

# CSC-261 - Syllabus - Spring 2026

## Artificial Intelligence

**Instructor** [Fernanda Elliott](#), PhD (she/her/hers)  
[ELBICA research lab](#) (Enhancing Lives with Bio-inspired Computational Approaches)  
[Cognitive Robustness Research Studio](#) (Untraining Predictability)  
[AI Aura](#) (Reflecting on the impacts of GenAI)

Welcome to CSC261! In this course, you will find a good balance between theory and development. The first half of the course is heavy on theory (you will carefully read a lot of book chapters and scientific papers). Finally, in the second half you will apply learned concepts as you work on a challenging group project.

And nope, we are DEFINITELY not using “AI” as a synonym for Generative AI (GenAI).

### 1. Course Mission is to:

1. Acquire proficiency in the foundations of AI and reflect on its impact (or potential?) to our community.
2. Obtain familiarity with a) Machine Learning concepts and paradigms with a focus on Reinforcement Learning (RL) techniques and Multi-Agent Systems (MAS).
3. Boost problem-solving and software design and development practices.
4. Reflect on multidisciplinary applications (e.g., robotics, cognitive sciences, and Generative AI), ethical dilemmas, and limitations of AI.
5. Deepen career readiness skills and reflect on the industry maturity and landscape (e.g., Capability Maturity Model and AI Maturity Model).
6. Develop scientific skills. Students will work on a group project to apply the skills and concepts learned. The project culminates into a final presentation and paper manuscript.
7. Improve communication skills having professional settings in mind.

### 1.1 Learning Objectives

1. Employ essential terminology, concepts, and techniques used in AI with a focus on traditional RL techniques.
2. Analyze classical references and papers that show state-of-the-art approaches. Read and summarize those identifying the research problem, methods, limitations, and findings.
3. Describe, design, develop, and test algorithms.
4. Create an effective testbed while making use of theory and reflection to drive insights.
5. Use theory and data graphics to synthesize experimental results and generate conclusions and hypotheses about those results.
6. Students are able to write a publication-quality scientific paper using appropriate frameworks in the field.
7. Effectively present scientific findings using a poster with an oral presentation.
8. Students navigate the steps and challenges of the scientific paper submission process.
9. Students can utilize relevant recommendations to improve their work and respond professionally to reviewers' feedback.

10. Employ professional conduct appropriate for scientific settings (i.e., communicating with peers and the instructor, conducting, and describing experiments, avoiding plagiarism, and acknowledging other people's ideas).
11. Use personal experiences with modern technologies to discuss and reflect on the ethical implications of AI.

## 2. Course Info

- [Course Page](#).
- Prerequisites: CSC 161 and CSC 208, MAT 208, or MAT 218.

## 3. Textbooks

1. [Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach](#). (4th Edition) by Stuart Russell, Peter Norvig.
2. [Reinforcement Learning: An Introduction](#). Richard S. Sutton and Andrew G. Barto.

## 4. Grade Setup (Unless stated otherwise, deliverables are equally weighted within a category)

**Attendance is required to successfully conclude this course.**

- 30% Group Project.
- 25% Labs.
- 25% Midterm Exam.
- 10% Quizzes and Other Assignments.
- 10% Attendance (see the FAQ below).

### Letter Grades

B-	80 – 83%
A	95 – 100%
A-	90 – 95%
B+	87 – 90%
B	83 – 87%
C+	77 – 80%
C	70 – 77%
D	60 – 70%
F	0 – 60%

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. **Can I fail this class by lack of attendance, even if I have high grades?** Yes.
2. **How can I know if I am about to fail the course by lack of attendance?** Your instructor will submit academic alerts so that you get connected to resources. Fail by attendance may occur starting from the *third academic alert* specifically triggered by lack of attendance.
3. **What should I do if I receive an academic alert?** In that case, you are highly encouraged to talk to your instructor, ask for support from academic advising, and keep your academic advisor in the loop.
4. **Do you submit academic honesty reports?** Yes, if I have a concern, I will submit an academic honesty report.

## 5. COURSE INSTRUCTIONS

- **Schedule.** Kindly find a daily schedule on the course page. Always make sure to check the course page for daily updates.
- **Readings.** This course focuses on building foundational knowledge. To that end, you are expected to keep the required readings up to date and take them very seriously. (You will read a lot of book chapters and scientific papers.)
- **Reading Journal.** You will take notes in a paper-based notebook. You will use the notebook to document readings, lectures, and activities. (Hint: your notebook is likely to be helpful during the midterm.)
- **Gen AI.** Nope, you are not allowed to use any gen AI platforms in this course (unless stated otherwise by your instructor for specific activities).
- **Deliverables.** Kindly check Gradescope for due dates, extensions, and upload your deliverables on Gradescope.
- **Group work.** Submit a single report per group.
- **Coding Policy.** You are expected to follow the course's policies.
- **Attendance.** If you need to miss a class, you are still responsible for the material covered on that day, and I expect you to email me in advance so that I can check on you and provide assistance in every way possible. Please note that attendance, in addition to impacting your grade, is required to succeed in this course. Finally, arriving 10 or more minutes late counts as an absence.
- **Writing, Reading, and Speaking Center.** The center supports students working on papers, projects, and presentations, as well as applications for internships, and graduate school. Schedule an appointment here: <http://mywco.com/grinnell>.
- **Library Research Help.** Gina Schlesselman-Tarango is our science librarian. Please don't hesitate to reach out to her if you need help finding, accessing, or managing sources for research projects. You can stop by her office in the Kistle Library, email [schlesselman], or [use this link](#) to book an appointment. You can also access resources and tips for this and other classes in relevant library guides, which can be found at <https://grinnell.libguides.com/>
- **Community.** I would love to see and chat with you in my lab for our [AI Coffee Chat](#) (Optional).

## 6. Policy – Course Culture and Interactions

- **Team Spirit.** Collaborate, respect, be friendly, and learn from your peers. Disagreements may happen, and those play an essential role in your self-development: see those as an opportunity for developing your soft skills. *Also, remember that your peers are a powerful professional network!*
- **Ideas.** Acknowledge and welcome other people's ideas, contributions, and thoughts.
- **Active Listening.** Practice multiple ways of listening to others and be mindful of their voices and perspectives.
- **Integrity.** We appreciate privacy, honorable conduct, and team spirit. kindly read and follow the Grinnell College's Academic Honesty and the [CS Academic Integrity Policy](#).
- **Coding and Professional Conduct.** You are expected to follow the course's coding policy (see the course's page) and [professional conduct policy](#).

## 7 Life Events

Circumstances may change. If you experience anything that impacts your learning and/or promptness to submit the deliverables, **let me know, and let me help you**. The most important message here is communication!

### 7.1 Accessibility and Inclusion

- I am here to help you advance and be successful in your academic journey! We all learn and get inspired differently, and accommodations help us to achieve our goals.
- If any aspect of the course prevents you from learning or excludes you, please let me know as soon as possible! I am happy to chat and looking forward to finding, together with you, strategies that fulfill both: your needs and the course requirements.
- Grinnell College has a robust and supportive network of people and services ready to support you; for example: [the Accessibility and Disability Services](#); [Writing, Reading, & Speaking Center](#); [Academic Advising](#); [Student Affairs](#), including International Student Affairs (OISA); [the Center for Religion, Spirituality and Social Justice \(CRSSJ\)](#); or [Student Health and Wellness](#); finally, confidential support is available through [the Office of the Ombuds](#).
- Grinnell College provides accommodation for students with documented disabilities. Students with disabilities partner with the Office of Disability Resources to make academic accommodation letters available to faculty via the accommodation portal. To help ensure that your access needs are met, I encourage individual students to approach me so we can discuss your distinctive learning needs and accommodations within the context of this course. If you have not already worked with the Office of Disability Resources and believe you may require academic accommodations for this course, Disability Resources staff can be reached via email at [access@grinnell.edu](mailto:access@grinnell.edu), by phone 641-269-3089, or by stopping by their offices on the first floor of Steiner Hall.

### 7.2 Academic Support

If you have other needs not addressed above, please let me know soon so that we can work together for the best possible learning environment. In some cases, I will recommend consulting with the Academic Advising staff: <http://www.grinnell.edu/about/offices-services/academic-advising>. They are an excellent resource for developing strategies for academic success and can connect you with other campus resources.

If I notice that you are encountering difficulty, and I have reached out to you and not received a response, or if you have missed multiple class sessions or are not meeting our class objectives repeatedly, **I will submit an academic alert** via Academic Advising's SAL portal. This notifies you of my concern, along with the Academic Advising team and your advisor(s), so that they can reach out to you with additional offers of support.

### 7.3 Religious Observances

Grinnell College offers alternative options to complete academic work for students who observe religious holy days. Kindly contact me if you want to chat about alternative options to complete academic work due to religious holy days.

## **7.4 Title IX and Pregnancy Related Conditions**

Grinnell College is committed to compliance with Title IX and to supporting the academic success of pregnant and parenting students and students with pregnancy related conditions. If you are a pregnant student, have pregnancy related conditions, or are a parenting student (child under one-year needs documented medical care) who wishes to request reasonable related supportive measures from the College under Title IX, please email the Title IX Coordinator at [titleix@grinnell.edu](mailto:titleix@grinnell.edu). The Title IX Coordinator will work with Disability Resources and your professors to provide reasonable supportive measures in support of your education while pregnant or as a parent under Title IX.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- I would like to thank Dr. Vanessa Preast for reviewing and providing fantastic recommendations for the learning goals for a previous course, which are adapted here.
- I would like to thank Dr. Jerod Weinman for the insights and inspiration on the Reading Journal assignment.