

Former NSF director aims to help make science, tech more accessible in return to ASU

'We, as a nation, can outcompete by out-innovating,' says Sethuraman Panchanathan

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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From his third-floor office at Arizona State University, floor-length windows give Sethuraman Panchanathan a stunning panorama of the sprawling Tempe campus.

But the view is not new to [Panchanathan](#), University Professor of Technology and Innovation and former director of the National Science Foundation.

Before becoming director of the National Science Foundation in 2020, he worked at ASU for 22 years, where he created the [Center for Cognitive Ubiquitous Computing](#), founded the School of Computing and Augmented Intelligence (formally the School of Computing and Informatics) and the Department of Biomedical Informatics, and served as the executive vice president of ASU's Knowledge Enterprise and the chief research and innovation officer.

But it's not the past that has brought Panchanathan back. It's the future, and the trajectory that he and ASU share: the absolute belief and unwavering certainty that research matters.

"I'm very passionate about that from a personal perspective, from my own research interests and the amazing opportunities that are in front of us to unleash innovation and talent for global good," said Panchanathan, who also is a prolific inventor with several patents and copyrights, and a writer with nearly 500 published papers in journals and conferences.

As director of the NSF, Panchanathan says his main focus was "to ensure that innovation thrives everywhere across our country, thereby leading to opportunities for everyone."

He envisioned and launched the new Technology, Innovation and Partnerships Directorate, the first new directorate in 31 years at NSF, which leverages and energizes fundamental discoveries to supercharge in-place innovation throughout the country. He launched the GRANTED program, which ensures that all institutions are capable of translating their ideas into successful funded projects, and launched a global centers program with several projects focused on addressing shared global challenges with like-minded international partners.

Also during his tenure at NSF, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum biotechnology, advanced manufacturing and next-gen wireless were strengthened and accelerated. For example, under his leadership, NSF launched 27 AI institutes that focused on agriculture, weather, learning, advanced materials and astronomical sciences. These institutes span the country with NSF and partnership investments exceeding half a billion dollars.

He also oversaw the development of the National Artificial Intelligence Research Resource Pilot, an access point for researchers and educators to advance research ideas in AI and train the next generation of AI talent.

“Typically, frontier infrastructure is only available in industry,” Panchanathan said. “It’s pretty expensive, and in some cases it’s also complex in terms of converging all of that for research and development. We therefore wanted to democratize access by bringing in partners, co-investing and making that available for researchers and students in various universities and community colleges so they can advance their ideas in AI.”

Panchanathan said that what he did nationally while at NSF mirrors what he did at ASU, regionally and locally, with enterprises like SkySong and [MacroTechnology Works](#), which serve as labs, fostering collaborations with industry partners and startups.

ASU President Michael Crow said the university is excited to welcome back Panchanathan as he blazes new trails in AI, quantum, semiconductors and health care.

“Panch and I have worked together for more than two decades to make ASU a pioneer in use-inspired research and to prepare our nation’s future innovation leaders,” Crow said. “Panch’s vision, energy and global engagements were integral to ASU becoming a force in science and technology.”

Panchanathan said that in the next five years, ASU can be at the forefront of setting the groundwork for a model AI university/learning enterprise.

“I don’t even want to use the word university because that gives a connotation that somehow it’s about four-year degree programs and master’s degrees and PhDs and so on,” he said. “It’s about how an AI enterprise can be built that can completely transform how people learn, live and contribute. Such an enterprise should advance AI literacy, AI competency and AI expertise.”

Another of Panchanathan’s goals for the university is continuing to strengthen the educational partnerships between ASU and India. ASU is the top university home in the U.S. for students from India, and its Indian alumni network exceeds 12,600 alumni.

“The oldest democracy and the largest democracy working together can pioneer new models of discovery and learning that ensure good quality of life and prosperity for all at speed and scale,” said Panchanathan, who in May was [awarded the Padma Shri](#), a symbol of national gratitude in

India that is awarded for excellence in the fields of art, education, industry, science, medicine, social service and public affairs.

“Our students here and our research partnerships with industry in both nations is something that can continue to enrich students and set the stage for the future.”

Panchanathan said his immediate mission is to continue the work he did at the NSF in advocating for the importance of science and technology to American competitiveness.

“I’m a huge fan of democratization of talent, and ideas all across the country being energized, inspired, motivated, nurtured and brought to life,” he said. “This will guarantee that we, as a nation, can outcompete by out-innovating.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Former NSF director Sethuraman Panchanathan returns to ASU as a Professor of Technology and Innovation. Photo by Deanna Dent/Arizona State University