From ideas to impact: ASU moonshot teams pitch the future

From climate resilience to Alzheimer’s disease detection, 10 ASU-led teams advanced solutions toward real-world funding

By Tiffany Gonzalez, ASU News
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From climate resilience to Alzheimer’s disease detection, 10 ASU-led teams advanced solutions toward real-world funding through the ASU Foundation for a New American University's moonshot cohort.

The nine-month program helped Arizona State University faculty and community collaborators refine and position their work for philanthropic investment. It culminated in “Preparing for Launch,” a pitch event on May 21 where teams presented to philanthropic leaders and received feedback to strengthen each project’s impact, scalability and readiness for funding.

The event marked a key milestone for participating teams as they refined their ideas and next steps.

“Building big ideas requires diverse perspectives to help us identify our blind spots/assumptions so we can improve and refine our thinking. (Preparing for Launch) allows our teams one final opportunity to receive feedback that can help them take their idea to the next level,” said Monro Obenauer, assistant director of the cohort.

“The most successful moonshot teams are endlessly curious and humble,” said Michelle Govani, assistant vice president of the ASU Foundation for a New American University. “We coach our teams to view their challenge and idea through multiple frameworks over the course of the year."

Many teams leave with a clearer sense of what they don’t know but feel inspired and better prepared to act, and several teams are already applying their work in real-world settings.

Diving into solutions

The Islands Resilience Network team is helping small island and coastal communities prepare for climate risks through locally driven tools, training and partnerships.

To protect essential resources, the team works directly with end users such as utility managers and planning staff to translate technical information into practical tools they can use to guide decisions.

“Our work doesn’t just produce a climate dataset or information tool and then expect people to know how to use it,” said Laura Brewington, research professor in the Global Institute of Sustainability and Innovation and co-director of NOAA's Climate Adaptation Partnership for the U.S. Pacific Islands region.

The Global Groundwater Sustainability team is using satellite data to track groundwater loss and inform policy decisions.

“We try to make the invisible, visible. We try to help people visualize where groundwater comes from and that there are limited opportunities for replenishment,” said Jay Famiglietti, Global Futures professor in ASU’s School of Sustainability and director of science for the Arizona Water Innovation Initiative.

The team is building a transdisciplinary network to improve monitoring, guide decision-making and elevate groundwater sustainability on policy agendas.

The Alzheimer’s Cross-Cultural Interventions team is expanding early detection through large-scale dementia screenings, using simulated environments deployed across diverse communities.

“The data would be sent and evaluated by experts in the field,” said Helen Elizabeth Davis, assistant professor in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change. “Creating a pipeline between patients and higher-level medical care without long, expensive travel costs and wait times. Our goal would be to teach people in the communities to use the tech, not to make assessments on their own.”

While global in scope, many of these solutions are being implemented locally across Arizona.

The Next Lab: NextWork team is connecting ASU students with local industry partners, including the city of Surprise, Maricopa County and Salt River Project, along with large global employers to provide experience with in-demand careers.

“The moment you pay a student, the relationship changes entirely,” said Dan Munnerley, executive director of Next Lab and senior Global Futures scholar at ASU. “They become professionals with a responsibility to a partner and to a team.”

The Possible Education Futures Labs team is working with the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation to test and scale new approaches to teaching and learning.

“Possibility thinking encourages educators to shift from focusing on constraints to asking ‘what if,’ identifying what’s already working and turning those ideas into scalable, shareable practices,” said team member Nicole Thompson.

Phoenix 2050 is collaborating with the ASU Heat Futures Lab and Arizona’s chief officer of city innovation to help schools and city leaders prepare for rising heat risks.

“We are already getting a few key leaders looking at the problem differently,” said Clark A. Miller, professor at the School for the Future of Innovation in Society and director of the Center for Energy and Society.

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Main image



Panel judge Taylor Pineda, with the Arizona Community Foundation, praises the pitch of faculty members from the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation. From left: Tanya Pinkerton, Nicole Thompson, Deb Martinez and Rachael O'Flaherty presented on their Possible Education Futures Labs at the ASU Foundation's Moonshot Preparing for Launch event on Thursday, May 21, at the College Avenue Commons in Tempe. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



Group photo with many of the faculty and staff members who made pitches at the ASU Foundation's Preparing for Launch event.



American Indian Studies faculty members Jessi Solyom (left) and Angela Gonzales present their pitch on I-LEAD (Indigenous Leadership, Education, Advocacy and Development) during the moonshot pitch event.



Panel judge David Martinez III, with Vitalyst Health Foundation, provides feedback during the American Indian Studies presentation on I-LEAD.



Next Labs program coordinator Amanda Federico shares her department's mission to create a community of tech-driven, future-focused thinkers and creators who innovate to solve complex global problems with future tools, skills and mindsets, during the moonshot pitch event.