

National Academy of Engineering honors Panchanathan with Arthur M. Bueche Award

ASU professor and former head of the NSF is first Indian American and Arizonan to receive award, which recognizes dedication to science and technology

By Bret Hovell, ASU News
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In 1969, 8-year-old Sethuraman Panchanathan stood in line outside the American Center in Chennai, India. He was with his father and hundreds of others who had come to see something truly remarkable in the history of human achievement: moon rocks from the Apollo 11 mission.

As he approached the gray pebbles shielded under glass, he was struck, even at a young age, not by what he saw directly in front of him, but by what the rocks represented.

“The rocks were just rocks,” Panchanathan recalled. “But what fascinated me was all the human ingenuity and scientific prowess that went into bringing them here.”

It was a moment that would shape his life. Panchanathan, an engineer, is University Professor of Technology and Innovation at Arizona State University and the former director of the National Science Foundation. He has spent his career studying and building the modern structures of engineering and science that have advanced knowledge and benefited humanity — just like the ones that allowed for the success of the moon missions.

In recognition of these achievements, the National Academy of Engineering has named Panchanathan the recipient of the 2026 Arthur M. Bueche Award, which honors an engineer who has had “active involvement in determining U.S. science and technology policy, promoting technological development, and contributing to the enhancement of the relationship between industries, government and universities.”

“Panch is one of the most remarkable systems thinkers we have in this country,” ASU President Michael M. Crow said. “This award is a national recognition of what we have known here at ASU

for some time, which is that when big problems need to be solved, Panch needs to be in the room.”

As the 15th director of the National Science Foundation, Panchanathan’s term spanned COVID-19 and the race for a vaccine, and included the creation of the first new directorate in more than 30 years. That directorate works to accelerate the translation of science and technology for economic progress, national security and societal impact in local and regional hubs throughout the country.

“I’m honored and humbled by this recognition,” Panchanathan said. “Awards like this are never only about the individual. They are about the scores of people that have contributed to the outcomes recognized. I owe my inspiration to my family, teachers and mentors, and to the many students and colleagues I have been fortunate enough to collaborate with throughout my career.”

Panchanathan was nominated for this award by the president of the University of Arizona, ASU’s athletic rival but close collaborator in higher education in the state.

“I am delighted to congratulate my friend and colleague Sethuraman Panchanathan on this well-deserved recognition from the National Academy of Engineering,” University of Arizona President Suresh Garimella said. “I have had the privilege of witnessing Panch’s combination of scientific vision and genuine commitment to expanding opportunity over many years and across many roles. Few people I know have translated those qualities into more lasting impact for our nation and the world.”

Before his appointment to the NSF, Panchanathan led ASU’s research portfolio as the head of Knowledge Enterprise and served as the university’s chief research and innovation officer. During this time, the research volume tripled at the university and ASU was named [the most innovative university in the country](#) by U.S. News and World Report.

Now back at ASU, Panchanathan focuses his work on artificial intelligence, quantum computing and the future of higher education. In April, [he was appointed](#) by Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego to lead the city’s quantum strategy. He is also developing a vision for higher education in an age of artificial intelligence that will stress cultivating students’ mindsets and forging closer partnerships between universities and industries in high-tech fields.

The award, which was announced Tuesday, cites Panchanathan “for leadership in promoting fundamental science, technology and policy that advances translational research and expands opportunities nationwide.”

Panchanathan was elected to the National Academy of Engineering, one of the highest honors for an American engineer, in 2024. He is the first Indian American to win the Bueche Award in its more than 40-year history, as well as the first Arizonan. In 2025, [he was awarded the Padma Shri](#), a prestigious civilian honor in India. On the 250th anniversary of the United States, he was cited by Indiaspora as it chronicled 250 moments that recognize the achievements of Indian Americans. And he was included on the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership’s list of the 250 most important voices that have shaped the U.S.-India relationship.

The Bueche Award will be presented in October at the National Academy of Engineering’s annual meeting in Washington, D.C.

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

Main image



Sethuraman Panchanathan, University Professor of Technology and Innovation at Arizona State University and the former director of the National Science Foundation, has spent his career studying and building the modern structures of engineering and science that have advanced knowledge and benefited humanity. Photo by Deanna Dent/ASU