

GENERATION AI:

How College Students Really Use AI in the Classroom

Since the public launch of generative AI tools like ChatGPT, higher education institutions have been navigating ongoing concerns about the changing role AI will play in the classroom. Some have instituted policy changes focused on limiting AI usage; others have prioritized implementing AI detection technologies that police when and how students use AI to support with coursework. In many cases, those decisions have been made with very little input from the students themselves.

Packback's January 2026 survey of nearly 700 college students offers a more grounded picture: rates of academic dishonesty are consistent with historical cheating rates, and AI is reshaping how students learn and work in ways that may be more subtle than headlines often suggest.

BY THE NUMBERS



ABOUT
50%

of students say AI has both a positive and negative impact on their education.



5%

of students say they use generative AI to complete entire assignments.



3 in 4

Students are at least "moderately concerned" about being wrongfully accused of using AI.

KEY FINDINGS

THE CHEATING PANIC MAY BE OVERSTATED.

Only about ~5% of students say they always or often use AI to write a full assignment, comparable to **global rates of contract cheating** going back to 1978. Students who use AI as a short cut do so because of time constraints (46%), not knowing enough about the topic (43%), and lack of interest (42%).

"When I'm paying for a class I'm required to take but don't necessarily need, I do not find any value in putting in my own effort for what is essentially 'busy work'."

STUDENTS SEE AI AS AN ALWAYS-ON TUTOR.

The dominant use case for AI isn't avoiding work. Students often turn to AI to get unstuck, understand challenging material, and spark curiosity. About two-thirds say **AI helps them grasp complex topics** and deepen their understanding of a topic; more than half say it helps them overcome academic obstacles.

"When used responsibly, it pushes my thinking, helps me see connections, and supports learning in a more interactive way. I don't use AI to replace my work, but as a learning aid similar to a tutor."

AI IS RESHAPING THE PROCESS, NOT JUST THE PRODUCT.

While 80% of students report never using AI to write an entire assignment, nearly half say they use it to outline their work, and more than half use it to summarize source material.

These “process” uses are arguably just as consequential for learning—and far less likely to trigger an honor code conversation.

STUDENTS CONSISTENTLY BELIEVE THEIR PEERS ARE USING AI MORE AGGRESSIVELY THAN THEY THEMSELVES ARE, AND ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE DOWNSTREAM IMPACTS OF WIDESPREAD USE OF AI.

Only **about a quarter** of students say they use AI to summarize books, articles, or other resources often or always.

Three times as many students say their peers use AI often or always for this purpose.

“It worries me about what will happen to the generation. Will our doctors and engineers have used AI for all their classes? Will they truly be prepared for a career if they are just generating the answers to everything?”

“I am so tired of competing with robots...My work is worth so much more than a robots, yet their robot ramblings get passed as their own writing.”

FALSE ACCUSATION OF USING AI IS THE NO. 1 CONCERN STUDENTS HAVE ABOUT AI.

Nearly 3 out of 4 students say they’re at least moderately concerned of being wrongly accused, including more than 40% who say it’s a major concern. For some, this stress outweighs the benefits of AI.

“Frankly, my experience using generative AI results in stress and anxiety due to the fear of being accused.”

AI USE, AND PERCEPTIONS OF AI’S USEFULNESS, VARY BY AREA OF STUDY.

Students enrolled in business and management use AI more frequently for all types of academic tasks; they’re also more likely to report significant benefits from using AI. This may be in part because the professors themselves are encouraging it:

“I have only ever used generative AI in one of my general business classes because it was required for the assignment.”

Students in the social sciences and humanities are less likely to use AI frequently for academic tasks, and less likely to report benefits from using AI.

METHODOLOGY

In January 2026, Packback conducted an online survey of students who had been enrolled in at least one Packback community since January 1, 2025. Respondents represented a range of institution types (e.g., large, medium, and small four-year institutions, community colleges, and online programs) and spanned all undergraduate class years and graduate students. The sample skewed female (65%) and predominantly 18-25 years of age (87%).

Disciplines represented included STEM (30%), business and management (24%), social sciences and humanities (20%), and health sciences (20%), among others.