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The Role of AI in Graduate Admissions: Results From the Fall 2025 ETS/NAGAP Survey

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Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to gain prevalence, its use is gaining acceptance in graduate enrollment management (GEM), as professionals begin to think beyond its use for chatbots or recruitment materials to imagine how it can increase efficiency. At the same time, AI's effects on how GEM professionals perceive traditional application components are beginning to become clearer. GEM professionals have begun to question the value of the traditional personal statement essay and indicate that other elements of a holistic admissions process may consequently gain significance moving forward, including interviews, campus visits, and proctored writing samples under controlled conditions. Here we detail results from the Fall 2025 ETS/NAGAP survey of graduate enrollment management professionals, sharing their experiences of AI's impact on graduate admissions processes, and conclude by looking forward to how processes and practices are likely to change based on emerging norms and consensus on best practices.

Keywords: graduate enrollment management, GEM, graduate admissions, NAGAP, higher education admissions, AI ethics, AI literacy, admissions essay

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., 2022; Haviland et al., 2023). The series has looked at how testing policies have evolved over time and, beginning with the February 2025 survey (Gooch & Haviland, 2026b), tracked the ways that AI is shaping the graduate admissions field from the perspective of GEM professionals, the staff who oversee the enrollment of new graduate students. The February 2025 results revealed that GEM professionals had a mixed level of understanding of AI's potential and risks and felt underprepared to make informed decisions about its use in the absence of institutional guidance.

Since the previous survey, AI technologies have continued to develop rapidly, bringing changes to graduate admissions that are not yet well understood. Consequently, we decided to focus again on AI in our most recent NAGAP survey in order to leverage GEM professionals' unique insights into the changes AI is bringing as they happen. In this survey, we continue to track GEM professionals' use and understanding of AI and their expressed needs for related professional development. Our focus moved beyond GEM professionals' opinions on the ethics of different applications of AI to explore how their practice has been changing in response to the AI era, how they envision AI's impact on holistic admissions and the application package, and which application components specifically they see as becoming more or less useful in the AI era.

Methods

Survey

The current ETS/NAGAP survey was administered to GEM professionals in November 2025. It was distributed to all NAGAP members subscribed to the organization's mailing list (N = 943) and advertised in their internal newsletter. The survey received a total of 155 responses (16.4%), of which 115 were fully completed, with the remaining 40 providing partial data. The survey was a mixture of Likert-type, multiple choice, and open response questions. To minimize time burden on respondents, questions were targeted to respondents based on prior selections in the survey (a *skip pattern*). The survey length therefore varied between 28 and 32 questions for each respondent. The survey asked participants background and demographic questions

and collected their perspectives on testing policies, diversity-related policies, and AI in graduate admissions. Here, we report results related to AI in graduate admissions.

Participants

Respondents to the survey were members of NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management. Respondents worked at a variety of organizational units within their institutions (Appendix 1), with some of the most common being an academic school or college within the institution (23.5%); an institution-wide graduate admissions office (excluding undergraduate admissions; 21.7%); and an institution-wide enrollment management office (16.5%). Respondents reported on the selectivity of the educational units at which they work identifying most as *inclusive*[1] (45.2%) or *selective*[2] (36.5%), indicating that a majority of students applying are typically accepted (see Appendix 2). The majority of respondents' roles included responsibilities to recruit prospective graduate students (79.3%); oversee the admissions process as an administrator (76.4%) and to collect and record applicant materials as part of the admissions operations process (65.0%). Some respondents' roles also included responsibilities such as reviewing and recommending applicants to be further considered by another individual or office (47.1%); reviewing and selecting applications to recommend for institutionally funded graduate student financial support (35.0%); and reviewing and making final admissions decisions on applications (32.9%; respondents could select multiple roles). Most respondents identified as white (85.1%) and the majority of respondents were female (73.0%).

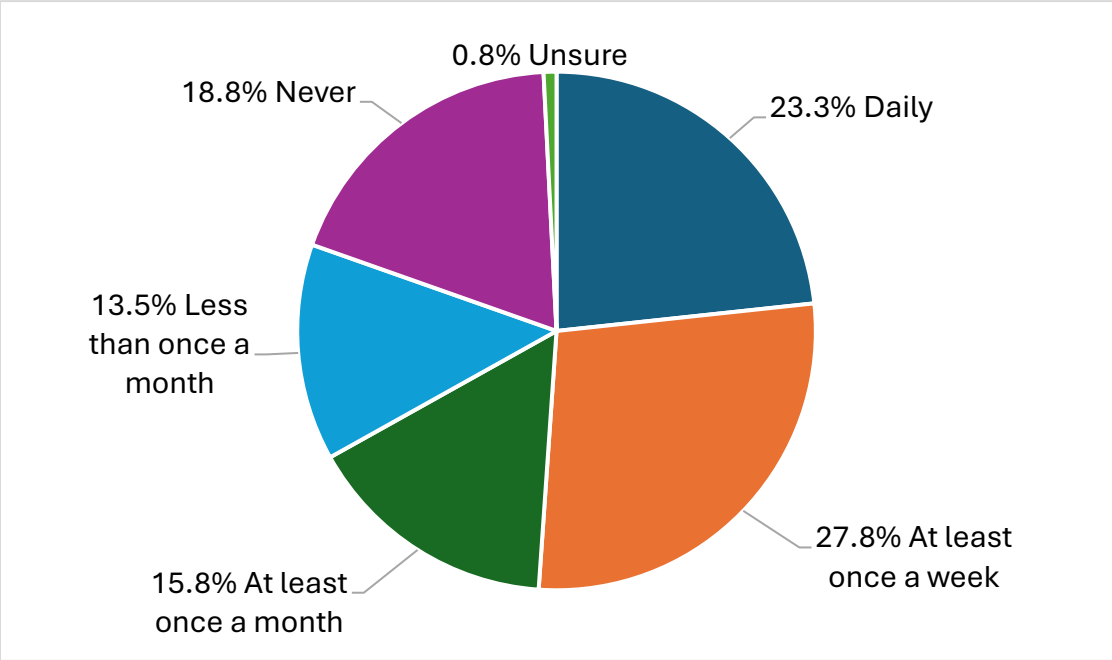
Results

GEM Professional Knowledge of AI

Compared to the previous survey in this series administered to GEM professionals (Gooch & Haviland, 2026b) administered in February 2025, respondents on the current survey reported more frequent use of AI-enabled tools in the workplace. About twice as many respondents (23.3% current survey vs. 12.9% February survey) reported using AI-enabled tools Daily and a smaller proportion also reported Never using AI-enabled tools for their work (18.8% vs. 30.7%). While the results of the current survey still show a broad range of frequency of use

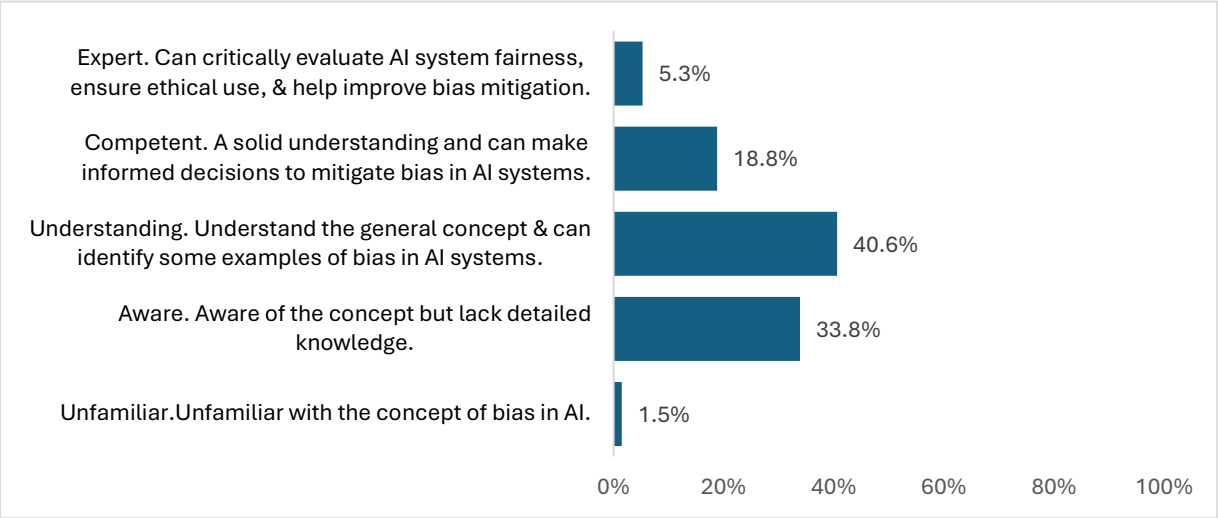
among respondents, over half now report that they use AI frequently (once a week or more: 51.1%; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. AI-Enabled Tool Use by GEM Professionals (Current Survey)



Although the majority of GEM professionals reported using AI weekly or more, respondents nevertheless expressed mixed levels of comfort with AI and understanding of how to apply AI ethically in their work. For example, self-reported knowledge of AI bias was very similar to results from the previous ETS/NAGAP survey. In the previous, February, survey, most respondents (90.4%) were aware of bias in AI systems but only 23.2% felt they had enough knowledge to take any meaningful action (Gooch & Haviland, 2026b). In the current survey, nearly all (98.5%) respondents reported being at least *aware* of the concept of bias in AI systems, but still under a quarter of respondents (24.1%) felt that they had enough knowledge to make informed decisions to mitigate such bias in AI systems (Figure 2). Relatedly, the current survey shows that only a minority (43.0%) of respondents *agreed* (33.9%) or *strongly agreed* (9.1%) that they felt prepared to make ethical decisions about AI use in graduate admissions, and a strong majority of respondents felt that they would benefit from professional development or training focused on AI literacy in admissions (92.6%) or AI ethics in admissions (92.5%).

Figure 2. Understanding of Bias in AI Systems (Self-Report)

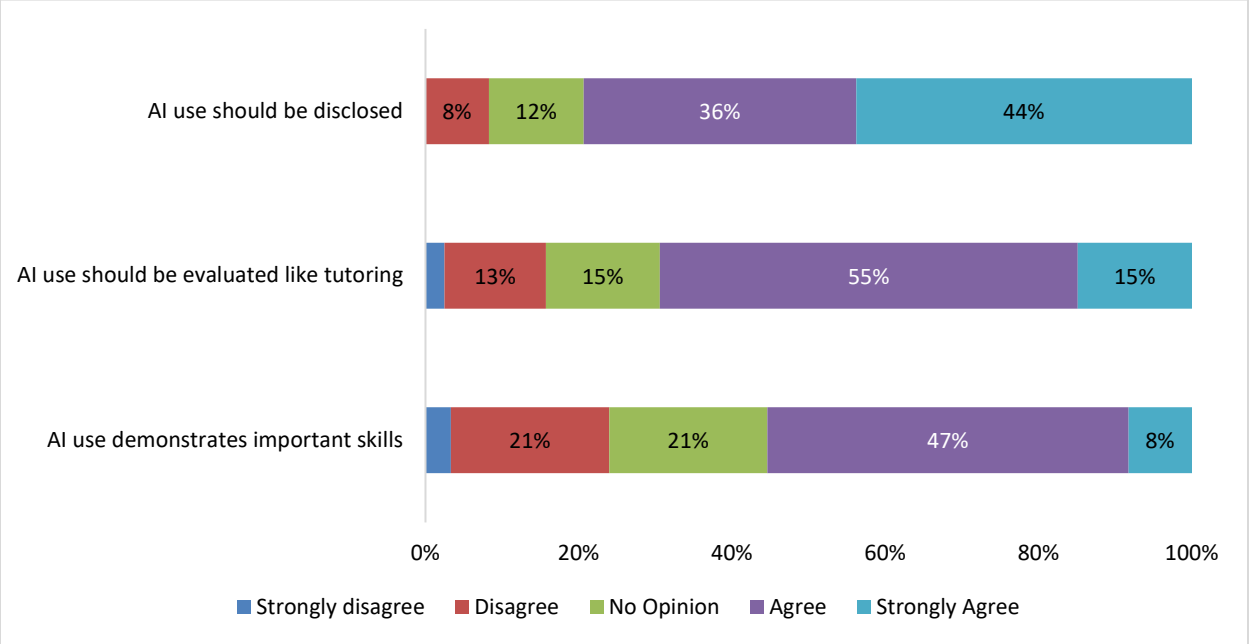


Interpretation of Student AI Use

As an extension of our exploration of GEM professional knowledge of and comfort with AI, we asked respondents to rate how confident they feel in their ability to evaluate application materials that may have been influenced by AI. Respondents were split, with 49.6% of respondents either disagreeing (45.5%) or strongly disagreeing (4.1%) that they feel confident to evaluate such materials, and with 40.5% either agreeing (33.1%) or strongly agreeing (7.4%).[3]

Regardless of respondents' split on how comfortable they feel evaluating application materials that may have been influenced by AI, respondents largely agreed that applicants should disclose their use of AI in preparing their application. This point was agreed to by 79.3% of respondents versus 8.3% who disagreed, with the remaining expressing no opinion. A majority also agreed that tutoring is a useful parallel to consider when evaluating applicant AI use, with 69.4% of respondents either agreeing (54.5%) or strongly agreeing (14.9%) that AI use should be evaluated similarly to use of professional editing or tutoring services. A smaller majority (55.4%) of respondents felt that, from a more positive standpoint, applicants who use AI tools demonstrate important durable skills such as resourcefulness and adaptability. Results are displayed in Figure 3.

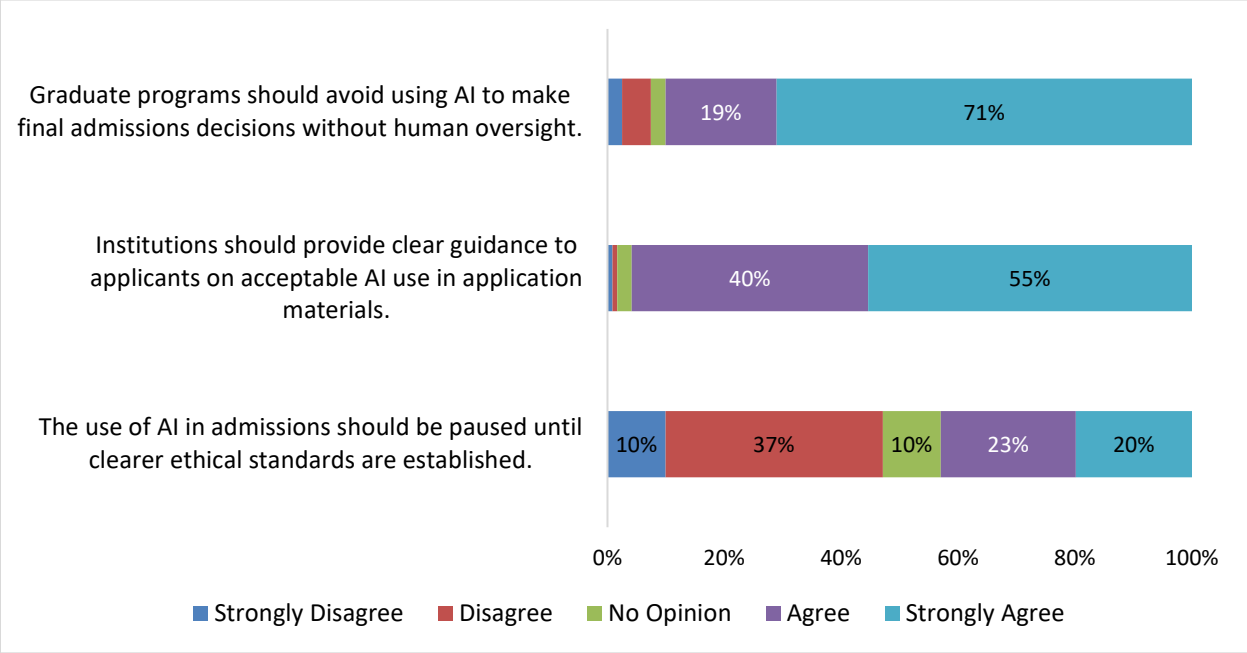
Figure 3. GEM Professional Interpretation of Student AI Use



Responsibilities of GEM Professionals and Graduate Institutions

GEM professionals also shared their opinions on the responsibilities that they believe graduate programs and institutions hold relative to AI in admissions. In keeping with the findings of the previous survey (Gooch & Haviland, 2026b), a majority of respondents (71.1%) strongly felt that AI should not be used to make admissions decisions without human oversight, with a further 19.0% also agreeing that this use of AI is inappropriate (total: 90.1% agree or strongly agree). The strong majority of respondents also agreed (55.4% strongly agree; 40.5% agree; total: 95.9%) that institutions have a responsibility to provide clear guidance to applicants on the acceptable use of AI in application materials. Opinions were split on whether the use of AI in admissions should be paused until clearer ethical standards are established. Slightly more respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (47.1%) than agreed (42.9%). See Figure 4 for details.

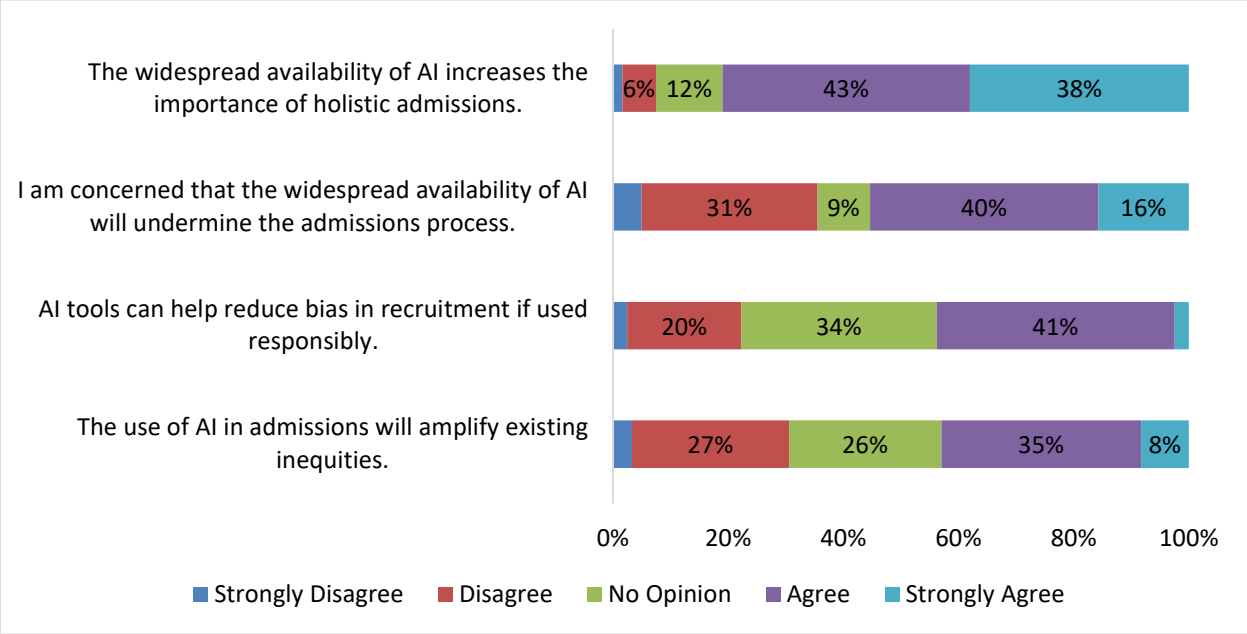
Figure 4. GEM Professional Opinions on Institutional Responsibility around AI and Admissions



GEM Professional Views on Impacts of AI Looking Forward

We asked GEM professionals to look forward and consider how AI will impact graduate admissions in the big picture (Figure 5). Respondents felt that overall, the use of AI in admissions will worsen existing inequities (43.0% agreed/strongly agreed), although about a third of respondents (30.6%) disagreed. A slight majority (55.4%) also expressed concern that AI could undermine the admissions process. Yet on a more positive note, some respondents felt that AI tools, when used responsibly, can reduce bias in recruitment. While over a third of respondents (33.9%) indicated they had no opinion on this possibility, 43.8% agreed/strongly agreed with only 22.3% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing. In response to changes brought about by the widespread availability of AI, GEM professionals doubled down on their support for holistic admissions. Respondents were relatively united in their response, with 81.0% agreeing or strongly agreeing that holistic admissions would increase in importance with the widespread availability of AI and only 7.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Figure 5. GEM Professional Views on AI Looking Forward



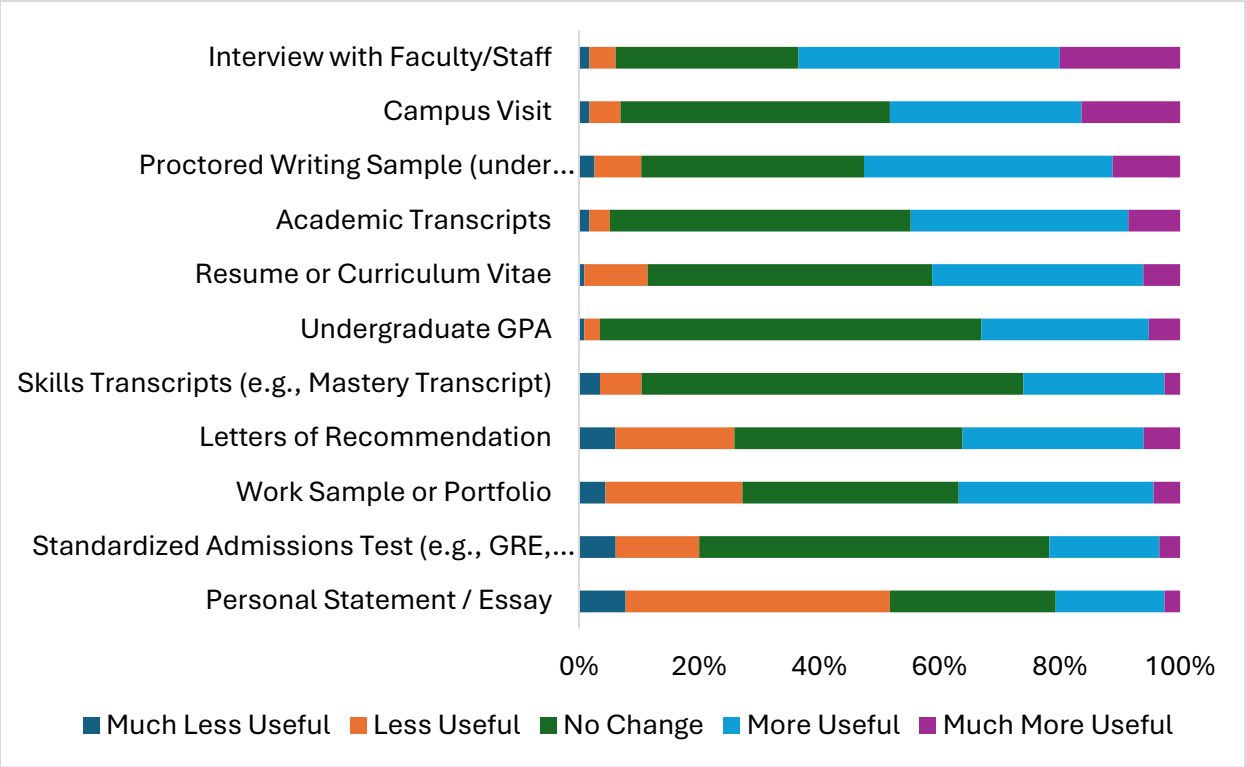
How Will AI Impact Utility of Specific Application Components

Holistic admissions can be defined in a variety of ways (Bastedo et al., 2018; Kent & McCarthy, 2016) and often may lack transparency (Ober et al., 2023; Paris & Winfield, 2024), so we also polled respondents to better understand how AI may be affecting the individual components that may be considered by programs using holistic admissions processes. Respondents rated how AI will impact the utility of various application components *relative to how useful they have been*. Figure 6 shows a ranking, not of how useful GEM professionals find the application components overall, but rather of the degree to which the growing availability of AI influences the usefulness of the application components (positively or negatively).

Notably, on balance, respondents felt that AI would increase the utility of all application components but one — the personal statement or essay. For the essay/personal statement, more than double the percentage of respondents thought that it would be less or much less useful (51.8%) versus the percentage of respondents who thought it would be more or much more useful (20.7%). In all other cases, more respondents reported a belief that the component would become more useful based on the growing availability of AI, rather than less useful (see Figure 6). Among those components, the ones which GEM professionals perceived as most

positively affected by AI were the Interview With Faculty/Staff; Campus Visit; and Proctored Writing Sample (Under Controlled Conditions).

Figure 6. Survey Respondent Perceptions of How AI Affects Utility of Application Components

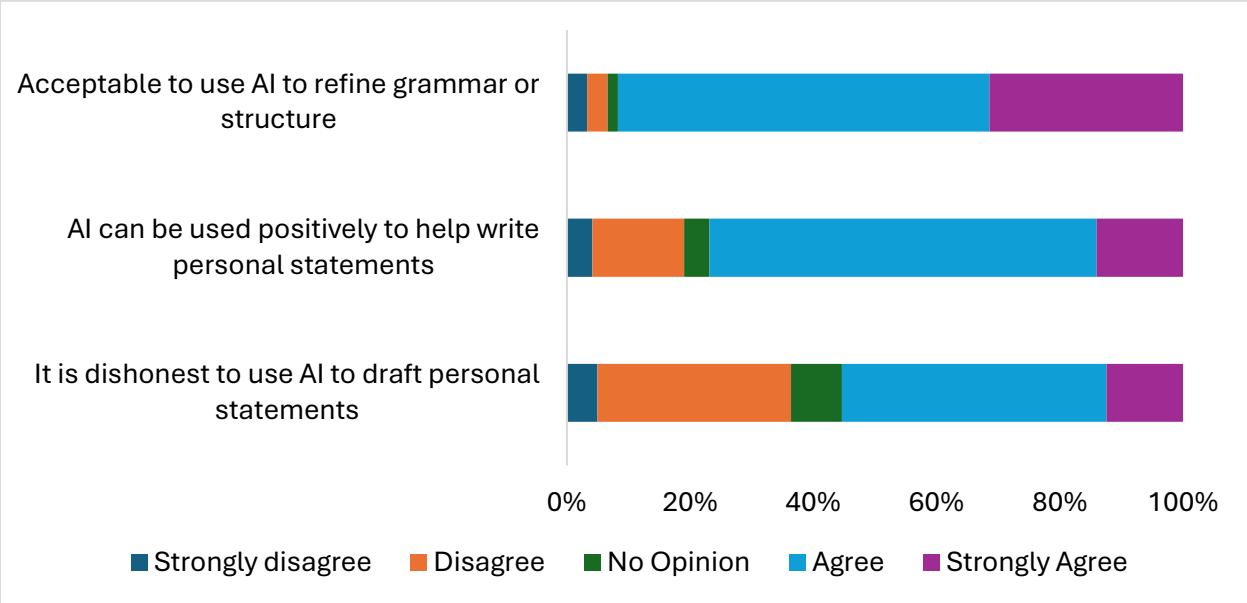


Perceptions on AI Use for the Personal Statement/Essay

As noted in the previous section, the effect of AI on the personal statement or essay was more concerning to GEM professionals than the effect of AI on any other application component. In addition to general questions about student AI use reported above which are relevant to the essay and personal statement (e.g., "AI use should be disclosed; AI use should be evaluated like tutoring or professional editing services"), questions specifically about the essay or personal statement were also posed to understand if opinions differed based on *how* AI was used in the preparation of an essay or personal statement. Overall, the majority (76.8%) of GEM professionals found that students could acceptably make use of AI to some extent in essay writing. Yet, when asked about particular methods of AI use, opinions diverged. The most accepted use of AI in essay writing (by 91.7% of respondents) was when AI was used to refine grammar and structure. However, GEM professionals expressed more concern about using AI in

the *drafting* process of personal statements specifically, with 55.5% finding it dishonest for applicants to use AI to draft personal statements (compared to 36.4% who disagreed/strongly disagreed). Additional details are presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7. GEM Professionals' Opinions on AI Use for Personal Statements

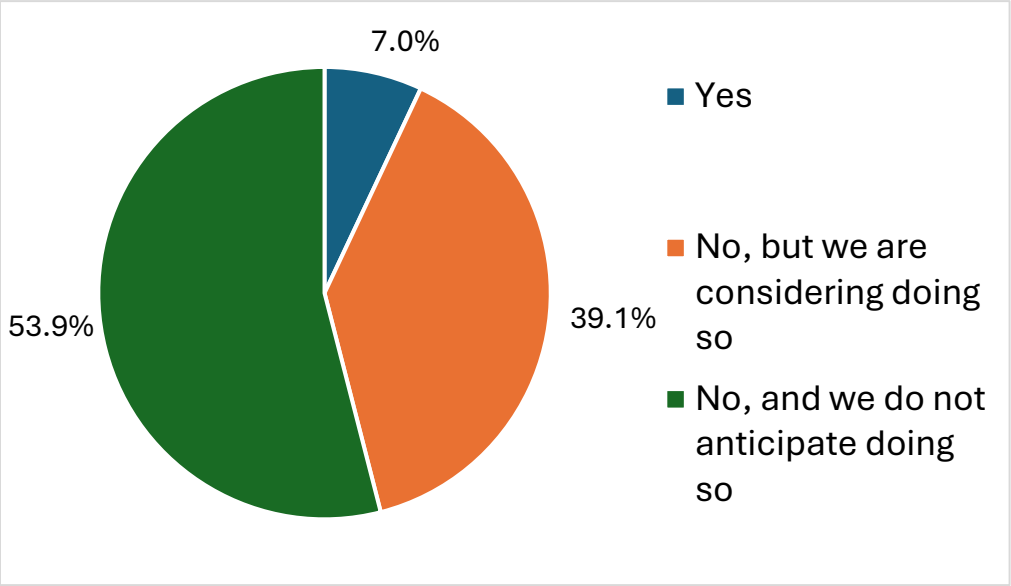


Implementation of Changes in Response to AI

Few respondents reported that their organizational units (i.e., the graduate school, department, etc. at which they work) had made any changes to existing admissions policies due to AI – only 7.0% (See Figure 8). And although some respondents' organizational units (39.1%) are considering future changes in response to AI, that group had not yet made any changes. A majority of respondents (53.9%) reported that their organizational units were not even considering changes to admissions policies at the time of the survey. Of the few institutions which made admissions policy changes, the most common aspect changed was in relation to adding a student-facing AI policy guiding or restricting applicant AI use, particularly in the essay or work sample component. Adding an AI acceptable use policy was the most commonly reported change currently under consideration for future adoption by other institutions (of institutions considering future changes, 40.0% mentioned adoption of AI acceptable use policy), although roughly a third (35.6%) of this group reported that their institution was not yet at the

stage of considering specific changes to admissions policies, or that they were unsure of the nature of changes under consideration.

Figure 8. Have Institutions Made Changes to Admissions Policies Due to AI



Discussion

GEM Professionals See More Need for Change

Few respondents' institutions had yet made changes in response to the widespread availability of AI. While a few institutions have been proactive in making changes, principally by providing AI use guidelines to applicants, many institutions had not yet had time to go through their internal decision-making processes to consider whether and what sort of changes they find appropriate. Yet, over half of respondents' institutions do not anticipate making any change to admissions policies. In contrast, survey respondents widely agreed on several steps which should be taken to adapt admissions practices in recognition of the ways AI is already affecting the admissions process, which are discussed below.

Guidance for Applicant AI Use

Nearly all respondents (95%) agreed that graduate institutions have a duty to provide clear guidance on acceptable AI use to applicants to graduate programs. In practice, some institutions are making changes to address this need, as this was the most commonly reported change made due to AI or that is being considered due to AI among respondents' institutions.

Still, those institutions constitute a minority, whereas GEM professionals were nearly unanimous in their agreement that providing guidance on AI use falls to institutions.

Looking Ahead

The results of this survey indicate that, as of November 2025, GEM professionals saw major issues in their practice, particularly around the usefulness of the personal essay, as it has been traditionally used. The issues have been severe enough that the majority of respondents (56%) expressed concern that the graduate admissions process itself will be undermined by AI. At the time of the survey, few institutions had yet made particular changes (7%) to admissions policies or processes, but results indicate that GEM professionals foresee change on the horizon. The first policy or process change to be intentionally implemented on the graduate program side of admissions looks to be implementing guidance for AI use in the application process. Not only is this the most common step that has been taken to date, but it is also the most common change being actively considered by those respondents' institutions that anticipate making changes in response to the proliferation of AI.

Implementing guidance for AI use for applicants represents a practical first step with a number of clear benefits. Doing so can provide clearer context to graduate programs on how AI is being used by applicants so that reviewers can better understand and evaluate application materials. Ethically, it helps to reduce moral ambiguity for applicants who, when guidance is absent, are left to make their own decisions not only about how to best and most efficiently complete their application packet according to their own moral compass. Applicants must guess both what may or may not be viewed favorably by reviewers, and what practices peers may be using to gain a competitive advantage. Providing guidance can remove stress for applicants, increase transparency for all parties, and even prevent applicants from over-correcting, completely avoiding use of AI for fear of unknown repercussions. GEM professionals would likely support such a move, as 95% of respondents to this survey reported believing that institutions should provide clear guidance to applicants on acceptable AI use in application materials.

Looking farther ahead, GEM professionals are likely to reconsider the role of the admissions essay in particular. Although programs are not yet taking formal steps to adjust how

the essay is used and viewed, the proliferation of AI is already affecting how admissions essays are being interpreted, if in no other way, at least by loss of confidence in the essay as a useful source of information relative to previous admissions cycles. When admissions officers are left to make their own assumptions about AI use, it could also potentially lead to fairness concerns – for example, university faculty have difficulty accurately differentiating AI-generated essays from those written by college students (Waltzer et al., 2024), an issue which may only be exacerbated in the case of international students, where even trained ESL faculty have been shown to rely on flawed strategies to differentiate AI-generated essays from those written by English language learners (Alexander et al., 2023). Survey results indicate that interviews, campus visits, and proctored writing samples may gain importance in the holistic review process as sources that GEM professionals see as more verifiably authentic. In particular, interviews are likely to gain in importance, as many programs already have processes in place for interviews. Campus visits, although they provide a benefit as a marketing tool, incur more expense on applicants and therefore present equity concerns. Proctored writing could become more important moving forward as the authenticity of essays or work samples is brought into question. In current practice, proctored writing is not commonly used as a standalone application component. Rather, where it is used, it tends to be embedded in proctored standardized assessments (e.g., GRE, LSAT) and looked at as a scored or unscored component of those exams.

Limitations

Approximately 16.4% of the NAGAP membership completed at least a portion of the survey, with 12.2% completing the entire survey. The survey was distributed by link and therefore we cannot monitor a formal response rate. 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 the membership response is in line with previous similar studies (Gooch & Haviland, 2025; Gooch & Haviland, 2026a; Gooch & Haviland, 2026b; Haviland et al., 2022; Haviland et al., 2023).

Conclusion

AI has already begun affecting graduate admissions through the use of AI tools by graduate programs and particularly by applicants. Although most institutions have not yet made formal changes to admissions policies or review processes, review has nevertheless been affected through the knowledge that applicants may be using AI on various application components, and on admissions essays in particular. Survey results reflect GEM professionals' attitudes to AI in admissions which are only now beginning to be reflected in policy. The first wave of change reaches only as far as providing guidance to applicants on AI usage or requesting disclosure on AI usage. In the future, more substantial changes may emerge as best practices are shared through peer networking, professional development opportunities, and other dissemination channels.

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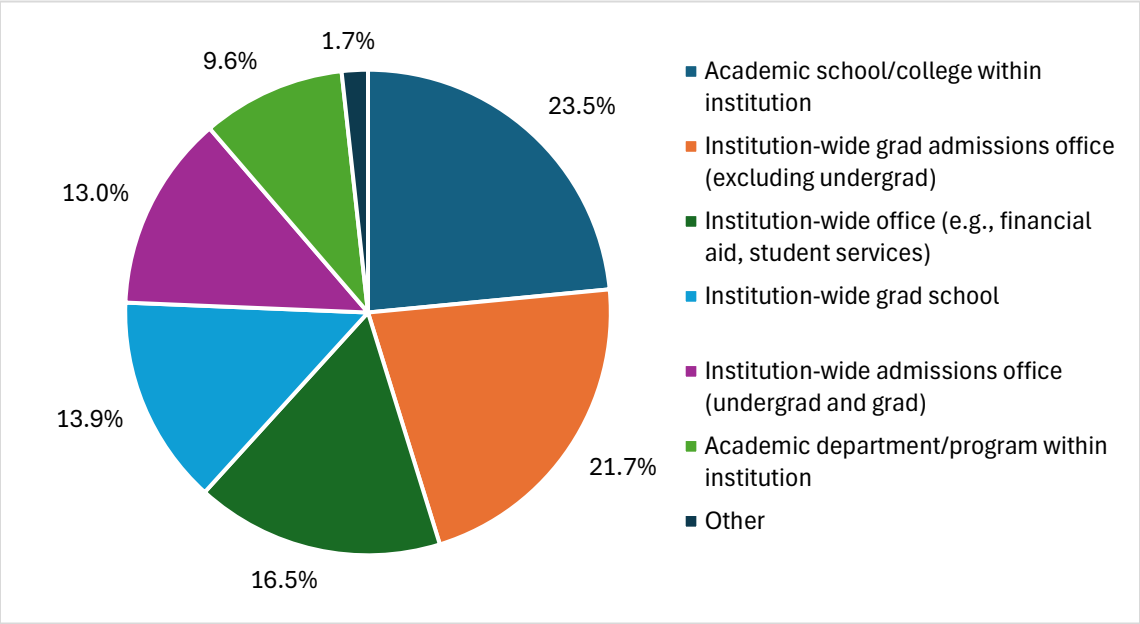
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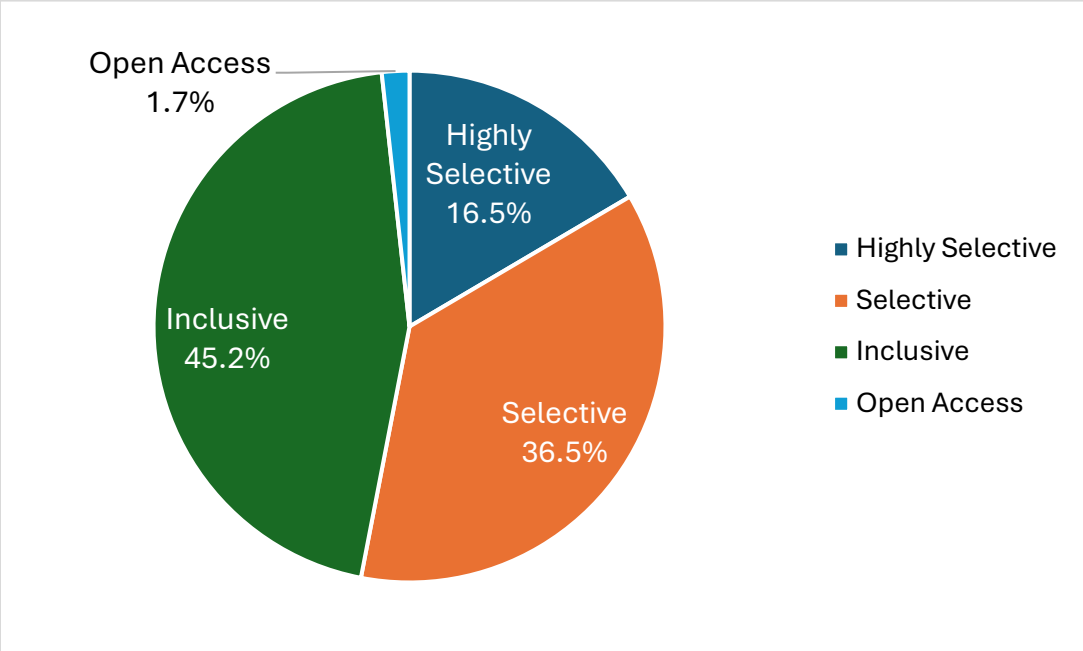
Appendix A

Figure 1. Organizational Unit at Which Respondent Works



Appendix B

Figure 1. Selectivity of Respondents' Institution or Program (Self-Report)



Note. Highly Selective = < 50% applicants accepted; Selective = 50–75% applicants accepted; and Inclusive = > 75% applicants accepted.

Notes

[1] Over 75% of applicants accepted

[2] 50–75% of applicants accepted

[3] The remaining 9.9% of respondents selected No Opinion

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