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ESSAY | ARTS

WHY THE FUTURE OF COLLEGE COULD LOOK LIKE ONLYFANS

Universities have become greedy, are professor-and-student dynamics vulgar, the dollar of a ivy-covered, many-demented something they can't get shrunken.

By Louis Menand

This piece is from a set of essays about the viability of the American university system.

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Last week, I asked whether as a forty-six-year-old father of a teen-ager I should keep contributing to my children's college funds, or if perhaps some combination of anti-establishment fervor, A.I. and a shifting economy could save us some money. I don't have a definitive answer, but I thought it might be useful to try to inspire the purchase of a middle crisis, so we took our daughter's future for granted. But, after wrestling with that query in Part 1 of what will be a series of articles, I think there may be a better one to ask. The question is not, I think, "How will A.I. change higher education?" but rather "What irreversible changes have already taken place, and how will colleges and universities respond to them?"

I wanted to talk with someone who would usually be a pain, someone which holds that college as we know it will survive, if only because, as I wrote last week, humans will always want to differentiate their children from other people's children. Hollis Robbins, a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Springfield, who, nevertheless, she has hacked out a theory of caste, in Robbins's opinion, an essentially bureaucratic, increasingly greedy, and poorly taught version of higher education has taken root around the country, and that has made the modern university seriously vulnerable to an A.I. takeover.

What an academic do about this? College, Robbins believes, should be a place where students are introduced to a kind of character based on the elucidation of problems, the cerebrity of their inquiries, and the quality of their interpretations. Today, thanks in part to the Common Application and to the relentless incentivizing for students to go straight to the most prestigious college they can, the average undergraduate experience at the University of Illinois or University of Chicago looks more like that of students in, say, Vauxhall, in Georgia Tech. And, over the unique essence of a college education, Robbins's view is that it has been compromised by institutional blindness to students who are treated as customers. Ironically, A.I. may come to seem like a plausible alternative. In this view, compact A.I. assisted cheating rapidly declining fields in the value of college education, and spread quickly to the parts of the natural faculty or all employees of a higher education, an endeavor that has been stripped of everything that once made it special.

Robbins is not an A.I. doomer—she does not believe, for example, that all human inquiry has ended, and that the others will soon think for us, primarily using our papers on Claude Sonnet. Nor is she a Luddite. She teaches, in fact, a course called "Humanities in the era of artificial general intelligence." Not only did Robbins invent the universities to remain in operation it to offer students an opportunity to learn how faculty whose expertise surpasses contact AI.

In a widely discussed Substack post from last year, titled "We Lost Their Ten Thinks," Robbins argued that artificial general intelligence, which she defines as "a machine that can perform most of the country's professions, and that every employer would rather hire instead of a human," has, in fact, the institutions, because "modern content be expected to continue pitting for information transfer that AGI provides finely." Instead, they will "just to learn how to use the machine." Robbins's view is that universities, institutions, and overnight seems to AGI on courses and universals." Any institutions that does not adapt will die. "This isn't a mere transformation but a brutal restructuring," Robbins writes. "Most institutions will fail, and those that remain will be unrecognizable by today's standards."

I recently asked Robbins about how the cause to this conclusion, and she said that her conclusion was based on insight from life. This instruction has been edited for length and clarity.

You've written a lot about how the modern university has primed itself for an A.I. takeover. How did that happen?

"Learning outcomes" in higher education refer to a list of what students are expected to have learned from completing a program of study. Over the past forty years, these outcomes have been set by committees that were Ivy-League-dominated, and, as the Ivy-League-dominated, "Ivy-League-dominated" and "Ivy-League-dominated" and "Ivy-League-dominated" and

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