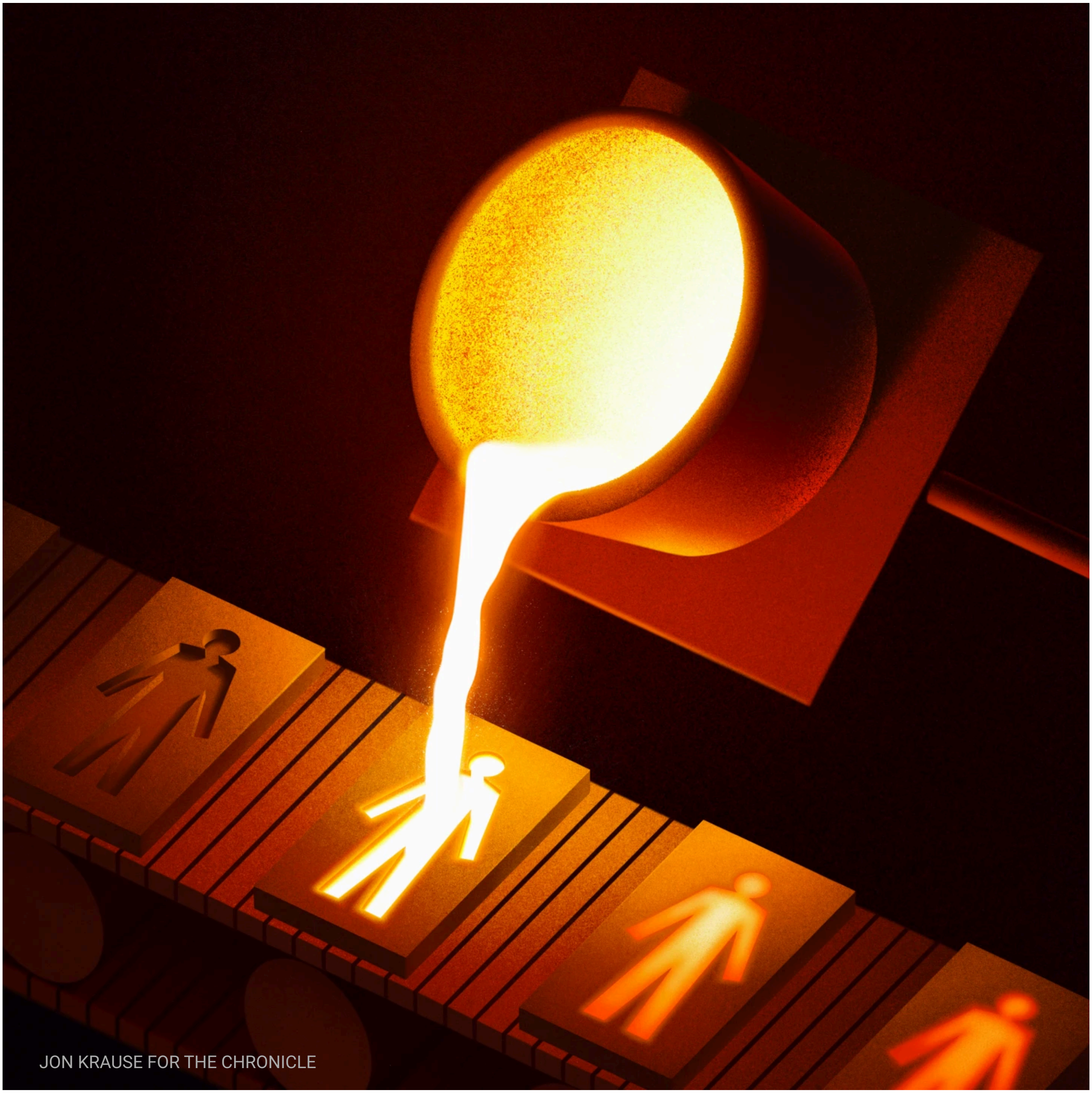
Some Assembly Still Required

How K-12 reforms and recent disruptions created Gen Z’s baffling habits.



JON KRAUSE FOR THE CHRONICLE

KIDS THESE DAYS

By Beckie Supiano December 20, 2024

Tatania Campbell had always done well in school. But when she started at the University of Virginia, she realized that her education had some gaps. She came to see that her knowledge of history was spotty. And she didn't know how to write the kind of essay her professors expected.

Campbell, who plans to graduate in May, is an education major, so her coursework has deepened her understanding of how these gaps developed and why they've endured. Test prep was a major focus. Throughout the year, students at her Houston charter school would take benchmark tests to gauge how they were likely to perform on the year-end state exam. Afterward, instead of moving on to the next unit in, say, English, students would spend time practicing questions like the ones they had missed. She didn't learn how to write an essay, because high-school writing served as practice for producing formulaic responses that would be scored well on standardized tests.

"I learned how to write for AP exams in high school," Campbell says. In college, "I had to learn how to write just to write." She figured it out, Campbell says, in a required writing class her first year, through trial and error and getting lots of feedback.

In retrospect, Campbell sees how her school designed instruction so that it yielded high test scores that would excite donors and pull in funding. Short-term performance was, across the country, emphasized more than long-term learning.

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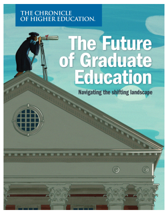
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The pandemic, which arrived when Campbell was in the 11th grade, further complicated her cohort's adjustment to college. During emergency online teaching, she says, high-school teachers worked with students to forge a path through their classes, and they got used to having a say. Many students still expect a level of leniency that most professors no longer think the situation calls for.

Campbell's schooling exemplifies many of the forces that have shaped the current batch of traditional-age undergraduates. These students, many professors observe, don't seem to be engaging in their academic work in the same ways earlier groups did. They struggle to read long texts — and even with reading comprehension. They expect to receive detailed specifications on each assignment and to earn credit for attempting to complete it, regardless of the quality of their work. They require more time and support to get through smaller amounts of course content.

“No one can tell you with any certainty what the cause, or causes, of this are,” says Daniel Koretz, a research professor of education at Harvard University. “It’s almost certainly causes, plural, but we simply don’t have the kind of data that would allow us to ascribe cause with any confidence.”

“It’s abundantly clear that test-based accountability is a plausible contributor to this.”

Broader social and cultural changes have been buffeting schools for years: An ever-increasing to-do list of responsibilities have been assigned to schools and teachers. The rise of new media has fractured students’ attention. Changing leisure habits have diminished the importance of reading. These existing trends were then hit with the shock of the pandemic, in ways education scholars are still just starting to make sense of.

Koretz also points to one of the key factors in Campbell’s experience. “It’s abundantly clear,” he says, “that test-based accountability is a plausible contributor to this.”

The accountability movement formalized and deepened by No Child Left Behind, the landmark federal law signed in 2002, was intended to raise the floor of student performance. Its intent was laudable: Requiring states to test students and publicly report results for both the whole student population and subgroups would make it harder to hide students who were minorities, low-income, English-language learners, or in special-education programs and not faring well. The law, which had bipartisan support, never quite lived up to its ambitions. But it did set off a series of unintended consequences that help explain the way today’s college students operate.

“We have roughly 35 years of studies showing that high-stakes testing has had profound effects on K-12 education,” Koretz says, “and that many of those effects are undesirable.”

Some of those undesirable effects are relatively simple to trace.

For example, holding schools accountable for test scores didn’t just change the way the tested subjects were taught. It also shaped what was taught in the first place. This is an example of a phenomenon called reallocation, says Koretz. It involved “a de-emphasis on subjects that are not tested” so that schools spent more instructional time on things that could boost their scores.

“Some of the things that got cut are things that would require substantial reading, substantial thinking, and analytical thought,” he says, “and it was replaced by drills in math and reading.” That’s a loss, not only because students like Campbell have weaker preparation in subjects like history, but because a good history class would likely make them better at the kinds of reading professors want them to do in courses across many disciplines.

Subjects that were not tested, like science or social studies, were played down, Koretz says. There was also reallocation within the tested subjects, which were taught with an eye to making short-term gains on test scores.

Test design requires taking a subject, like algebra, and testing on a discrete sample of it. The idea is that the way students perform on the sample can be extrapolated to their understanding of the whole subject. But that notion breaks down if test-takers know what will be in the sample.

Koretz gives an example. Years ago, he says, the Princeton Review figured out that the test taken by 10th graders in Massachusetts regularly included a question on the Pythagorean theorem. Given the limited number of questions on the test, he says, knowing what one of them will likely cover can make a real difference on the final score.

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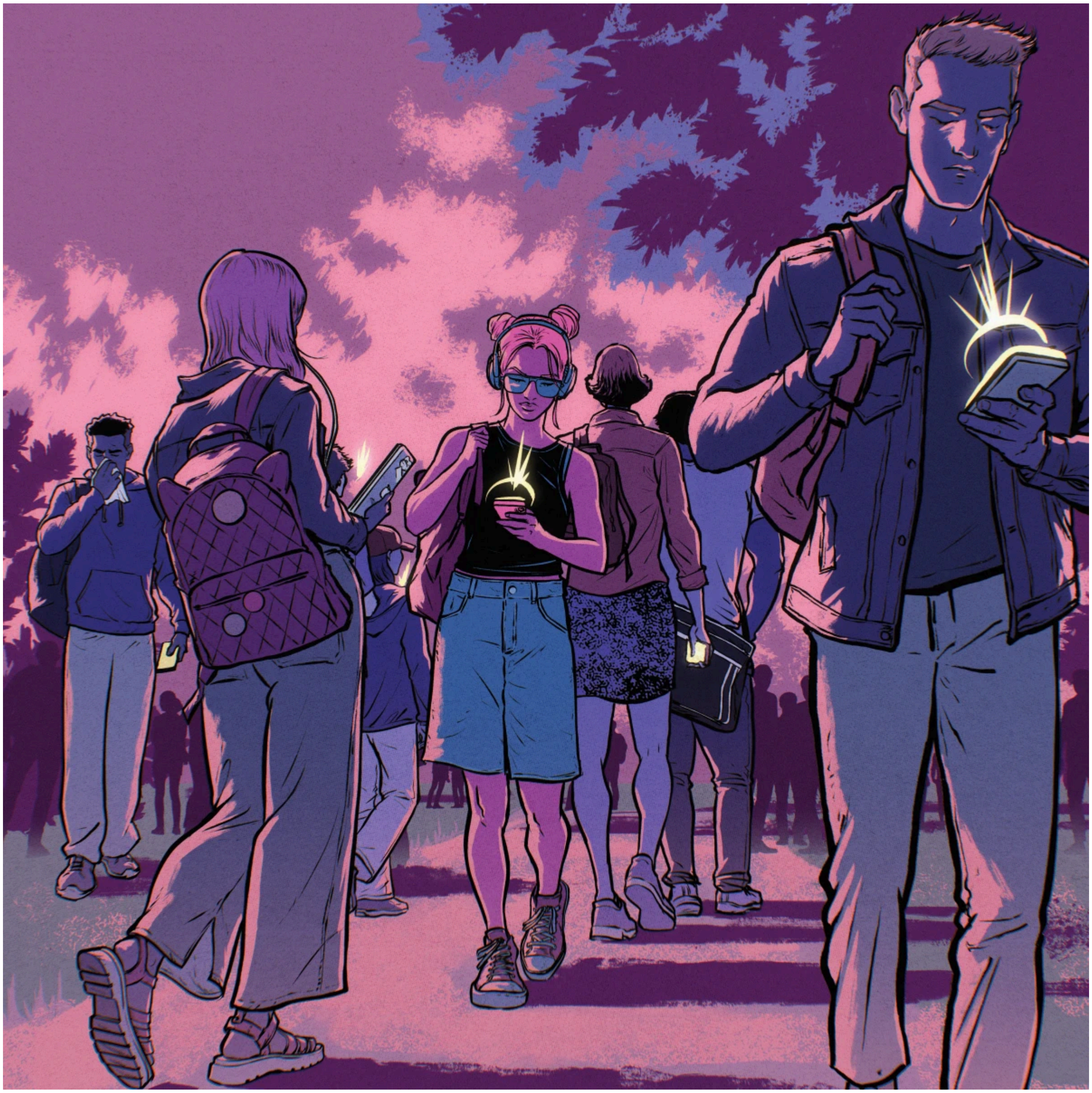
to use calculators on the test, he says. That meant the question would be written with simple squares, and there are only so many of those.

Students who knew that simply memorized those ratios and got the answer right, whether or not they understood the Pythagorean theorem. So their performance on that question was not a stand-in for their knowledge of algebra writ large, as intended.

Furthermore, schools’ knowledge of which parts of algebra would be tested likely led them to teach students parts of that subject to the exclusion of others. The problem is that the content teachers skip because it isn’t on the test can still be important when students go deeper into a subject later on.

Similar dynamics have unfolded with reading and writing. Because it’s impractical to ask students to read or write at length on state tests, they ask students to read short passages and write short responses. That, in turn, pushes schools to emphasize the reading and writing of short passages, too. While such a strategy can quickly boost students’ performance on tests, it tends not to substantially improve their learning or set them up for longer-term success.



Check out *The Chronicle*’s latest stories about Teaching Gen Z.

One effect of these dynamics is that education has been “atomized,” says Ethan Hutt, an associate professor of education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The curriculum has been narrowed to mirror standardized tests. Students work on short passages to develop specific skills. Every class has a lesson, and every lesson has an assessment plan and an outcome.

So when students arrive at college, they are conditioned to expect that same level of guidance.

Hutt would like to give an assignment that goes like this: Pick a topic, write an essay, and say something interesting. But he finds he can't — not even with his doctoral students.

Not only that, Hutt adds, students seem to think he has granular directions in mind but just won't share them. They'll ask how he's going to grade. His answer is, "I'm going to read it, and I'm going to give you a grade."

What they are really after, Hutt says, is a rubric. They want one because their education until now has conditioned them to write to one. They can't understand that he wants them to engage in writing in a different way, as means of developing ideas and sharpening their thinking.

Students are given little independence in school and, when they gain it in college, are overwhelmed rather than relieved, unmoored rather than motivated. After years of having their education treated as a performance, it's asking a lot of students to trust that it might be more fulfilling to approach it as a process.

Much of the concern about Gen Z's academic habits has centered on their shortcomings as readers. Here, especially, experts point to several drivers beyond high-stakes standardized testing, including a widely adopted and influential set of academic standards.

The Common Core standards, a broad effort to bridge the disparate standards set by each state by creating a consistent set of expectations for what K-12 students should know about English and math in each grade, were meant to better prepare students for college and career. Adopted by most states around 2010, the standards added another push to the emphasis on short texts, says Morgan Polikoff, a professor of education at the University of Southern California. "However its authors meant for it to be interpreted," he says, "it was really focused on, among other things, close reading and textual evidence."

This focus has an intuitive appeal. When many professionals have to use those kinds of reading skills on the job, they tend to do so with short texts, like memos and emails. “There’s virtually no one on earth whose job involves them reading a whole book,” Polikoff says, noting that even he rarely has to read whole books.

Here’s the problem, he says: “Maybe we didn’t think about how, just because that’s the end goal, doesn’t mean that’s how you should be teaching children along the way.”

Reading books — *whole* books — in other words, does seem to be important for developing students’ reading abilities, even if it’s not the way they’ll eventually put those abilities to work.

The move away from assigning books has occurred alongside other changes in the curriculum and in student habits.

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Polikoff says that many schools have moved away from an emphasis on the Western canon with an eye to providing students with exposure to a wider range of traditions. While it’s possible, of course, to replace books by white men with equally challenging books by a broader set of authors, this shift has sometimes dovetailed with the idea of moving away from books to other kinds of material, written or not, in language arts, says Polikoff.

And yes, the time we all spend on our phones does probably matter. But it might matter differently than conventional wisdom suggests, Polikoff says. Students’ devotion to their devices can convince teachers that students won’t read books, so they don’t expect it of them.

Teachers, though, are not the only influence on kids' reading habits. Survey data collected through "The Nation's Report Card" shows a drop in kids reading for fun on their own time, says James S. Kim, a professor of education at Harvard. There's been a big decline over the past decade in the share of kids who report reading for pleasure almost every day, while the share who report reading for fun "never or hardly ever" has gone up. And reading for fun is strongly correlated with having strong reading proficiency. "And you could say, well, that's because kids who don't like to read read poorly — but that's my point. There's a Matthew effect" — where those who begin with an advantage accumulate more advantage over time, he says. "We look at these reading scores declining, but we're not looking at the fact that a very important source of background knowledge and vocabulary knowledge and practicing decoding, which is what kids do outside of school" is "going in the wrong direction."

Reading for pleasure, he says, gives students practice, deepens both their love of reading and skill as readers, and builds up their knowledge base to understand what they read in the future.

Julie Cohen, an associate professor of education at the University of Virginia, sees the K-12 antecedents for college students' classroom behavior a bit differently than some of her colleagues. Policies like No Child Left Behind were well-established when Cohen started at UVA a decade ago, she says. The roots of the issues that professors are noticing today in their students lie elsewhere. One factor she points to is that many students in K-12 are "being taught by teachers who are not fully licensed, or particularly well-prepared," because of the teacher shortage.

Recently, Cohen found that some of her own upper-level students didn't read the directions on a large assignment — to the point that "we had to go back and just do a kind of walkthrough, like, here are the keywords, here's how you underline them, here's how you check to make sure you're answering what the question is asking. These are things that would typically happen in high school." That tells her students didn't have adequately trained teachers in high school to help them move into doing this kind of work for themselves.

Another big piece of what's going on, Cohen thinks, is that teachers are urged to rely on a lot of online resources for students to use in their schoolwork. That can have benefits, she says, especially in the current climate. "It's very unlikely that we're going to prepare a large number of elementary teachers to teach math with as much precision and clarity as some of these apps," she says. But it "fundamentally changes kids' experiences of what it is to be in school," she says. Moving classroom activities to devices has made school less relational — and that undermines learning.

The rise of accountability testing, the teacher shortage, the ubiquity of smartphones and social-media platforms — all contributed in complicated ways to the academic formation of college students. Then the pandemic arrived, adding new challenges and worsening existing ones.

For the past few years, professors have wondered how much of what they're seeing in students ties back to the pandemic, and whether these shifts are short-term or more durable. And schools — and colleges — have wrestled with how best to support students as they try to catch up academically and socially.

The need is clear: An analysis of standardized-test results released by NWEA Research this past summer estimates that the average student would need the equivalent of 4.8 more months of schooling to catch up to pre-pandemic achievement levels in reading and 4.3 months to do so in math.

These pandemic-driven impacts have also affected students' performance in college, says Timothy M. Renick, executive director of the National Institute for Student Success at Georgia State University. Renick points out that retention across the state's 26 public institutions had its largest-ever drop between 2020 and 2021 and that rates of drops, failures, and withdrawals in first-year required courses at the five Georgia State campuses climbed after the pandemic hit. That heightened failure rate remained for two years or so before it started to go down, he says. "It was very, very clear that something out of the ordinary and not gradual had gone on."

The good news, Renick says, is that for the last few semesters "we've begun to see a return to some of the success rates in these courses that were characteristic prior to the pandemic." Yes, it will be many more years before colleges enroll traditional-age students whose educations were unscathed by the Covid years. And students might have struggles that are not reflected in their pass rates for these courses. But the concern of just a few years ago, that students came in unable to do the work of their intro courses successfully, has at least abated, he says.

The pandemic, of course, had a profound effect on more than just students' academic performance; their social lives and sense of normalcy were upended, too. As Frederick M. Hess, a senior fellow and director of education-policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, sees it, schools' efforts to support students' whole selves sometimes end up undercutting their academic preparation. Since the Trump era and especially the killing of George Floyd, Hess says, schools have shifted the focus of social-emotional learning away from a model that was mostly about supporting academics, emphasizing "self-discipline, and empathy, and delayed gratification" to something "much more therapeutic," focused on trauma and harm.

> **"K-12 is spending most of its time and resources trying to heal the trauma of a pandemic and trying to adapt and help students adapt to this new world."**

And this thinking, Hess adds, has informed academic policies like grading for equity — an effort to remove teachers' bias, comparisons to classmates, and students' behaviors from grades — that he argues can inadvertently weaken students' academic preparation by de-emphasizing deadlines. So there's now debate, he says, over whether the approach schools are taking is "necessary support, versus enabling," and over "the degree to which what we are seeing in youth is still a product of the pandemic versus other habits that were simply accentuated by the pandemic, particularly around shifting the locus of their identity and their activity online."

That shift online, Hess says, has academic implications, including students' preference for video over text as well as the challenges of perpetual distraction. It is difficult to tease out how much of pandemic schooling's effect on students was a function of so much of it playing out online.

Elena Silva, senior director of pre-K–12 education at New America, shares the sense that much of what has confused faculty members about current students can be traced to the pandemic. Previous cohorts of students, Silva says, never questioned that they had to go to school. "But now, they're kind of like: But why?" she says. The scale and seriousness of a global pandemic pushed students to question what they'd always just assumed. And who can blame them, Silva says, for being unsure of why they have to go to school when so many professionals never went back to the office in quite the same way?

Silva points to two other factors, which predate the pandemic but were worsened by it and have shaped the school experience of today's college students. One is the sheer volume of information now at their fingertips and the enormous challenge of sorting out what can be trusted. The other is the changing nature of teachers' jobs, which have become, she says, more standardized and less autonomous.

Put that all together and "K-12 is spending most of its time and resources trying to heal the trauma of a pandemic and trying to adapt and help students adapt to this new world," she says.

"We keep telling K-12, Let's fix K-12 so it's better." But K-12, she says, would answer: "Fix everything around you, and then maybe we can do our jobs. Because we can't even teach you all to read and write and do math right now, because we're basically the only social safety net that this country has."

"Higher ed is inheriting students who have these behaviors and these learning challenges — not because of K-12," Silva says, "but because K-12 is so limited in what it can do, given everything else going on."

Since the onset of the pandemic, many professors have become more aware that the academic performance of their students is deeply influenced by what's going on in their lives outside of class. It's worth remembering that the same thing is true of the schooling they received before they ever set foot on a college campus.

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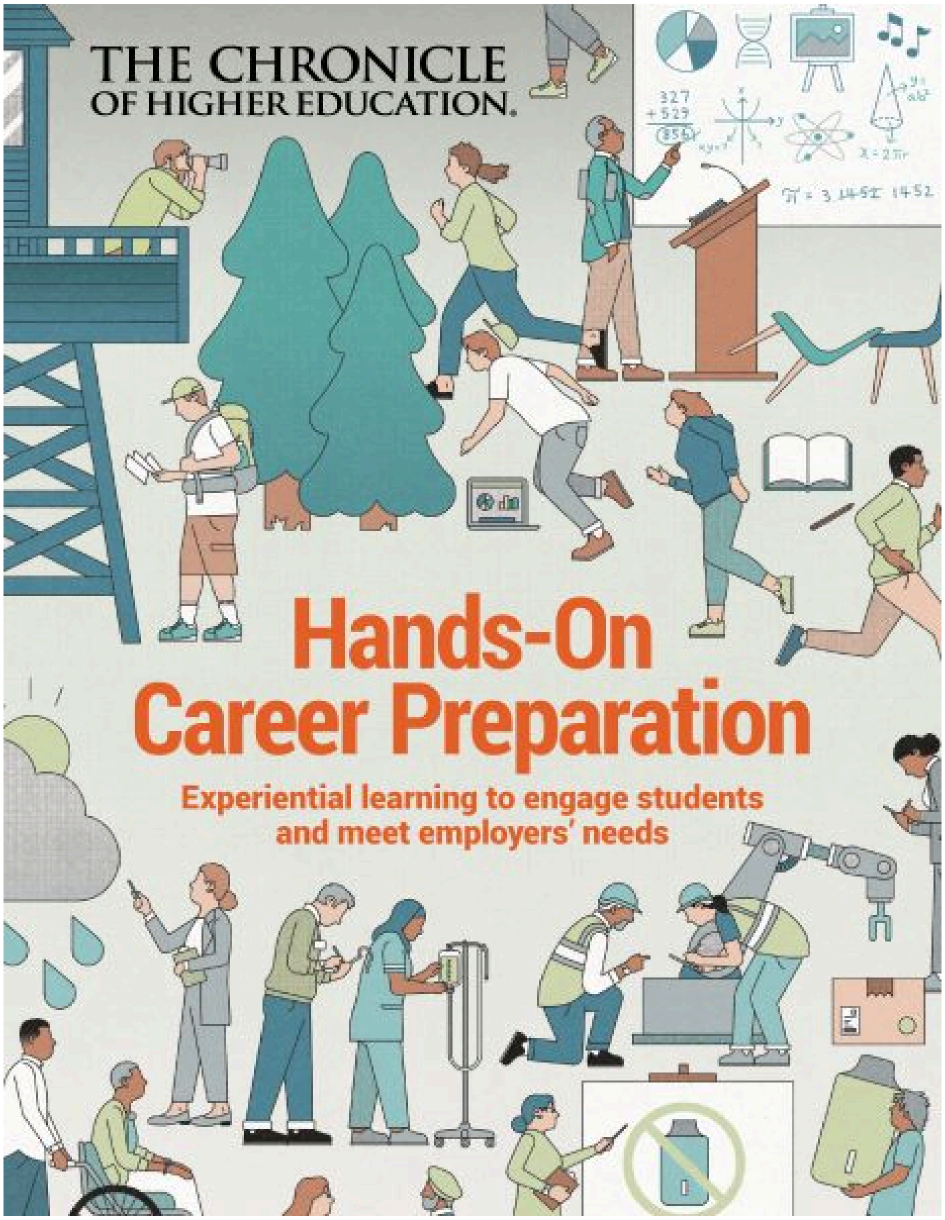
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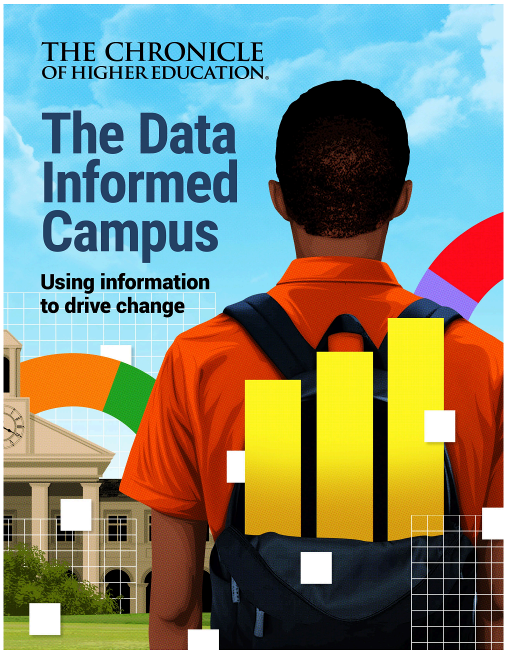
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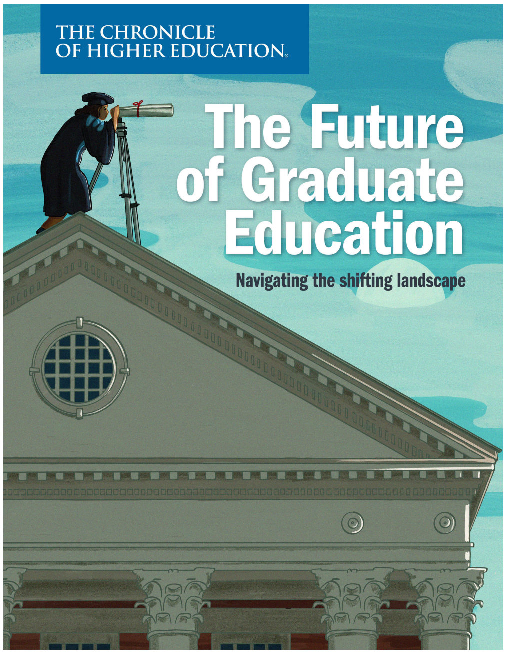
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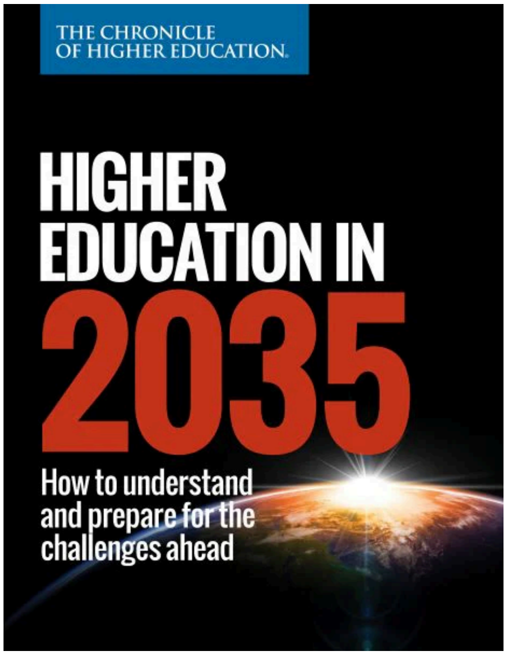
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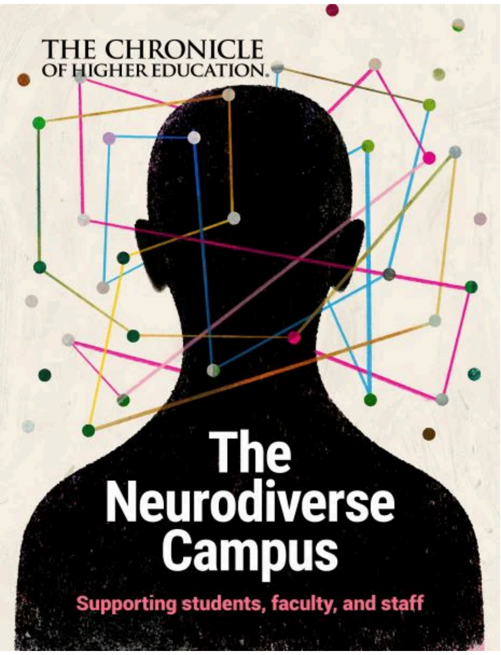
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