Academic BRASS, Fall 2025, Vol. 20, No. 2

From Databases to Discovery Maps: Integrating GenAI Tools into Business Research Instruction

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Introduction

MBA students are no strangers to information overload. Between demanding coursework, professional obligations, and time constraints, conducting a comprehensive literature review can feel daunting. As a business librarian and someone who teaches thesis prep courses in both the MBA and Honors program, I often hear students say that the finding and synthesizing research part of the thesis process takes a long time and can sometimes be overwhelming.

In spring 2025, I introduced AI tools into IMB 538: Financial Research Methods, a one-credit graduate MBA course I teach at the Cameron School of Business, University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW). I wanted to see whether these tools could make the literature review process more efficient, helping students better identify, evaluate, and organize scholarly sources. The course focuses on developing applied research skills in finance, so it was an ideal setting to experiment with how AI might complement traditional research methods. My goal was not to replace human judgment or analysis but to explore whether AI could reduce the time students spend searching for articles and give them more time to focus on interpreting and synthesizing what they find. In other words, can integrating AI in the literature review process enhance discovery and organization while maintaining critical thinking and academic rigor?

This classroom experiment reflected a broader trend in research practice. Across disciplines, AI is increasingly being used to support literature review and synthesis, enhancing both the efficiency and depth of academic inquiry. These tools can extract and analyze information from large bodies of scholarship and synthesize key findings into coherent overviews. Their ability to process extensive volumes of data makes them invaluable for producing detailed and current literature reviews. Still, this integration must be carefully monitored to preserve academic integrity and maintain methodological rigor (Khalifa & Albadawy, 2024).

AI can help humans clarify their thoughts, explore new ideas, increase divergent thinking, and perhaps even become more creative. The potential for more creative humans and better thinking is the promise of this new partnership; it is in the iteration, the reflection, and the back and forth, and the refined question that thinking and creativity happen.

It is the job of educators to help students become better thinkers. As recent research from Ithaka S+R highlights, AI tools can complicate students' evaluative processes by presenting information that appears authoritative, underscoring the need for deeper critical engagement with AI-generated content (Chen, Kelber & MacDougall, 2025). Our role now is to help students become even better thinkers by teaching them to question, verify, and interpret information rather than accepting it at face value.

Why Business Librarians Should Care

AI tools have quickly become part of everyday conversations about academic research. Faculty and students alike are curious, sometimes cautious, but nearly always interested in how these tools might change the way they work. For business librarians, this curiosity often turns into questions about responsible and effective use.

Tools such as Research Rabbit**,** Elicit AI**,** and Litmaps promise to save time and reveal connections between studies that might otherwise go unnoticed. Yet they also raise important questions about credibility, transparency, and how we teach the fundamentals of research. Business students need to learn how to use these tools to explore ideas and synthesize information quickly, but they also need to know when to pause, verify, and think critically about the results.

This evolving landscape is reshaping the librarians' role. We are not only helping students find reliable sources; we are also helping them assess the quality of what AI retrieves, summarizes, and interprets.

Project Context

IMB 538 introduces MBA students to the research process within the context of finance and applied business topics. Students are expected to choose a topic, frame a research question, and conduct a focused literature review using peer-reviewed sources. For many, this is their first in-depth research experience since their undergraduate studies, and the volume of available information can feel overwhelming. Because the course runs on a short timeline, it provided an excellent opportunity to test whether AI tools could make the early stages of research, finding, screening, and organizing sources more manageable and less intimidating.

With support from a UNCW teaching grant, I incorporated three AI-powered research tools into the course syllabus and assignments before the semester began: Research Rabbit, Elicit AI, and Litmaps. Each tool offered a unique function: Research Rabbit helped students visualize relationships between studies through citation mapping. Elicit AI summarized research articles and highlighted methods or variables. Litmaps allowed students to track how ideas evolved over time by building citation networks. Together, these tools provided a useful balance between efficiency, visualization, and analytical depth.

Each tool serves a distinct purpose:

- Research Rabbit helps students visualize scholarly connections through citation mapping.
- Elicit AI summarizes articles, extracts variables, and identifies common themes or methodologies.
- Litmaps creates visual citation networks that help track the evolution of ideas across time.

Students also used traditional keyword-based library databases—including ABI/INFORM, Business Source Complete, and Scopus—to compare results with AI tools. These databases primarily rely on structured indexing and controlled vocabulary, unlike generative AI tools that provide synthesized summaries or relationship mapping. This helped students see how AI augments rather than replaces established research databases.

Methodology

Students began the semester by completing a pre-survey that measured their familiarity with library databases, awareness of AI tools, and confidence in conducting literature reviews.

After a hands-on introduction to each AI tool, students selected a finance-related research topic. Their assignment was to use both library research databases and one AI tool of their choice to locate, organize, and synthesize peer-reviewed sources.

At the end of the course, a post-survey was conducted to capture their reflections on usability, effectiveness, and perceived value. The survey framework drew from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Bloom's Taxonomy, emphasizing both usability and comprehension.

The project received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and all student participation was voluntary.

What Students Found

Students consistently reported that AI tools improved efficiency and enhanced understanding of topic relationships. Many appreciated being able to visualize how studies connect and evolve. One student wrote, "Litmaps helped me see which authors were central to my topic, which saved me time in identifying key sources."

Students valued the time-saving aspect. Many were full-time professionals balancing work and school, so tools that reduced the hours spent on preliminary searches were welcome. Several noted that AI helped them find relevant sources they might not have discovered through keyword searching alone.

However, the enthusiasm came with important lessons.

Verification remained critical**:** AI-generated summaries sometimes lacked nuance or context, prompting students to check the full article for accuracy. One student said, "Elicit's summaries were useful, but I learned not to trust them completely." Another "One of the drawbacks encountered was the need for human validation of AI summaries to ensure accuracy and relevance of context to the research topic".

Integration challenges surfaced**:** Some students had difficulty connecting AI tools to citation manager, Zotero. One student said, "The Litmaps tool helped me visualize a citation map to find citation relationships and a timeline with author names, but I couldn't sync it with my Zotero".

Information overload was a common complaint**:** Research Rabbit's visual networks, while powerful, produced dense webs of citations that required librarian guidance to interpret effectively.

Reflections and Takeaways

The project revealed that AI can meaningfully support the research process when paired with strong information literacy instruction. However, it also reinforced that human oversight remains essential**.**

For librarians interested in similar integrations, several lessons emerged:

- Frame AI as a support tool, not a shortcut**:** Emphasize that AI can guide discovery but cannot replace critical evaluation. Students need to interpret results, not just collect them.
- Teach active verification**:** Ask students to compare AI-generated summaries with the original abstracts and conclusions. This helps them see discrepancies and strengthens their analytical reading skills.

- Simplify tool introduction**:** Introducing one AI tool per session reduced cognitive load and helped students focus on comparing AI and conventional database methods.
- Collaborate early with faculty**:** Faculty interest in AI integration is high, but many need support. Co-developing assignments ensures that learning goals align with responsible use.

Broader Implications for Business Librarianship

Rather than signaling a complete shift in our role, this project highlights how AI adds new layers to long-standing librarian responsibilities. We still teach students how to search effectively using indexed and controlled vocabulary systems, but we now also teach them how to evaluate the systems that generate AI-produced results. In this sense, AI information literacy builds on and expands the core skills librarians have always used in helping students think critically about information. As AI tools grow more sophisticated, students must understand their capabilities and biases.

In business research, especially, where decisions often rely on data-driven evidence, this awareness is essential. AI tools can accelerate discovery, but they also risk promoting surface-level engagement if used uncritically.

Through guided instruction, MBA students learned that AI tools save time but do not replace intellectual effort. One student summarized it best: “AI made it easier to start my research, but I still had to think about what the studies were saying and how they connected.”

That reflection captures the essence of why librarians are vital in this space. We help students move from collecting information to creating knowledge.

Conclusion

Integrating AI tools into IMB 538: Financial Research Methods showed that generative AI can be a valuable ally for business students when paired with thoughtful librarian support. The tools improved efficiency, visualization, and confidence, yet they also underscored the continued importance of critical thinking and verification.

As Bowen and Watson (2024) observe, AI can help humans clarify their thoughts, explore new ideas, and strengthen divergent thinking. The promise of this partnership lies in the reflective, back-and-forth process between human insight and machine assistance. For educators, that means our role is expanding. We are not only helping students become better thinkers, but also, as they put it, helping them become *even better thinkers*.

Generative AI may be reshaping how research begins, but librarians will always shape how it ends with informed analysis, intellectual curiosity, and a commitment to integrity in the pursuit of knowledge.

References

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