



National Disability Center
for Student Success

Access Leads to Achievement:

A National Report on AI Tool Use Among College Students With and Without Disabilities

October 2026

NATIONAL REPORT



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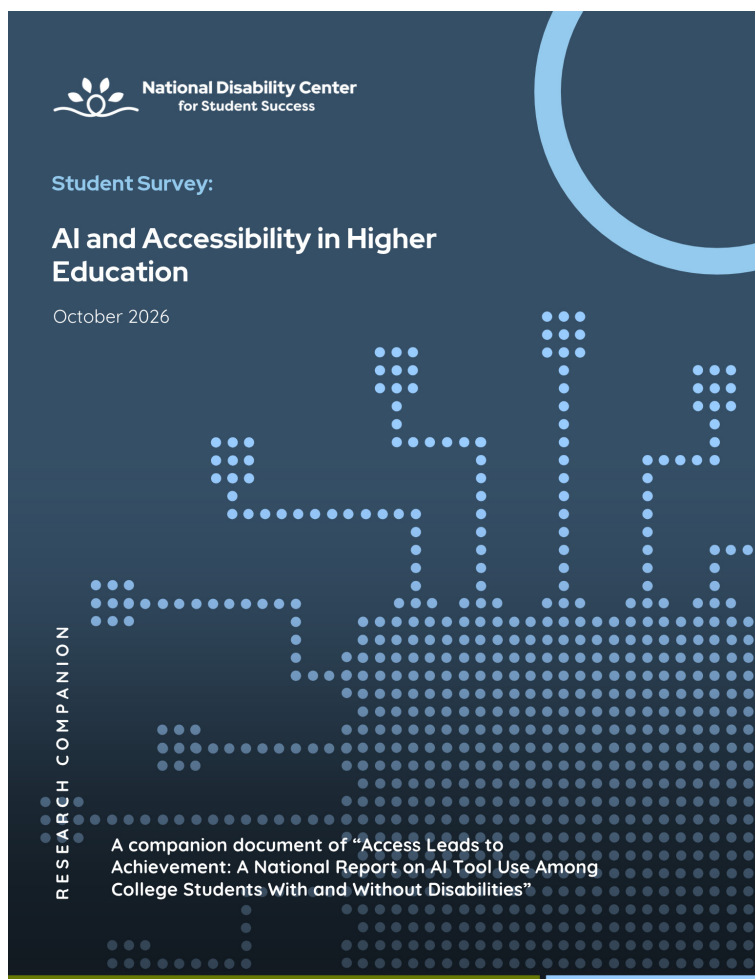
Disclaimers & Limitations

- Participants were recruited through Prolific.co, a paid research panel — this is a convenience sample, not a nationally representative one.
- Subgroup sizes for disability type and some open-ended tool categories are considerably smaller than can be used for statistical analysis and should be read as descriptive patterns.
- Exploratory item-level comparisons used 2×2 chi-square tests (Fisher's exact where cells were small) and were not adjusted for multiple comparisons; *p*-values should be interpreted cautiously.
- Some open-ended responses suggest category overlap in how students view AI tools and their purpose — for example, a number of respondents describing image-generation tools (e.g., asking for AI-generated pictures) rather than alt-text/image-description tools when answering questions about accessibility tools. This is noted where relevant.
- This report substitutes open-ended survey responses for the one-on-one interviews used in previous National Disability Center reports — there is no separate student interview sample in this report.

Research Measure Companion Survey

In addition to this national report, there is a separate companion document for researchers, **Student Survey: AI and Accessibility in Higher Education**. The research companion includes the complete survey flow, with survey questions, response options, and the branching and display logic used during survey administration.

nationaldisabilitycenter.org/AI



Suggested Citation

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Research Team

The National Disability Center's interdisciplinary research team is led by people with disabilities — faculty members, researchers, and postsecondary students — who collaborate on a student-centered, asset-based approach that prioritizes understanding disabled students' experiences and obstacles.

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Introduction: Student Experiences Shaped by AI Access

The Role of Generative AI and Expanding Access in Higher Education

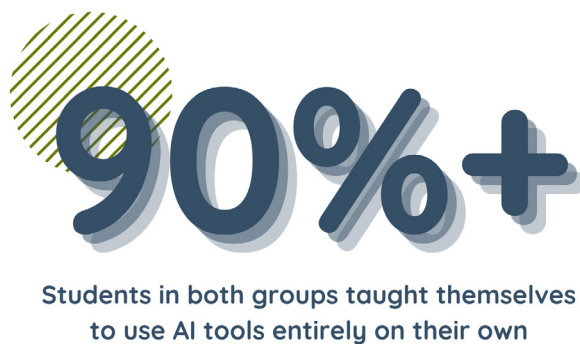
As generative AI becomes progressively embedded within higher education, it also raises questions about access for students with disabilities.

Artificial intelligence encompasses a wide range of technologies designed to analyze information, recognize patterns, and support decision-making. These forms of AI range from tools that analyze or classify information to those that generate new content. Generative AI is a type of artificial intelligence that can create new content, including text, images, audio, and other materials. Moreover, generative AI tools are increasingly transforming higher education and how college students access information, complete academic work, organize learning, and imagine future careers.

Generative AI use is growing quickly across higher education. A 2026 California State University systemwide survey found that more than half of students, six in ten faculty members, and two-thirds of staff use AI-powered tools. Another survey of more than 95,000 students across 20 public universities found that about one-third use generative AI to create text, video, and code

(Waldon, 2026). Faculty views of AI are also generally positive, including its use for course design and teaching activities (Colloton, 2024; Oyarzun et al., 2026). Some institutions are even using large language models to create instructional tutors that provide additional support to students (Ko et al., 2026).

For students with disabilities, these evolving technologies may also create new possibilities for accessing and navigating academic environments. Tools such as transcription, summarization, plain-language rewriting, file conversion, planning, and communication assistance can offer new forms of access support. Yet discussions of integrating AI in higher education often center on academic integrity, productivity, or general student use. However, these conversations often disregard whether students with disabilities experience AI differently than students without disabilities.



These discussions matter because tools framed as optional learning supports may also function as accessibility infrastructure. Students face unequal barriers related to cost, course policy, inaccessible interfaces, privacy, stigma, and a near-total lack of institutional guidance. According to the survey findings, both groups reported high AI use, but non-disabled students reported greater use of several mainstream academic tools and multi-tool workflows. On the other hand, disabled students reported strong perceived access benefits when they did use AI. There is therefore a tension between generative AI's potential to expand access and the uneven support available to recognize that value. At the same time, growing concerns about AI's impact on academic quality and student learning make it increasingly important to understand how these tools can be used responsibly while also supporting student access.

The National Disability Center's Response: Understanding Generative AI in Higher Education

Students with disabilities continue to enroll in postsecondary education at high rates (Mata & Borrego, 2024); at minimum, 1 in 4 students has a disability, chronic health, or mental health condition at any given time. Even with high enrollment and growing awareness of support resources, gaps remain in academic and later employment outcomes. This is primarily driven by limited accessibility resources, slow adoption of universally designed materials, and negative faculty and staff attitudes about disability and providing access beyond compliance.

Formal and informal supports are both known to reduce the educational attainment gap for disabled students (Cawthon et al., 2025; Newman et al., 2021). However, a significant share of students with disabilities, estimates run as high as 50%, never disclose to their institution (NDCSS, 2025; Mata, 2025). This means students with formal accommodations represent only a fraction of the disabled student population. Generative AI tools may be part of a formal accommodation, but more often the entire student population accesses them as general-purpose assistive technology, not something limited to students who disclose.

Access to technology depends heavily on who can use and develop it. Disabled people have often been the first adopters of new technology. For instance, texting began as a communication tool used by Deaf and hard of hearing people (Power & Power, 2004) long before it became a standard form of personal and professional communication. With generative AI, access also involves considering the material used to build these tools. Large language models (LLMs) are trained on content collected from across the internet, which can carry forward biases and stereotypes from broader culture, including the under-representation of affirming views of disability (Gadiraju et al., 2023).

AI fluency is becoming an increasingly important aspect of higher education as it redefines workplace skill sets, especially for entry-level roles. Because colleges are key to developing these skills, varying access to AI tools can affect students' ability to participate in learning and prepare for employment. At the same time, AI tools may support disabled students directly by enhancing existing accommodations and furthering participation in higher education.

About the AI and Accessibility Survey

The study used a mixed-methods survey design combining item checklists, rating scales, and open-ended questions.

The survey asked about AI tool use across three learning domains: **Gathering Information**, **Understanding Information**, and **Writing and Organizing Information**.

Each domain listed possible tasks a student might use AI for. For example, the Gathering Information prompt asked: "Please check all of the AI tools you use for gathering information," with options including web navigation, research and information retrieval, AI agents or scripts for tasks, and AI-generated statistical analyses. When participants indicated that they used an AI tool, an open-ended follow-up asked which specific tools or programs they used.

The study also examined AI as both a learning technology and an accessibility support. For students with disabilities, AI tools may provide support through transcription, summarization, plain language rewriting, file conversion, time management, and communication support. The study examined AI use among students with and without disabilities and barriers that may limit beneficial use, including cost, course restrictions, fear of limiting learning, privacy and security, errors, inaccessible interfaces, and perception.

Student Open-Ended Responses Deepen AI Accessibility Insights

Student perspectives are an essential component to understanding how AI is impacting higher education experiences, especially for students with disabilities. In addition to the multiple choice and rating scale survey items, this study used open-ended survey responses to capture participants' experiences with AI. The open-ended questions gave participants an opportunity to share experiences, concerns, and uses of AI that structured responses alone may not capture. This approach complemented the item checklists and rating scales by allowing participants to provide additional context about how they use AI and the role it plays in their learning and access to information.

Why This Research Matters

This research examines AI as both a learning technology and an accessibility support across four domains: making information accessible, gathering information, understanding information, and writing/organizing information.

The study seeks to:

- Reframe AI literacy as an accessibility and equity issue, not only a general student skill or academic integrity concern.
- Compare AI use between students with and without disabilities and identify whether those experiences are comparable.
- Understand barriers, including cost, course restrictions, fear of limiting learning, privacy/security, AI errors, and inaccessible interfaces.
- Identify potential institutional support gaps as instructor training and access office support are only just emerging within the AI space.

Ultimately, understanding how students experience and use AI can better inform higher education institutions about how these technologies are shaping learning and access. This research highlights the significance of considering disability when developing AI guidance, support, and policies. This will give students the opportunity to use these tools in ways that support their learning and participation. The research can help inform institutional policy around AI guidance, access to tools, accessibility, and use.

Research Questions

The survey was designed around four research questions:

1. How do students with and without disabilities differ in their reported use of AI tools across four learning/accessibility domains: making information accessible, gathering information, understanding information, and writing/organizing?
2. What barriers to AI use are reported by students with and without disabilities, and how do these barriers differ across groups?
3. How do students with and without disabilities perceive the influence of AI on their post-graduation plans or career goals, and what patterns emerge across disability types?
4. How do students with and without disabilities make sense of AI as a tool for access, learning, productivity, risk, and career preparation?

Key Findings: Understanding the Student AI Experience



By Default, Students Are Learning AI Mostly on Their Own

Over 90% of both disabled and non-disabled students learned to use generative AI entirely on their own.

AI instructor training and accommodations office support were the least used sources for either group.



Yet AI Use Is Not Equal Across Student Groups

Students without disabilities reported equal or higher AI use across most areas, especially alt text, writing outlines, and multi-tool workflows. Students with disabilities reported higher use in only a few areas, including the use of AI Agents, yet also reported a high level of benefit across the tools.



But Cost and Course Policies Limit AI Use

Over 45% of both disabled and non-disabled students cited the cost of paid versions as a barrier. More than 40% of both groups also reported course restrictions on AI use as a barrier.



Even When AI Provides Strong Accessibility Perks

A majority of disabled students (82-92%) said AI tools met their access needs. Yet only 6% of disabled students reported receiving AI training from instructors. This gap suggests that students are finding value in AI tools despite limited instructor-led support.



And Broader Concerns Shape Whether Students Use AI

All students were concerned about hallucinations and privacy. However, disabled students cited environmental and data center concerns more often than non-disabled students. Disabled students were also more concerned about how others perceive their AI use (25% vs. 18%) and emphasized concerns related to access, participation, and fatigue.



Top Recommendations to Support AI Use on Campus

These recommendations emphasize that accessible AI use is a shared responsibility requiring students to build AI fluency, faculty to provide clear and flexible guidance, and institutions to create well-resourced support systems that recognize AI as both a learning tool and an accessibility resource.

For Students

Use AI Responsibly and Protect Your Work

Students should understand both the benefits and risks of using AI for academic work. Review course expectations before using AI on assignments, be transparent about its use when required, and avoid submitting AI-generated work as your own. Verify information rather than assuming AI-generated responses are accurate, and consider privacy and security before entering personal, academic, or disability-related information into an AI tool. Students should view AI as a resource that can support their work, not replace their own judgment, learning, or decision-making.

Use AI to Support the Way You Learn and Access Information

Students are encouraged to explore AI for tasks such as summarizing information, converting materials into accessible formats, organizing ideas, transcription, communication support, and other learning needs. This approach recognizes that students may use AI differently depending on their individual needs. When course expectations are unclear, ask your instructor or campus support services how accessibility-related AI use fits within course policies rather than assuming the tool cannot be used at all.

Tap Into Your Peer Networks

Students are encouraged to tap into fellow students for support in strategies for using AI, especially for accessibility purposes. Often students are early adopters of new technology and may know more than their faculty or staff. Disabled students in particular can leverage their community knowledge to build their collective expertise on how AI can be used to enhance their learning and career preparation.

For Faculty

Avoid Blanket Bans on AI

Higher education faculty should avoid blanket AI restrictions that could unintentionally limit tools students use for learning and accessibility. More than 50 different tools were identified for making information accessible, reflecting the range of ways students use AI to meet their individual needs. For example, students may use Equatio or MathType to read equations aloud, Ava for real-time captioning, or Otter.ai to transcribe and revisit lectures. Because students may not disclose a disability or request formal accommodations, faculty may not always know when students use AI for accessibility. Rather than broadly restricting AI, institutions should provide clear guidance that allows students to use appropriate tools to support access and learning.

Set Clear Expectations for AI Use

Students should not be expected to determine appropriate AI use entirely on their own. Faculty should provide clear, consistent guidance on when AI is permitted in their courses, how it can be used, and students' responsibilities when using it. The course syllabus is an ideal place to document these policies. This guidance should include concrete examples within the specific academic context of each course rather than relying solely on general statements or prohibitions. Guidance should also include how tools used for accessibility purposes may be used without fear of being flagged for academic dishonesty.

Use AI to Make Course Materials More Accessible

Faculty should explore appropriate uses of AI to improve the accessibility of their course materials and activities. AI may support tasks such as transcription, summarization, plain-language explanations, alternate formats, and other forms of information access. These tools should complement and not replace existing accessibility practices and accommodations processes.

Tap the Resources of the National Disability Center

From the Campus Accessibility Spotlight Series to our online Townhalls, the National Disability Center has resources, research, and opportunities for engagement on this and related topics for faculty from a range of postsecondary institutions.

For Institutions

Reduce the Cost Barrier to AI Access

Explore ways to offset the cost of paid versions of AI tools for students, particularly when those tools support accessibility needs. Cost was the most commonly reported barrier to AI use, reaching 65% for accessibility-focused tools. Platforms vary widely in their fit with different accessibility related tasks. Institutions should consider stipends, reimbursements, or other flexible funding models that let students access tools that meet their individual needs, rather than limiting support to a single platform.

Build an Institution-Wide AI Support Program

Institutions should move beyond simply providing access to AI and establish comprehensive support for how students use these tools. An institution-wide program could include recurring AI literacy education, guidance on responsible and accessible AI use, information about available tools, and pathways to financial support. Importantly, these resources should be available to all students without requiring disability disclosure or formal documentation. This would help reach students who may not be connected to traditional disability services while also normalizing accessibility-related uses of AI across the broader student population.

Address the Need for Individualized Support

Beyond institution-wide AI literacy, there is also a specific gap around students being able to find and actually learn the tools that meet their individual access needs in their specific program or courses. For example, STEM courses can be notoriously difficult when it comes to finding accessibility tools because of complex formatting; support needed there is very different from what a general AI literacy module would cover. This may include adding staff to existing learning or tutoring centers who have experience with diverse access needs and accessibility technology, and who could offer ongoing, individualized support to help students find the most effective tools and learn to use complex supports like multi-tool workflows.

Where to Start: A Phased Roadmap

Change does not have to happen all at once. This proposed roadmap offers a practical place to start planning, with steps campuses can take now and build on over time.

NOW 0–3 MONTHS	NEXT THIS ACADEMIC YEAR	LATER ONGOING
DISABILITY & ACCESS Publish a plain-language list of AI tools that already function as accommodations (text-to-speech, alt text, note-taking) so students can use them without waiting on a formal plan.	DISABILITY & ACCESS + IT Pilot an AI-assisted accommodation-request tool. Roughly half of students never disclose at all; reducing paperwork friction is a direct value add for students.	ALL OFFICES Assign clear, shared ownership of “AI + accessibility” on campus, such as across Centers for Teaching and Learning, Disability & Access, and IT. This may include adding financial support for students who need funds to obtain AI tools for accessibility.
ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP Distribute a syllabus-ready AI use statement template. “Not allowed in class” is a top-3 barrier for both groups (40%+) and most of that is unclear policy and documentation.	LIBRARY + ACADEMIC TECH Coordinate AI tool use for file remediation, captions for videos, note-taking for classes, and online database navigation.	DISABILITY & ACCESS Develop internal feedback about the intersection of AI and accommodations used for students who receive services and supports. Collaborate with other units to provide individual support to students seeking to learn how to use specific tools to meet complex access needs.
IT / ACADEMIC TECH Identify and license 2–3 free or discounted AI tools campus-wide. Cost is the #1 barrier for both groups (48–58% across every domain).	ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP Build a short, required AI-fluency module into orientation, paired with honor code guidance. The same self-teaching gap (90%+) shows up for faculty in the Access Leads to Achievement: A National Report on Faculty Accessibility Practices .	CAREER SERVICES Disabled students are nearly 2x as likely to say AI affects their career goals (21% vs. 12%). Build AI career-readiness guidance into career services, not just academic support.

AI and Accessibility Student Survey: Survey of U.S. Postsecondary Students

The National Disability Center developed and collected data with the AI and Accessibility Student Survey in Spring 2026. A summary of study results is provided here. The AI and Accessibility survey was designed to explore an emerging area of student experience and establish a clearer picture of how students with and without disabilities are currently using AI, where barriers exist, and where additional support may be needed. Unlike previous National Reports, this measure has not been fully validated using standard psychometric procedures, and should be considered exploratory at this time.

A total of 202 eligible participants completed the survey, and 188 provided data for comparisons of AI use between students with and without disabilities. Participants were based in the U.S., 18 or older, and currently enrolled in technical programs, community colleges, or four-year institutions.

Percentages shown in charts were rounded to the nearest whole number when applicable. As a result, totals may be slightly above or below 100%. For questions that allowed multiple responses, percentages may also total more than 100% because participants could select more than one answer.

Demographics of Students Surveyed

Students represented a range of educational experiences and backgrounds, including both disabled and non-disabled students. This sample provides insight into how students with different experiences are using AI and navigating accessibility in higher education.

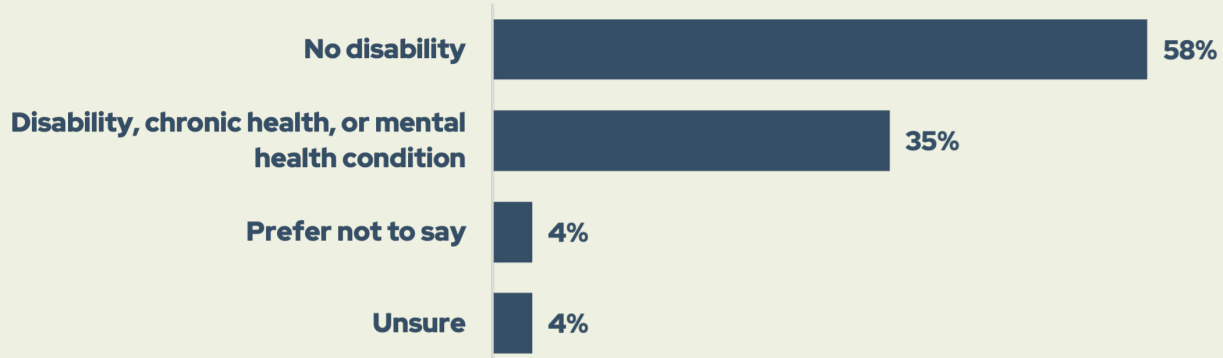
Disability Status

Student participants reported their disability status, with 35% indicating they have a disability, chronic health condition, or mental health condition. More than half of participants, 58%, reported no disability. A small proportion selected unsure at 4% or prefer not to say at 4%.



“I have dyscalculia, so I use AI to help explain chemistry and math problems in a way more accessible to me. I also use them to explain complex topics, create study analogies, and break down my translation errors.”

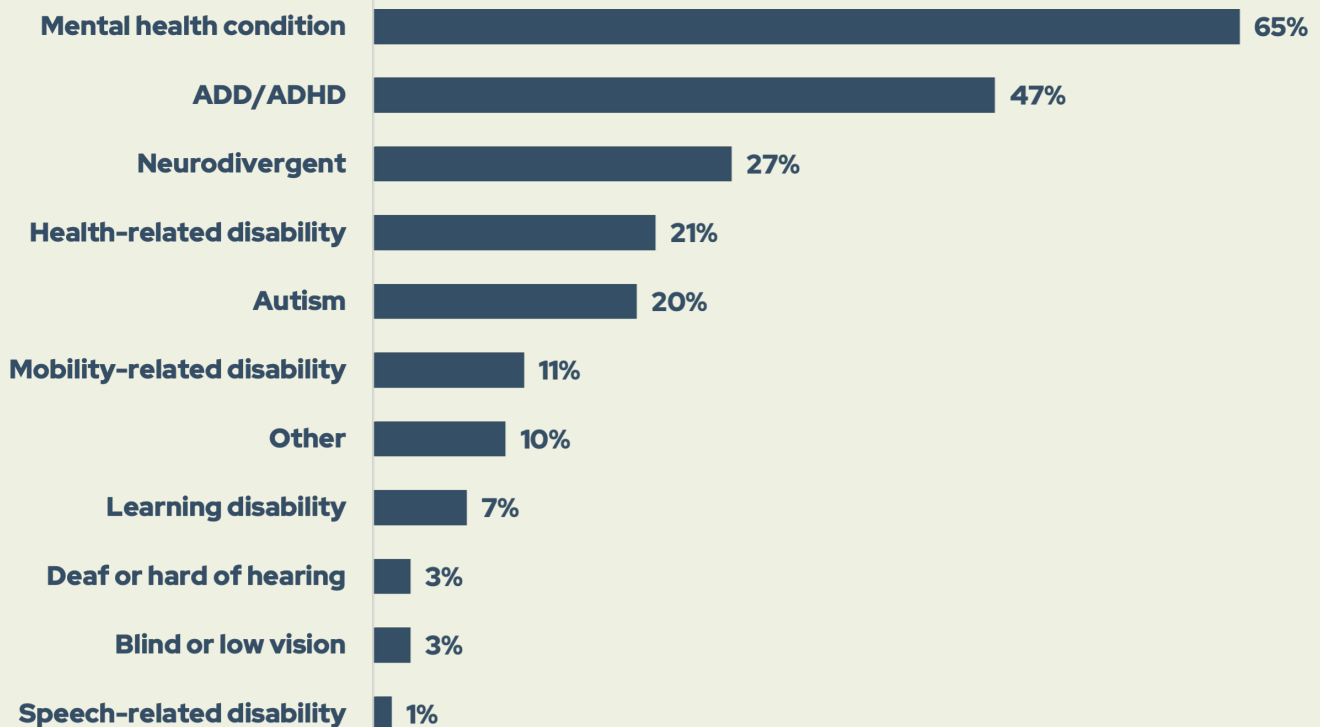
Disability Status



Disability Types

Disabled students reported a range of disability types, and participants could select more than one. Mental health conditions were the most commonly reported at 65%, followed by ADD/ADHD at 47% and neurodivergence at 27%. Health-related disabilities and autism were each reported by about one in five disabled students. Mobility, learning, sensory, and speech-related disabilities were reported less often.

Disability Types



AI and Accessibility Survey Results

AI Use and Accessibility Are Part of the Student Learning Experience

Students with and without disabilities responded to the AI and Accessibility Student Survey, providing a comparison of how students use AI tools across their learning experiences. Their responses offer insight into how students use AI for academic tasks and accessibility, as well as the barriers and supports that may shape whether students can use these tools effectively.

The figures represent the percentage of students who reported using AI for specific tasks within each learning domain. Students could select all uses that applied. When students selected a task, they were also asked which specific AI tools or programs they used and provided their examples via open-ended responses.

In addition, disabled students were asked how well AI tools met their access needs. Responses were measured on a 1 to 3 scale, with options that included:

1. Not at all meets my access needs
2. Somewhat meets my access needs
3. Very much meets my access needs
4. Does not apply, not relevant to my access needs. Not applicable figures were excluded from the average scores in this analysis.

For a full set of the survey items, see the companion document **Student Survey: AI and Accessibility in Higher Education**.

Key AI and Accessibility Student Survey Components

For the purpose of this report, AI use is summarized across **four learning domains** that reflect different ways students may use AI to support academic work and access.

The first domain, **Gathering Information**, examines how students use AI to find and collect information. These items include web navigation, research and information retrieval, AI agents or scripts for tasks, and AI-generated statistical analyses.

The second domain, **Understanding Information**, focuses on how students use AI to process, interpret, and learn from information. These uses include note-taking and summarizing, plain-language rewriting, tutoring and adaptive learning, exam preparation, vocabulary support, language translation, and math or statistics support.

The third domain, **Making Information Accessible**, focuses specifically on uses that may improve access to information. These include speech-to-text, text-to-speech, alt text and image descriptions, file conversion, live transcription and captions, and tools that read mathematical equations aloud.

The fourth domain, **Writing and Organizing Information**, examines how AI supports students as they develop and organize their work. These items include writing outlines, editing and revision, scheduling, planning and to-do lists, and= formatting references or tables.

Across all four domains, students were also asked about **barriers** that may affect their use of AI, including:

- Cost of paid versions
- Course restrictions
- Inaccessible tool interfaces
- Difficulty learning or using tools
- Concerns that AI may limit learning
- Concerns about how others may perceive AI use

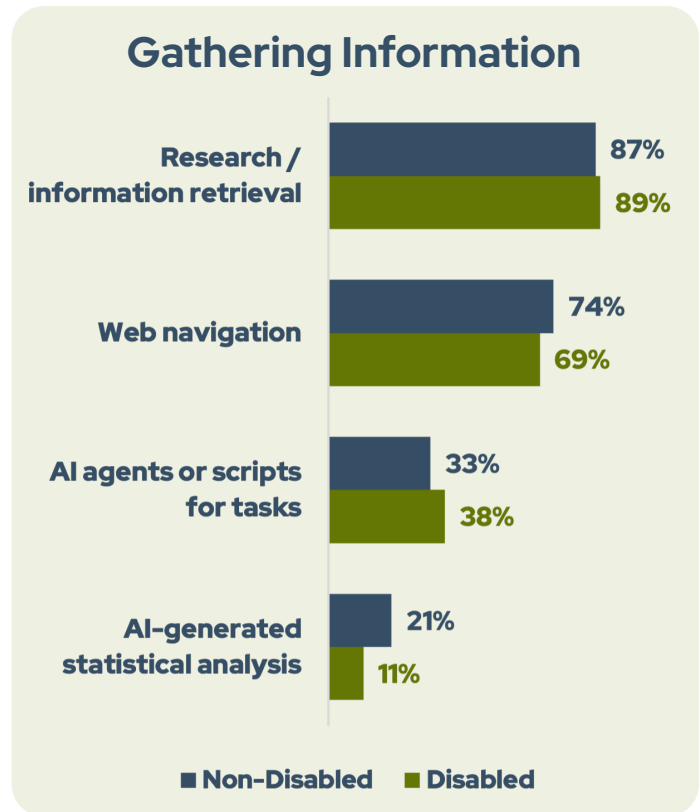
The survey also examined how students learned to use AI, whether they combined multiple AI tools to complete a task, and their overall reasons for avoiding AI. Open-ended responses provided additional insight into the specific tools students use and the experiences influencing their decisions.

Gathering Information

The first set of items focused on how students use AI to find and gather information for academic tasks.

Research and information retrieval was the most common use for both groups, reported by 89% of disabled students and 87% of non-disabled students. Web navigation was also common, reported by 69% of disabled students and 74% of non-disabled students. Fewer students used AI agents or scripts for tasks, while AI-generated statistical analysis was the least commonly reported use in this domain.

AI tool use for Gathering Information was generally similar between disabled and non-disabled students. Disabled students reported somewhat higher use of AI agents or scripts for tasks, while non-disabled students reported higher use of web navigation and AI-generated statistical analysis.



No items in this domain reached statistical significance between the two comparison groups.

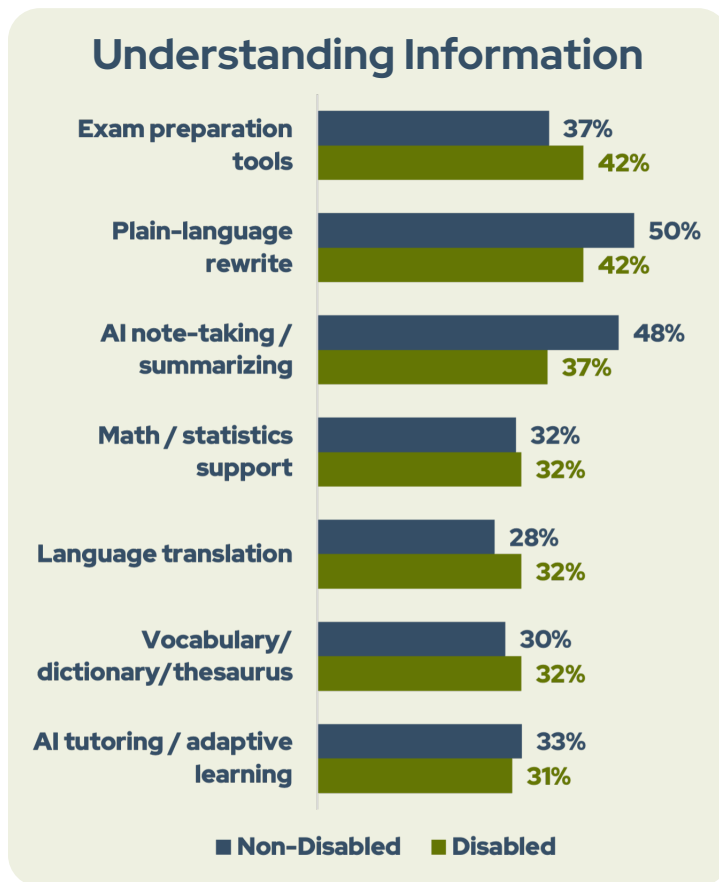
These findings suggest that AI has become a common tool for gathering information among both disabled and non-disabled students, particularly for research and information retrieval. The similar patterns across groups indicate that disability status alone may not substantially shape how students use AI for these tasks. However, the lower use of more specialized applications, such as AI agents, scripts, and statistical analysis, may point to opportunities for institutions to help students move beyond common AI uses and develop a broader understanding of the tools available to support research and academic work.



“Claude has mostly replaced Google as my search engine. I do cross-reference information, but AI can help find better documents.”

Understanding Information

The second set of items focused on how students use AI to understand, interpret, and learn from information.



AI tool use for Understanding Information varied across the different learning activities. Non-disabled students reported higher use of AI for note-taking and summarizing (48% vs. 37% of disabled students) and for plain-language rewriting (50% vs. 42%). Disabled students reported somewhat higher use of exam preparation tools, language translation, and vocabulary support. Math and statistics support was nearly identical across the two groups.

No items in this domain reached statistical significance, though disabled students trended lower on note-taking and summarizing and higher on exam preparation tools.

These findings suggest that disabled and non-disabled students are using AI to support understanding in many of the same ways, but the tasks they turn to AI for may differ. Disabled students' somewhat higher use of exam preparation, translation, and vocabulary tools may reflect the value of AI for breaking down or reinforcing information in specific learning contexts. At the same time, their lower use of note-taking, summarizing, and plain-language rewriting suggests that students with disabilities are not necessarily using tools commonly associated with reducing information-processing demands more often. This pattern highlights an opportunity to better understand whether differences in awareness, access, cost, course policies, or tool fit influence which AI supports students choose to use.



"I use it when professors post images without descriptions so I can understand what's in charts and diagrams in my courses."

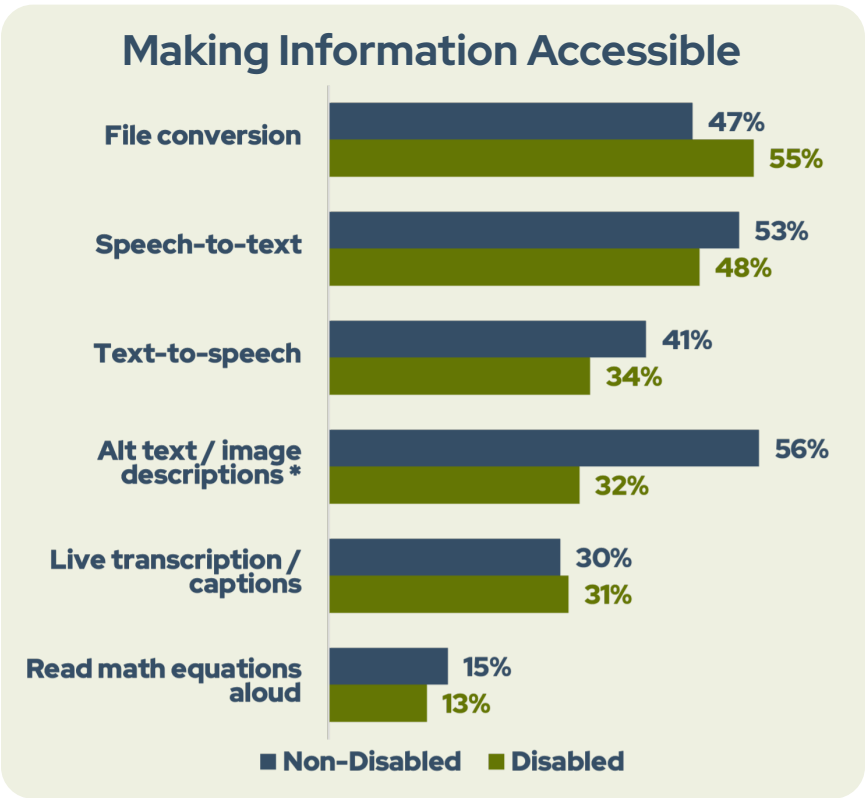
Making Information Accessible

The third set of items focused on how students use AI to make information more accessible, including tools that change how information is presented, accessed, or communicated.

Use varied across the different accessibility-related tasks. Disabled students reported higher use of file conversion (55% vs. 47% of non-disabled students) and similar use of live transcription and captions. Non-disabled students reported higher use of speech-to-text, text-to-speech, and tools that read math equations aloud. The largest difference was for alt text and image descriptions, reported by 32% of disabled students compared with 56% of non-disabled students.

Alt text and image descriptions were the only item in this domain with a statistically significant difference in use between disabled and non-disabled students ($p = .003$).

These findings suggest that disabled students do not necessarily use AI tools associated with accessibility more often than their non-disabled peers, and that it may vary by tool. While disabled students reported greater use of file conversion, they were substantially less likely to report using AI for alt text and image descriptions. Further exploration is needed to understand why such a large gap exists and whether students who could benefit from these AI-supported accessibility functions are aware of and able to use them.



* Statistically significant difference in use between disabled and non-disabled students ($p = .003$)



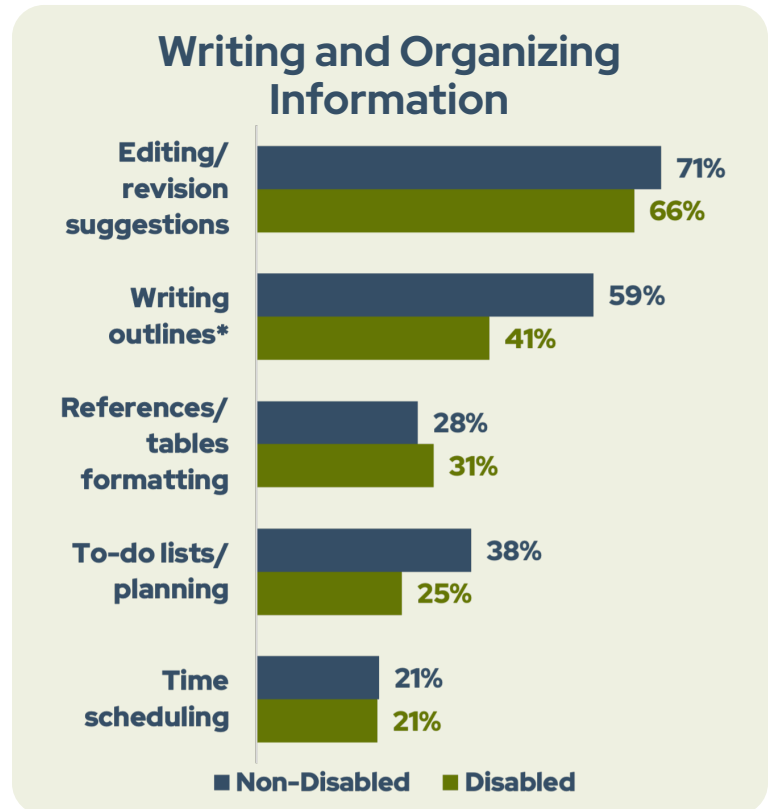
“I use AI tools like Be My Eyes, Claro Read, or Voice Access to navigate websites more easily, especially when reading, accessing menus, or interacting with online content that isn’t fully accessible.”



Writing and Organizing Information

The fourth set of items focused on how students use AI to support writing, editing, planning, and organizing academic work.

Editing and revision suggestions were the most commonly reported use for both groups, at 66% of disabled students and 71% of non-disabled students. The largest difference was in writing outlines, reported by 41% of disabled students compared with 59% of non-disabled students. Non-disabled students also reported higher use for to-do lists and planning, while time scheduling was nearly identical across groups. Disabled students reported slightly higher use for formatting references and tables.



* Statistically significant difference in use between disabled and non-disabled students ($p = .024$)

Writing outlines was the only item in this domain with a statistically significant difference between disabled and non-disabled students ($p = .024$).

These findings suggest that students in both groups commonly use AI for editing and revising, but disabled students may use it less often for tasks that support planning and structuring academic work. The significant gap in writing-outline use is particularly notable because organizing ideas and breaking larger assignments into manageable steps can support students throughout the writing process. Like the unexpected difference in alt text and image descriptions, the significantly lower use among disabled students raises questions about awareness, access, tool fit, or how students perceive AI's role in these tasks.

Further exploration could help identify what contributes to this difference and whether students are missing opportunities to use AI in ways that support organization and academic work.

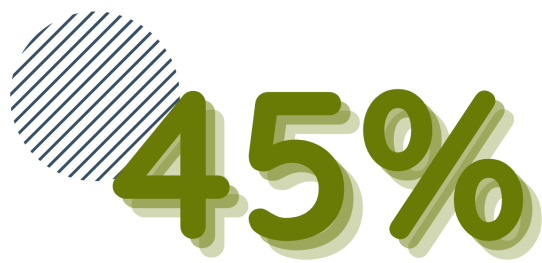


“Since I am autistic, I struggle with writing emails that sound friendly. I ask the AI to reword my emails or suggest new phrasing so that I don’t sound blunt or rude.”

The Student AI Experience Across Learning Domains

The four learning domains provide insight into the specific ways students use AI, but students' experiences with these tools do not always fit neatly within a single domain. Students may combine tools and move between tasks as they research, understand information, make content accessible, write, and organize their work.

This overlap was especially apparent in students' use of multi-tool workflows. Students described workflows that moved from research to summarization and drafting or from coding and data analysis to writing. Nearly half of non-disabled students (45%) reported combining multiple AI tools to complete a single task, compared with 27% of disabled students, **a statistically significant difference ($p = .040$)**.



Non-disabled students reported multi-tool workflows



Disabled students who were asked said AI tools at least somewhat met their access needs, across the four domains

AI also appears to provide meaningful access support across these different uses. Among disabled students who were asked about their access needs, **82% to 92% reported that AI tools at least somewhat met those needs across the four learning domains.**

The following findings look across the four domains to better understand the broader conditions surrounding student AI use, including **barriers and reasons for avoiding AI, how students learn to use these tools, and the perceived impact of AI on future career goals**. Together, these findings help show not only what students are doing with AI, but also what may enable, limit, or influence that use.

Barriers to AI Use

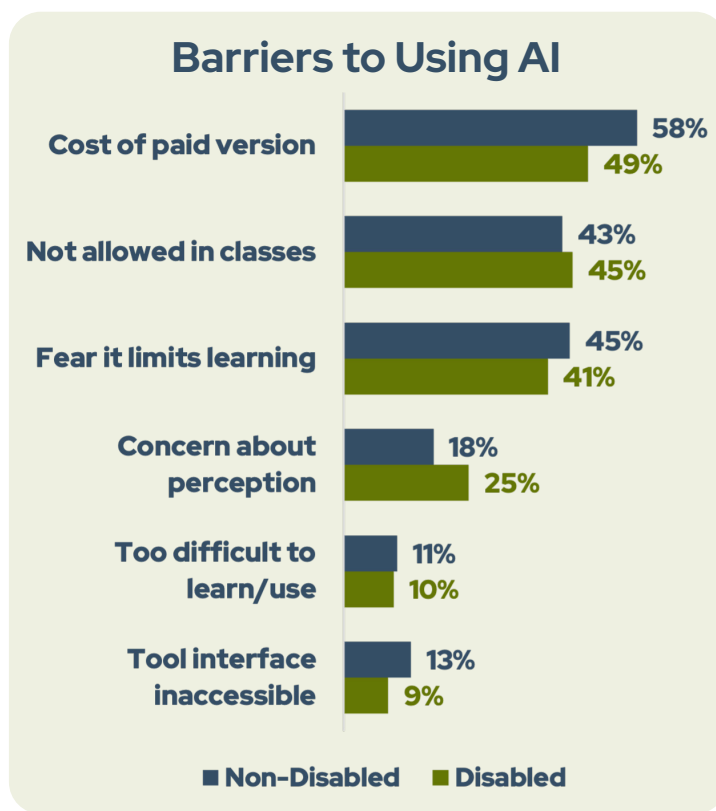
Cost of paid versions was the most commonly reported barrier, at 49% for disabled students and 58% for non-disabled students. Classroom restrictions were also common for both groups, reported at 45% and 43%, respectively. Concerns that AI could limit learning

followed closely, while inaccessible interfaces and difficulty learning or using AI tools were reported less often.

Disabled students reported greater concern about how others might perceive their AI use, at 25% compared with 18% of non-disabled students.

Because these results combine barrier mentions across the four learning domains, statistical significance was not calculated for the combined percentages. None of the individual domain-level barrier comparisons reached statistical significance.

These findings point to **cost and classroom policy as the most consistent barriers to AI use**, rather than difficulty using the technology itself. For institutions, this suggests that expanding access may depend as much on affordable tools and clear expectations for appropriate AI use as it does on teaching students how to use AI. The higher concern about others' perceptions among disabled students also raises questions about whether stigma or uncertainty may influence how comfortable some students feel using AI as a learning or accessibility support.



“I fear being accused of academic dishonesty for using AI; that my writing could be flagged as AI or plagiarism.”



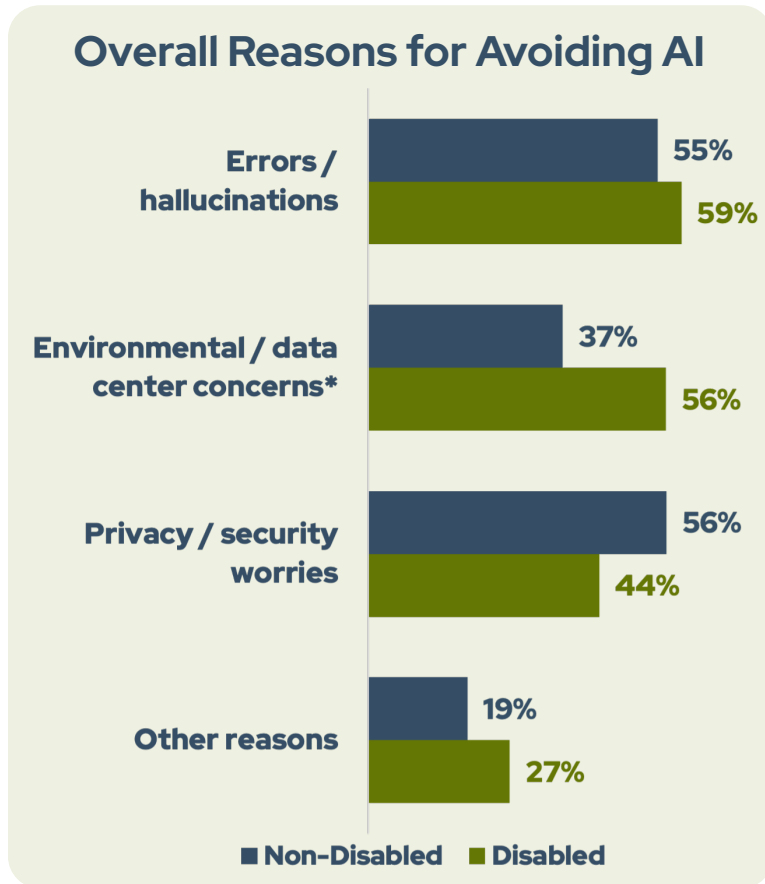
“I do not have unlimited access to these image generators and they eat a ton of tokens; oftentimes the graphics need lots of tweaking or redirecting to be useful.”

Overall Reasons for Avoiding AI

While examples of AI tool use was the main focus of this survey, we also explored reasons why students may elect not to use AI. Errors and hallucinations were the most commonly reported reason disabled students avoided AI, at 59%, followed closely by environmental



and data center concerns at 56%. Among non-disabled students, privacy and security concerns were reported most often at 56%, followed by errors and hallucinations at 55%.



* Statistically significant difference in use between disabled and non-disabled students ($p = .013$)

The largest difference between groups was environmental and data center concerns, reported by 56% of disabled students compared with 37% of non-disabled students.

Environmental and data center concerns were the only statistically significant difference among the overall reasons for avoiding AI ($p = .013$).

These findings show that students are weighing concerns about AI alongside its potential benefits. Accuracy remains a prominent concern for both groups, but disabled students were significantly more likely to consider AI's environmental impact when deciding whether to use it. Non-disabled students, meanwhile,

reported greater concern about privacy and security. These differences suggest that decisions about AI use may be shaped by broader values and risks, not simply whether a tool is useful or available.



“A lot of the information is false or not completely true so if you take it at face value, you’d be wrong. You must double check everything because sometimes it just summarizes things incorrectly or doesn’t understand the nuance in a question.”

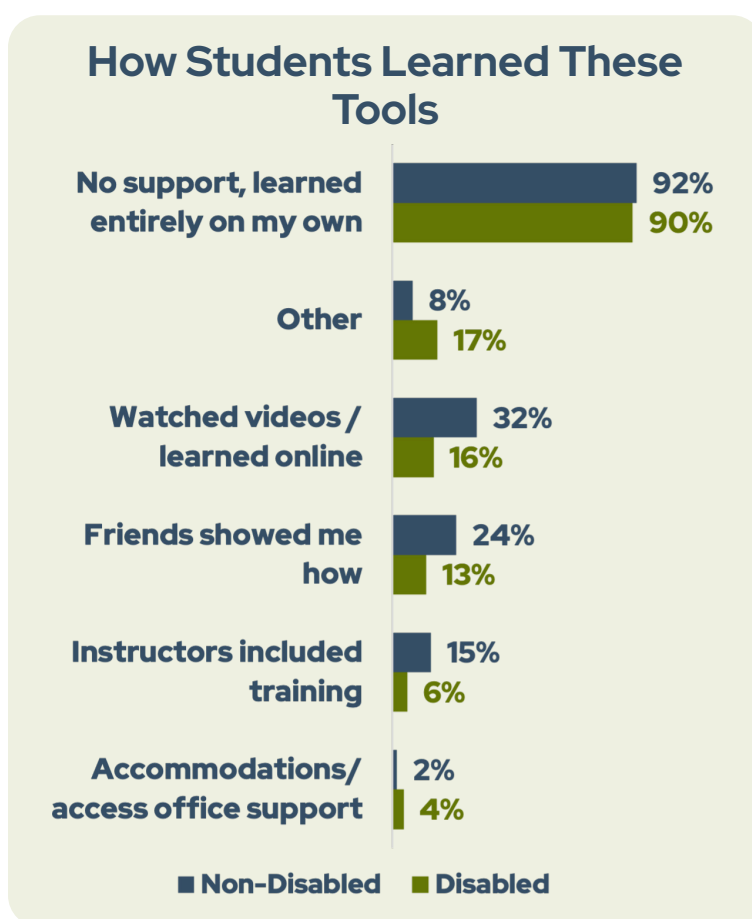


“I found that they would hallucinate when they couldn’t view the article (paywall or PDF) and give entirely false information instead of saying they can’t read the article.”

How Students Learned to Use AI

More than 90% of both disabled and non-disabled students reported learning to use AI entirely on their own, making self-teaching by far the most common approach for both groups. Non-disabled students were more likely to supplement that learning through online videos, friends, or instructor training. For example, 32% of non-disabled students reported learning through videos or online resources compared with 16% of disabled students.

Formal institutional support was uncommon. Only 6% of disabled students and 15% of non-disabled students reported receiving AI training from instructors. Support from the office responsible for accommodations and access was even less common, at 4% and 2%, respectively.

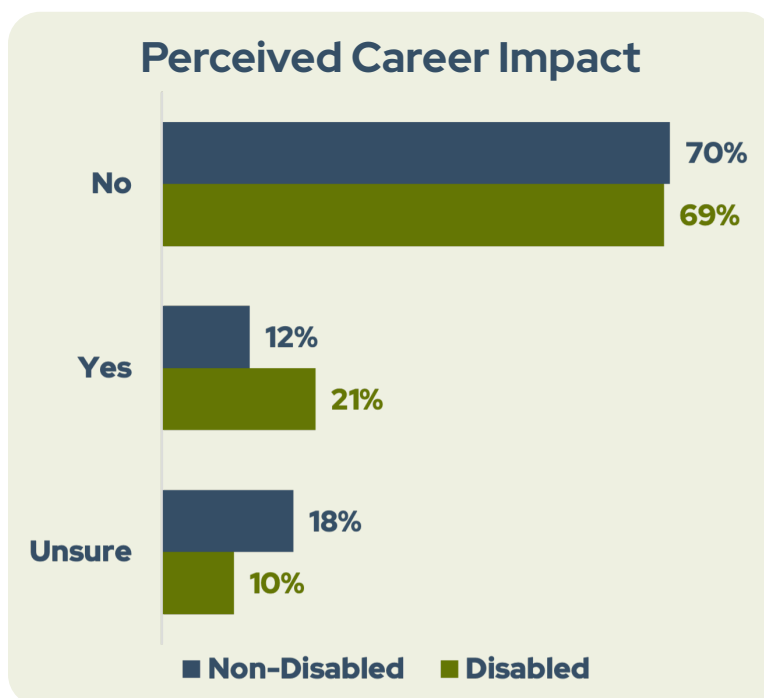


No items in this domain reached statistical significance between the two comparison groups.

These findings reveal a substantial gap between how widely students are using AI and the support available to help them use it. Students in both groups are largely navigating AI on their own, with relatively little guidance from instructors or other campus resources. The lower use of supplemental learning sources among disabled students also raises questions about whether students have equal opportunities to build on what they learn independently. As AI becomes more integrated into academic work, institutions can provide clearer, more consistent guidance that reaches students without requiring them to seek it out on their own.

Perceived Career Impact

Most students in both groups reported that AI had not affected their post-graduation plans or career goals, at 69% of disabled students and 70% of non-disabled students. However, disabled students were nearly twice as likely to report that AI had affected their career goals, at 21% compared with 12% of non-disabled students. Non-disabled students were more likely to be unsure (18%) than disabled students (10%).



Open-ended responses reflected both opportunity and concern. Some students described AI as an important career skill or a tool that could support productivity, while others expressed uncertainty about how AI may change job expectations and future career opportunities.

Because these results combine open-ended responses across the four learning domains, statistical significance was not calculated for the combined percentages.

These findings suggest that AI is already influencing how some students think about life after college, even though most students have not changed their plans because of it. The higher percentage among disabled students is particularly notable and may indicate that AI's potential role in future work carries different considerations for this group. Students' responses also show that perceived career impact is not necessarily positive or negative. AI can represent new opportunities while also creating uncertainty about the skills and expectations students may encounter in the workforce.



"I'm a graphic design major and a lot of people use generative AI to create designs for them instead of hiring designers."



"Was originally trying to be a coder, computer scientist, but after all the AI stuff, while I was still in my 2nd-3rd year in university, decided to go to IT so I could focus on security instead."



Conclusion

The student experiences and perspectives captured in this report highlight how access, institutional support, and emerging concerns shape AI use in higher education. Students with and without disabilities already use AI for a wide range of academic and accessibility-related tasks. However, because instructors, accessibility offices, and other campus resources provide limited guidance, most students are learning to use these tools on their own.

Furthermore, the results reveal that students with disabilities were not more likely to use AI, even for accessibility-related tasks, which they often reported using less. Yet many disabled students reported that the AI tools they use support their access needs, describing AI as a tool for improving access, participation, and their overall learning experiences. These insights show that students who may benefit substantially from AI as a learning and accessibility support are not necessarily using it at the same rate or with adequate guidance.

Additionally, the findings highlight that meaningful AI use requires more than simply making tools available. Students must consider cost, accuracy, course policies, and environmental concerns. Some students also expressed worries about how others perceive their AI use and whether AI could limit their learning.

Institutions must look beyond academic integrity and recognize AI as an accessibility, student success, and career-readiness issue that requires shared responsibility, tools, and support. This includes clear and readily available guidance, affordable access, flexible policies, and support that does not depend on disability disclosure. Course guidance should incorporate clear examples of AI usage, including when and how it is appropriate. Ultimately, these uses must integrate access supports to ensure reasonable accommodations are not lost within broad AI policies.

Recommended Reading

While not a comprehensive list, the following readings provided important perspectives that informed the development of the AI and Accessibility survey, the student interview protocols, and this national report. National Disability Center researchers focused on research findings from the last 10 years, as well as the legal foundation for accessibility in postsecondary education.

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15. Oyarzun, B., Kim, S. Y., Bong, J. Y., & Maxwell, D. (2026). University instructor’s generative AI perceptions and use. *American Journal of Distance Education*.
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17. Waldon, P. (2026, January 5). Widespread AI misuse means higher ed must rethink assessment. *Cornell Chronicle*.
18. Zhao, X., Cox, A., & Chen, X. (2025). The use of generative AI by students with disabilities in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 66, Article 101014.



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Research Survey Companion

In addition to this national report, there is a separate companion document for researchers, **Student Survey: AI and Accessibility in Higher Education**. The research companion includes the complete survey flow, with survey questions, response options, and the branching and display logic used during survey administration.

nationaldisabilitycenter.org/AI

Suggested Citation

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