

Critical Systems Heuristics + DELTA

Every institution makes decisions that affect people who had no voice in making them. Sometimes that's unavoidable, but often it happens by default because no one stopped to ask whose experiences were missing, whose concerns weren't represented, or whose definition of success was simply being assumed.

This is especially true with AI. Decisions about how and whether to adopt AI tools are being made quickly, often by a small group of leaders, in ways that will shape the experience of students, staff, patients, and communities for years to come. The consequences of getting those decisions wrong—or making them without the right people in the room—are significant and may be hard to reverse.

Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH) is a framework designed to reflect on that process in a productive way. Developed by social scientist Werner Ulrich, it offers a structured set of questions for examining who is actually shaping a decision, whose interests are being served, and who is being left out. Ulrich observed that the hardest problems—the ones that persist despite good intentions and real effort—often have less to do with technical failure than with whose perspectives were included in defining the problem in the first place.

DELTA: Human Formation in the Age of AI

As artificial intelligence becomes more powerful, Christian institutions must look beyond an “ethical floor” of safety, privacy, and transparency. DELTA proposes a deeper, faith-informed approach rooted in enduring Christian values: Dignity, Embodiment, Love, Transcendence, and Agency. We need, as Pope Francis put it, a growth in human responsibility, values, and conscience that is proportionate to the advances posed by technology.

The Institute for Ethics and the Common Good is leading the development of DELTA, which will provide practical resources for scholars, religious leaders, tech leaders, teachers, journalists, young emerging leaders, and the broader public to help navigate the challenges posed by rapidly developing AI.

The CSH framework organizes inquiry around four core sources of influence in any system.

For each source, CSH asks not just who is present, but who is absent; whose motivation, power, knowledge, and judgment are being excluded, and what difference that makes.

Motivation Who has a stake in this, and what are they trying to achieve?	Power Who has the authority or resources to shape how things unfold?
Knowledge What expertise, evidence, or experience is informing the situation?	Legitimation Who has standing to say whether the right things are being done, and for the right reasons?

How to Use this Document

- ➔ The questions in this document can be worked through at the level of your whole institution or within a particular division, department, or team. If you work within a large institution, you don't need to speak for the whole, just be clear about which level you're working at and who the relevant decision-makers are before you begin.
- ➔ The questions are designed to be worked through with a group, not completed by a single decision-maker alone. We recommend starting with one DELTA principle (either the one most relevant to your institution or the one that feels most approachable) and working through all four CSH question categories for that principle. Alternatively, if your group wants a quick cross-sectional view, try working through just one CSH source (e.g., Motivation) across all five principle.
- ➔ For each question, consider both what is currently the case in your institution and what should be the case. The gap between those two answers is often where the most important conversation happens.
- ➔ Before discussing as a group, have each person work through the questions for that principle independently first, then come together to compare and discuss. This helps to surface individual perspectives before group dynamics take over.
- ➔ Each principle likely requires at least 30 minutes of honest conversation. The goal is not to reach perfect consensus, but to uncover where your team agrees, where it doesn't, and who else needs to be part of the conversation.
- ➔ The table on the following page draws on CSH as an entry point—not a comprehensive mapping of all twelve of its questions—to help institutions begin to define what each DELTA principle means in their own context before applying it to any specific AI tool or decision.
- ➔ If you find these questions helpful and would like to go deeper on a particular principle, you can start by reviewing the full list of CSH questions [here](https://go.nd.edu/CSHIntro) (go.nd.edu/CSHIntro). And if you'd like help applying or expanding the questions below to your institution's specific context, feel free to reach out to Megan McDermott (mmcderm6@nd.edu), who created this resource.

	Motivation	Knowledge	Power	Legitimation
	Who has a stake in this, and what are they trying to achieve?	What expertise, evidence, or experience is informing the situation?	Who has the authority or resources to shape how things unfold?	Who has standing to say whether the right things are being done, and for the right reasons?
 Dignity Does our institution treat the people it serves as having irreducible worth, or does it reduce them to data points and productivity metrics?	Whose dignity is most at stake in your institution's work? Whose is most often overlooked?	What metrics, data systems, or evaluation processes are used to determine how people are valued or measured in your context? Who decides what those systems track (and who is subject to them)?	What knowledge (lived experience, research/ data, or wisdom) does your institution draw on to understand what dignified treatment looks like for the people you serve? Whose experience informs that understanding?	Who can credibly say whether people are being treated with genuine worth? Are those voices represented in your decision-making?
 Embodiment Does our institution account for the fact that the people it serves are physical, relational, and situated in real communities?	Who has the most at stake in whether physical presence, community, and place are valued? Who bears the cost when they aren't?	How does your institution determine what aspects of its work require direct human presence versus technological mediation? Whose priorities are reflected in those determinations?	What knowledge does your institution draw on to understand what embodied human life requires in your context? Whose expertise or experience informs that understanding?	Who can credibly say whether your institution is honoring or undermining embodied human experience? Are those voices represented in your decision-making?
 Love Does our institution foster genuine care and connection, or does it simulate or substitute for it?	Who has the most at stake in whether genuine relationships and care are cultivated? Who is most vulnerable to having real connection replaced by something that merely resembles it?	Who has the authority to define and shape how genuine care is practiced in your institution? Who controls the time, space, and structures that make genuine care and connection possible?	What knowledge does your institution draw on to understand what genuine care requires (as distinct from its simulation or substitution)? Whose expertise or experience informs that understanding?	Who can credibly say whether care in your context is genuine or being substituted? Are those voices represented in your decision-making?
 Transcendence Does our institution leave room for meaning, wonder, and things that can't be measured or optimized, including our shared sense of connection to something larger than ourselves?	Who has a stake in protecting space for meaning, purpose, and connection beyond productivity? Who is most at risk of losing it?	Who in your institution decides what is valuable beyond what can be measured or optimized? What time, space, or resources are allocated to those things?	What knowledge does your institution draw on to understand what gives people a sense of meaning and connection? Whose expertise or experience informs that understanding?	Who can credibly say whether your institution is protecting or foreclosing space for meaning and connection? Are those voices represented in your decision-making?
 Agency Does our institution strengthen the human judgment and moral responsibility of the people it serves, or does it quietly erode it?	Whose capacity for genuine judgment is most at stake - the people your institution serves, the people who work within it, or both? Who among them is most at risk of having that capacity eroded?	Who decides how people's jobs are defined and what work they do? When those definitions change, are the people most affected a part of that decision, or is it decided for them?	What knowledge does your institution draw on to understand where human judgment and moral responsibility are essential, and where assistance is appropriate? Whose expertise or experience informs that understanding?	Who can credibly say whether genuine agency is being protected or gradually replaced? Are those voices represented in your decision-making?

Synthesis & Reflection

- ➔ Where did your answers converge easily?
- ➔ Where was there disagreement or uncertainty?
- ➔ Whose voices were missing from this conversation that should have been present?
- ➔ What assumptions about human flourishing are shaping how your institution answered these questions? Have you named them explicitly?
- ➔ Are there tensions between principles in your context that need to be named?
- ➔ Where are the biggest gaps between how your institution currently operates and how it should operate across these principles?
- ➔ Given what you've surfaced, what does your institution need to get right before making any consequential AI decision?

If you'd like help applying or expanding the questions to fit your institution's specific context or to provide feedback, feel free to reach out to Megan McDermott (mmcderm6@nd.edu), Notre Dame director of the ND-IBM Technology Ethics Lab, who created this resource.



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