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Subject: Daily Briefing: Will AI really rot students' brains?

Good morning, and welcome to **Friday, September 26**. Brock Read wrote today's Briefing. Get in touch: dailybriefing@chronicle.com.

 **What's in today's Briefing?** A professor who bashed Charlie Kirk gets his job back — for now. Scholars puzzle over the government's grant policies. Which university is selling its president's house? But first ...

Brain rot? Maybe not.

Perhaps you've read the study, or heard some of the chatter about it. It's got a catchy title: [Your Brain on ChatGPT.](#) And it delivers an equally memorable conclusion: People who turn to AI for writing help demonstrate lower neural connectivity than those who go it alone.

Commentators leaped to a conclusion: Here's proof that generative AI is making us dumber! But it's not that simple. And misunderstanding the study's findings could

hamper work to help students navigate learning in a period of intense technological change. [Our Beth McMurtrie reports on the study](#), on other research into AI's effects on learning, and on what teaching experts make of it all.

Let's start with the science. The study, conducted by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and not yet peer reviewed, measured electrical activity in the brains of people as they wrote short essays based on SAT prompts. Some of the writers used ChatGPT; some used a search engine; some used no technology at all.

- **A key difference emerged:** The cognitive activity of ChatGPT users “scaled down.” The task of completing an essay became easier, but the “rich associative processes” that come with creative writing diminished.

That doesn't mean AI is causing “brain rot.” The authors reject that term, [along with many others](#). Think instead of what one psychologist describes as “cognitive offloading”: the process of relying on something else, whether a technological tool or another person, to free up the brain for other work.

Cognitive offloading isn't necessarily good or bad. But it is something to be reckoned with. AI tools now present students with countless opportunities to lighten their cognitive loads. Outsourcing some mental labor might be sensible, even necessary; pawning off too many tasks, with too little discrimination, could undercut the development of critical-thinking skills. A growing body of evidence suggests that students learn more when their use of AI is carefully guided.

Rather than bemoan a general “dumbing down,” watch out for these potential downsides of unfettered AI use:

- **Homogeneity:** The MIT researchers found that essays written with the aid of ChatGPT showed evidence of groupthink. For example: Many essays on happiness coalesced around the idea that it's closely tied to career success. One study warned that overreliance on AI could generate a “closed cultural feedback loop.”
- **Isolation:** The real threat of AI, write two professors at St. John's College in [an essay for The Chronicle Review](#), is “not that it will steal our words, but that it will steal

our ability to think and work together.” If students find themselves turning to ChatGPT instead of their peers, they may find the experience of learning “far more solitary, far lonelier, than ever before.”

The bigger question: Many students sense that their reliance on AI is changing, and that their brains might be changing with it. “It’s not like every student is having some existential crisis,” says Annette Vee, an associate professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. “But I do think their personal relationship with the AI is largely unexamined.” How can professors help those students understand — and interrogate — that relationship?

 **Read Beth’s full reporting:** [The Student Brain on AI](#)

 **Go deeper with *The Chronicle Review*:** [AI Is Making the College Experience Lonelier](#)

Speech after the Kirk killing

Two news developments augur trends worth watching in the wake of the murder of Charlie Kirk, Turning Point USA’s founder — a rise in campus rabble-rousing and legal battles over the firings of Kirk’s faculty critics:

- **Tennessee State ejects MAGA “debaters”:** A small group [arrived at the historically Black institution](#) Tuesday with film equipment and signs critiquing diversity, equity, and inclusion in tow. University officials say its members were escorted off campus “without incident” because they had not sought approval to demonstrate. The group’s so-called “Fearless Tour” of college campuses is inspired by Kirk’s frequent campus events, its leaders say. (*TheGrio*)
- **Professor who criticized Kirk is reinstated — for now:** A federal judge on Wednesday [temporarily reinstated](#) a professor at the University of South Dakota who had been placed on administrative leave after calling Kirk a “Nazi.” The judge wrote that Phillip Michael Hook, a tenured professor of art, “spoke as a citizen and his speech was on a matter of public concern.” Expect more such decisions to come: *The Chronicle* [has identified 26 professors](#) disciplined for making negative comments about Kirk. (*The Washington Post, The Chronicle*)

- **Meanwhile, the firings keep coming:** Iowa State University [has dismissed a financial-aid adviser](#) who posted on social media that Kirk “got what was coming and I’m glad he’s rotting in hell now.” (*Iowa Public Radio*)

The grant-funding guessing game

In the broad strokes, the Trump administration has been remarkably unabashed about identifying the academic research it deplores and stamping out federal funding of that work. Gender identity? A nonstarter. Racial inequity? Too divisive. Climate change? Vaccine hesitancy? No longer priorities. That’s nothing if not clear, right?

But scholars say determining what research will pass the government’s muster can feel like nailing Jell-O to the wall. Our Stephanie Lee shared two eye-opening examples with Jack Stripling [on *The Chronicle’s College Matters* podcast](#).

- **Research on redlining:** Jay Bhattacharya, director of the National Institutes of Health, reportedly told his staff that research about structural racism is “unscientific.” He went on to say that redlining — the banking practice that reinforced racial segregation — was a legitimate field of study. Yet the NIH *has* canceled grants studying redlining. What to make of that? Researchers have no idea.
- **Writing around “racism”:** An epidemiologist told Stephanie that her application for an NIH grant had been stalled for months before she finally spoke with a program officer. The officer’s suggestion: replace the application’s mentions of “structural racism” with softer language about “health disparities across races.” The scholar was left to decide whether to stand her ground or tweak the document.

The bigger picture: It’s easy to view federal support of research as a simple binary: Either the money’s there, or it’s not. But scientists say stop-start funding, guessing games about the status of grant applications, and mixed messages about what topics are truly *verboten* create an atmosphere of instability bordering on entropy. “Now these scientists I’m talking to don’t feel like they can recommend that path for the next generation *anymore*,” Stephanie says.

Quick hits

- **Lawsuit accuses Los Angeles Film School of gaming accreditation:** Two administrators-turned-whistleblowers say the institution [created temporary sham](#) jobs as part of a scheme to juice its student outcomes, retain accreditation, and access federal student-aid funds. Representatives of the film school have denied the charges. (*Los Angeles Times*)
- **Should college rankings reward good governance?** The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges says it is “strongly encouraging” *U.S. News & World Report* and other rankers to do so. A spokesman told *The Chronicle* the organization is willing to partner with publications to help them determine how governance could be measured. (AGB)
- **Michigan State U. classrooms feel the pain of budget cuts:** Among [the complaints levied](#) by students and professors: Classes have gotten larger, teaching assistants have vanished, and course reading packets haven’t arrived on schedule. (*The State News*)
- **Two Syracuse U. students arrested in antisemitic incident:** One of the students [allegedly threw a bag of pork](#) into a Jewish fraternity house during Rosh Hashanah observations, police said. (NBC News)
- **Hazing punishment at Harvard:** The university [has suspended its student symphony orchestra](#) for the remainder of the fall semester after investigating allegations that new members were blindfolded and given vodka shots at a bonding retreat. (*The Harvard Crimson*)

Weekend reads

- [Why Aren’t Professors Braver?](#) (*The Chronicle Review*)
- [A Professor Explores What Makes the In-Person Classroom So Valuable](#) (*The Chronicle*)
- [Sometimes We Resist AI for Good Reasons](#) (*The Chronicle*)
- [The Grand Strategy Behind Trump’s Crackdown on Academia](#) (*The New York Times*)
- [The College Board Capitulates to Trump](#) (*Washington Monthly*)

- [What Happened to Harvard Business School's \\$25-Million Racial Equity Plan? The School Won't Say.](#) (*The Harvard Crimson*)
- [After Protests and Layoffs, Where Does Emerson College Go From Here?](#) (*The Boston Globe*)

Footnote

At the risk of sounding unprofessional: Hey, take a look at [this cool Zillow listing I found!](#)

It's a century-old house in Missoula, Mont., built in the Italian Renaissance style, and it's got a heck of a lot going for it: [Glorious porches. Built-in bookcases. A dramatic bay window. Mahogany](#) and [leaded glass](#) everywhere. Nearly 7,000 square feet of space on almost an acre of land. Seems like it's in a good neighborhood, too.

There's just one thing it's missing: the collection of ramps, doorways, and other accouterments that would make it compliant with the Americans With Disabilities Act. And that's why the University of Montana is putting this mansion — its presidential residence since 1974 — up for sale.

Since the house is a state building, it *has* to be ADA-compliant. Retrofitting it would have been prohibitively expensive, Dave Kuntz, a university spokesman, [explained to Mansion Global](#), a luxury real-estate listings site. "So we determined the best way forward is to sell the property and use the money toward student-facing programs."

Think of it this way: If you plunk down \$2,995,000, you're not just getting six bedrooms, six bathrooms, and a three-car garage. You're also doing your part — and then some — to enrich the UM student experience.

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