

Provost Q&A: What endures as AI transforms higher education

From offering AI literacy courses in all colleges at ASU this fall to advancing new frontiers in research and discovery, Provost Gonzales reflects on how and why ASU is guiding the future of AI

By Kevin Kovaleski, ASU News
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As Arizona State University begins a new academic year, Nancy Gonzales is marking a milestone: five years as executive vice president and university provost at Arizona State University.

Gonzales is a leader who knows the university uniquely well. She was an ASU student and alumna, the first in her family to graduate from college. She has served for more than three decades as a faculty member, teacher and mentor, and she has held such leadership roles as center director, dean and now provost. She's also a mom to ASU graduates.

Over her career, she has seen ASU's evolution from nearly every perspective and over a long period of historic growth. And although the last five years have been marked by extraordinary growth, what she's seeing now with the rapid rise of artificial intelligence and its impact on education is an accelerating pace of change far different from in years past.

ASU News sat down with the provost to discuss how ASU is evolving and is distinctly positioned to lead higher education through this generational moment of change.

Question: Let's start this conversation from the perspective of a provost, the person who guides the academic trajectory of a university. What's on the mind of a provost right now when it comes to making decisions about AI for an academic community?

Answer: As part of my leadership role at ASU, I serve as the AI taskforce chair for the [Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities](#) (APLU), an organization of 255 universities across the country. The provosts that participate in that work group, my peers across the country, are all after the same thing: ensuring that our universities play an active role in guiding the best of what AI offers

and will offer, while safeguarding the transformative potential of our academic communities for our students and scholars.

The first thing on my mind when thinking about my role at ASU is, frankly, gratitude. I am so grateful to be provost at a university with a crystal-clear charter and design aspirations. When it comes to decision-making around a frontier technology like generative AI, and possibly AGI (artificial general intelligence), these fundamental principles offer ASU immediate shared ground and purpose from which to launch our plans. Not all universities have that foundation, which I believe positions us to advance more rapidly and lead our sector more intentionally.

I'll be specific. Our charter asks us to advance discovery for public value and take responsibility for our community. In other words, we are compelled to understand AI as a technology that has the potential to improve lives. And our design aspiration, "practice principled innovation," challenges us to innovate only in ways that advance such positive outcomes.

This is why, starting in fall 2026, we're announcing that AI literacy courses will be offered by every college and school at ASU. Now, every student in every college and school at ASU has access to a course in AI literacy that counts toward their major. We are among the first universities to do so.

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Nancy Gonzales, executive vice president and university provost, on AI literacy being the first step toward using AI well
Arizona State University

Q: Let's discuss student learning. What is ASU's approach to AI in regard to student use of AI?

A: First and foremost, the use of AI technologies begins with AI literacy. Literacy is not just learning how to use a given AI tool. AI literacy also means that you understand social, psychological and ethical context so that you know how to use the tool effectively and responsibly. We want students, and society for that matter, to use AI in ways that help them learn and grow and enhance their abilities, skills and relationships.

This is why, starting in fall 2026, we're announcing that AI literacy courses will be offered by every college and school at ASU. Now, every student in every college and school at ASU has access to a course in AI literacy that counts toward their major. We are among the first universities to do so. These classes have been designed by the faculty of these colleges so that the lessons learned in the coursework relate to our students' chosen fields of study. This was a major effort over the spring and summer, and it is a major opportunity for students.

I would encourage all students to take the AI literacy course either this semester or sometime over the next academic year.

Additionally, we're asking students to understand that their professors will set the “rules of engagement” with AI for their classes, and it may vary from assignment to assignment. Part of AI fluency is learning how and when to use these tools, but also when not to use them. We want to train students to recognize when AI can support learning and when it would get in the way of developing critical thinking, teamwork, comprehension, disciplinary knowledge and other skills faculty are working to teach and assess.

Q: As students are learning to use these tools, in many cases professors are as well. It must be challenging for faculty to navigate how AI is used in their classes. How is ASU addressing faculty needs?

A: As provost, I also think a great deal about the enormous challenge AI poses to the role of a faculty member. Namely, how do you ensure that your students are learning in an era where AI can help students deliver completed homework, essays, etc., instantaneously?

That need led us to develop the Assessment Design Accelerator this summer as part of our [Creating Assessments in the Age of AI](#) collaboration between the Office of the Provost, EdPlus and faculty members who teach in our top-100 enrolled courses. Through this work, faculty are coming together to examine how AI is changing the conditions for learning and assessment, and to redesign assignments in ways that are clear, meaningful and aligned with course learning objectives. The goal is to support thoughtful, discipline-specific decisions about when AI may enhance learning, when it may interfere with learning, and how students can demonstrate what they know and can do.

We're also actively providing faculty and students [access to AI tools and training](#), most of which is available at no cost.

Q: Beyond your role as provost, you are also an ASU faculty member and a psychologist. How does that experience inform the decisions you make as provost?

A: I will always be proud of my faculty role and everything it has allowed me to do as teacher, mentor and scientist. I think it's important to step back and understand why people enter this profession. For most of us, it's because we believe in people and the transformative power of learning, discovery and creativity.

AI by the numbers

100%: Every ASU college and school now offers AI literacy coursework or pathways.

200 students participated in the AI Scholars program in the 2025–26 academic year.

I love my work with students, both in the classroom and the research lab. My research seeks to understand how life experiences, biology, social relationships and emerging competencies combine over time to enable youth to thrive in the face of challenge, and how we can design interventions and opportunities to promote mental and physical health and resilience. Working with a wide variety of populations in educational and clinical settings, I've been amazed at the human capacity for growth and learning.

Our students don't want us to teach them in a bubble. That wouldn't work anyway, and it will not prepare them for lifelong success. They need us to believe in them and to teach them to use their knowledge, talents and tools to create a life of meaning. They also want to be inspired.

Regardless of the tools available to us, those motivations will persist, and it's on us to determine how to harness this incredible tech so that we don't discount the very human experiences and potential our students bring into their classrooms, studios and labs in our universities.

When you're on the leading edge, as ASU always positions ourselves to be, we will undoubtedly make mistakes as we advance. But I will argue that those missteps will be errors in our execution rather than errors in our judgment or vision. In the conversations I have, I see a university that remains laser-focused on practicing principled innovation while also driving the future of what higher education will become. Both of these things can be true at the same time, and that creates a tension that can be challenging to hold but absolutely worth the challenge. We must stay rooted in our principles while we innovate.

Q: Back to the student experience: Why is AI literacy necessary for all students?

A: Here's a very immediate answer. It is obvious that students can use AI to complete coursework and write essays. And while there are some safeguards that can detect irresponsible AI use, we know that regulation will not keep up with the creativity of humans using AI.

Because policy and detection alone are unlikely to be sufficient, we are focused on providing students the resources they need to use AI responsibly. Training in AI literacy will help students understand that using AI to complete their homework or write their essays only hurts them. On the other hand, if students use AI tools to enhance what they learn, dig deeper into topics outside classroom time, etc., these tools can enrich and even accelerate the learning experience.

So, in the short term, I see that AI and AI literacy are significantly changing how students interact with knowledge and learn. In the long term, there's a more transformational opportunity for those who graduate with AI literacy.

Here are two ways I see that transformation:

No. 1: It is clear to ASU's academic leaders that we are already seeing significant changes happening in our own work lives because of the AI technologies we use. And we're hearing from

400 AI workshops delivered for faculty and staff.

45,000+ users on CreateAI, a platform that empowers the ASU community to build and engage with AI-enabled products in a secure environment.

50 large language models available through CreateAI.

11,000+ AI experiences designed on CreateAI Builder, supported across disciplines.

employers that we need to graduate students that have not only expertise in their fields, but also fluency in how to use AI tools.

New and upcoming AI news and events at ASU this fall

[AI Days begin Sept. 3](#)

[Agentic AI and the Student Experience 2026 Conference, Oct. 20–22](#)

[ASU FOLC Fest 2027](#) “Future of ...” Conference, coming in February 2027

[Claude available for faculty and staff starting in fall 2026](#)

As an example, our newly launched medical school is intentionally positioned to be a leader in medicine and medical engineering because physicians with fluency in technologies like AI will be in demand, and they will be the kind of leaders who advance medicine toward new groundbreaking discoveries that will improve health outcomes. I anticipate this happening in all fields.

No. 2: At ASU, we want to graduate future leaders who are grounded in principles, ethics and AI literacy so that they can positively impact the trajectory we are on with AI. We intend for our students to be the business, political and community leaders we need to protect our shared humanity. If we leave AI decision making to those only motivated by the technological and economic promise of AI, we may lose the ability to guide the outcomes that we want.

Make no mistake, as a species, we need to address the threats that AI poses to our economy and jobs, to democracy and to the health of our planet. Universities are in a unique position to guide us toward the future we want. For example, ASU faculty are already leading the charge in addressing these challenges. It is critically important that our students

learn under these leaders so that they can advance AI as a tool for humanity, rather than the other way around.

Q: Can you give us some examples of how ASU experts are creating positive solutions through the use of AI?

A: Absolutely. There are many, so I'll share just a few examples. ASU's School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning is working with AI industries to [reduce the impacts of heat produced by data centers](#). The School of Sustainable Engineering and the Built Environment at ASU is leading a project [focused on alternatives to cooling large-scale manufacturing sites, including data centers](#), to reduce water consumption.

And it's not just engineering-related projects. Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions recently announced its [AI + Elections Clinics](#) to prepare public servants for the impacts of AI on elections. And ASU just won a \$4 million project from the NATO Special Operations Forces Command to counter adversarial political influencer campaigns using AI.

Finally, I strongly encourage everyone at ASU and beyond to read a [recent Substack essay written by N. Ángel Pinillos](#), professor and faculty head of the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies, on the case for the humanities in the age of AI. It was also recently published by the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#). In it, he reflects on why students need the knowledge gained by studying the humanities, especially in the age of AI. His examples are both practical and compelling.

Q: As we start the semester, can you share some advice to the ASU academic community as we navigate this emerging, AI-enabled world?

A: “Navigate” seems to be the default word we're using to describe what we're experiencing. I think it's apt because we are on this journey together and figuring it out.

I would start by acknowledging that what we're all going through is a significant paradigm shift. I feel that it's important that we don't downplay that fact and mistakenly gloss over the impact it may have on people. In any time of major change, there will be a wide range of human reactions, and we should always listen, be willing to learn and engage respectfully.

An academic community is not a monolith, so as you can imagine, the sentiment toward AI varies widely, and I respect the range of emotions and reactions to AI. That means being candid about real risks, including academic integrity, privacy, bias, environmental costs and the possibility that AI could weaken rather than strengthen human relationships in learning if used carelessly.

To the first adopters of AI, I admire their openness to change and their optimism for the future. I share their excitement that AI will very likely unleash an incredible era of discovery. I would also invite them to think of their role not necessarily as cheerleaders for AI, but as wayfinders for how their peers and colleagues can approach AI. Sharing what they have learned with colleagues or classmates will be vital in responsible adoption. As one example, AI Days, scheduled on all ASU campuses this fall, will be a great way for students and faculty alike to get together and advance community knowledge of AI.

To those uncertain about AI, I share many of the concerns that I have heard. To call out one, I agree that the relationship between professor and student is, frankly, precious and deserves our safeguarding. The interpersonal dynamic between a student and a teacher often goes beyond dispensing facts. Anyone who has been in the classroom knows that the mentoring, the friendships and the range of human interactions that occur within a class and between faculty and students are vital to the experience. AI can't replace that, nor should it.

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

Main image



"In the short term, I see that AI literacy has the ability to transform how students learn," said ASU Executive Vice President and University Provost Nancy Gonzales (pictured, center, with two students on the Tempe campus). "In the long term, there's a more transformational opportunity for those who graduate with AI literacy." Photo by Jill Richards