DFI Advisory Board Meeting

Date of the meeting – 10/17/2025

Location – Remote via Teams

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

Contents

Digital Frontiers Initiative (DFI)

Strategic Direction, Industry Engagement, and Program Roadmap for 2026

Insights from the DFI Virtual Advisory Board Meeting

Executive Summary

The Digital Frontiers Initiative (DFI) continues to evolve as a leading platform for industry–academia collaboration, applied analytics, and artificial intelligence–driven innovation at the University of Connecticut. The 2026 Virtual Advisory Board Meeting convened academic leaders, industry partners, and program stakeholders to review recent outcomes, align on strategic priorities, and shape the future direction of DFI as it enters its third year of operation.

Key areas of focus included tangible outcomes from Fall 2025 capstone and applied AI projects, the launch and scaling of the AI Fluency Program, expanding industry engagement and workforce upskilling initiatives, and reimagining the structure and value proposition of the DFI Advisory Board for 2026. Together, these themes reflect a growing emphasis on translating academic research into measurable business impact while building scalable learning and innovation infrastructure.

Discussions highlighted the increasing demand for applied AI capabilities, internal upskilling across organizations, and practical, use-case–driven innovation. Advisory Board members emphasized the importance of data readiness, structured change management, and modular learning programs to ensure that AI investments generate sustained organizational value rather than isolated technical pilots.

This document synthesizes the meeting agenda, presentation materials, and participant discussions into a cohesive strategic brief. It outlines current program performance,

emerging opportunity areas, and recommended next steps to strengthen DFI's role as a catalyst for responsible, industry-aligned AI adoption and workforce development.

1. Meeting Context and Objectives

The DFI Virtual Advisory Board Meeting was structured to balance retrospective program evaluation with forward-looking strategic planning. Advisory Board members were invited to assess recent outcomes, validate strategic direction, and provide industry-grounded perspectives on how DFI should evolve to remain relevant and impactful.

Six core objectives guided the session: reviewing DFI's strategic direction and organizational updates; gathering industry partner perspectives on AI adoption and workforce needs; assessing outcomes from Fall 2025 capstone and applied analytics projects; previewing the Spring 2026 project pipeline; reimagining the DFI Advisory Board model for 2026; and identifying concrete next steps to amplify DFI's impact and visibility.

Collectively, these objectives positioned the meeting as both a governance milestone and a strategic inflection point as DFI enters its third year of operation.

2. Overview of the Digital Frontiers Initiative (DFI)

The Digital Frontiers Initiative operates as a University of Connecticut–affiliated platform designed to bridge academic research, student talent, and real-world industry problem-solving. Its mission centers on advancing applied analytics and artificial intelligence education, enabling use-case–driven innovation, and preparing students and professionals for data-driven roles in modern organizations.

DFI's programming integrates academic coursework, experiential capstone projects, faculty research collaboration, and professional development offerings. Through partnerships with regional and national organizations, the initiative delivers tangible value in the form of analytics tools, AI pilots, dashboards, and decision-support solutions.

Over time, DFI has evolved from a project-centric collaboration model into a broader innovation ecosystem focused on scalable education, applied research translation, and workforce development.

3. Program and Initiative Updates

3.1 Organizational Updates

Several foundational developments were highlighted during the meeting. The **annual DFI report** was published and added to the DFI website, reinforcing transparency and program accountability. Prof. Wei Chen's workshop with Connecticut Library Consortium related to AI was formally recognized.

Additional updates included discussions around professional certifications to be formally offered by DFI, aligned with AI and analytics skill development and workforce-readiness objectives. Performance highlights from Innovate Labs were also shared, emphasizing program growth, student engagement, and expanding applied-technology capabilities across campuses. In addition, confirmation was provided that feedback from the Fall Advisory Board meeting had been incorporated into the 2026 strategy. Lab-track updates were also presented, with overall program readiness targeted for Fall 2026.

Collectively, these developments reflect a maturing operational model and an increasing emphasis on long-term program coherence and scalability.

3.2 AI Fluency Program

The AI Fluency Program emerged as a cornerstone strategic initiative designed to build foundational AI capabilities across faculty, staff, and the broader university community. The program is intended to move beyond ad-hoc workshops toward a structured, reusable learning framework.

Its stated goals include building AI fluency across the school and community, providing evergreen learning assets, and fostering an active support community around responsible AI usage.

The core deliverables include four recorded AI Essentials sessions (60 minutes each), four self-guided labs (45 minutes each, hosted via Blackboard), four monthly AI Office Hours (one-hour Zoom sessions), and an impact brief with an accompanying slide deck to support Spring 2026 funding.

Program scope and structure include two instructional modules—Prompt Engineering and Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG)—targeting faculty and internal staff. Approximately four hours of video content and lab work are delivered in a two-week training format, with collaboration from faculty leadership. Discussions also included the potential development of a graduate certificate in AI and an introductory AI module for undergraduate and graduate students.

Strategically, the program reflects DFI's intent to embed AI capabilities into internal university processes while simultaneously creating scalable learning infrastructure that can be repurposed across programs and audiences.

4. Industry Partner Perspectives

Advisory Board members shared insights into how AI is currently operationalized within their organizations, offering a grounded view of real-world adoption challenges and opportunities.

Joseph Radziewicz, Vice President of Corporate Controllership and Global Shared Services at Stanley Black & Decker, Inc., described a company-wide focus on upskilling teams and executive-level engagement in AI strategy. He emphasized the application of AI to supply-chain processes and the importance of use-case–driven innovation supported by internal value justification.

Marcio Silviera, Chief Executive Officer of e-Core Technology Solutions, a technology consulting firm, discussed the deployment of AI agents in client delivery, organization-wide transformation initiatives, and the operational friction created by time constraints and adoption resistance. He highlighted the importance of structured change-management frameworks to support sustainable AI integration.

Lindsay Bridenbaker, Senior Director of R&D at PepsiCo, provided a large-enterprise perspective on the PepsiCo–Siemens collaboration, illustrating a multi-year AI and digital-transformation roadmap. She emphasized data readiness as a prerequisite for AI success and highlighted the role of Siemens data controllers in feeding enterprise AI pipelines.

Nitya Joseph, Associate Vice President of Enterprise Analytics at American Eagle Financial Credit Union, outlined efforts to build an enterprise AI strategy and roadmap. She noted that vendor cost pressures are accelerating internal upskilling efforts and described two

GenAI projects being conducted with the School of Business in collaboration with Prof. Wei Chen

Across all partner discussions, three recurring themes emerged: AI adoption is now a strategic priority rather than an experimental activity; workforce upskilling is essential for sustainable AI value creation; and clean, structured data remains a primary bottleneck.

5. Fall 2025 Project Outcomes

5.1 Graduate BAPM Capstone Projects

Two graduate-level projects were highlighted. The PepsiCo project focused on analyzing multiple beverage types to support data-driven decision-making. The AndX (formerly Ananda) project involved developing an open-source AI model to generate consistent trading suggestions.

5.2 Undergraduate AIM Capstone Projects

Undergraduate projects spanned analytics, automation, forecasting, and applied AI. These included marketing dashboards for AEFCU, a construction-forecasting tool for Habitat for Humanity, sponsorship analytics for the Hartford Yard Goats, HR automation for Otis, an intake and readiness assessment tool for CT SBDC, AI Fluency pilot programming for DFI, and a custom chatbot for Potoo Solutions.

5.3 Project Impact and ROI

Sponsors reported tangible business value generated through DFI projects. One organization estimated approximately $25,000 in avoiding internal development costs. Indicative sponsorship value was estimated at roughly $500 per month on multi-year contracts.

Additional benefits included reduced sales-cycle duration, improved client engagement and early-stage qualification, and strong assessments of student innovation and delivery quality. These outcomes reinforce the business case for expanding DFI's applied project portfolio.

6. Spring 2026 Project Pipeline

6.1 Graduate BAPM Capstone Projects

The flagship Factory Twin project, an MSBAPM capstone initiative, will involve a locally deployed, open-source AI agent enabling natural-language querying of manufacturing data without reliance on external cloud APIs.

This project reflects a strategic shift toward production-grade, enterprise-ready AI systems aligned with security and data-sovereignty requirements.

6.2 Undergraduate AIM Capstone Projects

Industry partners for the Spring 2026 Undergraduate AIM Capstone projects included the Central Connecticut Chamber of Commerce, the Connecticut Business & Industry Association (CBIA), Control Station, Crystal Ventures Entertainment, Diligence Training Cares, e-Core, GE CoCreate, the National Havoc Robot League, and UppTik.

7. Strategic Discussion: The Future of the DFI Advisory Board

As DFI enters its third year, the Advisory Board engaged in a strategic roundtable to redefine its structure and value proposition. Participants emphasized the importance of board diversity, cross-industry representation, and transitioning from abstract research discussions to concrete, applied use cases.

Proposals included expanding board membership with multiple representatives per organization, enabling cross-functional engagement, and increasing campus-wide visibility for DFI programs.

7.1 Membership Model (Draft)

The board discussed a proposed tiered membership structure as a potential framework to formalize value exchange between DFI and partner organizations. The board emphasized that the purpose of the tiered model is to support flexible participation, allowing organizations to engage at different levels based on their size, capacity, and strategic priorities.

The Silver tier was discussed as an entry-level membership option intended to provide baseline engagement. It includes one AIM capstone project, one in-person meeting, unlimited virtual access, and professional development discounts. Board members noted that this tier could be strengthened by more clearly quantifying benefits, such as including a defined complimentary professional development offering (e.g., one free short course or workshop), in addition to percentage-based discounts.

The Gold tier was discussed as a mid-level engagement option designed to increase both project involvement and organizational visibility. It includes two AIM capstone projects, two in-person meetings, enhanced visibility, and increased professional development discounts. Board members suggested that this tier could also include expanded event access and additional complimentary professional development offerings to better communicate value.

The Platinum tier was discussed as a high-engagement partnership level intended for organizations seeking deeper integration with DFI. It includes one BAPM capstone project or three AIM capstone projects, three in-person meetings, premium visibility, and the highest professional development discounts. Board members discussed positioning this tier to emphasize priority access to students, broader representative participation, and no-fee participation in select career and networking events, particularly for larger organizations with extensive internal training resources.

Across all tiers, the board highlighted the importance of distinguishing between general membership and board participation. Several members noted that while membership could expand to include more organizations and representatives, board membership should remain more selective to preserve effective governance and diversity. Increased visibility through DFI communications and social media, clearer articulation of tangible benefits, and differentiation based on organizational interests (such as project-based engagement versus training-focused participation) were identified as key areas for further refinement.

7.2 Event Strategy and Engagement

Proposed engagement enhancements included monthly topical discussions, more frequent advisory interactions, career-day and student-networking events, board-led workshops through Innovate Labs, and structured introductions between board members and students. Building on this, participants discussed how event topics, formats, and locations influence both industry and student engagement.

Recent flagship events, including Data Disrupted and the Smart Manufacturing Summit, were cited as effective anchors for DFI programming, alongside smaller supplemental engagements and collaborations with broader university initiatives. Location was identified as a key factor, with Hartford and Stamford noted as more accessible for industry partners and Storrs more accessible for the broader undergraduate population. Participants noted that commuter-based campuses can limit after-hours student attendance, while hosting events in Storrs can create travel barriers for industry participants.

Networking opportunities with industry representatives were consistently identified as the primary driver of student attendance. While skill-building content was viewed as valuable, participants emphasized that direct access to employer representatives is the most compelling incentive for participation. As a result, aligning event locations with target student populations and prioritizing networking-focused formats were discussed as important considerations for maximizing participation.

Participants also discussed rotating major events across locations, including planned Stamford-based programming and the potential evolution of the annual DFI banquet into a broader academic–industry consortium-style event, subject to budget considerations. Strengthening regional partnerships, including potential engagement with organizations such as the Norwalk Chamber of Commerce, was also identified as an opportunity to expand DFI's external presence and business connectivity.

8. Strategic Implications for DFI

The meeting underscored several strategic imperatives: scaling AI education through modular, reusable learning assets; expanding enterprise-aligned applied AI projects; formalizing a tiered advisory-board membership model; strengthening workforce-upskilling

pathways; increasing DFI's visibility across UConn campuses; and building sustainable funding mechanisms for long-term growth.

Together, these imperatives position DFI to evolve from a project-based initiative into a durable, institution-level innovation platform.

9. Key Outcomes and Next Steps

Immediate priorities include finalizing AI Fluency Program materials, launching the Spring 2026 Factory Twin project, and refining advisory-board membership tiers.

Medium-term initiatives focus on expanding AI curriculum offerings, formalizing a graduate AI certificate, increasing professional-development programming, and recruiting new advisory-board members.

The long-term vision is to position DFI as a national model for applied AI education, establish a sustainable, industry-funded innovation ecosystem, and create an integrated AI workforce-development pipeline.