

CHAPTER 8.

UNDERSTANDING THE LANDSCAPE OF GENERATIVE AI USE AMONG WRITING CENTER CLIENTS

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In our October 2023 meeting for writing center consultants, four lead consultants led a conversation about students' use of generative AI (GenAI) and what consultants were seeing in the writing center.¹ The conversation was mixed: one consultant said that most of his appointments had involved GenAI in some capacity, but another consultant said she hadn't seen any AI use and that faculty's fears about students' misuse of it were "overblown." Some consultants expressed enthusiasm for helping students use AI effectively, especially for brainstorming, whereas for others, using AI in any capacity signaled the death knell to their deeply held views about writing as a tool for self-discovery and self-expression.

This conversation was one of several we held with our hired cohort of 40 consultants during the fall 2023 semester, starting with initial training at the beginning of the semester, in which Julia Bleakney, the writing center director, introduced guidelines for AI use in the writing center that she had quickly drafted as the term began. In addition to the conversations with our consultant staff, fourteen students preparing to be writing center consultants (in a four-credit course) received training focused on Tom Deans et al.'s "AI in the Writing Center: Small Steps and Scenarios." By the end of the fall term, conversations with both experienced and new consultants had revealed much variation in their attitudes toward and experiences of AI in our writing center, making it clear that we needed to more fully understand how students were using AI in order to best prepare consultants to work effectively and responsibly with it in appointments.

Our university's response to GenAI is important context for our writing center's conversations about GenAI. Our university has been quick to respond to the GenAI challenge. At the beginning of fall 2023, after gathering information from faculty and staff about their AI concerns and needs, university

1 AI Disclosure: Grammarly was used for proofreading; all edits are authors' own.

administration released a “Generative AI Statement”; this statement emphasized that AI use for courses was faculty choice and asked faculty to include AI policies in their syllabi and talk openly with students about if, when, and how AI use would be acceptable in their courses. Throughout the 2023-2024 academic year, our university held several campus-wide discussions about the potential impacts of AI on education; our Center for Writing Excellence (comprising the writing center and Writing Across the Curriculum [WAC] programs) was at the forefront, offering faculty and staff AI-focused professional development workshops, AI pedagogy grants, and online resources. A university-wide task force, with three co-leaders, including Paula Rosinski, collected faculty and staff concerns, questions, and needs about AI, culminating in a final report to the provost. The university also created a new director of AI integration position; the internal search (co-chaired by Paula) resulted in the hiring of a faculty member with substantial AI research experience.

With so many initiatives and conversations happening around campus regarding GenAI, the writing center struck us as an ideal space to study students’ AI use related to writing because we are “ground zero” for seeing students as they struggle to incorporate new technologies into their writing processes and for supporting student writing across the disciplines: as Elisabeth Buck and Joshua Botvin in their introduction to this edited collection state: “Writing centers have always been on the front lines of assessing the impact of new technologies on students’ writing processes.” Additionally, our approach to training, as is the case with other writing centers, is informed by a practitioner inquiry model (see, for instance, Liggett et al.): we gather evidence from consultants and clients based on their experiences and needs and then develop training for the consultants in order to best meet those needs.

In this study, then, we sought to understand how and in what ways students who come to our writing center are using GenAI to support their writing for any kind of purpose, academic or otherwise. At the same time, we also sought to understand if or how writing center consultants are using AI in their appointments with students. The goal of the client survey was to create a baseline understanding of students’ use of and attitudes toward AI, and the goal of our consultant survey was to have a clearer understanding of what consultants were encountering with clients’ AI use, as well as their sense of comfort with addressing or utilizing AI during sessions. In consultant meetings, the most strongly opinionated voices, both pro- and anti-AI, were speaking the loudest, and a survey would allow us to understand a fuller range of consultants’ perspectives related to AI. After reviewing our context and research methods and presenting the data, we discuss our findings and offer some implications for our own and other writing centers. We found in our study that most clients are using AI, and

they are using it for the invention and proofreading stages of their writing processes; not all clients are disclosing their AI use to consultants; and consultants have a cautious interest in using GenAI in their writing center appointments.

WRITING CENTER CONTEXT AND STUDY METHODS

Elon University is a mid-sized private university in rural North Carolina with approximately 6,400 undergraduate and 800 graduate students. Consultants in the writing center, housed within the Center for Writing Excellence, are all undergraduate students. Also within CWE is Writing Across the University (WAU), our version of WAC. Julia Bleakney is the writing center director, and Paula Rosinski is the WAU director. Lauren Jablon, our third author, was a lead writing center consultant in 2024. In spring 2024, when we ran the surveys, we had 64 consultants: this included 15 trainee consultants in our four-credit course; these students worked about 16 hours in the writing center as part of the course. For our study, which received Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemption, two surveys (one for consultants and one for clients) were prepared using Google Forms. Each survey had three sub-sections: one section to collect participation consent, another with the survey questions, and a final section to collect emails for a gift card drawing. (To incentivize participation, we conducted a drawing every two weeks for one gift card of \$25.) Each of these sections was created in a separate Google Form (to disaggregate identifiers, such as name in the consent form and email in the gift card drawing form). [This example of the client survey](https://forms.gle/3avrCnXuZ1rjFPxK8) at <https://forms.gle/3avrCnXuZ1rjFPxK8> shows how all three sections were incorporated into one form.

CONSULTANT SURVEY

Writing center consultants were invited (via an email sent through Moodle, our university's learning management system) to take the consultant survey three times during the spring 2024 semester—at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. We asked a total of six survey questions in three areas: if clients were using GenAI (based on clients' self-reporting and consultants' observations), how clients were using AI, and clients' and consultants' perspectives on AI use, particularly whether they felt that AI use for coursework is ethical. While most questions in each of the three consultant surveys were the same, we made some adjustments to account for the time of the semester. For instance, in the first survey, we asked consultants to reflect on their experiences with clients in the fall 2023 semester, and by the third survey, we asked them to reflect on the spring 2024 semester.

CLIENT SURVEY

The client survey was emailed every two weeks to all students who had visited the writing center within the prior two-week period; the email list was generated through our appointment scheduling system, WOnline, and sent as a “BCC” to clients. The client survey was much longer than the consultant survey, with 19 questions across four main areas: if they are using GenAI and, if so, which tools and for what purposes; if they used GenAI for the assignment they brought to the writing center; other ways they have been using GenAI; and their ethical perspective on AI use. For this article, due to space constraints, we don’t examine the ways clients use AI outside of coursework.

For both surveys, because responses were collected anonymously, we do not know how many consultants took all three surveys, two surveys, or just one; likewise, for clients who visited the writing center multiple times during the semester and therefore potentially took the survey more than once. What we can say from both surveys is that they provide us with a useful snapshot of clients’ use of AI and consultants’ experiences with AI in a semester with lots of initiatives, as well as uncertainty about AI.

Table 8.1. Response Rates, Client Survey

Total No. of clients, Spring 2024	No. of Survey Responses	Response Rate
502	72	14.3%

Table 8.2. Response Rates, Consultant Survey

	First Survey		Second Survey		Third Survey	
Total No. of Consultants, Spring 2024	No. of Responses	Response Rate	No. of Responses	Response Rate	No. of Responses	Response Rate
64	15	23.4%	14	21.8%	12	18.7%

SURVEY RESULTS

In this section, we present the results of our surveys of writing center clients and consultants. We start with survey responses related to writing center clients’ generative AI usage, followed by survey responses from both clients and

consultants on how generative AI is being used. Finally, we present survey responses from both groups on the perceptions about the benefits and drawbacks of generativeAI.

SECTION 1: ARE WRITING CENTER CLIENTS USING GENAI?

Client Responses

In the first set of questions, we wanted to understand what percentage of writing center clients are using GenAI and if they are bringing their AI-enhanced writing to their writing center appointments. First, we asked: “Have you used generative AI tools to assist you with any writing assignments for classes (and not just the writing you brought into the writing center recently)?” We also asked if they had used GenAI on the assignment they’d recently brought to the writing center. Their response options were “yes,” “no,” and “not sure” for general assignments and “yes,” “no,” and “prefer not to say” for the center-specific assignment. We present the responses to both questions in Figure 8.1. In general, 59 (81.9%) of clients had used GenAI, 11 (or 15.3%) had not used GenAI, and two (2.8%) were unsure. In their study on perceptions and use of AI at Clermont Auvergne University in this collection, Hamza Miftah, Dacia Dressen-Hammouda, and Christine Blanchard similarly found that a majority of students were using AI. In our study, for students’ writing center appointments, 26.1 percent (18) said they had used AI, with some clarifying that it was “for grammar and spelling,” 72.5 percent (50) said they had not, and one student preferred not to say.

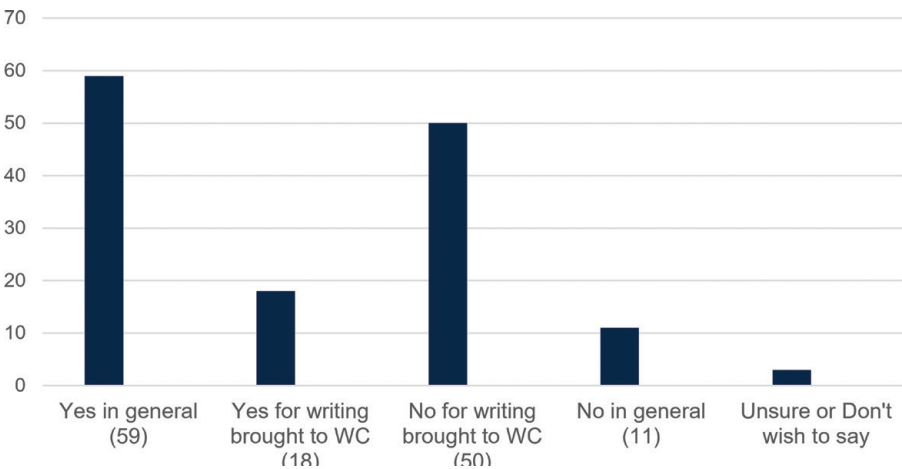


Figure 8.1. Clients using AI in writing assignments in general and for the writing they brought to the writing center.

What is striking about this figure is the discrepancy between clients' general use of AI versus their use of AI for the writing they brought to the writing center. Possible explanations for this discrepancy include students bringing in assignments where AI use was prohibited, or students being uncertain about how to use AI for that particular writing situation.

We also wanted to know if clients had discussed their AI use during their recent writing center appointment. Most students (88.2%, or 43) said their consultant did not talk with them about AI, while eight students (15.7%) said they did. Note that 51 students (70%) chose to answer this question; we assume that no response likely means "not applicable."

Finally, we asked clients which AI tools they were using; while we provided some examples (including Grammarly, ChatGPT, etc.), we left this survey open-ended so clients could write in whatever they wanted. Overwhelmingly, clients were using Grammarly (46 students) and ChatGPT (45 students). We consider Grammarly to be an AI tool because it uses AI to offer suggestions on grammar, style, and clarity. One client said they used Quilbot, and one said Microsoft Word (which we assume means CoPilot, though we can't know for sure).

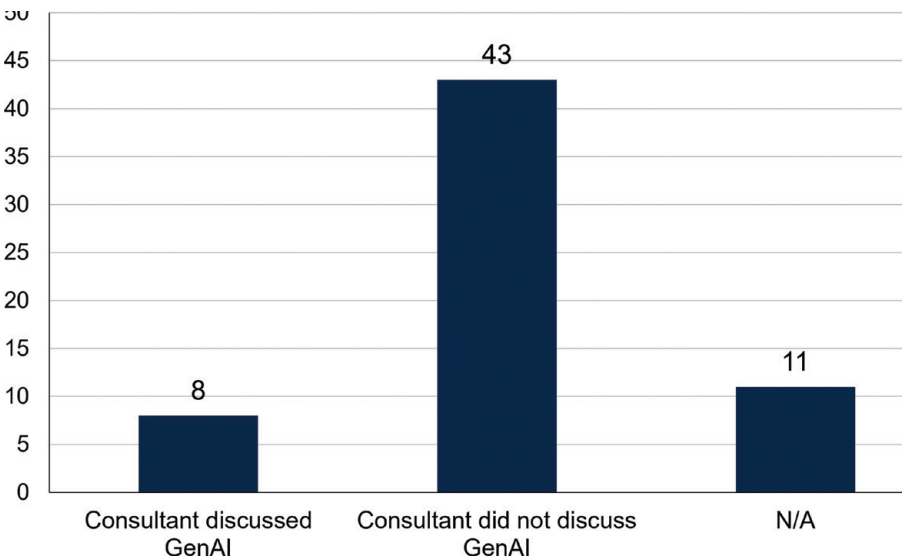


Figure 8.2. Number of clients whose consultant talked with them about GenAI use.

Consultant Responses

We first asked consultants if they had worked with any students who appeared to be using AI in their writing (see Figure 8.3). As a reminder, we ran this survey three times. In the first survey of the semester, we asked consultants to reflect

back on the previous semester; eight consultants (of 15) said their clients had used AI, and four consultants said they hadn't. Mid-semester, we asked consultants to focus on the current (spring) semester; two consultants (of 14) said their clients had used AI, while eleven said their clients had not used AI. By the end of the semester, the numbers were similar to the first survey: eight consultants (of 12) said their clients had used AI, and four consultants said they hadn't.

One possible explanation for the response to the mid-semester survey is that faculty had implemented “no AI use” policies for the spring semester; another possible explanation is that detecting AI use was getting more challenging. To understand how consultants were identifying AI use, we added a new question to the third survey: “How did you know they were using/not using AI?” The most common response was that the client either verbally disclosed their use of AI or started using the tool during the appointment. This suggests that, in the absence of evidence, consultants assumed the client was not using AI.

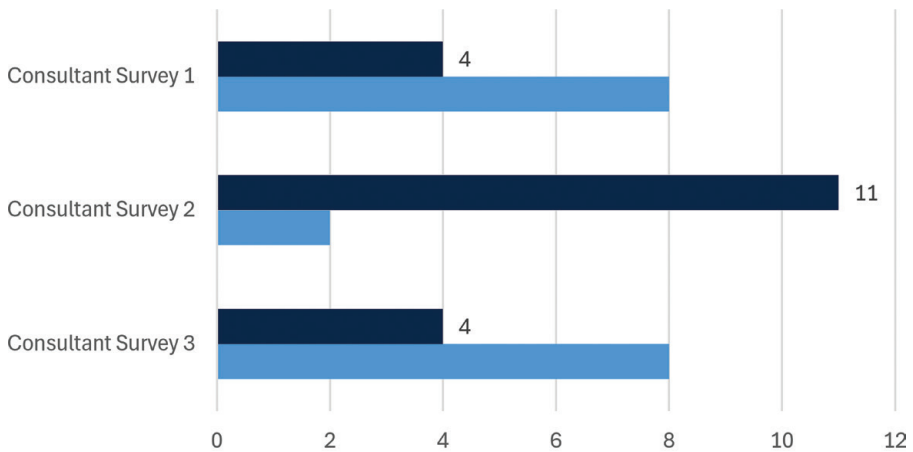


Figure 8.3. Consultants' response to “Have your clients used AI?”

SECTION 2: HOW ARE CLIENTS USING GENAI?

Client Responses

We also asked clients and consultants to explain for what purpose or during which stages of the writing process clients were using GenAI. In both client and consultant surveys, we provided a list of possible options; they could select any or all of the options, and there was room to write in their own response. While the list of options on both surveys was mostly the same, there was some variation; for instance, we did not ask consultants if clients had used AI to “check spelling and grammar” because we (wrongly) assumed that clients rarely complete this

step prior to coming to the writing center. As it turns out, checking spelling and grammar was the number one way clients used AI, and for this category, the tool was most likely to be Grammarly. After spell check and grammar, as shown in Figure 8.4, clients most frequently used AI to brainstorm ideas or to provide topics to write about, followed by using AI to explain concepts or answer questions, and then to provide feedback on their writing.

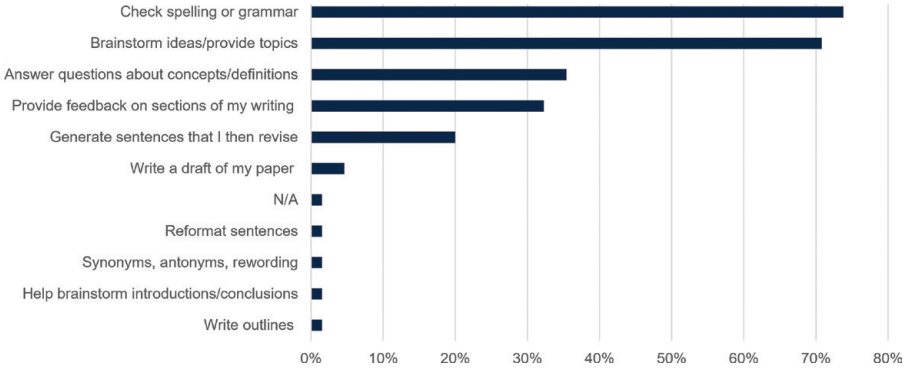


Figure 8.4. Writing center spring 2024 clients' purposes for using GenAI in writing.

Consultant Responses

Consultants (see Figure 8.5) also most frequently noted clients' use of AI for brainstorming, then to write a portion of their paper (which did not show up in the client survey, except perhaps for "generate sentences that I then revise"), and then to understand a concept or subject. Across the three surveys we ran during the semester, the only time consultants indicated their clients were using AI "but were unclear how" was at the beginning of the semester.

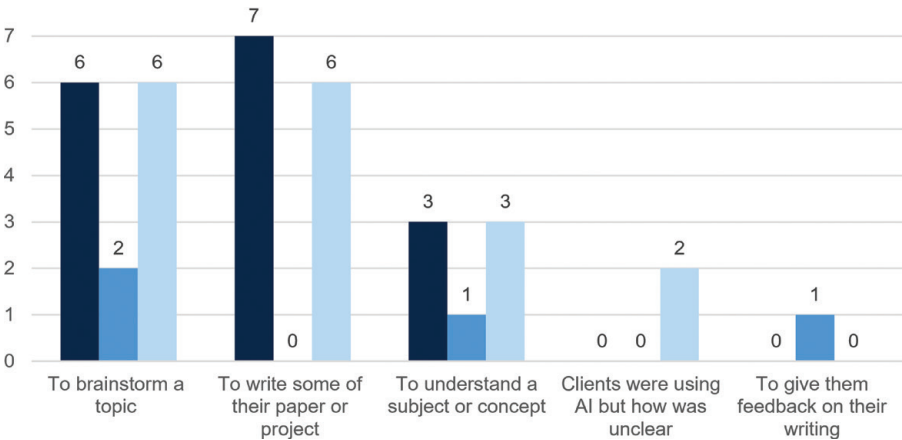


Figure 8.5. Clients' purposes for using GenAI according to consultants.

SECTION 3: HOW DO CLIENTS AND CONSULTANTS PERCEIVE GENERATIVE AI

Writing center consultants and clients were also asked about their attitudes toward AI use, particularly related to coursework.

Client Responses

Clients were asked to rank a series of statements using a Likert scale of 1-5, with the first statement (see Figure 8.6) being “Using generative AI is cheating.” No client “strongly agreed” with this statement, but 15.3 percent (11) “agreed” and 8.3 percent (6) “strongly disagreed.” The majority of clients either felt neutral about AI as cheating (34.7%, 25) or “disagreed” (41.7%, 30). We can compare these responses to Miftah et al.’s study of students’ perceptions of AI in this volume, where they show how students find AI beneficial to learning but also express concern about how AI might negatively impact critical thinking.

We also asked clients if they had used AI for one or more writing assignments and not disclosed it to their professors (see Figure 8.7). While the majority (62.3%, 43) said no, 29 percent (20) said they had used AI without disclosing it to their professors. This response could mean that the clients’ professors did not ask them to disclose their AI use, or the clients used AI in ways they did not think needed disclosure, or they were expected to disclose AI use but chose not to.

Finally, we asked clients whether they found GenAI helpful for their writing process. Shown in Figure 8.8, the responses are unsurprising: 32.5 percent (25) said yes, 49.5 percent (38) said yes for some parts of the writing process, and 18.2 percent (14) said no.

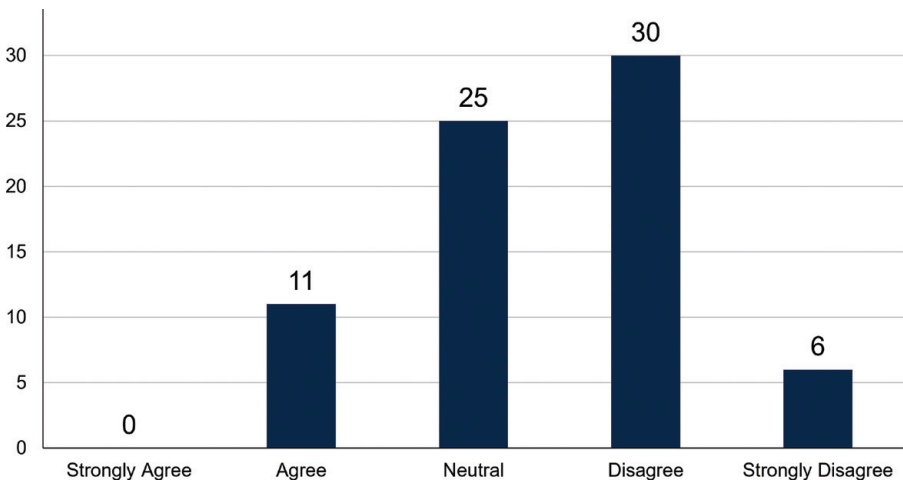


Figure 8.6. Clients' Likert scale response to "Do you think Using AI is cheating?"

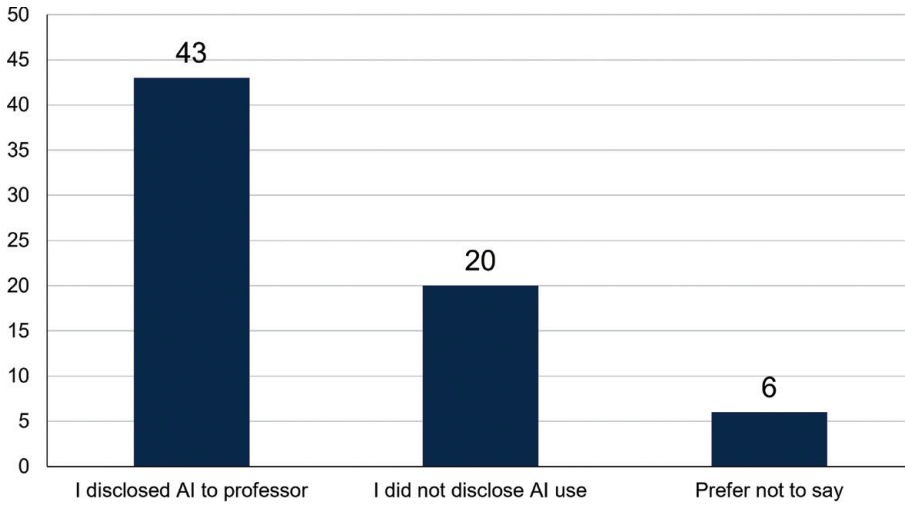


Figure 8.7. Clients' response to question about whether they disclosed AI use to their professors.

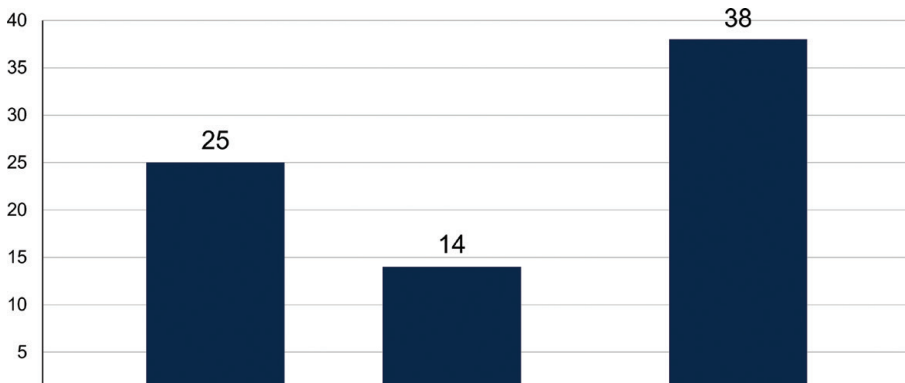


Figure 8.8. Clients' response to question about GenAI's usefulness to their writing process.

Consultant Responses

To understand consultants' ethical perspectives on GenAI, we provided five statements and asked them to rank each statement in relation to the other statements. Each statement presented a perspective ranging from "GenAI is essential" (meaning it's an indispensable tool for the writing process) to "cheating" (implying it should not be used). The statements consultants were asked to rank are:

1. Generative AI is an essential tool to support all aspects of the writing process.

2. Generative AI is a useful tool for the writing process if used ethically.
3. Writers should limit their use of generative AI to only certain tasks, like narrowing a topic.
4. Generative AI dulls writers’ creative and critical thinking skills.
5. Using generative AI is cheating.

Consultants ranked the statement they most strongly agreed with as “1” and the one they most strongly disagreed with as “5.” For instance, if one consultant felt that the statement “GenAI dulls writers’ creative and critical thinking skills” best captured their beliefs about AI, they would drag that to the top of the list, or to the “number 1” spot. The results of the highest-ranked statement (the statement most often ranked at number 1) and lowest-ranked statement (the statement most often ranked at number 5) are in Figures 8.9 and 8.10.

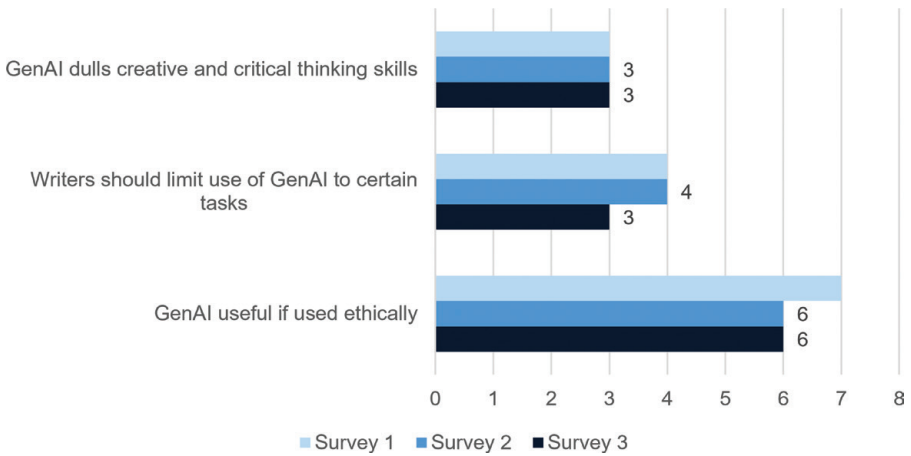


Figure 8.9. Consultants’ highest-ranked selection across surveys.

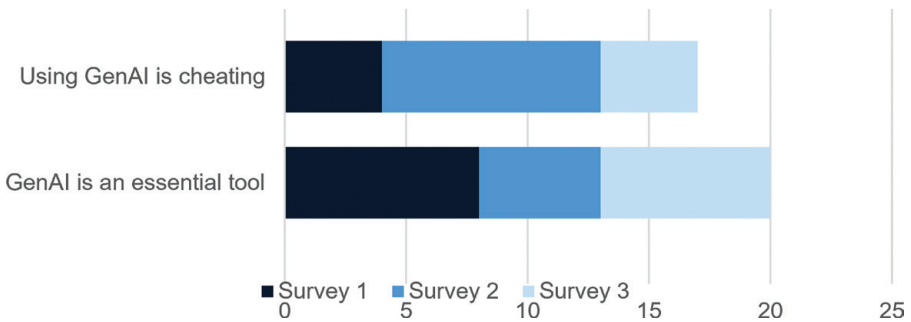


Figure 8.10. Consultants’ lowest-ranked selection across surveys.

These figures show a clustering of strongly agree and strongly disagree in two areas. In the area where consultants most strongly agree (ranked “1”) are the statements: “Generative AI is a useful tool for the writing process if used ethically,” followed by “Writers should limit their use of generative AI to only certain tasks like narrowing a topic,” and “Generative AI dulls writers’ creative and critical thinking skills.” On the other end of the scale, the statements that consultants favored the least and most frequently ranked “5” were “Generative AI is an essential tool to support all aspects of the writing process” and “Using generative AI is cheating.” This suggests that consultants generally don’t believe AI is either essential to the writing process or that it’s wrong to use it. Rather, consultants’ attitudes to AI are cautious and nuanced; generally, more consultants believe GenAI use is acceptable if it’s used ethically and carefully, for some selected aspects of the writing process. They are not convinced that it’s necessary for the writing process, but if students want to use it (especially in ethical ways), it shouldn’t be considered cheating.

And, finally, we asked consultants to rank their comfort level with using AI in their appointments. What is notable (see Figure 8.11) is that quite a number of consultants across all three surveys are uncomfortable or very uncomfortable consulting with AI (six in each survey).

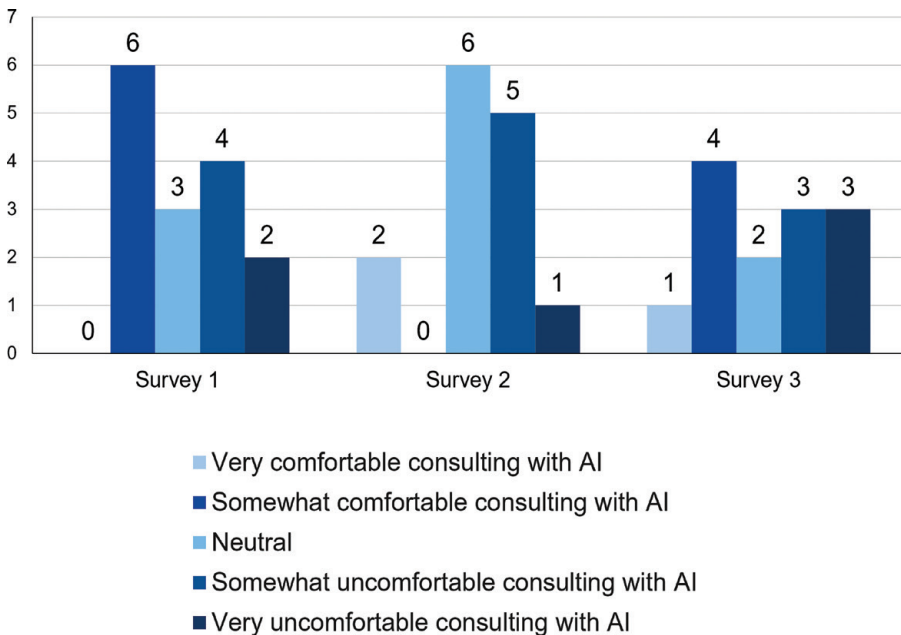


Figure 8.11. Consultants’ self-reported comfort level with using GenAI in writing center appointments.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Based on the findings of our spring 2024 surveys of writing center clients and consultants, we now have a better understanding of if, how, and in what ways our clients are using GenAI, as well as how consultants are handling clients' use of GenAI in their appointments. While a 14.3 percent client response rate and a 21.3 percent average consultant response rate (across three consultant surveys) must be considered with caution, we can say, tentatively, that:

1. Most writing center clients are using GenAI, as other recent studies have found (e.g., Cheattle), they are using the most predictable tools (Grammarly and ChatGPT), and they are using these tools primarily for the beginning and end stages of the writing process: ChatGPT for brainstorming and getting started and Grammarly for grammar and spelling checks. Other recent studies have also found that students commonly use GenAI for these parts of the writing process (Zieve-Cohen et al.)
2. Clients are not always disclosing their use of AI to the consultants (and indeed to their professors), and consultants do not always bring up AI, even if they suspect their client is using it.
3. Both clients and consultants have a somewhat nuanced ethical response to GenAI use, and neither clients nor consultants believe using AI is cheating.
4. Finally, some consultants are moderately comfortable using or discussing AI in consulting sessions, while others are not comfortable doing so.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING CENTERS

We still have much more to learn from our clients and consultants about how GenAI is impacting their writing lives. And so much has already changed since we conducted the survey in the spring of 2024, including students' attitudes, the tools themselves and students' access to them, and faculty attitudes toward using AI. However, our study shows us that students are already using AI and that consultants want to help students use AI tools in thoughtful and responsible ways. With these findings in mind, we have some next steps for our own writing center, and we believe these suggestions are useful for other writing centers as well.

- Consultant training needs to include techniques for how to discuss AI use with clients, a conclusion reached in other recent studies (Aikens and Weildon; Zieve-Cohen et al.). As AI becomes increasingly

integrated into students' writing processes and their writing technologies, consultants need to feel comfortable asking clients about their use of AI. Discussing students' GenAI use in a safe environment will more likely lead to productive conversations about how to use these tools responsibly and in accordance with faculty guidelines. Consultants need training and sample question scripts to lead these conversations with clients.

- Writing consultants also need to develop their AI critical literacies. As is the case when any new technology emerges, consultants need some training to help them understand how AI tools function, as well as their benefits and limitations.
- Consultants also need to know faculty's AI use policy, which means that faculty should have clearly stated AI use policies. This is especially important as students report being confused by conflicting faculty AI policies (Cheatle; Zieve-Cohen et al.). Consultants already use a series of questions in the opening moments of an appointment; now they also need to ask about professors' GenAI use policy before proceeding with those policies in mind.

Many writing centers are concerned about how AI tools will impact not only the nature of our work but our very futures (Lundin). Will writing centers continue to exist if students or administrators think AI can do our jobs just as well as humans can? Despite this real concern, the nuanced response to AI from consultants, in both our and other writing centers, leads us to end on a more hopeful note. Writing centers remain essential places of learning by providing human-to-human connections, kindness, and affective collaboration opportunities (as discussed by Rebecca Hallman Martini in Chapter 7 of this collection). As importantly, consultants have a crucial role to play in leading honest conversations with their peers about the benefits and limitations of using AI as part of the writing process, as well as in helping students use AI tools critically and responsibly.

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