Industry leaders showcase the intersection of analytics and AI

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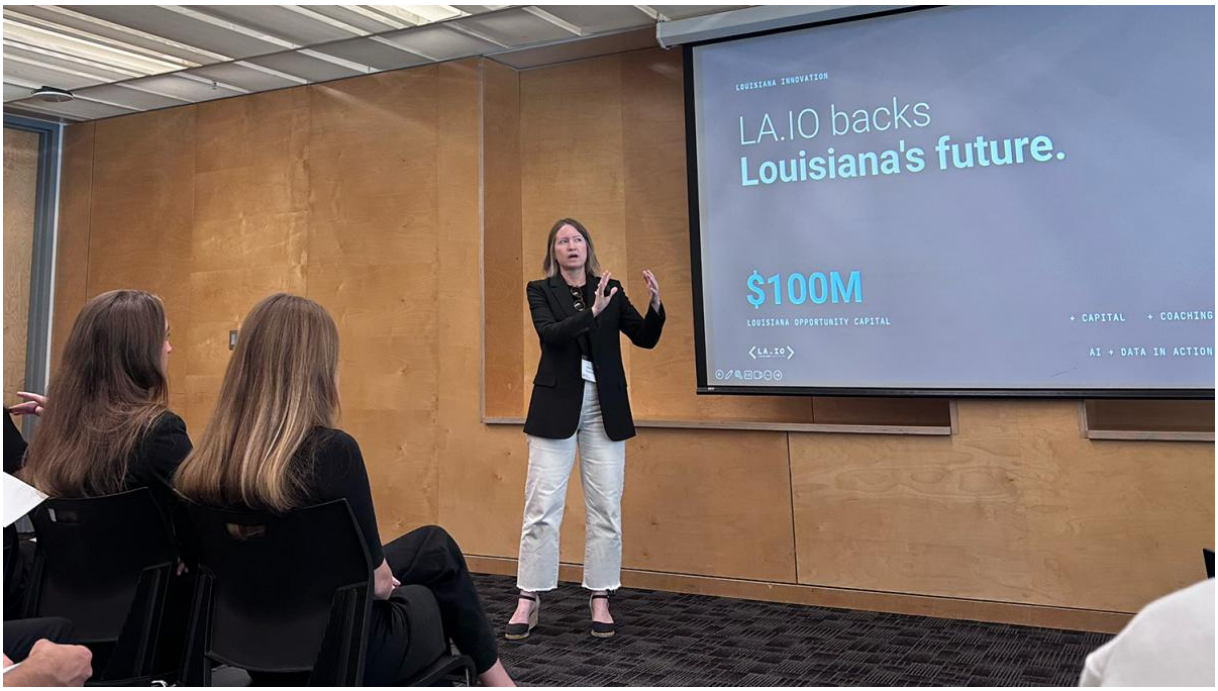

Madeline Kawanaka, executive director of innovation partnerships with Louisiana Innovation, highlights funding the agency has available to support Louisiana startups during her AI & Analytics in Action keynote talk on Nov. 13.

From autonomous maritime defense vessels being built in south Louisiana to clinical algorithms helping to streamline patient care in local hospitals, artificial intelligence is transforming the regional and global economy.

On Friday, Nov. 13, Tulane University's A. B. Freeman School of Business hosted a colloquium to highlight real-world examples of how AI is changing business. "AI & Analytics in Action" brought together industry executives, public-sector leaders, faculty and students in Tulane's Lavin-Bernick Center for University Life for a half-day program on the practical application of cutting-edge technologies.

Organized in conjunction with the Freeman School's Master of Business Analytics and AI (MANA) program, the event aimed to bridge academic training with business reality, connecting students with top employers while illustrating how organizations are using analytics, machine learning and automation to drive high-stakes decision-making.

Opening the program, Cam Verhaal, associate professor of management and faculty director of AI initiatives, outlined Freeman's strategy to integrate AI fluency throughout the curriculum while emphasizing human judgment and critical thinking.

"In traditional workflows, the bulk of your work is execution, but AI native workflows have flipped that on its head," Verhaal said. "Now, you spend huge amounts of time planning and designing and not as much on execution. It's imperative that we teach students to use judgment and keep a human in the loop. That's the challenge we're facing. One of the key axioms we try to stay true to is training students how to use AI but not forgetting to teach them how to think for themselves autonomously."

Keynote speaker Madeline Kawanaka, executive director of innovation partnerships at Louisiana Innovation (LA.IO), a division of Louisiana Economic Development, detailed the state's aggressive push into frontier tech deployment — from humanoid robotics to autonomous defense manufacturing — and urged Freeman students to lead this industrial transformation locally.

"We're the first state to put resources behind bringing a humanoid robot to live industry," Kawanaka said. "We want to own this future. We don't want to wait for that to happen to Louisiana, and then we just have to order them from California. We want to own that IP, and we want to build that here."

Kawanaka added that the MANA program’s emphasis on analytics puts graduates in a strong position to drive that future.

“You guys are in the sweetest spot right now because everybody’s moat in these startups is data,” she said. “What makes a robotics company successful right now is data. It’s hard to collect, and it is super, super vital to everybody’s operations.”

Next, a series of industry showcases demonstrated how large organizations are navigating AI adoption across complex operations. Kayla Piazza, lead product manager for AI enablement at Ochsner Health, described how the region’s largest nonprofit health system deploys AI to reduce administrative burdens on healthcare workers and uncover actionable insights from its massive datasets.

“Originally, we’d see a problem, and it was all hands on deck,” Piazza said. “We’d get a workforce of 30 people and look through all the data and spend a month understanding all the different facets of patient access. Now, we can take our data sets and really hone in on those facets without requiring someone to parse through that data. What used to take probably a month can literally be a conversation with an agent.”

Piazza added that the next big frontier isn’t necessarily building the AI, it’s getting people to think alongside AI and use it effectively in their daily practice.

Offering a corporate risk and financial services perspective, Frank Recio, executive vice president of operations and technology with Pan-American Life Insurance Group, explained how the 115-year-old multinational firm balances rapid digital adoption with institutional trust and cybersecurity vigilance.

“We are in the trust business," Recio said. “People trust us with their money, their financial well-being, so they don’t want us to be doing crazy things with AI. We are doing some pretty cool things, but it’s non-core insurance functions. It’s marketing, legal, financial analysis, the data side and obviously cybersecurity. We’re using AI to fight AI, and we’re using all the tools available to us because of those spikes (in cyberattacks).”

Other industry showcase participants included Devin Cope, senior manager, Technology Risk, Assurance, with Ernst & Young, and Jason Camardelle, vice president, AI & Data Platform, with ENFRA. The morning concluded with a recent alumni panel featuring Sam Centeno Martinez, AI engineer with Tulane Innovative

Learning Center; Vinh Tran, system analyst with Maui Oil Co.; Carter Mitchell, ALM analyst at Hancock Whitney; and Sarah Oubre, business analyst with Stuller Inc.

“The name AI & Analytics in Action perfectly captured what we’re trying to do with both the colloquium and the MANA program as a whole,” said Simin Li, assistant professor of management science and organizer of the event. “Hearing from professionals at the forefront of their industries on how they’re using data and AI to drive business success helped our students connect what they’re learning in the classroom to real-world applications and gain a better understanding of the many career options available to them. I thought all our guest speakers did a great job.”