

THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION SETTINGS

A phenomenological study centering African American undergraduate students

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PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

AI tools increasingly support learning, yet students do not experience these benefits equally. Digital access, institutional resources, unclear policies, and limited qualitative evidence leave African American students’ perspectives underrepresented.

PURPOSE

Examine how African American undergraduates experience AI and how those experiences shape academic learning and co-curricular engagement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1What are the lived experiences of African American undergraduate students using artificial intelligence tools in the higher education setting?
- 2How do African American undergraduate students describe the impact of their lived experiences with AI tools on academic learning and co-curricular experiences?

METHODOLOGY

- Qualitative phenomenological design

10 African American undergraduates at one public state college in the southeastern United States

Semi-structured virtual interviews, audio recorded and professionally transcribed
- Manual first-cycle coding, AI-assisted prompted coding, pattern coding, and thematic analysis

De-identified transcripts, member checking, and researcher authority over all interpretations

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Technology Acceptance Model

Perceived usefulness and ease of use help explain students’ confidence, selective engagement, and continued use of AI.

Davis, 1989

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

10 CURRENTLY ENROLLED AFRICAN AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATES WHO USE AI

FINDINGS

Five themes show how students balance AI’s usefulness with ethical judgment, verification, and growing confidence.

01

RQ1

AI as Academic Support

Students used AI to process information, strengthen comprehension, and work more efficiently.

“AI breaks it down into smaller parts.” — Lily

02

RQ1

AI Boundaries and Ethical Use

Students navigated differing faculty rules through policy awareness, personal responsibility, and academic integrity.

“I have to be very careful about when and how I use it.” — Kate

03

RQ1 + RQ2

AI Trust and Verification

Students described accuracy concerns, double-checking practices, and uncertainty when AI produced conflicting answers.

“I always double-check what AI gives me.” — Kate

04

RQ2

AI Beyond Coursework

AI supported organizational planning, student leadership, communication, and creative administrative work.

“I’ve used AI to create meeting minutes and agendas.” — Emma

05

RQ2

Confidence with AI Use

Repeated exposure helped students integrate AI into routine, recognize its usefulness, and shift earlier perceptions.

“At first, I thought using AI was cheating...” — Kate



INTERPRETATION

- Students used AI as structured academic assistance rather than a replacement for learning.

Inconsistent faculty expectations required students to make their own ethical decisions.

Trust remained conditional because students routinely verified AI responses.
- AI influenced leadership and co-curricular work beyond formal coursework.

Confidence increased through repeated exposure and perceived usefulness.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- 1Create a cross-functional AI task force
- 2Publish clear interim guidance across courses
- 3Teach student AI ethics and decision-making
- 4Strengthen faculty guidance at the assignment level
- 5Integrate AI support into student success and leadership development

LIMITATIONS

- One institutional setting
- Focused sample of 10 participants
- Self-reported interview data
- Rapidly changing AI tools and policies

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Broader and more diverse student populations
- Long-term studies of AI engagement
- Expanded theoretical and methodological approaches
- Ethical, policy, and equity-focused inquiry

CONCLUSION

Students engaged AI with intention, reflection, and discernment. Institutional clarity shaped trust and decision-making, while usefulness and ease of use strengthened confidence and selective engagement.