Colloquium explores AI in analytics

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Assistant Professor Simin Li, far left, moderates an alumni panel at this year's MANA Colloquium. Featured on the panel are, from left to right, Luke Roosa, Ansen Shen, Jasmine Williams and Sarah Oubre.

As director of DevOps Delivery with Copado, a Chicago-based tech company that provides specialized software tools to help businesses build, test and manage their Salesforce and cloud-based applications, Joe Imperato had some reassuring words for business students concerned about AI-fueled job cuts.

“There’s no replacement for real intelligence,” Imperato told Master of Business Analytics and AI (MANA) students. “It’s always going to win out over artificial, but AI is getting there.”

The rapid advances of AI — and its limitations — was the theme of this year’s MANA Colloquium, “Beyond the Data: How AI Is Transforming Business Analytics.”

The forum, which took place at the Freeman School on Nov. 7, was created to provide students in the MANA program with insights into analytics roles, industry trends and employer needs. Earlier this year, the MANA curriculum was revised to emphasize the growing use of AI in analytics, and this year's colloquium program reflected that change.

"AI is at the center of every conversation in the analytics profession right now," said Simin Li, assistant professor of management science, who organized this year's conference. "I believe it is essential for students to understand what AI can and cannot do, and what it will and will not replace in real workplaces. Industry leaders have first-hand experience experimenting with GenAI initiatives, and they can offer an honest view of what has worked, what has failed, and where the technology is heading."



Joe Imperato discussed his role as director of DevOps Delivery at Copado at this year's MANA Colloquium.

As morning keynote speaker, Imperato discussed Copado’s business, the role of DevOps in the company, and how AI is impacting DevOps and business analytics as a whole.

“Businesses want to make it so that as soon as your sales team needs something, they can just tell AI and it’s going to go and write the notes, develop the code, test it, deploy it and let you know it’s done and it all works perfectly, and you need maybe one person to make sure the AI is working. That’s the dream, but we’re just

not there yet.”

Instead, Imperato said employees are increasingly using AI on an individual basis.

“It’s happening in silos,” he said. “We haven’t had a standard AI practice happen yet. That’s the revolution I think everybody’s hoping for.”

Later that afternoon, Dana Fos, senior engineering leader with Cloud IX, discussed her career in tech and the current state of the industry.

Fos said organizations like Cloud IX, an AI-powered chatbot that offers a secure, confidential and university-specific support platform for sexual assault survivors, have the potential to push AI in a more positive direction than we’re currently seeing from companies like Meta, Alphabet and OpenAI.



Assistant Dean for Corporate Relations Brent Rosen, left, moderates a fireside chat with Dana Fos, senior engineering leader with Cloud IX, at this year's MANA Colloquium.

“There is a lot of tech being built that is labeled social impact or medical impact that will be driving the changes,” Fois said. “They’re the ones that are creating new architectures that don’t use those really shallow, gigantic pools of LLMs. It’s very, very deeply trained. Instead of wide, it’s going deep.

“The more people who get involved in [tech] who have good intentions and understand what they’re doing,” she added, “the more we’ll be able to correct that

path.”

In addition to Imperato and Fos, the colloquium also featured an industry leaders panel featuring Sean Douglass, AI business manager with Entergy, Erica Salm Rench, CMO with sidecar.ai, and Jim Dries, CEO of PILYTIX.

The afternoon concluded with a young alumni panel featuring Ansen Shen (BSM ’24, MANA ’25), value-based performance financial manager with Ochsner; Sarah Oubre (MANA ’24), business analyst with Stuller Inc.; Jasmine Williams (BSM ’23, MANA ’24), IS EPIC analyst with Ochsner; and Luke Roosa (BSM ’24, MANA ’25), product analyst with Pillar4 Media.

"I think the senior leaders panel and keynote speakers shared concrete examples from practice but also dispelled several common myths about GenAI’s actual capabilities," Li said. "The real skill is learning how to work effectively *with* GenAI — using it to enhance your thinking and productivity rather than expecting it to do everything for you. To paraphrase a point made by Sean Douglas, AI Business Manager at Entergy, vibe coding can be a powerful tool for quickly building prototypes or proofs of concept, but moving those ideas into production, human expertise, oversight and decision-making cannot be replaced."