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Rionxee - December 20, 2025, 10:23 pm

I have not been active in quite some time... life has been difficult. My goal is to deposit my experience thus far.

I had the opportunity to complete my undergraduate education prior to the public release and widespread accessibility of ChatGPT and comparable large language models. During that period, peer review sessions were marked by a relative parity in both writing proficiency and conceptual engagement. Most students wrote at a comparable undergraduate level, shared a similar grasp of the material, and exhibited predictable weaknesses such as structural gaps in argumentation, occasional grammatical errors, and limited theoretical depth. These shortcomings were neither unexpected nor disqualifying. Undergraduate writing was widely understood to be provisional by nature: imperfect, exploratory, and constrained by developing subject mastery. Instructors evaluated student work with this context in mind, prioritizing evidence of foundational comprehension, accurate contextualization of sources, engagement with relevant scholarship, and the ability to produce substantive work independently.

At the time, students were largely reliant on physical library holdings and vetted academic databases such as JSTOR. The constraints of access and effort functioned as a kind of intellectual gatekeeping mechanism: research and writing were necessarily slower, more deliberate, and more cognitively demanding. While undergraduate work lacked sophistication, it nonetheless reflected the student's own reasoning process and limits of understanding.

The rapid rise and normalization of generative AI, however, has profoundly altered and, I would argue, distorted.....the undergraduate academic landscape. There is an emerging consensus among many instructors that students now arrive at the university having used AI tools extensively throughout high school and that this reliance only intensifies in college. Colleagues across institutions increasingly report severe deficits in reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, and independent thought at the freshman level. In some introductory mathematics courses, instructors encounter students unable to perform basic operations such as fraction multiplication which were skills that were once assumed prerequisites.

This signals a deeper and more consequential problem. While students may be able to satisfy course requirements through the strategic use of AI tools, they are doing so without internalizing knowledge or developing transferable competencies. The result is a growing disconnect between credential attainment and actual intellectual capability. We are, in effect, producing graduates who appear academically proficient on paper yet are fundamentally unprepared for real-world problem solving, professional demands, or sustained critical reasoning. If left unaddressed, this competency gap will generate cascading and potentially catastrophic consequences across professional, civic, and institutional domains.

In response to these concerns, I elected this semester to eliminate a traditional written exam in one course and replace it with an oral examination, using the class as a pilot study. Students were scheduled for individual meetings in my office and examined orally on core course concepts. The questions mirrored the short-essay prompts, allowing for a direct comparison between written output

and demonstrated understanding.

The results were deeply concerning. Students who produced highly polished, detailed, and sophisticated papers often struggled to articulate even basic concepts during the oral examination. Conversely, students whose written work was merely competent and lacking academic style or advanced nuance consistently demonstrated stronger comprehension and performed better in real-time discussion. The divergence was stark.

While AI detectors have proven almost entirely ineffective, the discrepancy between written sophistication and oral comprehension is unmistakable. It has become increasingly obvious when a student has relied heavily on generative tools rather than their own cognitive processes.

My central concern is this: we are systematically advancing students through higher education while allowing AI to substitute for learning itself. In doing so, we risk hollowing out the very purpose of undergraduate education, which is producing graduates who possess credentials but lack knowledge, fluency, and intellectual independence. Without structural intervention, we are not merely adapting to a new technological environment; we are actively eroding the foundations of academic competence.