The Reading Struggle Meets AI

The crisis has worsened, many professors say. Is it time to think differently?

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CULTURE SHIFT

By Beth McMurtrie May 22, 2025

Over nearly three decades of teaching, Mary Beth Leibham has developed a good rapport with her students. They speak frankly about their struggles in and outside of the classroom. And her courses in educational and child psychology lead naturally to discussions about learning, memory, and teaching.

That hasn't helped much, though, when it comes to trying to get them to read. Growing numbers tell her that the only time they open a textbook is to find a specific answer to a question on an assignment. Otherwise they will run the required reading through ChatGPT or some other generative-AI tool and come to class armed with a summary. She recently caught one of her strongest students putting questions from a course reading guide through AI to fill in the answers.

Leibham, a psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, has long noticed that her students are arriving at college with underdeveloped reading skills. But the growing prevalence of AI complicates this problem, she says. It misleads students by giving them a false sense of having absorbed something. That makes it harder for instructors to convince them that reading is important.

“We have a significant motivation issue on our hands,” she says.

Last year, I reported on how and why a growing number of students lack critical reading skills as well as the ability to read more than a few pages without getting distracted or mentally fatigued. Professors said many of their students could not discern key points in articles, stumbled over vocabulary words, or were unable to synthesize readings without altering their meaning. Students told their professors that reading was hard, confusing, and felt like a chore. Reading for exploration or pleasure seemed to be a thing of the past.

While no one had come up with a fix, some instructors had pieced together strategies that helped struggling students.

A year later, I checked in by phone and email with the same people to see if anything had changed. Has generative AI had an impact on student reading? Have professors come across new strategies to encourage students to read? Does it help that we are another year away from the pandemic?

With a couple of exceptions, these professors told me the reading crisis has endured or gotten worse. In classes like English or religion, where reading is central to how and what faculty members teach, students struggle and class discussions are halting. None of this is surprising, perhaps, since we know that there are no quick fixes. The professors' frustration, sadness, and confusion is palpable. Yet they are determined to do what they can to motivate their students. Here's how they describe their classrooms.

AI is giving students a false sense of comprehension.

Several faculty members say student use of AI tools to summarize reading has been the most significant change since last year. Students can generate a few talking points and head into the classroom, feeling prepared.

"[N]ot only is that not really true," writes Andrew Tobolowsky, a professor of religious studies at the College of William & Mary, "when I have them respond to passages of various kinds in the classroom that I didn't assign at home, many struggle, or seem to struggle, to arrive at any real takeaways, even so far as what literally happens over the course of the text."

He wonders if the pressures students feel might contribute to their being less willing to say what they think. Either way, Tobolowsky has started giving more in-class midterms instead of take-home essay assignments. That way, he says, students have to put some energy into reading and remembering what they have read.

Theresa MacPhail, an associate professor in the program of science and technology studies at Stevens Institute of Technology, who felt last year like she had lowered her expectations almost as far as they could go, says now she has essentially "given up."

"It was a losing battle and quite frankly I can't see how to win it with AI in the room with us," she writes. "They're just feeding texts into the AI or having AI give them summaries of books and articles."

MacPhail now assigns shorter pieces, podcasts, and videos — such as documentaries and YouTube explainers — in most of her courses. She crafts her lectures to go over what was in the assigned reading. She asks students to take turns presenting on the readings during the first 20 minutes of class, which assures her that at least a handful of them have read the material.

Students see reading as counterproductive.

Does reading often confuse students? Chris Hakala thinks so. "[T]he disturbing thing for me is that for many of our students, they are saying that reading is a time waste that makes things harder rather than more understandable," writes Hakala, a psychology professor at Springfield College who directs the Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship.

He describes this as a crisis, but "it's a crisis of THINKING as much as it is about reading," he writes. "Thinking requires work. Reading requires thinking. It's difficult to read and think, so folks shortcut it."

This idea that students find reading ineffective and stressful comes up again and again

in conversations with faculty members. It likely ties into the foundational challenges students have with reading comprehension. If you trip over words, don't understand how the parts of a chapter or academic article fit together, or are unclear what your professors want you to glean from a reading, then the act of reading can lead to confusion rather than clarity. It stands to reason that a summary generated by a chatbot would at least give you an orientation toward what your professor wants you to know.

Curious how much students have read for pleasure, Troy Spier, an assistant professor of English and linguistics at Florida A&M University, asks them every year to describe their reading history. Did their parents read books to them at night? Did they go to the library often?

Increasingly the answers to this question have shown that people simply don't read in-depth or see their parents read. Instead, Spier says, students are overstimulated through reading almost exclusively on their phones.

"Students have never been taught to engage in slow reading. Everything in their lives is fast," he writes. "So, when I ask students how much time they spent completing the reading for the week, which was intended to take four to five hours, they invariably respond with far, far lower numbers. Worse yet, when I ask them to pull out their phones to see how much time they spent scrolling, posting, etc., during that week, I receive (comparatively) moderate numbers like 'twelve hours' and far more extreme numbers like 'twenty-four hours.' That's utterly heartbreaking."

Spier notes that the decline in reading goes hand-in-hand with the decline of other skills. Almost none of his students have looked through an online database before checking out a library book. Pre-reading, or effective browsing, is not something they are familiar with.

"When I first started teaching, it was a little bit of an obstacle to convince students that the system established by the Library of Congress was useful and pragmatic," he writes.

“They had at least some facility with the Dewey Decimal, though. Now, however, they have neither, so I need to start from nothing.”

Professors’ habits may be part of the problem.

For insights into students’ perspectives, I called Liz Norell, associate director of instructional support at the University of Mississippi’s Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. She has dug into the reading dilemma on her own campus, surveying students and conducting focus groups to find out what students think about reading and whether they are doing it.

She found that students have two main complaints. By far their biggest gripe, they told her, is that the assigned reading rarely gets talked about in class. If the professor doesn’t refer to it, they said, why should they think it’s important?

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The second reason — and perhaps a more complicated one — is that they don't really understand what they are supposed to be reading *for.* Some said they show up to class having done the reading, yet are not able to answer the professor's questions.

Norell says she can relate. She takes classes at the university for fun, across a range of

subjects. Recently, she took a graduate-level sociology course on race and ethnicity. A political scientist by training, Norell came to the first class having read the assigned text and prepared to talk about the relationships between concepts in the book and how to apply what she read to the world at large. But the professor asked students instead to describe in detail the theory of the book. She found herself frantically flipping pages, looking for answers.

"I've had that experience in multiple classes," she says. "If I'm having that trouble, I can't even imagine how undergrads are feeling, where, maybe, the opacity of academic writing only makes that harder."

Norell isn't convinced that fewer students are doing the reading than before. (Students told her they complete their readings about half of the time. And studies show that students have long skimmed their readings.) Rather, she thinks professors may be paying more attention to the issue. "My personal sense is that this has always been a problem but for whatever reason it's more visible now."

She also thinks that the pandemic has had a lasting effect, and that "everyone, students and faculty alike, have a different orientation toward how they want to spend their time and what is really important," she says. "My students are just deeply worried about the world, as many of us are. And it just doesn't seem like a huge important thing that they get every single scrap of reading done for class."

It's not all bad.

Pockets exist where students seem more willing and able to read. Adam Kotsko, an assistant professor in the Shimer Great Books School at North Central College, who published a widely read essay for *Slate* in early 2024 on the reading problems he was witnessing among his students, sees improvement. "Although I tended to downplay the pandemic angle, it does seem like the worst problems are fading as the last cohorts most intensely affected by the pandemic have started to age out," writes Kotsko.

"What I've found in the last year or so is that I may have cut too far in some cases, leaving not enough to talk about in my discussion classes," he writes. He's planning to increase reading levels — starting with shorter readings and gradually building. "Routinely doing 30 pages a day still seems unattainable," he says, "but I think I can get to 20 as the norm and 30 as an occasional stretch."

It may help that Kotsko teaches small, discussion-based classes. Another professor who teaches small-enrollment courses, Eileen G'Sell, a senior lecturer of writing at Washington University in St. Louis, also sees progress.

> **"It wasn't the content but their lack of familiarity reading actual books with actual chapters."**

This year, she writes, "I had more students who seemed genuinely invested in the readings assigned." Some of her students in a modern media course, she noted, did complain about reading a book, Kyle Chayka's *Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture.* (She described this in a *Chronicle* essay last year, *Algorithms and the Problem of Intellectual Passivity*.)

"It wasn't the content but their lack of familiarity reading actual books with actual chapters," she observes. "Some of my students did share, though, that they knew it was important to learn how to harness the focus and attention to *read* physical books. I did not regret assigning the whole book, and think that instructors who have the bandwidth — and resources — to do so should make it part of the learning experience."

Directed reading can help.

Many professors continue to adjust their expectations, scaling back the amount of reading they ask students to do and building time into class to review what students

were supposed to read on their own.

This semester Leibham, the Wisconsin psychology professor, started using structured reading guides. Students are expected to fill in each section, answering questions such as "what is the purpose or objective of this article?" "What are the three main ideas?" and so on. The guides are due an hour or so before class begins.

Students "are capable, and they are able to meet the expectations, but it seems to require a lot more scaffolding than it ever has," Leibham says, noting that some of her students are essentially working full time while taking a full course load. Given their lack of time, she sees the guides as a tool to help them focus more efficiently, even if that approach is open to AI misuse as well.

Stuart Patterson also gives students something to look for. A colleague of Kotsko's and chair of the Shimer Great Books School at North Central College, Patterson teaches a course about power: different forms, bases, and uses. Students use definitions of power to analyze a variety of narratives, including children's stories and news articles. He notes that they particularly loved reading *Animal Farm* through that lens.

"Of course, giving students something specific to look for in a text is a pretty basic strategy for teaching reading," he writes. "That said, I realize I've often done less of this kind of directed reading in my courses only because I (like most professors of humanities) have a bias for promoting the kind of undirected, immersive reading that we'd all love to see resurge but that seems inevitably on the wane." He has had some success guiding students' reading more actively.

In addition to reading guides, professors use other accountability strategies to motivate their students, such as reading quizzes and in-class essays based on readings. Students are more likely to read, they say, if it directly affects their grades.

Spier, of Florida A&M, points to two books students have found eye-opening:

Gulbahar Haitiwaji's *How I Survived a Chinese 'Reeducation Camp,'* and Richard Reeves' *Of Boys and Men*. Because Spier includes an essay-length question about the readings on his exams, they do the work.

"Both texts have been illuminating for students and have sparked great discussions," he writes. "Without the inclusion of exams, though, I'm convinced that my students would continue on their merry way without paying mind to the fact that they, like most of us, live in their own bubbles."

The multimedia future is already here.

Susan Blum, an anthropology professor at the University of Notre Dame, also mourns the decline of a reading culture, but has been struck by how her own tastes have changed.

"There are old articles, old journal articles, that I've always used, and I look at them from 2025 eyes, and I think, Oh, I don't want to read that," she says. The layout seems boring and stiff. There are too many words on the page. The author takes too long to get to the point.

It makes her wonder if we're all changing our reading habits. She now assigns shorter, more colloquial works that may include multiple elements: text, images, videos, interviews. She still aims for each work to be "accurate and responsible and scholarly in its underpinnings but more approachable." She likes The Conversation, for example, which bills itself as offering "academic rigor, journalistic flair."

> **"I no longer believe reading is uniquely capable of educating."**

I asked her if she thinks, as many faculty members do, that there's no substitute for

reading.

“I feel that but I no longer think that,” she says. “I no longer buy that argument. I think people can be transported by film and television and music. Yes, there are the kinds of abstract arguments that we get in long texts, which is why I still write them. But I no longer believe reading is uniquely capable of educating.”

Patterson, of North Central College, has studied and taught about the evolution of media, from the introduction of writing, which led to the decline of oral culture, to the introduction of moving pictures, which largely supplanted novels in popular consumption, to the internet, which has moved us toward multimedia communication.

He used to teach a course on the evolution of reading but hasn’t in awhile, he writes, “in part because the demands of the reading are greater than many of my current students can handle.”

He tries, instead, to “keep an eye on the longer term regarding how our media are remaking our society over all.

“I sometimes find this view unpopular with colleagues who are devoted to the idea that learning comes primarily through reading. I don’t disagree, at least for the time being, but I wonder what place reading will have in our educational system in even a few decades.”

Patterson thinks, for example, that students may have to learn higher-order concepts faster than before, because AI can process so much information for them. He doesn’t think reading will disappear, “But I think the most interesting questions right now concern the nature of education itself.”

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

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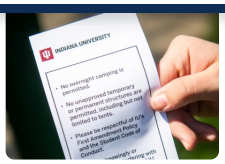

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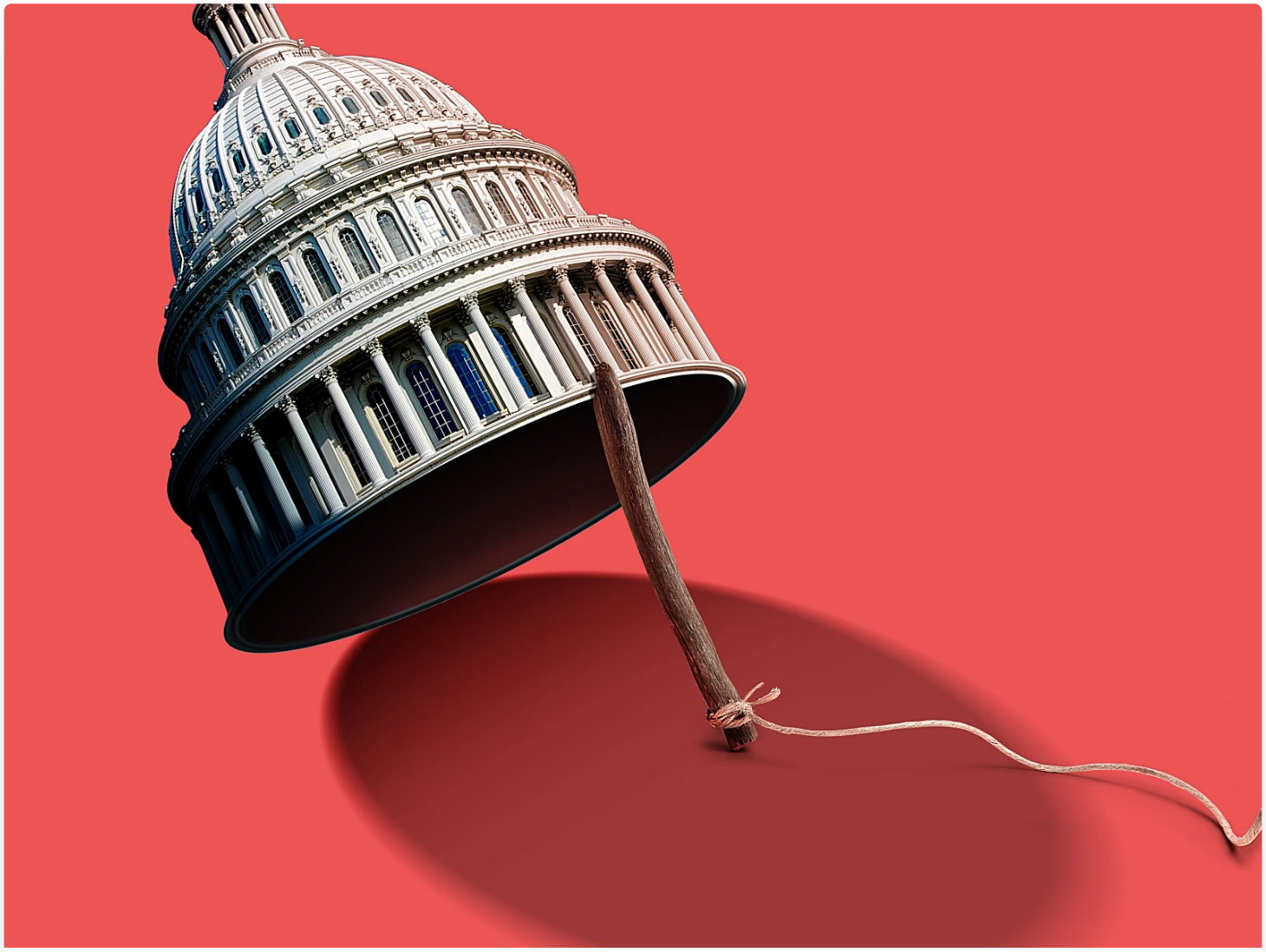

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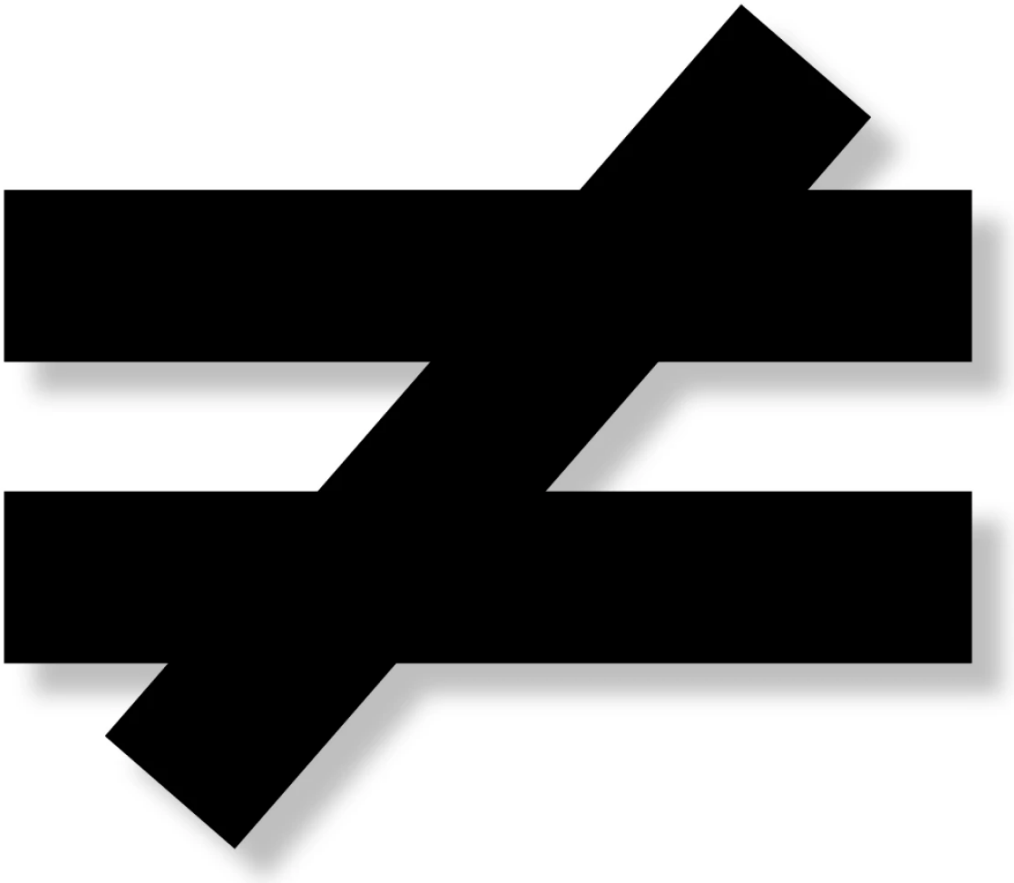

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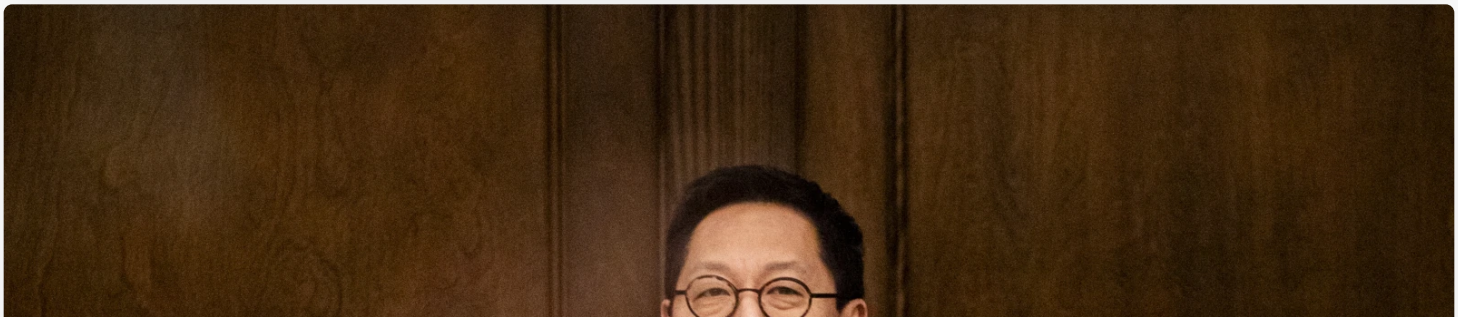

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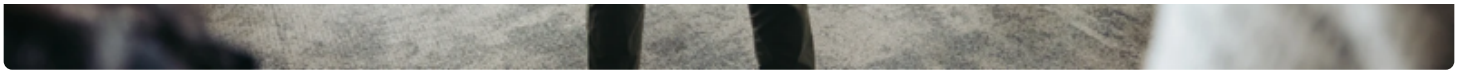

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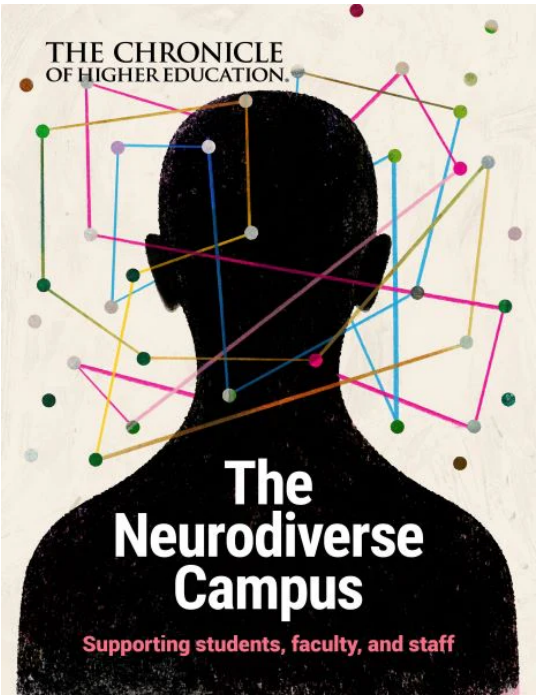

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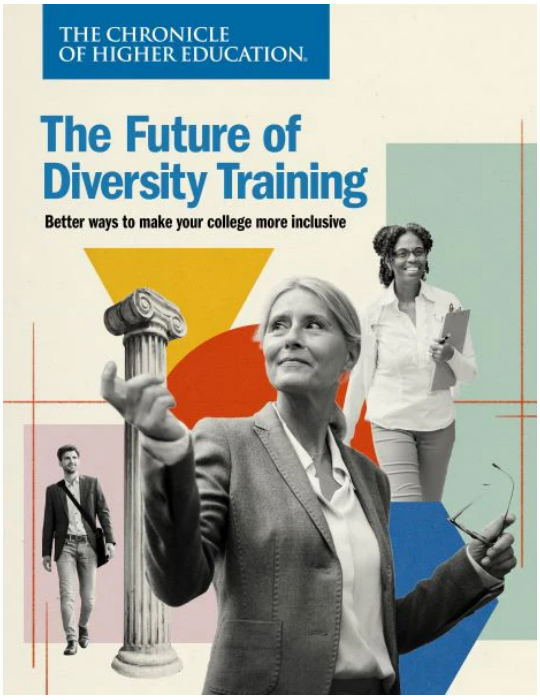

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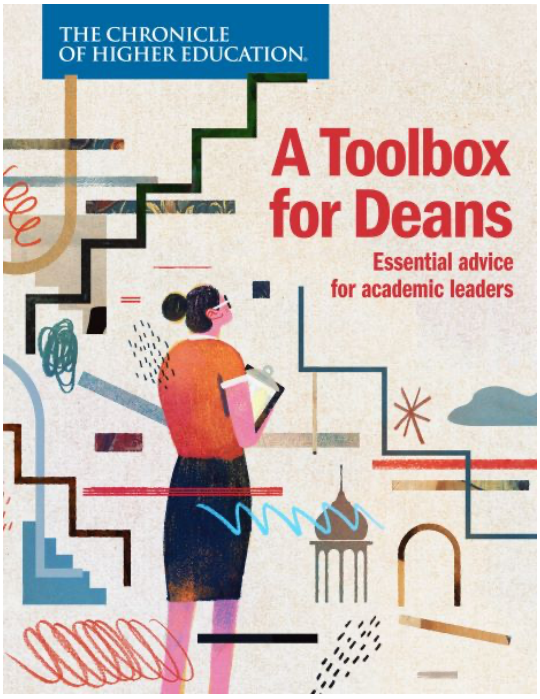

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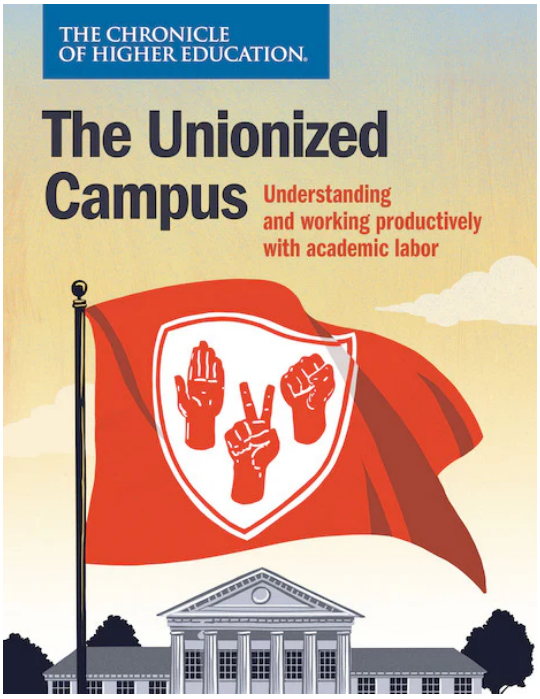

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