



Pingry

Remarks from Head of School Tim Lear Convocation — September 5, 2025

On July 3, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote an article titled “Are We Really Willing to Become Dumber?” He opens by saying:

“I’m generally optimistic about all the ways artificial intelligence is going to make life better — scientific research, medical diagnoses, tutoring, and my favorite current use, vacation planning. But it also offers a malevolent seduction: excellence without effort. It gives people the illusion that they can be good at thinking without hard work, and I’m sorry, but that’s not possible.”

While A.I. is relatively new, the seduction that Brooks describes isn’t. Nor does this promise — of excellence without effort — tempt students alone. In fact, well after my graduation from Pingry and before A.I. became a global topic of anxiety and optimism, I experienced firsthand the temptation to believe that excellence without effort is possible.

And I’m here to assure you that **it’s definitely not.**

The year was 2014 and my wife and I were turning 40. To commemorate this milestone birthday and set a positive tone for the year, we decided to enter a Tough Mudder with some family members and friends.

For those of you who don’t know, a Tough Mudder is a race with a series of obstacles designed to test participants’ physical and mental stamina while also encouraging teamwork and camaraderie.

These obstacles would unfold over a 12 mile course, and driving from Basking Ridge to Raceway Park in Englishtown, NJ, it became clear that many members of our team hadn’t trained properly in the months prior and were having second thoughts about the race.

My own doubts were largely in check as I mentally reviewed my preparation — until I turned to talk to my brother-in-law, a former Division I athlete I was counting on to help lead us, and saw him speeding away in his car. Apparently he had taken one look at the first obstacle — called Ladder to Hell — and had had enough.

While I was also unaware that many of the Tough Mudder obstacles involved scaling walls made of mud and wood — obstacles with quaint names such as Berlin Walls, Everest, and The Block Ness Monster — one team member had wisely done her research and proactively recruited her younger brother to participate. He was a 6'4" college senior whom I'll refer to as Andre the Giant. I'm not sure what lies she told Andre to get him to agree to join our middle-aged (and now shrinking) team, but at that moment I was too grateful and nervous to ask.

So despite the unexpected departure of my brother-in-law, we quickly rallied, and the Tough Mudder's guiding principles — encouraging teamwork and camaraderie — were evident on the starting line as we exchanged high fives and psyched each other up.

Unfortunately, those principles disappeared 75 meters into the race when we encountered the first wall, at which point we stopped, shrugged our shoulders, and began frantically pointing and speaking gibberish.

Years later, watching *Despicable Me* at the AMC Headquarters in Morristown, I would shake my head in recognition and embarrassment thinking back upon our Minion-like behavior; but that morning at Raceway Park, with 11.95 miles still to go, I had no time for reason or nostalgia. Instead, I began signaling with my teammates for Andre the Giant to lift us up over the wall, which he did with surprising ease.

We would repeat this pattern — run, wall, gibberish, lift — for mile after mile with amazing success. And while I like to think that I was the smartest Minion on our team, emerging as a King Bob or Kevin-like leader, the sad fact is that I just as quickly and completely came to rely on Andre the Giant to solve almost every problem we encountered.

That was the case until we arrived at one of the final obstacles, known as "Electroshock Therapy." Here, unused to asking questions and thinking independently or creatively, my string of good luck ended — and ended badly.

As I've since learned from the Tough Mudder website by reading *Electroshock Therapy: A History*, there aren't any recommended ways to train for this daunting obstacle, perhaps the race's most controversial and nonsensical. As the website entry reads, "this simple structure remains largely unchanged from its inception" and consists of a field of wires dangling from a rectangular frame, clicking as 10,000 volts of electricity crackle through them. Completing this obstacle is "a rite of passage for most participants and a favorite amongst spectators who enjoy watching the carnage."

The entry ominously concludes, "in the end, [as you approach the obstacle] just close your eyes and run." Like a Minion not bothering to think or ask questions, I did exactly what the website said: closed my eyes and ran straight through. And then I made contact with one of those dangling wires "clicking 10,000 volts of electricity" and fell face first, unconscious, into a pile of mud.

The Tough Mudder website has an entire page dedicated to Electroshock FAQs under the heading, “What the heck just happened?” I don’t think David Brooks was familiar with it when he wrote the following about the dangers posed by A.I. search engines:

“The neuroscience cliché is that neurons that fire together wire together. Thinking hard strengthens your mental capacity. Using a bot to think for you or even just massaging what the bot gives you is empty calories for the mind. You’re robbing yourself of an education and diminishing your intellectual potential.”

As I regained consciousness while lying there in the mud, I wasn’t thinking about search engines, neurons, or my diminished intellectual potential. In that moment, crawling through the mud like an extra in *The Walking Dead*, I was too dazed and confused to regret not thinking hard, or at all, before running straight into an electrical field.

But that regret would arrive a few moments later, when my head cleared and I watched my teammates **calmly walking around the obstacle** — and thereby avoiding the electrical field entirely.

“Wait,” I asked my team once my mouth started working again, “why didn’t you guys follow me?” “Because you don’t have to,” Andre replied calmly. “You can opt out of any obstacle. You didn’t know that? Oh well, it was fun watching *you* do it!”

The lesson hit me just as hard as the wires: I had become so reliant on race shortcuts and on extra help from our Giant that I had stopped thinking for myself.

With the rise of A.I., these shortcuts are more available to us now than ever before — and I wonder (and worry) whether we truly understand the risks of continually taking them.

A group of researchers led by an M.I.T. professor (Nataliya Kosmyna) recently recruited 54 participants and asked them to write essays. As David Brooks describes in the *New York Times*, “Some of [the participants] used A.I. to write the essays, some wrote with the assistance of search engines, and some wrote the old-fashioned way, using their brains.”

Using an EEG headset to look at the inner workings of the participants’ brains, the researchers found that the “subjects who relied **only on their own brains** showed higher connectivity across multiple brain regions. Search engine users experienced less brain connectivity and A.I. users least of all.” “In other words, more effort, more reward. More efficiency, less thinking.”

David Brooks and the M.I.T. researchers understand the tempting appeal of using A.I. When messages about the value of “speed, efficiency, and productivity” seem to be everywhere these days, it’s easy to understand why many students and adults view A.I. as a critical time-saving tool — especially for the homework and assignments that might seem less important.

But those same researchers also understand that “there’s a seductiveness to the process... You start by using A.I. as a research tool, but then you’re harried and time pressured, and before long, A.I. is doing most of the work.”

Given how suddenly and completely A.I. appeared not just in schools, but in our lives beyond campus, it may be hard to imagine an alternative to either fully embracing **or** fully rejecting it. But as with almost every obstacle we face, we can (and I would argue, we must) carefully choose how (not whether) we are going to engage with it.

Indeed, while A.I. may seem unique in its potential to disrupt and improve our lives, it is merely **one** in a long list of complicated topics — from energy and climate, to farming, politics, future pandemics, and the economy — that deserves our full attention. And we had better develop the skills necessary for facing this growing list of challenges and making the necessary and hard choices required of us.

So how do we tell the difference between a shortcut and a genuine solution? How do we differentiate between the mindless, even harmful tools and the complex, ultimately useful ones? How do we ask for help while not becoming overtly dependent on that help?

In short, how do we remember to think for ourselves?

I believe the answers to these and other related questions can largely be found offline in our nearly 100 year-old Honor Code. While almost everyone agrees that A.I. isn't going anywhere, I would hope and argue that neither is Pingry. And yet A.I. will most certainly change Pingry, especially if we make the mistake of sitting passively by, allowing it to interpret, translate, and rewrite our values, and our Honor Code, for us.

As David Brooks argues, “the crucial question [facing us] is one of motivation. What do students, and all of us, really care about — clearing the schedule [checking boxes and clearing obstacles] or becoming educated? If you want to be strong, you have to go to the gym.”

So what does that look like in practice? What does it look like to possess good judgment, to think and act independently, to be a lifelong learner who, rather than outsource the work, is willing and comfortable to engage with new ideas and ask questions and build connections?

It looks like a story I read this summer in *The Athletic*, a story that answers these questions and illustrates just how important and transformative human relationships can be.

Nearly three years ago, Head Coach Sean McVay from the Los Angeles Rams admitted in an interview that after a disastrous season, he was burned out and was considering leaving coaching altogether. Watching from home, retired college football coach Chris Petersen recognized the look on McVay's face — he had been there himself — so he picked up the phone.

Petersen, best known for building winning teams and positive cultures at Boise State and the University of Washington, didn't call McVay to simply offer quick fixes. Instead, he offered steady support, honest feedback, and accountability — the same habits that had defined his own college coaching career.

The relationship Petersen subsequently built with McVay helped McVay emerge with a regained sense of balance, purpose, and happiness from what he describes as “the hardest year of his life.”

Different setting, different stakes, but the lesson is the same: Excellence isn't just about talent or shortcuts. To truly be excellent and honorable, we need to be willing to put in the work, to summon the courage to reach out to others *as well as* the humility to listen to others and admit when we need help ourselves.

Each of us needs to show up this academic year with the same lofty hope and goal — that our actions will positively impact others — because we each bear this responsibility. That we can't accomplish this goal *every* time, that we will inevitably fall short, is secondary to our commitment, to our belief that it's a goal worthy of our continuous effort and pursuit.

Allowing someone to carry you over Tough Mudder obstacles earns you a T-shirt, not a knighthood, and none of us should settle for being a bystander to our education. A core part of a Pingry education involves not just benefitting from this outstanding community, but actively creating and maintaining it.

Perhaps now more than ever, we have to genuinely prioritize, support, and invest in one another more than we rely on and trust sophisticated A.I. systems like Gemini or Claude. The convenience of a "human-like" conversation isn't a worthwhile substitute for the benefits of an actual conversation.

A virtual community, while potentially powerful and useful, isn't a replacement for ***this one***.

Pingry's Mission states that we value exploration, growth, and social responsibility. Not just for the benefit of the individual student, however, but "for others." Our Honor Code echoes this, stating that we believe in acting as responsible members of the community, in working for the common good, and in honoring the rights of others. This emphasis on community, on the importance of people and relationships, is our North Star.

So whether you are a first-year employee or a member of the Magistri, a Pingry lifer or a newly-enrolled student, we share a collective responsibility to show up for and uplift one another today, and every day. And this isn't a duty that we can outsource to A.I. or to Andre the Giant.

For we set the culture. Our actions build the community. And we breathe life into the Honor Code.

Our Honor Code.

Let's have a great year.