wgu labs

STUDENTS ARE AI OPTIMISTS, BUT WOMEN ARE AT RISK OF BEING LEFT BEHIND

Students are largely using AI in academic settings and are comfortable with AI-generated learning support

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly becoming part of the higher education experience, particularly in online learning environments. Tools that leverage AI are often positioned as mechanisms for improving educational equity, streamlining access to support, and personalizing instruction (**Castro et al., 2023**; **Stoltzfus & Shelton, 2025**; **Hosseini, 2023**).

As digital-first learning experiences, online universities seem likely to have students and instructors who would be among the first to engage with and integrate these technologies in their instructional experiences. At the same time, these institutions also enroll a disproportionate number of students from under-resourced and marginalized communities, who historically have had more limited access to technology. The push and pull dynamics of the online institution make for an interesting venue to dig into the use of, comfort with, and expectations for the integration of AI technologies in postsecondary learning experiences. As more students attend online institutions, particularly those from historically marginalized groups who have had less access to brick-and-mortar institutions, understanding AI perceptions and usage among these students is critical.

In January and February of 2025, we surveyed 4,634 students at the largest not-for-profit online university in the U.S. to better understand their awareness, usage, and perceptions of AI in learning.

Notably, we found high levels of AI usage across student groups, with minimal gaps by race or first-generation status. Students were largely positive about the potential of AI to personalize their learning experiences, but expressed concerns about transparency and the application of AI in evaluative and social/emotional support roles. However, we observed substantial gender disparities in confidence and usage.

As AI becomes increasingly embedded across industries, there is an urgent risk of leaving women behind in both higher education and the workforce. Gender gaps in AI confidence, exposure, and usage could exacerbate broader disparities in career opportunities, particularly in a labor market increasingly shaped by AI-driven technologies. Women are more likely than men to work in jobs vulnerable to automation and displacement (**Workshift, 2023**), and persistent gender pay gaps continue to disadvantage women across sectors (**Equal Pay Today, 2024**). In the rapidly growing AI workforce itself, men hold 71% of all AI-related roles globally, highlighting a significant talent gap (**Randstad, 2024**). Moreover, bias is already embedded in many AI systems, reinforcing gender inequalities in areas ranging from hiring to financial services (**UN Women, 2024**). Recent investigations even show that AI-powered career coaching tools can provide different — and less ambitious — career advice depending on whether a user is perceived as male or female (**Washington Post, 2024**). These trends underscore the importance of examining and addressing potential gender gaps in AI usage, experiences, and perceptions, particularly in educational settings, to ensure that women are not further marginalized by the rise of AI.

These findings point to a need for expanded AI literacy, especially for women, ethical and transparent implementation, and student-centered integration of AI in higher education.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Women are 12% less confident in their ability to use AI tools than men

Across the student population, AI awareness and usage were high, but notable gender disparities emerged in students' awareness of and self-reported confidence with these tools. While 96% of men reported that they were familiar with the tools, 89% of women reported the same. Men also consistently expressed higher confidence with the tools than women. For example, 74% of men agreed they were confident in their ability to use AI tools effectively, compared to just 62% of women — a 12 percentage point gap. Similarly, men were more likely than women to say they understood how AI tools work (73% vs. 60%), knew how to write effective prompts (64% vs. 50%), and could evaluate AI-generated content (74% vs. 59%).

2

59% of students are positive about AI in education, and over 60% are comfortable with AI using their data to provide personalization

Students generally held favorable views of AI in education. When asked about the role of AI in higher education, 59% of students reported positive attitudes, while only 17% expressed negative views, and 24% were neutral. Students were especially open to AI systems that use their personal data to enhance the learning experience. For example, over 60% reported feeling comfortable with AI analyzing academic performance data, career goals, and other inputs to offer tailored learning materials and guidance. They also saw value in AI for specific use cases, including resource recommendation, personalized assessments, and customized instruction.

3

58% of students are comfortable with AI-generated feedback, but only 35% trust AI to grade their work

Most students are open to receiving feedback from AI tools, with 58% saying they are comfortable receiving AI-generated feedback and 66% open to real-time feedback during exams or assignments. However, this comfort declines sharply when it comes to AI taking on evaluative roles. Just 35% said they would trust AI to accurately evaluate their work, and only 36% said they believed AI-generated assessments could accurately reflect their skills. Similarly, students expressed doubt about the fairness of AI feedback, with only 17% believing that AI feedback is less biased than human feedback.

4

Only a third of students want AI tools for social or emotional support

Students were less enthusiastic about AI being used in roles that involve social or emotional support. Just 32% said they believed AI would be beneficial for emotional support or mental health guidance. Similarly, only 35% found value in AI tutors or coaches, and only 40% were comfortable with AI offering strategies for mental health. However, students showed greater comfort with AI in the form of chatbots providing 24/7 academic and career support, suggesting that comfort depends heavily on how the tool is framed and what role it plays.

5

92% of students want to know when they are interacting with AI

Students expressed a strong desire for transparency in AI-supported learning. The overwhelming majority (92%) said it was important to know when they were interacting with AI. In addition, 84% wanted the ability to opt out of AI-supported experiences, 83% said it was important to have access to a human, and 79% wanted to know when content was AI-generated. These preferences are particularly noteworthy given that almost half (45%) of students reported being unaware when AI was being used in their learning.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly emerged as one of the most transformative forces in higher education. Since these tools became open to public use in the fall of 2022, AI is now being widely deployed across the educational ecosystem — from tools that provide real-time feedback and automate administrative tasks to systems that personalize content and predict student success (**Castro et al., 2023**). Its rapid integration has created both promise and pressure: Institutions are being asked to innovate quickly, often without a clear roadmap for how these tools will impact students' learning experiences (**Stoltzfus & Shelton, 2025**).

As digital-first learning experiences, online universities seem likely to have students and instructors who would be among the first to engage with and integrate these technologies in their instructional experience. At the same time, these institutions also enroll a disproportionate number of students from under-resourced and marginalized communities, who historically have had limited access to technology. The push and pull dynamics of the online institution make for an interesting venue to dig into the use of, comfort with, and expectations for the integration of AI technologies in postsecondary learning experiences.

As online institutions seek to deliver scalable, personalized, and on-demand support for a broad student base, they may be particularly likely to explore and integrate AI tools into their instructional and support services (**Castro et al., 2023**; **Stoltzfus & Shelton, 2025**). In these environments, AI may be more likely to be embedded into core instructional and support systems, making it not just a supplemental resource but a central part of the educational journey. Students at fully online institutions — many of whom are working adults, caregivers, or from historically marginalized backgrounds — may experience AI in ways that differ significantly from their peers in traditional, campus-based programs. Understanding the experiences and

perspectives of online students is essential for the equitable and responsible design of AI in education, especially as its use continues to expand.

At the same time, the rapid integration of AI raises urgent concerns around equity — particularly for women. Gender gaps in AI confidence, exposure, and usage could exacerbate broader disparities in career opportunities in a labor market increasingly shaped by AI-driven technologies. Women are more likely than men to work in jobs that are vulnerable to automation and displacement (**Workshift, 2023**), and persistent gender pay

gaps continue to disadvantage women across sectors (**Equal Pay Today, 2024**). Within the growing AI workforce itself, men hold 71% of all AI-related roles globally, highlighting a significant talent gap (**Randstad, 2024**). Moreover, bias is already embedded in many AI systems, reinforcing gender inequalities in areas ranging from hiring to financial services (**UN Women, 2024**). Recent investigations have even found that AI-powered career coaching tools can provide different — and less ambitious — career advice based on perceived gender (**Washington Post, 2024**). These trends underscore the importance of addressing gender gaps early, particularly in educational settings, to ensure that women are not further marginalized by the rise of AI.

To better understand how students are engaging with AI tools in their learning, **WGU Labs** — the research, development, and investment arm of Western Governors University (WGU) — conducted a survey in January and February of 2025 among students at the largest not-for-profit online university in the U.S. Our goal was to document not only patterns of use but also levels of trust, confidence, and perceived value in AI overall and across demographic groups. We sought to understand how these tools are shaping the student experience — and where institutions should focus their efforts to ensure AI is implemented in ways that are ethical, transparent, and beneficial for all learners.

Our results showed high levels of student engagement with AI tools, with over 90% of students reporting familiarity. This is a substantial increase from a 2024 survey,

which found that roughly 75% of students were familiar with AI (**WGU Labs, 2024**). A large percentage of students (77%) also reported that they are using AI tools in their academic studies. The most commonly reported uses of AI were getting explanations of complex topics (50%), brainstorming creative ideas (41%), and getting feedback on work (40%).

Interestingly, we saw minimal gaps in awareness and usage by race/ethnicity and first-generation status. The lack of meaningful differences by first-generation status was reassuring, particularly given that we have previously found lower awareness and usage among first-generation learners (**WGU Labs, 2024**). However, similar to other surveys (e.g. **Otis et al., 2024**; **World Economic Forum, 2024**) we observed substantial gender disparities in confidence and usage. These gaps are particularly concerning given the broader workforce trends: Women are disproportionately at risk of being impacted by automation (**Brookings, 2019**), face persistent gender pay gaps, and remain underrepresented in AI-related fields (**World Economic Forum, 2025**).

These gaps notwithstanding, students were largely positive about the potential of AI to personalize their learning experiences, but expressed concerns about transparency and the application of AI in evaluative and social or emotional support roles. These findings point to a need for expanded AI literacy, especially for women, ethical and transparent implementation, and student-centered integration of AI in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

We distributed a student survey in early 2025 to examine awareness, usage, and perceptions of AI in education. The survey included items on tool familiarity, usage patterns, attitudes toward AI applications in learning, and demographic characteristics. Overall, 4,634 students responded to the survey. Seventy-four percent of respondents identified as women, 25% identified as men, 1% identified as non-binary, and .8% did not report their gender. Thirty-four percent were enrolled in the School of Education, 31% were enrolled in the School of Business, 20% were enrolled in the School of Technology, and 14% were enrolled in the Leavitt School of Health. For a detailed breakdown of the demographics of our sample, please see the appendix. The analytic approach included frequency analyses and subgroup comparisons across gender, program of study, race/ethnicity, and first-generation status.

The WGU Student Insights Council

Participants in this survey were recruited from the WGU **Student Insights Council**. The Student Insights Council (SIC) is a standing panel of approximately 8,000 students from across Western Governors University's (WGU) broader student body of roughly 176,000 students. The panel was designed to be representative of WGU's overall student population based on key demographics such as program of study, degree program (undergraduate versus graduate), and first-generation college status.

To enable more reliable subgroup analyses, the SIC intentionally oversampled Asian, Native American/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students. Participants come from all four WGU colleges. The panel also includes both undergraduate and graduate students, with approximately 6,006 undergraduates and 2,130 graduate students represented.

KEY TAKEAWAY 1:

Women are 12% less confident in their ability to use AI tools than men

Students at the institution showed widespread awareness and use of AI tools, but significant gender disparities emerged. Overall, 92% of students reported familiarity with AI tools. However, when disaggregated by gender, men reported greater awareness (96%) than women (89%) (*Figure 1*).

Students' awareness of AI tools

Men

96.4%

3.6%

Women

89.1%

10.9%

■ Yes ■ No

Figure 1
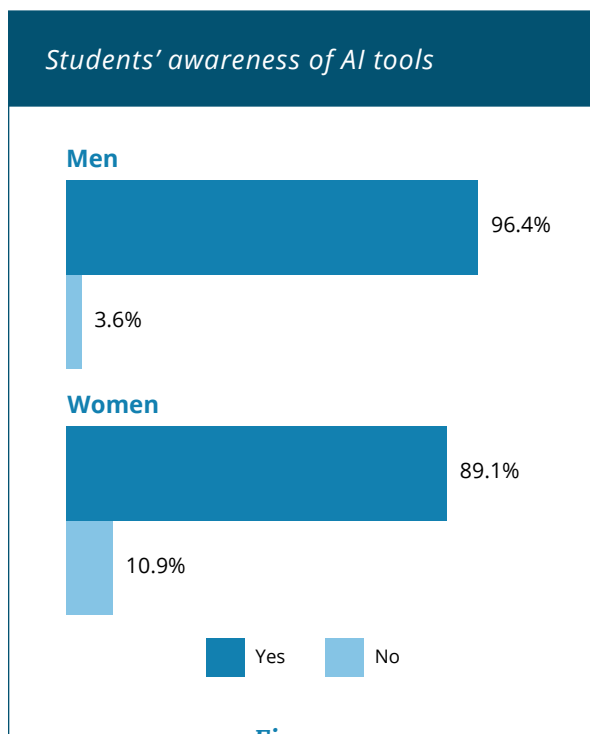
🔍 A NOTE ON PROGRAM OF STUDY:

In our sample, gender and program of study were correlated. As a robustness check, for all items on which we saw differences in gender, we conducted additional analyses in which we controlled for the influence of program of study. For binary response items, we conducted logistic regressions, with gender and program of study as predictors. For items in which we reported frequencies of different response options by gender, we also examined mean responses on these items, controlling for program of study. These analyses revealed that the differences between men and women were statistically significant, even after accounting for differences based on students' program of study.

When we examined their self-reported skills in using AI, men consistently expressed more confidence in their ability to effectively engage with the tools. Indeed, 74% of men agreed that they were confident in their ability to use AI tools effectively, while only 62% of women did. Seventy-three percent of men agreed that they understand how AI tools work, but only 60% of women did. Moreover, 64% of men felt confident in their ability to write effective prompts, compared to 50% of women. Finally, when asked about their ability to critically evaluate AI-generated content and use AI to support study routines, men again reported higher confidence (74% and 68%, respectively) than women (59% and 52%;) (*Figure 2*).

Students' confidence with AI tools

I understand how to write effective prompts for AI tools.

Men: 6% | 11% | 18% | 38% | 27%
Women: 13% | 17% | 20% | 33% | 17%

I understand how AI tools work.

Men: 4% | 9% | 14% | 43% | 31%
Women: 9% | 16% | 15% | 40% | 20%

I know how to use AI to support my study routines.

Men: 6% | 10% | 17% | 42% | 26%
Women: 11% | 17% | 20% | 35% | 17%

I am confident in my ability to use AI tools effectively.

Men: 3% | 7% | 16% | 40% | 34%
Women: 8% | 12% | 18% | 37% | 25%

I am confident in my ability to critically evaluate AI-generated content.

Men: 4% | 7% | 16% | 38% | 36%
Women: 10% | 13% | 18% | 35% | 24%

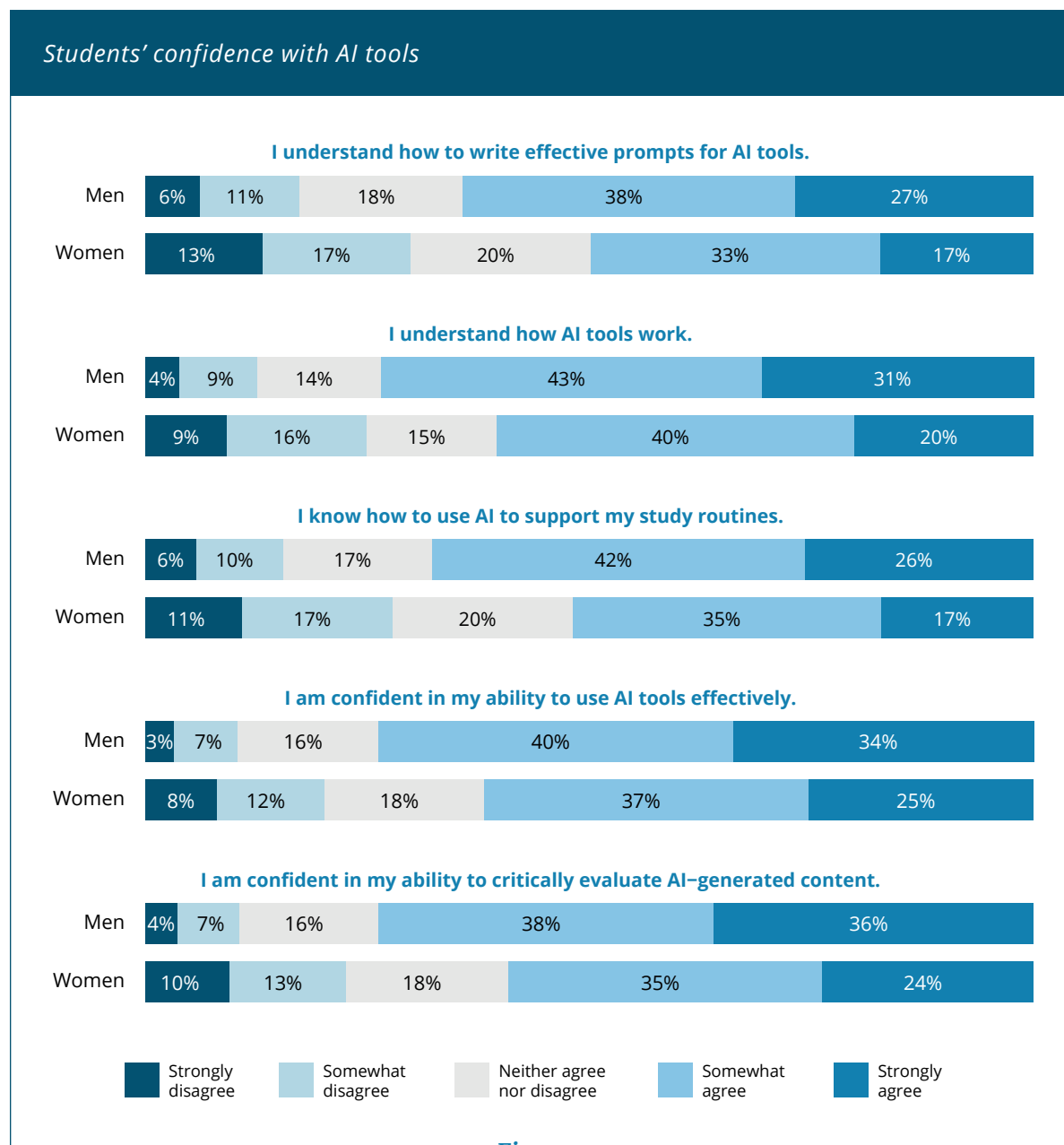Legend: Strongly disagree | Somewhat disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Somewhat agree | Strongly agree

Figure 2

Notably, when we examined confidence in the overall sample without disaggregating by gender, we saw that while the majority of students expressed confidence in their ability to use AI tools, a sizable minority did not. Sixty-six percent agreed they were confident in their ability to use AI effectively, but 17% were neutral, and another 16% disagreed. When asked about their ability to write effective prompts, confidence was even lower: 55% agreed, 19% were neutral, and 25% disagreed.

Why this matters

These differences highlight a critical equity gap in how AI tools are experienced by gender. Without intervention, this gap could contribute to broader disparities in academic outcomes and future career opportunities in tech-influenced fields. Given the increasing integration of AI in the workplace — particularly in administrative roles that are disproportionately held by women — these disparities may have substantial consequences for women's outcomes in the workforce if left unaddressed. Students entering the workforce today are **already seeing the importance of AI skills**, and any gaps in confidence and usage are likely to translate into missed opportunities quickly. As AI becomes more embedded into hiring, workplace processes, and career advancement, even small differences in skill and comfort could have substantial impacts within the next year. Institutions should take proactive steps to address these disparities by offering AI training and support for students of all genders, ensuring that students in less tech-centric fields of study — in which women often make up the majority — have equal access to these supports as those in tech-focused programs.

Beyond the influence of gender, a segment of students in our overall sample lacked confidence in their AI skills and abilities. Without targeted efforts to build these skills, students who are less confident or tech-savvy may fall behind their peers, reinforcing existing inequities in digital literacy. Training programs, peer workshops, and support tools could play a critical role in bridging these gaps and ensuring that all students are prepared for an AI-driven workforce.

KEY TAKEAWAY 2:

59% of students are positive about AI in education,
and over 60% are comfortable with AI using
their data to provide personalization

Students were largely positive about the potential of AI tools to improve their learning experiences. When asked how they felt about the use of AI tools in higher education, 59% of students expressed positive views. Twenty-four percent were neutral and 17% were negative. When we asked how they felt about the use of AI tools at their institution specifically, we saw a similar pattern of results. Fifty-eight percent were positive, 27% were neutral, and 15% were negative (*Figure 3*).

Attitudes toward use of AI

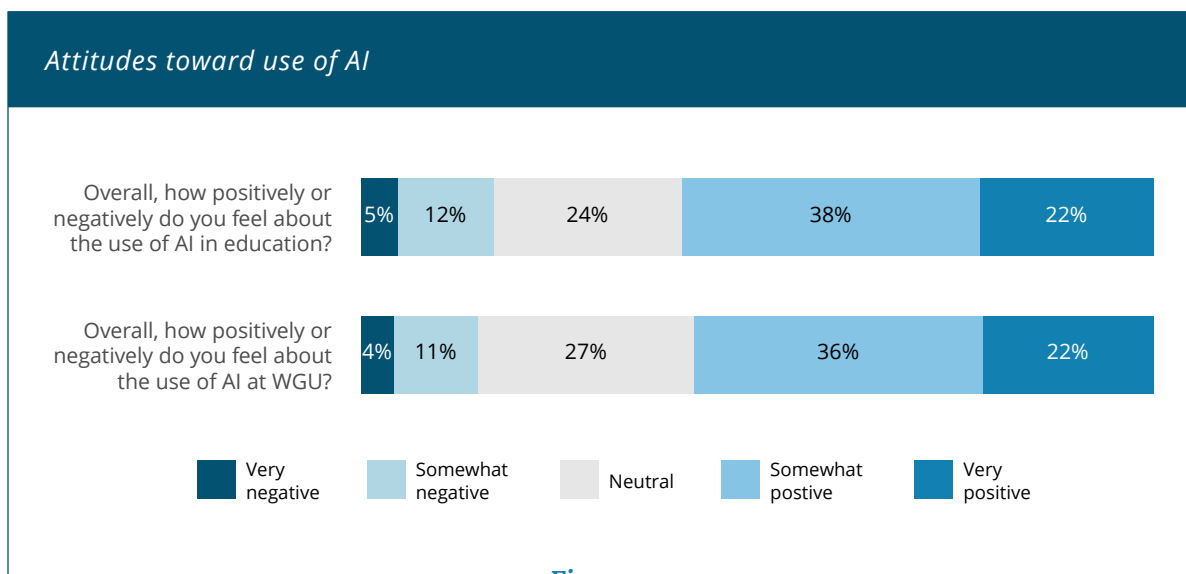|	Very negative	Somewhat negative	Neutral	Somewhat positive	Very positive
Overall, how positively or negatively do you feel about the use of AI in education?	5%	12%	24%	38%	22%
Overall, how positively or negatively do you feel about the use of AI at WGU?	4%	11%	27%	36%	22%

Figure 3

Next, we asked students about their comfort with the way that AI tools might operate in the learning experience and their views of how beneficial specific applications would be for them personally. The results showed that students were comfortable with applications using their personal data, especially when AI is used to personalize instruction and institutional support. For example, 64% said they were comfortable with AI analyzing academic data to recommend learning materials, 68% were comfortable with AI using data on their career interests to offer guidance, and 63% felt comfortable with AI analyzing their academic performance to predict challenges and offer support (*Figure 4*).

Comfort with AI

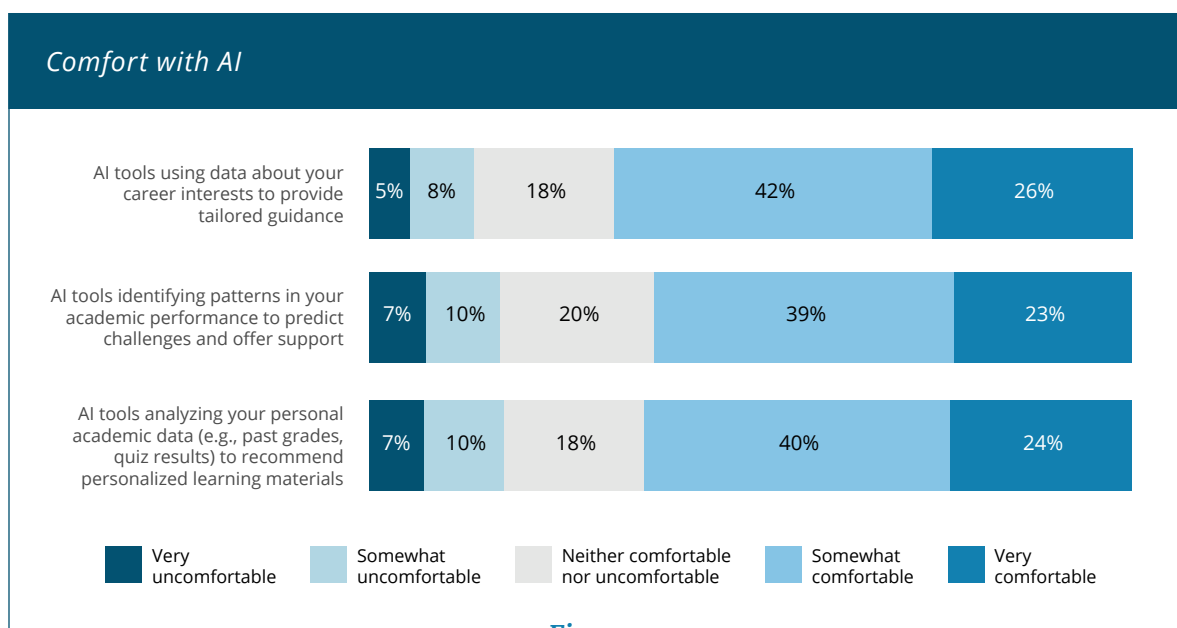|	Very uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Very comfortable
AI tools using data about your career interests to provide tailored guidance	5%	8%	18%	42%	26%
AI tools identifying patterns in your academic performance to predict challenges and offer support	7%	10%	20%	39%	23%
AI tools analyzing your personal academic data (e.g., past grades, quiz results) to recommend personalized learning materials	7%	10%	18%	40%	24%

Figure 4

When we asked about the benefits of specific use cases of AI, we saw a similar pattern of results. For example, 67% of students believed AI tools that help them find and access resources would be beneficial. Fifty-nine percent said that AI tools that create personalized learning assessments would be beneficial, and 52% said that developing personalized instruction based on their learning preferences and needs would be beneficial (*Figure 5*).
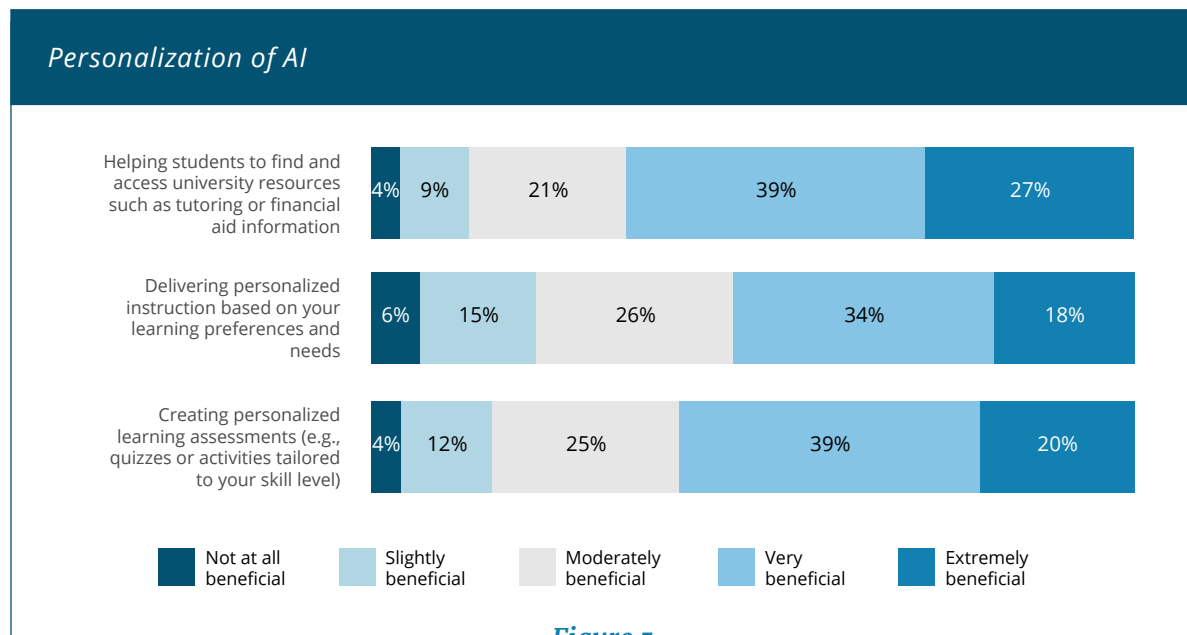
Personalization of AI

	Not at all beneficial	Slightly beneficial	Moderately beneficial	Very beneficial	Extremely beneficial
Helping students to find and access university resources such as tutoring or financial aid information	4%	9%	21%	39%	27%
Delivering personalized instruction based on your learning preferences and needs	6%	15%	26%	34%	18%
Creating personalized learning assessments (e.g., quizzes or activities tailored to your skill level)	4%	12%	25%	39%	20%

Figure 5

Why this matters

Students' openness to personalized learning powered by AI presents an opportunity for institutions to better meet individual needs at scale. Our data show that students are particularly enthusiastic about personalized AI applications that provide clear benefits and support tailored to their unique needs— for example, by recommending resources, tailoring instruction, or providing guidance aligned with their academic performance and career interests. This comfort with personalized AI experiences likely reflects broader trends in students' everyday digital lives, where personalization is now the norm — from TV and music streaming platforms to social media feeds, online shopping, and promotional emails. These findings suggest that students are not inherently skeptical of AI or the ways that these applications use their personal data, but rather, they value applications that are demonstrably beneficial and supportive. Institutions looking to implement AI should focus on these high-value, student-centered use cases while continuing to engage students in conversations about how their data is used and how personalization tools can best serve their learning.

KEY TAKEAWAY 3:

58% of students are comfortable with AI-generated feedback, but only 35% trust AI to grade their work

Students were generally comfortable with AI-generated feedback, but they were much more skeptical about AI performing evaluative tasks like grading and scoring assessments. Fifty-eight percent of respondents were comfortable receiving feedback from AI, and 66% said they would be comfortable receiving real-time AI feedback during exams or assignments.

However, views on the fairness and accuracy of that feedback were mixed. Only 50% of students agreed that AI-generated feedback could help improve the quality of their work, while 32% were neutral, and 18% disagreed. When asked about bias, only 17% believed AI-generated feedback was less biased than human feedback (*Figure 6*).

Perceptions of AI-powered feedback

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I am comfortable receiving feedback generated with AI.	9%	14%	18%	38%	20%
Feedback generated with AI is more fair and accurate than human feedback.	18%	28%	37%	13%	5%
Feedback from an AI will help improve the quality of my work.	8%	10%	32%	37%	13%

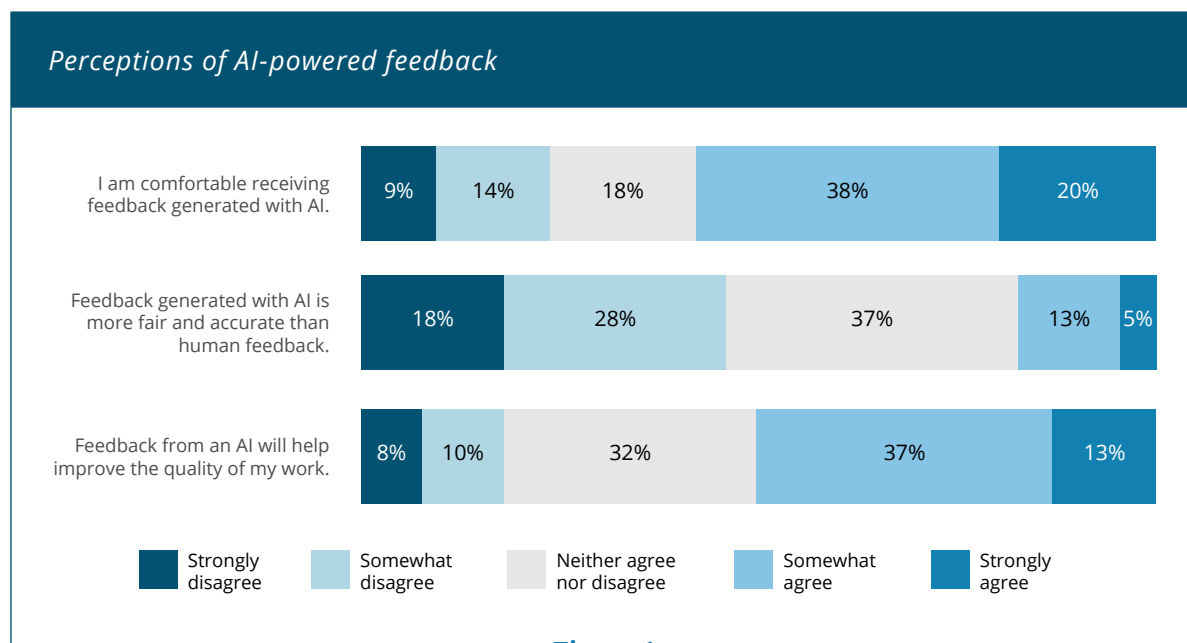Legend: Strongly disagree · Somewhat disagree · Neither agree nor disagree · Somewhat agree · Strongly agree

Figure 6

When asked about their views of AI in evaluative roles, students were even more skeptical. Just 36% said assessments generated with AI could accurately evaluate their skills, and only 35% would trust AI to evaluate their work. Similarly, only 38% believed AI proctoring was less biased than human proctoring (*Figure 7*).

Perceptions of AI-based evaluation

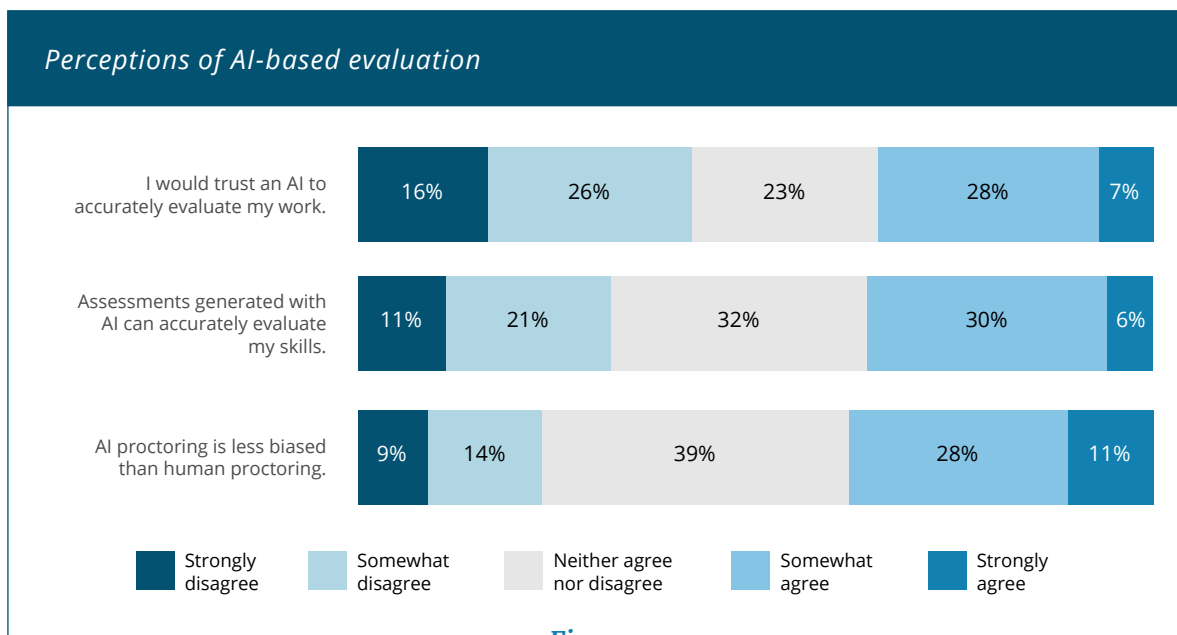|	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I would trust an AI to accurately evaluate my work.	16%	26%	23%	28%	7%
Assessments generated with AI can accurately evaluate my skills.	11%	21%	32%	30%	6%
AI proctoring is less biased than human proctoring.	9%	14%	39%	28%	11%

Figure 7

Interestingly, 65% of students were comfortable with AI tools being used to generate content for quizzes, assignments, or study guides (*Figure 8*). Students may be more comfortable with AI-generated content used for evaluation, but not with AI-based grading.
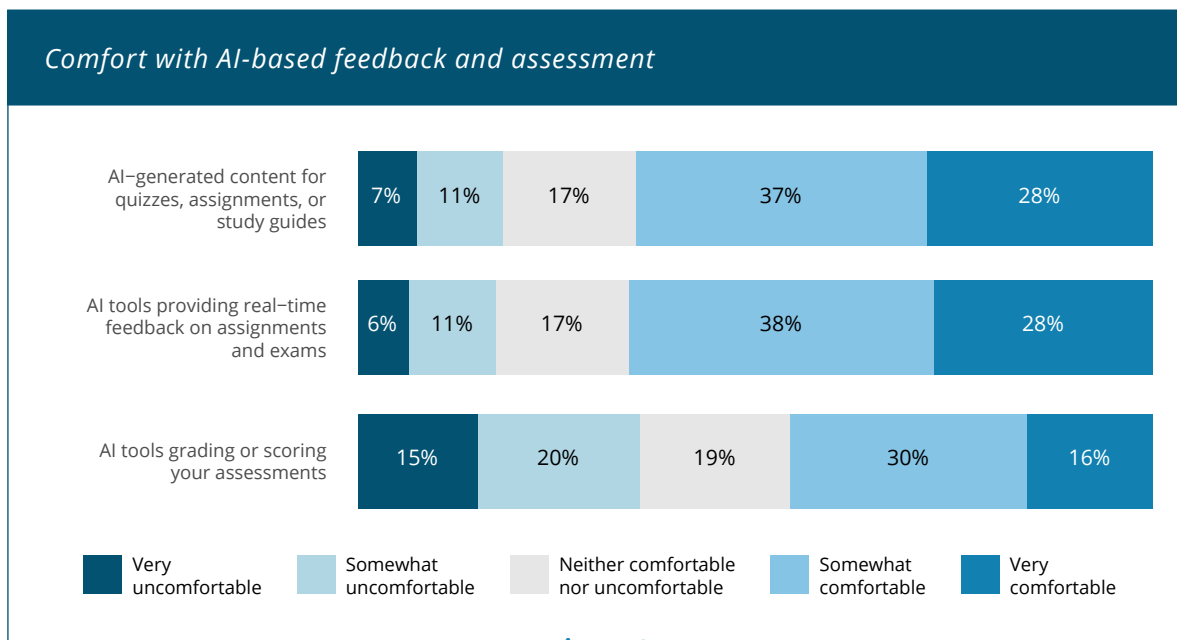
Comfort with AI-based feedback and assessment

AI-generated content for quizzes, assignments, or study guides	7%	11%	17%	37%	28%
AI tools providing real-time feedback on assignments and exams	6%	11%	17%	38%	28%
AI tools grading or scoring your assessments	15%	20%	19%	30%	16%

Legend:
- Very uncomfortable
- Somewhat uncomfortable
- Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Very comfortable

Figure 8

Why this matters

These findings suggest that while students are open to AI augmenting their learning, they still expect human oversight in evaluative contexts. Students may be familiar with tools like Grammarly or spell-check that offer support and suggestions, but grading, scoring, and assessment are seen as higher-stakes decisions that benefit from human judgment. This nuance underscores a key insight: Students differentiate between AI as a tool for support and AI as a decision-maker. To gain student trust, institutions must provide transparency about how AI is used in grading and evidence that it can fairly and accurately evaluate their skills.

KEY TAKEAWAY 4:

Only a third of students want AI tools for social or emotional support

W hile students were open to many AI applications, they were less enthusiastic about AI replacing human roles in emotional or social support. Only 40% of students said they were comfortable with AI tools suggesting mental health strategies (*Figure 9*), and just 32% thought AI would be beneficial for supporting students' social and emotional development (*Figure 10*). Similarly, 35% believed AI tutors or coaches would be beneficial, and the same percentage said AI-powered career counseling would help them.

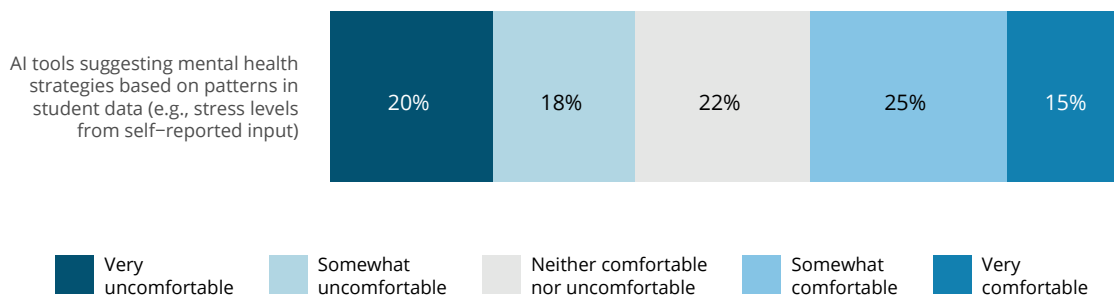**Students' comfort with AI-based mental health suggestions**

| AI tools suggesting mental health strategies based on patterns in student data (e.g., stress levels from self-reported input) | 20% | 18% | 22% | 25% | 15% |

Very uncomfortable · Somewhat uncomfortable · Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable · Somewhat comfortable · Very comfortable

Figure 9

Perceived benefits of AI-based social and emotional support

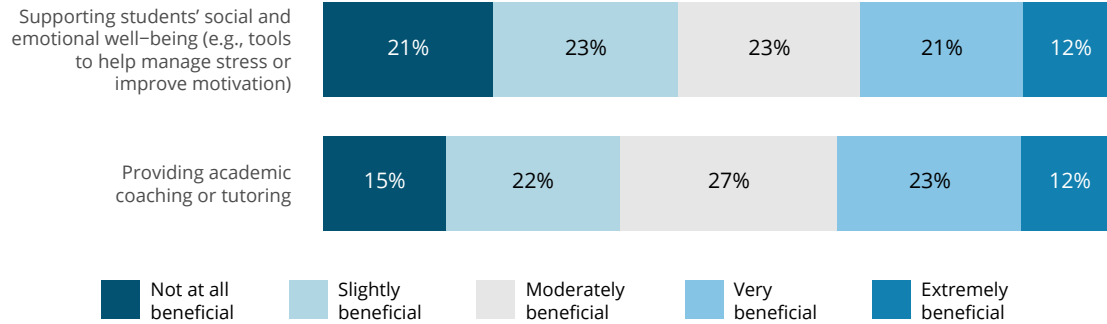| Category	Not at all beneficial	Slightly beneficial	Moderately beneficial	Very beneficial	Extremely beneficial
Supporting students' social and emotional well–being (e.g., tools to help manage stress or improve motivation)	21%	23%	23%	21%	12%
Providing academic coaching or tutoring	15%	22%	27%	23%	12%

Figure 10

Interestingly, students were more receptive to AI support in the form of chatbots. For example, sixty-five percent were comfortable with chatbots that offer 24/7 academic support, and 59% were fine with chatbots answering academic or career questions (*Figure 11*). This suggests that students are more comfortable with AI applications that augment traditionally human–centered support roles rather than replace them. Students may also be more comfortable with use cases that they see as academic support, rather than mental health support.
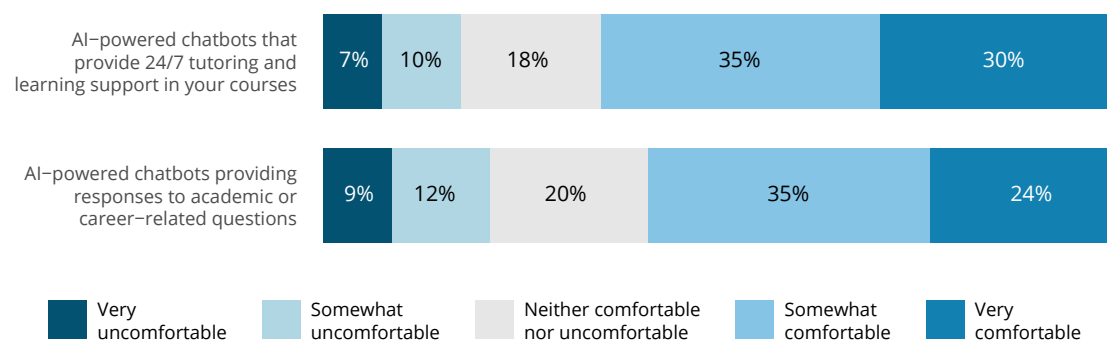
Comfort with AI-based support chatbots

Category	Very uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Very comfortable
AI–powered chatbots that provide 24/7 tutoring and learning support in your courses	7%	10%	18%	35%	30%
AI–powered chatbots providing responses to academic or career–related questions	9%	12%	20%	35%	24%

Figure 11

Language likely plays a role in shaping student reactions. Terms like "AI tutor" or "AI coach" may imply the replacement of human experts, which may trigger concerns about quality, empathy, or job displacement. Conversely, the idea of a "chatbot" evokes something more like an app, which students may view as a helpful service that enhances access but does not displace a person. This linguistic framing may influence how students interpret the role and impact of AI.

Ultimately, students appear open to AI as a resource, but not as a relational substitute. They are fine with AI supporting access to information or guidance, but they are not ready to hand over emotionally sensitive or complex developmental tasks to machines. This finding speaks to the enduring value students place on human connection in education.
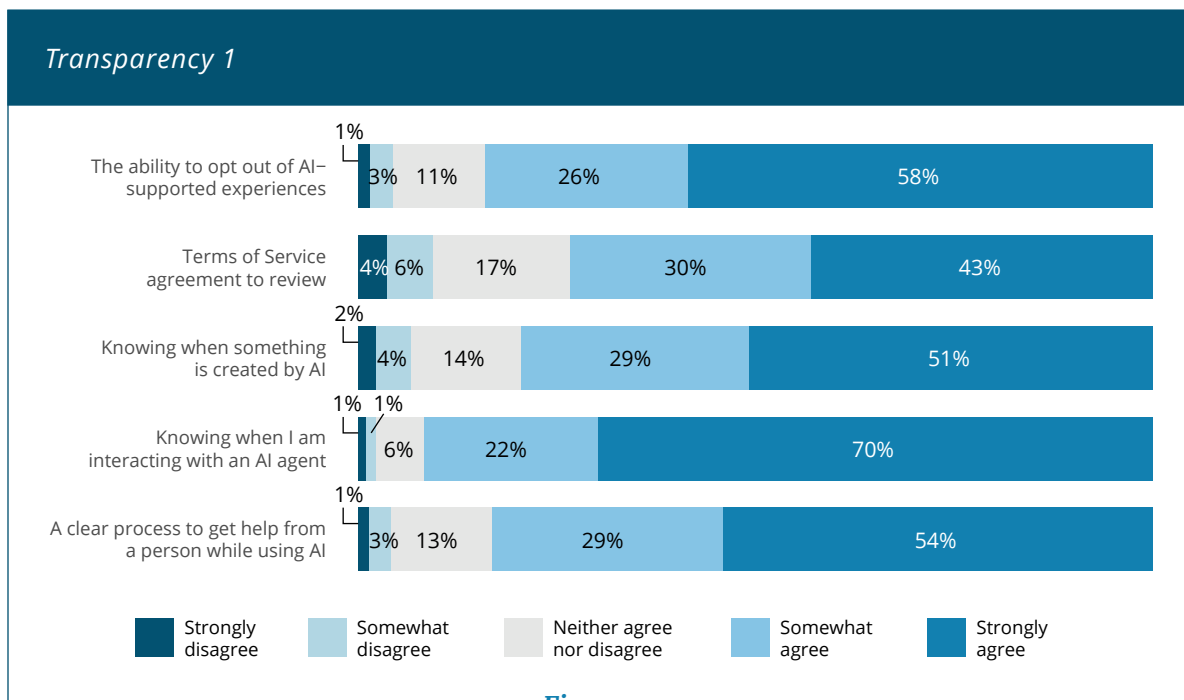
Why this matters

Our findings suggest that while students are open to the use of AI in academic contexts, they are less comfortable with its application in areas traditionally characterized by human connection, such as emotional support, coaching, or counseling. Students appear more willing to engage with AI when it is presented as a tool or service, such as a chatbot, rather than a replacement for human support roles. This distinction highlights the need for institutions to be thoughtful in how they frame and deploy AI in support services. While automation can increase access and responsiveness, students still value — and often prefer — human relationships in emotionally complex or developmentally important contexts.

KEY TAKEAWAY 5:

92% of students want to know when they are interacting with AI

Perhaps the strongest consensus across the survey was around the importance of transparency in AI-supported learning. Students overwhelmingly expressed a desire to know when they are interacting with AI, how their data are being used, and how to get help from a human when needed.

Ninety-two percent of students said it was important to know when they were interacting with AI, and 84% said that the ability to opt out of AI-supported experiences was important. Similarly, 83% emphasized the importance of being able to connect with a human for support, 79% wanted to know when content was AI-generated, and 73% thought having access to a terms–of–service agreement was important (*Figure 12*).

Transparency 1

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
The ability to opt out of AI–supported experiences	1%	3%	11%	26%	58%
Terms of Service agreement to review	4%	6%	17%	30%	43%
Knowing when something is created by AI	2%	4%	14%	29%	51%
Knowing when I am interacting with an AI agent	1%	1%	6%	22%	70%
A clear process to get help from a person while using AI	1%	3%	13%	29%	54%

Figure 12

The desire for transparency is particularly noteworthy given that a significant portion of students reported uncertainty about when AI was being used in their own learning. While 55% said they were aware, 26% were neutral, and 19% disagreed, indicating potential confusion or lack of communication (*Figure 13*).
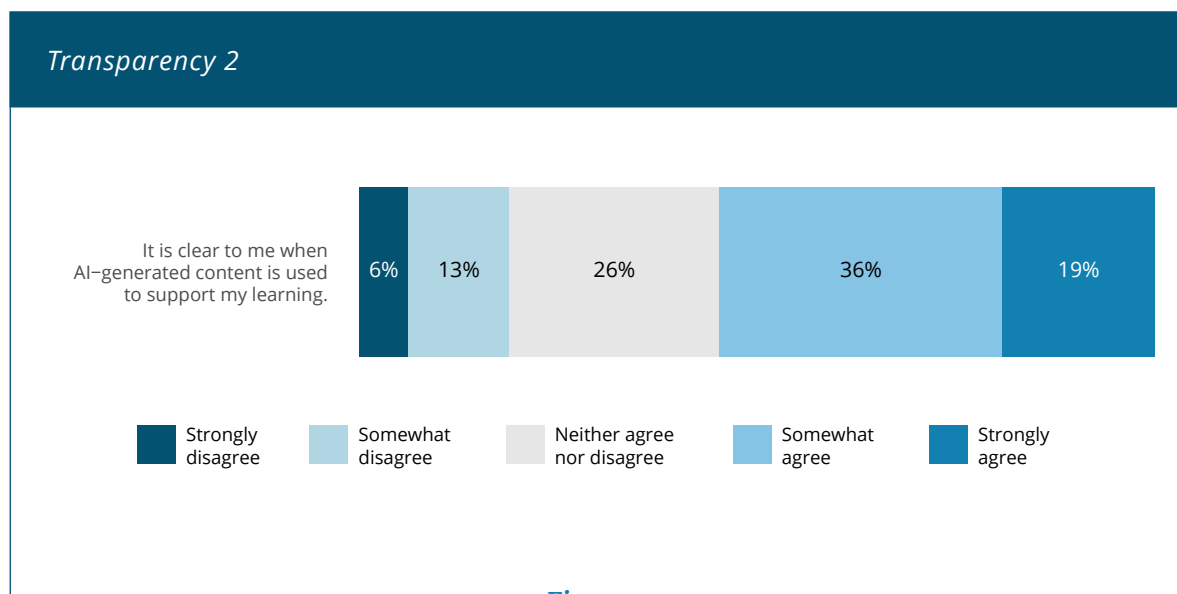
Transparency 2

It is clear to me when AI–generated content is used to support my learning.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
6%	13%	26%	36%	19%

Figure 13

Why this matters

Transparency is foundational to building student trust in AI–supported learning environments. Our data reveal that students overwhelmingly want to know when AI is being used, how their data are being processed, and how to connect with a human when needed. While students are generally comfortable with AI personalizing their experience based on their data — and even see clear benefits in these applications — they want transparency about when and how it is happening. Despite this openness, a sizable portion of students reported uncertainty about when AI is involved in their learning, suggesting that current communication practices may fall short. As institutions adopt AI across instructional and support systems, they must prioritize clear, consistent, and proactive communication to ensure students feel informed, empowered, and able to trust these technologies.

STRATEGIES TO DESIGN EFFECTIVE, STUDENT-CENTERED AI-POWERED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Findings from our survey underscore that while students are largely optimistic about AI in education, thoughtful design and implementation are needed to ensure these tools enhance — rather than undermine — equitable learning experiences. As institutions continue integrating AI into instruction and support, we recommend the following strategies to ensure new models reflect students' needs, preferences, and concerns.

1. Rapidly expand AI training and support to close gender-based confidence gaps

While AI usage is high across student populations, our data reveal a persistent gender gap in awareness and confidence with the tools. Men were significantly more likely than women to report familiarity with the tools, understanding how they work, feeling confident using them, and knowing how to evaluate or prompt AI systems.

Institutions should offer training, support, and coursework to build AI literacy among all learners. This includes embedding AI skill-building into general education, creating inclusive spaces for experimentation (e.g., peer-led workshops or digital coaching), and ensuring that programs where women are overrepresented — such as education and healthcare — receive the same access to AI training as those in tech and business.

Addressing these gender gaps should be an urgent priority for policymakers and higher education leaders. Research shows that AI capabilities are already proving valuable across a wide range of industries, and individuals without these skills may face fewer opportunities for advancement (**World Economic Forum, 2025**; **Randstad, 2024**). As AI continues to shape the workplace, ensuring equitable access to AI literacy will be critical to preparing all students — particularly

women — for success in an AI-integrated economy. Without proactive efforts to build these skills, confidence gaps may deepen, leaving women in particular underprepared for the increasingly AI-integrated workforce.

2. Prioritize high-value personalization that aligns with student goals

Students were most enthusiastic about AI when it enhanced their learning experience, particularly through personalization based on academic performance, career interests, and individual needs. Applications that offered resource recommendations, tailored assessments, and customized instruction were viewed as especially valuable.

Institutions should focus AI investments on tools that support these high-impact use cases, while clearly communicating how student data is used and protected. Personalization must be purposeful — not performative — and should prioritize applications that students say improve access, engagement, and outcomes. At the same time, institutions should regularly solicit student input to guide development and iterate on existing tools.

3. Build student trust in AI-supported assessment by highlighting its potential for fairness

While students are generally open to receiving feedback from AI, they are much more hesitant to accept AI in evaluative roles. Just 35% of students in our survey said they would trust AI to grade their work, and only 36% believed AI-generated assessments could accurately reflect their skills. These findings suggest that students view grading as a high-stakes task that requires human judgment and are not yet convinced that AI can perform this role equitably.

To move toward broader acceptance of AI-supported assessment, institutions must frame these tools not simply as efficiency boosters but as potential levers for fairness. Grading — whether by faculty, teaching assistants, or peers — is not immune to bias. Fatigue, grading order effects, and unconscious assumptions can all shape how student work is evaluated. AI systems, when thoughtfully designed and monitored, can help reduce these inconsistencies by applying consistent criteria across submissions. One way to build trust in AI-supported evaluation may be to first use these tools in formative assessment contexts, where the stakes are lower and students can experience the learning benefits firsthand. Exposure to AI in formative feedback — such as low-stakes quizzes, practice assignments, or real-time coaching — may help students build familiarity and confidence over time, ultimately increasing their comfort with AI use in summative assessment settings.

4. Use AI to enhance student access to support services

Students in our survey made it clear that while they welcome AI in certain academic contexts, they are far more skeptical about its role in providing social and emotional support. Only a third believed AI would be helpful for mental health or emotional guidance, and a similarly small percentage saw value in AI tutors or coaches. Yet when the same types of tools were described as "chatbots" providing 24/7 academic or career help, levels of comfort rose significantly.

This suggests that students are not rejecting AI in support services outright — they are responding to how these tools are framed and the types of interactions they are being asked to trust. Students value the relationships they form with institutional staff, and most want their institutions to continue investing in people who understand their individual journeys and can offer meaningful, relational support. At the same time, students are comfortable receiving logistical, academic, and career guidance from chatbots and other AI systems, particularly when these tools offer quick, convenient, and accessible help outside of traditional service hours.

Rather than limiting the potential of AI tools, institutions should design them thoughtfully to expand access to support resources, enhance responsiveness, and proactively engage students at key points in their learning journey. New technologies create opportunities to deliver personalized, just-in-time support that complements human relationships. Institutions should continue to prioritize staff who can build trust and community with students, even as they deploy AI to extend reach and provide new modes of support.

5. Communicate clearly and consistently about AI use to build student trust

The strongest consensus in our survey centered on transparency. An overwhelming 92% of students said it was important to know when they were interacting with AI — yet nearly half weren't sure when AI was being used in their own learning.
Institutions must adopt clear and consistent communication practices around AI. This includes labeling AI-generated content, offering opt-out pathways, and ensuring that human support is always accessible. Transparency should also extend to data use, decision-making processes, and terms of service. Without this clarity, even the most well-designed tools risk eroding student trust.

CONCLUSION

As AI becomes increasingly embedded into digital learning, students are signaling both enthusiasm and caution. They see the potential for these tools to personalize instruction, enhance access, and support academic success. But they are also raising critical questions about trust, fairness, and the importance of human connection.

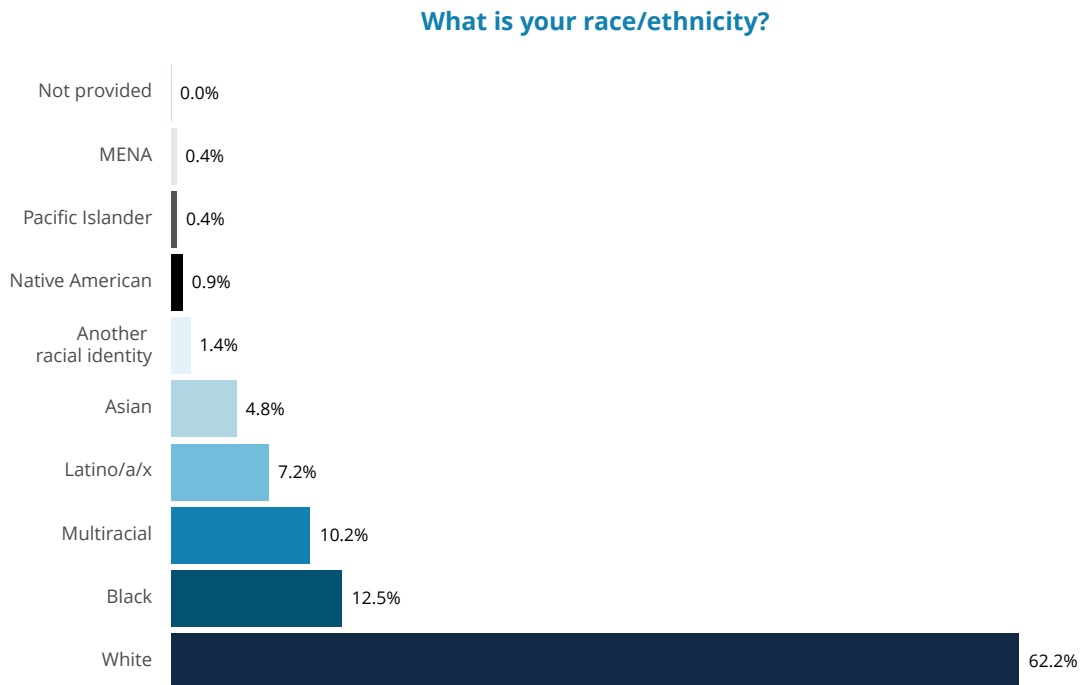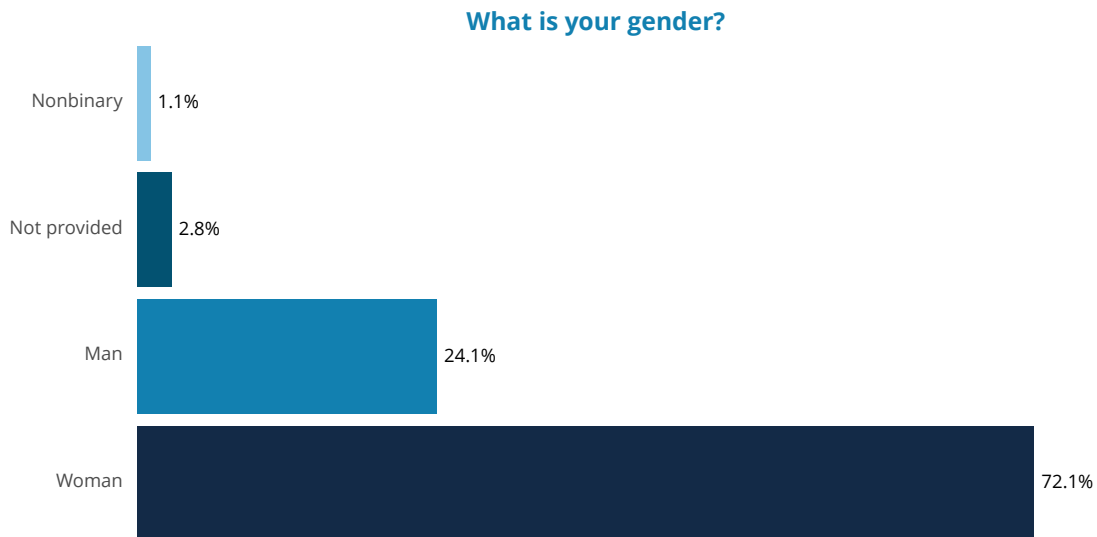*Our findings suggest that students are not asking institutions to slow down innovation — they're asking them to design with intention.* This means closing confidence gaps, centering personalization, and prioritizing transparency.

Done well, AI has the potential to close equity gaps and improve learners' experiences in higher education. But without thoughtful design and implementation, it risks leaving some learners behind.
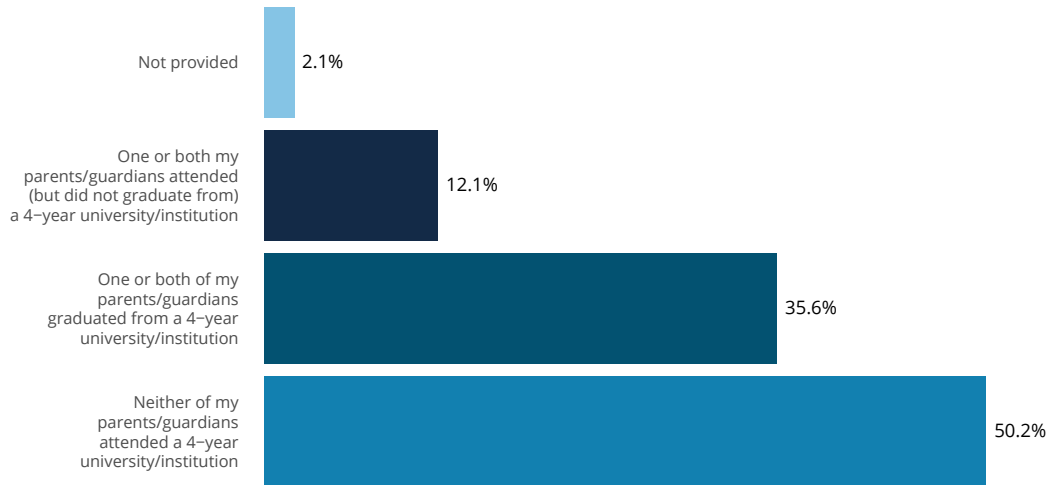
APPENDIX

WHO TOOK OUR SURVEY?

What is your gender?

Nonbinary	1.1%
Not provided	2.8%
Man	24.1%
Woman	72.1%

What is your race/ethnicity?

Not provided	0.0%
MENA	0.4%
Pacific Islander	0.4%
Native American	0.9%
Another racial identity	1.4%
Asian	4.8%
Latino/a/x	7.2%
Multiracial	10.2%
Black	12.5%
White	62.2%

Parental Education: Which of the following statements best apply to you?

Category	Percentage
Not provided	2.1%
One or both my parents/guardians attended (but did not graduate from) a 4–year university/institution	12.1%
One or both of my parents/guardians graduated from a 4–year university/institution	35.6%
Neither of my parents/guardians attended a 4–year university/institution	50.2%

WGU College students are currently enrolled in

School	Percentage
School of Education	34.4%
School of Business	31.2%
School of Technology	20.0%
Leavitt School of Health	14.4%
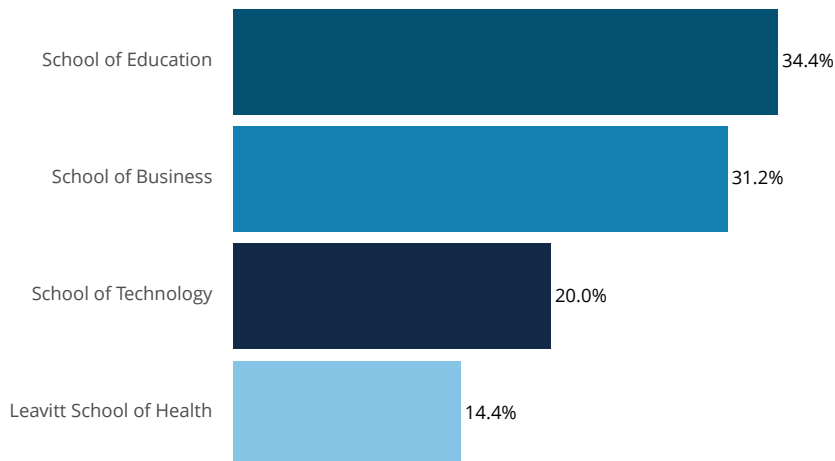
What is your age (please enter in numeric format)?
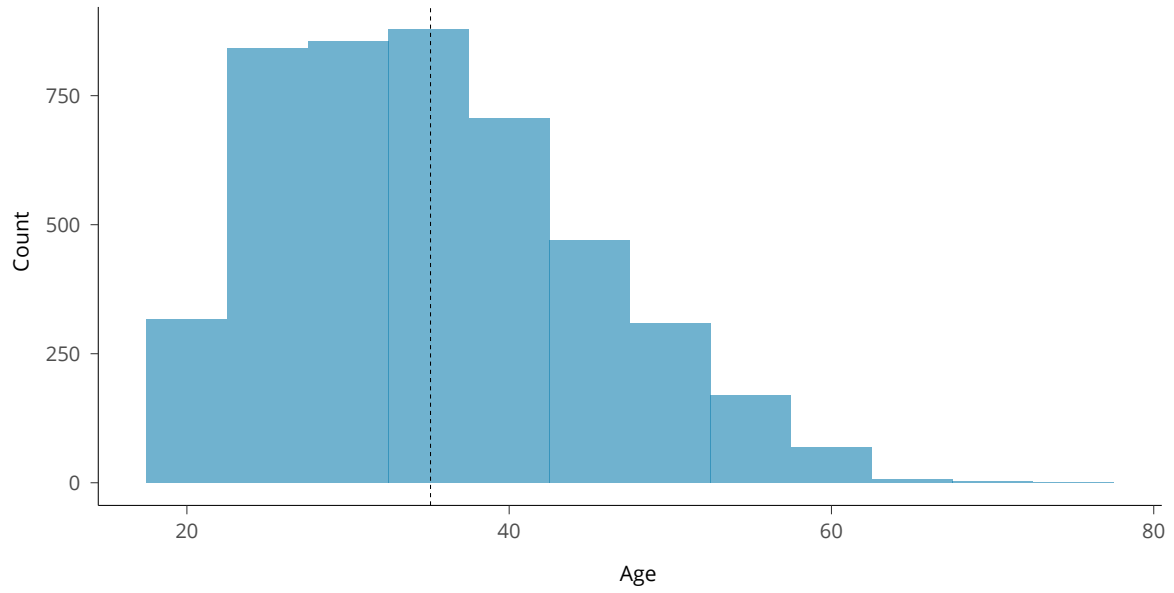
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About WGU Labs

WGU Labs is the research, development, and investment arm of Western Governors University, where our mission is to identify and support scalable solutions that address the biggest challenges in education today.

Report Contributions

This report was authored by Stephanie Reeves, with valuable contributions from Holly Wallace, Betheny Gross, Natalie Berkey, as well as visual design from CallyAnn Hamilton.