

BearcatGPT Reshapes Learning at UC

UC's AI platform is changing how students learn, raising questions about creativity, integrity and the role of technology in classrooms.

By. Grace Green

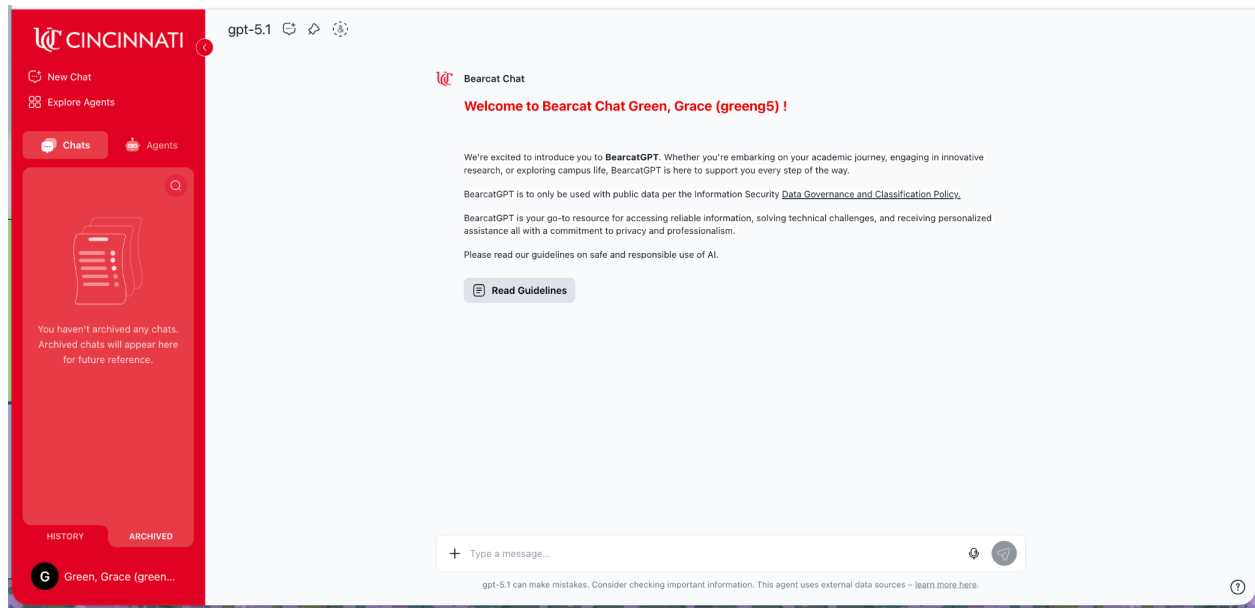


Photo: BearcatGPT Landing Page

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hen senior architecture student Rodney Adkins saw an email introducing BearcatGPT, a university-developed artificial intelligence platform available to students at the University of Cincinnati, his reaction was immediate.

“My first reaction was, ‘Ew,’ and I deleted it,” he said.

He hasn't used it since. But across campus, many students are doing the opposite. They're using BearcatGPT to help draft essays, solve problems and generate ideas for projects. For Adkins, that shift raises concerns about more than just convenience.

"If all you're doing is telling a computer what to do," he said, "it lacks a human element; it lacks interest, it lacks soul."

BearcatGPT is part of UC's effort to integrate artificial intelligence into academic life, offering students a university-supported alternative to public AI tools. As its use becomes more popular, students and faculty are navigating a new set of expectations around when and how it should be used. Some see it as a useful academic resource, while others question its impact on learning and creativity. At the center of the conversation is a broader question: as tools like BearcatGPT become more accessible, what role should they play in the learning at universities and what happens when they begin to change it?

What is BearcatGPT?

At its core, BearcatGPT is the University of Cincinnati's attempt to bring artificial intelligence into the classroom on its own terms. UC is the first university in Ohio to offer a private, secure AI platform. Unlike other major AI platforms like Google Gemini, the platform is designed to operate within UC's digital environment, giving students and faculty access to generative AI while maintaining institutional control over how it is used.

According to Jeffrey Shaffer, Director of the Applied AI Lab and professor at Carl H. Lindner College of Business at UC, one of the platform's defining features is accessibility.

“Everybody has access to it,” Shaffer said. “You don’t have to pay for outside tools. That’s what makes it special.”

By providing a university-supported AI system, UC is lowering the barrier to entry for students who may not otherwise have access to paid tools. At the same time, the platform allows UC to align AI use with its own policies on data privacy, security, and academic integrity, something that is more difficult to implement with external AI apps.

For Thomas Scherz, an AI engineer and developer of BearcatGPT, he says that the platform reflects a broader shift in how education is evolving with technology.

“The tools have gotten better even in the last 12 months; the coding, the writing, the ability to connect with other tools has improved a lot,” he said.

As AI continues to advance, BearcatGPT represents UC’s effort to bring new technology into the classroom in a way that is structured, accessible, and increasingly unavoidable.

Rapid Growth and Pressure to Adapt

If BearcatGPT represents UC’s entry into artificial intelligence, the speed at which that technology is evolving is what makes it impossible to ignore.

For Shaffer, the defining feature of AI right now is not just what it can do, but how quickly it is improving.

“The worst AI you will ever use is the AI today, because it’s getting better every single day,” Shaffer said.

That rapid pace leaves little room for hesitation. What feels like a limitation today can be within days.

“Don’t say on a Friday that AI can’t do something,” he said, “because by Tuesday it probably will be able to.”

That kind of evolving has forced universities into a reactive position. Policies, assignments and expectations that once lasted for years are now becoming outdated within a single semester.

Rather than asking whether AI should be allowed, many faculty members are now asking how quickly they can adapt their courses to account for it. In some cases, that means redesigning assignments. In others, it means rethinking what skills are actually being taught.

For Scherz, that adaptation is inevitable.

“I had worked with this technology before, but once it was opened up to everyone, that’s when you could really see the impact it was going to have,” he said.

As BearcatGPT continues to evolve alongside AI in general, the challenge for UC is not simply keeping up, but deciding how to keep up in a way that still prioritizes learning.

Learning vs. Efficiency

While BearcatGPT offers speed and convenience, some faculty say it also highlights a deeper shift in how students approach learning.

For Dr. Alvaro Ortiz, a mathematics and statistics professor at UC, that shift is tied to what he describes as a “culture of immediacy.”

“Students are increasingly shaped by a culture of immediacy, they are used to getting answers instantly, and that expectation carries into learning,” Ortiz said.

In mathematics, that expectation can conflict with how students develop understanding. Courses often rely on repetition, asking students to work through similar problems multiple times in order to build familiarity and confidence.

“In mathematics, students have to practice the same types of problems over and over to truly understand a concept,” Ortiz said. “Those skills come from repetition—you build that pathway in your brain by doing the work multiple times.”

Tools like BearcatGPT can shorten that process. Students can generate step-by-step solutions or check answers quickly, reducing the amount of time spent working through problems on their own.

“AI is designed to remove friction— especially repetitive tasks, but in mathematics, that repetition is exactly how students learn,” Ortiz said.

He said that difference can show up in student performance. Some students complete assignments successfully but struggle to apply the same concepts during exams.

“You’ll see students with perfect homework scores, but then they struggle on exams,” Ortiz said.

Part of the challenge, he added, is that AI-generated responses can appear reliable even when they are not.

“AI can be very confident, even when it’s wrong,” he said.

For Ortiz, the focus is not on removing AI from the classroom, but on helping students understand how to use it without replacing their own thinking.

“Students need to learn how to tell the difference between a good solution and a bad one,” he said.

Writing, Voice, and Integrity

In writing-based courses, BearcatGPT presents a different kind of challenge; one that is less about solving problems and more about preserving a student’s voice.

For Dr. Rebecca Borah, an English composition professor at UC, that difference often becomes noticeable when reading student work.

“You notice when something isn’t written in a student’s natural voice,” she said.

While AI-generated writing can sometimes be identified, Borah said it is becoming harder to distinguish as the technology improves.

“It used to take more time and effort to cheat than to just do the work and now, I’m not so sure,” she said.

In response, she has adjusted how she structures assignments. Rather than focusing only on final submissions, she now requires students to show their process.

“Now I require multiple drafts so there’s proof that the student actually did the work,” Borah said.

Some instructors have taken similar approaches, including requiring handwritten drafts completed in class. These methods are intended to ensure that students are engaging with the material, rather than relying entirely on AI tools.

For Borah, the concern is not just about academic misconduct, but about what students lose when they skip the writing process.

“When students use AI to generate something like a journal entry, they’ve really cheated themselves,” she said.

Writing, she explained, is meant to reflect thinking, reflection, and individual perspective. When that process is replaced, the result may meet the assignment requirements—but not the purpose behind them.

“We’re here for the life of the mind,” Borah said, “not just to get through tasks on a list.”

Student Perspectives: Ethics and Creativity

For students, BearcatGPT is not just a classroom tool, it is something they are actively deciding whether or not to use, and what it represents for their work.

The hesitation starts with how AI tools are built.

“A lot of AI is trained on work that people didn’t give permission to use,” he said. “There’s a real argument about whether that’s plagiarism—and I’d say it is,” Adkins said.

That concern extends to the environmental impact of the technology, which is a common debate within AI discourse.

“The amount of water and land it takes to run these data centers is a real concern,” Adkins said.

In architecture, those ethical questions intersect with creativity. Design projects are meant to reflect individual ideas and approaches, something Adkins believes can be lost when AI is introduced into the process.

“Yeah, it’s quicker and easier, but it lacks creativity,” he said. “There’s no real opportunity for ingenuity when you’re relying on AI like that.”

He said the concern is not just about using AI for support, but about when it begins to replace the work itself.

“Once it starts doing the work for you and or becomes the work, that’s academic dishonesty,” he said.

At the same time, Adkins acknowledges that tools like BearcatGPT are becoming more common across campus.

“I definitely see AI usage trending upward as the years go on,” he said.

That trend raises broader questions about how creative fields may change in the future. For Adkins, the value of his work comes from the human perspective behind it.

“What I love about architecture is that it reflects thousands of different human perspectives coming together,” he said. “I worry about a future where that stops being the case.”

UC Policy and Guidelines on AI

As BearcatGPT becomes more widely used, the University of Cincinnati has outlined guidelines intended to shape how artificial intelligence is used across campus.

Rather than banning AI, the university presents it as a tool that should be used carefully. UC describes AI as a “powerful partner,” encouraging students, faculty and staff to use it in ways that are ethical and aligned with academic integrity.

One of the expectations focuses on data use. According to university guidance, students should only input information classified as “public” into AI tools. That includes materials like published research, public statistics or open educational resources. Sensitive or restricted information is not permitted, and users are expected to avoid sharing personal data that could raise privacy concerns.

The university also encourages students to use UC-licensed tools, such as BearcatGPT, while logged in with their UC credentials. This allows the platform to operate under university privacy protections and security policies, which are not guaranteed with outside tools.

At the same time, UC applies its existing academic conduct policies to AI use. Unauthorized or undisclosed use of AI in coursework can be treated as academic misconduct under the Student Code of Conduct. Consequences can range from a failing grade on an assignment to more serious disciplinary action, depending on the situation.

Expectations for students can also vary depending on the course. The university advises students to check syllabi and communicate with instructors to understand what types of AI use are permitted. In many cases, tools like BearcatGPT may be allowed for tasks such as outlining or brainstorming, but not for completing entire assignments.

Students who have questions about how to use tools like BearcatGPT are encouraged to consult the university's central AI resource hub at <https://ai.uc.edu/>. The site provides up-to-date information on regulations, data use guidelines, and academic integrity expectations, along with resources to help students better understand how AI is being used across campus.

Mixed Messages and Uncertainty

Even with university guidelines in place, many students say the expectations around BearcatGPT are still unclear.

“It absolutely sends mixed messages,” said Rodney Adkins.

On one hand, UC promotes tools like BearcatGPT and encourages students to explore artificial intelligence. On the other, students are warned that misuse could result in academic misconduct.

“If students aren’t supposed to rely on AI, why is the university promoting it?” Adkins said.

That tension is not limited to students. Faculty members are also navigating a system where expectations can vary widely between courses.

“Academic freedom allows faculty to set their own policies, but part of the inconsistency comes from a lack of clear institutional guidance,” Ortiz said.

Because individual instructors determine how AI can be used in their classes, students often encounter different rules from one syllabus to another. What is acceptable in one course may be discouraged or prohibited in another.

“There’s no one answer to AI in the classroom, it’s going to depend on the professor,” Shaffer said.

For Scherz, that uncertainty reflects a broader transition.

“We’re still figuring out what the right use looks like,” Scherz said.

As BearcatGPT becomes more integrated into academic life, the lack of consistency leaves students balancing opportunity with risk, trying to use a tool the university provides, while also avoiding crossing lines that are still being defined.

Embracing BearcatGPT

While some faculty express concern about how students use AI, others are working to integrate BearcatGPT directly into their teaching.

For Shaffer, the focus is not on limiting the tool, but on using it intentionally.

“I encourage my students to use AI,” he said. “I have an open policy where they can use it for writing, coding, or anything in the course.”

Rather than avoiding AI, Shaffer builds it into assignments, asking students to engage with the tool while still demonstrating their understanding.

“I’m not really concerned about students using it for an entire assignment, I’m more interested in how they use it,” he said.

Scherz takes a similar approach, by helping design coursework that incorporates AI as part of the learning process.

“I design assignments where AI works well, so students can learn how to use it properly,” Scherz said.

For both educators, BearcatGPT is not a shortcut, it is a skill students will need as they navigate their future professions.

“Employers are going to expect students to know how to use AI,” Scherz said.

In that sense, the goal is not to prevent AI use, but to guide it by shifting the focus from whether students use BearcatGPT to how they use it.

The Future of Learning at UC

As BearcatGPT becomes more integrated into classrooms, faculty and students are continuing to adjust to what learning looks like with AI as part of the process.

Shaffer says that shift is already underway.

“It all comes down to the intent of the assignment— what are we actually trying to measure?” he said.

If tools like BearcatGPT can generate essays, solve problems or write code, traditional assignments may no longer reflect a student’s understanding in the same way. Instead, faculty are beginning to focus more on skills that extend beyond producing an answer.

“We need to focus more on human skills; problem solving, reasoning—things AI can’t do,” Shaffer said.

Ortiz sees that adjustment as necessary, but continuously changing.

“This tool is going to require new norms, clearer expectations, and a stronger emphasis on reasoning,” he said.

UC’s approach to BearcatGPT reflects a major shift in higher education, one that encourages innovation while trying to preserve academic integrity. As those expectations continue to evolve, students and faculty are learning alongside the technology itself.

Sources:

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-Alvaro Ortiz: Mathematics and Statistics Educator, empowering classrooms with research-based teaching methods- Interview via Teams 3/13/2026

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-Rodney Adkins: Senior Architecture student at UC, who is critical of AI and the BearcatGPT- In-person interview 4/1/2026

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Code of Conduct

[Policies | AI at The University of Cincinnati](#) -UC AI Policy

<https://ai.uc.edu/about/ai-guidelines> -UC AI Guidelines

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