

Student and faculty perceptions of AI: A qualitative study with focus groups

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Abstract

In Spring 2025, librarians at a regional comprehensive university in Southwest Florida conducted focus groups with faculty and students to explore their perceptions and experiences with artificial intelligence (AI). Previous research suggests that both groups recognize potential benefits of AI for learning, teaching, and productivity while expressing concerns regarding misinformation, ethics, and future societal impacts. The purpose of this study was to explore faculty and student perceptions of AI knowledge, training, and ethical use within a higher education context. Using a phenomenological approach, researchers conducted separate focus groups with faculty and students and analyzed the resulting discussions for recurring themes. Faculty participants expressed concerns related to critical thinking, institutional guidance, access to practical training, and adapting instruction to an AI-enabled environment. Student participants emphasized misinformation, future employment, and broader societal impacts of AI. Participants in both groups viewed AI as a tool that could be used ethically when applied appropriately. Although limited by its small sample size and single-institution context, the findings suggest opportunities for AI literacy initiatives and continued discussion regarding ethical AI use in higher education.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; higher education; library

Introduction

In Spring 2025, researchers from a regional university in Southwest Florida conducted two separate focus groups with faculty and students on their perceptions and lived experiences with artificial intelligence (AI). Building on previous research suggesting that both students and faculty value AI for academic tasks, this study explores how faculty and students at the study site describe their knowledge of AI, training experiences, and perceptions of ethical AI use. The findings provide insight into how academic libraries can support AI literacy initiatives within higher education.

The rapid growth of AI has made it difficult for higher education institutions to develop and enforce appropriate use policies, leading to uneven policies between institutions and even departments within a singular institution. This challenge was evident at the study site, where university administration gave faculty members autonomy to either allow or prohibit the use of AI in their courses. The student Code of Conduct references the use of AI in three ways (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2024). First, any student that submits work that is not their own—such as if it was completed by another person or entity—may be subject to disciplinary action; the university has clarified that ‘entity’ includes generative AI tools (Generative AI and FGCU teaching and learning). Second, any student that receives assistance on an assignment or assessment—from another person or entity—that has not been authorized by the instructor or professor may be subject to disciplinary action. Third, students may also be subject to disciplinary action for the use of sources that go beyond what their instructors or professors have authorized; these sources include generative AI.

AI is also referenced as part of the university’s Core Syllabus Policy Statements (Core syllabus policy statements): “[Students] may use generative AI tools only with explicit permission to do so for specific course assignments and activities. If explicit permission to use generative AI is not given on an assignment or course activity, it is not permitted.” This policy goes on to state that if generative AI is used, then any AI generated content must be cited; the method of citing AI content is up to the instructor’s discretion.

As institutions of higher education continue to develop policies and guidance related to AI, questions remain regarding how faculty and students understand those policies and translate them into everyday practice. At the study site, university administration has established policies related to AI use and several campus units have offered AI-focused workshops and professional development opportunities. However, the extent to which faculty and students participate in those resources, perceive them as useful, and feel prepared to implement AI ethically remains unclear. Exploring these perceptions was one motivation for the current study.

As AI tools become increasingly integrated into information discovery, research workflows, and academic databases, academic librarians occupy a unique position within higher education. Librarians have long supported people of all ages and abilities to navigate the information landscape, which is increasingly digital and complex. These responsibilities increasingly overlap with emerging concepts of AI literacy, suggesting a role for librarians to support faculty and students as they navigate AI-enabled learning and research environments.

The current study aims to explore faculty and student knowledge, training, and ethical use of AI, which may offer preliminary insights to librarians at other institutions in developing training programs and promoting a shared understanding of ethical use on their campuses.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Students' Opinions and Knowledge of AI

Students' opinions of AI vary. In a 2024 study (Almassaad et al.), researchers found that 78.7% of college students frequently use generative AI tools, while 21.3% do not. When polling over 600 students in bachelor's and master's degree programs, researchers determined that when asked "How [will] the use of [AI] in education will impact employment prospects" (Săseanu et al., 2024), 25% of student participants said that it will create significant opportunities. Most respondents stated that it will have a medium positive impact, while 16% said that it will have no significant impact. In the same study, students were asked if they believed that the use of AI in their education improved their learning experience; 60.8% said yes. Finally, when asked how they think AI in education will impact society, 29% of student participants stated that it will create a more knowledgeable workforce. 34% said that it will negatively impact employment opportunities by increasing inequality; 37% stated that it causes economic disturbances and job loss (Săseanu et al., 2024).

Students believe that there are positives from using AI tools in their education. Using AI saves time and provides instant feedback (Almassaad et al., 2024; Fleischmann, 2024; Krause et al., 2024). AI is also accessible for students as it can tailor their learning experience to meet their needs and is available 24/7 (Krause et al., 2024). Students also believe that AI can be used as a good source of inspiration and ideation, akin to that of a collaborator (Fleischmann, 2024).

Even with the positives, students have concerns with using AI. They believe that it is a new method of plagiarism and are concerned with academic integrity (Almassaad et al., 2024; Krause et al., 2024). Some students are disappointed with AI's outputs, stating that they are uncreative, generic, and repetitive (Fleischmann, 2024), as well as unreliable (Almassaad et al., 2024). Students argue that AI is not as accessible as many platforms require users to pay for a subscription to use their tools (Almassaad et al., 2024). They also are worried about the lasting impact AI has on learning autonomy due to how it reduces human-to-human interaction (Almassaad et al., 2024).

Even with students' varying opinions on AI, they use the tools for similar reasons. When surveying over 800 students at King Saud University, Almassaad et al. (2024) found that students use AI for translating works, generating ideas for writing, summarizing academic literature, and clarifying concepts. A 2024 study by Delcker et al. found that first-year university students prefer mindless AI tools—tools with machine characteristics—over mindful AI tools—tools with human-like characteristics).

1.2. Faculty Opinions and Knowledge of AI

According to Pisica et al. (2023), faculty members see numerous benefits with AI usage in their jobs and classrooms. It increases the accessibility of their lessons by making them more inclusive; students can receive personalized learning experiences tailored to their specific needs. It decreases the time needed to complete administrative tasks, therefore increasing their own efficiency. Participants in this study also agreed that AI directly impacts the teaching-learning process in ways of developing, adapting, and improving it. These new processes are believed to be beneficial for students as they should prepare them for careers in an AI-powered world (Yitages & Kasai, 2024). Outside of the classroom, research faculty believed that involving AI in the research process would be beneficial. Participants stated that AI would help streamline the research process as well as increase their ability to work with others to conduct interdisciplinary research (Pisica et al., 2023).

Other faculty members are more hesitant to integrate AI into their work (Pisica et al., 2023). Some participants expressed concern that AI use could negatively affect students' critical thinking, independence, and engagement with

learning. Others worried that the full integration of AI in higher education could lead to staff redundancy and eventually layoffs. Faculty members expressed concern with specific generative AI models over security and data privacy for them and their students. Participants admitted that AI is not to the point where it can be completely relied on without checking its output; it has been caught with inaccurate assessment of students' work and fabrication of citations (Yitages & Kasai, 2024).

Faculty members' opinions on AI appear to be dependent on subject and department; computer science professors were seen as more willing to use and integrate with AI than humanities professors (Yitages & Kasai, 2024). Overall, however, it depended on the participant's specific experience and knowledge of AI—those who had worked little with AI showed more hesitancy with the tool (Nadim & Di Fuccio, 2025).

1.3. AI Literacy, Information Literacy, and the Role of Academic Libraries

Information literacy is commonly understood as the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively and ethically. Contemporary interpretations extend beyond technical search skills and emphasize understanding how information is created, shared, valued, and used within complex information environments (ACRL, 2016). Mackey and Jacobson (2011) further conceptualized information literacy as a form of metaliteracy, recognizing that individuals must critically engage with information presented across multiple formats and collaborative digital environments. As generative AI becomes increasingly integrated into information creation and discovery, these concepts provide an important foundation for understanding emerging discussions of AI literacy.

Long and Magerko (2020) defined AI literacy as “a set of competencies that enables individuals to critically evaluate AI technologies, communicate and collaborate effectively with AI; and use AI as a tool online, at home, and in the workplace” (p. 2). Although there are other definitions of AI literacy with differing nuances, this is one of the most cited and widely accepted definitions. Hossain (2023) posited that information literacy is the foundational core necessary to support higher-level literacies such as digital, media, and AI literacy (p. 1). This article serves to highlight the role of librarians to teach the critical skills that allow users to understand not just how to use AI but to question and analyze the entire process from the ground up.

2. Research Questions

While current literature indicates that both faculty and students value AI for supporting academic-related tasks as well as a shared concern for an uncertain future, less is known about how students and faculty members describe their AI knowledge, training experiences, and ethical use, particularly in regard to specific university policies. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of faculty and students regarding their perceptions of their knowledge, training, and ethical use of AI. During the focus groups, researchers led the discussions with topic questions (see Appendix A), asking follow-up questions as needed.

The research questions were:

- How do faculty and students describe their knowledge of AI?
- How do faculty and students describe their training in AI?
- How do faculty and students describe ethical AI use?
- What implications do faculty and student perceptions of AI have for library-supported AI literacy initiatives?

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of faculty and students regarding their perceptions of their knowledge, training, and ethical use of AI. This exploration will be approached through a phenomenological qualitative study of their lived experience based on semi-structured focus groups. The researchers chose a focus group methodology to explore faculty and student perceptions, as they believed the interaction between the participants might produce richer discussion. Faculty and students were separated into two different focus groups to allow for candid responses, as the researchers were concerned that students would be less confident discussing AI with faculty.

3.1. Participants, Setting, and Sampling

The participant target population is 860 faculty and 16,000 students at a single study site, where the researchers work and have access to the participants. The participants were selected through purposive criterion sampling (as participants had to be a faculty member or student of FGCU) and convenience sampling (participants were selected as they were available when the focus groups were scheduled) (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Participants were recruited through e-

mail, website postings, and social media. Participants were offered a \$10 Starbucks gift cards for their participation. The researchers accepted participants into the study on a first-come, first-served basis, who had met all inclusion criteria, with a maximum threshold set at ten participants per focus group.

The researchers selected four participants in the student focus group. Three students identified as female, and one identified as male. Three students were in their first year of college and one student was in their second year. These students stated their majors to be supply chain management, business management, English, and marine biology.

The researchers selected nine participants in the faculty focus group. Five faculty members identified as female, and four identified as male. Three participants stated that they have worked for FGCU for ten years or more; three participants stated that they have worked for FGCU for one to three years. The final three participants have worked for FGCU for under a year. Four faculty members work for the College of Health Sciences, one faculty member works for the College of Business, one faculty member works for the Water School, and one works for the College of Arts and Sciences. The other faculty members work for the Military and Veteran Success department and the Service-Learning department.

3.2. Ethical Considerations

The researchers' protocol received IRB approval in Spring 2025 (Protocol ID # 2024-149). All participants completed a consent form that explained the potential benefits and harms from the study. The researchers protected participants' identities by assigning pseudonyms and avoiding descriptive identifying characteristics (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

The researchers asked the participants for their verbal consent to be recorded via video and transcript. The participants were informed that only anonymized data would be collected and synthesized with other participant data before publication. Focus group data will be stored on a password protected device and destroyed after the mandatory data retention period required by the IRB board.

3.3. Limitations of the Study

This is a single-site qualitative study using focus group data with only 13 total participants. The findings cannot be widely generalized to other environments or contexts. However, the rich data provided by this initial study and research protocol may provide summary guidance to academic librarians and campus leaders on how to engage their campus communities on topics such as AI knowledge, AI training, and AI ethics, and may inform future research.

3.4. Data Collection

In Spring 2025, the researchers recruited 13 participants. Four participants were recruited for the student focus group, and nine participants were recruited for the faculty focus group. The researcher met with each focus group for one hour. Using a semi-structured focus group protocol, the researchers asked the student focus group, a total of six questions and asked the faculty focus group eight questions (see Appendix). The questions asked participants their perceptions on AI knowledge, training, and ethical use. As these were semi-structured questions, the researchers occasionally asked questions out of order or asked probing (follow-up) questions to prompt rich, detailed answers from participants (Tisdell et al., 2025).

The focus groups were scheduled to best accommodate participants' availability. The researchers conducted the interview with zoom, using a camera and transcription.

3.5. Data Analysis

To analyze the participant data, transcripts were downloaded from zoom and manually corrected by one researcher who reviewed the recording. The transcripts were individually analyzed by two of the researchers, who created a memo of initial reflexive thoughts and initial codes. The researchers used inductive coding, guided by the participant's words, and by the theoretical framework of Moustakas (1994) Transcendental Phenomenology. The researchers did not employ deductive coding during analysis. As this research was exploring a relatively new phenomenon of AI, they resisted applying any codes that did not originate from the words of the participants. In doing so, they bracketed their own experience to prioritize the participants' voices.

The two coders met with the third researcher who reviewed the initial memos and codes, providing inter-coder reliability. The codes were then organized into categories and themes, agreed upon by the three reviewers. Differences in coding interpretation were discussed during researcher meetings until consensus was reached. The researchers maintained

analytic memos throughout the process and used peer debriefing among the three researchers to enhance trustworthiness. The reviewers followed best practices for multiphase qualitative analysis, as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1984), including “data reduction, data display, and conclusion/verification” (p. 23).

4. Researcher Positionality

The three researchers are librarians at a comprehensive regional university in Southwest Florida. The first named author has a master's degree in information science and is in her first year as the librarian for research impact, psychology, and business. The second author has master's degrees in information science and history, and is the humanities librarian, with over 10 years of experience as an academic librarian. The third author has master's degrees in library science and art history, with over 20 years of experience as an academic librarian. All three librarians work closely with students and faculty and have some experience with AI prompts and AI enhanced database searching. Two of the authors also teach for-credit courses at the university. Through awareness of our own positionalities the researchers made a diligent approach to bracket (or set aside) their own experience to mitigate researcher bias or misinterpretation of phenomena, guided by Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology (1994). Even so, it is pertinent to acknowledge that some bias will always remain (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

5. Theoretical Framework

The three researchers were guided by Moustakas (1994) Transcendental Phenomenology during the focus group session and while analyzing the data. This framework was chosen for two reasons. The first reason is that the phenomenon of AI is still very new and the researchers were curious to explore the phenomenon from the participant's human point of view. Although the researchers asked participants some focused questions about AI knowledge, training, and ethics in their protocol, they relied on participants to guide the discussion with their own thoughts and ideas. Additionally, the topic of AI is controversial, particularly with regard to ethics, and its impact for harm or for good is still largely uncertain. The researchers decided to embrace transcendental phenomenology to guide their research, prioritizing the participants' human voices, and prompting them with open-ended questions.

The researchers sought to bracket our own experiences with AI to gain greater empathy with the lived experiences of the faculty and students in our focus groups. By setting aside our own perceptions, judgements, and preconceptions, we frequently checked-in with our participants during the focus groups and assured them that we would maintain their confidentiality and were interested in their candid feelings and experiences. In doing so, we made our best attempts to reduce researcher bias and implement Moustakas (1994) state of Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, in which “everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (p. 34).

Thus, within the context of exploring faculty and students' lived experiences with AI, phenomenology is an appropriate approach. In phenomenology, the researcher focuses “on the experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness” (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). Furthermore, it is the “lived experience” (Van Manen, 1990) of the participants that is recorded, analyzed, and organized into themes and codes, while “every perception is granted equal value” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96). It is through this analysis that the researcher is able to find the essence, or the underlying shared phenomenological experience, that is recognized by multiple experts as the ultimate goal of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2014). With this end goal in mind, the researchers sought to understand the lived experiences of students and faculty; specifically, their reported perceptions of their AI knowledge, training, and ethical use.

6. Findings

Eight key themes emerged from our thematic analysis of the semi-structured focus group discussions. Three of these themes came from the faculty-only discussion, two themes came from the student-only discussion, and three themes were found in both discussions.

The faculty-only themes were:

- Critical thinking
- Institutional guidelines
- AI as an inevitability

The student-only themes were:

- Information and misinformation
- Generational differences and AI

The themes evident for both students and faculty were:

- Ethics
- Future, job outlook, and societal impact
- AI as a tool

6.1. Faculty-only themes

6.1.1. Critical thinking

Faculty shared concerns about the impact of AI on students' critical thinking abilities. While students can generate content with AI tools, many faculty members noted a lack of ability or initiative in evaluating the quality, accuracy, and appropriateness of the output. One faculty member expressed that the challenge is not in plugging in a prompt and getting a response but rather the challenge is to "take it that step further and say, is this good information, or how would you edit this? And, you know, when would this be appropriate to use?" This highlighted the broader issue of students feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information available to them, a feeling heightened by the increased production of AI generated information. As one participant observed, "...a problem with your generation...is you guys have too much information, and you have to figure it out. We hardly had any, and we had to go find one or two solutions in the library or whatever. But you have too much information, and that would include sort of AI stuff." In response, some faculty have started integrating AI literacy into their teaching, aiming to help students develop a more analytical approach. Across the board, there was a clear sense that fostering AI literacy and critical evaluation skills is becoming an essential part of modern pedagogy.

6.1.2. Institutional guidelines

When questioned, several of the faculty members expressed uncertainty over institutional policies on AI use. They were unclear about what type of use was permitted, particularly concerning tasks like grading and curriculum development. Several mentioned that they were not even certain if they were allowed to download or use AI programs on university-owned devices, although the institutional subscription to the Microsoft suite includes Copilot access. As one faculty member put it, "I truly don't know what the policies are. I don't know if they've actually been created." Others echoed this confusion, noting mixed messaging around approved and restricted tools: "I don't know what their exact policy is on all that stuff, but I know sometimes they say, nope, you're not allowed to download that program." This ambiguity has led to inconsistent practices and hesitancy around AI integration by faculty.

Compounding the issue, faculty expressed dissatisfaction with the available AI training provided by campus administration and departments, describing it as either too simplistic and focusing repeatedly on "AI ethics" or too advanced to be applicable by a non-expert. One participant reflected on the AI ethics trainings, "I kind of stopped going to trainings...we've talked about it. It's here. We know. We're all concerned." Another added their insight about the trainings that are too advanced: "That is way past where I'm at with AI. So, I wouldn't call that helpful." Collectively, these insights point to a pressing need for clearer institutional guidelines and more targeted, practical training aligned with faculty needs in instruction, grading, curriculum design, and research.

6.1.3. AI as an inevitability

The most common theme from the faculty discussion was AI as an inevitability. One participant stated that "the genie isn't going back into the bottle" and another said, "I believe that AI is going to come whether we like it or not." None of the faculty members ban the use of AI in their classroom, although several discussed the ways they are rethinking their roles as educators and guiding students in the appropriate use of AI. Part of this discussion included the ways that faculty are having to adjust course content and assignments to consider AI use, such as using AI-powered academic coaches like Clarivate's Alethea, changing up traditional assignments like college essays, and creating assignments that are AI-resistant. A faculty member stated "...if you don't want AI to be used, there are ways to write assignments that AI cannot follow all the twists and turns that you just presented. And so, I think we have to be creative. We may not be able to use the same assignments we were using before, and that's okay." There was an overall acceptance of the fact that faculty have to adapt to these technologies and change what and how they are teaching. Finally, there was a clearly articulated desire to model appropriate AI use for the students, "...to be part of this change versus the resistance to the change that's going to happen anyway."

6.2. Student-only themes

6.2.1. Information and misinformation

The students in our focus group demonstrated a general awareness of the challenges associated with obtaining credible information through AI tools, but few were able to articulate more than a surface-level understanding. None offered meaningful insight into the complexities of evaluating AI-generated content for accuracy or reliability. When asked about the influx of AI-generated responses on internet and database searches, one student remarked:

“I do think that there’s a lot of issues with AI. I know that Google has like an AI thing now where you search it up... And it gives wrong answers. And if I just scroll down, I can see this stuff. Real information. I think. It does have a lot of issues finding sources that are credible. And it kind of just compiles things.”

When the students were asked how capable they thought they were in assessing the accuracy of AI-generated content, their responses demonstrated limited ability to understand the ways to do so. One student stated, “I think I’ve been so online that I could tell if it’s AI with pictures and voices, but some written stuff is just 1:1 to human writing.” Another added, “I did like a news literacy class...and I didn’t do too bad on identifying.”

This limited ability and desire to critically evaluate information – especially when it is AI-generated – is an ongoing concern for educators and librarians alike. Even with traditional sources such as articles, books, and websites, assessing credibility has long been a challenge. The emergence of generative AI has only heightened the urgency of addressing gaps in students’ information literacy skills.

6.2.2. Generational differences and AI

Although students had less to say about AI use than the faculty, they did express a notable generational perspective on attitudes toward AI. Most of the students felt that younger people, despite being “digital natives,” were more skeptical and uneasy about AI than older generations. They perceived that professors, parents, and other adults were more accepting of AI, whereas younger individuals harbor deeper concerns about its long-term impact on their futures. As one student observed, “Some older generations aren’t as concerned, but for us this is our future that is being greatly impacted, so we may have stronger opinions.” This generational divide highlights a sense of apprehension among students, particularly regarding the role AI may play in shaping their career paths and life opportunities. Nonetheless, it is relevant to note that the overall responses from the students did not seem to corroborate this stated concern over AI use.

6.3. Shared faculty and student themes

6.3.1. Ethics

There was broad consensus among both students and faculty that AI can be used ethically to support learning and studying. Students noted that AI can be helpful for understanding difficult concepts or clarifying material. As one student explained, “I think it can be used ethically in certain parts because a lot of students can struggle understanding a topic so maybe the AI could help them.” They went on to clarify: “But if you use AI to do a whole assignment, you’re just cheating yourself out of education.” This tension between benefit and risk was echoed by other students, one of whom expressed that “...maybe we’re all too dependent on it.” Faculty expressed similar thoughts. “Like most tools and technologies...most use will be ethical and to help become more efficient,” one faculty member said, adding, “The trick, as teachers, is to be one step ahead of how it can be used improperly. We should highlight where AI can help students learn and improve but also tell them about the guardrails in place.” Another faculty member framed it pragmatically: “I’ve truly moved on from the cheating aspect of it. If they’re going to use it, they’re going to use it. If I can detect it, great. If not, they’re hurting themselves, but usually I can tell.”

This led to discussion about the challenges in detecting AI plagiarism, which affects both students and faculty. As one faculty member stated regarding accusing students of academic misconduct based on AI use: “The problem with that piece is trying to figure out if it was AI or not. Because, you know, if you do it in Turnitin and they have that AI piece, it’ll say it could be 40% or 50%. But I don’t know how you write as a student. Are you super wordy? Are you not? Is this how you normally write?” Another explained that they are sometimes able to recognize clear academic dishonesty such as fake citations and references, but they are cautious about trying to “objectively assess if AI is used” because of how challenging the process is. Yet another faculty member reminded us that this affects faculty in their writing, as well, explaining: “One of my colleagues had an article rejected by a journal because they accused him of AI. He did not use AI. So, we are getting wrongly accused, as well.”

6.3.2. Future, job outlook, and societal impact

Another shared anxiety among students and faculty was the impact of AI on the future of the job markets. Students expressed concern about job loss and being locked out of career paths due to AI. One student was clear in their concern, stating “I do worry about it taking away a lot of jobs. I know there’s kind of new technology taking away jobs generally. But I feel like it’s taking more creative jobs or jobs that people like care about a little bit more.” Several students raised concerns over companies using AI for advertising. While one student emphasized that they didn’t think AI was “going to take over the government or anything,” they were nonetheless concerned about the potential for employers to use AI to replace human beings.

Faculty voiced similar concerns, particularly regarding the impact on job prospects for graduating students. One said, “It’s just like millions and billions and trillions of dollars being invested in AI capabilities. And what does it mean for somebody who’s 20 or 22 and, you know, looking to finish college, getting into the workforce? How do you train and how do you make sense of that? And how is this going to change my life over the next ten, twelve years?” Several faculty members noted that they encourage their students to anticipate these potential changes to the job market and prepare accordingly. One cautioned that students need to “be careful what they wish for in relying on it too much and feeding it information to get better,” a point that resonated with others in the group.

6.3.3. AI as a tool

The overall sentiment in both focus groups was that AI is one of many potential time-saving tools that can be used to organize information and assist with learning. Participants cited a range of potential ways to use AI, including generating outlines and SMART goals, explaining complex concepts, creating graphics like word clouds and timelines, and getting “the boring busy work done.” However, while both groups acknowledged the usefulness of AI, the students were hesitant to propose many ideas and seemed uncertain about how to use it effectively. One of the students said, “I did use it last semester for my exams. It didn’t really help me all that much, and I know that there’s kind of like a way to put out better prompts and stuff, and I’ve never really looked into it.” Another stated that they “know some of these kids are not writing these fancy essays in class” while also clarifying that they are “no snitch.” The association between AI-use and cheating seemed to be much stronger with the students, even as they recognized its potential as a helpful tool.

Faculty, in contrast, were far more forthcoming about concrete uses of AI. One described using it for literature reviews by specifying study parameters and databases to pull from; another went as far as to call AI their “research assistant.” Others highlighted its value in curriculum development, preliminary grading, and even more sensitive tasks, such as drafting reference letters, annual reviews, and white papers, though these ideas were shared with caution and many caveats. One faculty participant was frank about the pressures that drive such uses, stating, “My students can’t write. I mean, they truly can’t, and I don’t have time to teach them.” Overall, the prevailing attitude among faculty was summed up by one participant: “Hey, let’s just use it.”

7. Discussion

Faculty in the focus groups generally described AI as an inevitable part of higher education and were largely accepting of the curricular changes associated with its use. None expressed overt hostility toward the increased workload of rewriting assignments to either incorporate AI use or make them AI-resistant. Although there were concerns about potential misuse, overall frustration and accusations were lower than anticipated given the prominence of concerns about AI-related academic misconduct in higher education discourse. Participation bias may explain some of the positive attitudes towards AI in the faculty group. The faculty who volunteered for the focus group may have had stronger or more positive feelings about AI, while those who disliked it may have opted out. In addition, some of the faculty participants were very vocal about their acceptance of AI from the beginning of the discussion, which may have led others to temper their opinions, whether consciously or not.

Students, in contrast, appeared more hostile and anxious about AI, although their perspectives were not uniform. One nontraditional student at a higher level was quite enthusiastic about the technology, but most expressed negative views about AI’s impact on society and the credibility of its outputs. The limited participation from some students makes interpretation challenging. Several students appeared reluctant to speak openly: none had their cameras on, and some only participated via chat. This hesitancy may reflect discomfort discussing AI-related practices in an academic setting, although the reasons for limited participation cannot be determined from the focus group data alone.

Across both groups, a shared theme was uncertainty about what constitutes AI and AI use. Faculty tended to be more explicit about the limits of their knowledge, whereas students often conflated all AI tools – such as ChatGPT, grammar apps, and homework helpers – as interchangeable and as direct replacements for humans. This difference shaped their

concerns. Students were more focused on AI's potential to replace human workers and disrupt the job market, while faculty were more concerned about its impact on human capabilities, particularly creative and critical thinking skills.

Consistent with the phenomenological approach, the findings highlight the ways participants made meaning of AI through their lived experiences rather than through technical definitions or institutional policy language. Faculty and students often discussed AI in relation to their own concerns, responsibilities, and future aspirations, suggesting that perceptions of AI are shaped as much by personal experience as technical knowledge.

An interesting finding was not what the participants discussed, but what they did not discuss. Topics frequently encountered in public and professional conversations about AI, such as prohibitions on AI use, academic misconduct, and AI detection, received relatively little attention during the focus groups. This absence may reflect the particular participants who volunteered for the study, the group setting, or other factors beyond the scope of the current research. A major limitation of the study was its small participant pool: nine faculty and four students is not representative of the campus climate or even a single discipline. While the groups included participants from different disciplines and levels (see methodology), the sample size and self-selection effects limit the transferability of the findings.

8. Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study examined faculty and student perceptions of AI at a regional comprehensive university. While participants expressed differing levels of enthusiasm and concern regarding AI in higher education, both groups described it as an increasingly prominent part of their academic lives and discussed its implications for learning, work, and society. Faculty participants emphasized concerns related to critical thinking, institutional guidance, and adapting instruction to an AI-enabled environment, while students most frequently discussed misinformation, future employment, and the broader societal impacts of AI.

The findings suggest that AI-related questions in higher education extend beyond technical proficiency and encompass issues of information evaluation, ethical use, and decision-making. Participants in both groups demonstrated uncertainty regarding AI capabilities, limitations, and appropriate applications, highlighting the importance of ongoing conversations about AI literacy within higher education.

Although the study was limited by its small sample size and single-institution context, it provides preliminary insight into how faculty and students understand and experience AI in their academic lives. These findings may be useful for others within higher education seeking to support AI literacy initiatives.

8.1. Implications for Practice

Participants in both focus groups expressed uncertainty regarding AI capabilities, ethical use, and appropriate applications within academic settings. These findings suggest opportunities for academic librarians to contribute to AI literacy initiatives by developing training programs and hosting discussions about ethical AI use, output evaluation, and responsible integration of AI tools into teaching, learning, and research. Collaborative library workshops for students, staff, faculty, and community partners are a way to ensure that users have the opportunity to learn key AI literacy skills that may provide the foundational skills they need to interact ethically with AI in the classroom and out of it. Because AI literacy builds on foundational information literacy skills, students and faculty may benefit from instruction that emphasizes these skills. The findings of this study suggest that academic librarians can extend existing information literacy instruction practices into AI literacy initiatives while continuing to promote critical thinking, ethical information use, and source evaluation.

8.2. Future Research

The current study was intended to inform the researchers' AI literacy programming needs; therefore, the small sample size was adequate for those purposes. However, future research is warranted based on the study's noted limitations and results. Larger and more varied focus groups would provide a more comprehensive understanding of faculty and student attitudes toward AI. Comparative studies across disciplines are needed to uncover patterns in AI adoption, pedagogical integration, and ethical concerns. Cross-institution studies may indicate national and international patterns in attitudes.

Given the limitations of self-reported data in group settings, future research should employ mixed methods approaches, combining focus groups with anonymous surveys or interviews. Comparing real-use cases to self-reported cases may offer a more accurate picture of how AI is truly being incorporated into teaching and learning. In addition, this type of comparison would allow researchers to investigate the discrepancies between stated and actual behavior and examine the ways that perceived judgment and power dynamics influence participants' willingness to share authentically.

Finally, future research should assess how libraries can most effectively contribute to AI-related instruction. Studies should explore the kinds of training, resources, and consultations that are considered most valuable to students and faculty.

As generative AI tools become ubiquitous within higher education and the library, librarians are uniquely positioned to step into the role of teaching AI literacy to our students, faculty, and community, thereby using our skills in finding and assessing information to support the ethical integration of AI across campus.

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