



COILing Toward Consensus: Empowering Students to Co-Create AI Social Contracts Across Cultures in Journalism and Mass Communication

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Abstract

Using a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) framework, the authors implemented a cross-cultural experiential learning project in which 73 journalism and mass communication students from the U.S. and Mexico co-created a generative AI social contract for use in their courses. This approach enabled students to engage in cross-cultural collaboration, structured deliberation, and democratic voting to define the parameters of acceptable and prohibited uses of AI. Outcomes suggest that this intervention promotes student buy-in; increases awareness of AI uses, risks, and opportunities; and provides a replicable framework for AI policymaking to promote transparency, decrease procedural anxiety, and support human learning.

Keywords: AI pedagogy, consensus building, democratic pedagogy, experiential learning, international collaboration

Introduction

Generative AI has created a paradox in journalism and mass communication (JMC) education: While AI literacy is a necessary qualification for future industry practitioners, undergraduate students who have yet to master core disciplinary skills may not be ideal candidates for learning from AI use (Lim et al., 2025). Further, research suggests students favor clear policies and boundaries regarding AI use and

expectations (Hamerman et al., 2025), and ambiguity about the ethical implications and disciplinary risks of AI use may increase students' anxiety related to AI use and/or disclosure in their coursework. This cross-cultural, multi-section AI social contract project describes one approach that may clarify acceptable AI use for students, while also promoting AI literacy, cross-cultural collaboration, and democratic classroom decision-making. In fall 2025, the three au-

thors from two universities—one in the south-central United States and one in northeastern Mexico—implemented a novel experiential learning project for a virtual international exchange program, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). A total of 73 students from the authors’ three courses collaborated synchronously and asynchronously to brainstorm, vote on, and adopt a unified generative AI policy for use in their courses.

This timely project can enhance learning in the JMC classroom as it helps students to: a) talk openly and honestly about AI use, a topic that has become taboo in many classrooms; b) adopt professional standards regarding AI transparency and ethics in their work; and c) collaborate across cultures to reach consensus through democratic processes.

Learning Objectives

The COIL AI Social Contract project was designed to promote two learning objectives among JMC students: 1) to understand the practical and ethical implications of various generative AI uses in their work; and 2) to demonstrate critical thinking and culturally informed collaborative decision-making by evaluating ethical practices and co-creating use guidelines.

These objectives align with ACEJMC Professional Values and Competencies including: a) demonstrate an understanding of the multicultural history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications; b) demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in the pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and service to all peoples and communities; c) apply critical thinking skills in evaluating information; d) critically evaluating their own work and that of others; and e) apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communication professions in which they work (ACEJMC, 2025).

Description of Project

At the start of the fall 2025 semester, instructors of two sections of a senior-level media writing seminar (U.S.) and a media ethics seminar (Mexico) designed a two-week collaborative project that would account for 5-10% of students’ final grades. The instructors designed activities based on experiential learning theory, which posits that learning is cyclical as learners create new knowledge through stages, including concrete experiences, reflection, conceptual-

ization of future attempts, and active experimentation in new efforts (Kolb, 1984).

The project kicked off with a Zoom meeting with all students, where instructors outlined the project and its goals. In week 1, instructors discussed AI risks and opportunities, and students completed an assignment that required them to record and post an introduction video using the collaborative platform Padlet. In these videos, students were asked to share about themselves and their thoughts on generative AI. They were also required to comment on peers’ videos to encourage cross-cultural engagement early in the project.

Instructors divided the students into 19 teams of 3-4 students, with at least one student from each of the three courses on each team. Teams were purposely small to encourage individual participation and discussion. These teams were assigned a worksheet on AI use (see Figure 1 in the appendix). The worksheet allowed students to refine their ideas regarding fair, questionable, and prohibited uses for AI and to pose questions to their instructors. Teams were required to meet via Zoom or WhatsApp to discuss, debate, and reach consensus before submitting their responses via Google Forms. To ensure students participated in the video call, instructors required students to submit screenshots of their meetings in progress. The authors note that language barriers may have affected some of the dialogue; however, all students spoke conversational English.

Instructors organized the worksheet data to elicit topics and themes identified by students. All suggestions for inclusion that received more than one mention were first combined by similar theme or category (e.g., separate suggestions for using AI for “brainstorming” and “idea generation” were combined into one measure), then included as a measure on a Phase I voting ballot.

Students completed their ballots during class to ensure participation. Instructions on the ballot informed students that all measures receiving 50% or more of the classes’ votes would be included in the final social contract. Students then selected their top three options in six categories: 1) allowable AI uses, 2) questionable AI uses that would need further discussion with the instructor and/or class, 3) prohibited AI uses, 4) consequences for first offense violations, 5) consequences for second offense violations, and 6) disclosure expectations (see Figure 2 in the appendix). Measures that received some support but did not reach 50% were reconsidered in Phase II voting.

Measures that received little-to-no support were removed from future votes (see Figures 2 & 3 in the appendix).

Following both voting rounds, students discussed data and reflected on how their views on AI use had evolved and how they may vote in the second round. Discussion occurred in classes and on WhatsApp with international peers.

Upon reviewing the final ballots, the instructors discussed results and assembled the final social contract (see Figure 4 in the appendix). Students then recorded an additional Padlet discussion video to reflect on the contract, the process of creating it, if and how their thoughts on AI use had evolved, and their experience working across cultures; they were also required to comment on other students’ videos to reinforce collaboration.

Table 1: Adopted Social Contract Items

Adopted Uses	Percentage	Round
Brainstorming	73%	1 (n=63)
Organizing data	50.80%	1 (n=63)
Summarizing information	57.90%	2 (n=57)
Adopted Bans	Percentage	Round
Submitting AI-generated text	60%	1 (n=63)
Using AI as only source	50.80%	1 (n=63)
Manipulating information and/or creating disinformation	61.40%	2 (n=57)
Disclosure Policy	Percentage	Round
Explain AI use and value in writing	66.70%	1 (n=63)
Cite the AI tool and explain	57.10%	1 (n=63)
Specify how and in which parts of the assignment AI was used	58.70%	1 (n=63)
First Violation Consequence	Percentage	Round
Warning from instructor	65.10%	1 (n=63)
Second Violation Consequence	Percentage	Round
Revise assignment for half credit	45.60%	2 (n=57)

Results

Table 1 below illustrates what students adopted and banned in their social contract voting: and public relations contexts. A central thread of his scholarship investigates how emerging technologies reshape relationship-building in online communities and educational environments.

In addition to identifying fair (e.g., brainstorming) and prohibited (e.g., text generated for submission) uses, the process eliminated perceptions with little or low support. In fact, the students adopted and banned only a few uses. For instance, students did not endorse behaviors like obtaining feedback on first drafts as fair use (see Figures 2 & 3 in the appendix). It is interesting that no “questionable” uses, which would require further discussion with instructors, were identified in voting.¹ Students also set con-

sequences for policy violations, namely redoing work and receiving half credit for second offenses.

The second-offense policy was the only measure that did not reach the 50% threshold with 45.6% (n=57). However, as the faculty determined the course schedule could not accommodate a third round, they chose to adopt it as it was the measure with the highest level of support. Instructors opted to include a clause in the contract stating they would retain discretion for consequences for further violations.

Additionally, the final Padlet videos provided qualitative data for evaluating the experience’s impact on student participants. Upon analyzing these data, six themes emerged: 1) final policy satisfaction; 2) confidence in procedures; 3) new awareness of AI capabilities/uses; 4) opportunities and risks; 5) appreciation for new cultures; and 6) technical frustrations.

¹ We determined that anything not explicitly in the contract would default to requiring further discussion and therefore limited the final draft to fair and prohibited uses.

These themes not only suggest students appreciated having equity in the direction of the class (policy satisfaction & confidence in procedures) but also the activity satisfied the primary learning objectives of: 1) understanding the practical and ethical implications of various generative AI uses in their work (new awareness of of AI capabilities & opportunities and risks); and 2) demonstrating critical thinking and culturally-informed collaborative decision-making by evaluating ethical practices and co-creating use guidelines (appreciation for new cultures). Further, the iterative process of jointly creating the contract also satisfies objective No. 2.

Upon completion of the project, students who earned at least 80% of project points qualified for LinkedIn Badges issued by the Mexican university's Vice Rectory for International Affairs. Ultimately, 80.82% (n=59 of 73) earned the credential.

Conclusion

The COIL AI Social Contract process established a replicable framework for JMC faculty to promote AI literacy in an experiential learning process that promoted cross-cultural collaboration, democratic norms, and consensus-building. It also helped faculty and students collaborate to implement AI tools with clear boundaries to protect human learning and eliminate unnecessary anxieties over generative AI use. The fact that students opted democratically to adopt and ban only a few uses and went relatively easy on themselves for punishments suggests that the students, much like the professors, were uncertain about how generative AI can and should be applied in higher education and reflects both the emerging research in this area and the need for more practical tools and clear guidance for AI integration.

This experiential learning project took roughly one month to implement. The instructors had to plan for and address technological and logistical issues to ensure students could connect with international partners and navigate new platforms, which was reflected in the theme of technical frustrations (WhatsApp was new for many of the U.S. students, and although there was only one hour of time difference between the two sites, scheduling meetings was a challenge). However, future implementations are likely to require less preparation and setup, as we can now leverage the technical processes and teaching materials we developed.

Our approach and findings provide important

implications for JMC faculty. Implementing our approach in multi-section JMC courses may promote policy consistency and buy-in from students, as well as critical thinking and media literacy. Ultimately, this social contract project is a practical and proven approach that supports core JMC competencies while also providing students with applied learning experiences that leverage the latest technology in the field.

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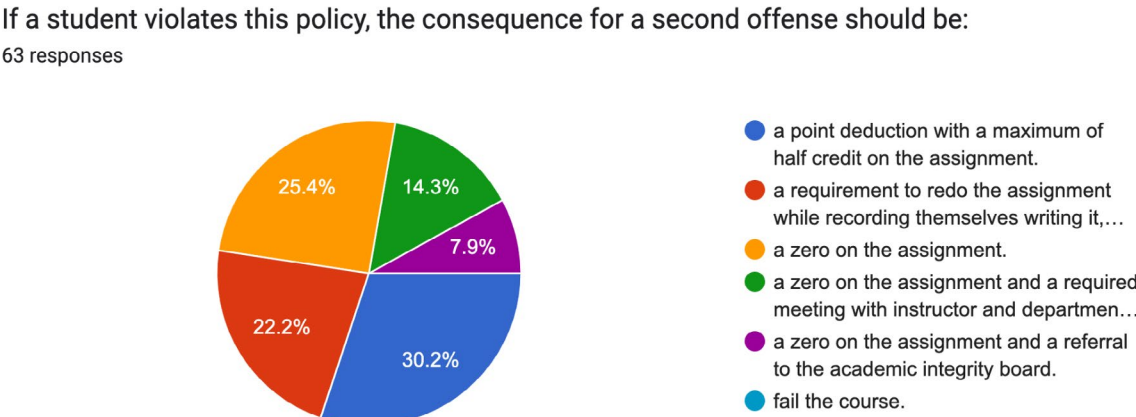
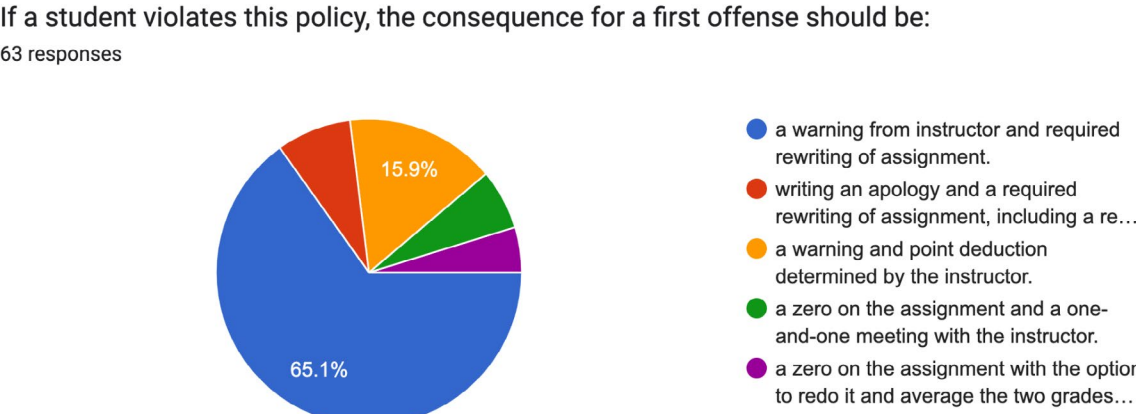
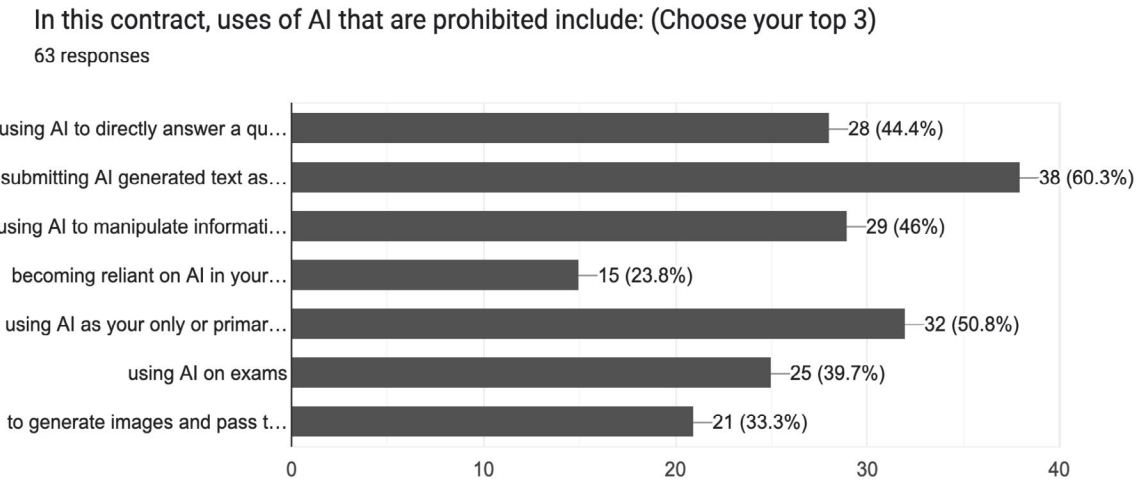
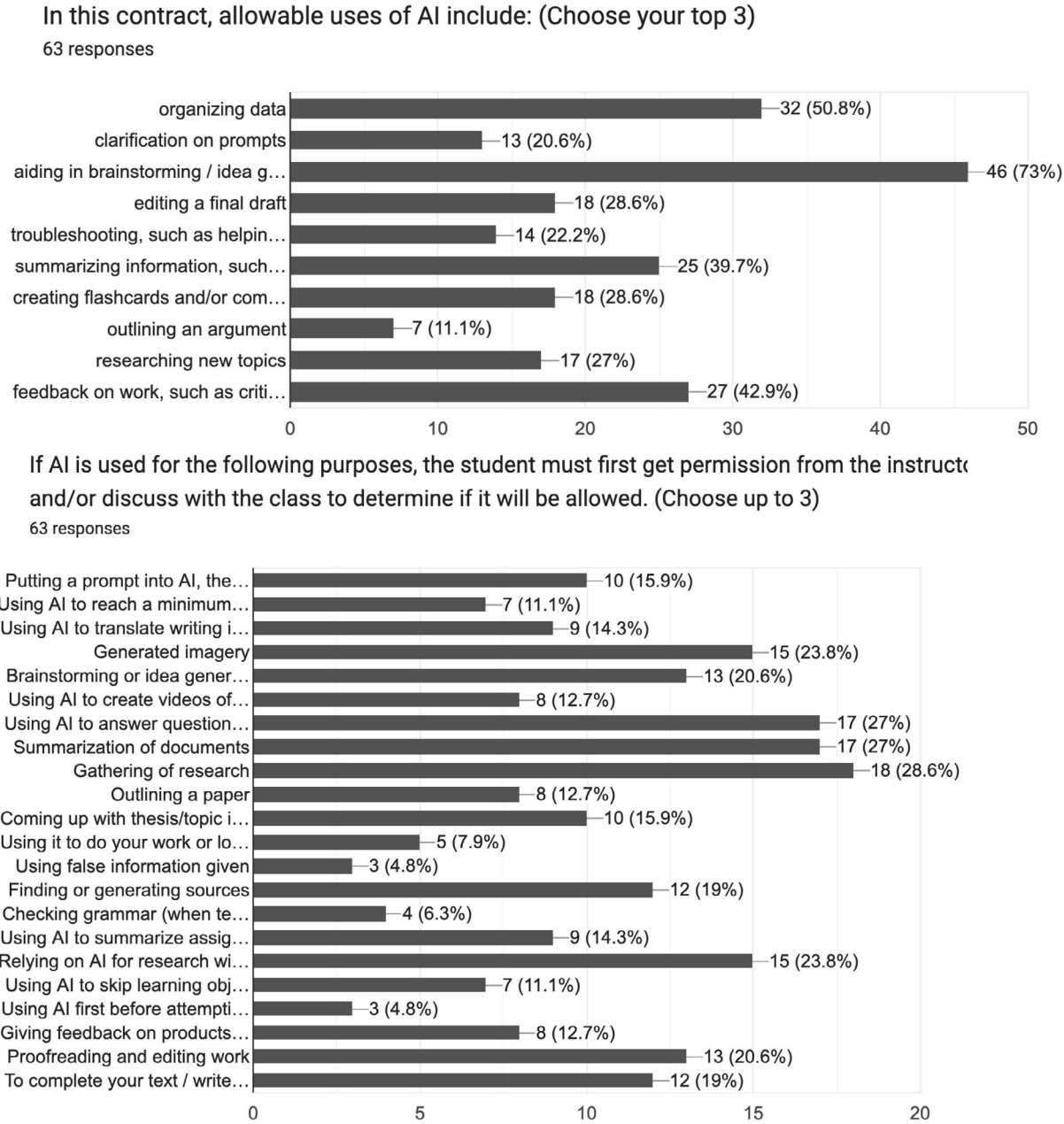
Appendix

Figure 1
Team Worksheet

Your team should engage in discussion and reach consensus on each item before completing this form. Do not use AI to fill out this form. Your responses will be used to create a ballot, and our classes will vote to finalize our social contract for AI usage this semester. Your group must submit your form **no later than [DATE and TIME]** to earn credit and to have your proposals included in the final voting.

1. **Purpose:** Provide a one-sentence statement on the purpose of ethical AI use in this contract. Consider completing this statement or something similar: “In this contract, ethical AI use includes _____ and/or _____ and does not include _____.”
2. **Transparency:** Provide a one-sentence statement on expectations for AI transparency in this contract. For example, you might complete this sentence: “If generative AI is used in any part of an assignment, the student must _____ and should back this up by _____.”
3. **Creativity:** Provide a one-sentence statement for the creative use of AI in our classes. For example, you might complete this sentence: “In this contract, students may enhance their creative efforts with AI through _____ and/or _____, but that does not include _____ and/or _____.”
4. **Accountability:** Describe what consequences should be expected or what should happen if a student or instructor violates our social contract on AI. Consider completing this sentence: “Upon a first offense, classroom members who violate this policy will _____; upon a second offense, _____.”
5. **Fair use:** List specific AI uses, if any, that your group considers acceptable in all instances.
6. **Questionable use:** List situations in which AI use is questionable and/or risky in this contract. These are aspects of classroom assignments or activities for which the class should discuss the use of AI and reach a consensus before engaging in it.
7. **Prohibited use:** List specific prohibitions on AI use in this class. These are uses and prompts that we agree are off limits.
8. **Final thoughts:** What final thoughts or questions do you have about this contract or the process?
9. Did you use AI to fill out this form? If yes, please disclose your usage.

Figure 2
Phase I Ballot Results



TJMC Submission: COILing Toward Consensus

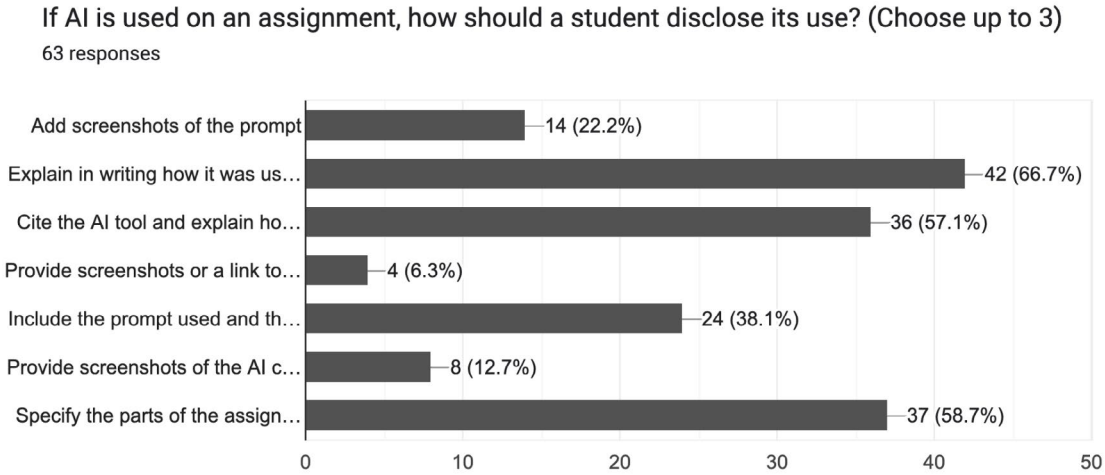
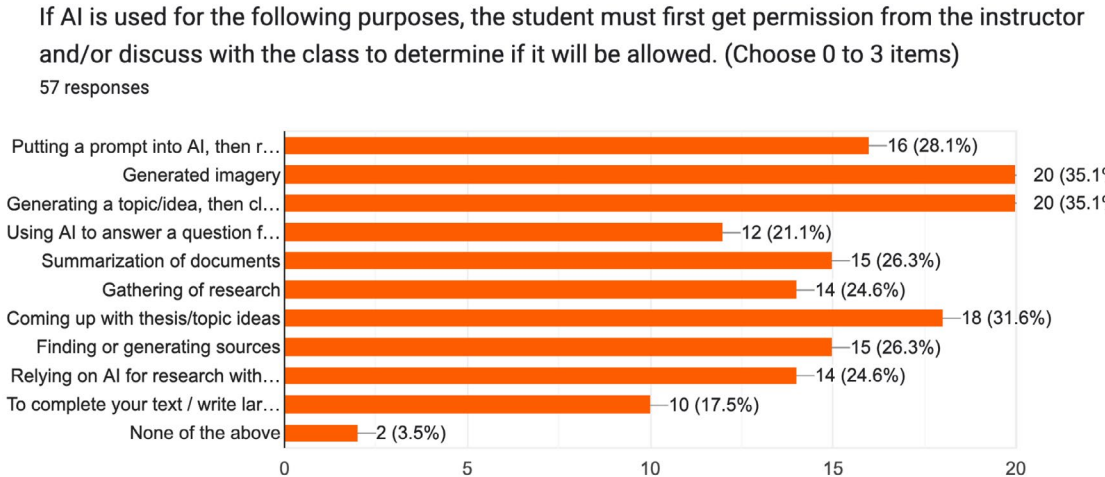
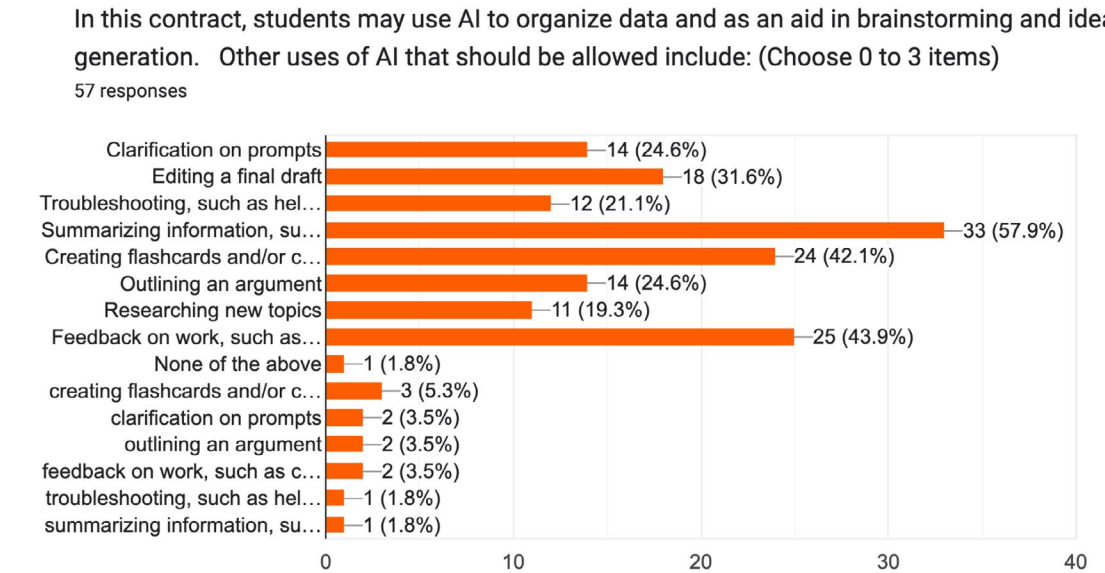
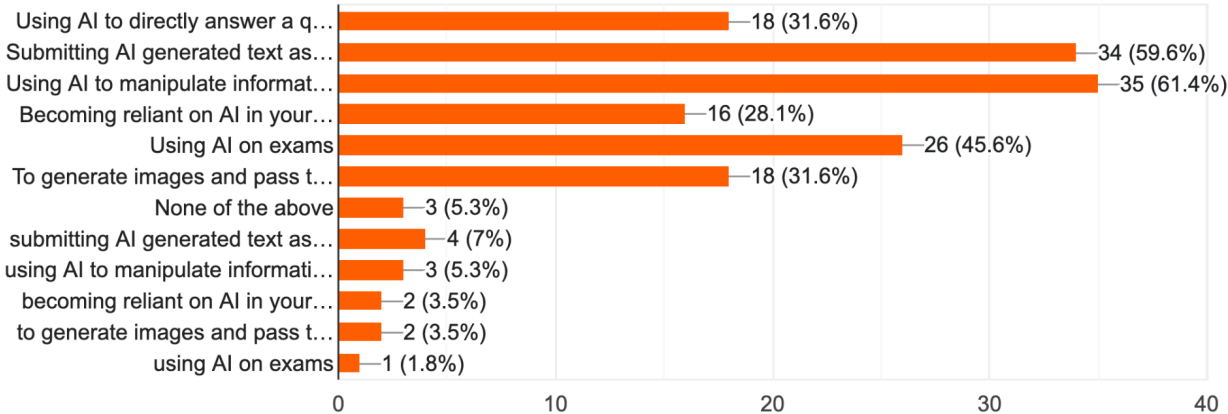


Figure 3
Phase II Ballot Results



In this contract, it is prohibited to submit AI generated text as your own or to use AI as your only or primary source. Other uses of AI that should be prohibited include: (Choose 0 to 3 items)

57 responses



If a student violates this policy, the consequence for a first offense will be a warning from the instructor and a requirement to rewrite the assign...ce for a second offense should be: (Choose 1 item)

57 responses

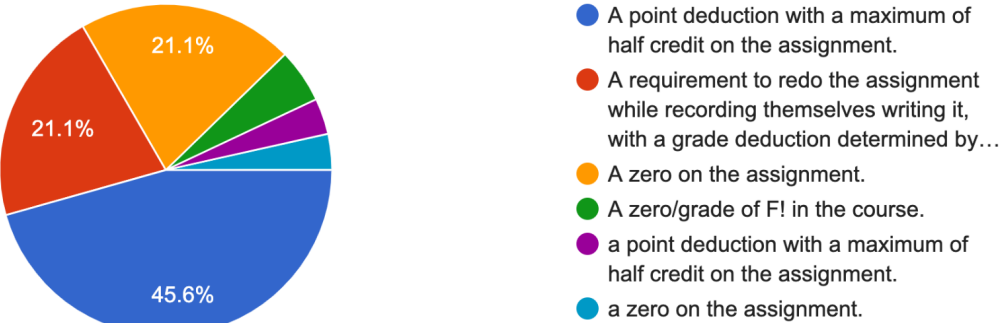


Figure 4: The social contract

