better, well-organized course.

## Key Takeaway: Communicate Why We Teach with Integrity

The next key takeaway is to use *how we teach* to communicate *why we must* teach with integrity. This is important to do as students will not always know how to make ethical decisions when faced with a dilemma. It is best we explicitly define and talk with students about academic integrity in the classroom, as well as define its opposite - *cheating*. This sends a clear message that integrity requires trust and relationship and that it can be used to effectively trigger an inherent sense of morality.

To achieve this, we can promote and use tools that promote the *opposite of cheating* and design courses and assessments FOR academic integrity. For example, a course that gives students specific learning objectives and learner goals that are easy to understand can better motivate students to focus on what they are learning. This can help deter cheating by facilitating students' meta-cognition to demonstrate their competence and their ability to learn at every level in the course. Simple tasks such as allowing co-collaboration to promote deep understanding of difficult material and planning for cognitive offloading to reduce challenges created by a task can benefit a student greatly.

## Key Takeaway: Use the Power of Modeling to Reduce the Motivation to Cheat

The final key takeaway involves promoting new strategies to protect the integrity of our assessments and the ethics we apply into how we teach and learn with students. We start by creating a classroom environment to shape the ethical behaviors we message to our students. We can also use the *power of*

*modeling* to illustrate how people learn through others, including ourselves as instructors. This can create a sense of belonging that makes learning more accessible, reducing the motivation for a student to cheat. To teach students the process of thinking clearly starts with ethical decision making. This is where cheating can become a teachable moment for students to learn an ethical way forward.

> Interested in reading the strategies outlined in *The Opposite of Cheating*? Stop by the CTLA Lending Library in room 425 of the J. Eugene Smith Library, or fill out a book request to have the book sent to you via interoffice mail (enter #178 in response to question 1).
>
> If you're interested in learning more about the research behind why students engage in academic dishonesty, the CTLA Library also has a copy of *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty* by James M. Lang (book #195).

## External Faculty Development Opportunities

### Free (or very low cost) opportunities

- February 26, 2 – 3:30 pm: The University of Massachusetts Amherst is hosting **The Power of Visuals: How to Enhance Learning through Effective Design**. This free online seminar will focus on how visual design influences cognitive load, attention, and comprehension. The seminar will be led by a learning design consultant, a professor of graphic design, and instructional designers.
- February 26, 3 – 4:30 pm: The Difficult Dialogues National Resource Center is hosting **Learning Through Their Experiences: Student Dialogue Across the Curriculum**. This free online workshop will feature student panelists from Clarkson University describing their thoughts on "how dialogue-based courses can increase understanding and knowledge of course material," including in STEM courses. Read more in DDNRC's newsletter.
- February 27, 9 am – 3 pm: Kent State University is hosting their annual **Education Elevated (e2)**, a free online conference. This year's theme is "Human-Centered Education: Accessibility, AI, and Innovative Instruction."
- February 27, 11 am – 12:30 pm: The New England Faculty Development Consortium is hosting **Cognition, Agency, and AI: Designing Courses for Learning**, a webinar aimed at reframing AI "from a policing issue to a course design challenge." Registration for Eastern faculty is $30 (Eastern is a member of NEFDC).
- March 11, 2 pm: Goodwin University is hosting **Strengthening Assignment Clarity with UDL, AI, and TILT**. This free webinar is part of a 9-part series about translating research to UDL practice in higher education.
- March 12, 3:30 – 5 pm: The University of Central Oklahoma is hosting **Collaborative Rubric Building: How to Co-Create Rubrics with Students**. This free virtual workshop will engage participants in reviewing a sample assignment and rubric, creating a new rubric collaboratively, and discussing the differences between the two rubrics.
- March 18 and April 2, 10 – 12: **Digital Accessibility Training Series**. This two-part series offered by Dr. Lauren Tucker, Associate Professor of Special Education at Southern, will provide guidance on ensuring the accessibility of Microsoft Word, Powerpoint, PDFs, and other documents. The series will also be offered June 5 and 12 from 1 – 3 pm and October 7 and 14 from 10 – 12.

- March 25 – 26: The **Northeast Open Educational Resources (OER) Summit** will be held virtually. The summit is designed for faculty, librarians, instructional technologists, students, and others engaged in open education initiatives. Registration for faculty is $35 (or $50 after March 18).
- April 20, 11 am – 12 pm: Stony Brook University is hosting **Generative AI Boot Camp: How Can AI Make Your Life as a Professor Easier?** This free virtual workshop will demonstrate "how ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, and other generative AI platforms can support you in crafting learning objectives, writing exam questions, composing rubrics, and designing course content such as lesson plans, in-class activities, instructional videos, and more."

## Other opportunities

- April 15 – 18: AAC&U's **Conference on Learning and Student Success (CLASS)** will be held in Tucson, AZ, and online. The conference is designed to showcase teaching practices, curriculum design, and campus-wide initiatives that strengthen student learning and success.
- April 28 – 30: The **Conference on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching** will be held at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada. This year's conference will focus on the importance of "connection and community amid shifting pedagogical practices, organizational structures, and the emergence of GenAI."
- June 2 – August 4 (Tuesdays, 1 – 2:30): University of California Irvine's Digital Learning Lab is offering **AI in Higher Education**, an online synchronous course. Designed for faculty and those who support them, the course will teach "key concepts and practical strategies for using AI thoughtfully, effectively, and responsibly in real educational settings." The course will be repeated quarterly.
- July 31: **Pedagogical Wellness Day** will be held at the University of California Irvine. The professional development opportunity is designed for faculty and staff to "gain familiarity with an actionable pedagogical wellness framework" and develop a pedagogical wellness plan on their own campus.

## Opportunities to Share Your Teaching and Learning Expertise

- Due March 1: The **Interdisciplinary Journal for Research on Pedagogy and Learning Design** is accepting manuscripts for its inaugural issue, which will focus on AI in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Submissions may include empirical research, conceptual or theoretical papers, case studies, practice-based reflections, and book reviews.
- Due March 1: The University of Minnesota is accepting proposals for the **International Forum on Active Learning in Classrooms**, to be held August 6 – 7 in Rochester, MN. They seek proposals that "address active learning and student-centered pedagogies, broadly defined, for in-person, hybrid, remote, or asynchronous modalities."
- Due March 1: CAST is accepting proposals for **UDL-Con: International Live Online**, an online conference that will be held July 21 – 22. The conference is designed to "convene a worldwide community of leaders in education to examine what UDL looks like in practice and what it must become next."
- Due March 6: Indiana University is accepting proposals for their annual **Assessment Institute**, to be held October 18 – 20 in Indianapolis, IN. Preference will be given to proposals that describe how assessment findings were used to improve student learning and/or institutional processes or services.

- Due March 15: The Council on Postsecondary Education is accepting proposals for **Pedagogicon 2026**, which will be held May 15 at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, KY.
- Due March 22: Elon University is accepting proposals for their 22nd annual hybrid **Teaching and Learning Conference**, to be held August 11 in Elon, NC, and online. This year's theme is "Teaching for Tomorrow: Building Transferable Skills and Lifelong Learners."
- Due March 30: The **International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning** (ISSOTL) is accepting proposals for its annual conference, to be held October 28 – 31 at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon (Canada). This year's theme is "Building Bridges: Strengthening Relationships and Networks in SoTL."
- Due April 10: AAC&U is accepting proposals for its new **Conference on AI and Higher Education**, to be held October 28 – 30 in Atlanta, GA.
- Due by April 30: Proposals are being accepted for the **Lilly Conference Asheville**, to be held August 10 – 12 in Asheville, NC. This year's theme is "Innovative Strategies to Advance Student Learning." Faculty are encouraged to submit as early as possible to be given full consideration.
- Due April 30: Proposals are currently being accepted for the 33rd annual **Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Summit**, to be held virtually September 16 – 18.



*Faculty work on imagining and designing a microlearning lesson for their own course during the "Microlearning as a Tool to Enhance Student Learning and Engagement" workshop, led by Dr. Barbara Murdoch on February 2nd.*