# DFI Advisory Board Meeting

**Date of the meeting** – 10/17/2025

**Location** – Observation Deck, 100 Constitution Plaza, Hartford, CT - 06103

**Duration** - 4 hrs. (12:00 PM – 4:00 PM)

## Contents

# Executive Summary

The Digital Frontiers Initiative (DFI) Advisory Board met on October 17, 2025, at the Observation Deck in Hartford for its Fall 2025 session. The four-hour meeting brought together faculty, industry leaders, and student representatives to share program updates, review recent DFI events, and discuss ways to expand experiential learning and innovation across UConn.

Key discussions included updates to the MSBAPM program and its new AI for Business concentration, progress on the AI Fluency Program, and a hands-on tour of Innovate Labs highlighting its Lab and Virtual Kit learning models. Board members also participated in group discussions ranking technology tracks by industry relevance and offering ideas to enhance student engagement, data storytelling, and entrepreneurial learning opportunities.

# Member Updates

The meeting began with member updates highlighting recent leadership transitions and academic initiatives across the School of Business.

**Jennifer Eigo**, who recently stepped into her new role as Academic Director for the MS in Business Analytics and Project Management (MSBAPM) program, has stepped down from her position as Associate Director at the Digital Frontiers Initiative (DFI). This transition reflects her shift in focus toward leading and advancing the MSBAPM program, ensuring its continued alignment with industry needs and innovation priorities.

## MSBAPM Program Updates

Professor Eigo provided an overview of the latest updates to the MS in Business Analytics and Project Management curriculum. The program continues to evolve in response to industry expectations and the growing influence of generative AI in business.

As part of the new AI for Business concentration, three key courses have been introduced:

- **OPIM 5515 – Generative AI for Business,** which establishes the foundation for generative AI concepts, tools, and business use cases.
- **OPIM 5517 – Building Advanced Generative AI Systems**, which focuses on developing and deploying complex generative AI applications.

- **OPIM 5518 – AI Governance**: A Risk Management Framework for Trustworthy and Responsible AI, which explores the principles of responsible AI use, governance structures, and regulatory compliance.

These additions strengthen the MSBAPM program's commitment to preparing students for the rapidly evolving data and AI landscape while promoting ethical and responsible innovation.

**Prof Wei Chen**, Associate Professor of Operations and Information Management (OPIM) and Academic Director of the UConn Digital Frontiers Initiative, shared updates on the AI Fluency Program.

### AI Fluency Program

The initiative is designed to help faculty, staff, and students build their understanding and confidence in applying AI within academic and operational settings. While the program primarily serves the School of Business, it also invites participants from other UConn departments to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration and shared learning.

Professor Chen noted that the program aims to improve AI literacy and integrate AI tools into teaching and research practices. Plans are underway to expand access beyond the UConn learning platform (HuskyCT) to an open-access environment, allowing a wider audience to benefit from Innovate Labs' AI resources and training modules.

## DFI Events Recap

- The **Educator Blackhawk Flight** event was organized through a partnership between the Digital Frontiers Initiative (DFI) and the Connecticut National Guard. As Innovate Labs operates under DFI, several Innovate Labs staff members participated in the event, which included a helicopter flight experience aboard a Blackhawk. The activity provided participants with firsthand exposure to the National Guard's operations and served as an outreach effort highlighting the intersection of technology, education, and real-world applications.
- DFI participated in **Hartford Innovation Week**, during which three DFI-led workshops were held from **September 29 to October 3, 2025**. These workshops were coordinated by **Katherine Lorange,** Project Coordinator at DFI, and focused on increasing awareness and engagement around emerging technologies. Each session had approximately ten participants, helping strengthen DFI's visibility and community presence in Hartford.

- DFI continued expanding the reach of its **UNIV 1820 – Introduction to Emerging Technologies** course. Previously, the course was offered only at the Storrs campus, led by **Jonathan Moore**, Executive Director of DFI. Beginning Fall 2025, the course was offered for the first time at the Stamford campus, taught by **Ryan Schwallie**, Manager of IT Services at Stamford, and at the Hartford campus, taught by **Katherine Lorange**, Project Coordinator at DFI. The UNIV course is aimed at integrating emerging technologies into general education.
- The **Makerspace Bounce Event** served as Innovate Labs' semester kickoff, featuring a **Scavenger Hunt** designed to engage students in exploring makerspace tools and technologies. The event was co-marketed with other makerspaces on the campus, fostering collaboration and expanding the broader innovation network.
- Lastly, the **AIM Capstone Info Session** was held to increase collaboration between students and industry partners by introducing available capstone opportunities. The session provided an overview of expectations, project structure, and engagement pathways. Following the event, companies were contacted for potential partnerships to support upcoming student capstone projects.

## Upcoming Events and Initiatives

- The upcoming **Smart Manufacturing Summit** will take place on **November 5, 2025**, from **4:00 PM to 7:00 PM** at the Graduate Business Learning Center (GBLC) in Hartford. The event will convene industry leaders, analytics experts, and students to examine how data, analytics, and emerging technologies are reshaping manufacturing operations and modern supply chains.

## Innovate Labs Tour Recap

As part of the Fall 2025 DFI Advisory Board Meeting, board members toured the Innovate Labs facility at the University of Connecticut's Hartford campus. The session was led by Jonathan Moore, Executive Director of the Digital Frontiers Institute (DFI) and Director of Innovate Labs, who provided an in-depth overview of the lab's history, mission, and role in advancing experiential learning and interdisciplinary innovation.

The visit offered board members firsthand insight into what Innovate Labs provides and how students across disciplines can engage with its resources to develop industry-valued skills in technology, analytics, and applied innovation.

Jon introduced the lab's two key learning streams -Lab Kits and Virtual Kits, which together form the foundation of Innovate Labs' hands-on learning model:

**Lab Kits** are in-person, equipment-based modules focused on emerging technologies such as 3D Technology, XReality, Circuitry, Applied Tech, and the Internet of Things (IoT). These kits allow students to explore, experiment, and collaborate within a physical environment designed for creativity and problem-solving.

**Virtual Kits** are self-paced, online learning modules accessible through UConn accounts, covering areas like Artificial Intelligence, Data Visualization, Predictive Analytics, Programming, and Blockchain. These virtual experiences expand access to innovation learning for students across all campuses.

Each kit is structured across three levels - Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced, and can be completed in 30 to 60 minutes, offering students a flexible, self-guided pathway to strengthen both technical fluency and creative confidence.

Overall, the visit gave advisory board members a deeper understanding of how Innovate Labs supports applied learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and entrepreneurship. The group discussed opportunities to integrate tech-kit experiences into credit-bearing coursework, expand faculty–industry mentorship, and further promote student engagement through innovation-driven projects.

## Group Discussion Summaries

Following the Innovate Labs tour, advisory board members took part in focused group discussions about the lab's two main learning streams: Lab Kits and Virtual Kits. The goal was to understand how these programs help students gain hands-on, industry-relevant experience and to explore ways to make them even more impactful and scalable.

As part of the activity, both groups were asked to review and rank all 10 tech tracks-five from the Virtual Kits and five from the Lab Kits based on their relevance and importance to their organizations. The discussion provided valuable insight into how industry professionals view each area of emerging technology and how effectively UConn's Innovate Labs is preparing students for the realities of today's job market.

Members representing major companies in healthcare, technology, manufacturing, and finance shared their perspectives on three key areas:

- How well the two learning streams prepare students with practical, job-ready skills.
- How these modules align with what employers are currently seeking in new graduates.
- Which skill areas - technical, analytical, or interpersonal - carry the most weight in hiring decisions.

## Group A

**Members:**

- Dennis Nash, President and CEO, Control Station, Inc.
- Jake Del, Director Digital Process Transformation, PepsiCo
- David Bergman, Associate Dean for Faculty & Research
- Gerri Kennedy - Program Manager, Digital Frontiers Academy
- Katherine Lorange  Project Coordinator, Digital Frontiers Initiative
- Manasa Ramaka - Student Advisory Board Member, Digital Frontiers Initiative

Group A, made up of the above-mentioned advisory board members, reviewed and ranked all ten Innovate Labs tech tracks, five from the Virtual Kits and five from the Lab Kits, to evaluate how relevant they are to industry needs and how well they prepare students for today's workforce. The group's discussion focused on identifying which skills are most valuable to employers and how students can strengthen both their technical and communication abilities to stand out after graduation.

**Virtual Kits Ranking**

The discussion began with the Virtual Kits, which include Programming, Predictive Analytics, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Data Visualization, and Blockchain. Members had different ways of ranking the tracks: some started with the most foundational skills, while others began with the most advanced. In the end, the group reached a shared ranking:

1. Programming
2. Predictive Analytics
3. Artificial Intelligence (AI)

4. Data Visualization
5. Blockchain

Programming was recognized as the most essential skill across industries. Predictive Analytics and AI were viewed as important for applying programming knowledge in business decision-making. Data Visualization was valued as a communication tool, and Blockchain was considered a niche area that could be expanded into a broader data management and warehousing track to make it more relevant to employers.

**Lab Kits Discussion**

For the Lab Kits, which include 3D Technology, Internet of Things (IoT), Circuitry, Applied Tech, and XR (Extended Reality), the group did not assign a strict order. Members noted that priorities vary by industry. For example, representatives from PepsiCo highlighted the importance of IoT and logistics technology for managing complex supply chains, while others placed more emphasis on 3D design and manufacturing. Everyone agreed that each Lab Kit contributes something unique and that students benefit most when they explore multiple tracks to build a well-rounded understanding of how design, hardware, and automation connect.

**Broader Discussion Themes**

The group also explored how AI is transforming manufacturing, especially in Connecticut's industrial sector. They discussed how AI improves efficiency and predictive maintenance but stressed that strong engineering and physics fundamentals are still vital. Members also noted that the overlap between AI, gaming, and engineering represents an exciting space for innovation.

A key part of the discussion focused on the balance between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Human Intelligence (HI). While AI continues to evolve, members agreed that it cannot replace the value of human understanding, context, and judgment. AI still depends on humans to train, guide, and interpret it effectively, and combining both will always produce the best outcomes.

When the conversation turned to career readiness, everyone agreed that technical knowledge alone is not enough. What separates top candidates is their ability to connect technical work to business goals, communicate findings clearly, and use data responsibly.

Data storytelling and data honesty were described as essential skills for every student entering the workforce.

**Suggestions and Next Steps**

To strengthen participation and visibility, Group A suggested several ways to build on the success of the kits:

- Encourage students to develop start-up ideas with university support for funding, mentoring, and ideation, so they can showcase what they have built, not just what they have learned.
- Integrate Lab and Virtual Kits into course syllabi, allowing students to earn credit or extra credit through completion.
- Provide recognition or digital certificates for finishing tech tracks to encourage engagement.
- Use industry branding (for example, “AI in Healthcare” or “IoT in Logistics”) to help students connect each kit with real-world applications.
- Host case study competitions on topics like data storytelling, ethical analytics, and data integrity to strengthen both technical and soft skills.

**Takeaway**

Group A concluded that the Innovate Labs learning model gives students a strong technical foundation while promoting creativity and collaboration. To make the most of it, students should build strong foundations, apply them through hands-on learning, and connect those skills to business storytelling, the combination that truly prepares them to thrive in a data-driven world.

## Group B

**Members**

- Fred Dimyan, CEO, Potoo Solutions
- Nitya Joseph, AVP of Enterprise Analytics, American Eagle Financial Credit Union
- Christina Mrachek, Director, DT Early Career Programs, Global Digital Technology Operations, Otis Elevator Company

- Prof. Wei Chen, Assistant Professor at UConn School of Business and Academic Director of Digital Frontiers Initiative (DFI)
- Astik Mehta, Student Advisory Board Member – Digital Frontiers Initiative

**Virtual Tech Track Insights**

- **Top Priority – Artificial Intelligence (AI):**
  AI emerged as the most important and widely discussed area. Advisors expressed strong interest in **Enterprise AI applications**, emphasizing its growing relevance across industries. The discussion focused on topics such as **AI governance**, **responsible deployment**, and the **need for technical depth** in verifying AI-generated code. Members agreed that as AI becomes embedded in development processes, ensuring human oversight and validation will be essential.
- **Second Priority – Programming:**
  Programming is seen as a critical foundational skill that supports AI adoption and integration. Advisors emphasized that with AI tools for writing code, developers must now understand programming principles deeply enough to **verify and interpret AI-assisted outputs**.
- **Other Notes:**
  The group briefly touched on **Statistical and Machine Learning (SML) models** and the importance of **AI governance frameworks** for enterprise environments.
- **Least Priority – Blockchain:**
  While acknowledged as innovative, Blockchain was ranked lowest due to its **limited direct application** in most participants' current organizational settings.

**Physical (Lab) Tech Track Insights**

- **Top Priority – Circuitry and Wearables:**
  Circuitry, especially **Wearable Technology**, was highlighted as highly promising. Advisors viewed wearables as **the future of connected devices**, with growing applications in health monitoring, smart systems, and IoT solutions. Microcontrollers and sensors were also recognized as essential learning tools that support innovation in embedded technology.
- **Moderate Priority – IT & 3D Tracks:**
  The group noted that 3D modeling and IT-based tools continue to be important for design, prototyping, and visualization.
- **At least Priority – Applied Tech (AT):**

Drones and Robotics, though valuable for learning and outreach, were seen as **less directly relevant** for enterprise-focused applications at present.

**Recommendations**

- **Introduce Tech Kits Related to Computer Networks and API Integration Management**
  All members of Group B suggested adding new tech kits that help students understand how devices communicate, how data flows between systems, and how APIs integrate software and hardware components. These areas were seen as important for preparing students for modern, interconnected technology environments.

## Key Outcomes & Next Steps

The board highlighted major strides in academic innovation and hands-on learning.

- **AI Innovation**: Launch of new AI for Business courses and expansion of the AI Fluency Program to strengthen UConn's focus on applied artificial intelligence.
- **Hands-On Learning**: Innovate Labs tour highlighted the value of Lab and Virtual Kits in building practical, industry-ready skills.
- **Industry Priorities**: Programming, AI, and Circuitry/Wearables identified as top skills for workforce readiness.
- **Student Engagement**: Emphasis on data storytelling, communication, and entrepreneurship to complement technical learning.
- **Next Steps**: Explore credit-bearing options for tech kits, case competitions, and university-backed start-up initiatives.

**Looking Ahead**: The board will meet again virtually **on January 9, 2026**, to continue advancing innovation and collaboration.