STUDENT-LED RESEARCH

BLICKSTEIN GROUP

The College Student AI Reality Check



A Cross-Disciplinary Look at Student Use, Ethics, and the Road to the Legal Profession

How are college students thinking about AI and its impact on their education and futures? We asked.

As the next generation of CEOs, managers, lawyers, and doctors are studying at university, the traditional expectation of a college learning environment has completely shifted. Computers, smartphones, and artificial intelligence (AI) are the name of the game, and whether those technological advancements are helping or hindering the future of the workforce is a real question. AI is no longer confined to computer science labs; tools like Claude, ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini now sit alongside the textbook and the Google search engine as a default for when students get stuck. Students' use, practice, and attitudes about AI will be absolutely vital for understanding how a new generation of entry-level employees will view their place and purpose in the working world. Will they be prepared for high-level work? Will AI help them become more efficient and avoid the drudgery of mindless assignments that plagued previous generations? Or will they feel discouraged as it takes over the routine and junior tasks that have been a core part of the work of young employees? Will the jobs they are studying for and dreaming about even exist in 10 years? These are the questions we try to answer in our inaugural College Student Reality Check report.

Executive Summary

As universities are still fathoming policies, professors often may draw inconsistent lines and regulations, sometimes even within the same department, leaving students to develop their own personal ethics. This is all taking place as technology has already changed in numerous ways since they began college and will definitely change again by the time they graduate. This report is meant to lend insight into what students' experiences with and attitudes about AI are in reality, specifically by capturing opinions from current college students across a range of institutions, majors, and academic cultures. The report also addresses the legal field tensions that carry very high stakes, and legal-studies interviewees in this research describe a field already contending with AI's presence in unexpected ways, from courtroom disputes over the authenticity of digital evidence to open questions about what AI literacy will mean to the next generation of attorneys.

Drawing on a survey of 86 respondents from 37 colleges and universities, along with five in-depth student interviews, the research asks a deceptively simple question: What is the current state of student AI use, and what do students themselves think it means for their education and future careers? The question, as expected, has no single answer, and the findings demonstrate that students take a nuanced approach to routine or explicitly restrained use of AI. Many students have settled into a fairly routine relationship with AI tools, using them several times a week or more for tasks ranging from explaining a difficult concept to summarizing a reading and increasingly turning to AI before turning to a professor, a classmate, or even a search engine. However, it is apparent that the routine use sits alongside some uncertainty about where an ethical line exists or if it does. Students are also strikingly aware that a gap exists between how much they rely on these tools and how little they trust their respective colleges or universities to prepare them to do so. Even as AI use becomes more normalized, its perceived benefit remains modest for most respondents, not an especially significant or reliable substitute for completing work.



About the Researcher and Author

Vera Grabow is a junior at Montana State University pursuing a double major in history and political science through the MSU Honors College and is currently studying abroad in Florence. She has been a legal and marketing research intern with Blickstein Group since August 2025. Her academic work is complemented by experience across legal research, political advocacy, and strategic communications.

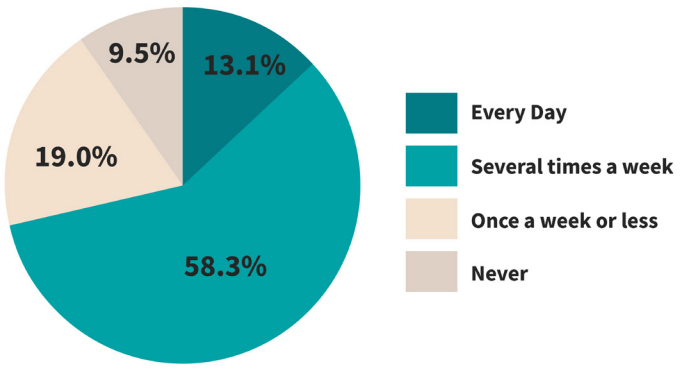
This project grew out of Vera's perspective on how AI is impacting her own education and curiosity about how her fellow students across the country are experiencing these technological changes. Vera graduated from Lone Peak High School in Big Sky, Montana, and drew extensively on insights from other LPHS graduates, along with other current college students, who attend a wide variety of institutions nationwide for this research. Find a full list of participants' schools on page 15.

Connect with Vera on LinkedIn to follow her bright future!

Key Finding 1: AI use is routine

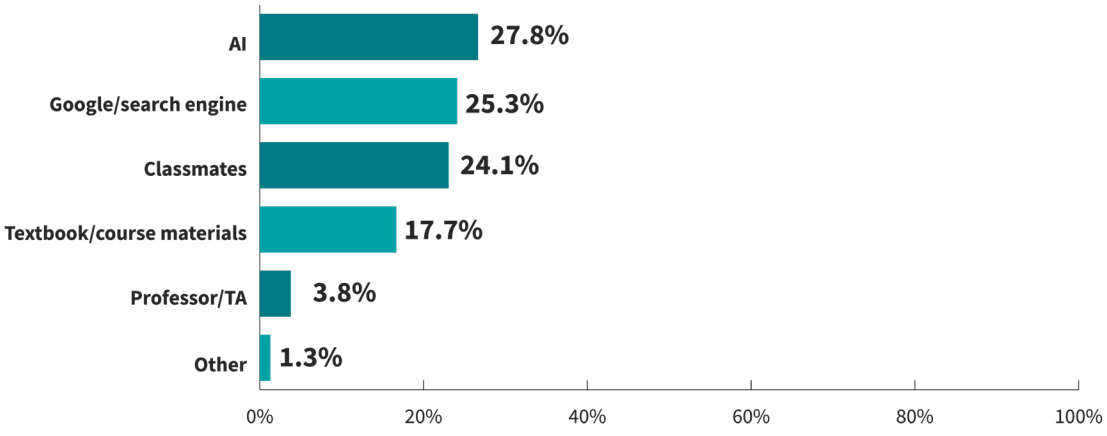
For most of the students in this research, AI is no longer a special-occasion tool reserved for use only when something needs in-depth explanation. AI has settled into the rhythms of academic life, acting alongside, or sometimes even in lieu of, other resources that students traditionally turned to in the past.

The clearest example of this is in the baseline frequency of AI use as a whole. 71% of survey respondents say they use AI several times a week or more for academic work, including 13.1% who say that they use AI every day. Only a small percentage of students (9.5%) report never using AI at all.



How often do you use AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot, Gemini, etc.) for academic work?

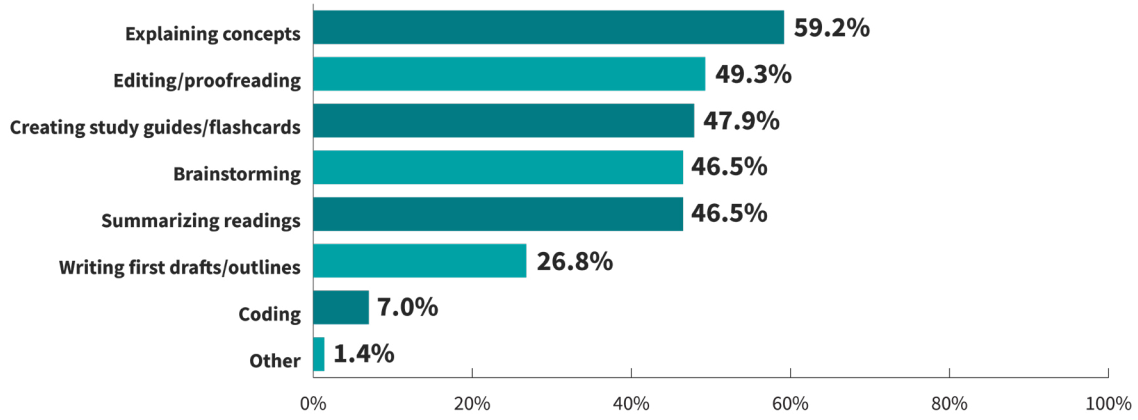
The normalization seen in that initial question is also represented clearly in a second data point: that when students are confused about coursework, AI is now their single most common first stop, cited by 27.8% of respondents, narrowly ahead of Google or online search engines (25.3%), classmates (24.1%), and textbook or course materials (17.7%). A professor or teaching assistant, by contrast to the other options, is the first resort for only 3.8% of students. For a meaningful share of the respondents, AI has taken the lead at the top of the list where students turn first, even ahead of people actually teaching the course.



When you're confused about coursework, where do you usually go first?

Key Finding 2: AI is for understanding, not outsourcing, assignments

What these students are doing with AI once they turn to it, however, complicates any assumption that this routine use means AI is writing or completing the majority of their work for them. In a question where respondents could pick multiple answers that applied to their experience, the most common uses of AI are comprehension-oriented rather than generative. For example, 59.2% chose explaining concepts, 49.3% editing and proofreading, 47.9% creating study guides or flashcards, and 46.5% summarizing readings or brainstorming. Only 26.8% use it to write full first drafts or outlines, and just 7% use it for coding. Altogether, these results demonstrate that AI use has more to do with consulting for help and assistance rather than completely outsourcing assignments.



What do you most commonly use AI for? (select all that apply)

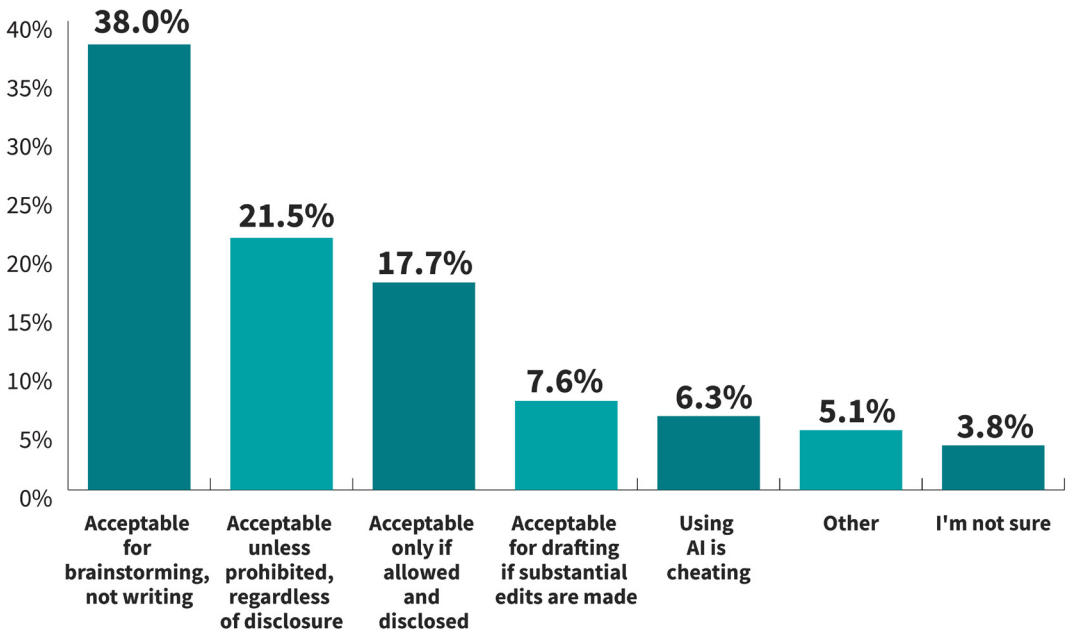
The interviews add depth to what it means to routinely use AI as a college student. The senior Stanford student studying Earth Systems described AI use as close to the campus default for low-stakes academic tasks or "busy work" assignments. "It's almost just expected that you're going to use AI for [routine tasks] almost every time, regardless of the class, regardless of the department." The University of Oklahoma junior describes a more specific version of a similar routine, where she uses AI "4x a week max" and thinks of it like a deliberate tool only for specific use cases.

The Montana State University junior studying Finance and Accounting offers an extensive description of what routine AI use looks like for him. He pays for a monthly subscription to Claude AI and even had it complete a restructuring of his calendar. He had the AI assistant compile every syllabus from the beginning of the school semesters, fed them into the tool with a detailed prompt to organize and condense the key information, and generated downloadable files that populated on his phone calendar. It's now easy to reference throughout the semester or during small syllabus quizzes, "because now that it's fed all my information about all my classes, it's a super easy almanac to just input something and get something back really quick."

One open-ended response from the survey captures the extent to which "routine" use can go for some users, especially for tasks that students might want to avoid altogether. When asked to describe a moment of uncertainty about whether their AI use crossed an ethical line, one respondent wrote of having AI watch a two-hour documentary and then "find a summary and explain it to [them]," to avoid watching the film for class. This is a great example of how different routine AI use looks depending on the user; for some it means explaining concepts, while for others it is summarizing class materials. Whether this routine use counts as cheating or not is exactly what the next section tackles.

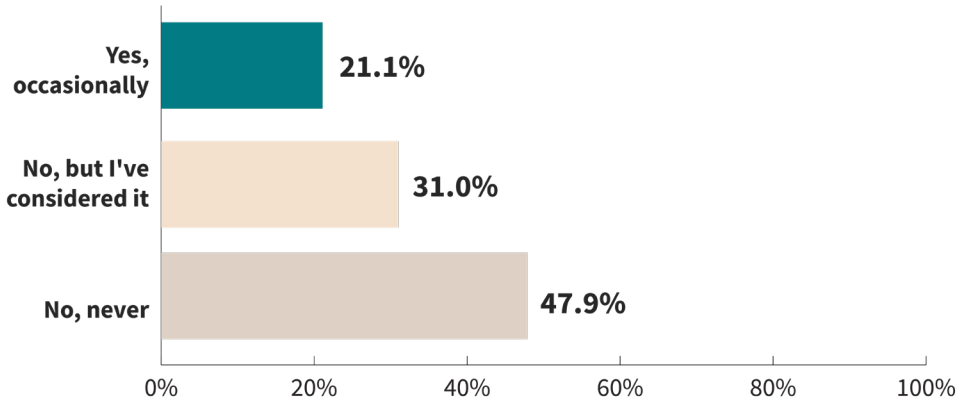
Key Finding 3: Views on acceptable AI use are split, with very few calling it outright cheating

Although many students routinely use AI in their everyday/weekly workflows, ideas about AI ethics, acceptable use, and the line before cheating are all varied and somewhat disputed. When asked which statement best matches their view on AI, opinions were split in three directions. 38% say that AI is acceptable for brainstorming but not writing, 21.5% say it's acceptable unless a professor specifically prohibits it regardless of disclosure, and 17.7% say it's acceptable only if it's been allowed and disclosed upfront. A smaller 7.6% say it's fine for drafting as long as substantial edits are made afterward, and only 6.3% say using AI is cheating outright.



Which statement best matches your view on AI?

The permissiveness on AI use demonstrated in that last poll does not fully settle the question of whether AI-assisted work still counts as a student's own, or whether it might be considered cheating. The responses indicate that students are conflicted. 21.1% of respondents have submitted AI-generated content as their own without making substantial changes, and 31% have thought about it.



Have you ever submitted AI-generated content as your own without substantially changing it?

The interviews expose a similarly interesting tension around the line of whether the AI-generated or AI-assisted work is still their own. The Oklahoma University student draws the line at when a generative AI program actually drafts a complete piece of work. When asked if she'd still consider an essay her own if AI wrote the first draft and she simply edited it, she said, "I think that ChatGPT [would have done] most of the work on that essay. If it's writing the entire thing and then you're just editing it…Yeah, I think that a student who does that, it would not be their own work. They're taking the time to edit it, but what about all the time it takes to write that essay? Editing's the easier part."

The Stanford student locates AI-generated ownership elsewhere, more connected to creativity and idea generation. "If I purely just had it go through and check for this [error] and that, then yeah, I feel like the work is still mine. I think the work being mine comes from idea generation… sentence and structure generation."

The MSU student complicates the answer further, as he describes a time in the past when he fed an AI engine a large sample of his own personal writing and asked it to emulate his style before touching up the final output. Even though these outputs are written in his tone, with language and style considerations taken, he was clear that the work sometimes "doesn't feel like [his] work at all… it's just this separate [category]."

The UVM student offers a unique perspective, saying that perhaps the ethical line is really specified based on what students are studying and how the use of AI fits into each field or occupation. "I think for a lot of professions, it's just using your resources," she said. "I don't think it's dishonesty when they use it the correct way." The term "correct," however, is impossibly arbitrary. For her, AI has very limited use in a field like theater, where the final product depends on live performance, human interaction, emotions, and interpretation.

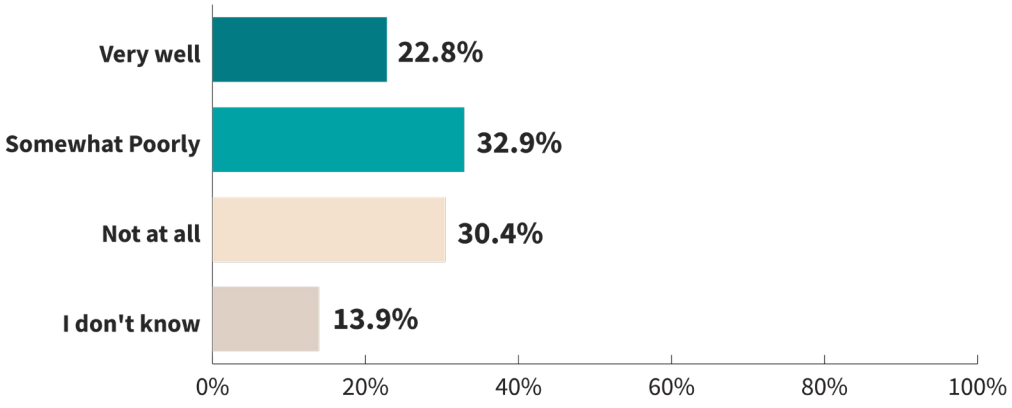
The policy at Bowdoin College, as described by the pre-law student, prohibits AI specifically "for writing and plagiarizing purposes," while generally allowing it for "study tools, editing/peer review, or more STEM-related things." This sounds similar to where the OU student draws the line: Editing and support are fine, but when an

AI engine actually starts producing the words and ideas is where that ethical line falls. The Bowdoin student extends her description about AI student use, discussing what it means for students to lean on AI, whether crossing a line or not. “I think using AI to your advantage while also using it ethically is a skill. I think this because it is such a new phenomenon that is unknown to so many, so knowing how to use it, and the correct way to do so, is a skill that must be learned.”

Some open-ended survey questions explore how uncertain the “cheating line” can feel at the moment, outside of a formal university policy or a confident personal philosophy. A survey respondent described the discomfort of brainstorming with AI directly, saying that “helping come up with ideas for essay topics felt like a weird territory because I was still getting ideas and material back that weren’t my own.” Another respondent described a case where using AI made them feel guilty because of the effort they put in compared with the effort their peers put in. “I used AI to summarize the reading and then wrote my own reflection. It felt like cheating because I knew I had spent way less time on the assignment than some other students, but still got the participation grade.” This student wasn’t bothered by the use of AI, but rather the aftermath and comparison of their work level to others. Even the instructors trying to enforce these lines aren’t always confident where they sit. One respondent, describing their own experience as a teaching assistant, wrote: “I had multiple students use it for brainstorming. Our syllabus was very lax and we did not know how to interpret the results.” If the people grading the work aren’t sure how to interpret AI-assisted brainstorming, it isn’t surprising that students report feeling uncertain themselves. That gap between student expectations and institutional guidance is a theme carried throughout the report.

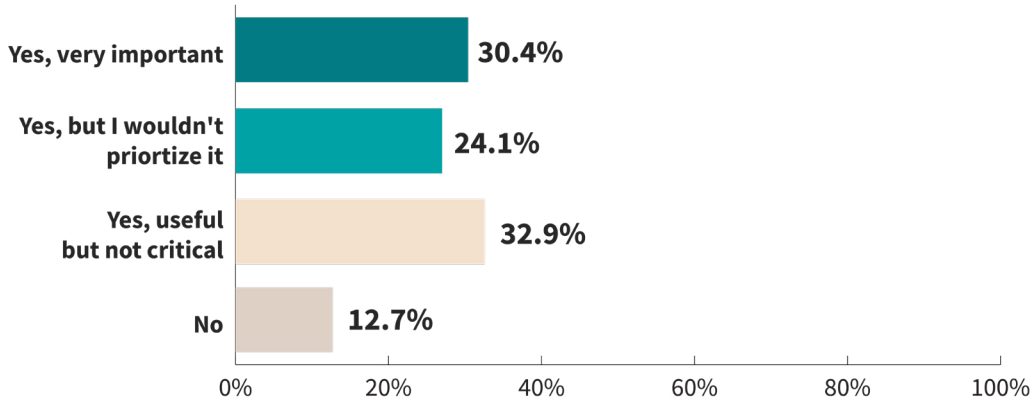
Key Finding 4: Students think their universities are failing to prepare them

There may be no cohesive answer to what “acceptable use” means to students, but they do generally agree that they are not being effectively directed on when, why, and how to use AI. 63.3% of respondents rate their university’s preparation on ethical and effective AI use as either “somewhat poorly” or “not at all.” Only 22.8% say “very well,” and the remaining 13.9% say they simply don’t know. For a technology so routinely used by students, it is notable to find so many voices of little confidence in the institutions teaching and preparing them for the future.



How well has your university prepared you to use AI effectively and ethically?

Students also think, despite their lack of preparedness, that AI will be relevant to their future. Nearly two-thirds (63.3%) still consider AI proficiency a professional skill worth developing, either "very important" or "useful but not critical," and only 12.7% say no. Students don't want to be left on their own to figure out the best way to integrate and use AI during college and beyond. They are asking for guidance they feel they're not getting.



Do you consider proficiency with AI tools to be a professional skill worth developing?

The interviews amplify these attitudes, showing how and why students feel unprepared to address and capitalize responsibly on AI use. The OU junior described policy changes that are dramatically different from class to class, even within the same major. Allowable AI-detection thresholds, which use AI detectors to determine what percentage of an assignment may be AI generated, vary wildly, according to her. "I've had classes that are less than 40% [that is acceptable]. That's such a high percentage. Are we kidding?"

The UVM junior offers a different perspective on a similar issue. At UVM, preparation isn't really coming from specific curriculum regulations. The near-universal anti-AI stance amongst her professors does not function as a universal policy but rather an informal norm that might be reinforced by UVM's broader identity, in her words, as "one of the greenest schools in the country." While she might have a clear expectation set for what is implied in her department by peers and professors, there are no actual instructions on how to use AI responsibly, or if it is allowed at all.

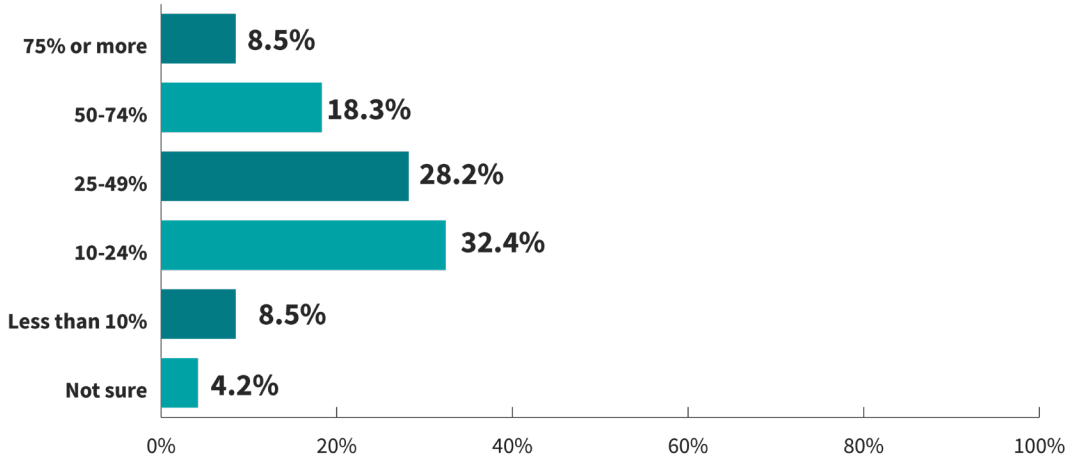
The MSU junior studying finance gives a more direct account of where the preparation gap actually originates. It is less reluctance than a genuine lack of understanding and knowledge on the professors' end. He describes his experience in multiple business classes as a "blurry" middle ground where professors "reluctantly admit it's a powerful tool" but stop short of offering real and tangible guidance, because many of them don't fully understand the tool themselves. "A lot of instructors have no clue what it can do. I feel like you ask any professor at MSU, for the most part, and they have no clue what prompt engineering is and how you structure a prompt to have the most efficacy."

The Bowdoin student's perspective is interesting, as she offers an extreme counter-perspective to the survey respondents and other interviewees. She explained that Bowdoin College recently launched the Hastings Initiative for AI and Humanity. This represents institutional involvement and a desire to create conversation and regulation, according to student experience and specifically pertaining to college students' use of AI. However, the student still explains that professor discretion reigns supreme and many "revert to 'absolutely no use of AI' simply for ease," since dealing with students who use it unethically has become its own kind of burden for instructors.

All of these various accounts, coupled with the sentiments from the survey, demonstrate that there is a very genuine and present lag in AI literacy on the instructional side of the classroom. Given how much time and trust students are already investing in AI, universities and institutions are likely to ramp up efforts to address these concerns more head-on and better communicate existing policies so they are more widely understood.

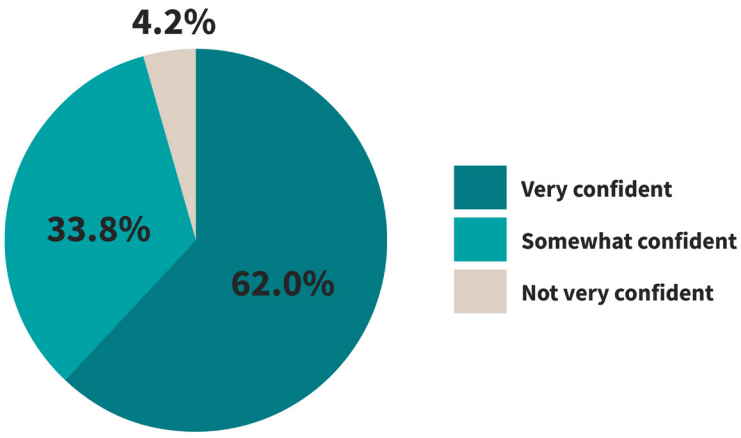
Key Finding 5: Perceived benefits are moderate, not transformative

When asked how much time AI actually saves them on a typical assignment, the most common answer is 10-24% of time saved (32.4%), followed by 25-49% (28.2%). Only 8.5% report saving 75% or more, and an identical 8.5% report saving less than 10%. For a tool that many students use on a regular basis, the payoff they describe seems more like an assistant and aid that creates incremental improvements than transformative solutions.



Approximately what percentage of time do you think AI saves you on a typical assignment?

This lines up with another finding about how much students rely on AI to succeed with their coursework. When asked how confident they'd be completing the same assignments without AI, 62% of students say "very confident," and another 33.8% say "somewhat confident." Only 4.2% say they'd feel not very confident, and not a single respondent chose "not at all confident." Read next to the graph above, it shows that AI is saving these students a moderate amount of time on tasks most of them are confident they could complete on their own, not rescuing them from tasks they couldn't do otherwise.



If AI were unavailable, how confident are you that you could complete the same assignments on your own?

The Stanford student's interview captures this from personal experience, expanding on the themes from the survey answers. When asked directly whether AI has improved her academic or workplace performance, she was careful to separate what getting various inputs means from what actual understanding comes from. "I think it's improved my performance. I don't think it has improved my own knowledge. I've become more efficient and also just produce probably better quality or more easily understandable work. And it's explained a lot of things to me, like math and chemistry, that I would otherwise have spent a lot of time on. So yes, I think it has improved my performance."

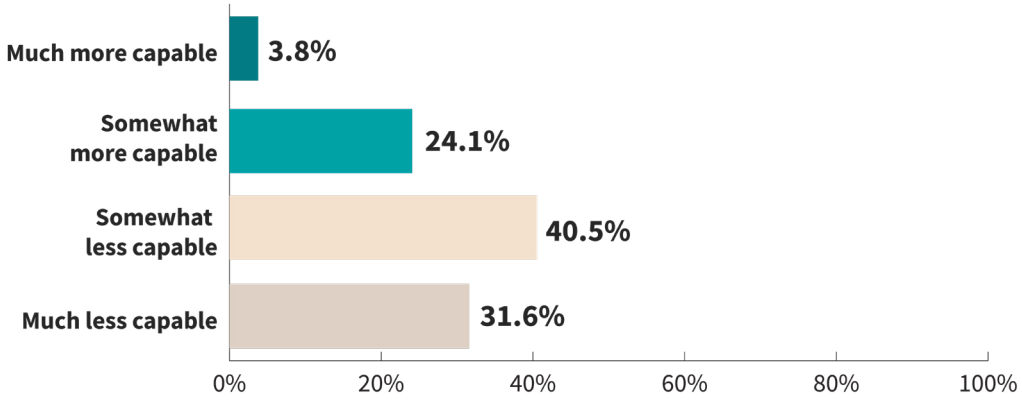
This pattern is further supported by the finding that students were asked to imagine giving up AI not just individually, but collectively as a campus. A combined 80.3% of survey respondents said they would volunteer to stop using AI for one semester, as long as everyone else did as well. A tool students genuinely couldn't function without would be unlikely to draw a cohesive agreement to set it aside.

Students at institutions as diverse as Bowdoin, Montana State, UVM, and Oklahoma all experience inconsistent AI policies and enforcement regardless of how intentional their universities are investing in AI research and governance.

Key Finding 6: Most believe relying heavily on AI makes people less capable in their future career

This next finding focuses on the future. When asked whether relying heavily on AI during college will make them more or less capable in their future career, 40.5% say somewhat less capable, and 31.6% say much less capable.

This further demonstrates the gap between use and perceived value, since most respondents are routinely using AI for schoolwork.



I think relying heavily on AI during college will make me _____ in my future career.

Four of the student interviews explain four different reasons that AI-usage skills during university might not translate directly into future professional success.

The OU marketing student ties her doubt to a belief that human work will only become more valuable as AI becomes more common, and not vice versa. When asked if and how AI might impact the future job she wants, she said, “I don’t think it will benefit me. As of right now, you can completely tell the difference between something that was human-produced versus AI-produced. I think human creativity is so important, and I think more people will come to realize it once AI keeps doing more.” She doesn’t necessarily think that AI will replace the work that she is prepared to enter, and she actually thinks that leaning on it as a student now might put her behind in terms of keeping up with a field that might have a trajectory of valuing human-created outputs.

The UVM student takes a more direct and skills-oriented view of the same question. When asked whether someone who relied on AI to do all of their work would be better or worse at her future job than she will be, she didn’t hesitate. “I think there are definitely benefits to using AI in all aspects, but I don’t feel as though it would make them extremely better. I think they would lack the social skills needed, the problem-solving skills needed, the free-thinking skills needed too, to do what I do.” She believes that AI reliance now comes at the direct cost of the specific, hands-on, and creative skills that her future job will actually require.

The earth systems student from Stanford frames the stakes in more competitive terms, discussing things like efficiency and productivity, looking at the future of AI through a very practical lens. When asked to describe or react to a student who refuses to use AI at all, she was sympathetic to their reasoning but blunt about where that choice may lead. “I think this is maybe going to put you at a disadvantage in the future because AI isn’t going anywhere.”

Finally, the finance student from MSU explains a more detailed, possible future reality, where putting “AI skills” itself on a resume might not be the wisest. For him, the technological field and scope of AI is always evolving. He described how quickly the learnable skill of prompt engineering has already gone out of date, saying, “I think it’s still relevant to be able to have an effective way to communicate ideas with AI, but we’re just in such a rapid rate of change that it’s hard to have anything that will be concrete, unless you maybe have a good fundamental understanding of how these models are being built up or what they respond to. But it’s hard to stay up with or to even grasp in the first place.”

Key Finding 7: Pre-law respondents use AI about as often as the full sample, yet trust it noticeably less

This report, as a whole, is relevant to most students, future employers, and people in all fields of life, but the results and crossover themes converge most sharply on law. The legal profession is expected to experience significant disruption driven by AI, so it is an ecosystem worth examining. These students use AI as often as other respondents, yet are much more skeptical of it: 66.7% say AI is acceptable for brainstorming only, against 38% of the full sample; 66.7% believe heavy reliance will leave them much less capable, against 31.6% overall. Their confidence that they could work without AI is higher (83.3% versus 62%), and their appetite for a collective AI-free semester is 100%, against 80.3% for everyone else. A group that uses AI often and trusts it least is not a contradiction. Rather, perhaps it mirrors the profession’s instincts showing up early in students who appreciate traits that the law values.

The Bowdoin student’s interview reflects this pattern among pre-law students, and explains specifically about Bowdoin’s campus culture surrounding AI. From her experience, comments are made about AI in every class and every classroom syllabus, and the Hastings Initiative backs that norm with real institutional regulation. The ethical line that she describes is similar to the OU marketing student, where AI is prohibited for writing and plagiarism, while generally permitted for study tools and editing. Legal studies, in her experience, might not need a different ethical framework than what the rest of the report has already surfaced.

The student also offers a unique perspective on how AI not only relates to legal education but also legal practice. Through a summer internship with the U.S. Department of Justice’s District of Massachusetts, she watched lawyers contest the authenticity of photo and video evidence by raising the question and possibility of AI fabrication, and furthermore questioning why law enforcement hadn’t tested contested evidence for it. These scenarios are new and unique to our current technological environment, as these examples might not have existed in a live courtroom setting just a few years ago. The student included a detailed analysis of the pros and cons of AI use in a courtroom setting, and for the criminal justice system specifically:

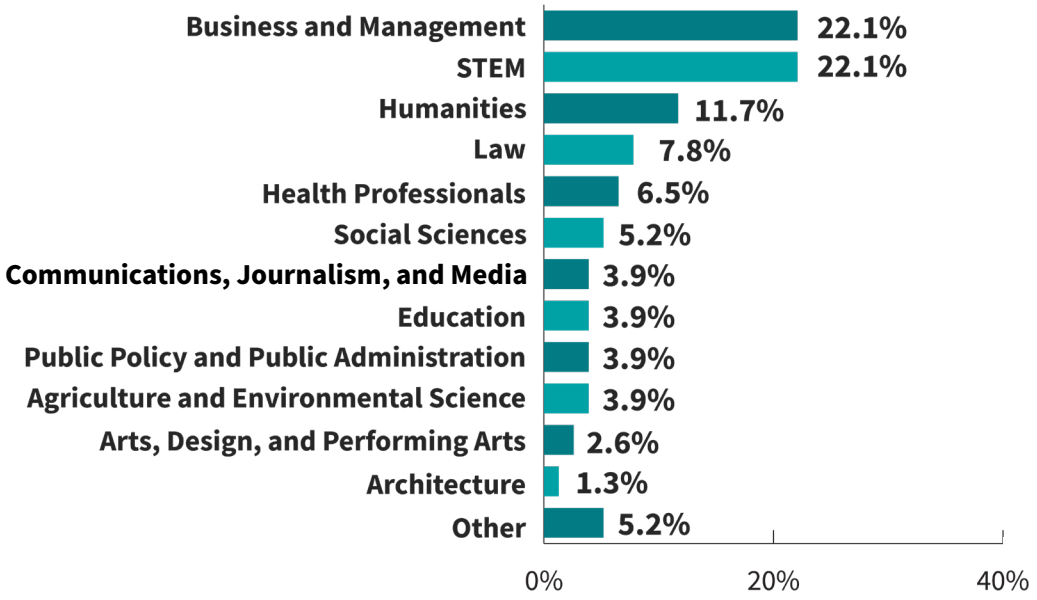
“I do think that AI has the capacity to benefit the field, although right now I believe that it should be used sparingly in the legal world. I think for a defendant or someone who may lack the financial ability to pay for a lawyer, or someone who wants to represent themselves in a pro se trial, AI assistance could be helpful for general guidance or explanation of the law. However, I do not think AI can replace the knowledge and work

Two students, even outside the legal field, use it as an example for a field where AI use, guidelines, and regulation carry real weight. The theater student from UVM names law and women's rights advocacy as a possible future path for her, as she described the strictest AI regulation and boundaries in the entire dataset. The MSU finance student reasons that AI caution "makes more sense" in a history or pre-law political science major, since that path "leads to a lot more academia where maybe you end up in law school." Interestingly, neither student is describing their own field, but both point to law school as an example where getting AI governance right matters more.

Based on both the survey results and these students' own reflections, those headed toward legal careers already seem to innately sense how much responsible AI use matters and can change the trajectory of their profession.

Comparing Majors and Professions

Four of the five interviewees in this research come from fields with very different relationships to writing, originality, and professional risk. The interviews highlight how much a major shapes how AI actually fits into their academic and future professional lives.



What is your primary field of study?

STEM and the Sciences: The Stanford senior studying Earth Systems with a focus in Sustainable Food and Agriculture describes a campus culture where AI use isn't just accepted; it is somewhat assumed in daily life and highly normalized. She explains that routine academic tasks like weekly quizzes and reading checks are tasks where "it's almost just expected that you're going to use AI for that almost every time, regardless of the class, regardless of the department. Routine things that are just meant to be knowledge checks." Because she sees herself heading into a profession connected to hands-on agricultural work, the Stanford student doesn't necessarily see AI as a huge threat to her future career. She explains that it might act as an accompanying tool, through things like precision agriculture technology, without replacing the physical nature of the work itself.

Liberal Arts and Performing Arts: The junior studying Theater and Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at the University of Vermont sits at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Stanford student. She explained that she has personally only used AI a handful of times and described a university experience where AI use is actively discouraged. When asked how AI might impact the future of performing arts specifically, she described a very specific prediction. "I think AI has made the attention spans and willingness to think through issues very hard for people, and it will only continue to get worse. With just our easy readiness to find solutions without actually looking for them. And so I think it'll become harder and harder for people to sit through live performances and think through difficult topics, and that will just affect how popular the performing arts are in the future." The risk isn't necessarily that AI will replace the theater and performing arts entirely, but it will definitely aid in eroding new generations' attention spans and interest that live performances directly rely on. "I think it'll be very similar to how our generation looks at our phones, how we still continue to use them, but most of us despise them and want to find solutions to get away from them… I think in 10 years, we'll still be using AI, but will want to not be using it, like we do with our phones."

Business: The University of Oklahoma junior studying Marketing and Sports Business occupies a sort of middle ground between the two previous perspectives. She describes it as a tool used only for specific purposes, not as a constant assistant to aid with routine tasks, and thinks about it in a professional way in that same deliberate manner. When asked whether being good at AI is something worth putting on a resume, she said, "I think learning how to phrase your questions, I think how to use AI for your benefit, rather than relying on it heavily, is a good skill. But if you're not using it at all, and you're not good at using it, then I think it doesn't really affect you." Her answer draws an interesting distinction that the skill isn't AI use itself; it's knowing how to use it well without leaning on it.

Finance, Accounting, and Architecture: The Montana State University junior studying Finance and Accounting also previously studied Architecture and offers a very unique perspective on how AI perception can change from major to major. In architecture, he explained that the department approached AI by simply not thinking about it at all. He described AI's relevance as "it wasn't even thought of. Which, in hindsight, is a bit naive." He thinks that architecture as a field of study might actually be more susceptible to change than many professionals might think, specifically when or if AI tools can operate drafting and rendering software directly, potentially pushing licensed architects towards a more bureaucratic and approval role, as non-architects can take on more creative and design work themselves. In his current major, finance, the MSU student expects real disruption for entry-level professionals. He points to an example of a one-person, AI-run startup reaching a large valuation to demonstrate how thin certain business functions can become. On the contrary, in the finance world, he thinks that AI's influence might stay more limited in high-stakes, relationship-driven work like sales or mergers and acquisitions, saying that this work might stay "insulated" precisely because it depends on face-to-face human trust that AI cannot replace.

Methodology

The research combines two complementary methods of information acquisition: a quantitative survey distributed broadly across college students at multiple institutions, and a set of structured qualitative interviews conducted with a smaller number of students in greater depth. The survey established a broad outline of students' AI attitudes and behaviors, while the interviews acted to fill in any gaps with real experiences, nuanced feelings, and any contradictions.

The survey, administered online through SurveyMonkey, asked respondents about the frequency and specific nature of their AI use, their views on what counts as ethical use, their confidence in their personal skills without AI, assessment of their university's policies and regulations, perceived time savings with AI use, and expectations about its impact on future careers. The survey also requested basic demographic information, including academic year, field of study, and the name of their university. There was one open-ended question asking respondents to describe a specific instance in which they were unsure whether their own AI use crossed an ethical line. 43 of the 86 total respondents provided a written answer, acting as a good source of anonymous qualitative data that represents their true experiences with AI use. Several of the responses are quoted in the key findings section regarding cheating and how AI fits into the picture. There were 86 total respondents on the online survey, representing 37 different colleges and universities and including a majority of current undergraduates along with a few graduate students and recent graduates.

Percentages are calculated using the number of respondents who answered each question, which varies across questions. Percentages in the charts on pages 3, 8, 9, and 13 may total slightly more or less than 100% due to rounding.

Five undergraduate students were recruited for individual interviews that were intended to add depth and further understanding to the survey's broader patterns. The questions asked consisted of themes like understanding the students' past with technology, technological culture on their respective campuses, how their professors and universities address AI use, how their peers view and use AI, where they draw personal lines on acceptable AI use, and how they expect AI to impact their future career and field.

The five interviewees were:

- A junior from the University of Oklahoma studying Marketing and Sports Business
- A junior at the University of Vermont studying Theater and Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies
- A senior at Stanford University studying Earth Systems with a focus in Sustainable Food and Agriculture
- A junior at Bowdoin College studying Government and Legal Studies with a concentration in International Relations—alongside Philosophy
- A junior at Montana State University studying Finance and Accounting

They were chosen specifically because of their diverse studies in hopes of surfacing how differently AI is being absorbed based on what a student's field of study and future profession might demand of them.

Conclusion

The findings in this report point to a college student population that has settled into routine AI use, while many of the institutions around them might not have figured out how to catch up and establish regulations for this fast-moving development. While most students turn to AI first several times a week, there is not a settled expectation of acceptable use. Layered on top of these nuanced discrepancies with generative AI use is a trust gap between students and the policy-makers at their universities, where regulation isn't well-outlined, and students may not feel prepared to navigate the AI era responsibly. And despite how embedded AI has become in day-to-day academic life, most students describe its actual payoff in modest terms, saving some time and filling in some gaps, but not as an exclusive substitute.

As the study has found, there is no single "student relationship to AI" that is all-encompassing, or that covers all the different students' experiences with AI. Therefore, no university policy, employer rules, or personal philosophy will exactly align with one another. The reality may be that, just as the approach to teaching and learning differs between subjects and planned career paths, differing approaches to AI will become the norm rather than there ever being one single standard.

While these tensions, apprehensions, and conversations are not unique to a single major, they carry a great deal of weight for undergraduate students planning to go into law. In a field built on precision, communication, and logical reasoning, issues regarding originality and ownership are particularly interesting. The pre-law students and legal-studies interviewees in this research were some of the more cautious voices, deeply delving into the ethical and logical repercussions of AI-generated errors and what it means to be an avid AI user. This caution, or at least conversation, regarding AI in the legal field is worth taking seriously as lawyers and legal professionals continue to figure out where it fits in.

While the technology and experiences of today's college students will change by the time they enter the workforce, what seems less likely to change is the complex question these students already have to navigate: not whether to use AI, but how to use it in a way that remains ethical and responsible and doesn't diminish their learning or corrode their own creativity and skill. This last point stands out as a consistent hope expressed by the subjects of this study. They want useful tools, not a replacement for their own intellect, opinions, and work.

Participants' Schools

- American University
- Bucknell University
- Dartmouth College
- Drake University
- Gonzaga University
- Lehigh University
- Lewis University
- Michigan State University
- Montana State University
- New York University
- Northwestern University
- Oregon State University
- San Diego State University
- Sewanee: The University of the South
- Stanford University
- Syracuse University
- Texas A&M University
- Texas Christian University
- The University of Texas at Austin
- University at Albany
- University of Arkansas at Little Rock
- University of Chicago
- University of Florida
- University of Georgia
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- University of Miami
- University of Minnesota Twin Cities
- University of Montana
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- University of North Carolina Wilmington
- University of North Dakota
- University of Notre Dame
- University of Oklahoma
- University of Oregon
- University of Tennessee, Knoxville
- Vanderbilt University
- Washington University in St. Louis
- Wheaton College