

When We Talk about Data . . .

LET'S BE HONEST

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Throughout the mid- to late twentieth century, each generation of academics, whatever their disciplinary background, more or less had a book that everyone seemed to read. I'm thinking about books like Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology* (1958), Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), and whatever was the latest from folks like Foucault, Chomsky, Frye, Butler, and Fish. One of the earliest such books may have been Darrell Huff's *How to Lie with Statistics* (1954), the all-time best-selling book on statistics. In it, Huff engages with common misuses of statistics (think small sample sizes, blurring correlation with causation, and data dredging). Essentially, he explains how statistics often are manipulated to deceive rather than inform, and in our era of evoking data as authority, I find myself thinking, "Exactly what data are we talking about?"

This opening is a roundabout way of my wanting to introduce data published since 2021. Studies from BioMed Central find that reducing smartphone screen time in classrooms improves mental health, while an article in *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* shows that depression among college students is directly linked to screen time. An article in the *Journal of American College Health* links screen time to broader student mental health outcomes, while one in *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* finds a positive correlation between screen use and self-harm. The *International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Sciences* examines dozens of prospective teachers at different universities and reveals a decline in mental health compared to earlier cohorts of education majors. A Brookings Institution report concludes that in under two years AI has disrupted foundational development, while studies from Harvard, Wharton, Cornell, and Penn find that LLMs hinder skill acquisition, weaken cognitive abilities, and contribute to rising anxiety and depression among Gen Z students.

Yet in the wake of all this data emerging during a supposedly data-driven educational culture, here's what I recall from my 2025-2026 academic year: multiple required in-person meetings where a campus counselor asked faculty to be more thoughtful about the academic expectations of anxious students; a colleague sharing an email with me where their supervisor asked faculty to lower academic expectations at the start of this semester; a shift to another online learning management system; conversations with colleagues using LLMs to create and grade their assignments; and countless invitations to webinars about AI, brownbags about better online education, seminars about virtual attendance tools, Zoom meetings about digital accessibility, and events about mastering Blackboard grading, improving courses with Ally, using technology to increase student engagement, and "coaching towards TurnItIn drafting" (whatever that means). I was even hoodwinked in December into a timeshare-like luncheon sponsored by yet another new digital learning platform that "guarantees AI-powered student success" by implementing its app into all UA classes, thus allowing students to "share their notes," which—let's be absolutely clear—is code for I need your students to feed my bot, essentially bribing educators to become allies in denying students the opportunity to create.

Yet this is not to say all universities ignore data. In fact, in 2024, at the University of Virginia, several professors piloted a series of no-technology courses, and the practice has since spread across the university. In 2025, the biology department at Temple University adopted similar restrictions on classroom technology, and that same year, Loyola University began offering "digital detox classes," where specific sections were advertised in the course catalogue as being "completely screen free." In January 2026, Washington University in St. Louis began "heavily restricting or banning the use of digital devices in the classroom" under the guidance of the Dean of Undergraduate Affairs. And in recent years, student newspapers at Harvard and the business school at NYU have reported on student-driven initiatives for limiting device use in the classroom.

Further, I've lifted all the research in my second paragraph from senior research projects at my home Honors College, where approximately 15% of the seniors completed a project that aimed, in one way or another, to address their own growing concerns about such things. To quote from one of these representative senior projects, "I despise the use of AI in classrooms, and how upper administration pushes for its inclusion in academia so heavily. If it were up to me, it would be banned." So says this 22-year-old biology and chemistry major with a 4.10 GPA about to graduate with Honors.

The most behind when chasing nominal innovation, universities ignoring the data on mental harm and cognitive decline, not to mention the environmental costs, may soon have much to answer for. How will we answer the parent who asks, "Why does my daughter need to take your class if everything you do caters to LLMs?" Educators do not need to find ways to educate exclusively with AI as much as they need to find ways to educate in a world where students already have AI.

That's the shift that needs to happen, and while I somewhat applaud the banning initiatives of the universities listed above, the real innovation will come from creating opportunities for students to be independent, creative, and experimental in this era. In other words, it's not 2006, and we don't need to create so many digital spaces for students. They've got that covered. They've inhabited digital spaces for 20 years, and the data confirms the harm it caused. They don't need to come to college so 50-year-olds can say, "Hey look, we've got some AI for you!" Instead, we need innovatively to create the unexperienced physical spaces that the data shows students need and want.

And maybe here is a good place as any to note that a syllabus line along the lines of "cite AI if you use it" is about as effective as the "drink responsibly" disclaimer obligatorily tacked on the end of an alcohol commercial. It's there to cover the company's interests, not because it benefits the consumer.

I'm not addressing technology's important role in helping non-traditional students find a classroom nor its place in enhancing classroom equity. I'm simply suggesting we find the nuance between "AI is ruining everything" and "AI is beyond critique." The concern I keep returning to with friends and colleagues is that beneath the corporate-driven platitudes of "work smarter, not harder," "it saves money," "we can't put the genie back," and worst of all, "we have to meet students where they are," we're mostly just helping students regurgitate.

As I put the final revisions on this . . . whatever this is, Davis Riley prepares his opening tee shot to begin the 2026 Masters Tournament, an event that has banned cell phones since 1993. This morning, when asked what he thought about this policy, 26-year old pro-golfer Ludvig Åberg responded, "it feels like the fans are a little bit more engaged and attuned to what's going on." So, given the data, let's consider how we can bring the contemporary classroom to the level of engagement found at a sporting event. Many universities already are finding truly data-driven ways to address the needs of their students, so let's see how it all pans out over on Sixth Avenue. ●