



Daily Briefing

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From: Rick Seltzer

Subject: Daily Briefing: Two demotions and a firing in 24 hours

Good morning, and welcome to **Wednesday, September 10**. Rick Seltzer wrote today's Briefing. Get in touch: dailybriefing@chronicle.com.



What's in today's Briefing? Linda McMahon wants college to be hard. An early look at a plan to rework the liberal arts. Conflict-of-interest claims at George Mason University. But first, right-wing criticism of a Texas professor led to a ...

Lightning-fast academic purge

Leaders at Texas A&M University scrambled to respond after a state lawmaker targeted a children's literature course, *The Chronicle's* [Gavin Escott reports](#).

Texas A&M University fired a professor and removed a dean and a department head from their leadership positions in the public institution's College of Arts and Sciences in a whirlwind 24 hours spanning Monday and Tuesday.

Administrators' alleged crime: signing off on instruction that didn't match a course's published description.

- **"If we allow different course content to be taught from what is advertised, we let our students down,"** Texas A&M's president, Mark A. Welsh III, [said in a statement on social media](#).

But a culture-war issue is at the center of the episode. State Rep. Brian Harrison, a Republican, [posted a series](#) of recordings and pictures to X that he said were provided by a whistleblower.

- **A student objected to a classroom discussion of gender and sexuality**, saying "transgenderism" conflicts with her religious beliefs and with an executive order from the Trump administration.
- **The professor responded that the student could leave**, but that the professor has a right to teach the lesson.

Another online recording showed Texas A&M's president initially dismissed the idea of firing the professor. And a third clip captured Welsh saying, "There is a professional reason to teach some of these courses."

Right-wing critics piled on in short order. Harrison posted the clips online around noon on Monday, calling for federal and state investigations. Other Republican lawmakers demanded that Welsh be removed as president, [The Texas Tribune reported](#). Harmeet K. Dhillon, assistant attorney general for the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, [promised to](#) look into the incident.

Texas A&M handed out punishment in two steps. Welsh announced he'd demoted the College of Arts and Sciences dean and English department head before midnight on Monday. Then Tuesday he announced the professor's termination.

- "This summer, a children's literature course contained content that did not align with any reasonable expectation of standard curriculum," Welsh [said in another statement](#). "At that time, I made it clear to our academic leadership that course content must match catalog descriptions ... However, I learned late yesterday that

despite that directive, the college continued to teach content that was inconsistent with the published course description for another course this fall.”

A course audit is next. Deans and department heads have been ordered to make sure course content aligns with descriptions.

The bigger question: By focusing on whether the professor taught what had been promised, are Texas A&M’s leaders distracting from the question of whether the professor [had the right](#) to teach the material at all? Concerns already ran high that [public scrutiny](#) of syllabi could lead to censorship. And it won’t be easy to litigate such complex issues in the fever swamps of social media.

 **Read the full story:** [A Classroom Clash Over Course Content Went Viral. Texas A&M Fired the Instructor and Removed 2 Administrators.](#)

Quote of the day

“College should be a trial by fire.”

— Linda McMahon, U.S. secretary of education

The Education Secretary laid out her vision for higher ed at Hillsdale College on Monday, [saying](#) college should inspire “students to struggle and strive.” She recommended college leaders:

- Prioritize students’ personal growth.
- Seek and serve the truth.
- Preserve and defend civilization.
- Model intellectual leadership and produce future thinkers and leaders.

Critics came out: The speech misrepresented “the reality on college campuses today” and ignored administrators working to help students, Ross Mugler, acting president of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, [told Inside Higher Ed](#). “Higher ed isn’t broken; it’s adapting,” he said.

The bigger question: McMahon warned that alternatives threaten to replace the four-year degree but said the country must cultivate “civic leaders — some would call them ‘elites’ — from among our best and brightest.” It’s a clear rejection of “college for all,” arguably with a very 1950s feel. But how much room does it leave for the less-selective colleges that enroll the vast majority of students today?

 ***The Chronicle* annotated McMahon’s speech with key details and context.** [See it here.](#)

A new liberal-arts model?

The Daily Briefing has an early look at a Massachusetts college’s career-focused redesign, which will be unveiled later today.

Arthur Levine quite literally wrote the book on higher ed’s uncertain future. The former president of Columbia University’s Teachers College and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation is a co-author of [The Great Upheaval](#), on preparing for a world reshaped by “intersecting forces of technological innovation, globalization, and demographic change.”

He has the chance to put his ideas into action at Brandeis University. Levine was named president of the Massachusetts liberal-arts college [in July](#) after taking on the role in an interim capacity [in November](#).

Levine’s “Brandeis Plan” promises a “sweeping redesign” of the liberal-arts college when it’s unveiled today in Washington, D.C. That includes:


- **A “unified academic model”** joining professional schools with the liberal arts.
- **Requiring students to complete at least one internship** or apprenticeship.
- **Four years of career counseling** for students, starting at orientation.
- **A “second transcript” students can use to show skills and microcredentials** they gained at Brandeis. It’s supposed to complement academic records. The testing giant ETS has been enlisted to develop it.

- **A redesigned core curriculum** that features skills valued by employers and experiential teaching.

Brandeis is spending \$25 million on the program. Some of the money will go to a Center for Careers and Applied Liberal Arts that's intended to help prepare students for a world changed by artificial intelligence and other technology.

"Today's students need more than knowledge. They need the skills, experiences, and confidence to lead in a world we cannot yet predict," Levine said in a statement.

The bigger picture: Brandeis [isn't the first](#) to try elements like improved advising, experiential learning, revised core curricula, and showcases of students' career skills. If Levine really is to forge a new model for liberal-arts institutions, his plan will need to be unique enough to attract attention and students but simple enough to copy elsewhere. Brandeis may have cleared at least one hurdle for such an ambitious goal — it says 88 percent of faculty members endorsed the plan.

 **I'll be interviewing Levine as part of next week's Chronicle Festival**, where we'll surely dive deeper into this. Nancy Gonzales, provost at Arizona State University, will join us in a conversation about leading in this unique moment. [Learn more and register here.](#)

Quick hits

- **Virginia Democrats take aim at university board chair:** Senators [accused](#) Charles Stimson, the board's rector at George Mason University, of a conflict of interest because he's also a senior legal fellow and top adviser to the president of the conservative Heritage Foundation. A report from that foundation last week criticized George Mason and said the Trump administration has justification to withhold federal funding from colleges that violate civil-rights protections. The Trump administration has accused George Mason of discriminatory hiring that prioritized people of color. (*The Chronicle*)
- **U. of Oregon cuts aren't as deep as feared:** The flagship [will lay off](#) 60 employees, including nontenure-track faculty members, as it seeks to close a structural deficit of

nearly \$30 million. But no tenure-track faculty members will lose their jobs, and degree programs won't be eliminated, after [an intense lobbying campaign](#) by professors. (*The Chronicle*)

- **Students protest D.C. crackdown:** College students in Washington, D.C., [walked out](#) of classes on Tuesday to protest President Trump's takeover of law enforcement in the capital. (*The Washington Post*)
- **Students who are parents need help:** [A new report](#) suggests helping parenting students pay for tuition, draw emergency funding, and access wraparound services like child care and transportation. Parenting students often face unsustainable workloads and high child-care costs if they want to earn a degree and improve their earnings potential. (EdTrust)

Footnote

No series of freshmen move-in photos would be complete without a scene of families building shelving for a dorm room. Fortunately, Sacred Heart University, in Fairfield, Connecticut, offered the photograph below, taken by Daniel Passapera.

Sacred Heart [handed out](#) to first-year students more than 2,000 wellness bags that were packed with Bigelow Tea products. Like Sacred Heart, Bigelow is based in Fairfield. Hopefully all that newly built shelving opens up just the spot for a warm mug to steep.