Universities explore how to balance AI development with responsible use

Tech founder and musician will.i.am joined other higher education leaders to discuss challenges, benefits of artificial intelligence during ASU conference

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Story highlights

ASU held a three-day conference that explored the challenges and benefits of AI in higher education.

Speakers, including tech founder, musician and Professor of Practice will.i.am, discussed how to promote responsible use of the technology when there are no guardrails.

Even as universities are embracing artificial intelligence, the technology is speeding ahead without guardrails, making ethical, responsible use critical, according to Arizona State University President Michael Crow.

Crow gave a keynote address at the “Agentic AI and the Student Experience” conference on Wednesday, Oct. 21. The three-day event, held by ASU Enterprise Technology, featured speakers, panels and hands-on workshops to explore how higher education is adapting to the lightning-fast advances and challenges of AI.

ASU offers 20 undergraduate, graduate and certificate AI programs, Crow said, and more than 4,000 faculty members have been trained in advanced AI systems.

“But we live in a world — right now on campus, and with our students both online and on campus — in which things are moving much faster by the learning consumer than by the knowledge producer,” he said.

“Virtually all of our students are using AI tools. Less than half are using those tools that we're providing them.”

Crow also discussed how AI would apply to the university’s charter.

“Our interest is in the benefit to the public,” he said. “How do we empower every person in the democracy, every person in this society, to enhance their learning outcomes, individualized to them?”

AI tools could be used to prepare people to go to college, assist neurodivergent learners and to solve complex problems, Crow said.

“The outcome is not the number of data centers that we build. (It’s) what cancers did we find treatments for?” he said.

“We start measuring the outcomes against those things.”

Key messages from the conference include:

Streamlining bureaucracy

One of the biggest barriers to a college degree is navigating the complex bureaucracy of a university, and AI tools are ideal for solving that, according to university presidents who spoke on a panel called “Leading in the Age of AI.”

Stacy Leeds, president of the University of Tulsa and former dean of ASU’s law school, said: “If the student has an issue with their bills, they have to go to the bursar's office and then they go to financial aid and maybe they also have to talk to somebody in their college.

“We’re looking at a system that can go in, check the situation, even remove a hold if necessary, and the student only has to interact with the person if it's elevated to that next level. It can truly and fundamentally change the workflow.”

Amy Diaz, president of Gateway Community College in Phoenix, said: “We leverage AI in a way that allows them to do their college business on their own time and then come in and talk to the human about the things that the human needs to interact with them for.”

Another area where AI is useful is re-imagining the admissions process, potentially shortening it from a monthslong process to just days, Leeds said.

“The idea that a 17-year-old would be judged by their scores and their GPA, and then be forced to wait eight months for somebody to make a decision and give their first financial aid offer is insane,” she said.

“We can reduce their stress before they ever enter into the school,” she said.

Maintaining agency

Tech founder and musician will.i.am said that the desire for responsible AI use compelled him to teach a course at ASU about it. “The Agentic Self,” which teaches students how to create personal agents, debuted in the spring semester.

A professor of practice in The GAME School at ASU, will.i.am also is the founder and CEO of FYI.AI, an AI-powered technology platform. The students in The Agentic Self course are creating their agents with the EDU.FYI platform, a collaboration between ASU and FYI.AI.

Unlike ChatGPT or Claude, large language models that store data in a public cloud, the students’ agents are private and entirely theirs.

The idea for FYI.AI came from observing how GPS works, will.i.am told the crowd at the conference on Tuesday.

“For Google or Apple or any map company to be able to give you directions down to the minute on the prediction of when you’ll get there, they had to map the Earth. Right now, the big data monarchies, these new kingdoms, can predict you but you don't own your predictions,” he said.

“We're just users to them.”

FYI.AI was created so people could own their own data, in the form of an agent.

And will.i.am jumped at the chance to teach the ASU class because he felt an urgent need to teach students the ethics alongside the technology — while regulation is nonexistent.

“Before you deploy a vehicle, you make sure that there's seat belts, airbags, emissions, and the folks that are going to operate it, let's make sure you're licensed,” he said.

“When it comes to deploying AI, there's no version of that. I didn't have to take a test to deploy FYI. Why is that possible?”

He has emphasized to his students that they should create agents to solve problems.

Celia Coochwytewa, assistant director of academic operations in the Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation, took will.i.am’s class in the spring.

“As we kept talking about what we wanted to give to the agent and what we wanted to hold onto, and we're listening to these experts from all over the industry, it became this personal piece that tied back to my Native side, with data sovereignty and trust and how we need to hold onto what we provide to these agents, what data we're sharing out there,” she said during a panel discussion at the conference.

“And that started to turn my mind over to how I can leverage this technology not just for my faculty, staff and students, but for the communities that I'm part of — how we educate the Native communities.”

Co-creating with industry

John Markoff, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author who’s covered Silicon Valley for decades, has seen many technology revolutions.

“Every generation of technology reached a broader circle of the world population. Smartphones took us to 50% of the population, and it's pretty clear that AI is taking us to ubiquity. This technology will touch everybody on the face of Earth,” he said during a talk titled “Covering the AI Revolution.”

He was stunned recently when he uploaded a city council meeting transcript to Claude and asked for a newspaper-style story.

“I couldn't have done it better. It was well sourced in terms of context. It was all there,” he said. “We don't need public reporters anymore. So that's something I'm still completely struggling with.

“At the same time, we're in the midst of a bubble in Silicon Valley, and I've learned enough from reporting that you have to distrust everything that the people who are building these technologies say. I don't think anybody knows where we're going and where this is headed.”

Sethuraman Panchanathan, University Professor of Technology and Innovation, believes that universities must engage more with the technology industry.

“Much of the advancement in AI is happening at a pace which is mind boggling in industry. So what are we doing with them? How are we co-creating with them instead of imagining that they’re just going to bring the tools?” he said.

Panchanathan, former director of the National Science Foundation, said that several years ago, he had a student who was visually impaired who created a device with a tablet and USB camera to better access lectures. He figured out a way to take notes and link them to the lectures. At the end of the semester, his classmates asked him to share his notes.

“Folks, that's the moment that we are in. He did not just develop, design and build a device,” Panchanathan said. “He actually built an environment that he co-evolved with.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



From left: Gateway Community College President Amy Diaz, ASU President Michael Crow, National University President Mark Milliron and University of Tulsa President Stacy Leeds speak during the “Presidents’ Panel: Leading in the Age of AI,” moderated by Digital Education Council President Danny Bielk, as part of the "Agentic AI and the Student Experience" conference held at the Omni Hotel in Tempe, Arizona, on Oct. 21. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University

Text image(s)



ASU President Michael Crow delivers the keynote address during the "Agentic AI and the Student Experience" conference held at the Omni Hotel in Tempe on Oct. 21. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University



Gateway Community College President Amy Diaz speaks during a “Presidents’ Panel: Leading in the Age of AI” as part the "Agentic AI and the Student Experience" conference at the Omni Hotel in Tempe, Arizona, on Oct. 21. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University



ASU President Michael Crow and ASU Professor of Practice will.i.am discuss the future of agentic AI during an Oct. 20 fireside chat at the "Agentic AI and the Student Experience" conference held by ASU Enterprise Technology. Photo by Deanna Dent/Arizona State University



ASU University Professor of Technology and Innovation Sethuraman Panchanathan speaks during a fireside chat as part the "Agentic AI and the Student Experience" conference on Oct. 21. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University