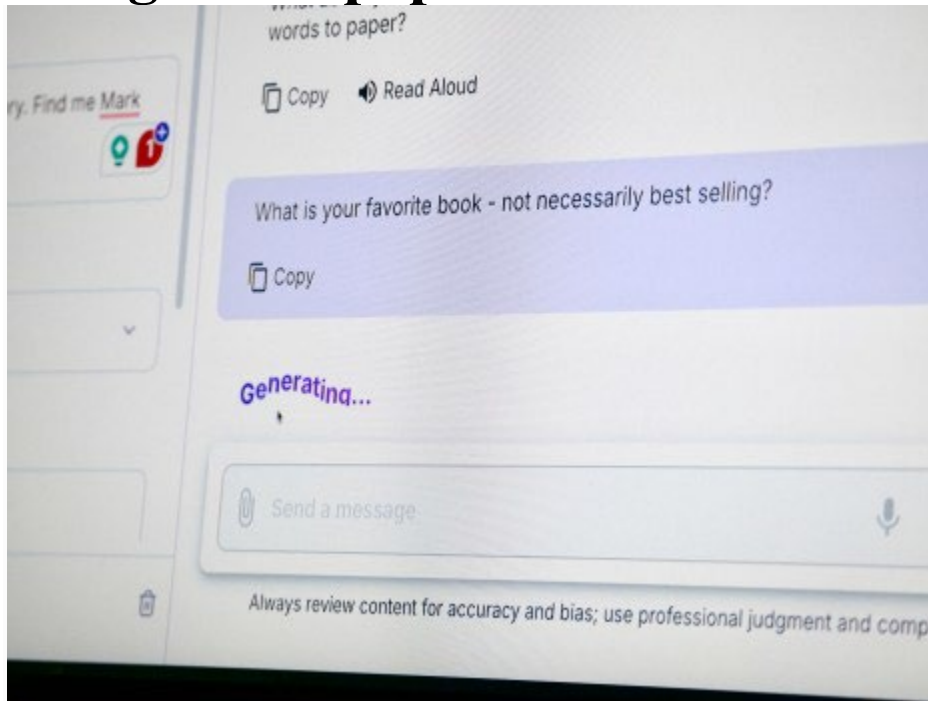


David McGrath: AI's making the purchase of college term papers look like child's play



AI is making it easier for college students to plagiarize and cheat, and it's become a real dilemma in the world of higher academics, columnist David McGrath says. (Pioneer Press)

By [DAVID MCGRATH](#)

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"Absolutely not," the vice president said. "We are not selling term papers. Our product is intended as an aid for research."

The speaker was a vice president for one of the new companies responding to accusations that her industry was churning out essays for college students to hand in to their professors as their own.

She denied their service was committing plagiarism.

"We offer a learning tool," she insisted, and her company merely provided ideas and sources. How college students ultimately used the tool was up to them. But her expectation was that they follow their teacher's instructions, their school's policy and the law.

She was addressing me and the rest of a small audience in an office building on LaSalle Street in downtown Chicago, all of us there for “orientation.”

The year was 1972. I was 21, desperate for a job and among about 40 other people hired by Termpapers Inc. to write made-to-order essays for college students. We earned \$2 per page, or \$3 for a graduate level course.

We were not naive. Nothing the VP said changed the fact that they were a “term paper mill,” or that my first task was a 2,000-word paper about the Attica prison riot for which an anonymous student at a nearby college paid \$40 (equivalent to \$300 today). I was to make carbon copies for the company’s catalog in Boston for future sales.

If the VP’s disingenuous pleading sounds familiar, it’s because AI companies today are spinning the same yarn.

Sam Altman, cofounder of OpenAI, denied that artificial intelligence programs, which can instantly produce a composition on any topic, will [wreck higher education](#).

“I’m sure the same thing happened with the calculator before, and now this is just a new tool that exists in the tool chain,” he said.

Like Termpapers Inc.’s vice president more than 50 years ago, Altman claims that students will partner with AI and use it for educational assistance. He maintains it’s more a “tutor” than a cheat-sheet, which will help students improve critical thinking as they screen, edit and integrate AI content with their own creative input.

All of which sounds great if it were true. But facts tell a different story. According to a [survey by the American Association of Colleges and Universities](#), 59% of college administrators say cheating with AI has increased, while 56% indicate their schools don’t know what to do about it.

An [investigation by The Guardian](#) found that proven cases of cheating with AI rose in the United Kingdom from 1.6 per 1,000 in 2023 to 5.1 per 1,000 in 2024. And that, the experts claim, is just the “tip of the iceberg.”

According to Business Insider, [plagiarism is overwhelming colleges](#). Philosophy professor Darren Hick of Furman University described AI’s rampant misuse as a virus: “All plagiarism has become AI plagiarism at this point.”

The “virus” has degraded the dynamic between faculty and students from that of an alliance to one of enmity and mistrust.

On what would be my last day at Termpapers Inc., when I showed up for another assignment, a notice was taped to the padlocked door: “Closed by order of the U.S. Marshal.”

A cease-and-desist order had been issued, and Harvard University filed a lawsuit against it and other term paper mills because of fraud and plagiarism and for breaking “an implicit educational contract” between colleges and students.

While “human chatbots” like myself were outlawed in the 1970s, the current AI versions of term paper mills endure. For you cannot jail a computer program or slap a padlock on the internet.

But we can restrict and hold them accountable, as a group of authors recently did in [winning a \\$1.5 billion settlement](#) after filing a class action lawsuit against Anthropic, an AI company that pirated thousands of books to “train” its chatbot. Meanwhile, all professors can do right now to thwart plagiarism is use AI resistant assignments that require oral components and handwritten work.