

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

"Ask yourself one question: 'Is it right?' Then do what you believe is best for your town, your state and your country."
— James M. Cox, founder, Cox Enterprises

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OPINION

AI won't kill a college degree. It will change it.

The value of an education will be measured not by student output but the reasoning behind it.

Editor's note: As students in metro Atlanta return to school this week, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution is publishing several guest opinion columns about how artificial intelligence is reshaping education. Here is the latest of these essays.

By Colin Gabler
For The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

A shift to artificial intelligence already is changing what counts as evidence of real learning in higher education and how we justify the valuable time and resources students, parents, local communities and potential employers invest in the next generation of citizens.

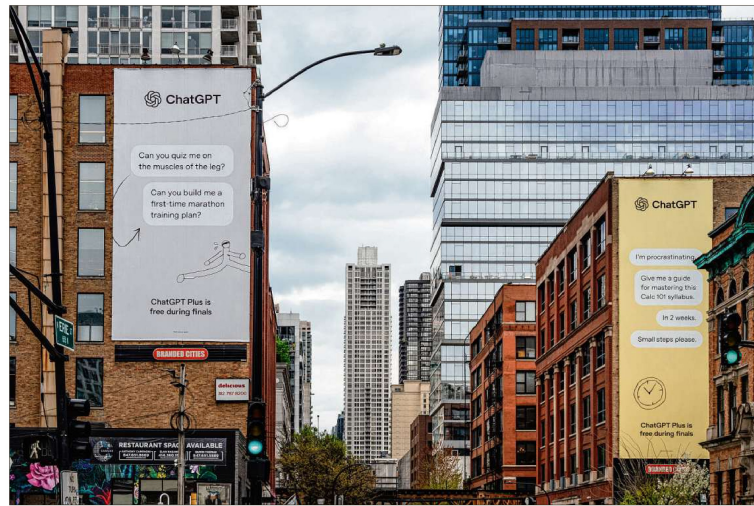


I saw this firsthand in my MBA classroom, where students recently presented market-entry strategies to a live client. The night before, I reviewed their slides. Everything looked strong: clean visuals, organized analyses, clear recommendations.

I had given them an analytical tool to help structure their recommendations, and when the first team presented, they confidently showed the tool and its output. But when pressed to explain the rationale behind their recommendations, they stalled. They could not defend their judgments. The rest of the teams performed similarly.

Defensible judgment is the difference between producing the answer and knowing how and why you got there. It forces us to make sense of all the output that AI is so good at producing, and "making sense" is a profoundly human exercise.

The issue was not that the students lacked information — thanks to the tool, they had plenty. It was that they could not present the output generated but struggled to articulate the reasoning behind it. The tool was doing all the talking.



Billboards for ChatGPT's ad campaign aimed at college students hang on buildings in Chicago's River North neighborhood. AI can be a useful tool — as long as students understand the thinking behind what they are producing and can defend their reasoning. NEW YORK TIMES 2025

That's my concern about AI and higher education. It allows students to bypass one of the central developmental processes of learning: discovering how to argue, persuade, defend, revise and ultimately convince others of one's well-formed position.

What's college for, really?

Ask five people what college is for and you will get five disparate answers. Students may say employment, parents may say workforce preparation. Faculty may say intellectual development, while communities desire a citizen capable of participating in civil society. None of these answers is wrong, which is why the debate over whether college is "worth it" has become so muddled. College always has been asked to serve multiple purposes at once.

AI did not create that confusion — it intensified it. For decades, the value of college has been packaged as content

delivery, skill accumulation, labor-market insurance and social signaling. AI destabilizes each part of that bundle. Content is easier to access, skills are faster to acquire and even white collar jobs once considered "safe from automation" are being threatened. The social signal of a college degree still matters, but the public confidence in that signal is less automatic than it was.

What remains is the part of college we often have undersold because it is hardest to measure: the developmental process itself.

A developmental environment is not simply a place where students acquire information. It is a place where they repeatedly practice the behaviors of judgment: making claims, defending them, revising them, encountering disagreement, weighing trade-offs and taking responsibility for the consequences of their reasoning.

These capacities do not emerge from exposure to

content alone. They emerge through developmental friction.

The problem, then, is not automation; it is the erosion of the formative process through which students learn to exercise judgment. In different ways, that capacity sits at the center of what each stakeholder ultimately hopes higher education provides.

College is worth its cost in the age of AI only if it develops graduates who can interpret, challenge and take responsibility for machine-shaped decisions rather than merely execute them. Not just students who can produce sophisticated work but people who can explain their reasoning, defend their assumptions, revise their thinking under scrutiny and hold their ground when it matters.

What cannot be outsourced

What matters now is not the end product; it's the messy parts in the middle: the scribbles, scratch pads, crossed-out

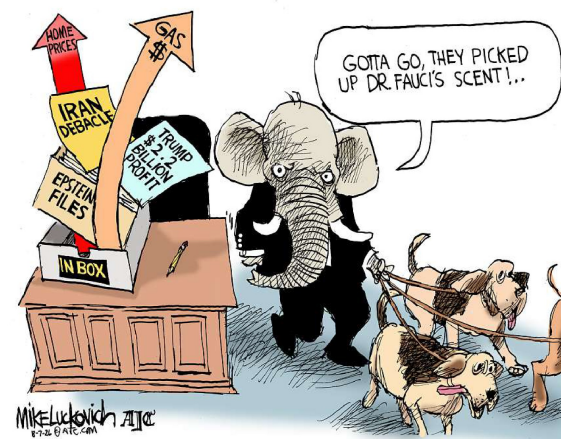
ideas, eraser marks.

These moments of uncertainty reveal whether a student actually understands what they are doing — and why they are doing it.

If college continues to measure success primarily by what students can produce, it will struggle to justify its value in a world where production is cheap. But if higher education becomes where students learn to explain their reasoning, defend their assumptions, revise under scrutiny and take responsibility for what they conclude, it may become more essential than ever.

Colin Gabler is the Hurston Professor of Marketing and a Fulbright Scholar at Auburn University. His writing on social justice and higher education has appeared in The Washington Post, The New Yorker, A.L.C. University Business and The Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch.

Mike Luckovich



Letters to the editor

Letters should be no longer than 200 words and include a daytime phone number for verification. Letters will be edited for fact, length, clarity, style and tone and may be published in print and digital formats. Emailed submissions are strongly preferred, with letters in the body of the email. Please do not send attachments. The volume of submissions prevents us from acknowledging the receipt of letters. Please email letters to letters@ajc.com.

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The AJC recognizes the diversity and differences of opinion among our readership, and we strive to accommodate this by regularly offering insights that point toward solutions for problems facing us today. Part of this work is publishing conservative and liberal opinion essays. We also recognize the variety of voices within parties, and we strive to represent those, too. We welcome submissions of about 750 words. Opinion essays will be edited for fact, length, clarity, style and tone. Send Opinion essay submissions to opinion@ajc.com.

READERS WRITE

Global deal can solve the Atlanta-Fulton standoff

Atlanta and Fulton County do not need another public fight over Tax Allocation Districts, Atlanta City Detention Center and the jail. They need a global deal.

Fulton voted 4-1 not to participate in Atlanta's proposed Neighborhood Reinvestment Initiative TAD extensions. I first moved to hold the item for more information from county and city staff and Invest Atlanta, then cast the sole "no" vote. Because the adopted legislation requires five affirmative votes for future participation, any new proposal must be materially different.

A path forward should include three linked pieces. First, Atlanta should transfer the detention center to Fulton at no acquisition cost while preserving diversion and agreed city uses. Fulton expects about \$75 million in renovations and may otherwise face roughly \$200 million in temporary-facility and alternate-housing costs. Durable county control and the sheriff's approval of operational terms are essential.

Second, Atlanta's request for up to \$200 million for the Atrium Health-Morehouse School of Medicine hospital must be coordinated with Fulton's Union City emergency room and Grady South Fulton hospital commitments. We need complementary healthcare plans, not competing ones.

Third, the TAD formula must be fair. The county base should reset to the value that would return at expiration. Fulton should receive the first growth layer, and the city and Invest Atlanta can receive the next; additional growth can be negotiated.

A one- or two-day mediation led by a mutually acceptable senior figure could produce a term sheet. This is not about personalities. It is about a defensible agreement for public safety, healthcare and neighborhood investment — not an approved county proposal.

COMMISSIONER MARVIN ARRINGTON JR., ATLANTA
FULTON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS, DISTRICT 5

Right to vote is in critical condition

My wife and I completed our online applications for voting by absentee ballot. And, once again, our applications were denied. Previously, the election website indicated that our addresses were incorrect, despite our having lived at the same address for over 20 years. As such, I hand-delivered our applications with additional and duplicate documentation.

This year, again in both our cases, the website denied our applications, stating that our driver's license numbers were incorrect and therefore invalid. These are the same licenses we have had since 2019. The Gwinnett election office told us that we should complete a printed mail-in voter's application and include copies of our licenses if we wanted to receive our ballots.

Curious as to what future roadblocks are in the works, if voting has not been declared unconstitutional.
J.M. SAULSON, SNELLVILLE