STINGER SPEECH TOURNAMENT

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Discussion

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Artifacts & Questions

The Government Has Made College an Overpriced Scam

August 16, 2023

It's August. Many young people head off to college.

This year, fortunately, <u>fewer will go</u>.

I say "fortunately" because college is now an overpriced scam.

Overpriced, because normal incentives to be frugal and make smart judgements about who should go to college were thrown out when the federal government took over granting student loans.

Why?

Because our government basically vomits money at everyone who applies.

If private lenders gave out the loans, they'd look at whether they were likely to be paid back. They'd ask questions like: "What will you study? You really think majoring in dance will lead to a job that will pay you enough to allow you to pay us back?"

Government rarely asks these questions. Bureaucrats throw money at students. Many don't benefit. Many shouldn't even be going to college. Today, nearly half of the students given loans don't graduate even after six years.

Many feel like failures.

College is good for people who want to be college professors or who major in fields like engineering and computer science that might lead to good jobs. But that's not most people. Government loans encourage *everyone* to go to college, even if they're not very interested in academics.

Government's handouts also invite colleges to keep raising tuition. Over the past 50 years, college cost rose at four times the rate of inflation. Four times!

Years ago, I <u>reported</u> how colleges were suddenly wasting money on luxuries like fancy gyms and even day spas. Last week, *The Wall Street Journal* <u>reported</u> that it's gotten worse: The University of Oklahoma bought a monastery in Italy for study abroad students! The University of Kentucky built a theater where students play video games.

"Why *not* raise tuition?" asks the typical college president. "Uncle Sam pays the bill!"

When I went to Princeton, tuition was $2,000. Now its $60,000.

Colleges have little incentive to cut costs or innovate. Princeton still "teaches" by having professors lecture. Super boring. I slept through many.

Although today, I guess I should thank Princeton because its tedious lectures inspired me to try to find better ways to present information. That made me successful on TV.

Today, student loan borrowers owe tens of thousands of dollars. Last year, President Joe Biden announced he would cancel up to $20,000 of that debt per person.

Indebted students loved that! A group named the Student Debt Crisis Center called that "a major win for many."

But it would be a major loss for many more! Canceling debt is unfair to the people who work hard and pay off their debts.

Fortunately, Biden's plan was struck down by the Supreme Court, which said only Congress has the right to cancel student debt. Congress didn't.

Now Biden's trying again. The administration announced they will forgive debt for anyone who's been making payments for more than 20 years. That's better, but still bad. Maybe courts will stop this handout, too.

College students take on loans and spend decades in debt because they believe they must get a degree to be hired. But that's no longer true. IBM, Accenture, Dell, Bank of America, Google, and other big companies, recognizing the uselessness of many undergraduate degrees, recently dropped college degree requirements. So have state governments in Maryland, Utah, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Alaska, North Carolina, New Jersey, and Virginia.

Good jobs in the trades, like welding and plumbing, don't require a college degree. Trade school programs often take less than two years and cost much less than college.

To have a good life or get a good job, you don't need fancy dining halls, video game auditoriums, or a college degree.

College has become a government-subsidized rip-off. It's good that fewer people go.

Ghost kitchens were supposed to revolutionize restaurants. They're crashing

Nathaniel Meyersohn   December 5, 2023

New York CNN —

Big investors, celebrity chefs and chains rushed to open ghost kitchens during the pandemic, and they were expected to make up more than 20% of the restaurant industry by 2025. But ghost kitchens are now crashing.

Last week, Kitchen United, which raised $175 million in funding and was backed by Kroger, announced it would sell or close all of its locations. The startup ran delivery-only restaurants from inside Kroger stores, malls, and even from inside chain restaurants, sharing cooking space.

Ghost kitchens are stripped-down commercial kitchens with no dine-in option. Sometimes called cloud kitchens, dark kitchens or virtual kitchens, ghost kitchens fulfill online orders from delivery apps like Grubhub and Uber Eats. Several dozen menus can come out of the same ghost kitchen, and customers often don't know they're not ordering from a restaurant with a real, physical location.

Ghost kitchens have been around for years, but they boomed during the pandemic. They were seen as a salvation for the restaurant industry during the height of the pandemic, and they expanded as dine-in restaurants closed and online ordering became the primary option for customers. More than 70,000 restaurants permanently closed due to the pandemic.

A delivery is received from the production kitchen. A ghost kitchen, by Reef Technology, operates in a small parking lot on A Street in South Boston on November 11, 2021. The chefs create meals for several restaurants.

Many restaurant owners and investors bet ghost kitchens were a cheaper way to start or grow their business than sit-down dining rooms. Ghost kitchens also offered big chains a way to test new menu concepts, items and brands at lower rents and with less labor.

"Coming out of the pandemic, a boatload of restaurants closed. There was a lot of vacant restaurant real estate, especially in cities. There was hope that this valuable real estate could be put to use," said John Gordon, a restaurant consultant. "Chains wanted to bring in new products in cost-effective fashion."

Wendy's released plans in 2021 to open 700 ghost kitchens with startup Reef Technology. CloudKitchens, a ghost kitchen startup started by Uber co-founder Travis Kalanick, bought more than 40 properties in two dozen cities for $130 million. Applebee's launched Cosmic Wings, which served Cheeto-flavored chicken wings.

Ghost kitchen flops

It turns out the ghost kitchen concept puzzled many customers, who could not find the restaurants on a map, drop by in person to see where their food was prepared, or report problems with their orders. Some customers felt "fooled" and "catfished" when they learned that they ordered from what they thought was a small restaurant that instead turned out to be a big chain using ghost kitchen techniques.

As people began returning to restaurants, the "mystery meal world of virtual restaurants wasn't as necessary," said Stephen Zagor, a restaurant industry consultant and adjunct professor at Columbia Business School. "We care a lot about what my restaurant is about, and how fresh and delicious the food is."

While people are happy to order off delivery apps, they want to eat from restaurants — not technology companies they don't recognize selling food, he said.

People have returned to eating at restaurants in person and ordering at drive-thru, and delivery growth has stalled from its pandemic heights. Additionally, many consumers are pulling back on meal delivery because of higher prices and delivery fees.

Transparency and quality issues have also been a major problem for ghost kitchens.

Consumers prefer ordering from brick-and-mortar restaurants, the National Restaurant Association found in a survey this year, with 70% of diners saying it's important for their food to come from a publicly accessible, physical location.

"There was no identity or marketing behind the ghost kitchens. Consequently, the sales were too low," John Gordon said.

The business side of running a ghost kitchen has also been challenging. Ghost kitchens rely on third-party delivery companies to deliver orders. Third-party providers charge fees, which can be as high as 30%.

Local health departments have struggled to inspect and regulate ghost kitchens, too.

And the online delivery market is saturated. Uber Eats this year cracked down on ghost kitchens, removing thousands of listings that were crowding the site.

So restaurants have shut down their ghost kitchens and funding for the concept has dried up.

Wendy's abandoned its ghost kitchen plans earlier this year, Applebee's folded up Cosmic Wings, and Kalanick's CloudKitchens laid off its staff this fall. Butler Hospitality, which operated ghost kitchens for the hotel industry, also shut down.

It's the most recent example of how businesses that boomed during the pandemic, like Zoom, Peloton and Instacart, have faltered as consumers return to old habits.

"It was a pandemic buzz," Gordon said.

AI-Generated Essays Are Nothing to Worry About

September 2022 was apparently the month artificial intelligence essay angst boiled over in academia, as various media outlets published opinion pieces lamenting the rise of AI writing systems that will ruin student writing and pave the way toward unprecedented levels of academic misconduct. Then, on Sept. 23, academic Twitter exploded into a bit of a panic on this topic. The firestorm was prompted by a post to the OpenAI subreddit where user Urdadgirl69 claimed to be getting straight A's with essays "written" using artificial intelligence. Professors on Reddit and Twitter alike expressed frustration and concern about how best to address the threat of AI essays. One of the most poignant and widely retweeted laments came from Redditor ahumanlikeyou, who wrote, "Grading something an AI wrote is an incredibly depressing waste of my life."

As all this online hand-wringing was playing out, my undergraduate Rhetoric and Algorithms students and I were conducting a little experiment in AI-generated student writing. After reviewing 22 AI essays I asked my students to create, I can tell you confidently that AI-generated essays are nothing to worry about. The technology just isn't there, and I doubt it will be anytime soon. For the aforementioned AI essay activity, I borrowed an assignment sheet from the University of Texas at Austin's first-year writing class. The assignment asks students to submit an 1,800- to 2,200-word proposal about a local issue. Students usually tackle on-campus issues, advancing ideas like "It shouldn't be so hard to get into computer science classes" or "Student fees should be lower" or "Campus housing should be more affordable." For the purposes of the Rhetoric and Algorithms class, I asked students to rely on the AI as much as possible. They were free to craft multiple prompts to generate AI outputs. They were even welcome to use those prompts in their essays. The students were also free to reorder paragraphs, edit out obvious repetitions and clean up the formatting. The primary requirement was that they needed to make sure the bulk of the essay was "written" by AI.

The students in this class were mostly juniors and seniors, and many were majors in rhetoric and writing. They did great work, putting in a lot of effort. But, in the end, the essays they turned in were not good. If I had believed these were genuine student essays, the very best would have earned somewhere around a C or C-minus. They minimally fulfilled the assignment requirements, but that's about it. What's more, many of the essays had obvious red flags for AI generation: outdated facts about the cost of tuition, quotes from prior university presidents presented as current presidents, fictional professors and named student organizations that don't exist. Few of the students in my class have experience with computer programming. As a result, they mostly gravitated toward freely accessible text generators such as EleutherAI's GPT-J-6B. Several students also opted to sign up for free

trials of AI writing services such as <u>Jasper AI</u>. However, regardless of the language model they used, the results were pretty consistently mediocre—and usually quite obvious in their fabrication.
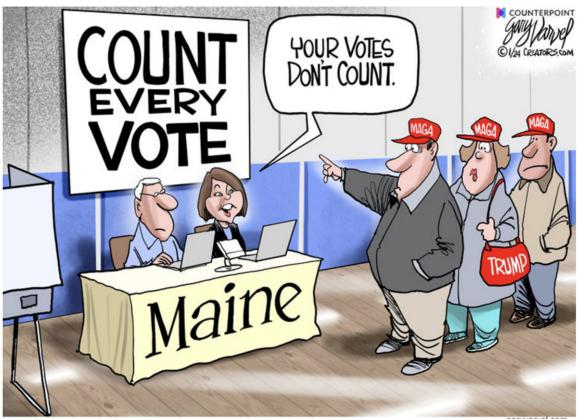
At the same time, I asked my students to write short reflections on their AI essays' quality and difficulty. Almost every student reported hating this assignment. They were quick to recognize that their AI-generated essays were substandard, and those used to earning top grades were loath to turn in their results. The students overwhelmingly reported that using AI required far more time than simply writing their essays the old-fashioned way would have. To get a little extra insight on the "writing" process, I also asked students to hand in all the collected outputs from the AI text generation "pre-writing." The students were regularly producing 5,000 to 10,000 words (sometimes as many as 25,000 words) of outputs in order to cobble together essays that barely met the 1,800-word floor.

There has been a fair amount written about the supposed <u>impressiveness</u> of AI-generated text. There are even several high-profile AI-written <u>articles</u>, <u>essays</u> or even <u>scientific papers</u> or screenplays that showcase this impressiveness. In many of these cases, the "authors" have access to higher-quality language models than most students are currently able to use. But, more importantly, my experience with this assignment tells me that it takes a good writer to produce good algorithmic writing. The published examples are generally the beneficiary of professional writers and editors crafting prompts and editing results into a polished form. In contrast, many of my students' AI-generated essays showed the common problems of student writing—uncertainty about the appropriate writing style, issues with organization and transitions, and inconsistent paragraphing. Producing a quality essay with AI requires having enough fluency with the target writing style to craft prompts that will lead the model to produce appropriate outputs. It also requires having solid organizational and revising skills. As a result, the best writers among my students produced the best AI essays, and the developing writers generated essays with many of the same issues that would have been in their genuine writing.

All in all, this exercise tells us we are not on the verge of receiving a flood of algorithmically generated student submissions. It's just too much work to cheat that way. The activity also tells me that the best defense against AI essays is the same as the best defense against essay repositories—a good assignment sheet. If your assignment is "For today's homework assignment, please describe the reasons for the U.S. Civil War" (a literal stock prompt from the GPT-J model mentioned above), you are way more likely to get AI or downloaded essay submissions than if you craft a detailed assignment sheet specific to your classroom context. The assignment I used for my Rhetoric and Algorithms students was a substantial challenge because it asked them to address local issues of concern. There are just not enough relevant examples in the data the AI text generators are drawing from to generate plausible essays on this topic whole cloth.

Beyond worries about academic misconduct, this activity also showed me that using AI text generation can be a part of good writing pedagogy. Two of the most important and difficult things to teach about writing are genre awareness and best practices for revision. Developing writers don't have the experience necessary to intuit the subtle differences between different essay or assignment types. This is why student essays often feel either over- or underwritten. Students are often still figuring out how to find the sweet spot and how to adjust their style for different writing activities. What's more, the usual delay between submission and feedback doesn't do a lot to help develop this intuition. Prompt crafting for AI text generators, however, provides mostly immediate feedback. Through experimenting with sentences that do and do not produce appropriate AI outputs, students can develop a sense of how to write differently for different genres and contexts. Lastly and regrettably, most of my students complete their writing assignments in a single session just before the deadline. It is hard to get them to practice revision. AI-generated text provides an interesting possibility for a sort of pedagogical training exercise. Students could be asked to quickly generate a few thousand words and then to craft those words into useable prose. This isn't "writing" in the same way that line drills aren't basketball. But that doesn't mean there isn't a useful pedagogical role here.

Ultimately, higher education is going to have to come to grips with AI text generation. At present, most of the efforts to engage these concerns seem to gravitate either toward AI evangelism or algorithmic despair. I suppose this parallels AI discourse more broadly. Nevertheless, neither evangelism nor despair strikes me as the ideal response. To those who despair, I think it's very unlikely that we are (or will soon be) drowning in AI-generated essays. With current technology, it's just too much harder and more time-consuming than actually writing an essay. At the same time, I am deeply skeptical that even the best models will ever really allow students to produce writing that far exceeds their current ability. Effective prompt generation and revision are dependent on high-level writing skills. Even as artificial intelligence gets better, I question the extent to which novice writers will be able to direct text generators skillfully enough to produce impressive results. For the same reasons, I also question the enthusiasm of AI evangelists. It has been just over five years since Google Brain computer scientist Geoffrey Hinton declared, "We should stop training radiologists now. It's just completely obvious that within five years, deep learning is going to do better than radiologists." Well, we're still training radiologists, and there's no indication that deep learning is going to replace human doctors anytime soon. In much the same way, I strongly suspect full-on robot writing will always and forever be "just around the corner."