Michael B. Horn's Written Testimony

Committee On Education and Workforce

Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

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As AI has exploded all around us, the analog to the adoption of electricity has become well known.

Early factories replaced steam engines with electric motors but saw little productivity gains because they kept the same organizational designs and processes. Only later, when factories redesigned themselves around electricity, did productivity surge.

So it is now with AI in higher education.

In my testimony, I will discuss how the majority of faculty and students at traditional colleges are using AI—yet most of these colleges are not seeing improvements because they, like the steam-powered factories over a century ago, aren't redesigning their underlying processes and priorities. Second, I will discuss how there are big opportunities for AI to improve the value of higher education in a range of ways. Doing so, however, requires a rethink of the fundamental processes and priorities at the heart of traditional colleges and universities, just as occurred with electricity in factories. Third, one of the rethinks that must occur is in the actual curriculum and work in many majors, so that colleges and universities can keep pace with the rapidly changing nature of work itself in a world with companies and industries adopting AI. And finally, I will talk about the opportunity for new colleges and universities to bolster the value of higher education in this era by not being beholden to the traditional processes and priorities as they build for an AI-native world.

First, just as the steam-powered factories adopted electricity, college students and faculty *are* using AI. According to the College Board, roughly three-quarters of faculty say their students use GenAI to write essays and papers. Roughly the same percentage of faculty use GenAI themselves in the course of their work.[1]

[1] Emily Angehr, Michael Bloem, Jessica Howell, and Alexandria Walton Radford, "College Faculty Perceptions of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education," College Board Research, February 2026, https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/ai-research-brief-3-vf.pdf.

Yet in the sector writ large, despite some notable exceptions, AI has been more threat than benefit. Few learning leaps. Few dramatic improvements in student success. Few efficiency gains. As my cohost of my Future U. podcast, Jeff Selingo, concluded in his recent research report on the topic, "most campuses have landed somewhere between a wait-and-see approach and a patchwork of siloed experiments." Students are stuck in the middle of a range of different expectations and standards from faculty, departments and institutions.[2]

This is predictable. In every sector, when an organization treats the adoption of technology as a problem of technology, progress is slow. That's because the problem is actually one of the underlying operating model—its resources, processes, and priorities. This wasn't just true with electricity. It has been true in countless other efforts that the late Harvard faculty member Clayton Christensen studied in his research on innovation—from transistors replacing vacuum tubes to the rise of computers and then the Internet.

Because the teaching and research at most higher education institutions are driven by faculty and departments, few institutions have the managerial and leadership authority to rethink and redesign their resources, processes, and priorities. At most schools, the faculty are expert in methods of research in their discipline, but few are experts in the science of learning. It's not been part of their training nor part of the process for gaining tenure and prestige. This is not their fault of course. It's the default of the system. Most colleges as a result, however, have therefore been heavy on guidance while leaving the fundamental pillars and processes of college untouched. What one might describe as more deer in headlights than opportunistic redesign.

As a result, AI is accelerating the processes and priorities currently in action on college campuses—the good and the bad. In the case of the latter, it's exacerbating such things as the already troubling trends in the amount of work that college students do,[3] and faculty overwhelmingly report concerns around student dependency on AI and plagiarism.[4]

But there are big opportunities for redesign that would use AI to dramatically boost the value of higher education.

For example, despite the concerns around cheating and academic decline, there are opportunities to use AI to increase academic rigor and reinvent assessment. As businesses

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[2] Jeff Selingo, "Designing the AI University: From Fragmentation to Foundation," May 2026, https://jeffselingo.com/resources/designing-the-ai-university.
[3] Frederick M. Hess and Greg Fournier, "What Do College Students Do All Day? The Answer Isn't Studying," Manhattan Institute, May 1st, 2025, https://manhattan.institute/article/what-do-college-students-do-all-day-the-answer-isnt-studying.
[4] Angehr et al, "College Faculty Perceptions of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education."

increasingly expect employees to accomplish more, not less, with the aid of AI, our expectation of student work should similarly increase. If today's assessments are such that AI alone could pass them, perhaps the existing assessments themselves are wanting and in need of a change. Imagine all students engaging in live oral defenses before faculty. Or making presentations and demonstrations based on the work and learning they've done before in-field professionals. Or think of the potential to leverage AI itself to assess learning as it occurs and deliver rigorous feedback. This notion—at one point far-fetched—is becoming a more tenable proposition. Using AI in this way—as an objective, third-party arbiter with a consistent standard, can also potentially help address the rampant rise of grade inflation by taking learning out of the domain of the faculty themselves so they can make their focus on supporting students, not judging them. These sorts of steps would leverage the reinvention of assessment to also raise the rigor. They wouldn't do so by banning AI, but by ensuring that if AI is used, the students themselves are still doing the hard work of learning the material and being able to apply and use that material. This moves beyond a fear-based view of AI to one of hope and opportunity.

There are also opportunities to use AI to boost student success by connecting data around student academic performance, finances and well-being to offer more meaningful supports. And there are opportunities to use AI to streamline various processes and cut administrative overhead costs, which have contributed mightily to higher education's soaring expenditures over the past several decades.[5] Indeed, this may be the place where AI is poised to have the most immediate impact for existing colleges. Startup companies like Protagonist, where I'm an advisor, are working closely with a select few institutions around these value propositions today.

To be clear, none of what I just listed is easy. Nor is it really about AI. It's about higher education institutions changing their underlying operating models and focusing on redesigning its resources, processes, and priorities.

To that end, institutions also increasingly have an imperative of integrating real-world work into the learning that they offer.

As companies expect entry-level employees to come with relevant real-world experience, education must provide the opportunity for students to gain those experiences. This has an

[5] See Clayton M. Christensen, Michael B. Horn, Louis Caldera, and Louis Soares, "Disrupting College: How Disruptive Innovation Can Deliver Quality and Affordability to Postsecondary Education," Center for American Progress, February 2011, https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/02/pdf/disrupting_college.pdf, pp. 35–39. And see, for example, Melissa Korn, Andrea Fuller, and Jennifer S. Forsyth, "Colleges Spend Like There's No Tomorrow. 'These Places Are Just Devouring Money.'" Wall Street Journal, August 10, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/state-university-tuition-increase-spending-41a58100.

added benefit. As AI rapidly changes the nature of work and the half-life of skills shrink, the best way to keep curriculum—what universities teach—up to date is not by trying to keep pace with textbooks. It's to have students do real work in real-world settings and use AI in the course of the work itself. Employers aren't asking whether employees should use AI; they are expecting it. The opportunity here for higher education is to teach students to use AI with the proper underlying knowledge, skills, and dispositions whether through embedded projects and simulations in courses, externships, paid internships, coops, or apprenticeships. All the better when these experiences both pay, count for credit, and connect students to working professionals to help students build social capital.

Many universities are stepping up to meet this moment—from Northeastern University with its co-ops to Minerva University, where I'm a trustee, with its combination of online seminars and in-person, in-country projects, to Reach University with its apprenticeship degrees.

Finally, as we think about the future, given that it is hard to redesign existing institutions, we need to take advantage of the fact that many educators are designing new AI-native institutions that rethink how to deliver a university education from first principles with the goal of improving higher education's value proposition. This is difficult, uncertain work.

Some existing institutions are leading this work. Western Governors University and UMass Global are two notable examples with models independent of their existing ones that promise to dramatically reduce the cost of education by an order of magnitude. Other important efforts are from startup universities, such as those at Outsmart and Newstate University. We need more such experiments with the goal of dramatically bolstering student outcomes. That's because many of these attempts will not succeed. But with a focus on student outcomes from the start, we can make sure that the new universities that do create dramatically more value for students can get their start in the first place and then grow.

Enabling these innovations will require accreditation reform to lower the barriers to entry. To be clear, this shouldn't be an invitation to just print diplomas; it should be an invitation to strengthen and improve the measures this Congress has put in place in the past year to focus relentlessly on student outcomes. By my definition, innovation is only something when it results in true progress and value. Otherwise, it's simply throwing things at a wall and hoping it sticks. The current efforts at reforming accreditation are critical to bringing in new entrants that can rethink the fundamental resources, processes, and priorities of higher education in this world of AI.

With our focus on the success of students, the AI that is leading many to question the value of college right now can instead be an enabler of redesign that contributes to higher education's efficacy and value.

Thank you for time and focus on improving higher education for the benefit of every American.