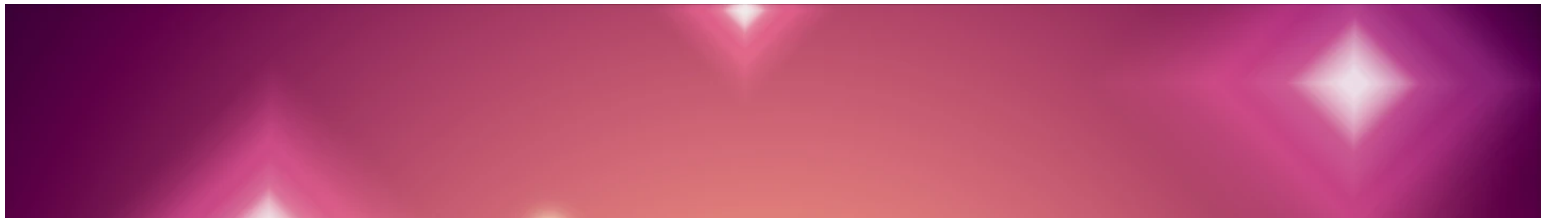


In the Age of AI, Is Education Just an Illusion?

We are in the midst of a crisis of purpose.



THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION





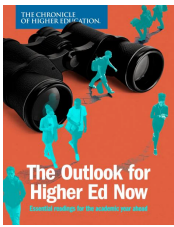
THE REVIEW | ESSAY

By [Dan Sarofian-Butin](#) March 19, 2025

For two long years, professors have been fighting a rear-guard battle against artificial intelligence. We brought back blue books and in-person tests, appealed to our students' ethical principles, used multiple and ever-shifting platforms in an attempt to catch cheaters, positioned AI as a supplement to (rather than a replacement of) their learning, and developed ever-more desperate attempts to "AI proof" our assignments. Nothing has worked.

The [vast majority](#) of college students now use some form of AI to do their assignments. (And seriously, wouldn't you too if, with the press of a button, that late assignment you didn't really understand or care about was miraculously written?)

From the Chronicle Store



ARTICLE COLLECTION

The Outlook for Higher Ed Now

Essential readings for the academic year

[Visit The Store](#)

Now, it seems, their professors are following suit.

“It’s crazy how much feedback my professor gives me,” one of my advisees, who was taking an online class, told me recently. I asked to see an example of the professor’s feedback. The student showed me his last three papers. The feedback indeed was substantial, written in a clean, crisp, and supportive manner. It was also clear that it was written by ChatGPT.

The student, truth be told, wasn’t really surprised when I told him my suspicions. He, too, he sheepishly admitted to me, used ChatGPT to write substantial portions of his papers.

Let me put it starkly: We are not facing a cheating crisis. We are in the midst of a crisis of purpose.

To understand this moment, we have to go back to a cold Friday morning in February 1989. That is when Vince McMahon, then the chief executive of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), testified before the New Jersey Senate, attempting to convince them that professional wrestling should not, in fact, be governed by the state’s athletic commission.

“Its entertainment,” McMahon [told them](#), “it’s illusion.” While this “illusion” had been common “insider” knowledge since wrestling began in carnival tents in the 1800s, the wrestling world always claimed to outsiders that these were true athletic competitions. By the mid-1980s, though, the WWF had tired of states’ taxes, oversight, and meddling in their “sporting events.” That’s why, in 1985, Linda McMahon (Vince McMahon’s wife and now our country’s secretary of education) [testified](#) before the Pennsylvania House of Representatives: “Unlike professional boxers, professional wrestlers are not competing in contests ... Instead, like the skilled athletes you see in the circus or the Harlem Globetrotters, our athletes are well-conditioned professionals who ... entertain people.”

We are not facing a cheating crisis. We are in the midst of a crisis of purpose.

In the wrestling world, this became known as “kayfabe”: Everyone — insiders and outsiders, participants and audiences — knew wrestling was fake yet still leaned into the wink, wink, nod, nod of authenticity. This suspension of disbelief created, as Roland Barthes famously [put it](#) in his 1954 essay on wrestling, the perfect spectacle: “The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle.” Barthes contrasted wrestling with “authentic” sports, such as boxing and judo, to show how the performance of wrestling had nothing to do with fairness or effort, or even winning and losing: “The function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him.”

So let’s do a thought experiment: Could you imagine any college president standing up and, because they were tired of the accreditors’ oversight and meddling, stating that the

faculty were simply “professionals who ... entertain people” and what goes on in the classroom has “nothing to do” with teaching and learning, and instead the “function” of the professor and students “is to go exactly through the motions which are expected” of them? That it was all just one big “illusion”?

Of course not. There is supposedly no place for illusion or entertainment in higher education, where the life of the mind is sacrosanct, the coin of the realm is knowledge, the only buying and selling is in the marketplace of ideas. Yes, a few students may cheat and a few professors may cut corners, but higher education is not a performative spectacle!

But if you believe that, I really don't know where you've been these last two long years. Probably not in a classroom.

I was walking around my classroom the other day, observing as students were supposedly doing a quick bit of online research to a question I had posed. One student was playing sudoku; another student's computer was off (“It ran out of power,” she claimed); another student said they couldn't access the internet. All of them, I knew, would turn in superb reflection papers on the topic once class had ended. (Did I mention that, with the press of a button, the late assignment you didn't really understand or care about is miraculously written?)

Yet there I was, pacing around the room, extolling students' ideas, exhorting them to think deeper, suggesting alternative keywords and ideas for future research.

In wrestling, they would derisively call me a “mark”: someone who did not understand that everything was staged. All I really had to do was perform my role. And, in turn, the students would perform theirs.

I am well aware that students have always cheated and faculty have always cut corners. This is why the sociologist Willard Waller, almost a hundred years ago, [saw](#) the classroom in a “state of perilous equilibrium.” But whereas before ChatGPT [I believed](#) that we could manage this situation, today I realize that we cannot.

**There is supposedly no place for illusion or entertainment in higher education.
But if you believe that, I really don't know where you've been these last two
years.**

We used to take it for granted that teaching and learning took time. It took time for a student to read, then write a draft, get feedback, discuss the thesis statement, revise, and finally, submit the paper and wait to see how the professor graded it. The underlying issue was always time: to read, think, teach, write, respond. In economics, this is formally known as Baumol's cost disease: Some processes can't be sped up, such as playing a Mozart concerto or teaching the relationship between the sign, signifier, and signified.

Yes, the research suggests, we could probably [speed it up](#) a little bit and develop and systematize [best practices](#) a little bit. But none of us can simply download what we want to learn, like Neo in *The Matrix*, and 30 seconds later, have it appear on our computer screens.

But ChatGPT can.

And that's precisely the problem. It collapses the entire process of teaching and learning (thoughtful, recursive, effortful) into an instantaneous, efficient, and polished

transaction — no struggle, no iteration, no [friction](#). It creates the perfect performative illusion of teaching and learning.

The friction of teaching and learning — everything from my academic labor of preparing my lectures to my students' listening to it and then writing about it — has been instantaneously smoothed over.

And so we are stuck in the kayfabe, powered by ChatGPT.

There is no happy ending here. A disengagement spiral is upon us as AI supercharges students' disinterest in learning and faculty disinvestment from teaching.

Before I conclude, let me tell you what happened as I was finishing this essay.

I had a Zoom meeting with a first-year student who had clearly used AI for one of his assignments. His earlier assignments had a nice but vague style and tone, and the depth is what you would expect from someone straight out of high school. His most recent assignment, though, was clean, crisp, and substantial, using language and concepts I would expect from my graduate students. I pushed him on all of this, and it was clear he could not explain what he had written. (I heard him typing some of the words on his computer and then reading the explanations that popped up.) Yet he resisted any sort of confession. He was trying, he claimed, to write in a different mode; his ADHD, he reminded me, made him forget some words he used before; his high-school teachers, he solemnly explained, told him to always vary his style.

It was, to be honest, maddening. I asked him to flip the situation and imagine he was the professor and a student displayed completely different writing styles. Wouldn't he too think something was up? "Yes," he noted, "I see your point." But in his case, he

insisted, staring straight at me, not blinking, not hesitating, not squeamish, not sweating, not pausing, everything was absolutely his own writing.

It was a perfect performance.

A disengagement spiral is upon us as AI supercharges students' disinterest in learning and faculty disinvestment from teaching.

So do you know what I did? Staring straight at him, not blinking, not hesitating, not squeamish, not sweating, not pausing, I gave him an A.

It's disengagement all the way down.

I'm tired of being the "mark," tired of fighting for the authenticity of the classroom in an AI-saturated world. Yes, teaching has always been hard but usually enjoyable. And grading, well, as the saying goes, we get paid to do it. But now, today, the emotional labor of keeping my students "honest" as to whether or not they are using AI is just too exhausting.

I try to read my students' work carefully. It's one of the few mechanisms I have to know whether I am teaching something well and whether my students are getting it. And, over time, I see students shift their perspectives, rethink their assumptions, and have those "aha" moments. It is deeply rewarding.

And, please, don't get me wrong. I was one of those early adopters, fundamentally [rethinking](#) and [revising](#) my entire syllabus and teaching practices in order to leverage AI as (yes indeed!) supplementing my students' learning.

But I'm tired. If all is spectacle and performative, who am I to hold up the crumbling edifice? Maybe I should just embrace the simulacra. Jean Baudrillard would of course [disapprove](#): "What such machines offer," he wrote of artificial intelligence long before ChatGPT was a glimmer in Sam Altman's eye, "is the spectacle of thought, and in manipulating them people devote themselves more to the spectacle of thought than to thought itself."

But this "spectacle of thought" is what I deal with every single day. Would Professor Baudrillard really waste his time grading an AI-written paper? I think not. He is not a "mark." He would just shrug, cut corners, and have AI grade it.

So we are left with a difficult decision.

We could sheepishly accept a shared capitulation to a logic of convenience, embracing the performative spectacle of "entertainment." The problem, of course, is that we all know where that road leads, as higher education lurches ever more steadily toward the transactional horizon, and what we do — the difficult yet rewarding friction of teaching and learning — becomes yet another far-fetched story grandparents tell youngsters: I walked uphill to school, both ways, in a snowstorm ... and then, yes, I did, I had to read a book and write a six-page paper about it.

Or we could accept, after two long years, that we are in the midst of a crisis of purpose as ChatGPT strips away — efficiently, effortlessly, instantaneously — the heart and soul of what makes teaching and learning real.

It is, I admit, unclear what happens then. But I look forward to your feedback.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

Tags

Teaching & Learning

Technology

Opinion

Share



About the Author

Dan Sarofian-Butin

Dan Sarofian-Butin is a professor in the School of Education and Social Policy at Merrimack College.

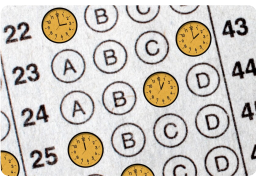
Top Articles



THE REVIEW | ESSAY
Opinion | Can the Humanities Survive AI?



THE REVIEW | ESSAY
Opinion | Flaws in AI Are Deciding Your Future. Here’s How to Fix Them.

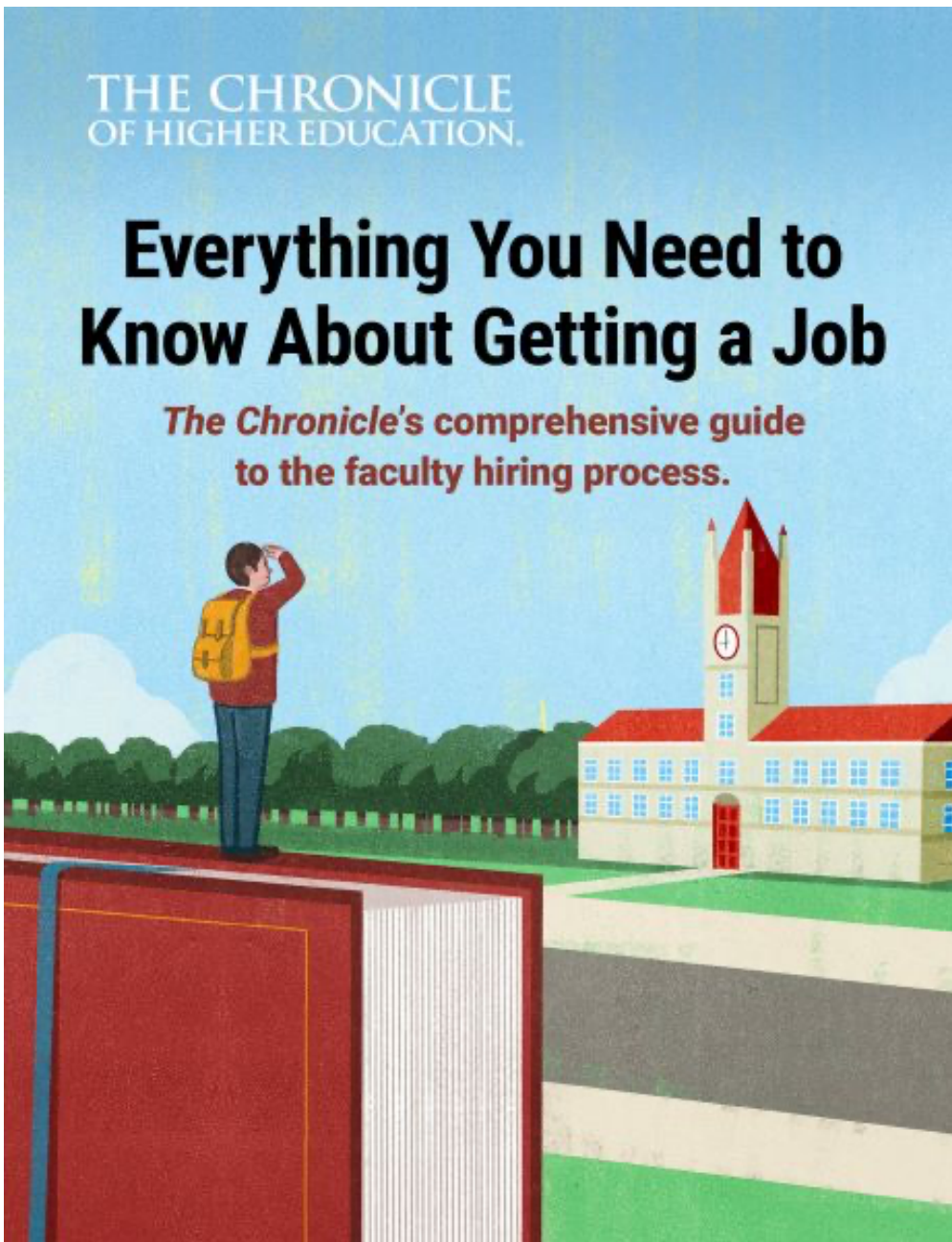


THE REVIEW | ESSAY
Are Colleges Getting Disability Accommodations All Wrong?



THE REVIEW | ESSAY
Breaking the Mold of Academic Philosophy

From the Chronicle Store



Visit The Store

What's happening on your campus?

We are tracking how these DEI laws are affecting colleges.

If you have information to share, please fill out our form.

DEI On My Campus



Jobs Recommended For You



Nicholls State University

Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs

Nicholls State University



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS

Dean of Undergraduate Education

The University of Texas at Dallas



UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC

Executive Associate Dean

University of the Pacific



Ascendium

Vice President of Education Grantmaking

Ascendium Education Group



UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON
BOTHELL

Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

University of Washington Bothell

[View More Jobs](#)

Where Higher Ed Goes to Find What's Next

Explore thousands of open opportunities today

[VISIT OUR JOB BOARD](#)

CHRONICLE
CAREERS

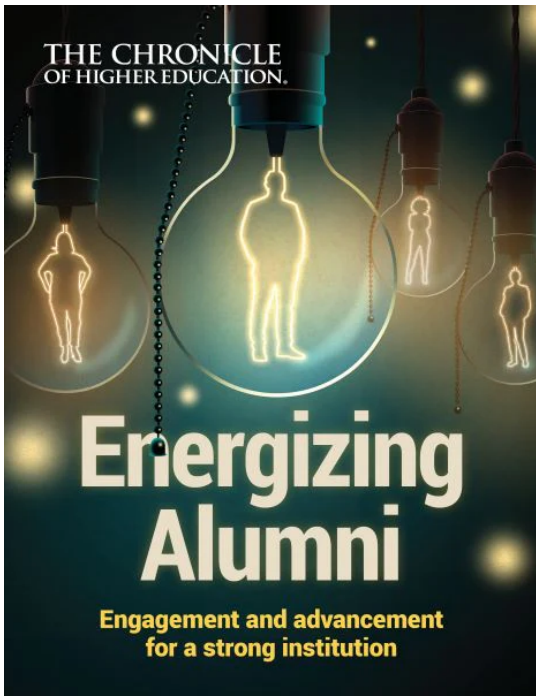
NEWSLETTERS

Teaching

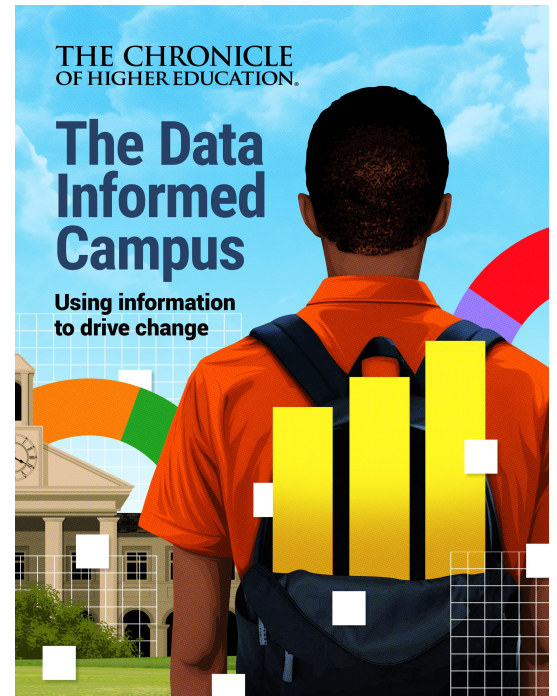
Join a community of instructors and improve your teaching and learning outcomes with our free weekly newsletter.

Sign Up

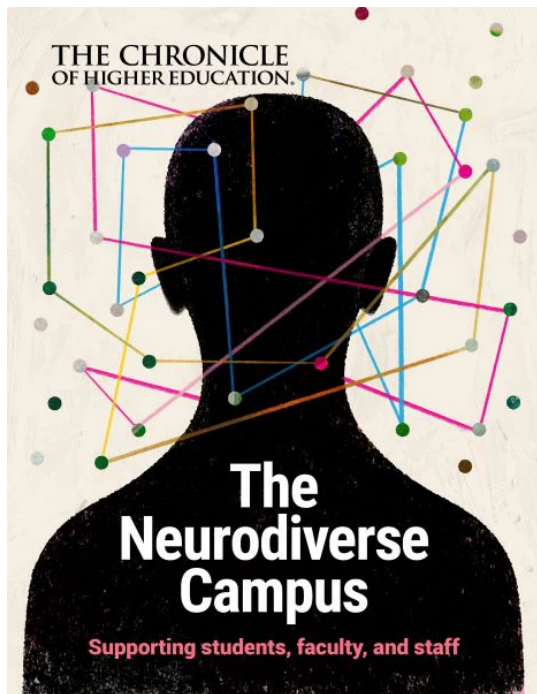
In The Chronicle Store



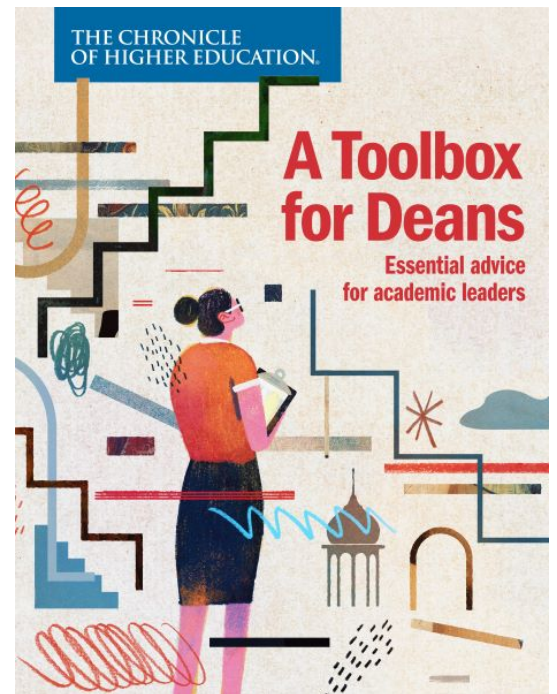
Energizing Alumni



The Data Informed Campus



The Neurodiverse Campus



A Toolbox for Deans

Get More

1255 23rd Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037
© 2025 The Chronicle of Higher Education

The Chronicle of Higher Education is academe’s most trusted resource for independent journalism, career development, and forward-looking intelligence. Our readers lead, teach, learn, and innovate with insights from *The Chronicle*.