



GenAI Conversations: Student Use of Generative AI at Pitt

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Recent reports by [OpenAI](#), [Anthropic](#), [Educause](#), [Pew](#), [Rand](#), [Lumina/Gallop](#), [Inside Higher Ed](#), [Brookings](#), and others provide insight on student uses of Generative AI, indicating that use is highly prevalent, increasing, and complex. These reports provide a big picture yet have limited use for guiding AI policy and approaches specifically at Pitt. To provide a more nuanced and detailed picture of Generative AI (GenAI) use by students at Pitt, a team of faculty members representing four of Pitt's undergraduate campuses (Oakland, Greensburg, Bradford, Johnstown) conducted focus groups of students during March and April 2025. Supported by Pitt Vice Provost and CIO Mark Henderson, this study helps to shed light on how students at Pitt use and experience GenAI in their academic work, personal lives, and professional expectations. Few studies of student experiences have been published, making this data set incredibly valuable to understanding how students experience GenAI in academic settings, both at Pitt and potentially elsewhere.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Key Findings	2
Recommendations	2
Conclusion	3
Full Report	3
Study Framework	3
Students' Orientation towards GenAI	3
Uses of GenAI among Students	4
Challenges Identified by Students	5
Recommendations	8

Executive Summary

A faculty study team from four University of Pittsburgh campuses (Oakland, Johnstown, Greensburg, and Bradford) conducted focus groups in March and April 2025 with 95 undergraduate students to understand their experiences, attitudes, and uses of Generative AI (GenAI) in academic and personal contexts. This qualitative study followed five semesters of surveys given to students in Composition classes and was supported by Pitt's CIO office.

Key Findings (updated from Version 1)

- **Widespread Use and Mixed Attitudes:** Students overwhelmingly reported using GenAI tools, with ChatGPT being the most common. Students noted that AI was generally framed negatively in their classes, but they were actively experimenting and saw both benefits and ethical issues with AI use.
- **AI's Impacts Students' Interpersonal Relationships:** Students described GenAI as potentially impinging on faculty and peer relationships. They felt a mistrust in classrooms due to faculty's use of GenAI detection as well as suspected faculty use of GenAI. They resented peers that they felt overused GenAI, sometimes affecting grading curves and fair assessment. They often justified their own uses of AI while critiquing their peers' uses.
- **Motivations and Use Cases:** Students used GenAI for studying, coding, outlining assignments, proofreading, and even grading their own essays. Less productive uses often arose under stress, unclear course value, or limited understanding, highlighting moments when students turned to GenAI to simply complete work rather than learn.
- **AI felt inevitable but not necessarily desired:** Students saw unnecessary and often unwelcome integration of AI into their social media apps, searches, and word processing platforms. Many also saw it as a fact of their future workplaces but few embraced it. Their regular use of AI was often not by choice but was forced by defaults or pressure to compete with peers or prepare for their future.
- **Students Feel Ahead of Faculty in AI Use:** Students generally felt confident in their AI skills, believed they were more familiar with GenAI than their instructors, and saw it as an intuitive tool similar to Google, but more "personal."
- **Policy Ambiguity and Student Workarounds:** Despite existing course-level bans, students often used GenAI anyway, citing unclear or unrealistic policies. They expressed a desire for clear, flexible guidelines that reflect actual practices and offer legitimate examples of permissible use.
- **Emotional Responses and Ethical Concerns:** Students voiced guilt, shame, or worry related to AI use, particularly around privacy, environmental cost, and future implications. Even students most ethically opposed to AI reported using it at times.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we recommend that faculty:

- Establish clear AI policies with flexible integration
- Create alternative assessments and flexible deadlines in courses
- Communicate course value more clearly

and Pitt should:

- Enhance AI literacy training
- Embed positive AI uses in courses
- Strengthen faculty-student connections
- Expand experiential learning opportunities
- Provide faculty development support
- Build trust in institutional AI tools
- Include student input in AI planning

Conclusion

Students are actively navigating the presence of GenAI in their academic lives with a mix of curiosity, pragmatism, and concern. Thoughtful policy development, improved communication, and shared literacy efforts can help the University of Pittsburgh support ethical, effective, and educationally sound AI engagement.

Full Report

Study Framework

To better understand Pitt undergraduate experiences and attitudes towards AI and to help inform policy, Annette Vee (Oakland) convened a team of faculty members from four of Pitt's campuses to conduct focus groups of students. Students were recruited through advertisements circulated on each campus and through classroom outreach; participants received \$25 (in cash at Oakland and in Amazon gift cards at the regional campuses). In total, 95 students were interviewed during March and April 2025: 31 students at Oakland; 31 at Johnstown; 19 at Bradford; 14 at Greensburg. Interviews were conducted in person by members of the study team and were anonymous to the extent that they could be (Oakland's student body size made this more possible than at the regional campuses). Pitt's IRB was consulted and declined oversight, determining the study as primarily policy-directed.

In collaboration, the faculty study team members have identified key themes across campuses. Although conducted across four campuses that vary in their student populations, the initial findings suggest that there are identifiable patterns and similarities across all four campuses. The team plans to extend analysis over the summer in preparation for publication.

Students' Orientation towards GenAI

Overwhelmingly, the focus groups confirmed that the majority of students use Generative AI – a rough estimate is upwards of 90% of students. The vast majority use ChatGPT, but platforms such as Perplexity, Gemini, Copilot, Grok, Deepseek, and SnapChat AI were also mentioned.

Most students are acutely aware of the many reasons why they should avoid AI, from the ethical to the ecological. But they are also motivated by a variety of personal inclinations and practical ambitions to explore this new territory. Almost all had experienced positive results from using AI for their work and many expressed how impressive these tools are. Yet they experience faculty as generally discouraging GenAI use and framing it negatively. In short, most of our students are using these tools, including for classroom assignments, and there is no simple way to summarize the complex feelings they may have about their usage.

Most of them consider themselves familiar enough with the tools to be relatively expert. Using the tools was pretty seamless, so they didn't see a lot that needed to be learned about it, for instance, in AI literacy training. They generally considered themselves more skilled in GenAI use than their instructors, although some indicated they had learned about AI from their courses. Their AI literacy wasn't always technically competent, but many had a strong intuitive sense of how the tools worked, the potential risks of over relying on them, and the ecosystem of different companies out there invading nearly every facet of their digital lives, from search engines to social media to word processors. In other words, they weren't naive.

They understood that GenAI tools didn't always produce accurate answers--most had seen that themselves, and they'd learned about it through media and AI disclaimers. That wasn't an impediment to GenAI use for them, however. They said they just kept plugging away until they "have what they want," or they would correct the output before submitting it.

They see GenAI as a kind of replacement or parallel to Google--as in, Google opens a window to one Internet and GenAI opens a window into another Internet. GenAI is viewed as a more sophisticated and "personal" form of the Internet that they are free to search to help find information and answers.

Very few students had paid accounts to a GenAI tool. To get around usage limits (primarily for ChatGPT), some used a friend's paid account or knew people who had multiple Gmail addresses and ChatGPT accounts. No student whom we asked indicated they had signed up for the free student "pro" account offerings of Gemini and ChatGPT.

The limited number of students we asked expressed skepticism and reluctance to adopt a Pitt-provided GenAI tool, something that might substitute for ChatGPT, such as PittGPT. One reason they gave was that they assumed Pitt would be able to access their data or "spy" on their uses of the tool, as their high school administrators could do with their school-issued iPads and email accounts. Another reason was that they assumed the tool would be limited compared to the commercial tools. In other words, they were more interested in trusting their data to commercial AI platforms than to Pitt, likely because Pitt's potential use of their data could have greater direct and personal consequences for them in terms of academic integrity.

Uses of GenAI among Students

Given the wide range of approaches to Generative AI, there are also multiple ways in which students use the tool. Students identified multiple uses, including the following:

- Studying: creating study guides or using the tool to clarify concepts
- Coding: filling in gaps in knowledge, carrying out template coding
- Outlining: inputting ideas and asking GenAI to craft a coherent outline of an assignment
- Writing essays: supplying alternative wordings or filling in text, composing in part or whole
- Proofreading: cleaning up grammar, polishing tone, or "humanizing" an AI-written passage
- Grading essays: asking the GenAI model to grade their essay based on the rubric
- For fun/extracurriculars: using it to craft emails, create lesson plans for volunteer activities, plan travel, chat with it for advice and support

In addition, students expressed primarily three reasons for turning to Generative AI in ways they knew weren't conducive to their learning. For example, students expressed that they turned to Generative AI when they experienced one of the following:

- They were pressed with deadlines;
- They thought the work they were doing wasn't important or didn't see meaning or value in it (often associated with Gen Ed courses or "busywork" assignments); and
- They had reached the limit of their own knowledge or understanding.

These uses have implications for assignment designs, assessment, and justifying educational outcomes and goals to students.

Challenges Identified by Students

Challenges identified by students have been synthesized by the faculty group into the following categories: the impact of AI on interpersonal relationships; the impact of AI on their academic experience; the limitations of students' critical AI literacy; the challenges associated with institutional policies on GenAI; and students' affective responses to GenAI.

The Impact of GenAI on Interpersonal Relationships

Focus group respondents expressed that GenAI shifted relationships with professors and peers.

Student respondents often expressed that the value of a university education was in the connections made between professor and student. Yet they also said that GenAI made them less likely to rely on professor support through one-on-one interactions. For example, students suggested that GenAI made it less likely that they would visit office hours or support services such as the Writing Center. For some, this was a matter of convenience: GenAI was available at the time they were studying. Others expressed embarrassment about reaching out to professors about material that was unclear. GenAI allowed them to learn material without having to admit that they did not initially understand it. Some students admitted that they weren't going to go to office hours anyway, so AI wasn't changing anything.

GenAI also impacted professor-student relationships by introducing a sense of suspicion. Students reported worries about their work being run through an AI-detection tool. Some of them ran their work through an AI detector before turning it in just to ensure they were ok, but also because they had heard of other students being accused of using GenAI when it hadn't

been used. They were worried about being caught, but they were also concerned about potential hypocrisy if instructors were using AI (e.g., for grading or feedback or course design) when their own use was restricted. This suspicion appears to have been fueled by insufficient policies around GenAI use among faculty and/or on policies that completely banned GenAI for students.

In addition to professor-student relationships, student respondents also identified how GenAI impacted peer-to-peer relationships. Many students expressed frustration when peers over-relied on GenAI to complete assignments--roommates, group partners, friends. A few students identified this as unfair. For the most part, though, students were hesitant to challenge peer use of GenAI: "that's their business." Some hoped that there would be a stronger response from instructors for these clear cases of overreliance. Aside from a few exceptions (pressed for deadlines, etc.), none of the students interviewed indicated *they* were overreliant, suggesting either an artifact of our sample (e.g., self-admitted "cheaters" didn't volunteer for the study) or students were able to justify their own uses of AI even when they couldn't justify the uses of their peers.

The Impact of GenAI on Students' Academic Experience

Students have varying opinions on how AI is changing their education. While they believe the university should be teaching the basic skills needed for a degree, some believe that GenAI changes the value of the degree. There were also students who strongly argued for the value of a degree and its ability to strengthen students' critical thinking skills.

We sensed a slight difference between first-year and more advanced undergraduates: first-years were more likely to embrace AI, whereas advanced students were more likely to resist it. The study team felt this difference could be due to the advanced students moving closer to the job market, or to when the students encountered GenAI (in high school or at Pitt), or their orientation to educational technologies based on their remote learning experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Some students appear to be seeking to cultivate learning via process whereas others are viewing their education as solely transactional and to get a job. If they weren't able to learn something in college because they'd used GenAI to shortcut, some students felt they'd be able to learn it on the job, anyway. This attitude was connected to their sense that some assignments weren't directly useful to them.

The Ubiquity of GenAI Across Platforms

Many students expressed frustrations about what they perceive as an increasing inescapability of various AI tools in their composing and social media platforms, especially Snapchat's "My AI," and Google's "AI overviews." Students described, with some distress, that in many of these cases AI was "so unnecessary" and there is no way to "turn it off." Some were enthusiastic users of these integrated tools (particularly on Snapchat which partners with OpenAI to power the My AI chatbot integration) but expressed that AI was not always a bolster to their peer

interactions or their desired engagement with the platform. Their experience of this seeding across platforms parallels their assumptions about the inescapable use of AI by their peers.

Student Responses to Policies on GenAI

Student respondents offered valuable insights into classroom and university policies on GenAI.

Students were not aware of any existing university-wide policies on GenAI (including our existing policies on data and AI use). But they agreed that a university-wide policy was not possible nor desirable because of the differences across fields; freedom and flexibility were preferable.

Course policies appear to have somewhat limited influence on students' use of GenAI. Students frequently shared that, at the course level, professors instituted a general ban on GenAI use. Some had instructors who encouraged use, but this wasn't as common. Even students who indicated they were opposed to AI, or knew there were course policies against it, used it--although sometimes "just a little bit." One student said the only influence on her use of GenAI was from her dad, a teacher, who helped pay for her college, and who said he didn't want her using it to shortcut the degree. She still used it some, but felt guiltier about it. Another student declared himself a non-user of AI, and then later in the interview disclosed he had used it extensively to pass a gen-ed class.

Despite bans on GenAI and other course-level policies, students indicated that a clearer policy was necessary. In general, they were not invested in permitting GenAI without constraints. They expressed the need for clear limits on use; some respondents shared the need for enforcing those limits (they also pointed out the difficulty of doing this). The study group heard this need as students wanting the policy to better reflect their *actual* use and experience of AI. They were generally not compliant with complete bans, and so they wanted more examples of permissive use of AI.

Given widespread use of AI, some students suggested that to put clear boundaries on AI use, instructors could go back to blue book exams and analog methods of assessment. They didn't want that to be the only option for all of their classes, but they saw a place for anti-AI enforcement for classes. This kind of assessment also leveled the playing field for them, since they saw use of GenAI generally improving grades. It was hard to resist unless they knew their peers were also forced to do so.

Students' Feelings about GenAI

Student respondents expressed nuanced views on GenAI, and they had complicated emotional reactions to its introduction in their academic life.

There was a distinct minority of students who objected to GenAI on ethical grounds. Within this group, students expressed fear about the future in terms of GenAI's ecological impact and social impact. This impact was recognized by other students as well, although others were less concerned. The use of water for giant data centers, appropriation of artists' and writers' work,

deepfakes, privacy, and homogenizing language were all ethical concerns expressed by students as reasons to refuse to use GenAI or at least be wary of it. Yet even students most passionate about these problems with GenAI still mentioned they used GenAI sometimes.

Many students expressed mild guilt or shame about their GenAI use. These feelings often were related to a lack of clarity about what was permissible as well as the ubiquity of the GenAI tools themselves. Many also knew that they were skipping out on learning by using GenAI in certain instances.

A number of students expressed concern for their professional futures and some had steered their professional trajectories with AI in mind. They noted careers they felt would be “safe” from AI, or that they would personally be distressed to see embracing AI, such as medicine, plus those that would be gone in the future (warehouse workers, policing, nursing). Others said they would believe AI before they would believe a doctor. These examples also suggest a range of orientations to GenAI's rapidly evolving societal integrations.

A few students expressed existential concern about AI—that it might bring about the end of humanity. Students did not feel empowered to do anything about that potential future, however.

Students were grateful for conversations with their instructors about AI. The students we talked to were eager to share their ideas in our focus groups, some wanted to know updates about the study, and they wanted to contribute to policy discussions on AI at Pitt.

Recommendations

The focus groups yielded information that can help guide decision-making about GenAI at the University of Pittsburgh.

1. **Course policies must be AI-aware and acknowledge the reality of student use of GenAI.** Faculty need to provide clear yet flexible course policies along with examples of permissible use of AI for individual assignments. If an instructor wants to ban GenAI use, they will need to redesign assignments and assessment and provide areas where it's truly difficult to use AI (e.g., blue book exams). These can be framed positively—that is, not as a disciplinary measure against untrustworthy students, but as the generous removal of a temptation that the students appear to be eager to be freed from, at least from time to time. Faculty should have an open door for students to discuss their uses of AI and questions about policy. GenAI training for both faculty and students may help students understand professors' different policies better and may help faculty communicate their policies better, too.
2. **Faculty should consider alternative assessments and flexible deadlines.** Given that much of the illicit use of GenAI occurred when students were faced with hard deadlines and competitive grades, faculty should consider alternative grading schemes such as student self-assessment, contract grading, or specifications grading. Support alongside

flexibility for deadlines could help students make choices about AI that better align with course learning goals.

3. **Courses should better communicate their value to students.** Gen-eds and "busywork" may not be perceived as meaningful or fitting with a students' professional trajectory, and could be subject to more illicit use of AI. Instructors could re-evaluate course objectives and consider which assignments contribute to meeting them. Gen-ed teachers may need to have flexible content that students see as more directly contributing to their own learning goals. Faculty should not assume students know the inherent value of courses and assignments but instead need to make the case.
4. **AI and information literacy training may be necessary for students.** If students think about AI as a newer Google, that shows a new trend in information-seeking behaviors with little understanding about what the models are actually doing to "find" information (i.e. how RAG functions). We already know students don't evaluate sources very well from Google, and so their uses of GenAI signal renewed need for information literacy training. Where this training should come from is unclear, given that faculty may also need it for AI. The libraries, writing centers, teaching centers, or first-year programs are possible sponsors.
5. **Courses may need to embed positive AI uses.** Very few students mentioned examples of positive or sanctioned integrations of AI in their courses. Their responses suggested an almost entirely negative frame for AI coming from faculty, which likely contributes to their illicit use of it, and to their sense that they know more about AI than faculty. Students do not generally feel a need for AI literacy training. If they do, they are unlikely to sign up for workshops, and 1-cr online courses are unlikely to be the answer. First-year programs may be able to deliver basic AI literacy information to incoming students, but integration into courses across disciplines is likely to be the best way to reach students about positive AI uses. This would require faculty familiarity with that information, if they are the ones providing it.
6. **Pitt should lean into its existing investments in undergraduate research and experiential learning.** Pitt may want to consider alternative ways for students to meet requirements of courses, including through independent research, archival work, community work, or project-based learning that integrates AI to solve real-world problems that students find meaningful. When working with faculty on these kinds of projects, students may learn more practical skills alongside increasing connections among peers, community, and faculty.
7. **Pitt should consider ways to help students better connect with peers and faculty.** Students frequently identified networking and interpersonal connections as a distinct value in higher education, but GenAI might be impeding these interpersonal connections. As residential campuses, we may want to double-down on in-person courses and connections, even when students find it challenging. Faculty should be

incentivized to encourage students to visit during office hours. Some additional ideas for connection may be faculty-led research, mentoring, and cross-hierarchy campus community events--perhaps even events centered around AI use. One student attendee at our (faculty-focused) public event was fascinated by the lightning talks teachers gave about integrating AI into their courses.

8. Provide faculty support for policy development and curriculum adaptation.

Guidance for faculty in crafting effective policies, meaningful courses, and positive examples and integration of AI is crucial. Some support is already present through the Teaching Center, Writing Institute and other trainings, but it may need to scale up to reach more faculty. (This study didn't include faculty, and so a survey of faculty might be useful to learn more about what they need and how to best provide it.) Faculty as well as students need more opportunities to interact with AI responsibly and learn about its technical aspects from professional sources.

9. Establish trust in institutional AI tools. Students are wary of university-provided GenAI platforms, fearing surveillance or reduced capability. Building trust will require transparency around data privacy, clear communication, and visible partnerships with trusted academic units. The findings also suggest a need for IT-supported learning environments that accommodate both AI-integrated and AI-free work, and flexible digital tools that reflect varied classroom needs.

10. Include student input in the development of AI curriculum, infrastructure, and policy. Many students we spoke to were highly engaged and opinionated about the role AI should play in their education, including course policies, possible AI-integrated courses, curriculum, and future workplaces. Student input will be valuable as we design flexible, innovative, realistic, and informed integrations of AI at Pitt.

Through the cultivation of thoughtful assignments and integrations, in combination with detailed, iterative, and open communication, GenAI can represent an enhancement to learning that enriches student experience within and outside of the classroom. Students and faculty have varying levels of GenAI literacy, but we're all equally naive when it comes to the social conventions of this new technology; we are finding our way to new norms, positive applications, and stigmatized uses. We will need to continue the dialogue between faculty and students to steer ourselves through the challenges and opportunities GenAI represents.