The Algorithm at the Gate: Exploring Ethical Tensions in Graduate Admissions

Reginald M. Gooch and Sara B. Haviland

ETS Research Institute, ETS, Princeton, New Jersey, United States

Abstract

As generative artificial intelligence (AI) rapidly reshapes how information is created, shared, and evaluated, graduate admissions professionals are confronting new questions about its role in recruitment and selection. This report draws upon ETS's February 2025 pulse survey of NAGAP members to explore how graduate enrollment management (GEM) professionals are navigating this evolving landscape. We present their perspectives on the acceptable use of AI in graduate admissions—both by institutions and by applicants—and highlight emerging norms and tensions. The report concludes with a discussion on the implications of these findings for GEM policies and practice.

Introduction

Since 2021, ETS has partnered with NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, to survey admissions professionals and capture their perspectives on a rapidly evolving field (see Gooch & Haviland, 2025; Haviland et al., 2023; Haviland et al., 2022). The February 2025 survey included a focus on the role of generative AI in graduate admissions, a topic that has gained urgency as AI tools become increasingly embedded in both applicant behavior and institutional practices.

In 2024-2025, AI usage accelerated across higher education, raising new questions about its appropriate use in recruitment, application preparation, and admissions decision-making. Graduate applicants now have access to AI tools that can assist with researching graduate programs, drafting personal statements, and preparing application materials. At the same time, GEM professionals are exploring AI-driven solutions to aid in recruitment, communication, and other facets of enrollment management. Despite the growing use of AI, it is unclear whether guidance at higher education institutions has kept up with the pace of change, or even what the current state of institutional adoption policies is for AI use (Jin et al., 2025). Admissions is a special use case of AI, and it is unlikely at this point in time that many

institutions have AI usage policies specific to guiding the use of AI in graduate enrollment management, as most existing policies tend to focus on academic use (see McDonald et al., 2024). Overall, technology leaders across higher education have expressed concern that their institutions have not been adeptly handling the rapid rise of AI to date (Palmer, 2025).

In this context of uncertainty and innovation, ETS and NAGAP surveyed GEM professionals to understand their perceptions of what constitutes ethical and unethical use of AI, both by applicants and graduate programs. We also asked respondents to anticipate the future impact of AI on the graduate admissions process and to self-assess their AI literacy, defined by the frequency with which they engage with AI tools and their confidence in understanding AI bias and its implications in an effort to determine what are GEM professionals' current experiences around AI in admissions and what kinds of AI use GEM professionals perceive as ethical or unethical for graduate programs and for applicants to graduate school.

Methods

Survey

This report presents results from the February 2025 administration of the ETS/NAGAP survey of GEM professionals. Since the initial survey in 2021 (see Haviland et al., 2022), each iteration has tracked the evolution of testing policies in graduate programs across the United States as various disruptive events have affected higher education in the U.S., such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) Supreme Court cases. Each survey has also focused on a special topic, including perceptions of holistic admissions strategies (see Haviland et al., 2023) and perceptions around the consideration of race/ethnicity in admissions and funding decisions before and after the U.S. Supreme Court SFFA rulings on affirmative action (Gooch & Haviland, 2025).

The current survey focused in part on GEM professionals' viewpoints on the role AI should play in graduate admissions and its likely effects in the near to medium term. An online survey was distributed to members of NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management via email and was advertised in the association's weekly newsletter in February 2025. To honor the spirit of the pulse survey and minimize the time burden on respondents,

questions were targeted to respondents based on prior selections in the survey (a "skip pattern"); therefore, the survey was between 23 and 31 questions for each respondent.

Participants

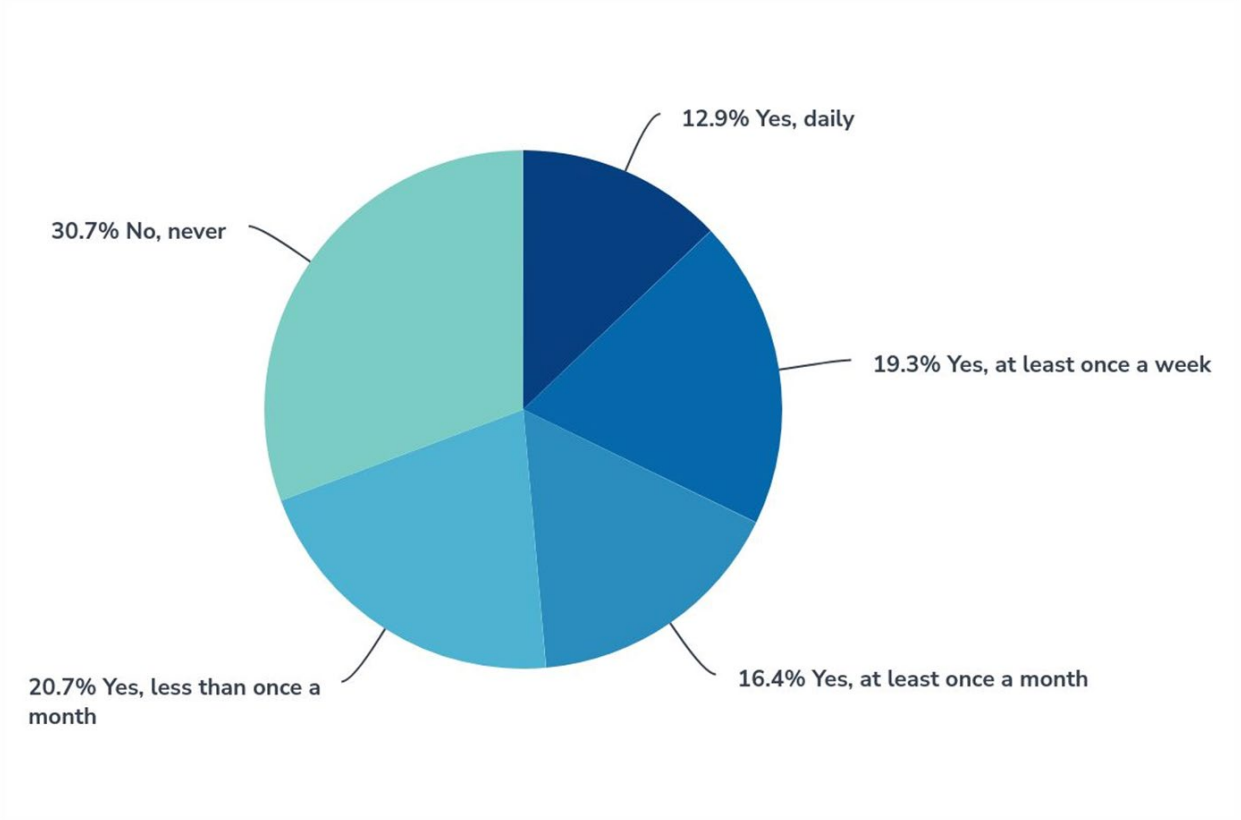
Respondents to the survey were members of NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management. The survey was distributed to all NAGAP members (N = 1,207) in February 2025. A total of 206 respondents completed at least part of the survey, with 122 completing the full survey. Given the skip patterns noted above, in this publication, we report results for all respondents who completed any given survey section, rather than reporting only results for those who completed the full survey. See the appendix for additional details.

Results

Frequency of AI Tool Use

Respondents were asked to self-rate their frequency of AI use (Figure 1). Results indicate broad variation in the frequency with which respondents use AI in their role. Respondents can be split into two roughly even groups — those who indicated that they use AI tools regularly (monthly or more frequently) and those who do not use AI regularly (less than once a month or never). Looked at another way, respondents can be divided into three groups of roughly equal size – those who never use AI in their role (30.7%), those who are infrequent users or who have experimented with AI in their role (20.7% less than once a month and 16.4% at least once a month) and those who are frequent users (19.3% at least once a week and 12.9% daily).

Figure 1. Frequency of AI Use in Current Role (*n* = 125)

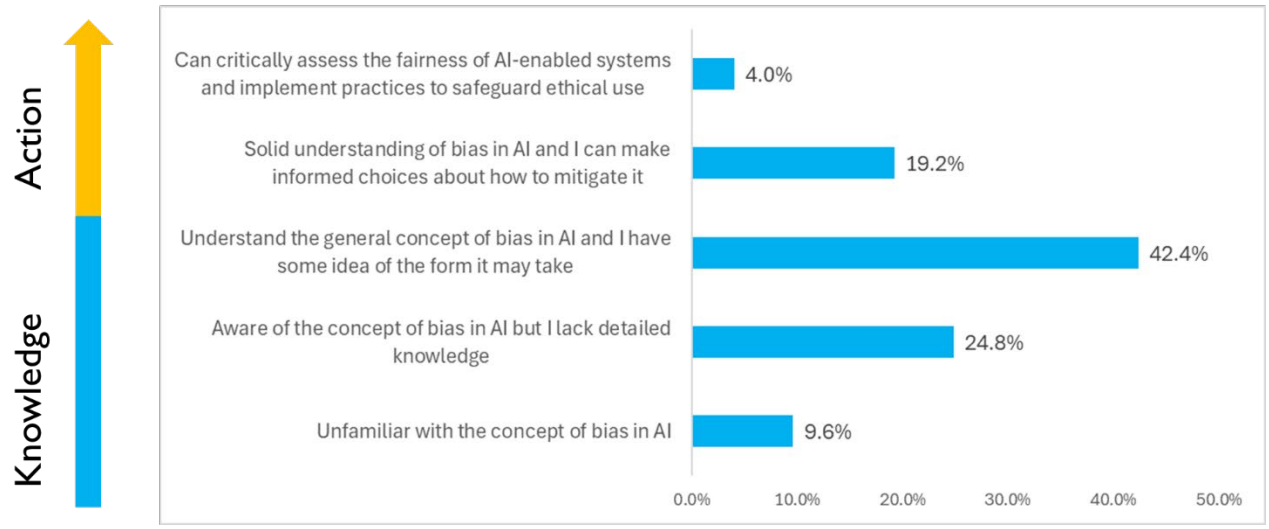


Understanding of Bias in AI

A second facet of AI literacy we asked respondents about was their knowledge of bias in AI, a key component of AI literacy (see Sparks et al., 2024). Respondents self-rated on a scale beginning with unfamiliarity with the concept of bias in AI, moving through understanding of bias in AI, and at the highest levels indicating the ability to take informed action based on understanding of AI (see Figure 2). Results are displayed on a continuum from knowledge to action, representing the development of skills from the ability to recognize and understand to the ability to apply and evaluate (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Similar to results on frequency of use of AI, respondents indicated a range of understanding of bias in AI. Of note, 90.4% indicated at least some idea of the concept of bias in AI, indicating that AI bias is an issue that respondents are generally aware of. Yet less than a quarter (23.2%) felt confident enough to use their understanding to inform actions and decision-making.

Figure 2. Understanding of Bias in AI Self-Report (*n* = 125)



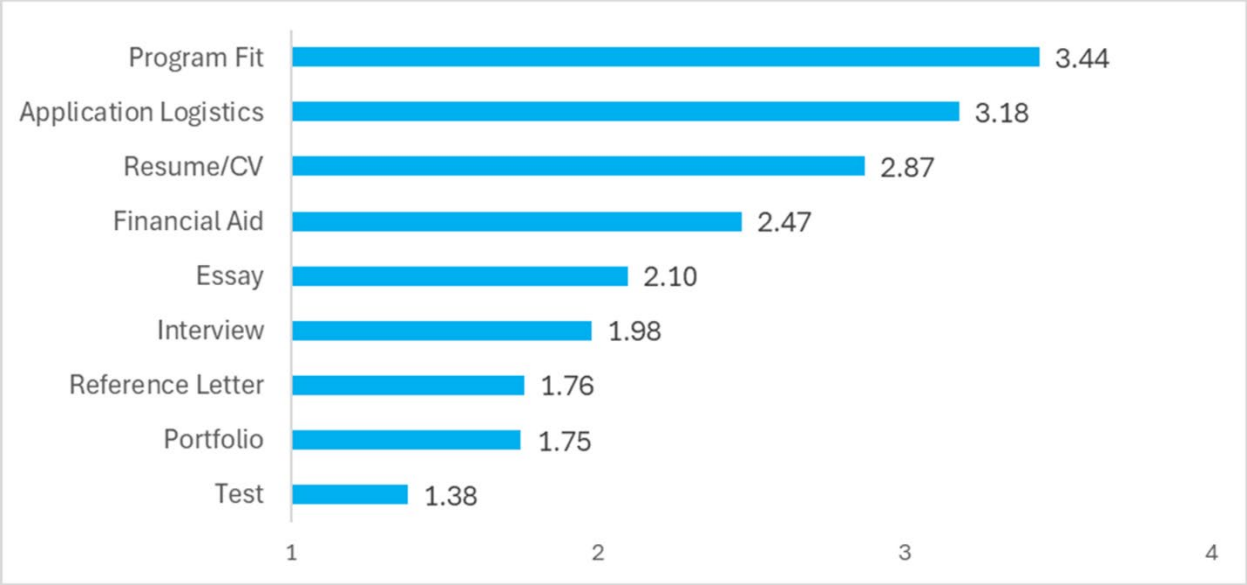
Perceptions on Ethics of AI Use Cases

AI Use by Graduate Applicants

Respondents were asked to think about a variety of ways that graduate applicants might use AI and to rate how ethical AI use would be in in those situations. Respondents were presented a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (clearly unethical) to 4 (clearly ethical) on which they made their judgements. Respondents also had the option to choose *unsure* as an answer option. Average responses are given in Figure 3 (responses of *unsure* were not calculated in the average). Responses with mean of over 3.0 were rated between *likely ethical* and *clearly ethical* on average. Responses with an average below 2.0 were rated between *likely unethical* and *clearly unethical* on average.

Applicant uses of AI which respondents most often perceived as ethical were use of AI to research program fit/requirements (3.44) and use of AI for application logistics/processes (3.18). Use cases which respondents least often perceived as ethical included use of AI for reference letters (1.76), portfolios/work samples (1.75) and for admissions tests (1.38). The use of AI which provoked the most uncertainty (16% of respondents) was use of AI for financial aid application, which also received an average rating of 2.47, indicating it was rated between *likely ethical* and *likely unethical* on average.

Figure 3. Applicant Uses of AI Perceived as Ethical (*n* = 140)

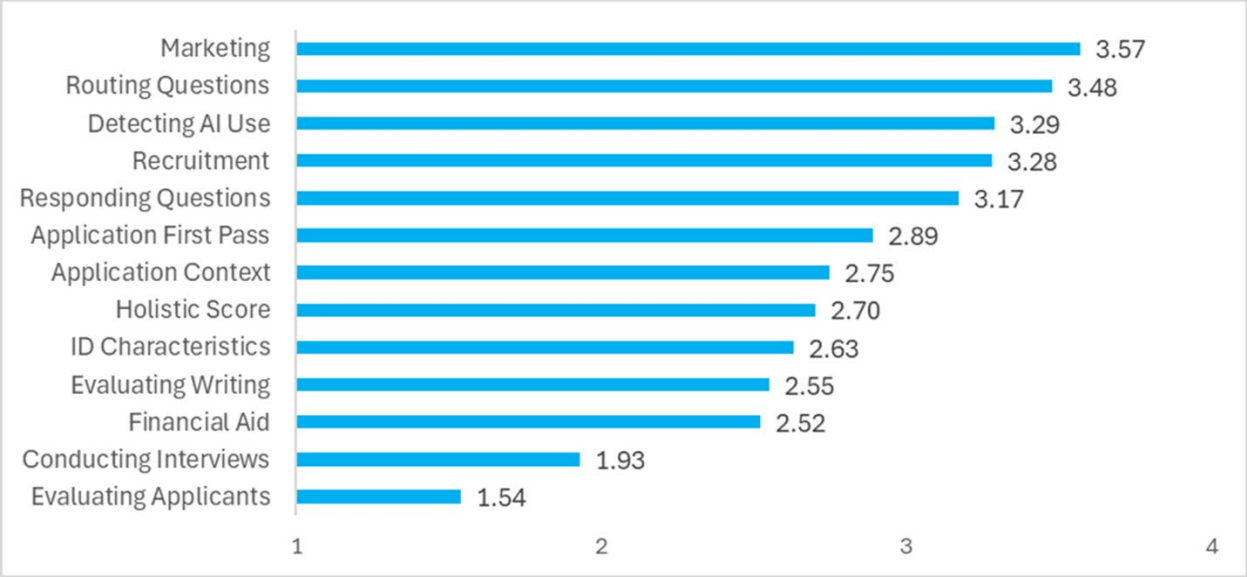


AI Use by Graduate Programs

Similarly, respondents were asked to rate their perceptions of how likely they believe various uses of AI by graduate programs are to be ethical. The same four-point Likert-type scale was used, with an option to select *unsure*. Results are displayed in Figure 4.

Program uses of AI rated as *likely ethical* or *clearly ethical* on average (i.e., 3.0 or higher) included use of AI for drafting and sending marketing materials (3.57); routing student questions to university staff or faculty (3.48); detecting AI use by applicants in preparing application materials (3.29); identifying students to target for recruitment (3.28); and responding directly to questions from applicants (3.17). Uses which were rated as *likely unethical* or *clearly unethical* on average (2.0 or lower) included use of AI for conducting interviews (1.93) and for making decisions about overall applicant quality, without further human evaluation of the applicant (1.54). Respondents showed a high degree of uncertainty around use of AI to understand the context of an application (20.8% *unsure*), to identify student characteristics from application materials (20.8% *unsure*), and to conduct interviews (20.0% *unsure*).

Figure 4. Graduate Program Uses of AI Perceived as Ethical (*n* = 140)



Note. AI use categories in the figure are shortened from the survey. To see full survey wording, see Table A1.

The Future of AI in Graduate Admissions

Respondents were asked to make predictions of how AI will affect graduate admissions by agreeing or disagreeing with statements about the effects of AI over the next 2-4 years (i.e., 2027-2029). Overall, respondents agreed with the statement that AI will make it easier to evaluate candidates (Figure 5). At the same time, respondents disagreed that AI will make admissions fairer over the next 2-4 years (Figure 6). Responses on these two items were almost mirror opposites, with 72.8% either agreeing or strongly agreeing that AI will make it easier to evaluate candidates, and 71.2% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that AI will make admissions fairer.

Figure 5. In the Next 2 – 4 Years, AI Will Make It Easier to Evaluate Candidates (*n* = 125)

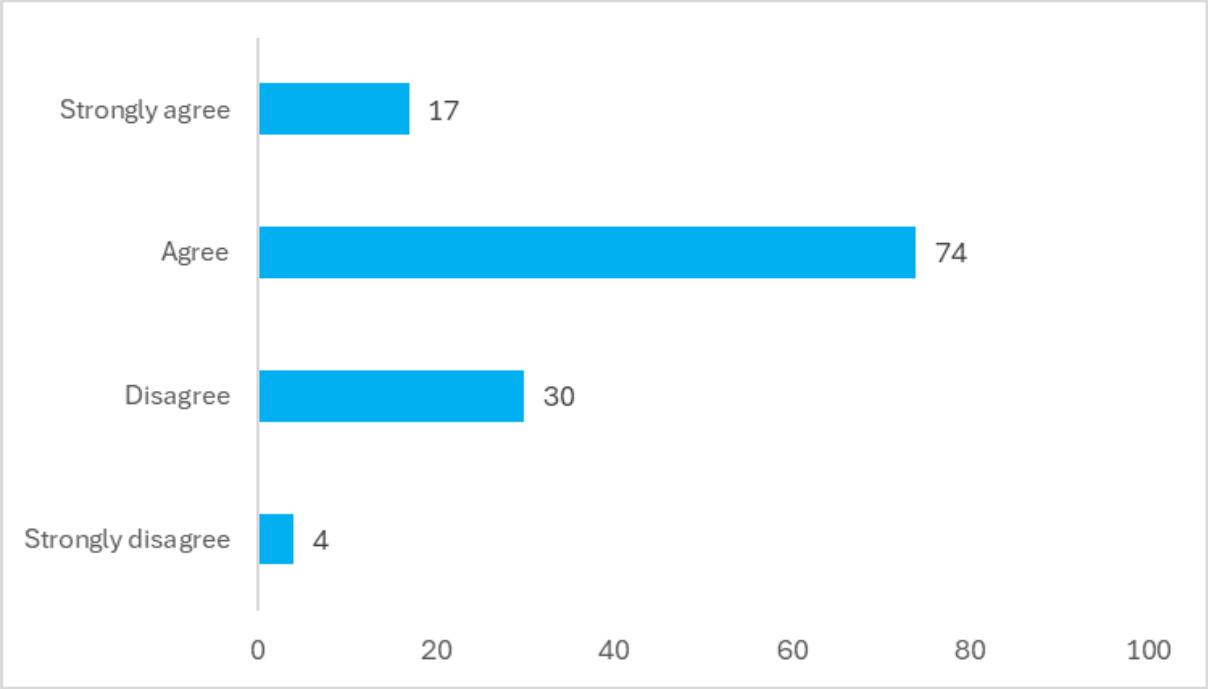
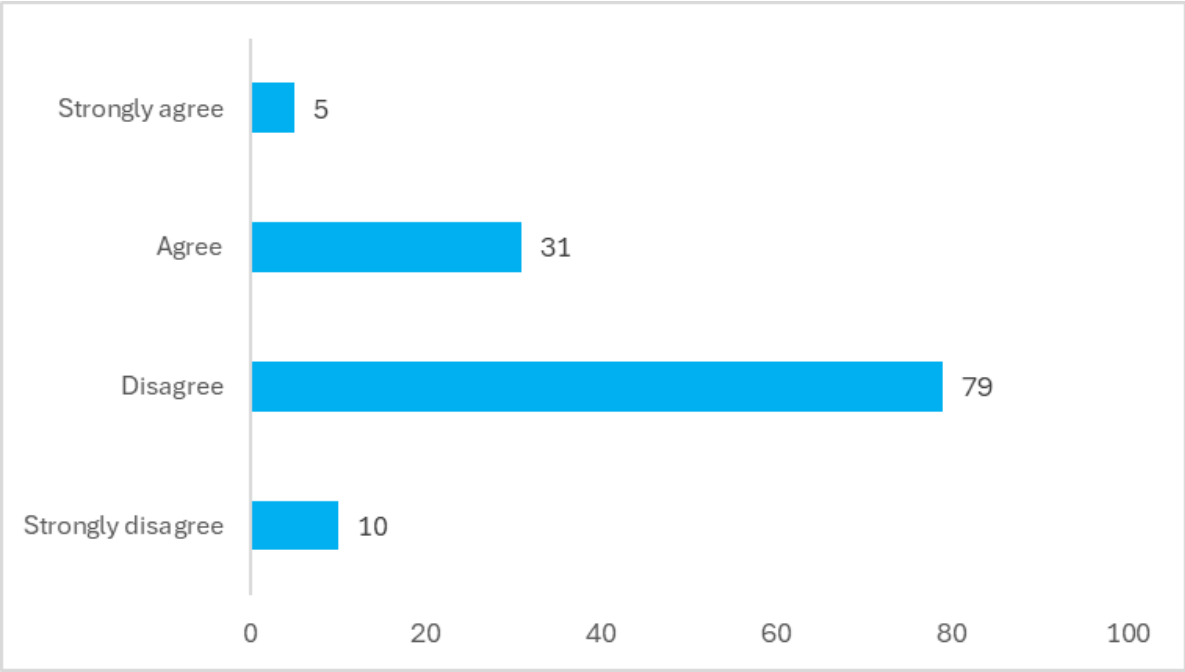


Figure 6. In the Next 2 – 4 Years, AI Will Make Admissions More Fair (*n* = 125)



Discussion

These survey results offer a timely snapshot of perspectives and practices in graduate enrollment management amid a period of rapid technological transformation. It is critical to note that this survey was conducted in February 2025, capturing a moment in which the field and the tools available to it are actively in flux. Indeed, AI is one of many pressures on the graduate admissions field, which stands out for its exponential growth in both capability and adoption (Pedersen, 2025). With that context in mind, this section highlights several key trends that emerged through the survey and explores their implications for GEM professionals and institutions.

AI Literacy and Perspectives on Ethical Use

Respondents had a wide variety of experience with using AI tools in their roles as GEM professionals; this was also reflected in their knowledge of bias in AI. Overall, respondents were aware of bias in AI to varying degrees, but most did not feel that they had the level of knowledge needed to make decisions around AI in their work. In addition to the newness of generative AI technology and tools, this range of experience and AI literacy may have contributed to the high percentage of *unsure* responses on perspectives on ethical AI use.

Despite the uncertainty around many use cases for AI, respondents indicated some common understanding of which uses are likely ethical or unethical, which can serve as a useful starting point for the development of future frameworks for acceptable AI use in graduate enrollment management, or to guide policy in the interim. For example, although any particular use case for an AI tool should be carefully considered on a program basis, programs may want to exercise additional caution in cases where the AI evaluates students and should likely avoid any such usage which does not involve careful human oversight.

Uses of AI which respondents deemed more likely to be ethical included use cases tied to outreach and information sharing (marketing; routing student questions to university staff or faculty; identifying students to target for recruitment; responding directly to questions from applicants) and detecting AI use by applicants in preparing application materials. A note of caution that GEM perspectives from this survey alone should not be used to craft policy, however. For example, there are considerable fairness concerns with using automated

detectors of AI-generated texts. One major concern is that they are more likely to misclassify texts produced by non-native English speakers (Jiang et al., 2024).

Other survey results reinforce that fairness considerations will be particularly important for programs considering AI use. Of note is the opinion of GEM professionals that AI will make graduate admissions easier over the next 2-4 years, but will *not* make admissions fairer. For graduate programs, considering how to integrate AI into the admissions process will be a challenging balance between twin desires to increase efficiencies and to mitigate harmful effects – currently, GEM professionals see using AI to evaluate applicants as unethical, but as it becomes easier to do so, tensions around how to integrate AI into graduate admissions could increase. In practice, decisions on the ethics of AI use will be more nuanced than we were able to represent on this survey. As one example, while respondents indicated that it would likely be unethical to conduct interviews with AI, applications in which AI serves as a supplemental information-gathering tool during a human-conducted interview may be seen as more ethical, again underscoring the importance of interpreting these results with caution.

Going forward, graduate programs will want to provide clearer guidance to applicants on acceptable AI use. Doing so will not only increase clarity of expectations for applicants, but could help make the ways in which applicants use AI more transparent to graduate programs, for example if programs ask applicants to disclose details on AI use. Areas which respondents saw as most likely to constitute ethical use by applicants were information-gathering and procedural tasks. These tasks are roughly analogous to some uses by graduate programs respondents also saw as likely ethical. These parallels indicate that there may be underlying principles GEM professionals believe to be true even though those have not yet been formally articulated. An applicant researching program fit could be seen as the other side of the same coin of a graduate program identifying students for recruitment, for example.

Respondents were more skeptical that other AI use cases by applicants would be ethical, but there may be room for more nuanced policies that guide student AI use rather than simply allowing or barring it. For example, one respondent opined in an open response question that regardless of use case, “the bigger issue is not ‘for what was the AI used’, but ‘how was the AI used’.” Another respondent thought that using AI in a way similar to how applicants will make

use of it in the workforce could be appropriate: “AI use to brainstorm and refine thoughts and ideas is appropriate in many work contexts and so that use case should trickle down to essay, work samples, and personal statements. Applicants should be discouraged from allowing AI to speak for them.” Any future AI policy for graduate admissions should consider providing students with guidance not only on where generative AI may be used in the application package, but how it should be used.

Looking Ahead

AI adoption and use has the potential to influence various admissions policies going forward. One respondent had the following reflection on AI’s impact on testing policy, for example: “as AI use by applicants increases and AI becomes more difficult to detect, [requiring admissions testing] is a sure way to establish rapport with applicants and also determine if their abilities…meet admissions criteria.” Admissions tests are conducted in controlled environments, so admissions testing results less vulnerable to distortion due to AI use than essays, for example.

Policies around essays and personal statements seem particularly likely to be affected by the rise of AI, probably more so even than testing, given AI’s capabilities for composition and for AI detection. Students have already long relied on others to review and heavily edit their writing (Woo et al., 2022), so in a sense, the prevalence of AI could be seen to have democratized access to tutoring services already available to some students. Whether or not graduate programs see the expanded prevalence and use of AI as a reason to adjust testing policy, it will be important to continue to track for how it affects admissions processes in general.

Limitations

The results listed above represent a snapshot in time, with a self-selected group of respondents. Given the rapid evolution of generative AI, including expanding capabilities and increased usage, some of the views from this survey may change as GEM professionals gain increased familiarity with the technology and its uses. Future research is advisable to continue monitoring trends in this quickly evolving area.

Approximately 17.1% of the NAGAP membership completed at least a portion of the survey, with 10.1% completing the entire survey. The survey was distributed by link and therefore we cannot monitor formal response rate, and currently NAGAP does not monitor the demographic or organizational profile of its membership, so we cannot remark on the representativeness of the survey except to note that it the membership response is in line with previous similar studies (Gooch & Haviland, 2025; Haviland et al., 2023; Haviland et al., 2022). We did see a similar profile in our respondents in the February 2025 survey to previous administrations in terms of the breakdown of job roles represented in the survey sample and departments in which respondents worked (see Tables A2 and A3 for a detailed breakdown).

Conclusion

As AI continues to evolve, graduate enrollment management professionals must navigate a complex and rapidly shifting landscape. The ETS and NAGAP February 2025 survey reveals that while there is growing awareness of AI's potential and risks, institutional guidance remains limited, and many GEM professionals feel underprepared to make informed decisions about its use.

The emergence of shared ethical intuitions, particularly around transparency, human oversight, and fairness, offers a foundation for future policy development. Respondents' reflections suggest that AI can ethically be used to support recruitment and information-sharing, but its use in evaluative contexts must be approached with caution. Similarly, applicants' use of AI for procedural tasks may be acceptable, but programs must clearly communicate expectations to ensure equity and integrity.

In the future, graduate programs will need to strike a careful balance between innovation and responsibility. This includes not only crafting policies that reflect evolving norms but also investing in professional development to build AI literacy across the field. As AI becomes more deeply embedded in both applicant behavior and institutional operations, the decisions made now will shape the future of graduate admissions and the trust placed in it.

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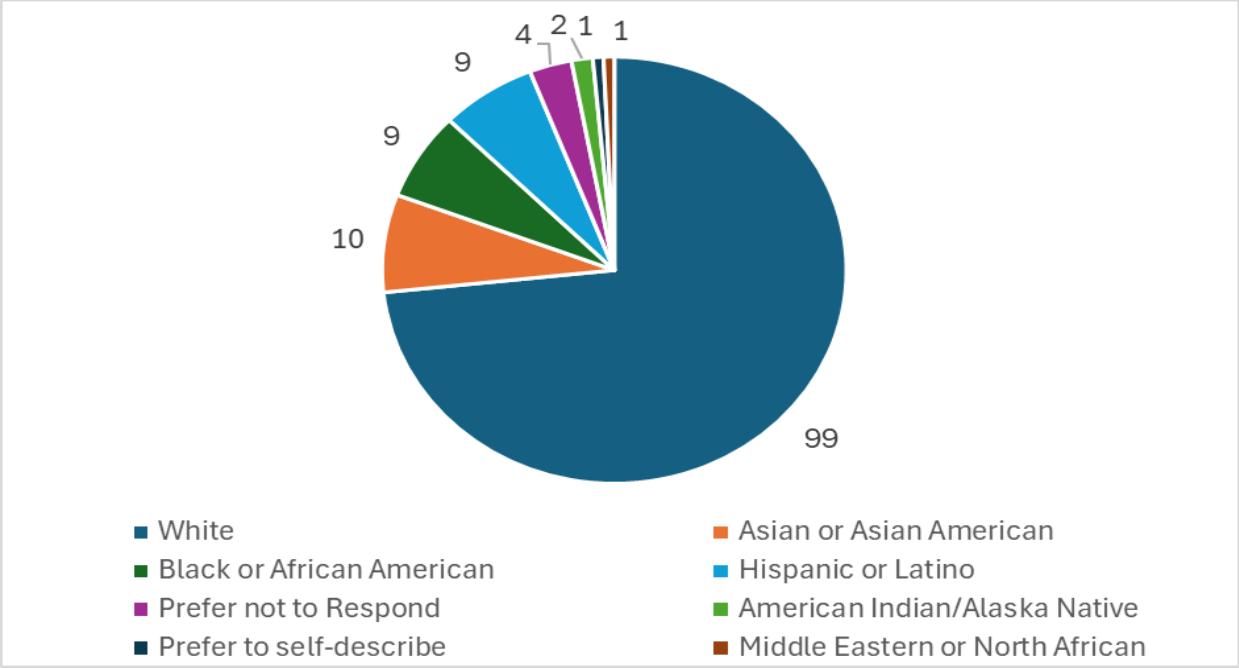
Appendix

Figure A1. Race/Ethnicity of Respondents (*n* = 124)



Note. Respondents could select multiple categories, so totals do not add to 124.

Figure A2. Gender of Respondents (*n* = 124)

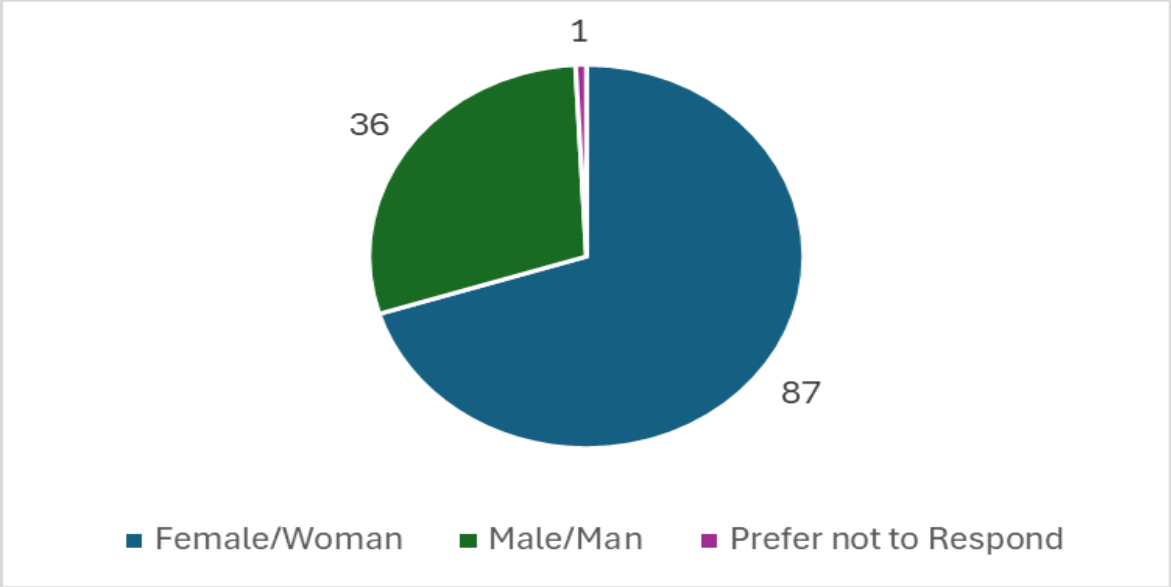


Figure A3. First-Generation Student Status of Respondents (*n* = 124)

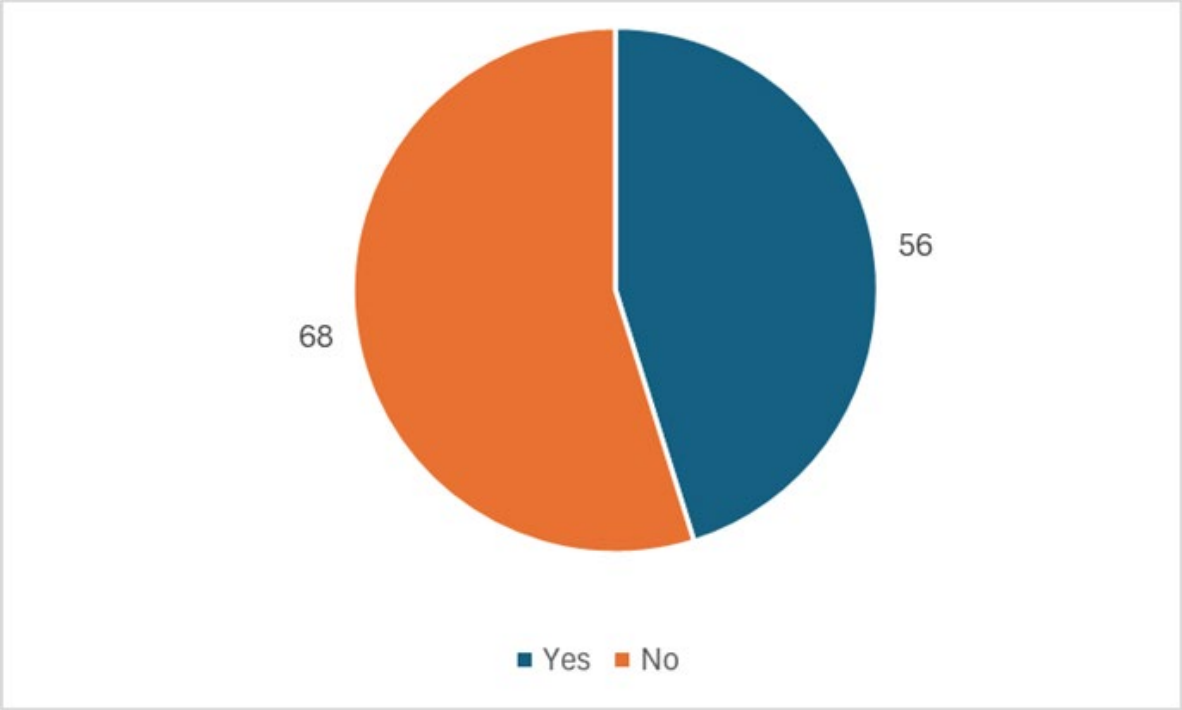


Table A1. Full Option Text From Survey Item Represented in Figure 4

Please select the degree to which you consider it ethical for graduate programs to use AI in the admissions process in the following ways:	Average Rating (1-4)
Drafting and sending marketing materials	3.57
Routing student questions to university staff or faculty	3.48
Detecting AI use by applicants in preparing application materials (e.g., to detect AI use in writing personal statement)	3.29
Identifying students to target for recruitment	3.28
Responding directly to questions from applicants	3.17
Making a first pass evaluation of overall application quality, for further human evaluation of the applicant	2.89
Understanding the context of an application (e.g., an "adversity" or "distance traveled" score based on factors such as the applicant's first-generation status, zip code, and/or other factors)	2.75
Providing a holistic score on applicants based on a combination of various application materials (possibly guided by rubrics or priorities set by the graduate program)	2.70
Identifying student characteristics from application materials (e.g., perseverance, critical thinking, leadership)	2.63
Evaluating written components of applications (e.g., personal statements, reference letters)	2.55
Informing decisions on financial aid awards	2.52
Conducting Interviews	1.93

Making decisions about overall application quality, without further human evaluation of the application Informing decisions on financial aid awards	1.54

Table A2. Comparison of Job Roles of NAGAP 2024 and February 2025 Respondents (Multiple Responses Allowed)

2024 Respondents			2025 Respondents		
Role	**N**	**Percent**	**Role**	**N**	**Percentage**
Recruit prospective students	129	84.9	Recruit prospective students	126	83.4
Oversight of admissions process as an administrator	123	80.9	Oversight of admissions process as an administrator	129	85.4
Review and recommend applications to be further considered by another individual or office	74	48.7	Review and recommend applications to be further considered by another individual or office	66	43.7
Review and make final admissions decisions on individual applications	57	37.5	Review and make final admissions decisions on individual applications	54	35.8
Review and select applications to recommend for scholarship, fellowship, assistantship, or other institutionally funded graduate student financial support	53	34.9	Review and select applications to recommend for scholarship, fellowship, assistantship, or other institutionally funded graduate student financial support	60	39.7

Table A3. Comparison of Departments of NAGAP 2024 and February 2025 Respondents

2024 Respondents			2025 Respondents		
Department	**N**	**Percentage**	**Department**	**N**	**Percentage**
Institution-wide graduate admissions office (excl. undergrad)	36	23.7	Institution-wide graduate admissions office (excl. undergrad)	36	23.8
Academic school/college within institution	31	20.4	Academic school/college within institution	37	24.5
Institution-wide graduate school	29	19.1	Institution-wide graduate school	30	19.9
Academic department/program within the institution	24	15.8	Academic department/program within the institution	15	9.9
Institution-wide admissions office (undergrad and grad)	15	9.9	Institution-wide admissions office (undergrad and grad)	18	11.9
Institution-wide enrollment management office or division (e.g., admissions, financial aid, student services)	15	9.9	Institution-wide enrollment management office or division (e.g., admissions, financial aid, student services)	13	8.6
Other	2	1.3	Other	2	1.3

Suggested citation: Gooch, R. M., & Haviland, S. B. (in press). *The algorithm at the gate: Exploring ethical tensions in graduate admissions* (Research Notes). ETS. https://doi.org/10.64634/kj3h8q48