

# Don't believe ChatGPT has revolutionary potential for college students? Here's the proof. | Opinion

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With this new literacy technology, which comes in the form of an artificial intelligence processor, first-generation students who have to navigate the college system on their own now have the ability to advocate for themselves.

[Star-Ledger Guest Columnist](#)

**By Audrey Fisch**

Here's an example of a typical email I receive from students:

Hello Professor Fisher [sic], I wanted to see if it was possible to make up any assignments possible.

Because of [ChatGPT](#), this student's ability to advocate for herself is about to change radically.

Some educational institutions have responded with panic to this new technology, trying to ban it or bemoaning the looming death of good writing and thinking. But as someone who works with first-generation, low-income students, I would argue that ChatGPT has transformative potential.

Think about the college admissions world today. The wealthy pay vast sums to counselors and coaches to edit — even author — complex, time-consuming college application essays. However, the students I work with navigate those college

applications on their own, without any assistance from parents. Mexican immigrants without a high school education and with limited English skills, for example, are unlikely to offer much pragmatic support, although they certainly offer encouragement and inspiration for their children.

Suddenly, that young, ambitious high school student has a free, virtual coach who can suggest topics, provide a model Common App essay, or revise a draft.

Here is a paragraph from an essay ChatGPT served up. It's not brilliant, but it is a huge start for a student who does not know where to begin:

*In conclusion, my background as a first-generation immigrant and my passion for mathematics have shaped who I am today. Through participating in math competitions and community service, I have come to realize the potential mathematics has to make a positive impact in our world. I am excited to see where this journey takes me and to continue making a difference in the lives of others.*

One of the other barriers that first-generation students face in the college application process is all those supplemental essays for selective institutions (those that have the most institutional resources to support low-income students). For example, "why do you want to attend Amherst College?" Such questions are research and labor-intensive, not to mention intimidating tasks that the students need to complete while holding down heavy high school courseloads, shouldering significant family responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, or caring for siblings, and/or working. Few have the resources to visit campuses; many elite institutions like Amherst College are entirely unfamiliar.

Again, ChatGPT can offer tremendous help:

*1. Strong academic programs: Amherst College offers a wide range of academic programs, including over 30 majors, that are designed to challenge and engage students. The college has a strong commitment to interdisciplinary study and encourages students to explore multiple areas of interest.*

*2. Outstanding faculty: Amherst College is home to a talented and dedicated faculty who are passionate about teaching and research. They provide students with individualized attention and mentorship, helping students to achieve their full potential.*

*3. Active student life: Amherst College has a vibrant student life, with over 150 student organizations, clubs, and activities to choose from. Whether you are interested in sports, music, politics, or community service, there is something for everyone at Amherst.*

4. *Beautiful campus: Amherst College is located on a 1,000-acre campus in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts. The campus is surrounded by stunning natural beauty and is close to major cities such as Boston and New York.*

Another piece of the process that is challenging is asking people for letters of recommendation. No parent to coach a child through the process?

Ask ChatGPT : *“Hello [Name], I hope this email finds you well. I am reaching out to ask if you would be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me as I apply to colleges. I would be honored to have your support as [insert reason, such as a teacher who inspired you, a mentor who has seen your growth, etc.]. I understand that this is a big request, so I wanted to give you plenty of notice. The deadline for submitting the recommendation is [insert date]. I would be happy to provide you with any information you may need, such as a copy of my resume or transcript. Thank you for considering my request, and I truly appreciate your support.”*

Once in college, ChatGPT can continue to coach the first-generation student on what educators call “the hidden curriculum.” For example, few of my students know how to ask for extra time on an assignment, as in the email example with which I began. Most are totally unfamiliar with the concept of an extension.

If we ask ChatGPT what to do, the bot offers fantastic advice:

1. *Communicate with your instructor: Reach out to your instructor as soon as possible to explain the situation. They may be willing to grant an extension or to offer alternative instructions.*
2. *Prioritize quality over quantity: Rather than trying to rush and write a lengthy essay, focus on writing a concise and well-written essay that demonstrates your understanding of the material.*
3. *Get help: Consider reaching out to classmates, tutors, or writing centers for help. They may be able to provide you with feedback, ideas, or encouragement.*
4. *Use extra time to revise: If you do receive an extension or if you are able to complete the essay after the deadline, use the extra time to revise and improve your essay.*
5. *Take responsibility: If an extension is not granted, it is important to take responsibility for the situation and to communicate openly with your instructor. They may be able to offer suggestions or accommodations to help you make up for the missed deadline.*

*Remember, it is always better to communicate with your instructor and to take proactive steps to manage the situation, rather than avoiding the problem or ignoring the deadline.*

If the student were to take this advice and request an extension, ChatGPT has a draft for that as well:

*Subject: Request for Extension on [Assignment Name]*

*Dear [Professor's Name],*

*I hope this email finds you well. I am writing to request an extension on the [Assignment Name] due on [Due Date]. I have been facing [personal/health/academic] difficulties and have not been able to devote the necessary time and attention to complete the assignment to the best of my abilities.*

*I understand the importance of meeting deadlines and I take my academic responsibilities very seriously. However, I believe that I would be able to produce a better and more thoughtful essay with a few extra days. I would be grateful if you could grant me an extension until [Proposed New Due Date].*

*I would be happy to meet with you in person to discuss my request and to offer any additional information or support that you may need. I am committed to making up for any missed work and I will do my best to meet the new deadline.*

*Thank you for considering my request. I look forward to your reply.*

*Best regards, [Your Name]*

ChatGPT has produced exactly the polite and appropriate email that most professors want to receive and that few, if any of my students, know how to write. It is also the sort of email that many college-educated parents coach their children to write when they check on their college students.

ChatGPT does not level the playing field. Wealthy, college-educated parents still confer tremendous advantages on their children. But I, for one, am delighted that the students I work with and teach have access to this game-changing resource. I cannot wait to teach my students how to use this tool to their advantage in accessing and succeeding in higher education.

Will my students be cheating? I do not think so.

In "[From Pencils to Pixels: The Stages of Literacy Technology](#)," a well-known essay first published in 1999, Dennis E. Baron, an English and linguistics professor, writes

about how the “latest” developments in writing technology always pose seemingly existential challenges to writing teachers.

Here’s the argument in brief: With the development of cheap erasers attached to pencils, teachers worried that students would write carelessly and make mistakes; when computers and spell-check programs became widely available, teachers fretted that students would not learn to write grammatically correct. As these examples make clear, however, worries inevitably give way to acceptance and writers are urged, even expected, to make use of new technology to write.

ChatGPT is clearly a revolution, like the eraser and spell check, in literacy technology.

Others have and continue to unpack the issues with ChatGPT, but I am confident that, for my students, it has the potential to be a transformational coach, giving them access to models and advice for how to navigate some elements of the maze of higher education.

If I sound optimistic, however, I am not. In Baron’s seminal article, he highlights one key point: “Literacy has always functioned to divide the haves from the have-nots.”

If ChatGPT, like the eraser or spell check, levels the playing field, the game will change. I have no doubt that ChatGPT has initiated the demise of the college admissions essay. Wait and see.

*Dr. Audrey Fisch is a professor of English at New Jersey City University and founder and president of [More Than Bootstraps](#).*