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Generative Artificial Intelligence as a Thought Partner for Academic Leaders: Opportunities, Boundaries, and Directions for Research

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has become part of everyday work in higher education, yet much of the discussion has focused on teaching, academic integrity, and productivity. This conceptual article examines a narrower application: the use of GenAI as a thought partner for academic leaders. Drawing on emerging literature on educational leadership, human-AI collaboration, and organizational decision-making, it identifies five thought-partner functions: analyst, devil's advocate, rehearsal partner, idea generator, and organizer. It then considers boundaries related to accuracy, privacy, context, bias, cognitive offloading, and accountability. The central argument is that GenAI is most useful when it broadens deliberation without substituting for human judgment. The article proposes a simple reflective approach for leaders and outlines directions for empirical research on how academic leaders use AI for production versus deliberation, where they draw boundaries between support and substitution, and whether AI-assisted reflection improves decision quality.

Keywords

Generative Artificial Intelligence, Academic Leadership, Higher Education, Decision-Making, Thought Partner

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has evolved from a niche technology discussion to a commonplace topic in higher education. As with many novel technologies, early attention focused largely on its implications for students, and generative AI was no exception. Faculty and administrators grappled with issues of academic integrity, assessment, student writing, classroom use, and the possibility that generative

AI might substantially alter traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Although these concerns remain relevant, AI is no longer simply something higher education professionals must monitor for others. Increasingly, it is something they are using themselves.

Recent evidence illustrates the speed of this change. Robert (2026) found that 94% of higher education professionals surveyed had used AI tools for work within the previous six months. Common uses included brainstorming, writing, summarizing information, preparing presentations, and other work-related activities. Meanwhile, awareness of institutional policies and guidelines remained uneven. These findings suggest that workplace AI adoption is progressing rapidly and, in some settings, at a pace that exceeds the development and diffusion of organizational guidance.

This shift is important for academic leaders. Department chairs, program directors, school directors, deans, and other administrators routinely perform tasks that appear well suited to generative AI support. Leaders read lengthy reports, interpret policy, communicate with multiple constituencies, plan meetings, evaluate options, develop proposals, address conflict, and make decisions with incomplete or sometimes conflicting information. Generative AI creates obvious opportunities to complete some of these activities more efficiently.

But efficiency is only one aspect of the technology's potential utility. An academic leader can ask an AI system to create an agenda or summarize a report. The leader can also use it more recursively: What am I not seeing? What arguments could be made against this approach? What assumptions am I making? What are the possible consequences of this decision for different stakeholders? What questions should I ask before proceeding? How can I prepare for a difficult conversation? In these interactions, GenAI functions less as a writing assistant and more as a thought partner.

The concept of AI as a thought partner is not new. Basgen (2025) argues that generative AI can enhance creativity, challenge assumptions, and support the exploration and development of ideas in higher education. The concept has been discussed primarily in relation to learning, creativity, and professional productivity rather than the daily work of academic leaders. Yet this form of interaction may be particularly well suited to leadership because leaders often need to make sense of complex situations before taking action.

The scope of this article is limited and pragmatic. This is an illustrative, narrative synthesis rather than a systematic or scoping review. Sources were purposively selected for their relevance to GenAI in academic administration, human-AI decision collaboration, organizational judgment, and practical boundaries; no comprehensive database search, prespecified inclusion criteria, or formal quality appraisal was undertaken. The literature therefore supports conceptual development and identification of questions, not claims about the prevalence or effectiveness of these functions across institutions. Five possible functions are described alongside ethical and practical limitations. The article neither attributes human-equiv-

alent judgment to AI nor advocates delegating consequential leadership decisions to it. Instead, it asks whether interactive AI use might help academic leaders examine a problem more expansively and critically before acting.

1.1. Artificial Intelligence and the Changing Work of Academic Leadership

The literature on artificial intelligence in educational leadership is growing rapidly. Sposato (2025) identifies multiple domains of AI application in educational leadership, including administrative efficiency, decision-making and policy formulation, organizational leadership and strategic planning, governance and compliance, communication, student support, and ethical AI leadership. The breadth of this taxonomy makes clear that many applications of AI extend beyond teaching and learning to the work of educational leaders themselves.

This growing interest is also reflected in leadership scholarship. Uddin (2023) examined the ethical implications of AI adoption and highlighted leadership responsibilities related to fairness, transparency, and accountability. Cho and Ofosu-Anim (2024) discussed educational leadership in relation to differential use of generative AI among learners. More recently, Obuba (2026) explored opportunities and challenges associated with artificial intelligence in public-sector leadership. Taken together, these studies illustrate growing attention to the intersection of AI and leadership, extending beyond organizational technology to leadership practice and responsibility.

Much of the discussion naturally focuses on what leaders and organizations can do with AI. Artificial intelligence can analyze information, support administrative efficiency, inform planning, assist communication, and potentially contribute to decision-making. Sposato (2025), however, also notes the need for greater attention to effective models of collaboration between AI systems and human educational leaders.

With generative AI, that question becomes especially interesting because interaction with a large language model does not resemble the use of traditional administrative software. A spreadsheet performs calculations. Scheduling software identifies common meeting times. A database stores and retrieves information. A generative AI system, by contrast, permits an iterative exchange in natural language. Leaders can pose a question, review the response, refine the question, challenge the response, provide additional information, and ask the system to approach the problem differently.

This conversational capacity opens the possibility of a different relationship between technology and leadership work. The distinction can be described simply as the difference between saying, "Generative AI, make this," and saying, "Generative AI, help me think about this." The first orientation emphasizes output. The second emphasizes reflection.

1.2. From Productivity Tool to Cognitive Collaborator

This distinction is becoming more visible in the broader organizational literature.

Generative AI is now being examined not only as a tool for automating repetitive tasks and increasing individual productivity, but also as a participant in different phases of organizational decision-making. In their review of 68 publications, Schulte and Kanbach (2026) identified GenAI roles across activities such as attention, problem identification, information synthesis, alternative generation, implementation, and feedback. They found that GenAI can support, augment, or co-perform decision-related activities, while its use appears more limited in the choice phase, when a decision maker ultimately selects among alternatives.

A similar distinction appears in other scholarship on human-AI collaboration. Page and Kallapur (2026) suggest that AI is likely to replace human involvement in some repetitive operational decisions while functioning as a thought partner for more complex tactical and strategic decisions involving subjective judgment. Li and Tian (2026) likewise emphasize that the effectiveness of AI-human collaboration depends on the relationship between the form of collaboration and the type of decision being made. Across these perspectives, the important question is not simply whether AI is involved in decision-making, but what role it plays at a particular stage of the process.

The empirical basis for applying these ideas to university administrators remains limited. Salvatierra (2026) surveyed and collected written responses from 24 school leaders across 10 universities, finding relatively high awareness and intention to adopt GenAI but more moderate readiness, alongside concerns about governance, accuracy, and human oversight. Dozier and Molina (2026), in a qualitative case study of associate and assistant deans at one university, reported uneven adoption, limited guidance, and concerns about equity, bias, and the relational work of leadership. These studies document leaders' experiences and reported intentions; neither tests whether thought-partner prompts improve the quality of an academic decision. Likewise, broader organizational syntheses and studies of human-AI collaboration provide reasons to investigate that possibility, not direct evidence that academic leaders deliberate better with GenAI (Li & Tian, 2026; Schulte & Kanbach, 2026).

For present purposes, production and deliberation are distinguished by the immediate purpose and use of the output, not by the task label or software feature. Production use yields an artifact or condensed information intended chiefly to complete a task; deliberative use occurs when the leader uses AI output to examine competing interpretations, test assumptions, evaluate evidence or consequences, and potentially revise a preliminary judgment before acting. Summarizing a policy can therefore be production when the summary simply prepares a briefing, but deliberation when a leader critically tests what the policy permits, compares alternative readings against the source, and considers consequences for a pending decision. These categories are not mutually exclusive within a workflow; classification should be based on what the leader actually does with the output, preferably documented through prompts, follow-up exchanges, and decision reflections. In either case, the leader remains responsible for verifying sources and exercising judgment.

1.3. Why Academic Leadership Is Particularly Suited to Thought Partnership

Academic leadership is a particularly fertile environment for this type of cognitive collaboration because many leadership problems are not purely technical. Department chairs, program directors, school directors, and deans regularly operate within environments shaped by shared governance, professional autonomy, disciplinary cultures, institutional policies, accreditation standards, and diffuse formal authority. They may be responsible for outcomes without having unilateral control over the people or processes that produce those outcomes. Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017) describe department chairs as positioned at the intersection of faculty and senior administration and identify recurring tensions involving the management of position, people, and self.

Academic decision-making is therefore especially dependent on sensemaking. A struggling academic program, faculty conflict, curricular disagreement, an unsuccessful search, or a resource problem rarely arrives with a universally accepted diagnosis. A leader often has to determine what kind of problem is present before deciding how to respond. The same set of facts might be framed as a budget issue, a communication issue, a workload issue, a governance issue, or a relationship issue, and each framing points toward a different response. In these situations, the value of GenAI may lie less in providing an answer than in helping the leader make the problem more explicit and examine it from several angles.

Thought partnership may also be useful because academic leaders can have limited opportunities to think aloud. Some matters are not ready for broad circulation, some are too sensitive to discuss widely, and others are too undeveloped to justify convening colleagues. With appropriate privacy protections and without sharing sensitive or protected information, GenAI can provide an initial space to organize thoughts, test hypotheses, or develop questions that can later be taken to people with the expertise, experience, and legitimate stake to address them. This does not replace shared governance or human consultation. Ideally, it helps the leader enter those conversations better prepared and with a clearer understanding of what to ask.

1.4. Generative AI as a Thought Partner

In this context, an AI thought partner can be defined as a generative AI system that a leader uses interactively to explore, organize, question, expand, and critically examine the leader's own thinking during a decision-making process while decision-making authority and responsibility remain with the human leader.

The final clause of this definition is essential. A thought partner does not make the decision; it participates in the deliberative process leading up to the decision. Consider a department chair facing declining enrollment in an academic program. The chair might ask an AI system, "How can we increase enrollment?" The response would likely include familiar recommendations involving marketing, recruitment, curricular innovation, partnerships, and student engagement. That would be useful, but it would not fully represent a thought-partner approach.

With enrollment information in hand, the leader might instead ask: What are five substantially different explanations for this enrollment decline? What evidence would help distinguish among them? What explanation might I overlook if I assume the problem is primarily marketing? How might students, faculty, advisors, and employers view the problem differently? What questions should I answer before recommending a solution?

The value of the interaction does not depend on AI producing the correct diagnosis. Its potential value lies in encouraging the leader to consider additional explanations before settling on one. This suggests several practical functions that GenAI might serve in leadership deliberation.

The five functions below are an interpretive grouping of recurring tasks in the illustrative leadership and human-AI collaboration literature, not categories derived from a formal coding exercise or validated typology (e.g., Basgen, 2025; Schulte & Kanbach, 2026; Sposato, 2025). They were selected to distinguish five practically recognizable contributions to deliberation: interpreting evidence, challenging a working conclusion, rehearsing an interpersonal encounter, generating options, and structuring a complex work process. A single interaction may involve several functions, and future empirical work should test whether the distinctions are useful and complete. The analyst and organizer roles are closest: the analyst examines the meaning, reliability, or implications of information (e.g., comparing explanations in an enrollment report), whereas the organizer maps components, sequences, responsibilities, and dependencies (e.g., constructing a decision pathway for launching a program).

2. Five Thought-Partner Functions for Academic Leadership

Table 1 summarizes the five proposed thought-partner functions, their primary contributions to leadership deliberation, and illustrative applications in academic leadership.

Table 1. Five thought-partner functions for academic leadership.

Function	Primary Contribution	Illustrative Leadership Use
Analyst	Interprets information, tests evidence and explanations	Compare policy interpretations and competing explanations for an enrollment trend
Devil's Advocate	Challenges assumptions and initial conclusions	Generate counterarguments, overlooked risks, or alternative stakeholder perspectives
Rehearsal Partner	Supports preparation for difficult interpersonal encounters	Role-play likely reactions and test language before a challenging meeting
Idea Generator	Expands the range of options under consideration	Brainstorm alternative approaches to enrollment, curriculum, staffing, or implementation
Organizer	Maps tasks, dependencies, sequencing, and responsibilities	Sequence curricular, staffing, approval, and implementation steps

Note: The functions describe possible uses of generative AI during leadership deliberation; responsibility for judgment remains with the leader.

2.1. The Analyst

Academic leaders encounter policies, accreditation standards, enrollment reports, budgets, strategic plans, assessments, and institutional communications. In the analyst role, GenAI helps examine what these materials mean: compare claims, detect inconsistencies, identify competing explanations, and formulate questions that could be checked against underlying evidence. Its distinctive contribution is interpretive examination of information rather than the sequencing of work, which is the organizer's primary function.

This does not mean that a leader should replace reading essential source material with an AI-generated summary. A summary can orient the leader to a document, highlight areas requiring closer examination, or identify connections among different sources. It cannot guarantee the accurate representation of an important qualification, exception, or contextual detail. Used appropriately, the analyst function is an entry into analysis rather than its conclusion. For example, a chair comparing institutional policies might ask AI to identify areas of apparent consistency and inconsistency and then personally review the relevant provisions. A dean reviewing a large set of nonconfidential stakeholder comments might ask AI to suggest preliminary themes and then determine whether those themes accurately represent the comments. This type of use is consistent with broader literature describing AI applications in administrative efficiency, analysis, planning, governance, and decision support (Sposato, 2025).

2.2. The Devil's Advocate

An even more intriguing use may be to ask generative AI to disagree. Leaders, like everyone else, can become attached to an initial interpretation of a problem or an early solution. Experience brings obvious benefits, but it can also reinforce familiar assumptions: "We have tried that before," "Faculty will not support this," "Students are leaving because of cost," or "The problem is simply lack of staffing." A leader can deliberately ask a generative AI system to challenge those assumptions.

Instead of asking, "Is this a good plan?" the leader can ask, "Make the strongest case against this plan." Rather than asking whether a decision is justified, the leader can ask, "What evidence would make this decision unwarranted?" AI can also be asked which stakeholders might view the situation differently or what unintended consequences could follow from the decision.

This use has an important advantage: AI has no personal investment in preserving the leader's first idea, nor is it worried about disagreeing with the dean. Leadership positions sometimes reduce the amount of candid disagreement a person receives. Even in relatively collegial institutions, differences in authority, organizational culture, or interpersonal relationships may affect what subordinates and colleagues are willing to say directly. AI cannot replace authentic dissent from people who understand the institution, but it can offer a low-cost preliminary mechanism for testing an idea before presenting it to others.

The limitation is equally important. An AI-generated counterargument is not

evidence that actual stakeholders hold that position. Simulated disagreement should never substitute for asking people what they actually think. The value of the devil's advocate is that it encourages the leader to think again, not that it provides privileged information.

2.3. The Rehearsal Partner

Some of the hardest work of leadership occurs in conversation. A chair may need to address a faculty member's performance, respond to an angry student, explain an unpopular decision, navigate conflict between colleagues, deliver disappointing news, or facilitate a meeting in which conflict is expected. These encounters are rarely difficult because the leader simply lacks words. Leaders are trying to communicate clearly while anticipating reactions, managing their own emotions, preserving relationships, maintaining boundaries, and achieving an appropriate organizational objective.

Generative AI may have value as a rehearsal environment. Without disclosing protected or personally identifiable information, a leader can describe a hypothetical situation and ask an AI system to assume the role of a skeptical faculty member, frustrated staff member, concerned student, or resistant colleague. The leader can test explanations and ask how a particular word or phrase might be interpreted. The system might identify language that appears unnecessarily defensive, suggest questions that could replace declarative statements, or generate several possible reactions for which the leader should be prepared.

The goal is not to let AI conduct the conversation. The value lies in helping the human leader enter the conversation better prepared. This distinction points to an important principle for responsible AI use in leadership: technology may appropriately support preparation for a relational encounter without becoming a substitute for the encounter itself.

2.4. The Idea Generator

Leadership often requires creativity in less-than-creative circumstances. Problems arrive with deadlines. Resources are limited. Multiple constituencies seek different outcomes. Leaders must generate alternatives while simultaneously managing routine organizational responsibilities.

Generative AI is particularly efficient at producing possibilities. An academic leader might use it to brainstorm alternative structures for a retreat, approaches to increasing enrollment, options for reorganizing a committee, ways to gather stakeholder input, potential partnerships, alternative curricular structures, or strategies for implementing a new initiative. In this case, the greatest benefit may not be any single recommendation but the expansion of the set of options under consideration.

Basgen (2025) similarly explains how GenAI can support creativity and challenge assumptions when used as a tool for exploration rather than merely as an "answer machine." There is, however, a risk in equating the quantity of ideas with

originality, feasibility, or wisdom. Large language models excel at producing plausible language, but plausibility is not synonymous with feasibility. The leader still must understand resources, institutional culture, organizational history, regulatory requirements, and the people responsible for implementation.

AI can populate the whiteboard. Human beings still have to live with what is written into the strategic plan.

2.5. The Organizer

Sometimes a leadership problem is difficult not because too little information is available, but because too much is happening at once. A new academic program, for example, may simultaneously involve accreditation requirements, curriculum approvals, budgets, hiring, enrollment projections, marketing, technology, student services, faculty governance, and external stakeholders. The leader can easily lose sight of dependencies or focus prematurely on the most visible problem.

In the organizer role, GenAI can produce an initial map of a complex process: decisions to be made, information still needed, stakeholders to consult, dependencies, responsibilities, and possible next steps. For example, the output might sequence curricular approval, staffing, accreditation review, and recruitment activities for a proposed program. Unlike the analyst, which interrogates the meaning or adequacy of evidence, the organizer primarily arranges tasks and relationships so the leader can see the work as a whole.

The resulting structure need not be treated as authoritative. Its value is organizational. In this sense, AI can resemble an extraordinarily patient colleague with a whiteboard who is willing to say, "There are actually six separate problems embedded in the problem you just described." For busy academic leaders, that may not be a trivial contribution.

3. Where the Thought Partner Should Stop

Although AI has considerable potential as a thought partner, its usefulness must be weighed against limitations that are especially important in leadership settings.

3.1. Accuracy and Confabulation

Generative AI can produce inaccurate or unsupported information while presenting it in highly convincing language. The National Institute of Standards and Technology identifies confabulation and information-integrity concerns among significant risks associated with generative AI and emphasizes verification and appropriate organizational controls (Autio et al., 2024). For leaders, the implication is straightforward: AI-generated information should not quietly become institutional fact simply because it is expressed confidently.

AI-generated interpretations of policy should be checked against the actual policy. Accreditation requirements should be compared with the accreditor's official standards. Data should be validated against the underlying source. Citations should be verified before they appear in reports, memoranda, or decisions. A

thought partner can suggest where to look; it cannot remove the leader's responsibility to verify.

3.2. Privacy and Confidentiality

Academic leaders routinely encounter information that should not be entered unreflectively into external AI systems. Personnel matters, student information, performance concerns, complaints, medical information, legal matters, and other sensitive material require particular caution. UNESCO's guidance on generative AI in education and research emphasizes a human-centered approach and the protection of data privacy (Miao & Holmes, 2023). NIST likewise treats privacy and data governance as important components of responsible generative AI use (Autio et al., 2024).

A leader considering AI-assisted reflection should therefore ask not only whether the interaction might be useful but also whether the information required to make it useful is appropriate to disclose. Hypothetical scenarios, anonymization, or institutionally approved secure systems may reduce some risks. They do not eliminate the need to follow institutional requirements and applicable privacy protections.

3.3. Context

Academic institutions have histories that cannot be summarized fully in a prompt. A proposed decision may be shaped by a commitment made three years earlier, a prior failed initiative, faculty governance norms, collective bargaining agreements, professional accreditation requirements, or long-standing relationships among faculty members. An AI system can work only with the context available to it.

This creates the possibility that a recommendation could be technically reasonable yet organizationally disastrous. Experienced leaders often make better judgments not because they possess more information in the abstract, but because they understand what particular information means in this specific institution, with these specific people, at this particular time. That contextual knowledge remains essential.

3.4. Bias and the Illusion of Neutrality

Generative AI should not be treated as a neutral observer simply because it lacks an organizational position. AI systems reflect characteristics of their training data, model design, system instructions, and the way users frame questions. NIST and UNESCO both identify bias, fairness, privacy, and human-centered oversight as important considerations in responsible AI use (Autio et al., 2024; Miao & Holmes, 2023). Leaders can also unintentionally prompt AI toward a preferred conclusion.

The prompt "Explain why this proposal is problematic" will produce a different deliberative environment than "Identify the strongest arguments for and against

this proposal." Good leadership prompting may therefore resemble good leadership itself: curiosity matters.

3.5. Cognitive Offloading and Calibration

An additional risk is not only that AI may be wrong, but that leaders may become less inclined to perform some of the cognitive work they previously carried out themselves. Cognitive offloading can be helpful when it frees attention for more important tasks. The concern arises when increasing efficiency also reduces the leader's inclination or ability to evaluate whether an AI-generated analysis is trustworthy. A fluent, plausible answer can create the appearance that a problem has been reasoned through when, in fact, it has only been rendered coherent.

Emerging evidence suggests that GenAI may have different effects at different stages of decision-making. Nassiri and El Mzabi (2026), in a systematic review of 15 studies, found positive effects for information-oriented or intelligence tasks, mixed effects for the design of alternatives, and negative effects in the choice phase. They describe a calibration problem: users may have difficulty determining when a confident AI response is correct and when it is not. Schulte and Kanbach (2026) similarly caution that fluent and confident outputs may lead decision makers to place too much weight on AI suggestions even when verification and contextual judgment remain necessary.

For academic leaders, this distinction can be framed as the difference between cognitive scaffolding and cognitive substitution. Scaffolding occurs when AI organizes information, proposes alternative explanations, or makes assumptions explicit and the leader then evaluates those outputs independently. Substitution occurs when a coherent AI response reduces the leader's perceived need to continue exploring the problem. The first can support reflective leadership; the second can create only the appearance of deliberation. Responsible use therefore requires calibrated trust, with increasing caution as a task moves from information gathering toward consequential judgment, particularly when values are contested, outcomes are difficult to reverse, or decisions directly affect people.

Accordingly, claims in this article should be read at two levels. Findings about administrator readiness, reported practices, and institutional concerns are drawn from empirical studies of higher-education leaders (Dozier & Molina, 2026; Salvatierra, 2026). Claims that specific AI thought-partner functions could improve academic leaders' reflection, perspective-taking, or decisions are proposed applications of the broader organizational literature and illustrative examples, not demonstrated outcomes in academic leadership. Any causal benefit remains a question for direct testing.

3.6. Relationships and Accountability

Perhaps the most important limitation has relatively little to do with technology. Leadership carries responsibility. A leader cannot reasonably justify an unfavorable personnel judgment by saying that an AI system recommended it. A dean can-

not delegate responsibility for an ethically consequential decision to an algorithm and remain merely the messenger.

Likewise, AI-generated empathy is not equivalent to a caring relationship. An AI system may help a leader recognize that a message sounds cold or anticipate how it may be received. That can improve communication. Yet there is a meaningful difference between using AI to prepare to communicate compassionately and using AI as a substitute for the leader's own relational engagement.

This is where the thought-partner metaphor becomes especially useful. A thought partner may inform one's thinking. It cannot carry one's responsibility.

4. A Simple Reflective Approach for Leaders

Academic leaders considering the use of GenAI as a thought partner might begin by asking four simple questions before engaging the system.

1) What am I asking AI to do? There is a substantial difference between asking AI to organize information, identify alternatives, challenge an assumption, and make a decision.

2) What information would I need to provide? If useful interaction requires disclosure of confidential or protected information, the leader may need to use another approach or an institutionally approved system.

3) Whose human perspective is missing? AI can simulate viewpoints, but simulation should not substitute for consultation with people who possess relevant expertise, experience, relationships, or legitimate interests in the decision.

4) Can I independently explain and defend the eventual judgment? If a leader cannot articulate the reasoning for a decision without referring to what the AI recommended, the technology may have moved from assisting deliberation toward substituting for it.

These questions are intentionally simple. Academic leaders probably do not need another decision matrix to complete before responding to an email. The goal is to create a brief moment of reflection about the role the technology is being asked to play.

5. Discussion

The central contribution of the thought-partner perspective is to make the leader's *use* of an AI response analytically visible. Similar outputs can either close a task or open further inquiry. That distinction has implications for institutional training and evaluation, since competence in producing polished work should not be mistaken for stronger independent judgment.

Empirical studies of administrators indicate that leadership use of GenAI is developing amid uneven organizational guidance, readiness, and attention to governance (Dozier & Molina, 2026; Salvatierra, 2026). These findings reinforce the need to examine how leaders actually engage AI outputs. They do not yet demonstrate improvements in decision quality. The suggested benefits of thought partnership must therefore be framed as hypotheses informed by organizational re-

search, rather than established effects in universities.

Most importantly, thought partnership does not require the leader to believe that AI possesses wisdom. A devil's advocate does not need to be correct to improve a leader's reasoning. A rehearsal partner does not need to predict exactly what another person will say in order to help someone prepare for a difficult conversation. A brainstorming exercise does not need to produce the final solution in order to broaden the range of solutions considered.

The question, therefore, is not whether AI knows better than the leader. The test is whether the interaction helps the leader think better before acting. There may also be a useful paradox embedded in this relationship. Generative AI may save leaders time on routine cognitive and administrative work, leaving more time for activities that depend on human presence: mentoring, listening, relationship building, conversation, and strategic reflection. The reverse is also possible. Once leaders become accustomed to AI-generated efficiency, they may gradually extend its use from preparing for relational work to performing portions of that relational work for them.

An AI system that helps a chair prepare for a difficult conversation may strengthen leadership. An AI system used so that the chair can avoid having the difficult conversation raises a different set of questions. That distinction is worth examining.

6. Directions for Future Research

Future research should move from documenting adoption toward testing how, when, and with what consequences academic leaders use GenAI. Initial studies could combine surveys, interviews, and—with informed consent and appropriate privacy safeguards—de-identified interaction records or decision diaries to distinguish production from deliberation by the subsequent use of AI outputs, rather than by broad labels such as 'summarizing.' Such work could also test whether the five proposed functions describe recognizable practices or require revision.

Interviews could ask leaders to reconstruct specific decisions: their initial interpretation, prompts and follow-up questions, sources consulted, changes in reasoning, and the point at which AI advice was accepted or rejected. Researchers could also ask about limits on confidentiality, relational sensitivity, reversibility, ethical ambiguity, and the consequences of substituting generated responses for human consultation.

Experimental or quasi-experimental studies could compare independent deliberation, AI-assisted production, and structured AI thought partnership using equivalent academic leadership scenarios. Beyond recording decision confidence or counts of alternatives, blinded expert panels could score written decision rationales with a preregistered rubric assessing factual and policy accuracy, appropriate use of evidence, consideration of affected stakeholders, recognition of constraints and tradeoffs, procedural and ethical defensibility, feasible implementation, and explicit acknowledgment of uncertainty. Multiple independent raters,

reported agreement, and baseline measures of leaders' experience would strengthen the assessment. Where feasible, longitudinal field studies could examine implementation and unintended consequences, while recognizing that real-world decision outcomes are shaped by many factors beyond the AI interaction.

A separate line of inquiry concerns overreliance: whether leaders can independently explain their chosen action, identify an AI error when challenged, and revise their reasoning after contradictory evidence is introduced. These observable behaviors would provide more informative indicators of calibrated reliance than satisfaction or confidence alone.

Research should also examine relational outcomes, including employee perceptions of authenticity and trust when a leader uses AI in preparing sensitive communication. These questions require direct evidence from affected people, not only leaders' self-reports.

7. Conclusion

Generative AI has rapidly become part of the higher education workplace, and academic leaders are unlikely to remain spectators to its use. The more pressing question is no longer whether leaders will interact with AI, but how that interaction can contribute responsibly to leadership practice.

One potentially useful role is that of a thought partner: a system that helps the leader interrogate evidence, challenge assumptions, rehearse interactions, generate options, or organize complicated work while maintaining human responsibility for the decision. Whether these practices reliably improve leadership judgment remains an empirical question.

That distinction should remain central. Academic leaders are expected not merely to produce answers but to understand context, listen to people, weigh competing values, accept responsibility, and sustain relationships. Those responsibilities cannot be reduced to the quality of an AI-generated response.

What AI should do for a leader is not the same as what AI can do for a leader, and what AI can do for a leader is not the same as what it should be permitted to do on a leader's behalf. A more useful question is: Can generative AI help human leaders make more considered decisions about what to do?

The proposed five-function framework offers a vocabulary for examining those practices, not a validated prescription. Its usefulness will depend on research that observes leaders' reasoning and evaluates decision quality while respecting the limits of AI-generated advice.

Ultimately, the most useful AI thought partner may not be the one that gives the academic leader the best answer. It may be the one that prompts the leader to ask a better question.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this conceptual article because no datasets were generated or analyzed.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Manuscript Preparation Process

During preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with outlining, literature organization, initial language drafting, and editing. The author reviewed and revised the content and takes full responsibility for the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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