Weekly AI in Higher Education Report - May 22, 2026

Executive Summary

- **Widespread AI Misuse Prompts Assessment Reform Calls:** A massive survey of 95,000 students at 20 U.S. public research universities found that 37% use GenAI regularly, and 9% have used it to cheat. The study, published in *Science*, urges institutions to rethink assessment practices to maintain academic integrity and credential credibility [1].
- **Grade Inflation Linked to AI Exposure:** An analysis by a UC Berkeley researcher reveals that the share of ‘A’ grades in “AI-exposed” courses (where AI can substitute for student effort on unsupervised tasks) has risen by 30% since 2022, prompting calls to review courses based on their vulnerability to AI [2].
- **SUNY Adopts Systemwide AI Policy:** The State University of New York has implemented a comprehensive AI policy across its 64 campuses. The framework aims to expand AI use—including advising and early-alert systems—while establishing guardrails for student learning, support services, and data privacy [3].
- **AI Tool Integration Boosts Student Engagement:** A report by Clarivate on ProQuest Research Assistant shows that when AI is embedded directly within scholarly documents, students are 40% more likely to take meaningful actions (e.g., citing, saving) and use the tool to overcome research hurdles rather than bypassing the reading process [4].
- **Students Turn to AI for Emotional Support:** A survey of young people indicates that one in three are using AI for emotional or relational support, or interacting with AI characters, often turning to these tools during acute moments of need because they are accessible and nonjudgmental [5].
- **Harvard Caps ‘A’ Grades to Combat Inflation:** The Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences voted to cap the number of ‘A’ grades at 20% per course (plus or minus four) starting in fall 2027, a move aimed at addressing grade inflation where 66% of undergraduates recently earned A’s [6].

Major News and Developments

The Push for Assessment Reform Amidst Widespread GenAI Use

The impact of generative AI on academic integrity has reached a critical juncture. A new study published in *Science* analyzed survey responses from over 95,000 students across 20 U.S. public research universities during the 2023-2024 academic year. The findings indicate that approximately one-third of students regularly use GenAI models like ChatGPT, and 9% admitted to using it to cheat [1].

The adoption rates vary significantly by discipline, with 62% of computer science students reporting regular use compared to 24% in the arts [1]. Interestingly, estimated rates of misuse were higher in non-STEM fields such as economics (17%) and journalism (16%) [7]. The study's authors emphasize that assessment reform is "necessary and urgent," suggesting strategies such as returning to highly controlled testing environments for certain tasks, setting clearer guidelines, or adapting assessments to incorporate AI in ways that demonstrate professional skills [1].

Grade Inflation in AI-Exposed Courses

Corroborating concerns about assessment validity, a working paper from the Center for Studies in Higher Education at UC Berkeley analyzed over 500,000 grades from a large Texas research university. The study found that in "AI-exposed" courses—those relying heavily on homework-based writing and coding tasks where AI can substitute for student effort—the share of 'A' grades increased by 13 percentage points (or 30%) compared to a 2022 baseline [2].

The researcher, Igor Chirikov, warns that grades may become less informative measures of student capability. However, he cautions against a wholesale return to in-person exams, noting that important skills require sustained work over time. Instead, he recommends that departments review courses for their exposure to AI and redesign assessments to balance learning assurance, academic integrity, and preparation for an AI-integrated professional world [2].

Students Utilizing AI for Emotional Support

As institutions grapple with growing mental health needs, a significant number of students are turning to AI. Research by The Rithm Project surveyed nearly 2,400 young people and

found that about one in three use AI for emotional or relational support, or interact with AI characters [5].

Students often turn to AI during acute moments of need—such as interpersonal conflicts or major decisions—finding the AI to be nonjudgmental, accessible, and capable of providing solid advice. While this highlights a gap in human support systems, researchers are monitoring the potential risks of human displacement, addictive tendencies, and emotional attachment to AI entities [5].

Institutional Implementations

State University of New York (SUNY) Systemwide Policy

SUNY has adopted a new systemwide AI policy framework applicable to its 64 campuses. The policy is designed to scale the use of AI tools to improve student success, such as deploying AI-driven advising and early-alert systems. Simultaneously, it mandates training in responsible use, embeds AI literacy into the general education curriculum, and establishes strict guardrails to protect student data and academic records from being used to train external models [3].

University of North Carolina (UNC) System AI Fundamentals Course

The UNC System has piloted a set of six AI Fundamentals modules across 10 institutions, reaching over 3,300 students in various disciplines. Developed by a committee of faculty and instructional designers, the modules cover how GenAI works, responsible use, and workforce applications. The flexible design allows the modules to be offered as a standalone course or integrated into existing classes, with plans to expand availability throughout the state by fall 2026 [8].

University of Virginia (UVA) AI Literacy and Action Lab

To address accelerating employer demand for AI skills, UVA’s College and Graduate School of Arts & Sciences launched an AI Literacy and Action Lab. Developed with the UVA Library, the initiative embeds structured, evidence-based AI training directly into coursework. It emphasizes “learning by doing” through faculty-led pilots, one-credit seminars, and project incubators [3].

Harvard University Grade Capping

In a move indirectly related to the broader context of grade inflation (which AI is exacerbating elsewhere), the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences voted to cap ‘A’ grades at 20% per course starting in fall 2027. This policy aims to restore the ‘A’ grade as a mark of extraordinary distinction and reduce the anxiety associated with earning an ‘A-’, encouraging students to take intellectual risks [6].

Research and Studies

AI Integration Enhances Student Engagement with Scholarly Content

A report by Clarivate analyzed nearly 2 million document-level interactions within the ProQuest Research Assistant. The findings challenge the assumption that AI tools encourage superficial engagement. When AI is embedded directly in the document view, students are 31% more likely to scroll through the full text and 40% more likely to take meaningful actions like citing or saving the document [4].

Students utilize the Chat With the Document feature to overcome traditional research hurdles, such as interpreting complex language or understanding methodology, rather than drifting toward answer generation. The report underscores that responsible design—confining AI responses to the active material and providing clear attribution—supports persistence and deliberate reading [4].

Evaluating AI-Driven Adaptive Learning Platforms

A quasi-experimental study published in *Frontiers in Education* evaluated the NexusAI platform in pre-service computer science teacher education in Kazakhstan. The platform integrates modules for automated content generation, intelligent lesson planning, and adaptive trajectory management. Students using NexusAI demonstrated significantly higher academic performance, motivation to learn, and learning efficiency compared to a control group using a traditional LMS. The study highlights time efficiency, personalization, and immediate feedback as key drivers of user satisfaction [9].

Policy and Guidelines Updates

The Role of the Syllabus in AI Policy

As institutional policies lag behind technological adoption, educators are urged to use the course syllabus as a primary tool to establish AI usage frameworks. An opinion piece in *Frontiers in Education* recommends that syllabi clearly outline acceptable AI use, necessary citation formats or disclaimers, and the consequences of non-adherence. While acknowledging that a patchwork of syllabus policies can overwhelm students, the authors argue it is an essential immediate step while institutions develop comprehensive, campus-wide frameworks to ensure consistency, data privacy (e.g., FERPA compliance), and ethical adoption [10].

AI and Accessibility Considerations

Teach Access, in collaboration with Every Learner Everywhere, released a resource titled “Where AI Meets Accessibility: Considerations for Higher Education.” The guide aims to shift the conversation toward how AI can promote inclusion for people with disabilities. It highlights the role of AI in assistive technologies while also warning against biases and ableist assumptions that may inadvertently create new obstacles. The resource provides practical advice for educators and administrators on implementing AI inclusively [11].

Emerging Trends

- **AI Skills as a Workforce Imperative:** Employer demand for AI competencies is surging across all sectors, not just tech. A Handshake report found that 85% of college seniors now use AI tools, and mentions of AI skills in job postings have increased significantly in fields like financial services, government, and healthcare [3].
- **Disparities in AI Adoption:** The *Science* study highlighted demographic differences in GenAI use, with higher adoption among male, White, and Asian students compared to female and underrepresented minority students. This raises concerns about equity gaps in AI literacy that could impact students’ learning and future labor market prospects [1].
- **Shift from Output to Process in Assessment:** In response to AI’s ability to generate polished outputs, educators are increasingly focusing on the learning

process. This includes teaching students how to critique AI prompts, emphasizing backward design, and utilizing learning analytics (like epistemic network analysis) to understand how students negotiate trust, verification, and academic integrity when using AI [12] [13].

References

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