ENROLLMENT MANAGER

How Should College Admissions Approach AI?

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As a famous *New Yorker* cartoon declared, on the internet, nobody knows you're a dog. Today we could say the same thing about chatbots, which are quickly becoming ubiquitous in our digital and professional lives. But what happens when chatbots designed to replicate human expression get involved in the highly personal college application process?

Recent experiments from *The New York Times* and *Today* found that AI chatbots aren't quite ready yet to craft a world-class college admissions essay, but the key word here is "yet." Large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, Bard, and other popular machine learning algorithms are constantly getting better at following users' prompts to produce coherent communications that feel authentically human. Even when they generate a poor result, the feedback they receive about why a particular result is inferior or inaccurate helps the bots improve — much like actual students.

Obviously, there are many ethical concerns about students fabricating entire essays with chatbots. For one, the essay may not actually match a student's expertise, opinions, or lived experience, which is the equivalent of submitting fiction in place of an autobiography. For another, widespread use of chatbots amounts to plagiarism, since these programs generate their output based on existing texts written by others.

As a result, many organizations are considering these implications and trying to determine what rules, if any, should be put in place to ensure the authenticity of the essay writing process. Some are employing technology to detect AI-aided applications, although their accuracy is largely debatable. Even students themselves are split on the issue while also admitting they wouldn't necessarily trust college admissions offices which used AI to help make admissions decisions. Overall, trust in machine learning programs is wavering, but that isn't stopping them from being widely adopted.

Virginia Wesleyan University employs a seven-part enrollment strategy that diversifies the types of students served while also ensuring that no single aspect of a potential student's application, including their essay, dominates the selection process. By working with applicants across seven different stages of their educational experience — including traditional undergraduate and graduate students, transfers, evening/ weekend/adult, dual enrollment, continuing workforce/development, and online learners—VWU cultivates a dynamic and varied student body whose experiences may be enhanced by

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

The *Enrollment Cliff* is real.

More than 50 colleges and universities have closed since 2020 and there are more to come. Bold action and new initiatives will be necessary for institutions to mitigate this alarming trend.

HOW SHOULD COLLEGE ADMISSIONS APPROACH AI CONTINUED:

collaboration with AI and LLMs, but whose individual and personal educational needs are always our primary focus.

That said, we also believe there's no putting the genie back in the bottle regarding AI. These new and disruptive technologies are evolving quickly, and they're likely here to stay. But rather than banning AI-assisted work, penalizing its usage, or incentivizing alternatives, perhaps the key is to encourage faculty and students alike on how to best use it ethically and effectively.

For example, when it comes to evaluating applications and essays, instead of trying to determine whether the applicants used AI, it may be more beneficial to focus on the quality and consistency of the work itself. Just like your camera's auto-focus doesn't automatically make you a professional photographer, using ChatGPT doesn't automatically make someone a compelling writer. Conversely, being able to revise and polish an AI-assisted draft into a high-quality finished piece is a valuable skill that employers in many sectors will be seeking in the coming years.

Likewise, if you use AI in your own admissions processes, you may want to let people know this up-front, so they have a clear picture of how they'll be evaluated. Such transparency will allow your stakeholders to find their own comfort level regarding AI-aided processes and outcomes. It can also help them determine if they'd prefer to seek an alternative approach that's less reliant on the technology.

As for whether you *should* be using AI in your processes, it's less a question of *if* or *when*, and more a matter of *how* and *why*. Which applications of AI and other machine learning technologies will help streamline your work-flow, improve your accuracy and clarity, enhance your outcomes, and amplify your impact? Even if you're reluctant to fully buy in when it comes to AI, you should still stay apprised of the latest evolutions in the tech-nology so you can understand the opportunities and the challenges it creates.

Of course, it's also important not to get overly worried. Remember, there have been game-changing "tricks of the trade" for many years now, from calculators and Cliffs Notes to Wikipedia and the Internet in general. Ultimately, each of these momentarily disruptive technologies were just new tools to be applied in the evolution of learning. Yet even the best tools can still produce shoddy work if they're poorly applied, while talented and diligent users can use those same tools to create outstanding results. The problem isn't the tool, itself, it's managing the impact of what those tools make possible.

When it comes to the use of AI in college admissions, we're just at the tip of the iceberg and the potential seems endless. Colleges and universities must nimbly adapt to the rapid changes being created by AI and machine learning technologies. At the same time, we must also remain true to the mission and purpose of higher education, which is to help students develop critical thinking skills while also preparing them to become valued contributors in their chosen fields.

By embracing the upside of AI while also remaining vigilant toward its potential for misuse, you can responsibly incorporate it into your process while still maintaining the human-centered approach that is so fundamental to teaching, learning, and communicating —and that's one timeless value that will never change.

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FINANCIAL AID ACTION PLAN

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At the time of writing, the new FAFSA is still not available for students and families, and it is unclear when colleges and universities will have access to the results. This uncertainty requires targeted actions by institutions to mitigate the negative impact of the financial aid processing delay this cycle.

- Add an update on the home page of the website **now** indicating the new FAFSA availability is anticipated to be on December 31, 2023.

- Indicate on the home page that students will be sent an email and a postcard reminder to apply for financial aid as soon as FAFSA is available online.

- Be prepared to add a notice that the new FAFSA is available on the home page of the website as soon as it is available. Encourage all admission applicants and currently enrolled students to apply for financial aid immediately.

- Send a letter from the Director of Financial Aid to the home address of all currently enrolled students and applicants for admission with an update on the anticipated date of FAFSA availability. Note that an email reminder and a postcard will be sent to students to notify them when the online FAFSA is up. Indicate that the institution will be prepared to start packaging students soon after the FAFSA is available and that it is important for students to complete the FAFSA as soon as it is available.

- Work with the student newspaper to publish an article with an interview with the Director of Financial Aid on the delay and another article soon after the FAFSA is available. If it is possible to post advertisements in the student newspaper throughout the cycle, do so.

- Send an email and a postcard to all currently enrolled students at the end of December the day the new electronic FAFSA is available encouraging all students to apply for financial aid. Include in the email and post card that packaging students will commence soon after.

- Send a second reminder postcard to all admission applicants and currently enrolled students in the middle of January with the same message.

- It will be more important than ever to send reminders to all students who have not applied for financial aid at least once every three weeks for the rest of the cycle.

- Plan to post updates and reminders on campus (on electronic boards and posters) to coincide with the availability of the new electronic FAFSA.

- Consider one day in January for each faculty member to announce the availability of the new FAFSA at the beginning of class for all courses.

- Ensure that all academic advisors are aware of the changes this year.

- Ensure that all coaches are aware of the delays this year and specifically provide updates when the FAFSA becomes available and when you begin packaging.

- Consider creating a short video that can be texted to all admission applicants and currently enrolled students now and another when the FAFSA is available.

- If you have an internal text platform to communicate with currently enrolled students, use it to discuss the delay as soon as possible and again when the new FAFSA is available.

- If you have any assemblies or public meetings with students in January, be sure to update students during the event.

Taking proactive measures to address the financial aid processing delays this year is imperative. Active and systematic communication on this issue will be helpful throughout the year.

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THE DYSART GROUP is a higher education consulting firm specializing in enrollment management. We have provided consultation services to more than 200 colleges and universities throughout the United States with extraordinary results.

We have worked collaboratively with colleges and universities to significantly grow enrollment. Our institution-specific recommendations have helped increase the number of admission applications as much as three-fold. Improved communication strategies and new tracking metrics have resulted in higher folder completion rates and increased the number of students accepted for admission. New student enrollments have grown by as much as 70% in a single cycle while discount rates have been controlled. Proven strategies have increased retention rates by as much as 7% in one year.

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