Welcome to Campus. Here's Your ChatGPT.

OpenAI, the firm that helped spark chatbot cheating, wants to embed A.I. in every facet of college. First up: 460,000 students at Cal State.

By Natasha Singer
Natasha Singer, who covers tech in schools, reported from New York and San Diego.

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OpenAI, the maker of ChatGPT, has a plan to overhaul college education — by embedding its artificial intelligence tools in every facet of campus life.

If the company's strategy succeeds, universities would give students A.I. assistants to help guide and tutor them from orientation day through graduation. Professors would provide customized A.I. study bots for each class. Career services would offer recruiter chatbots for students to practice job interviews. And undergrads could turn on a chatbot's voice mode to be quizzed aloud ahead of a test.

OpenAI dubs its sales pitch "A.I.-native universities."

"Our vision is that, over time, A.I. would become part of the core infrastructure of higher education," Leah Belsky, OpenAI's vice president of education, said in an interview. In the same way that colleges give students school email accounts, she said, soon "every student who comes to campus would have access to their personalized A.I. account."

To spread chatbots on campuses, OpenAI is selling premium A.I. services to universities for faculty and student use. It is also running marketing campaigns aimed at getting students who have never used chatbots to try ChatGPT.

Some universities, including the University of Maryland and California State University, are already working to make A.I. tools part of students' everyday experiences. In early June, Duke University began offering unlimited ChatGPT access to students, faculty and staff. The school also introduced a university platform, called DukeGPT, with A.I. tools developed by Duke.

OpenAI's campaign is part of an escalating A.I. arms race among tech giants to win over universities and students with their chatbots. The company is following in the footsteps of rivals like Google and Microsoft that have for years pushed to get their computers and software into schools, and court students as future customers.

The competition is so heated that Sam Altman, OpenAI's chief executive, and Elon Musk, who founded the rival xAI, posted dueling announcements on social media this spring offering free premium A.I. services for college students during exam period. Then Google upped the ante, announcing free student access to its premium chatbot service "through finals 2026."

OpenAI ignited the recent A.I. education trend. In late 2022, the company's rollout of ChatGPT, which can produce human-sounding essays and term papers, helped set off a wave of chatbot-fueled cheating. Generative A.I. tools like ChatGPT, which are trained on large databases of texts, also make stuff up, which can mislead students.

Less than three years later, millions of college students regularly use A.I. chatbots as research, writing, computer programming and idea-generating aides. Now OpenAI is capitalizing on ChatGPT's popularity to promote the company's A.I. services to universities as the new infrastructure for college education.

OpenAI's service for universities, ChatGPT Edu, offers more features, including certain privacy protections, than the company's free chatbot. ChatGPT Edu also enables faculty and staff to create custom chatbots for university use. (OpenAI offers consumers premium versions of its chatbot for a monthly fee.)

OpenAI's push to A.I.-ify college education amounts to a national experiment on millions of students. The use of these chatbots in schools is so new that their potential long-term educational benefits, and possible side effects, are not yet established.

A few early studies have found that outsourcing tasks like research and writing to chatbots can diminish skills like critical thinking. And some critics argue that colleges going all-in on chatbots are glossing over issues like societal risks, A.I. labor exploitation and environmental costs.

OpenAI's campus marketing effort comes as unemployment has increased among recent college graduates — particularly in fields like software engineering, where A.I. is now automating some tasks previously done by humans. In hopes of boosting students' career prospects, some universities are racing to provide A.I. tools and training.

California State University announced this year that it was making ChatGPT available to more than 460,000 students across its 23 campuses to help prepare them for "California's future A.I.-driven economy." Cal State said the effort would help make the school "the nation's first and largest A.I.-empowered university system."

Some universities say they are embracing the new A.I. tools in part because they want their schools to help guide, and develop guardrails for, the technologies.

"You're worried about the ecological concerns. You're worried about misinformation and bias," Edmund Clark, the chief information officer of California State University, said at a recent education conference in San Diego. "Well, join in. Help us shape the future."

Last spring, OpenAI introduced ChatGPT Edu, its first product for universities, which offers access to the company's latest artificial intelligence. Paying clients like universities also get more privacy: OpenAI says it does not use the information that students, faculty and administrators enter into ChatGPT Edu to train its A.I.

(The New York Times has sued OpenAI and its partner, Microsoft, over copyright infringement. Both companies have denied wrongdoing.)

Last fall, OpenAI hired Ms. Belsky to oversee its education efforts. An ed tech start-up veteran, she previously worked at Coursera, which offers college and professional training courses.

Leah Belsky oversees OpenAI's efforts to get universities to adopt ChatGPT. George Etheredge for The New York Times

The company's New York offices are in the Puck Building. George Etheredge for The New York Times

She is pursuing a two-pronged strategy: marketing OpenAI's premium services to universities for a fee while advertising free ChatGPT directly to students. OpenAI also convened a panel of college students recently to help get their peers to start using the tech.

Among those students are power users like Delphine Tai-Beauchamp, a computer science major at the University of California, Irvine. She has used the chatbot to explain complicated course concepts, as well as help explain coding errors and make charts diagraming the connections between ideas.

"I wouldn't recommend students use A.I. to avoid the hard parts of learning," Ms. Tai-Beauchamp said. She did recommend students try A.I. as a study aid. "Ask it to explain something five different ways."

Ms. Belsky said these kinds of suggestions helped the company create its first billboard campaign aimed at college students.

"Can you quiz me on the muscles of the leg?" asked one ChatGPT billboard, posted this spring in Chicago. "Give me a guide for mastering this Calc 101 syllabus," another said.

Ms. Belsky said OpenAI had also begun funding research into the educational effects of its chatbots.

"The challenge is, how do you actually identify what are the use cases for A.I. in the university that are most impactful?" Ms. Belsky said during a December A.I. event at Cornell Tech in New York City. "And then how do you replicate those best practices across the ecosystem?"

Some faculty members have already built custom chatbots for their students by uploading course materials like their lecture notes, slides, videos and quizzes into ChatGPT.

Jared DeForest, the chair of environmental and plant biology at Ohio University, created his own tutoring bot, called SoilSage, which can answer students' questions based on his published research papers and science knowledge. Limiting the chatbot to trusted information sources has improved its accuracy, he said.

"The curated chatbot allows me to control the information in there to get the product that I want at the college level," Professor DeForest said.

But even when trained on specific course materials, A.I. can make mistakes. In a new study — "Can A.I. Hold Office Hours?" — law school professors uploaded a patent law casebook into A.I. models from OpenAI, Google and Anthropic. Then they asked dozens of patent law questions based on the casebook and found that all three A.I. chatbots made "significant" legal errors that could be "harmful for learning."

"This is a good way to lead students astray," said Jonathan S. Masur, a professor at the University of Chicago Law School and a co-author of the study. "So I think that everyone needs to take a little bit of a deep breath and slow down."

OpenAI said the 250,000-word casebook used for the study was more than twice the length of text that its GPT-4o model can process at once. Anthropic said the study had limited usefulness because it did not compare the A.I. with human performance. Google said its model accuracy had improved since the study was conducted.

Ms. Belsky said a new “memory” feature, which retains and can refer to previous interactions with a user, would help ChatGPT tailor its responses to students over time and make the A.I. “more valuable as you grow and learn.”

Privacy experts warn that this kind of tracking feature raises concerns about long-term tech company surveillance.

In the same way that many students today convert their school-issued Gmail accounts into personal accounts when they graduate, Ms. Belsky envisions graduating students bringing their A.I. chatbots into their workplaces and using them for life.

“It would be their gateway to learning — and career life thereafter,” Ms. Belsky said.

Natasha Singer is a reporter for The Times who writes about how tech companies, digital devices and apps are reshaping childhood, education and job opportunities.

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