Student Perceptions and Use of GenAI for Writing: "Great Tool" or "Pandora's Box"?

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Abstract: WAC/WID programs are uniquely positioned to lead the response to generative AI (GenAI) in student writing—not by policing its use, but by guiding ethical, effective integration across and in the disciplines. This study shares findings from a spring 2024 survey of 226 students at a midwestern university, exploring how students use GenAI in their writing, what they perceive as its benefits and risks, and whether they're receiving instruction on how to use it well. Students reported frequent use of GenAI for brainstorming and revising but noted limited faculty guidance. Many expressed nuanced views: they recognized GenAI's potential to support learning but remain aware of its flaws—especially the risk of inaccuracy, plagiarism, and loss of voice. Use varied by college, with education and business students reporting the most classroom integration and future use. Despite the tool's growing role in students' writing practices, faculty across campus had largely not adapted their pedagogy or policies to meet this shift. Students, meanwhile, asked for clear, thoughtful instruction rather than blanket bans. These findings reveal a disconnect between students' needs and faculty readiness, and they offer a timely call for WAC/WID programs to help bridge that gap. We recommend supporting faculty with discipline-specific resources, emphasizing writing as process, and centering critical thinking in classroom conversations about GenAI. We further recommend that WAC/WID programs collaborate across campus when providing AI-related faculty development, striving for the interconnectivity promoted in the Whole Systems Approach for sustainability.

"We're all spinning a bit." That understatement, spoken at a session on critical AI literacy at a recent academic conference, couldn't be more true. The sheer number of AI-related sessions at academic conferences, regardless of the discipline, is a testament to how unsettling the generative AI explosion has been for educators. Explosion is a particularly apt word in this case, as Sidney Dobrin (2023b) so starkly illustrates in *Talking about AI: A Guide for Educators*: "ChatGPT was only publicly launched in November 2022. Within five days, it logged in over 1,000,000 users. No other application has achieved that size of user base in that short of a time" (p.8).

Since then, use of this emerging technology has continued to grow. Complicating that growth is the simple fact that students are ahead of faculty in familiarity and use. Muscanell and Robert (2023) write that "[s]tudents were ahead of the game as early adopters of ChatGPT, and faculty had little time to adjust their teaching strategies before students started using it" (p. 18). Shaw et al.'s survey

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of 1600 students and 1000 faculty in fall 2023, in fact, revealed 49% student adopters vs. just 22% faculty adopters (p. 6).[1]

Even so, U.S. student use of AI has trailed global student use (*AI in Higher Education*, 2023), giving educators a bit of breathing room for responding with policies and pedagogical strategies before the gap widens further. It might be tempting to postpone action, hoping this will be another technological trend that waxes and then wanes, but that scenario seems unlikely. As Sarah Elaine Eaton (2023) writes in *Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity, Post-Plagiarism*:

> Increasingly, artificial intelligence tools are being used in industry, and if we want to ensure students who graduate from our universities have the skills they need to enter the workforce, it is essential to teach them how to use artificial intelligence tools responsibly. (para. 13)

A recurring finding in research is that students perceive AI will significantly influence their future careers and anticipate using it in the future (Chan & Hu, 2023; Getchell et al., 2022). Shaw et al. (2023) found that both faculty and students who use AI believe it will be needed for work in the future. For example, 55% of their student respondents who use AI believe they will need to know how to effectively use generative AI to succeed in their profession, and 75% of faculty respondents who use AI believe students will need to know how to use generative AI to succeed in their careers.

While professors from across campus might agree that generative AI (GenAI) is here to stay and, therefore, we must respond in effective and ethical ways as we instruct student writers—that might be all we agree upon. Christopher Mah et al. (2024) uncovered tensions within and between faculty and student groups when asking them to discuss, rank, and provide a rationale regarding the degrees of cheating and learning related to various uses of AI for writing. Participants could not agree whether GenAI provides a scaffold for learning or a shortcut that sidesteps learning.

When faculty cannot agree about which kinds of AI writing assistance might be acceptable, have less familiarity with GenAI than their students, and are only vaguely aware of students' perceptions and the ways they use GenAI for writing—it seems unlikely those same faculty could be expected to set policy and redesign assignments, curriculum, and assessment.

Beyond the swirl of AI discussions among faculty, we would do well to seek out student voices to inform our policies and our pedagogy. As Higgs and Stornaiuolo (2024) recognize, "To ensure decisions and policies related to AI and education reflect the realities of young people, their voices must be at the forefront of discussions and decision-making" (p. 633). Otherwise, we run the risk of making decisions based on false assumptions that today's students are all enthusiastic adopters of AI, "complacent youth eager to leverage AI to 'cheat' on coursework" (p. 632).

The research uncovering student voices has begun, as the next section will demonstrate. While many studies have surveyed students regarding AI use in general—or even in writing—that information has not typically been fine-grained. Yes, students may use it for writing, but in what ways? WAC/WID educators planning their response to AI would benefit especially from a more specific look at how students use AI tools throughout the writing process, from researching and brainstorming to revising and presenting. Our study, then, has sought answers to these overarching research questions:

1. How are students from different academic disciplines using GenAI in their school writing?
2. What do students from different academic disciplines see as the benefits and challenges of using GenAI in their school writing?

Our survey results from 226 students at our university revealed that they are using AI tools (somewhat, though by no means enthusiastically) throughout the writing process—especially for brainstorming and revising/editing—but they are not receiving much guidance from their professors on how to use them effectively and ethically in their writing. Moreover, they want that guidance. Kostopolus (2025) exhorts educators to recognize that "uncritical AI use can potentially hinder students' ability to learn the skills of composition," whereas thoughtful guidance can help students view AI as a supplement that can "enhance the cognitive process of composition" rather than "replace human thought with procedurally generated text" (p. 6).

In short, our data analysis reveals that students are using AI tools, but with little faculty direction. This gap between what students say they need (critical guidance) and what their professors are providing—or, in many cases, not providing—creates an opportunity for WAC/WID programs to develop customized and responsive faculty development.

Prior AI-Related Surveys

Other surveys conducted confirm that yes, many students report using GenAI tools. Based on a survey of 1,600 college students, Shaw et al. (2023) report that half of the respondents identify as regular users, and 12% identify as daily users. BestColleges, surveying 1,000 college students in March 2023, had 22% of respondents report using AI on assignments and exams. Rating their own AI proficiency, 16% of the students surveyed indicated very high proficiency, 29% high proficiency, 33% mid-range proficiency, and 22% poor proficiency (Welding, 2023). When the survey was repeated in November 2023—just eight months later—the percentage of students using AI on assignments and exams had jumped from 22% in May to 56% in November—a 34% increase (Nam, 2023). That November 2023 study also revealed that certain demographics are more likely to report AI use for coursework than other groups: "Business and STEM majors, men, and millennials are more likely than humanities majors, women, and Gen Z to report using the tools" (Nam, 2023). Anthology, an ed-tech company, surveyed 2,728 college students from 11 countries in August 2023. In their results, 62% of U.S. students report at least some use of AI. That percentage may seem high, but the U.S. trails nearly all other countries in the survey regarding AI familiarity and use (*AI in Higher Education*, 2023).

It is no surprise, then, that 61% of the students in BestColleges' March 2023 survey believe that AI tools "will become the new normal," and 48% believe that "it's possible to use AI in an ethical and responsible way to help complete my assignments and exams" (Welding, 2023, "Data summary" & "College students' beliefs"). Likewise, in the Anthology study, only a few students believe that GenAI is unethical and should be banned—just 16% of U.S. students, in fact. That favorable opinion of GenAI is widespread among students:

> [S]tudents are generally positive about the impact AI will have on their student experience, whether it relates to the level of engagement, the teaching style, or as a means to get assistance through the use of AI and generative AI. (*AI in Higher Education*, 2023, para. 9)

Specifically, 46% of U.S. students believe AI will enhance student engagement and interactivity—a higher percentage, even, than the 40% of global students combined in the study (*AI in Higher Education*, 2023).

Not all students share such broadly accepting views, of course. Some students do recognize that AI output can be inaccurate and unreliable (Welding, 2023). And in BestColleges' more recent survey, 54% of respondents do consider it cheating to use AI on assignments and exams, an increase from 51% in an earlier survey eight months earlier (Nam, 2023). Even if schools or professors ban its use,

though, many students indicate they will simply ignore such a ban. When asked, "If your instructor or institution prohibits the use of generative AI writing tools, how likely are you to use something like ChatGPT?" 75% of students who already use GenAI reported that they intend to keep using it, regardless (Shaw et al., 2023, p. 4). Owen Kichizo Terry (2023), author of "I'm a student. You have no idea how much we're using ChatGPT," a piece published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, writes that the familiar professorial admonition to "submit your own work" is, in light of GenAI, "laughably naïve" (p. 1).

One of the largest surveys to date was conducted in August 2023 by the ed-tech company Chegg, which polled 11,000 undergraduate students from 15 different countries. A key finding relevant to the WAC/WID community is that students report using AI more for writing-related tasks and less for STEM subjects (Coffey, 2023). Chan and Hu (2023) found that students used Gen AI as a writing assistant, providing them with support in brainstorming as well as grammar and mechanics. In Shaw et al.'s (2023) study, 30% of the student respondents say they use GenAI to "assist with writing assignments" (p. 8)—a rather vague measure. Assist how? To what extent?

These researchers do provide a more granular treatment of the writing process when they survey faculty about what kinds of writing assistance they would allow: 73% of faculty who use AI themselves would allow students to use it for brainstorming, 59% would allow students to use it for outlining, and 52% would allow students to use it for editing assignments (a few sentences at least) (Shaw et al., 2023). Similarly, Barrett and Pack (2023) found that students and faculty alike agreed overall that using AI for brainstorming was acceptable, especially if brainstorming was a skill the student had already demonstrated. Students are likely bringing this attitude with them to college. In a study of 131 high school students (Higgs & Stornaiuolo, 2024), over 25 % of the students see generative AI as a catalyst for their writing, a means of "[getting] ideas and new perspectives" (p. 640).

This notion that using GenAI at certain steps in the writing process might be acceptable (and even fruitful) challenges a common perception that AI's impact on writing in higher education will be ruinous. Professors are not the only ones with that negative perception. Of the 1,000 students surveyed by BestColleges in March 2023, 40% believe that when students use AI, it "defeats the purpose of education" (Welding, 2023). A recurring theme is students' fear of losing their creativity if they rely on AI tools (Baek et al., 2024; Higgs & Stornaiuolo, 2024)—a fear that may be well-founded. In a study conducted by Habib et al. (2024), students reported that once they had used AI for brainstorming, they had difficulty coming up with additional ideas on their own. "These reflections," the researchers note, "highlight how reliance on AI can result in fixation of thought, actually limiting rather than expanding possible ideas" (p. 4). A wiser approach might be to have students do their own brainstorming *first* before turning to AI. Students surveyed often express the desire for their teachers to provide such guidance so that they can learn how to use GenAI responsibly and effectively (Chan & Hu, 2023; Coffey, 2023; Petricini et al., 2024; Riggin, 2023). Crucial to responsible use is students' reflective understanding of AI's implications. Higgs and Stornaiuolo (2024) write, "One implication from our study is that schools can and should do far more to support students in thinking critically about the role of these technologies in their writing lives—not in a punitive or simplistic way (e.g., don't use AI) but through deep, sustained, and balanced inquiry" (p. 646).

Providing such guidance on the responsible and effective use of Gen AI—to our students and alongside our faculty peers who teach writing across the disciplines—is no small task, given the scope and complexity of this emergent technology. As helpful as the above surveys and studies may be, for us as educators to move forward with responsive policies and pedagogy, we need ongoing, current, and nuanced information about our students' knowledge, attitudes, and use of generative AI as they write. Hence, our study.

Method

We developed a survey (see Appendix for questions located in results tables) to collect student perspectives on their use of GenAI in writing, analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. The online survey collected quantitative data via four blocks of 5-point Likert-scale questions ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," and two blocks of 5-point Likert-scale questions ranging from "never" to "always." One open-ended question produced qualitative data. Quantitative questions investigated students' understanding of GenAI (Appendix, Table 1), perceptions of its effects on education (Appendix, Table 2), use in writing (Appendix, Table 3), and reported levels of course instruction or purposeful exposure (Appendix, Table 4). We adapted our survey from Cecilia Ka Yuk Chan and Wenjie Hu (2023), who based their survey on questionnaires on teachers' and students' perceptions of educational technologies in higher education, customizing it to address AI. Our further adaptations focused on questions specifically targeting GenAI in the writing process.

In spring 2024, we invited (via email and posted fliers) all on-campus undergraduate and graduate students at a rural, 4-year, comprehensive midwestern university in the United States to take our survey. Of the 257 students who responded, 226 students completed at least 85% of the survey. Of those, 141 were female, 71 were male, five were nonbinary/third gender, and nine preferred not to say. Majors were distributed across all five colleges: 42 from arts, humanities, and social sciences; 61 from business; 18 from education; 21 from health and behavioral sciences; 46 from science, technology, and math; and 38 did not report their major or college. The sample of students included 43 freshmen, 45 sophomores, 60 juniors, 59 seniors, and 19 graduate students.

To explore individual differences based on demographic data, we conducted a series of Analysis of Variance, or ANOVA, tests. We found no notable differences related to gender or to the classification of underclassmen and upperclassmen. Full results of these tests, including variable means by college, are in the Appendix, Table 5. The relationships between perceptions of AI and use were explored using Pearson correlations. The findings are discussed below and summarized in the Appendix, Table 6.

Our qualitative data came from 128 student responses to the open-ended question: "What else would you like to tell your professors or FHSU about the use of GenAI technologies for writing?" We conducted a thematic and descriptive analysis of 10 pages of single-spaced responses, identifying relevant examples that expanded and detailed our quantitative findings. To preserve the authenticity of participants' voices, we present excerpts as originally written, including any errors.

Results and Discussion

Understanding of GenAI Technologies

Question Set 2 asked students about their familiarity with GenAI—including its affordances and limitations. Students reported they are largely aware of the limitations of GenAI, with a majority expressing concerns about its ability to generate accurate, unbiased, and audience-appropriate content (Appendix, Table 1). In response to the open-ended question, one student wrote, "[GenAI is] unreliable at best and a plagiarism device at worst. All of its information is scraped, largely without permission by the original poster, and largely without any form of fact-checking," while another wrote, "[W]hen it comes to regurgitating information (especially in the sciences), it often generates blatant falsehoods." To mitigate this risk, a student must critically evaluate GenAI output. As one student wrote, "AI isn't always correct with the answers given so it's always a risk as well to fully believe that information without fact checking it." This observation is heartening: it demonstrates that not all students are dazzled by glittering notions of GenAI's capabilities. Many students, in fact,

recognize GenAI as a promising but nevertheless flawed tool, and they rely on their own critical thinking skills to evaluate AI output.

Despite its flaws, students remained optimistic about GenAI's potential benefits. Students perceived GenAI as a valuable writing tool—especially for saving time, providing ideas, and generating feedback on their writing. The survey statement "GenAI can provide me with ideas I may not have thought of myself" had the highest level of agreement, a result that aligns with a high reported use of GenAI for brainstorming (Appendix, Table 3). Having experienced its tangible benefits, students saw GenAI as helpful for overcoming writer's block and busy schedules.

Students frequently shared both the benefits and potential pitfalls of using GenAI in their writing when answering the open-ended question. For example, this student recognized the challenges related to the ethical and critical use of AI but still advocated for its use in college classes:

> We should not be afraid of AI. AI does not have the capability to write as humans do and does not have the critical thinking skills that are being taught in classes. Students should be warned about the relevancy and accuracy of the generated information and always use their own discretion. Many things already have AI implemented into them, such as Grammarly, which students are suggested and encouraged to use to review and revise their essays. AI can be a wonderful tool for brainstorming, coming up with research questions, or creating insightful interview questions for projects. These things can provide students an outlet to keep going in their research or writing process when they feel stuck.

This response was typical of students' awareness that GenAI is a mixed bag of possibilities and problems. Unreliable information and perceived cheating were frequent topics in the qualitative responses, as were the top-rated benefits of brainstorming and improving students' existing writing.

Pearson correlations (Appendix, Table 6) show us a connection between perceptions of risk and levels of use. As expected, students who perceived a greater risk of AI use also reported less frequency of use, fewer benefits, and less use in the classroom and in their future careers. Students who perceived more benefits reported more use (or expected use) in these areas. ANOVA tests (Appendix, Table 5) found no significant difference among colleges regarding students' perceptions of risks or benefits. These findings emphasize the importance of discussing the general and discipline-specific risks and benefits of GenAI-assisted writing with students to influence their responsible use of the technology.

Although students were concerned with information reliability, they were less in agreement about whether and how they would use GenAI in the future and in their careers (Appendix, Table 4). ANOVA tests (Appendix, Table 5) found a significant difference among colleges in reported plans for future use. Students in the college of business were more likely to report plans for future use compared to students from majors in the college of arts, humanities, and social sciences, which was the least likely of the colleges to report use. Education majors were the second most likely to predict they would use AI in the future. However, no significant difference emerged when students were asked about the need for AI in their future careers. Perhaps students were interpreting the "future use" statement to mean future use in their college courses only.

GenAI Technology's Effect on Learning

Question Set 3 probed students' perceptions of how GenAI might affect their learning. Findings from the first three questions (reported in Appendix, Table 2) suggest students held predominantly negative perceptions on how GenAI impacted (a) the value of a university education, (b) their writing

skill development, and (c) the development of their own voice and creativity. One student provided a warning on the use of GenAI in university classrooms:

> AI can be a great tool when used properly. It has helped me a lot in a few moments when I needed ideas (But I don't use it beyond that for a number of reasons) However, the fact that it can write entire papers, and the fact that more teachers are using it, makes education pretty much worthless when everyone is trying to finesse the system using AI. … [O]ne day soon, it will get to a point where there will be no point going to classes when students are using AI to do all the assignments. The Pandora's Box has been opened. Where we go from here depends on how responsible we want to be.

While students were generally less concerned than the previously quoted student about developing an overreliance on GenAI for their writing (Appendix, Table 2), they were evenly divided on its impact on the development of their personal voice and creativity. An equal number (39%) agreed ("strongly agree" or "agree") and disagreed ("disagree" or "strongly disagree") with the statement that GenAI would prevent them from developing their own voice and creativity as a writer. One student wrote:

> I wild like to point out that the "voice" produced with AI is never even close to what I have running around in my head, so the edits to what my prompt is needs heavy editing. You might ask then why not just listen to what is in my head. It is because that voice in my head is mostly quiet and only when an idea comes up that it then wants to show it's self.

This student's response reflects a recurring tension students revealed in their comments, a tension between knowing GenAI can help—yet worrying that its help can lead to writing that is inauthentic.

While the word *plagiarism* is never mentioned in the text of the survey, students frequently addressed cheating and plagiarism in their open-ended responses, expressing concerns related to their perceptions of how GenAI affected their potential learning. Consider these student remarks: "It's easy to simply change wording and never have to write an essay yourself and a lot of students are using it" and "I think it is a helpful tool/ resource for people to gain ideas and new insights but I don't like the plagiarism part of AI writing the whole paper." Students seemed to agree that generating a whole paper was indeed cheating—and that such whole-scale cheating could devalue a college education. GenAI's impact is, in fact, a question of scale. What if students use AI not to generate a full paper but only part of one? Just a section? Just a paragraph? Just a sentence? What about using AI to generate ideas or an outline, or to polish diction? Would each use have the same impact on student learning? Unlikely, but no one—students or faculty—seems to agree where to draw the line.

Before we attempt to draw that line, we would do well to take a more granular look at how students report their own use of GenAI as they write.

Use of GenAI in the Writing Process

Question Set 4 (Appendix, Table 3) asked students how frequently they used GenAI for specific writing activities. Although no mean rose above 2.95 (on a 5-point Likert scale), the data show that students were most likely to use GenAI for brainstorming ideas or checking grammar and mechanics of their written work. They were less likely to use it for improving their content, ideas, organization, and wording.

When we compared GenAI use in writing across the different colleges, we discovered key differences. Business students and education majors reported the highest GenAI use in the writing process compared to arts, humanities, and social sciences majors. Students from STEM majors and health and behavioral sciences also reported significantly lower use than education majors. However, education major data came from just 18 respondents—possibly from the same class with AI instruction, which may have inflated the results.

These results may indicate acceptance of or experimentation with AI in education and business colleges at this university. Because these two colleges also typically provide linear career paths, a more career-focused, practical application of writing and Gen-AI may be occurring in these colleges. We want to be clear, though: We are not suggesting that these college-and-use correlations apply universally. Local surveying at different universities is essential and may yield different, locally fruitful results.

In general, students described using GenAI during the writing process as analogous to their previous attempts to improve their writing. One student's comprehensive response addressed the GenAI features used most often:

> I think in todays day in age, it's better to use these resources available to us in order to help us succeed. Of course, I think there is a line you shouldn't cross with AI, because what we write and what we turn in needs to be our own original work, but I see nothing wrong with using AI to help me clarify questions, check my grammar, or help me brain storm ideas. I don't see it different from just typing a question into google, it's just a quicker way to do it. Or asking it to show me sources to go read for an essay.

An encouraging result for those concerned with students developing critical thinking and writing skills is that students reported low use of GenAI for drafting entire assignments, with just 4% responding "always" or "often" to this practice (Appendix, Table 3). In qualitative responses, nearly all students who discussed using GenAI to write full assignments called it "cheating" or irresponsible. One student wrote, "I believe some students may abuse the efforts of AI but most use it to help brainstorm and help with grammar that some students are just incapable of grasping!"

So here we are again: aware that AI can help students, but also aware that the type/degree of help at some point crosses a line from receiving legitimate assistance to cheating. Mah et al. (2024) approach the quandary from the perspective of cognitive outsourcing or "cognitive lift," which they define as "attention to whether the student or ChatGPT [is] doing more of the 'thinking'" (pp. 7-8). In their study, teachers and students alike considered a practice to be more "cheaty" (one teacher's term) (p. 7) if ChatGPT appeared to be "taking on the cognitive demand" (p. 10). As we will see in the next section, students who want to avoid cheating and use AI responsibly are unsure what that looks like and are seeking guidance.

Classroom Instruction on the Use of GenAI

Question Set 5 (Appendix, Table 4) probed students' recollections of how their instructors have addressed AI in the classroom. It is important to note that some students taking the survey will have had the same instructors since, in addition to emailing all students, we asked faculty to mention the survey to their on-campus students. This means that some students are likely reporting on the same instructors.

When students were asked about classroom use of AI, education majors and business majors reported the most use in their classrooms. STEM students reported the least use of GenAI in the classroom. Although there were reported differences in the use of GenAI in the classroom, there was

not a significant difference in AI policy across colleges, suggesting that although use varies across campus, the rules for AI may not. The data from Table 4 in the Appendix suggest most of the faculty of the students reporting had not introduced GenAI as a writing tool at the time of the survey (spring 2024) but rather prohibited or warned against its use in the classroom.

Some faculty had suggested using GenAI for brainstorming (Appendix, Table 4), but it was not reported as a common practice. Additional results demonstrate students had experienced limited guidance and integration of GenAI into classroom instruction. The lower mean scores for "Asked you to seek permission to use GenAI for your written work" (Mean=2.17, SD=1.38), "Showed you how to use GenAI to assist your writing" (Mean=1.95, SD=1.11), "Had you use AI during class" (Mean=1.90, SD=1.09), and "Had you use AI outside of class" (Mean=1.93, SD=1.14) confirm the limited guidance and integration of GenAI into classroom instruction.

The standard deviations for these items are relatively high, suggesting a wide range of individual practices among faculty. While some faculty may be open to incorporating GenAI into their teaching, others may have reservations or impose limitations. Most open-ended responses that mentioned classroom use of or instruction on GenAI expressed a desire for instructors to teach about using GenAI in a responsible way and to engage the topic beyond banning GenAI's use. Students wrote the following about their desire for instruction on GenAI: "Great resource, but there has to be specific instruction about how to use it properly" and "I think students should be taught how to properly use GenAI instead of completely barring it in the syllabus."

A notable finding from the series of Pearson correlations (Appendix, Table 7) was that exposure to an AI policy was unrelated to how much students used AI as well as how they perceived either risks or benefits. This lack of correlation suggests that students' decisions about GenAI use and perceptions of its value were unrelated to classroom policies. Students' own perceptions of risks and benefits, however, do appear to influence whether they use or plan to use GenAI. Our data confirm what an earlier study found: Prohibiting the use of GenAI with course policy is not an effective deterrent (Shaw et al., 2023, p. 4). But educating students about GenAI's limitations may be.

Some students indicated they wanted instruction in GenAI not only to improve their classroom performance but also to prepare them for their future careers. One student wrote:

> AI can be an amazing time saving tool especially in the HR world but I think where professors often forget and say "oh no you shouldn't be using that" because it will take over having our own thoughts, etc. when in reality that is not the case. Sure people take advantage of AI and not in the smartest way possible but those of us that use it to our advantage in a smart way and apply it to enhance our education and knowledge that we are learning in the classroom, that is where I think it is beneficial. … AI is the new future and just like a business has to always be innovative and forward thinking, education and professors should be the same way.

Students were optimistic about GenAI's use in the classroom if ethical considerations were preserved. They linked using GenAI for writing with a desire to learn more about how to use GenAI in other capacities. It was possible for students to imagine using GenAI responsibly and as a tool to enhance learning. One student summarized these themes well in their response:

> While I understand the concerns for ethics and educational legitimacy when using AI generative tools, I feel as though people are simply uneducated about how to properly use these tools in a productive and healthy way. I frequently use ChatGPT in my classes, not as a means of doing my work for me, but rather as an assistant to help me find and create ideas, organize my thoughts, and summarize educational material. In one of my

> philosophy courses, for example, we read a very dense chapter that I had trouble understanding. By utilizing ChatGPT, I was able to have the material explained to me at several different educational levels ranging from (and I am not joking) a caveman all the way up to a college level professor. I took my exams over the material and the professor said that I had an amazing grasp over the subject and that I had done a great job.

It seems clear that students are excited and concerned about using GenAI in their courses. Most learned about GenAI outside of the classroom and used their own ethical framework to make sense of and justify their varied use—or potential use—of GenAI. Now they are ready for professor guidance informed by the literature and by these results.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study is its timing. Although we collected surveys in 2024, our data may be dated because of GenAI's rapid rate of change. Longitudinal studies could reveal how quickly students are (or are not) adopting GenAI and for what purposes, within which ethical frameworks, and with what perceived impacts on learning and writing.

Another limitation is the scope of this study, which surveyed just 226 on-campus students at one university. Online students may differ demographically, possess higher levels of technology proficiency, and thus have different learning experiences. Our results are not broadly generalizable. Ideally, other institutions will conduct local surveys both to inform their own policies/strategies and to provide additional data for comparison. We provide our survey question blocks in our appendix for programs to use or adapt—perhaps adding questions related to the environmental impact of AI. Are students aware of this concern, and has it influenced their use or non-use of AI? In hindsight, we wish we had asked such questions.

We further recommend involving researchers with both qualitative and quantitative strengths to develop a complex and complete picture of student GenAI use. We were pleasantly surprised that over half of the respondents answered the optional open-ended question and provided us with a rich trove of opinions and information. Focused qualitative studies could provide a more nuanced look at how students are using GenAI in the writing process within their majors and at what skill levels. And the more data we can gather, the more intelligent and intentional WAC/WID programs can be as they facilitate faculty and institutional decisions related to policy and pedagogy.

Finally, recruiting students to complete the survey should ideally be a full WAC/WID committee effort. For the survey reported here, Cheryl and Rose, WAC Committee members representing just two of our five colleges, were primarily responsible for recruitment. While we encouraged our WAC Committee colleagues and home departments to share the survey with students, we may have had greater cross-disciplinary representation in our student sample if all WAC Committee members had been more directly involved in recruitment. More equal college representation in the student sample would allow for a closer look at how use varies across disciplines and specific majors.

Conclusion

Our findings reveal a complex pivotal juncture where students face a torrent of mixed perceptions surrounding generative AI. On the one hand, students recognize GenAI output can be inaccurate, biased, and inappropriate for their audience. They also worry that it can negatively impact the value of their university education, and the development of their writing skills, voice, and creativity, though they are less concerned that they might become overreliant on the tool. Of course, many express concern about "dishonest" use that amounts to "cheating" or "plagiarism." But students also see its

promise, using it "often" or "always" to help with brainstorming and editing for grammar and mechanics. Views can vary across disciplines. In our data, for example, students in business and education were more likely to use GenAI and view it positively than students in other fields. Most students in the survey responded that GenAI can help them save time when they write, generate ideas, and provide useful feedback on their writing—while others are more reluctant. Wary, even. They are unsure where to draw the line between "Never use GenAI!" and "Let GenAI write your paper for you!" Students talk among themselves, as Elizabeth Losh, a member of the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on AI and Writing, reminds us. They begin developing their own norms for AI use. "And peer-to-peer AI instruction is likely not the best!" (Johnson et al., 2025). A little professorial guidance is in order.

WAC/WID programs, therefore, must capitalize on this moment, helping faculty to help their students set parameters and negotiate conflicting options. When 58% of students agree that "Students must learn how to use GenAI technologies well for their careers" (Appendix, Table 1), but 54% also report that instructors and professors "Warned [them] not to use GenAI technologies for [their] written work" (Appendix, Table 5), we clearly have a disconnect.

This disconnect stems in part from the simple reality that instructors themselves are, as McDonald et al. (2025) note, "struggling to understand GenAI's capabilities and feasibility in their classroom" (2). Each new educational technology requires faculty to pivot from what is familiar and has always worked just fine, thank you, to what is foreign and perhaps even suspect. While a university's official stance might be to embrace GenAI, as McDonald et al. found in their analysis of universities' policy statements and guidelines—"to the point of endorsing a revision of pedagogical approaches"—what can be overlooked is the very real increase in faculty workload and time commitment engendered by such a stance (p. 2). Further complicating the situation for faculty is the highly contextualized nature of AI-related pedagogy. Different disciplines will certainly have different uses for GenAI, and faculty will find themselves relying on discipline-specific (and even classroom-specific and assignment-specific) guidance/policies (MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI, 2024, pp. 6-7). Those policies will have to align with disparate departmental and course outcomes.

In fact, professors need to understand not only how a student might ethically use GenAI in their own disciplines but also how that student is learning to use GenAI in other courses across the disciplines. Such understanding allows faculty to have fully informed conversations with students—conversations that demystify and logically explore why disciplinary differences exist. Such understanding can also diffuse interdisciplinary conflict among faculty and administrators. Achieving that level of understanding, however, is no mean feat. Is it any wonder, then, that students in our survey reported more faculty resistance than instruction?

The good news is that WAC/WID administrators, by providing data-informed, collaborative faculty development opportunities, can begin closing the gap between student needs and faculty readiness. Providing faculty development related to student writing is embedded in most of our mission statements. We can address workload in part by following the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI (2024) recommendation to provide stipends to compensate faculty for AI professional development time and labor (p. 9), perhaps through the WAC/WID budget or from the support of upper administration.

With or without funding, AI fatigue is a concern as faculty are potentially approached from all sides with AI-related professional development opportunities. In addition to the WAC/WID program, other campus entities such as the center for teaching and learning, the campus library, the writing center, and a campus AI task force might provide faculty development. At Fort Hays State University, we have followed a key strategy from the Whole Systems Approach advocated in Cox et al.'s *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs*

(2018). That is, we have applied their Strategy #5: "Work toward Positioning the WAC Program for Greater Interconnectivity and Leverage in the Institution" (p. 67). Granted, one reason for collaborating across campus is a matter of self-preservation: "WAC programs that do not fully integrate into existing institutional structures and do not move beyond a small core group are rarely sustainable" (p. 67). In the case of providing pedagogical guidance related to AI, however, this interconnectivity reaps the additional benefit of consolidating faculty-development options to thwart AI fatigue.

What might that look like in practical terms? At FHSU, the WAC director serves on the Generative AI Task Force and organized a WAC panel on "The Ethical Use of AI for Writing" when that task force hosted its AI Institute for the campus and the community. The WAC Committee led a faculty community of practice through the Teaching Innovation and Learning Technologies (TILT) Center and addressed questions on how to talk with students about AI and writing, how to respond to suspected unethical use, and how to design assignments that encourage responsible AI use. WAC's most ambitious and well-received collaboration with TILT was a half-day "AI and Writing" Mini-Conference, which kicked off with a keynote address by Sidney Dobrin, author of *AI and Writing*. Participating faculty received his book, lunch, and access to library-led, faculty-led, and student-led panels. Dobrin met separately with the WAC Committee, WAC Faculty Liaisons, and Writing Center student tutors.

Another upcoming mini-conference collaboration will focus on meaningful writing. An important implication from our survey stems from the large percentage of students (65%) who agree or strongly agree that "GenAI can help me save time when I write" (Appendix, Table 1). Students will be less likely to devote the amount of time and energy that we want to see if they view their writing assignments as irrelevant busywork—a hoop to be jumped through rather than a meaningful learning experience. Regardless of our respective disciplines, faculty who want to see their students invested in original writing would benefit from re-evaluating their writing assignments with an eye toward principles from the Meaningful Writing Project—principles outlined in *Making Writing Meaningful: A Guide for Higher Education* (Eodice et al., 2025). To that end, we have invited one of the authors, Michele Eodice, to campus as a keynote speaker and session leader, and all faculty registering for the free mini-conference will receive a copy of her co-authored book.

As speaker Sara J. Johnson noted during a 2025 CCCC workshop on "Generative AI and Writing Assessment," we have cause for hope, in part because the AI explosion has faculty across campus ripe for discussions on best practices related to writing instruction. But, she notes, "This work will not be done well unless faculty are given the time and the resources they need." By collaborating on faculty development opportunities with the FHSU Generative AI Task Force, TILT, Tebo Library, and the FHSU Writing Center, our WAC Committee is working to do just that in an effort to relieve the tension our survey revealed between students' desire for GenAI guidance and instructors' reluctance/inability to provide it.

Of course, not all fruitful WAC/WID work must be collaborative. One of this study's co-authors and a member of FHSU's WAC Committee, Rose Helens-Hart, authored an OER chapter on AI in business communication (Helens-Hart, 2024) for business students, a chapter that can be remixed and customized for other departments and universities. It includes a summary of literature on ethical AI authorship (Lentz, 2024), AI literacy (Cardon et al., 2023), and uses of AI in business communication. Having an easily updatable and sharable publication, such as an OER that can be linked in syllabi and learning management systems, makes it easier for faculty to include AI-writing guidance in courses that would not normally address it. These types of documents also help WAC/WID programs provide up-to-date information to faculty.

With the wealth of faculty development materials being generated today, WAC/WID administrators need not reinvent the wheel. We have already cited the work of the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI. To that good company we would add the WAC Clearinghouse's *TextGenEd: Teaching with Text Generation Technologies* (Vee et al., 2023) and Stanford University's (n.d.) "Artificial Intelligence Teaching Guide," including modules and "AI Workshop Kits" on topics such as "Creating an AI Course Policy" and "Integrating AI into Assignments." WAC/WID programs can link to such resources on their own websites and can draw from them when developing local faculty development opportunities.

Regardless of the resource or the faculty development venue they employ, WAC/WID administrators might find the following pedagogical recommendations useful, inspired by our survey results and our review of the literature:

- Consider that banning all use of GenAI across the board is a futile and unenforceable policy.
- Teach responsible use—i.e., AI-*assisted* writing as opposed to AI-*generated* writing.
- Co-construct course AI-use policies with students by discussing where to draw the line (see Mah et al., 2024).
- Privilege the writing *process* over the written *product* through scaffolded assignments, prewriting, in-class drafting, peer review, and revision.
- Ensure students can perform writing tasks, such as brainstorming, in non-digital environments before using GenAI.
- Keep critical thinking at the forefront of discussion and assignments.
- Teach students how to cite any GenAI-generated content (see Dobrin, *AI and Writing*, 2023a, pp. 39-41).
- Explore (in discussion or written assignments) with students how GenAI is being used in your discipline.
- Recognize that different assignments might call for different levels of GenAI use (see Perkins et al.'s [2024] "Artificial Intelligence Assessment Scale").
- Shift away from "policing" to focusing on helping students learn and meet outcomes in an educational landscape that includes GenAI (see Vee et al., 2023).

This list is neither exhaustive nor ground-breaking. Fortunately, others have already begun this work of developing strategies for bridging the gap between our pre-GenAI classrooms and our current (and future) educational environments—and will continue to do so. We may still be spinning for a while, but we will find new ways to ensure our students can both think for themselves and exploit the affordances of GenAI.

What better way to make that point than with an illustration and full transparency? We used Open AI's ChatGPT (April 2025 version), prompting it with our manuscript and asking it for an abstract that used a tone similar to that of the paper and that framed findings for a WAC/WID audience. We then edited that output further for content, tone, verb tense, clarity, and conciseness and shaped it into one cohesive paragraph. Now, we three authors know full well how to write an abstract and have written many in the span of our professional lives. Our point is that using GenAI to perform a relatively small, routine writing task that one already knows how to complete is perhaps an ethical way to capitalize on the affordances of this tool—especially when its use is revealed and cited. A student using GenAI to write an abstract for a course where learning to write an abstract is linked to one of the course outcomes, however, would likely not be ethical. These are exactly the sorts of

writing situations that WAC/WID administrators should be encouraging their faculty to discuss with one another and with their students. For now, we are okay—if not entirely comfortable—with using a GenAI tool in this way. Ask us again in five years.

Appendix: Results Tables

Table 1: Question Set 2: Understanding of GenAI Technology Capabilities

Statement	M	SD	SA/A	N	D/SD
			%	%	%
I understand how GenAI technologies such as ChatGPT work.	3.83	0.95	71	18	11
GenAI can generate content that is inaccurate.	4.16	0.84	80	16	4
GenAI can generate content that does not fit the intended audience/reader.	4.03	0.93	79	13	8
GenAI can include biases and unfairness in its content.	3.51	1.04	50	33	16
I will use GenAI in my writing practices in the future.	3.14	1.25	45	27	28
Students must learn how to use GenAI technologies well for their careers.	3.55	1.20	58	23	20
GenAI can help me save time when I write.	3.72	1.13	65	20	15
GenAI can provide me with ideas I may not have thought of myself.	4.30	0.85	89	6	5
GenAI can provide me with useful feedback on my writing.	4.00	1.00	72	21	8

Note. *M* indicates mean, *SD* indicates standard deviation, SA/A indicates Strongly Agree/Agree, N indicates Neutral, D/SD indicates Disagree/Strongly Disagree.

Table 2: Question Set 3:GenAI Technology's Effect on Learning

Statement	M	SD	SA/A	N	D/SD
			%	%	%
Using GenAI to complete writing assignments undermines the value of a university education.	3.17	1.23	41	22	35
Using GenAI will hinder the development of my writing skills.	3.13	1.29	42	20	37
Using GenAI will prevent me from developing my own voice and creativity as a writer.	3.04	1.31	39	22	39
I worry about becoming overreliant on GenAI for my writing.	2.60	1.31	30	17	53

Note. *M* indicates mean, *SD* indicates standard deviation, SA/A indicates Strongly Agree/Agree, N indicates Neutral, D/SD indicates Disagree/Strongly Disagree.

Table 3: Question Set 4: Use of GenAI in the Writing Process

Statement	M	SD	A/O	S	R/N
			%	%	%
Brainstorming ideas	2.95	1.22	40	28	33
Drafting parts of a writing assignment	2.22	1.12	16	28	60
Drafting an entire writing assignment	1.40	0.77	4	10	90
Improving the content/ideas of something I have already written	2.74	1.24	32	31	37
Improving the organization of something I have already written	2.58	1.28	31	24	45
Improving the wording of something I have already written	2.82	1.32	38	24	38
Checking the grammar and mechanics of something I have already written	2.89	1.43	40	22	39
Conducting research for a writing assignment	1.94	1.09	12	17	71
Summarizing reading	2.28	1.27	20	24	56
Preparing presentations	1.60	0.90	5	13	82
Seeking clarifications on assignment instructions	1.95	1.22	13	19	68

Note. *M* indicates mean, *SD* indicates standard deviation, A/O indicates Always/Often, S indicates Sometimes, R/N indicates Rarely/Never.

Table 4: Question Set 5: GenAI in the Classroom

Statement: To the best of your knowledge and memory, have your instructors and professors…	M	SD	A/O	S	R/N
			%	%	%
Suggested using GenAI for brainstorming	2.45	1.17	21	28	51
Warned you not to use GenAI technologies for your written work	3.39	1.25	54	22	24
Asked you to seek permission to use GenAI for your written work	2.17	1.38	19	16	65
Showed you how to use GenAI to assist your writing	1.95	1.11	11	22	67
Had you use AI during class	1.90	1.09	10	21	69
Had you use AI outside of class	1.93	1.14	13	17	70

Note. *M* indicates mean, *SD* indicates standard deviation, A/O indicates Always/Often, S indicates Sometimes, R/N indicates Rarely/Never.

Table 5: ANOVA Results for Study Variables Comparing Colleges

Measure/College	M	SD	F(df)
1. Frequency of AI Use			4.47 (5,220)*
Business	2.56	.94	
Education	3.11	1.08	
STEM	2.22	1.07	
Health & Behavioral Sciences	1.90	1.00	
Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences	2.02	.87	
2. Risks of AI Use			1.20 (5, 218)
Business	22.97	4.69	
Education	22.89	4.52	
STEM	24.26	5.99	
Health & Behavioral Sciences	23.76	4.53	
Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences	25.00	5.21	
3. Benefits of AI Use			1.88 (5,219)
Business	12.49	2.12	
Education			
STEM	11.98	2.29	
Health & Behavioral Sciences	11.76	2.88	
Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences	11.19	2.96	
4. AI Use in the Future			2.45 (5, 218)*
Business	3.48**	1.04	
Education	3.50	1.25	
STEM	3.07	1.34	
Health & Behavioral Sciences	3.00	1.26	
Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences	2.69**	1.22	
5. AI Use in Career			1.69 (5, 218)
Business	3.84	1.04	
Education	3.78	1.11	
STEM	3.41	1.19	
Health & Behavioral Sciences	3.24	1.34	

Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences	3.29	1.33	
6. Writing Process			5.28 (5, 214)*
Business	27.37**	8.80	
Education	32.50**	7.99	
STEM	25.00**	9.60	
Health & Behavioral Sciences	21.57**	10.00	
Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences	21.29**	8.45	
7. AI Use in Classroom			8.15 (5, 217)*
Business	9.41**	3.40	
Education	11.94**	4.92	
STEM	6.46**	2.82	
Health & Behavioral Sciences	7.62**	3.70	
Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences	7.66**	3.40	
8. AI Policy			1.45 (5, 216)
Business	5.57	2.04	
Education	4.94	2.65	
STEM	5.16	1.73	
Health & Behavioral Sciences	5.52	2.18	
Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences	6.20	2.22	

Note. M indicates mean*, SD* indicates standard deviation. Students who did not report a college are not included in the table. This group did not differ significantly ($p > .05$) from the other groups on any of the variables.

* Indicates significance at the $p < .05$ level.

** Indicates a significant pairwise difference in post hoc comparisons based on Bonferroni correction to reduce type I error.

Table 6: Correlations Between AI Use Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. AI Frequency	-							
2. Risks	-.46**	-						
3. Benefits	.55**	-.44**	-					
4. Writing Process	.76**	-.51**	.61**	-				
5. AI Policy	-.04	.09	.01	.00	-			

6.	Classroom Use	.42**	-.13*	.16*	.35**	.05	-		
7.	Future Use	.74**	-.52**	.65**	.69**	-.11	.31**	-	
8.	Career	.50**	-.42**	.60**	.51**	.12	.22**	.65**	-

* Indicates significance at the p < .05 level

** Indicates significance at the p < .001 level

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Note

[1] We note that Shaw et al.'s research was sponsored by Turnitin in partnership with Tyton Partners, a strategy consulting firm that owns and has not publicly released the raw data. While we consider these

results to be reliable, we cannot confirm them beyond any doubt. In addition, Shaw et al.'s conclusions may support the business interests of Turnitin or Tyton Partners.

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