

Policy Ambiguity, Instructor Guidance, and Students' Academic Use of AI Tools

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From Policy Ambiguity to Guided AI Use: Graduate Students' Sensemaking of AI Policies in Academic Practice

Introduction

The growing use of generative AI in higher education has raised concerns about academic integrity, ethical use, privacy, and responsible learning. Although AI can support writing, coding, and feedback, unclear policies may leave students uncertain about whether AI use is acceptable, ethical, or risky (An et al., 2025; Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025). Because institutional AI policies are still evolving, students often rely on course-level guidance from syllabi, assignments, and instructors (An et al., 2025). Prior studies have examined students' AI policy awareness and ethical concerns (Kim et al., 2025; Lund et al., 2025; Weichert et al., 2025), but less is known about how social science graduate students interpret and apply these policies in everyday academic practice. This study examines how policy ambiguity, instructor guidance, and clear communication shape students' confidence, ethical concerns, and academic use of AI tools.

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by sensemaking theory and policy enactment. Sensemaking explains how individuals interpret ambiguous information to guide action (Weick, 1995). Policy enactment emphasizes that policies are interpreted and implemented differently across contexts (Ball et al., 2012). These perspectives view AI policy as shaped through communication, interpretation, and classroom practice rather than as a fixed set of rules.

Methodology

This qualitative study explored graduate students' perceptions of AI-related policies in a Spring 2026 statistics course at a southern U.S. university. Participants were primarily from social science disciplines, such as agriculture, education, and communication. After Institutional Review Board approval, semi-structured Zoom interviews were conducted, and transcripts were analyzed using open coding in MAXQDA to identify recurring themes.

Results/findings

Theme 1. Policy ambiguity created uncertainty. Participants viewed AI expectations as inconsistent across professors, courses, and assignments. Because policies were often interpreted at the course level, students were unsure whether AI use was acceptable, ethical, or risky. One participant said, "Every professor has a different stance on AI," while another described AI use as a "gray area."

Theme 2. Instructor guidance legitimized AI use. Clear instructor guidance helped students feel more comfortable using AI. When instructors explained what was allowed and why, students were less likely to view AI use as cheating. Clear boundaries helped shift AI from a risky tool to a legitimate academic resource. One student explained that when the instructor explicitly encouraged AI use, they no longer felt as though they were "cheating." Instead, they understood AI use as acceptable within the course context. Another participant noted that clear boundaries helped students develop "healthy and ethical skill sets" for using AI.

Theme 3. Clear AI permission supported learning. When AI use was clearly permitted, students described AI as helpful for troubleshooting coding errors, completing assignments, and overcoming learning barriers. It also reduced frustration, increased confidence, and motivated students to continue learning.

Theme 4. Students wanted clearer AI policy guidance. Participants wanted clearer guidance at both the course and university levels, but not necessarily one universal rule. They preferred concrete examples, ethical discussion, and explanations of when AI use is encouraged, discouraged, or inappropriate.

Conclusions

Graduate students perceived AI policy not only as a rule for academic integrity, but also as a condition that shaped their learning experience. When AI policies were unclear or inconsistent, students felt hesitant and concerned about ethical risk. When instructors clearly encouraged AI use and explained appropriate boundaries, students felt more comfortable, confident, and motivated to use AI as a learning support.

Implications/recommendations

The findings suggest that AI policy in higher education should move beyond restriction and rule enforcement toward clearer and more practical guidance. Students experienced AI policy mainly through course-level expectations, syllabi, assignments, and instructor communication. When expectations were unclear, they felt uncertain about whether AI use was acceptable or ethical; when instructors provided clear guidance, they felt more confident using AI as a learning tool. This supports prior arguments that institutions should address both the benefits and risks of GenAI rather than simply restrict its use (Chan et al., 2025; Lund et al., 2025).

Institutions should translate broad AI policies into task-specific examples for writing, coding, data analysis, feedback, and exam preparation, since students may not fully understand or apply general GenAI guidelines in everyday academic practice (An et al., 2025). AI policy should also be paired with ethics and literacy education to support ethical judgment, transparency, and awareness of overreliance rather than relying only on punitive approaches (Lund et al., 2025; Usher et al., 2025). Because students often interpret policy through instructor communication, instructors need training to communicate expectations clearly and balance innovation with academic integrity (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025). Finally, AI governance should remain flexible and responsive to disciplinary and student differences, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model (Kim et al., 2025).

This study is limited by its small sample size and single-course context. Participants were graduate students primarily from social science-related fields at one southern U.S. university, which may limit transferability to other disciplines, institutions, or student populations. Future research should examine how diverse students interpret and respond to AI policies across courses, disciplines, and institutions. Longitudinal studies are also needed to explore how students' policy awareness, ethical judgment, and AI use change as institutional and state-level AI policies continue to evolve.

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