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Jacobs on Gioia's ideal university

[Alan Jacobs:](#)

Most young people today feel, with considerable justification, that they live in an economically precarious time. They therefore want the credential that will open doors that lead to a good job, either directly or (by getting them into good graduate programs) indirectly. Their parents want the same thing, and perhaps want it even more intensely because they tend to be making an enormous financial investment in their children's education.

But those same young people also want to have a good time in college, a period of social experience and experimentation that they (rightly) think will be harder to come by when they enter that working world. Many people sneer at universities that build lazy rivers and climbing walls, and devote every spare penny to their athletic programs — I've curled my lip at such things a few times over the decades — but the fact remains that such amenities are significant factors in recruitment. Many students like them; they're part of the *[insert university name here]* Experience.

Here's the key thing: what most people call AI but what I call chatbot interfaces to machine-learning corpora (yes, we've finally gotten around to that) do a great deal to facilitate the simultaneous pursuit of these two competing goods. Yes, students understand — they understand quite well, and vocally regret — that when they use chatbots they are not learning much, if anything. But the acquisition of knowledge is a third competing good, and if they pursue that one seriously they may well have to sacrifice one of the other two, or even both. Right now they can have two out of three, and as Meat Loaf taught us all long ago, two out of three ain't bad.

The people who run universities understand all this also, even if they have their own regrets; and they're not going to impede their income stream any further than it's been impeded already by demographic realities. They will make the necessary accommodations to a chatbot-dependent clientele, because, especially when customers are scarce, the customer is always right. Those departments and programs that push back will be able to do so only imperfectly, and probably at the cost of declining enrollments. So it goes.

And the kind of learning that Ted Gioia and I prize will still go on. However, it will primarily thrive outside the university system — as it did for many centuries before universities became as large a part of the social order as they are now.

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