



2026 Law Student Pulse Survey

How law students understand AI better than some institutions

Executive summary

The legal profession has spent several years trying to understand the impact of AI on the practice of law. Of course, AI is not really all that new; but at the same time, emerging forms of AI — such as generative AI (GenAI) and agentic AI, both of which are capable of operating at much higher levels of cognition — have opened an entirely new set of issues. Indeed, unknown future forms of technology will only accelerate the opportunities and risks of leveraging advanced tech in the legal profession.

Unfortunately, current arguments seem stuck in the binary that tries to categorize AI as either all good or all bad, when the reality is that AI in legal practice has genuine benefits and risks.

To shed some deeper insight into the current state of AI within the legal profession, The Thomson Reuters Institute conducted its *2026 Law Student Pulse Survey*, revealing some interesting perspectives from tomorrow's lawyers that could help turn the conversation away from the good/bad binary and toward a more productive discussion of how the profession can better manage the risks and opportunities of widespread AI use.

This survey gathered responses from more than 1,800 law students between April 6–19, and they presented a complex view of AI that reflects how today's law students have developed a working sophistication about AI in legal practice that many of their institutions seem yet to match. Indeed, almost one-third of students surveyed (32%) said they either disagreed or strongly disagreed that their school gives them the AI skills needed for their future career.

Further, almost three-quarters (72%) say they agree that learning AI is an essential professional skill, and similar portion (74%) say believe that over-reliance on AI could cause them to struggle in developing critical legal skills. Holding both of these nuanced views simultaneously is the kind of professional judgment the legal profession and law schools should foster, especially as AI becomes a larger part of legal practice.

To produce the best law graduates today and tomorrow, law schools need to embrace this technology as a core part of educating current students. Indeed, as students gain real-world exposure, they will increasingly see the gap between what they are being taught and what the profession — and future employers — will come to expect.

Interestingly, the survey also showed that students' nuanced view of AI is less the result of in-class learning and more the outcome of self-education and personal experience. Students have largely arrived at these conclusions without structured guidance, consistent institutional frameworks, or professionally supervised practice, the survey suggests. Yet, to be the most ethically responsible, students need professional judgment that's taught in an educational and practice ecosystem — and one that reinforces the risks and opportunities as well as students' personal accountability when using these tools.

Responsible use of AI cannot be taught in isolation. Law is a collection of complex systems, and AI's impact on its various components can be quite different. For example, AI's impact on accident reconstructions is different than its impact on initial contract drafting. Thus, the proper use of AI should increasingly be part of an overall and deliberate educational and practice experience. This can best be achieved by treating AI as a core professional competency on par with others — a learned skill that requires structured supervision and ethically grounded instruction.

And according to the survey, this is exactly what students are asking for with increasing urgency.

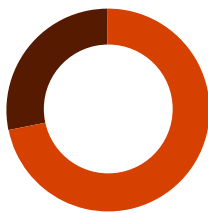
“Right now, it seems like conversations around AI either consist of ‘Don’t use AI to cheat,’ or ‘Use ChatGPT, but nothing in between.’”

– 2L Student who uses AI once per day



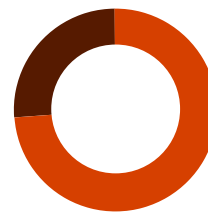
2026 Law Student Pulse Survey Highlights

Law students hold a more nuanced view of AI than the current institutional debate suggests



72%

of law students say they see AI literacy as an essential skill



74%

of law students say they recognize the risk of over reliance on AI

Student AI adoption is already widespread, especially among postgraduate students, but much of this learning is happening through **self-education rather than structured learning.**



AI guidance in law schools remains inconsistent



48%

report that AI policies vary by professor



32%

say that their schools do not give them the AI skills needed for their future career



Students are not asking for unchecked AI use; rather, they are asking for clear rules, ethical guardrails, and practical training on AI responsible use across course-work, clinics, internships, and their future legal practice.



There is growing concern among students that AI may reduce traditional entry-level legal work, weakening the development pipeline through which junior lawyers build foundational skills.



AI fluency is becoming a professional differentiator, and access to strong AI tools is beginning to influence how some students evaluate prospective employers.



Law schools, bar associations, and legal employers need to move faster to treat AI as a core professional competency — as many law students already are — rather than a side issue.

Students are already ahead of the narrative

The 2026 Law Student Pulse Survey generally reveals a legal profession in which the institutional presumptions about students and AI are out of sync with the reality of students' experiences.

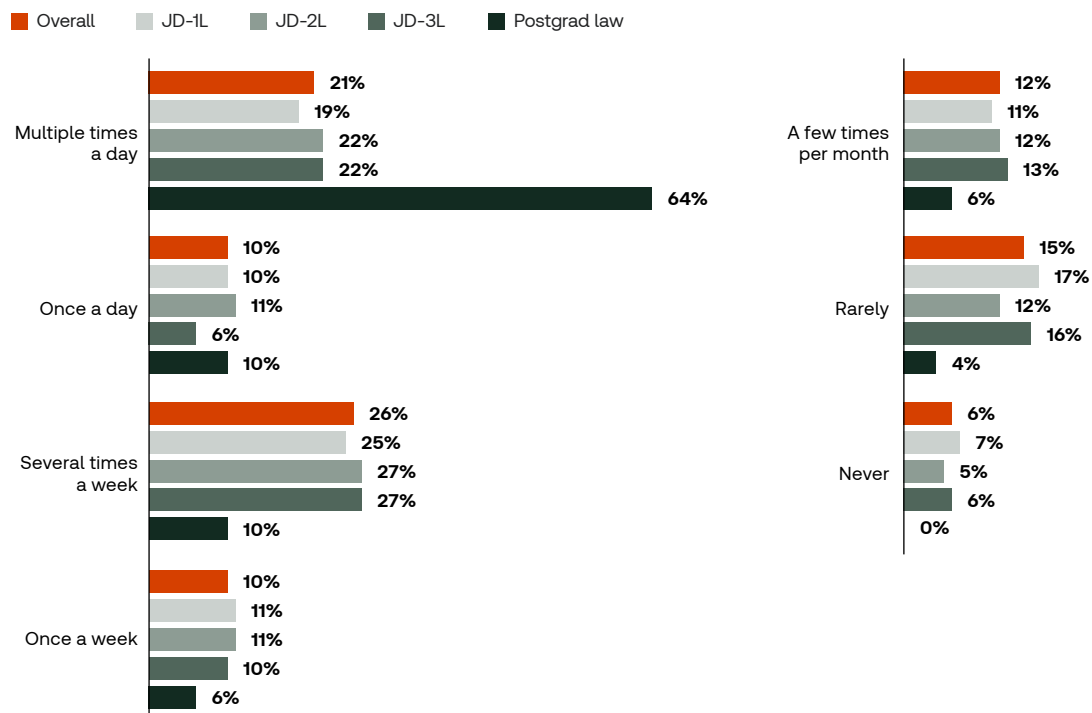
Currently, two competing narratives generally dominate institutional conversations about law students and AI. The first frames students as reckless adopters that use AI to cut corners and bypass the cognitive work that legal education is designed to produce. The second frames them as passive recipients of a technology they do not fully understand, making them vulnerable to ignoring the dangers of hallucinations and risking over-reliance on the technology without the experience to know better. The survey reveals that neither narrative is true.

Three of four law students agree that learning AI is an essential professional skill, and yet 74% agree that over-reliance on AI will cause students to struggle. Holding both positions simultaneously reflects a sophisticated understanding of what AI is and what it is not.

Usage data confirms the pattern. More than half (57%) of students say they use AI several times a week or more for academic work, with 84% postgraduate students saying that. The qualitative data is equally telling. Students describe AI as a workflow tool that changes where cognitive effort is applied rather than one that eliminates it. As one 1L, who uses AI several times a week said: "When approached intentionally, AI functions as a tool that enhances analysis, exposes new ways of framing issues, and helps refine arguments. It does not replace critical thinking; it can strengthen it."

FIGURE 1:

How frequently do you personally use AI tools for academic work?



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Informed understanding without guidance

The survey reveals a sophistication gap between students' everyday experience and their institutions' practices and policies. Notably, 54% of our survey respondents are 1Ls with limited professional AI exposure, which makes the maturity of their collective assessment even more striking. Law students have independently identified the real risks, such as hallucinations, over-reliance, integrity gray zones, and confidentiality concerns. However, what they have not received is structured guidance on how to consistently navigate such concerns as they enter the legal profession.

“In my experience as a student, I believe the legal profession is missing the distinction between general-purpose AI and fiduciary-grade AI.¹ Much of the current conversation is dominated by a binary of fear or hype—either worrying about ‘hallucinations’ or celebrating basic efficiency.

What’s misunderstood is that AI in law shouldn’t just be a productivity tool; it must be a professional-grade partner built on verified legal datasets. As students, we are taught that our primary duty is accuracy and client trust.

The profession needs to move the conversation toward how we can integrate AI that meets these specific ethical and fiduciary standards, rather than just treating it like a more advanced search engine.”

— Postgrad law student who uses AI multiple times a day

The thematic analysis of hundreds of open-ended responses to the survey question: *What is the legal industry missing or misunderstanding about AI?* reveals a consistent message from students. First, they understand that AI is a tool; and second, they see the need for mandatory structured training to promote greater understanding of AI's practical risks and opportunities.

¹ At Thomson Reuters, Fiduciary-Grade AI™ is our standard for how AI should work in high-stakes professions. It's AI designed for professionals with duties of care and regulatory oversight — drawing on our authoritative, domain-specific content; protected by rigorous privacy and security safeguards; shaped by subject-matter experts; and designed to produce transparent outputs that can be verified. Fiduciary-Grade AI sets the bar when accuracy, accountability, and trust are paramount.

Multi-layered institutional gap

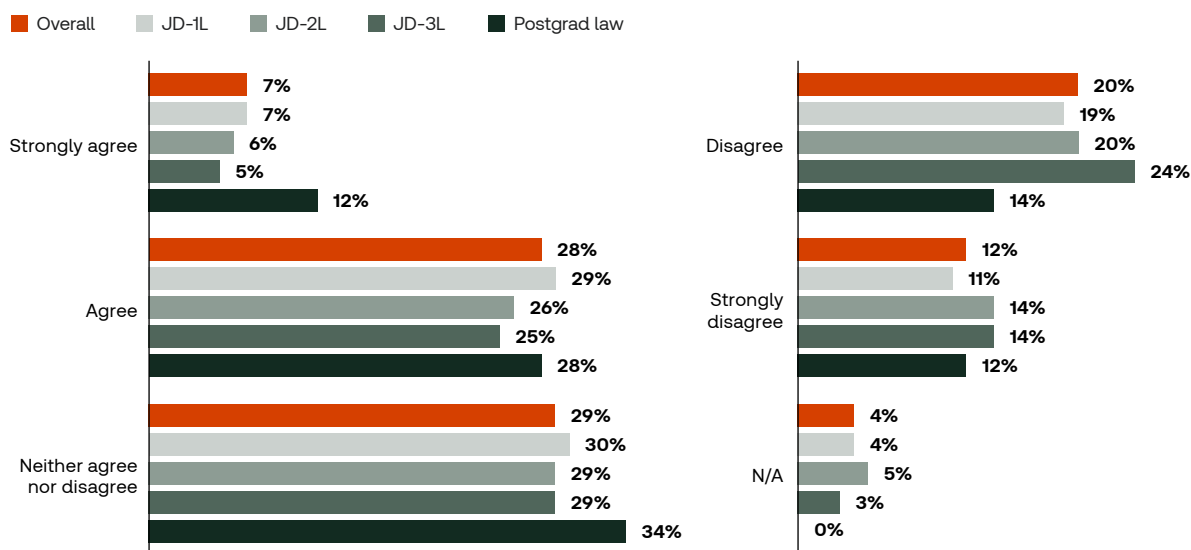
The survey also reveals that students are looking for far greater proactive institutional guidance on AI use. Almost half (48%) report that AI policies vary by professor, leaving students with no coherent institutional signal about what schools expect, what is permissible, or what constitutes responsible use.

Further, 15% of law students say there is no curriculum integration whatsoever across their institution. Among 1Ls, only 36% say they feel their school is preparing them adequately for AI in practice. Among 3Ls, that number drops to 30%. As students gain real-world exposure through internships, clinics, and networking events, they encounter firsthand this divide between what the profession expects and what their education has not yet provided.

As one 3L observed: “Schools or professors that have hardline bans on AI are not helping their students prepare for the world in which they will be entering.” For many students, law schools remain largely silent on one of the most consequential technological shifts in the history of modern legal practice. Additional data reinforces this concern.

FIGURE 2:

School gives the AI skills needed for future career



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

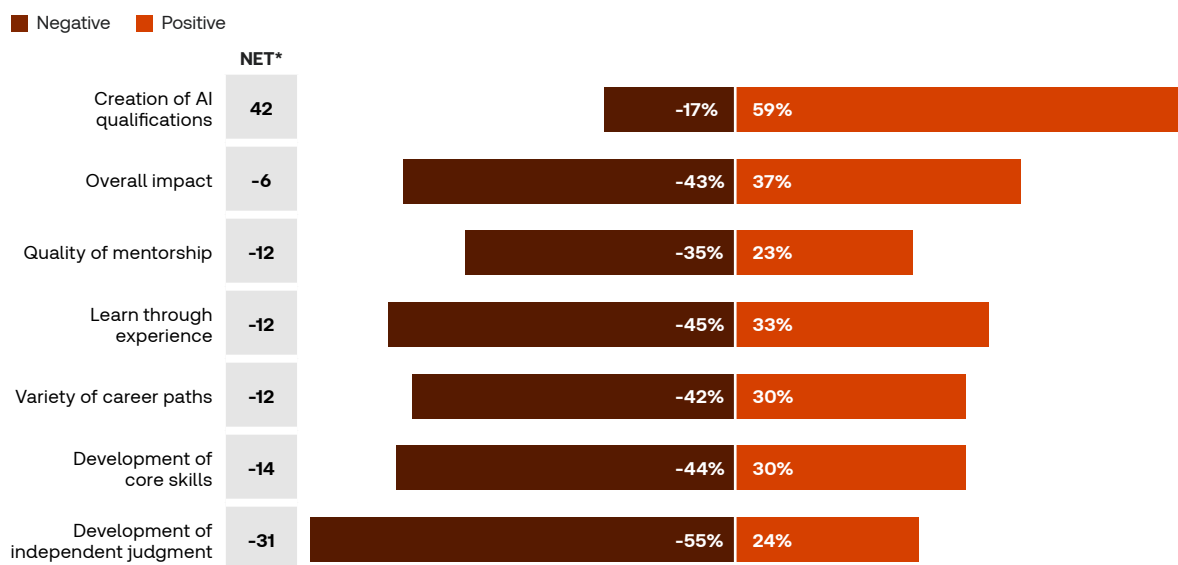
The employer side of the gap

One student in the survey shared an experience from a networking event that has become emblematic of the broader anxieties about entry-level roles. A partner at a large law firm explained that his practice group had not needed to hire new associates for several years now because of how effective their AI tools had been. Assignments that would normally go to junior associates were being completed in a fraction of the time.

Beyond individual anecdotes, almost a majority of law students say they expect entry-level roles to decline. Indeed, 47% say they see entry-level positions decreasing as AI absorbs work, and law students’ views on the impact of AI on early career professionals is net negative by 6.

FIGURE 3:

Impact of AI on early career professionals in the next 2-3 years



Base: 1874 and *NET = % Positive - % Negative.

Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Already, legal employers are moving quickly and increasingly expect new lawyers to arrive with the skills and judgment to use AI tools appropriately. The lack of a coherent training approach among many law schools then shifts this obligation to legal employers. Firms like Fredrikson & Byron² already are building AI fluency into associate development programs as other firms have shared anecdotally that they have asked summer associates directly about their AI tool usage during recruitment to better assess practical competency.

The survey results suggest that what many law firms may be finding instead are graduates that are self-taught, inconsistently prepared, and uncertain about what they are permitted to do with AI.

Ineffectiveness of bans

When schools ban or ignore AI, they miss the opportunity to provide structured guidance, forcing the usage of AI tools underground. Today, AI tools are ubiquitous, readily available, and increasingly easy to use; so, expecting students to simply stop using them reflects a misunderstanding of how embedded these tools have become in everyday academic and daily life.

A student that uses AI to simplify the wording of a sentence, reduce legalese, or find examples of applicable laws in other states to support a comparative argument may well be strengthening their work. Absolute bans that treat this kind of use as misconduct, even when the tools are building student knowledge and skill, do not help students navigate the complicated practice and ethics issues they may face in the future.

Students' comments confirm this dynamic. One student described peers sharing AI study prompts privately and qualifying every mention of AI use with assurances that they would never use it for graded work, even when using it for everything else. The result is a culture of secrecy around AI usage. As one 1L added: "The fear of being accused of cheating has pushed AI usage underground, which is the worst possible outcome for everyone. Underground usage means no quality control, no shared best practices, no institutional guidance, and no ethical framework."

² <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/legal/lawyer-development-ai-enabled-law-firms>.

“I think the legal profession is missing the way students actually use AI in their day-to-day learning. It is often talked about like a shortcut or a way to avoid doing the work; but in reality, it feels more like a tool that helps make sense of overwhelming material.

Law school involves learning a completely new way of thinking and speaking, and AI can help break things down, organize ideas, and make concepts easier to understand. It does not replace the effort; it just makes the process of getting there more manageable.

I also think there is not enough focus on judgment. AI can give you multiple explanations or possible answers, but it cannot tell you which argument is the strongest or what your professor or a judge is really looking for. That part still depends on you. So, instead of focusing so much on whether students are using AI, the conversation should be more about whether they actually understand the material and can apply it on their own.

At the end of the day, the profession seems more concerned with controlling AI than preparing students to use it well — but AI is already part of how people learn and work, and that is not going to change. It would make more sense to focus on teaching students how to use it responsibly while still developing their own skills, because that is what will actually matter in practice.”

— 1L who uses AI multiple times a day

AI's threat to legal talent

The structural consequences of the institutional gap also threaten the pipeline through which the legal profession develops its next generation of attorneys. As AI absorbs the tasks that historically taught early-career lawyers the basic mechanics of the legal practice, that developmental pathway through which the profession has reproduced its expertise appears to be eroding.

"I don't think AI will ever replace senior lawyers, but it will render many junior lawyers redundant, which may in turn reduce the number of future senior lawyers," one student respondent said.

This observation points to a compounding risk. If AI absorbs entry-level work without a corresponding investment in the creation of new developmental pathways, the profession could face a skills deficit. And that deficit among junior lawyers will then become a skills problem for future senior lawyers, who never had the chance to build their legal foundations. Indeed, the partner who stopped hiring associates may find in a few years that there is no one in the pipeline with the experience needed to take over.

"The capabilities of AI are going to keep improving and anyone that believes otherwise is flatly unfamiliar with the technology and its progress. This will inevitably mean that at some point AI will be better at entry-level tasks than associate lawyers.

It then becomes important to train entry level lawyers in how to develop the needed skills to understand what's good lawyering without necessarily being subjected to the standard associate tasks that previously would have given them these skills. Entry level tasks will be performed faster and better by AI, but new lawyers still must be trained.

The new jobs will be managing AI associates and providing the necessary knowledge and discretion to nudge them in the right direction and intervene when a mistake has been made."

— 2L who uses AI several times per week

What students say about skill development

The net negative ratings that students assigned to AI's impact on core skill development reinforce this concern. As previously shown, students rate AI's effect on independent judgment, learning through experience, and mentorship quality as net negatives across the board.

In short, they see the risks but are struggling to find the guardrails that will help them navigate those risks. The single exception is new AI proficiency qualifications, which receive a net positive rating of 42. Clearly, students see AI fluency as a differentiator, even as they worry about what is being lost in the process.

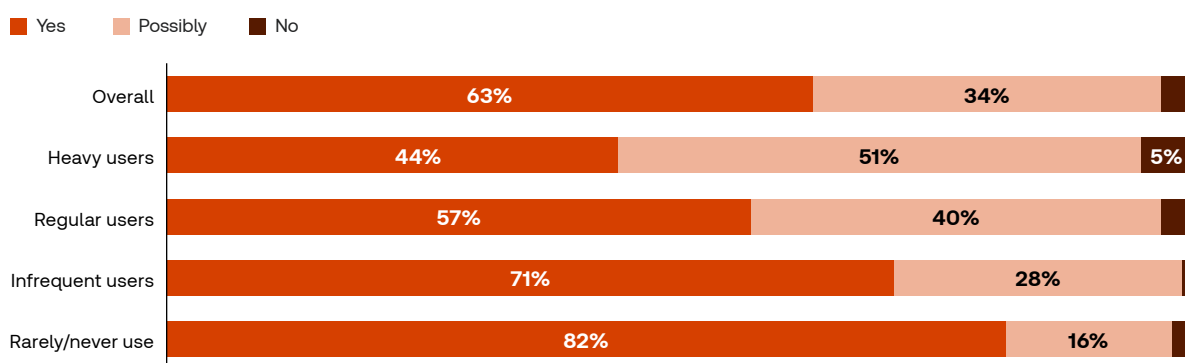
AI emerging as a talent attraction indicator

Many of those students who already have developed genuine AI fluency are beginning to evaluate employers on whether those employers will give them meaningful access to AI tools. While only 34% say the absence of Fiduciary-Grade AI™ tools would influence whether they accept a role, that number rises to 51% among heavy AI users.

As AI fluency becomes a more defining professional characteristic, prospective employers' AI infrastructure will increasingly factor into where talented graduates choose to go.

FIGURE 4:

Willingness to accept a job offer from an organization that did not provide access to Fiduciary-Grade AI™ tools



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

What students are asking for

Our survey's open-ended responses to the question of what the profession misses or misunderstands about AI point consistently toward the same need for clear, balanced, and actionable guidance on responsible use. The most repeated request from students is the establishment of a clear line between when and with what AI use is permitted, encouraged, and prohibited. This guidance needs to reach students in the context of their coursework, clinic work, internships, and eventual practice because the stakes and standards differ across each setting. The current patchwork of individual faculty policies, institutional silence, and vague honor code language is not serving students, schools, or the profession very well, the survey shows.

Students also want the profession to move past hallucination risk as its primary framing for AI. They understand that AI hallucinates; however, what they want is guidance on how to guard against it. As one 1L who uses AI multiple times daily puts it: "The conversation should not be 'AI can hallucinate, so don't use it,' but rather 'AI can hallucinate, so here's what you need to do to guard against it.'"

The educators' perspective

Presenting these challenges without acknowledging the difficulties facing legal educators would be incomplete and a disservice to law school faculty and professional staff. Today, law schools are navigating real tensions, including accreditation standards not written with AI in mind, faculty governance structures that make rapid curriculum change difficult, and a technology landscape that's evolving faster than assessment frameworks can adapt.

There are also legitimate concerns about whether students who rely heavily on AI early in their education will develop the independent judgment the legal profession requires. Legal problems are not mechanical or formulaic — they are complex human problems that often can only be resolved through the application of highly refined professional judgment.

As our survey shows, student feedback reflects many of these same concern. Indeed, anxiety around the risk of over-reliance on AI and it causing the erosion of core skills rank in the top three. Yet, those concerns do not argue *against* structured AI integration, rather they argue for it. They also argue for the kind of supervised, ethically grounded approach that transforms a genuine risk into a managed one.

FIGURE 5:

Categorization of what the legal profession is misunderstanding or missing about AI



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

The profession cannot wait

The findings of this survey describe what is *already happening* rather than a warning about what might occur if the profession fails to act. Many law students are entering the workforce self-taught, inconsistently prepared, and uncertain about what they are permitted to do in regard to AI. The institutions responsible for their preparation — including law schools, bar associations, and legal employers — appear to be waiting for someone else to move first. This lack of action could produce real consequences right now.

No single institution can solve this alone, but each has a specific and non-delegable responsibility. Here is what action for each could look like:



Law schools

Legal educators should work to replace ad hoc faculty policies with institution-wide AI curriculum frameworks that will provide students with consistent guidance across their learning. Those frameworks should address three aspects of what students are asking for explicitly: *i)* a clear taxonomy that details what is permitted, encouraged, and prohibited and tells students what AI use is appropriate in what context; *ii)* contextual guidance that distinguishes coursework from clinic work, internships, and eventual legal practice because the stakes and standards differ across each; and *iii)* assessment methods that evaluate whether students are developing AI fluency alongside the foundational skills that AI cannot replace.



Bar associations and accreditors

The Bar and law school accreditors can help support innovation and change. For example, ABA Formal Opinion 512, which establishes ethical guidance for lawyers using GenAI, can provide a good starting point, but it is not a finish line. Similarly, the technology competency outlined in the Model Rules of Professional Conduct provides a foundation but is not enough on its own.

What the profession needs to consider now is defining AI competency with the same clarity and accountability as other obligations around professional responsibilities. Concretely, this means integrating AI competency into continuing legal education and admission processes and providing all new and experienced attorneys with the opportunity to increase their competence and skill in the use of AI tools. Accreditors should consider what an AI-ready graduate looks like and how law schools can meet the needs of a rapidly evolving practice ecosystem.



Legal employers

Law firms, corporate legal departments, and other legal organizations have the most immediate leverage to advance this situation, yet are currently using the least of it. Firms that have built AI fluency into associate development programs are ahead of the curve, but fluency expectations that live only inside on-boarding programs are invisible to the law schools that need to respond to them.

Firms should publish their AI competency expectations for incoming associates with the same visibility and accountability they bring to pro bono targets. Published expectations create market pressure and give law schools a concrete, employer-defined target to build toward, as well as giving students a transparent standard to meet. Firms should also be candid with law schools about what skill levels they are finding in the graduates they are hiring.

The cost of delay

The students who will define the future of legal practice are already here; and in many cases they understand the risks and opportunities of AI better than some of the institutions preparing them. Our survey shows that these students are seeking to use advanced technologies responsibly and professionally — yet they're often left to figure it out on their own.

As recent events demonstrate, the cost of delay in addressing the concerns of these students is not abstract, mainly because technological developments show no sign of slowing. Failure to provide students and the profession with needed rules will leave lawyers exposed to an ever-increasing range of professional and ethical risks.

The *2026 Law Student Pulse Survey* clearly demonstrates that students are using AI daily, thinking carefully about its risks, and asking with increasing urgency for the institutions responsible for their legal education and career preparation to catch up.

As one 1L put it in terms that should challenge every law school administrator, bar association leader, and senior partner who has wondered why the next generation seems underprepared: “The profession seems more concerned with controlling AI than preparing students to use it well.”

This observation is not an indictment; rather, it is a description of system-level challenges that underscore how the students who will define the future of legal practice are sophisticated, anxious, and waiting for the profession to meet them where they live.

“The profession seems more concerned with controlling AI than preparing students to use it well.”

– 1L law student who uses AI multiple times per day

About this white paper

This white paper was produced by the Thomson Reuters Institute based on findings from the *2026 Law Student Pulse Survey*, a web-based survey of 1,874 law students conducted in April 2026. Respondents included students enrolled in JD programs at the 1L (54%), 2L (26%), and 3L (17%) levels, as well as students pursuing postgraduate law degrees (3%). The survey included both quantitative items and open-ended questions; thematic analysis of 1,874 open-ended responses to Question 10 informed the qualitative findings presented here.

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