

Claudine Gay, Plagiarism, and AI¹

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Abstract

The resignation of Claudine Gay as president of Harvard University demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of academic honesty by nonacademics. This misunderstanding contributes to the acceptance of the role of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education and, in turn, degrades the experience and quality of education for students. This article examines how demographics, economics, and technology contribute to student understanding of AI. It then argues that the hallucinations to which generative AI is prone are fundamental to its output, and attempts to use it in the academy abet the diminishment of academic freedom to uncover truth. Attacks on academic scholarship should be viewed not as attempts to discover something true but as propaganda attempting to reduce higher education to vocational training.

The accusations of plagiarism that toppled the first Black woman president of Harvard University are surely irrefutable proof of a “diversity, equity and inclusion bureaucracy” that elevates candidates based on “immutable qualities, such as race or sex,” and is “constructed to perpetuate progressive dominance of higher education by keeping conservatives out of the professoriate” (Rufo 2024). Or at least that is what the bad faith efforts of Christopher Rufo and the *Washington Free Beacon* would have us believe. As a first-year writing instructor of many years’ experience, however, what I see in Claudine Gay’s resignation is not some DEI bureaucracy being challenged. I do not even see plagiarism, in any meaningful sense of the word. What I see, instead, is the neoliberal university at work, with Gay’s resignation symbolic of a misunderstanding of academic honesty that will only abet the technologization and vocationalization of higher education.

Allow me to start with how Gay’s documented academic errors fall short of how plagiarism is practically understood by teachers of college-level writing like myself. Writing for the *Washington Free Beacon*, Aaron Sibarium (2023) has highlighted numerous instances of overlapping phrasing, unclearly cited or incorrectly formatted quotations, and apparent copying in Gay’s scholarly output. A more comprehensive review conducted for the *Harvard Crimson* by

¹ My thanks to Rachel May, Jill Giebutowski, Sherri VandenAkker, and Mike Spry for helping me to hone these thoughts.

Rahem D. Hamid, Nia L. Orakwue, and Elias J. Schisgall (2023) demonstrates how Sibarium's original reporting distorts the context somewhat, although they acknowledge many errors of a similar kind across multiple pieces authored by Gay. The writers for the *Harvard Crimson* even went a step further in their reporting than Sibarium, contacting many of the authors of pieces apparently copied by Gay, most of whom were at best indifferent to the accusations.² Nonetheless, it does not look great: the quantity of errors, far more than the quality of the errors themselves, suggests sloppiness. However, as one of Gay's former teachers and the author of one of the supposed sources points out to Hamid, Orakwue, and Schisgall (2023), the overlap is largely "a technical description of a quantitative method." He therefore judged it "technically plagiarism" but of a "minor-to-inconsequential" variety.

In fact, so many of the purported instances of plagiarism are technical descriptions that someone such as myself, untrained in the social sciences, has trouble understanding how else to phrase such similarities as "by definition," "0 to 1," and "minimum and maximum" (Hamid, Orakwue, and Schisgall 2023). There are few instances in the presented evidence of copying lengthy quotations, analysis, or argumentative claims; instead, there are sporadic, cut-and-paste phrases, frequently with overlapping verbs and objects that are nonetheless separated by unique dependent clauses.

Since so many are particularly technical, it is important to consider two factors: one is the quantity. There are a large number of such overlaps, which, when combined with sloppy citation practices, do suggest inattention. But another is context: two of the works presented by Sibarium—and the ones with, in my opinion, the most egregious number, length, and variety of overlaps—are from a brief, non-peer-reviewed article Gay released as a graduate student in 1993 and her 1997 dissertation. Anyone who has looked at a dissertation from before 2000 knows that some of these were still typewritten, and almost all were written without the use of contemporary internet-enabled research. A writer's ability to locate and cite quotations correctly was therefore largely dependent on keeping meticulous handwritten notes. Having completed a dissertation in 2015 with the assistance of a large number of handwritten notes, I can assure you that handwritten notes always contain some mistakes. The difference is that I had, in 2015, and Sibarium has, now, the power of internet databases and web searches, and therefore I double-checked often as I rewrote my notes into the final form. As self-described "professional cheat," Dave Tomar explained to NPR's Vanessa Romo and Ayana Archie (2024), the irony is that "Gay's alleged failings are likely only now coming to light because of the endless amounts of data that gets fed

² One source for Hamid, Orakwue, and Schisgall (2023) who was not indifferent was Harvard University spokesperson Jonathan Swain, who said that according to the contemporary standards at Harvard University some of the apparent overlaps in Gay's dissertation would count as plagiarism. He did not provide comment on whether they would have at the time that the dissertation was filed (1997), however, a point to which I come back below.

into artificial intelligence programs, such as ChatGPT,” on the back of which he predicts a slew of “outings” of administrators.³

From this, Gay’s supposed plagiarism appears to be some poorly handled quotations and mostly understandable errors that would be largely undetectable—and much more easily accidental—without the modern computing power of find-and-replace and internet archives. (There are, to be fair, later instances of overlap in Gay’s research, including as recently as 2017. But these, again, are almost exclusively of the technical variety that is harder to reformulate without distorting the methodological clarity.) To destroy a career based on a misapplication of contemporary methods of scholarship seems malicious. And, in fact, it was. Right-wing educational activist and provocateur Rufo admitted on X (formerly Twitter) that the goal of releasing this research in conjunction with Sibarium was not seeking the truth but damaging Gay’s career (Editorial Board 2023).

We are then confronted with a problem: The accusations leveled at Gay were an attempt not at promoting truth but at grinding a political ax. Since plagiarism generally falls under the umbrella of university policies regarding “academic dishonesty,” the guiding principle of our investigations, adjudications, and sanctions should be the production of honesty, of truth. Instead, this was a technologically enabled witch hunt.

The corollary that disturbs me is how this view of plagiarism as merely the presence or absence of data (that is, words) can be interpreted through contemporary technologies and policies. In this instance, the use of data analysis to root out plagiarism is akin to using algorithms to determine whether the object an autopiloted car encounters is human or not: such programmatic innovation looks neat in a promotional video, but no one would want to be the pedestrian a robotaxi is trying to detect. In context, almost all licensed drivers can tell a shadow from a human using a bicycle as a cargo transporter, but algorithms are only as good as the data sets on which they are trained, and the result can be death (McQuillan 2022, 28). What looks like plagiarism with a find-and-replace function might not also look so to someone reading the articles side by side. Cut-and-pasted words scattered across similar paragraphs may strike us as sloppy but often will not seem dishonest in the context of the whole.

To think of cheating as too many overlapping words even abets the current scourge to truth and originality in the academy: large-language models (LLMs) and generative artificial intelligence (AI). Since every generated entry from an AI chatbot is unique, detection of student dishonesty cannot rely on overlap of borrowed words. Rather, as I and my colleagues have discovered in the past year and a half since OpenAI’s public release of ChatGPT, dishonesty

³ Gay’s errors are therefore wholly distinguishable from the poorly conducted research released by former Stanford University president Marc Tessier-Lavigne and the data alleged to be falsified in scholarship by Harvard Business School professor Francesca Gino. For both of these, bodies of their peers were convened to evaluate them and found them to be not in compliance with academic standards. By comparison, Gay was not found to have violated academic standards by a similar body.

appears in the recurrent use of sentence structures and in unoriginal analysis. The tell-tale wishy-washiness of chatbots, combined with their inability *not* to hallucinate is what James Bridle (2023) has called “the stupidity of AI.”

Hallucination—or AI’s tendency to make up quotations, citations, and facts—looms large as one of the most dangerous elements of AI, not just to academic honesty but to society.⁴ But more important, hallucination is actually *the only text that AI generates*. Professor of media studies Siva Vaidhyanathan (2023) outlines this basic premise when he writes that chatbots “fake what looks like knowledge by producing strings of text that statistically make sense.” Nothing produced by AI is knowledge, since none of it is understood by its generator. Everything generated by AI is mathematically weighted and sorted, and while it would be more accurate for Vaidhyanathan to say it makes sense stochastically, it is all equally “fake,” even if it hits the truth. Hallucinations are both the symptom and the underlying premise of chatbot output.

If hallucinations reveal the programmatic limits of AI, the use of AI reveals the limits of contemporary higher education that claimed Gay and others. So what underlies the shift of students toward the use of AI? To figure out how students experienced AI writing, I assigned my spring 2023 section of science fiction literature to generate an essay on a broad, prescriptive topic using ChatGPT, accompanied by a reflective piece outlining their process and evaluation of the experience. Most of them struggled for hours to generate even the passing semblance of a “real” paper—that is, in my students’ own estimation, a work of substantive length grounded in their understanding of a text’s content and form. Some of my students simply gave up, and their reflective pieces were largely explanations of why their AI-generated essays were so incomplete. Many of them acknowledged the “miracle” of quick generation, while feeling disappointed at how much massaging the final product took to resemble their understanding of what an essay was supposed to be (including the correction of hallucinations).

One student, who claimed to have never heard of ChatGPT prior to my class, expressed a sentiment that seems pertinent to the existential question of the academy. Her reflective piece expresses her amazement at ChatGPT’s potential utility in her major in physical therapy—not for writing whole papers but for condensing and summarizing the information that she was asked repeatedly to recall for lab reports and clinical notes. Students like her may or may not be the norm, but there is no denying that college students are using it,⁵ and as the technology increases in power and refinement, the products will shift us ever further from the necessity of teaching

⁴ See, for example, a study reported in the *Washington Post* that the AI chatbot Microsoft Copilot generated hallucinated information about elections 30 percent of the time in recent European polls (Oremus 2023).

⁵ Surveys seem to vary greatly in the percentage that admits to doing so. An international survey from the educational institute Anthology released in November 2023 found that 38 percent of students had used AI, while a survey from the educational assistance platform Chegg around the same time found that 20 percent of US students admitted to using it (Coffey 2023). A survey from the same time period by BestColleges determined that 56 percent of college students had used it (Nam 2023).

writing as a skill. The widely used platform Grammarly has already integrated AI into some of its subscriptions and tools, and more integration into writing software should be expected in the future. Though AI is not presently a great replacement for essay writing, the more relevant (in our students' minds) application of words to the pro forma generation of text for specific purposes is already well underway. If students no longer need us to help them understand the density of words, the structure of sentences and paragraphs, or the mental architecture that pieces these together, why attend programs in which writing classes are required for degrees?

These revelations suggest that AI generation could not come at a worse time for many institutions of higher education. Demographic shifts and economic pressures are producing declining enrollments in all but the most elite programs (Carey 2022). Add to this the uncertainty of the worst inflation in two generations, record levels of student debt, continued disruptions from wars and disease, and the ever-more-visible perils of the global climate crisis, and spending four-to-six years in pursuit of degrees that cannot guarantee a job will be a less-than-appealing prospect for many high school students.

Reduced enrollment, which is tied to bustling job markets (Dickler 2022), may actually be worsened by AI even if a recession leads to a slowdown in hiring (which typically leads to increases in college enrollment). This is because, as MIT economist David Autor has argued, AI's current trajectory is more likely to increase the quality of work of lower-skilled workers than higher-skilled workers in the knowledge economy (cited in Rosalsky, Messick, and Blanchard 2023). As a result, the middle class will expand by boosting the earning potential and skill flexibility of workers with less formal education—and an unintended consequence of lowering the threshold for semiskilled labor will be the devaluation of higher education as a site of skill acquisition. If our profession has relied on skilling the upwardly mobile since the 1940s, what is the purpose of our profession in the verifiably real world outside the academy? How do we justify to our students the inflated tuitions, the unconscionable debt burden, the bloated administrative salaries?

It is in this context that the pressure campaign to force Gay to resign—and the politicians crowing at its success (Stefanik 2024)—should be seen not as the success of truth over falsehood, or merit over characteristics, but as a part of a broader trend to whittle down the value of education to the quantifiable, data-centric society of mass technologization. If you want further evidence of this, Bill Ackman's (2024) continuing efforts to subject *all* academic scholarship to AI review provides us with the antiacademic game plan: dangle the threat of policing "intent" over the ten typographical mistakes identified by algorithmic LLMs in a thirty-page paper. That editors and peer reviewers play key roles in ensuring no meaningful plagiarism is published seems not to be on Ackman's radar, nor the infeasibility of funding at every college and university a new administrative body charged solely with adjudicating the results of AI scholarly review. Instead, Ackman views every action taken under an academic's name to be their sole responsibility, and for such responsibility to be transparently intended. (His analogy to financial

fraud cases gives it away: few fraud cases are successfully brought to conclusion because of the difficulty of establishing intent.) As for Claudine Gay, what we can say is that her errors were her own, and, further, that she has owned them; but the broader threat of hallucinatory churn—responsible to no one and over which we have no control—is just getting started.

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