

ATLANTIC INTELLIGENCE

# The College-Major Gamble

What should young people study when AI threatens to take their jobs?

By Damon Beres



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When I was in college, the Great Recession was unfolding, and it seemed like I had made a big mistake. With the economy crumbling and job prospects going with it, I had selected as my majors ... journalism and sociology. Even the professors joked about our inevitable unemployment. Meanwhile, a close friend had switched majors and started to take computer-science classes—there would obviously be opportunities there.

But that conventional wisdom is starting to change. As my colleague Rose Horowitch writes in an article for *The Atlantic*, entry-level tech jobs are beginning to fade away, in part because of new technology itself: AI is able to do many tasks that previously required a person. “Artificial intelligence has proved to be even more valuable as a writer of computer code than as a writer of words,” Rose writes. “This means it is ideally suited to replacing the very type of person who built it. A recent Pew study found that Americans think software engineers will be most affected by generative AI. Many young people aren’t waiting to find out whether that’s true.”

I spoke with Rose about how AI is affecting college students and the job market—and what the future may hold.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

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**Damon Beres:** What do we actually know about how AI is disrupting the market for comp-sci majors?

**Rose Horowitch:** There are a lot of tech executives coming out and saying that AI is replacing some of their coders, and that they just don’t need as many entry-level employees. I spoke with an economics professor at Harvard, David Deming, who said that may be a convenient talking point—nobody wants to say *We didn’t hit our sales targets, so we have to lay people off*. What we can guess is that the technology is actually making senior engineers more productive; therefore they need fewer entry-level employees. It’s also one more piece of uncertainty that these tech companies are

dealing with—in addition to tariffs and high interest rates—that may lead them to put off hiring.

**Damon:** Tech companies do have a vested interest in promoting AI as such a powerful tool that it could do the work of a person, or multiple people. Microsoft recently laid thousands of people off, as you write in your article, and the company also said that AI writes or helps write 25 percent of their code—that’s a helpful narrative for Microsoft, because Microsoft sells AI tools.

At the same time, it does feel pretty clear to me that many different industries are dealing with the same issues. I’ve spoken about generative AI replacing entry-level work with prominent lawyers, journalists, people who work in tech—the worry feels real to me.

**Rose:** I spoke with Molly Kinder, a Brookings Institution fellow who studies how AI affects the economy, and she said that she’s worried that the bottom rung of the career ladder across industries is breaking apart. If you’re writing a book, you may not need to hire a research assistant if you can use AI. It’s obviously not going to be perfectly accurate, and it couldn’t write the book for you, but it could make you more productive.

Her concern, which I share, is that you still need people to get trained and then ascend at a company. The unemployment rate for young college graduates is already unusually high, and this may lead to more problems down the line that we can’t even foresee. These early jobs are like apprenticeships: You’re learning skills that you don’t get in school. If you skip that, it’s cheaper for the company in the short term, but what happens to white-collar work down the line?

**Damon:** How are the schools themselves thinking about this reality—that they have students in their senior year facing a completely different prospect for their future than when they entered school four years ago?

**Rose:** They’re responding by figuring out how to produce graduates that are prepared to use AI tools in their work and be competitive applicants. The challenge is that the

technology is changing so quickly—you need to teach students about what's relevant professionally while also teaching the fundamental skills, so that they're not just reliant on the machines.

**Damon:** Your article makes this point that students should be focused less on learning a particular skill and more on studying something that's durable for the long term. Do you think students really will shift what they're studying? Will the purpose of higher education itself change somehow?

**Rose:** It's likely that we'll see a decline in students studying computer science, and then, at some point, there will be too few job candidates, salaries will be pushed up, and more students will go in. But the most important thing that students can do—and it's so counterintuitive—is to study things that will give you human skills and soft skills that will help you endure in any industry. Even without AI, jobs are going to change. The challenge is that, in times of crisis, people tend to choose something preprofessional, because it feels safer. That cognitive bias can be unhelpful.

**Damon:** You cover higher education in general. You're probably best known for the story you did about how elite college students can't read books anymore, which feels related to this discussion for obvious reasons. I'm curious to know more about why you were interested in exploring this particular topic.

**Rose:** Higher ed, more than at any time in recent memory, is facing the question of what it is for. People are questioning the value of it much more than they did 10, 20 years ago. And so, these articles all fit into that theme: What is the value of higher ed, of getting an advanced degree?

The article about computer-science majors shows that this thing that everyone thought is a sure bet doesn't seem to be. That reinforces why higher education needs to make the case for its *value*—how it teaches people to be more human, or what it's like to live a productive life in a society.

**Damon:** There are so many crisis points in American higher education right now. AI is one of them. Your article about reading suggested a problem that may have emerged

from other digital technologies. Obviously there have been issues stemming from the Trump administration. There was the Claudine Gay scandal. This is all in the past year or two. How do you sum it all up?

**Rose:** Most people are starting to realize that the status quo is not going to work. There's declining trust in education, particularly from Republicans. A substantial portion of the country doesn't think higher ed serves the nation. The fact is that at many universities, academic standards have declined so much. Rigor has declined. Things cannot go on as they once did. What comes next, and who's going to chart that course? The higher-education leaders I speak with, at least, are trying to answer that question themselves so that it doesn't get defined by external forces like the Trump administration.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Damon Beres is a senior editor at *The Atlantic*, where he oversees the Technology section.

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