

Leveraging AI for Communications and Development Work in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

This article explores how generative artificial intelligence can support more sustainable, strategic, and effective communications and development work in academic libraries. Drawing on the author's experience navigating staffing losses, high-volume institutional communications, and the production of a major annual impact report, the article traces a personal journey from skepticism and resistance to the thoughtful integration of AI into professional practice. Through applications in campaign strategy, donor communications, annual giving, stewardship, event planning, visual concept development, and institutional storytelling, the author demonstrates how AI can reduce cognitive overload, accelerate production, and create greater capacity for strategic thinking without replacing human judgment. The article also examines the ethical and institutional responsibilities associated with AI use, including concerns around privacy, bias, intellectual property, data, and accountability. Ultimately, it argues that the most effective approach is one of harmony: AI can provide efficiency and scale, while humans remain responsible for empathy, ethics, relational intelligence, strategy, and institutional context.

It was 6 days before Christmas. I had just wrapped my final project of 2024 and was ready to settle into the holiday season with my family when I found myself in a moment that would quietly reshape how I think about sustainability in communications and development work in higher education. What began as a staffing crisis during a high-pressure publication cycle became my entry point into rethinking the relationship between human creativity and AI.

As director of external relations, communications, and development initiatives for the University of Delaware Library, Museums, and Press, my work sits at the intersection of strategic communications, fundraising, marketing, event planning, and institutional storytelling. On any given day, I may be drafting donor-facing campaign language, preparing an annual giving solicitation, developing leadership remarks, shaping messaging for exhibitions and public programs, coordinating stewardship communications, or producing our annual impact report.

What Brought Me to AI

In late fall 2024, my team had just completed the information-gathering phase for our annual impact report—a 34-page publication capturing the breadth of our work across the fiscal year—when we lost both our in-house staff writer and graphic designer. Their departure came just as we were entering the writing, editing, and design phase.

This required immediate recalibration. I identified two freelance partners and divided responsibilities: the freelance writer and I would split drafting, I would lead editing and narrative shaping, and the designer would bring everything together visually. But we were already behind schedule, and coordinating multiple writers, shifting institutional priorities, leadership edits, donor messaging, and a highly designed publication created a level of complexity that compounded quickly.

Still, we pushed forward. After weeks of drafting, editing, and revising, the report was completed, uploaded, and distributed digitally. The print file sat at the press, ready to be mailed to hundreds of donors, stakeholders, and campus partners.

For a moment, I exhaled. Then came a phone call from a colleague, followed by an email from a faculty member. A reader raised a concern about some language used to describe a student outreach program—a word choice that, while not intentionally harmful, could be interpreted as biased or insensitive. The phrasing had gone unnoticed by senior leadership, including me.

So, there I was, 6 days before Christmas, firing off responses and joining urgent conversations with leadership while most people were preparing to roast chestnuts on an

open fire. We developed a plan to address the issue thoughtfully while managing the reality of what had already been published. Fortunately, we were able to halt the print mailing before distribution and make the necessary revisions.



The cover of the report the team labored over before starting to use AI. See the full report at: <https://library.udel.edu/about/impact-report-2023-2024>.

The relief was real, but so was the emotional and mental depletion. Once the crisis stabilized, I found myself on the couch, rehashing everything with my supervisor. I shared what many in communications and advancement quietly carry: the exhaustion of sustaining high-volume, high-stakes work with limited capacity. The constant pressure to produce, refine, respond, elevate, strategize, and tell the story well for different audiences—and to do it all at scale—was wearing me down.

That pressure had intensified with the loss of two key positions. My team and I were depleted. It was during that conversation that my supervisor said something I did not expect: I needed to start using AI—specifically ChatGPT—to streamline parts of my work.

My first reaction to using AI was not curiosity. It was resistance. I was offended. I have a degree in journalism. I was trained to value writing as a craft—something deeply human and intentional. My team prided itself on producing thoughtful, original, carefully constructed communications. The idea that a machine could enter that space felt like a challenge to the foundation of how I understood my work.

But my resistance was not just about technology. It was about identity.

Many of us who work in communications see writing not simply as a task, but as evidence of expertise, creativity, discernment, and professional value. In a field stretched by shrinking capacity and rising expectations, AI can feel less like support and more like a signal that human labor is becoming negotiable. Beneath skepticism lies a quieter fear: that efficiency might eventually matter more than originality, strategy, human insight, or relationship.

At the time, I did not understand AI. I did not know how to access it or how it functioned. And I certainly did not want to participate in something that, in my mind, risked flattening the artistry of writing. I wrestled with it through the holiday break. My husband—who's far more comfortable with technology—eventually showed me where to go, how to access it, and how to begin. That moment became my entry point into AI—not as an expert or advocate, but as someone trying to understand whether this tool had any legitimate place in my work. I wanted to believe it didn't. I was wrong.

My Early Days Using AI

In my early days (and I laugh as I write that phrase because it was only about a year and a half ago), my prompts were basic. I asked ChatGPT to edit leadership remarks I had drafted for my boss or to review a blog post written by a colleague for AP style before it was published on our website. I viewed AI primarily as an elevated proofreading tool.

One of my early uses was tightening remarks for a donor event. My prompt was simple: "Please edit these remarks for clarity, grammar, and tone while keeping them donor-friendly and conversational." The response wasn't groundbreaking, but it reorganized transitions, tightened phrasing, and softened overly formal language. What struck me was not that it "wrote" for me, but that it accelerated a process that normally required multiple rounds of quiet, isolated, late-night editing.

Another early use involved annual-giving email language. I prompted ChatGPT to "write a warm but concise Giving Tuesday email soliciting financial support for a renovation project." The draft was generic, but it gave me something to react to—something to refine into institutionally grounded, emotionally resonant messaging. That was when I realized AI was less useful as an autonomous writer and far more valuable as a collaborative starting point.

Over time, my prompts became more layered. Instead of asking for a single deliverable, I began providing audience context, institutional priorities, tone guidance, campaign goals, donor psychology considerations, a clear call to action, messaging segmentation, and event-specific details. The quality of output improved as the quality of direction improved. I began to understand that effective AI use is not automation—it is structured thinking translated into language.

ChatGPT ▾

What's on the agenda today?

I need to update the acknowledgement letter template that we send to donors who made a gift to our Special Collections Renovation which we are calling our Building a New Home for Special Collections campaign. Based on what you know about the project, can you generate a first draft?

+  Tools



 Create an image

 Write or edit

 Look something up

Here's a prompt the author fed to ChatGPT to draft a letter to donors.

AI as an Operational Tool in Advancement Work

My use of AI has since become embedded in the operational infrastructure of my communications and development workflow.

One key application is campaign architecture, where I have used ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, and Google Gemini to build message hierarchies that translate a single institutional priority into coordinated outputs across segmented donor emails, social media content, website language, and leadership talking points. This ensures alignment across platforms while maintaining a consistent tone and narrative intent. Communications that used to take me days to write and edit were getting done in an accelerated and skillfully efficient way. Here are some examples:

In the annual giving strategy, I use AI to support audience segmentation by generating adaptable messaging frameworks for alumni, faculty, students, retirees, first-time donors, and lapsed donors. These frameworks allow for calibrated variation in emotional framing, narrative emphasis, and call-to-action intensity while preserving a unified campaign voice.

For stewardship communications, AI supports the production of first-draft donor acknowledgment letters and gratitude messaging, which I then refine for accuracy, AP style compliance, and relational tone. In event planning, I use it to develop run-of-show documents, print and digital invitation copy, presentations, and leadership briefing materials that consolidate logistics, messaging priorities, and audience context into a single operational reference. Once, I had a specific idea I wanted to see implemented into a visual design, but without a graphic design background, I feared my creation would fall short. So I described in grand detail what I was looking to visualize with AI, and it gave me an incredible mockup to share with a graphic designer, who brought it to fruition.



Using a detailed prompt, ChatGPT generated this mock-up of a room layout and decor for a donor fundraising event.



The author speaking in the event space that she'd planned with the help of ChatGPT.

Across these functions, AI operates as a structural support system, transforming unorganized inputs into usable communication assets that improve speed, consistency, and cross-channel coherence while preserving editorial judgment and institutional voice.

From Overload to Alignment

Before AI, I often began with a blank document and a long mental inventory of audience dynamics, institutional priorities, event tone, donor history, leadership voice, and timing constraints—all while managing multiple projects. Now, I can begin with a structured prompt that organizes those variables quickly, allowing me to move into refinement, strategy, and nuance much faster. In less eloquent moments, my prompt truly is an elevated stream of consciousness brain dump.

The work itself has not disappeared. But the cognitive burden of getting started has changed dramatically. I did not anticipate how much relief I would feel once I stopped believing every meaningful piece of communication had to begin from a blank slate. AI did not remove responsibility, but it reduced the cognitive overload that had quietly become

embedded in my professional life. It created space for more strategic thinking instead of constant production.

We are all operating under increasingly unsustainable expectations. Teams are managing expanding responsibilities, compressed timelines, staffing shortages, fundraising pressures, and growing demands for personalized communication—all while trying to maintain quality, creativity, and institutional trust. In that environment, AI is not simply a productivity tool. It is becoming part of how professionals sustain the scale and complexity of the work itself.

There is a misconception that AI cannot handle complexity or nuance. My evolved experience with AI has proven quite the opposite. When given thoughtful direction and strong contextual framing, it can support highly sophisticated communications work. My prompts have gone from a mere few sentences to sometimes pages of original copy and thought.

Ethical Use and Institutional Responsibility

As my use of AI deepened, so did my awareness of the ethical responsibility that comes with integrating it into institutional work. At the University of Delaware, we operate under a formal directive ([University of Delaware AI directive](#)) that specifies the appropriate use of generative artificial intelligence, outlining considerations around privacy, intellectual property, data classification, accuracy, and bias. The policy emphasizes human review, accountability, and ethical oversight.

I am also aware of broader industry concerns: authorship, data sourcing, bias, labor, intellectual property, environmental impact, and the scale of infrastructure required to support AI systems. Because of these concerns, I do not input confidential institutional or donor information into AI systems. I instead craft detailed, descriptive prompts to ensure accuracy without compromising sensitive data.

But responsibility cannot rest solely on end users. Companies developing these technologies must strengthen transparency, ethical safeguards, and data provenance practices to become far more robust than what currently exists.

Hi there. What should we dive into today?

We just finished fundraising for I Heart UD Giving Day. The UD Library, Museums and Press project was on raising money for additional furniture and decor for our new Family Study Room. I want to send a digital email to each donor who made a gift to us with an update on our space and with photos of all the new furniture and decor we were able to purchase with a final note of thanks for supporting this initiative. I also want to invite them to visit the space and ask that they subscribe to our newsletter. My goal is to take many of these first-time donors and turn them into long-term donors who increase their giving.



Smart ▾



One of the author's more detailed prompts for Microsoft Copilot.

Harmony Between Humanity and Technology

Even with its benefits, I understand clearly what AI cannot do. It cannot sit across from a grieving donor whose spouse established an endowment. It cannot navigate institutional politics in a room full of stakeholders with competing priorities. It cannot fully understand the historical weight certain language carries for a community. It cannot intuit relational trust, emotional timing, or organizational culture with the depth that human experience requires. And most importantly, it cannot care. Those responsibilities remain deeply and irreducibly human.

This conversation came into sharper focus during the 2026 Academic Library Advancement and Development Network (ALADN) conference, where I co-facilitated a workshop titled Harmony Between Humanity and Technology: Libraries Using AI in Advancement. Participants shared how they were integrating tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, NotebookLM, Microsoft Copilot, Otter.ai, and Grammarly into their daily work.

What emerged was not simply a conversation about tools, but about balance. AI is here to stay. The question is no longer whether we use it, but how we define our relationship with it.

In my practice, that relationship is grounded in harmony. AI brings efficiency and scale. Humans bring judgment, empathy, ethics, relational intelligence, and strategy. Together, they can strengthen outcomes in ways neither can fully achieve alone.

Over time, I have come to see AI not as a replacement for my work process, but as an extension of it—a system that supports drafting, organizing, and refining while I remain the steward of voice, judgment, ethics, and institutional context.

Looking back at December 2024, I did not realize I was standing at the beginning of that shift. I thought I was simply trying to finish a report under pressure and express my exasperation to my boss. In reality, I was standing at the edge of a larger transformation in how I think about labor, sustainability, creativity, and leadership in higher education. And I am still learning my way through it.

And yes—because I know you are wondering—AI did help me edit this article. And sharing that with you brings me both liberation and joy.
