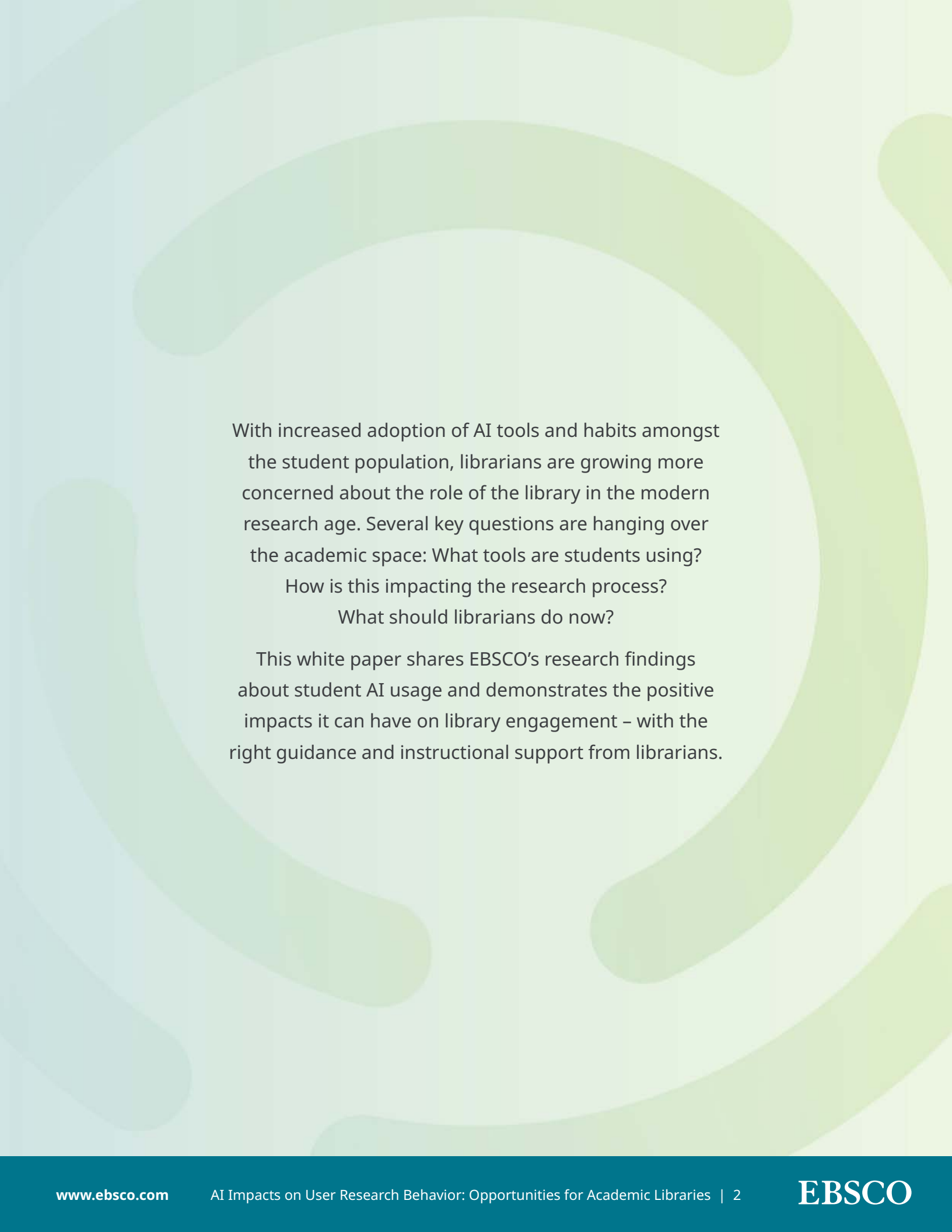# AI Impacts on User Research Behavior: Opportunities for Academic Libraries

Findings from 2025 user survey and feature case study

**EBSCO**

With increased adoption of AI tools and habits amongst the student population, librarians are growing more concerned about the role of the library in the modern research age. Several key questions are hanging over the academic space: What tools are students using? How is this impacting the research process? What should librarians do now?

This white paper shares EBSCO's research findings about student AI usage and demonstrates the positive impacts it can have on library engagement – with the right guidance and instructional support from librarians.

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# Student use of AI in the research process

In February 2025, EBSCO conducted a survey of 300 full-time students in the United States, comprising an even distribution of underclassmen (1st-2nd year undergraduates or community college students), upperclassmen (3rd-4th year undergraduates), and post-graduates (Master's, PhD or post-doctoral students).

This survey asked students to self-report on their usage of AI, including what tool(s) they use, why and how they use it, their attitudes towards AI and more.

From these findings, we discovered:

# 86%

**of students** surveyed have used AI technology to assist in some stage of academic research (topic refinement, finding sources, evaluating sources, writing, etc.)

Students were also asked to identify on a five-point scale how often they use AI to accomplish specific tasks (1-never to 5-almost always).

*How often do you use AI to accomplish the following research tasks?*

| Use case | 1 (Never) | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Almost always) | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Answer a specific research question | 49 | 49 | 49 | 106 | 48 | 3.2 |
| Find most relevant sources on your topic | 67 | 60 | 45 | 98 | 31 | 2.9 |
| Summarize long articles or book chapters | 49 | 29 | 42 | 84 | 97 | 3.5 |
| Simplify or rephrase complex academic language | 61 | 43 | 42 | 84 | 71 | 3.2 |
| Make connections and insights across multiple sources | 74 | 67 | 48 | 80 | 32 | 2.8 |
| Make writing or phrasing suggestions | 56 | 44 | 37 | 84 | 80 | 3.3 |
| Generate writing from notes and bullet points | 79 | 45 | 42 | 81 | 54 | 3.0 |

From this question, we identified that students are most frequently using AI to:

- ✔ **Summarize long articles or book chapters** (Average score of 3.5)
- ✔ **Make writing or phrasing suggestions\*** (Average score of 3.3)
- ✔ **Simplify or rephrase complex academic language** (Average score of 3.2)

*\*For example, clarifying a sentence the student wrote; this does not include entire paper generation based on notes or bullets, which was a separate option.*

Options with a lower average score included tasks related to source selection, evaluation and synthesis, suggesting that students are still generally engaging with this core function of the research process.

However, when asked to use the same five-point scale to identify frequency of AI tool usage, most students are relying primarily on open web AI chat and search tools (ChatGPT, Copilot, Perplexity) with an average score of 3.8 – not research-specific tools or those embedded directly within research platforms, both with an average score of 2.1.

*How often do you use the following AI tools?*

| Use case | 1 (Never) | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Almost always) | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| General AI chat and search tools | 32 | 26 | 38 | 84 | 121 | 3.8 |
| Research-specific AI tools | 150 | 63 | 26 | 46 | 16 | 2.1 |
| AI tools within research platforms | 138 | 70 | 31 | 46 | 16 | 2.1 |

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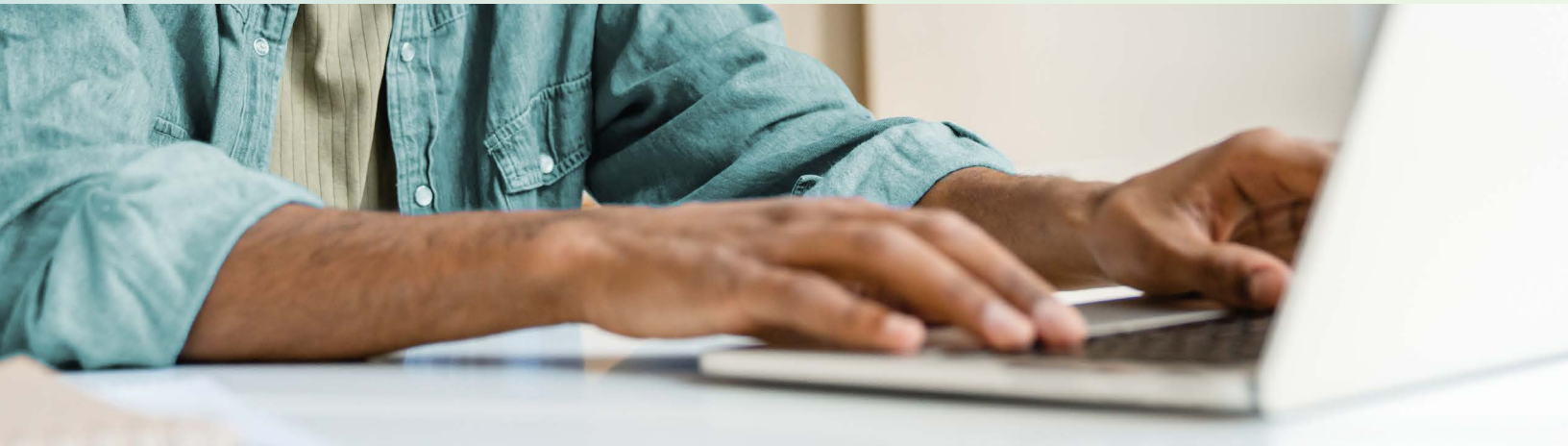
# The problem with open web AI

Open web AI tools are familiar and easily accessible, but do not provide the same safeguards that library-centric AI research tools offer. Open web LLMs (Large Language Models) gather information from various sources, including user-generated (non-expert) platforms. Some of the most popular platforms cited by open web LLMs like ChatGPT, Google AI, and Perplexity include:*

- ✓ Reddit
- ✓ Wikipedia
- ✓ Forbes
- ✓ YouTube
- ✓ NerdWallet
- ✓ LinkedIn

Unlike open web LLMs, AI services grounded in academic resources within library platforms ensure users operate in a **"walled garden" of trusted, vetted content.**

*Source: **https://www.tryprofound.com/blog/ai-platform-citation-patterns**

While students overall feel positive (68%) about using AI technology in academic research, nearly all (91%) identified at least one barrier or concern with using the technology in this process:

| Concern | Where library AI fits in |
|---|---|
| **74% of students** surveyed are concerned with AI generating **untrustworthy answers or content** | The "walled garden" approach of library-centric AI can increase student confidence and trust in the output of their tools. |
| **54% of students** surveyed are concerned about **breaking institutional AI policies** | Ambiguity breeds anxiety. Students need clarity on the expectations of AI usage, and better policy beyond a blanket "No AI allowed." Librarians are uniquely positioned to collaborate with decision-makers and stakeholders to shape clearer, more balanced guidelines that empower both students and faculty to engage with AI tools confidently and responsibly.* |
| **39% of students** surveyed are concerned about AI **impact on IP and publishing** | EBSCO works collaboratively with publishers to protect IP and ensure full transparency in content usage. We also adhere to ISO/IEC 27001, 27017, 27018, and 27701 standards for data security and privacy. |

**\*Need more support on your understanding of AI?**
Explore our **AI Resources for Libraries**, including our AI Literacy Short Course.

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> **There's always a chance AI could miss something. If I don't read or skim the articles myself, there's a chance something's getting missed, something's getting left out.**
>
> **– Graduate student,
> moderate AI user, February 2025**

# Faculty-driven AI policies are an added burden for students

Students report that AI usage policies at their institution tend to vary by professor, creating additional friction in the research process. The onus is placed on students to not only keep track of what platforms do and don't utilize AI (which may not always be clear) and in which cases they can and cannot use those platforms.

## 74%

are generally confident on their institution's AI usage policies

**but**

## 54%

are concerned about misusing AI according to their institution's AI policies

**Managing conflicting expectations and messaging from faculty may account for anxiety associated with AI usage.**

Directives from faculty often lack nuance (e.g., "no AI allowed"), even in instances where library resources at those institutions contain AI-driven search features and/or summarization.

Faculty relate a similar ambivalence, wanting their students to learn the "right way," while simultaneously observing how AI is rapidly transforming their fields.

"

**I have professors that are telling me I have to learn to use AI to be relevant in my field and others who are telling me I can't use ChatGPT for anything in their class."**

**– Undergraduate student,
moderate AI user, February 2025**

# Encouraging adoption of library-centric AI increases engagement

**A Case Study:** AI Insights & AI-Assisted Search in EBSCO Platforms

EBSCO's goal is to develop AI enhancements and services where it makes sense, and where we can best support our users in the evolving AI landscape.

We are taking a **deliberate and measured** approach working with our customers to ensure we release the most impactful features that **improve the research process** while ensuring we guard against potential AI-related misinformation and factual inaccuracies.

We are not currently investigating any AI that would affect the assessment and critical thinking components of the research process. Our goal is to assist with the researcher journey – **not replace it**.

Our platform roadmap provides an overview of the features and functionality completed and coming soon to EBSCO research platforms, including those that leverage AI.

**View Platform Roadmap**

The EBSCOhost and EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) platforms offer AI-based research support features, including:

- ✔ **AI Insights –** A tool that uses generative AI to summarize full-text articles by extracting 3–5 key points with the goal of helping users quickly assess whether an article is relevant to their research.

  **Click to read more about AI Insights**

- ✔ **Natural Language Search –** A supporting search function that allows users to enter queries in everyday language instead of using complex Boolean operators or keyword strings.

  **Click to read more about Natural Language Search**

More than 13,000 libraries currently make these AI features available to their users, and are **already seeing benefits** in research efficiency and platform engagement.

We examined anonymous platform engagement data, comparing the activities of all users over a 30 day period as an average baseline to those who engaged with AI features like AI Insights and Natural Language Searching.

**AI Insights** users are

# 40% more likely to access and engage with Full Text

and have

# sessions that are 3x longer

than other active users.

**NLS** users are

# 20% more likely to access and engage with Full Text

and have

# sessions that are 2x longer

than other active users.

Users who engage with **Suggested Searches** are

# 11% more likely to access Full Text

compared to other searches

and conduct

# 3x more searches per session

than other active users.

✓ **What this means:** AI features help users stay engaged in the research process and avoid search burnout. Users are not using AI to take shortcuts.

At a high level, these libraries are meeting students' expectations regarding AI availability and are positioned as forward-thinking and responsive to evolving research behaviors.

**Try These Features**

*Applicable EBSCOhost database or EDS subscription required – contact your EBSCO representative with any questions.*

# Perspectives from librarians:

**"**

AI is a valuable support for efficiency and user experience, particularly in discovery, communication, and resource management. Its use is growing, but our approach remains intentional, ethical, and staff-guided."

**– Raj Saxena, Australian College of Physical Education**

**"**

Our library approaches AI with cautious optimism. We aim to integrate it thoughtfully while teaching students how to use it responsibly and ethically in their research."

**– Audrey Butlett-Swenson, MLIS, Doctoral Librarian, Walden University**

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# Key takeaways

✓ While AI usage and use cases vary, nearly all students **are using generative AI to some degree** to streamline their research process.

✓ Student **awareness and willingness** to engage with necessary "in the loop" reviewing and fact-checking varies based **on investment in assignment, time, and comfort with generative AI.**

✓ **Librarians** can help shape transparent, practical guidelines by collaborating with institutional decision-makers.

✓ **Summarization of lengthy articles** and **explanation of complex academic material** are by far the most common use case among students.

✓ **Institutional constraints and concerns** represent one of the biggest blockers to usage for students.

✓ It's difficult not to acknowledge that generative AI is **emerging as an essential part of student research workflow.**

Integrating and embracing AI in library services is mutually beneficial: students can turn to the library for trusted AI tools to support their research workflows, which in turn drives higher search activity and platform engagement—ultimately strengthening the library's ROI.

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# Still have questions? Email ai@ebsco and talk to our experts.

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