

# Ventura College Sabbatical Leave Application for Fall 2025

Instructor's Sabbatical Leave Status

Full-time hire date: July 2019

Previous Sabbaticals: 0

## SABBATICAL PROJECT AND DESCRIPTION:

### Digital Sociology, AI, and Social Media in Sociological Research and Practice

#### I. Introduction and Background

Today's college students are increasingly supplementing their in-class instruction with outside digital sources of information. Some of the main sources include streaming media, social media and generative technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI). These tools are not just vehicles for interpersonal connections, but also an opportunity for learning and development. According to a recent survey by the Digital Education Council (Figure 1), we can see that nearly 9 in 10 learners incorporate AI into their academic work. The frequency is notable –roughly a quarter use these digital assistants every day, while over half make use of them at least once per week. Because students have been looking at these tools as a source of information, we stand to benefit from directly engaging with these kinds of sources and technologies. In order to better serve our students, it is important to understand the place that such technologies hold in their educational journeys and the role they serve in helping them navigate informational spaces. Additionally, leveraging these tools and thinking about them differently, provides the opportunities to adapt our own educational spaces to our students' current needs and preferences.

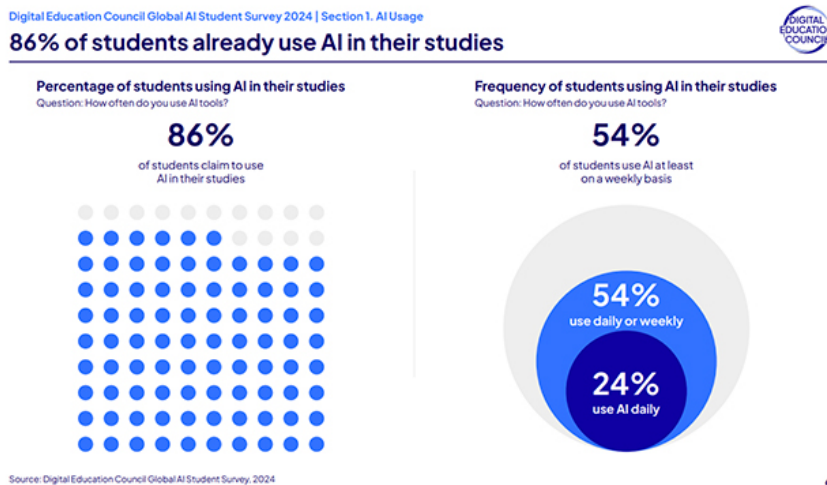


Figure 1- 2024 Digital Education Council

The rise of various digital and generative technologies presents both challenges and opportunities for enhancing student learning and refining faculty teaching methodologies. These technologies can positively affect student engagement and critical thinking, but also raise concerns about academic integrity and the authenticity of student work. Our students have already widely adopted these tools in their own academic work, highlighting the pressing need for structured educational frameworks and guidelines. As a tenured Associate Professor of Sociology at Ventura College, I've observed firsthand how much students rely on these technologies to supplement their classroom learning. For instance, many students utilize digital platforms such as social media, as their preferred method for accessing information and news. The proliferation and constant evolution of these technologies underscores a need to develop a deeper understanding of how they can be harnessed to enrich the classroom experience. I will work on developing resources to navigate these new digital tools, ensuring that our teaching methods evolve alongside technological advancements, while maintaining the integrity and human-centered approach to teaching at Ventura College.

I plan to explore how generative and digital technologies intersect with sociology in a way that allows professors to use social media and digital tools to conduct social research and enhance sociological teaching and learning. My focus will be on developing a toolbox for digital sociology, which as a subfield of sociology, explores how digital media is part of our social lives and how different technologies affect our individual behavior, social relationships and concepts of the self. The ultimate objective of this sabbatical project is to develop Canvas modules with resources to help both faculty and students critically engage with digital media in their sociological work, addressing both the learning potential and the ethical implications. My hope is that other professors will integrate the material into their own courses, and by doing so, help bridge equity gaps and support student success.

## **II. Components of the Sabbatical Project**

### **a. Part One: Research and Analysis**

- i. This step in my sabbatical project is about exploring digital and generative technologies in higher education. I aim to research best practices for integrating digital technologies in ways that support effective learning experiences. This will involve researching not only what such technologies are and how they work, but how they are being leveraged in educational spaces for improved teaching and learning experiences. This will include a literature review of scholarly articles to ensure that my findings are grounded in academic research. As part of this phase, I'll be enrolling in and taking the "Teaching with Artificial Intelligence" course through Auburn University. In addition, I will be doing my own research on how other colleges and universities have responded in the wake of

digital and generative technology. This initial phase of my project will lay the foundation for, and inform, the subsequent phase.

1. Investigate current applications of digital and generative technologies in educational settings, with a specific focus on community colleges.
2. Analyze scholarly articles to identify best practices and potential pitfalls.
3. Complete the “Teaching with Artificial Intelligence” course through Auburn University.
4. Attend the Digital Collective Conference in 2025

#### **b. Part Two: Pedagogical Resources and Curriculum Integration**

- i. The second part of the sabbatical project will move beyond research and education and concentrate on course design with teaching approaches that integrate digital and generative technologies/AI in student assignments. This phase will build on the insights gained during the research phase, in order to create a practical framework for integrating digital and generative technologies into the curriculum. This will not be a one-size-fits-all approach, but will be tailored specifically to the needs of sociology community college students. Specifically, I plan to create material regarding digital sociology in an effort to help students investigate the intricate ways in which digital technologies influence our social interactions, behaviors and structures.
- ii. Digital sociology studies how individuals communicate and build communities, while addressing a variety of social issues within digital environments. This is not only relevant, but necessary in our current society, due to the rapid influx of AI. My focus will be on using sociological research methods in creating authentic assessments for students. Ultimately, I plan to create a Canvas module with instructor resources and educational material, including best practices and potential challenges, as well as a module geared toward sociology students that includes materials on the sociological analysis and perspective on digital sociology. I will also be creating a Canvas unit specific for educators as they work to (re)design their courses in the age of AI. By equipping faculty with both the technical skills and the ethical awareness of digital and generative technologies, these resources will help ensure the adoption of effective and responsible teaching strategies. This phase will consist of developing resources for faculty so we can all enhance our pedagogical practices in order to create more meaningful and effective educational experiences.

1. Create Canvas a module centered on the technical and pedagogical skills that educators can develop and use in their own teaching efforts, while considering ethical implications.
2. Create a Canvas module with content-specific curriculum material that can be used when teaching sociology courses. This module will include theoretical analysis and sociological perspectives on digital technology and AI (i.e. Symbolic Interactionism, the social construction of technology, or the Digital Divide Theory) with an effort to help students critically engage with the digital world.

Ultimately, I will create a digital sociology hub by creating a module on pedagogical tips and processes for incorporating digital and generative technologies in the classroom, as well as a separate module on specific sociological material on digital technology and AI that allow students to critically examine digital and generative technologies' societal impacts. These modules will be available to VC faculty through Canvas Commons.

### **III. Value of Sabbatical Project Ventura College and Ventura County Community College District**

Both Ventura College and the Ventura County Community College District are dedicated to offering high-quality educational programs that keep students at the center of everything we do. Our vision is to “be a beacon of learning—a source of inspiration and guidance—for our students and community.” This sabbatical project is closely aligned with these goals by delving into practical ways to boost student learning and engagement in the age of digital and generative technology, while also safeguarding academic integrity. The insights gained from this project will help Ventura College faculty create assignments and course materials that encourage genuine learning and critical thinking, preparing students with the skills they need to navigate our technologically-driven world. This work will equip faculty with the resources and training to navigate the complexities of digital technology in education, ultimately improving the quality of instruction and furthering the college's commitment to academic excellence. In addition, by modernizing course delivery with current technological tools, the district may be able to enhance its competitive position and attract students who seek innovative learning experiences. Therefore, this sabbatical project will directly contribute to the district's mission of fostering comprehensive quality educational opportunities for all of our students.

### **IV. Value of Sabbatical Project to Students**

Ventura College's guiding principles include designing student-centered solutions, and sparking self-confidence and a sense of discovery. These two guiding principles will inform every aspect of my sabbatical project, as it is dedicated to finding effective ways

to enhance student learning and critical thinking in a world increasingly influenced by digital and generative technology, while also tackling the challenge of academic dishonesty. The project is guided by two key principles: first, designing student-centered strategies that place students at the core of the educational experience, ensuring that assignments encourage deep engagement and critical thinking; and second, fostering an environment that sparks self-confidence and discovery by creating assignments that promote original thought and personal insight, making it difficult for AI to replicate the same level of depth. The goal is to empower students to trust in their own abilities and apply their learning in authentic, meaningful ways.

Essentially, I believe that incorporating social media tools will allow students to observe and analyze real-time social phenomena as they can provide a window into how people engage in social interaction, form groups, and even construct their identities. AI can be a useful resource as they attempt to analyze larger data sets or patterns. These dynamics are important social processes in the field of sociology and being able to combine both digital and generative technologies can help students conduct digital ethnographies or content analyses in order to more deeply understand important contemporary social issues.

#### **V. Value of Sabbatical Project to Instructor**

Given my role as a full-time sociology professor, it's been a challenge to balance teaching responsibilities with the time needed to explore and integrate new and emergent pedagogical techniques or trends, such as how emerging technologies, like AI, are affecting education. This sabbatical would offer me the valuable time needed to focus on researching how these technologies are influencing student learning and development. With this opportunity, I could dedicate myself to developing practical strategies that ensure our educational practices truly engage students and encourage genuine learning in ways that are relevant and interesting to our students. Taking this time would also allow me to bring fresh perspectives and new approaches back to my courses, as I continue to support student success at Ventura College.

Thank you for your time and consideration,



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