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INNOVATION  
NETWORK

# Circular Economy Startup Simulator

*Advancing Sustainable Youth  
Entrepreneurship In Illinois  
Through Emerging Tech*

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## CIRCULAR ECONOMY STARTUP SIMULATOR



### Project Purpose

Empowering youth entrepreneurship through immersive technologies (AR, VR, AI) to build sustainable, inclusive businesses in Illinois.

## Research Collaboration

Supported by: Illinois Innovation Network

### Who Benefits

- ✓ Marginalized youth across Illinois
- ✓ Learners from rural and underserved urban communities

### Project Impact

- ✓ Comparative outcomes across regions
- ✓ Scalable model for statewide implementation
- ✓ Equity-driven innovation

### Why It Matters

- ✓ Builds a diverse, future-ready STEM workforce
- ✓ Promotes inclusive economic development
- ✓ Advances sustainability through circular economy principles

### Key Learning Areas

- ✓ Circular economy & life-cycle thinking
- ✓ Human-centered design
- ✓ Sustainable business models
- ✓ AI as a thought partner



Lead Researchers: Hei-Chi Chan, Neetu Singh, Anne-Marie Hanson, Christie Miller

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 **Northeastern**  
ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY



**What skill or mindset should every student or new graduate develop to thrive in a circular economy?**



# THE VISION

Creating immersive, inclusive pathways for youth to explore entrepreneurship, sustainability and technology—building a future-ready, equitable Illinois.



# WHY THIS MATTERS



Circular economy is reshaping industries and redefining how we create and consume.



AR, VR, and AI are transforming how we learn, explore, and solve real-world problems.



Too many youth still lack access to STEM and entrepreneurship pathways that prepare them for the future.



We aim to bridge these gaps — creating inclusive, future-ready opportunities for Illinois youth to lead in sustainability, innovation, and tech.



# Leadership Strategy With Artificial Intelligence (AI)

## 3 Pillars of Process Reinvention Through AI

Rethink  
processes

Leverage  
disruptive tech

Align with  
mission & values

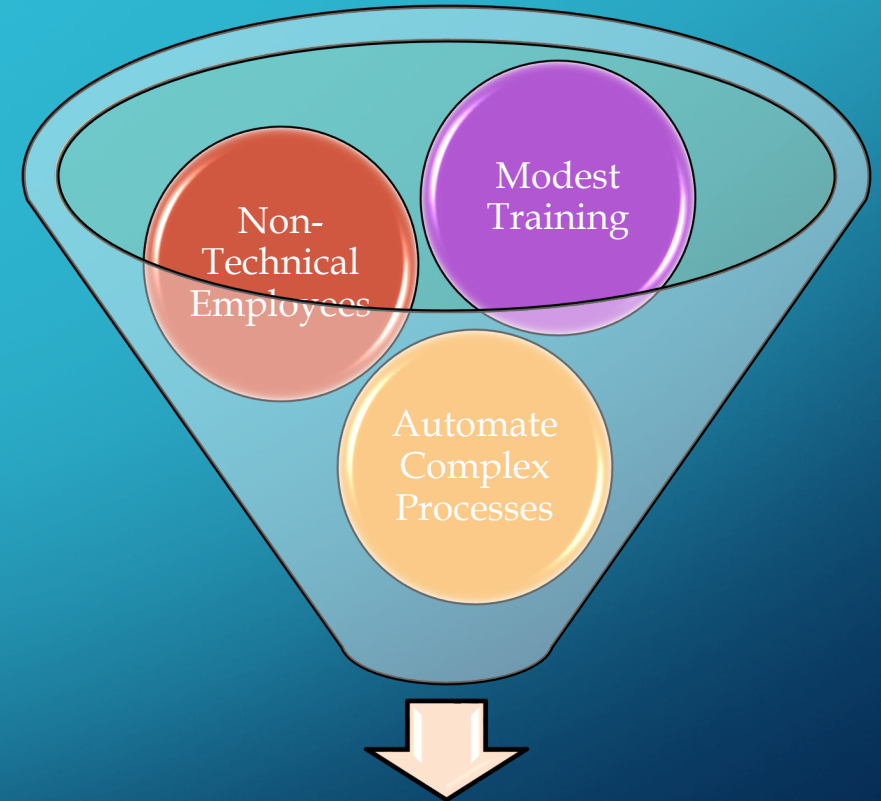


## Questions to Ask

What's your AI  
strategy?

Where will you  
start?

How will you  
invest in skills?



**Generate Significant Value  
for Organizations**



**If you had unlimited resources, which circular innovation would you prioritize to prepare the next generation (students and new grads) for the future of work?**

# PROGRAM OVERVIEW



4-week immersive training



Hands-on startup simulation



Focus on circular economy, life-cycle thinking, and human-centered design



Delivered in Springfield and Chicago





# LEARNING EXPERIENCE: KEY PROGRAM FEATURES



## Circular Economy Focus

- Inspire youth to think across the full life cycle — from design to reuse — while exploring careers in sustainability, innovation, and social impact.



## Entrepreneurial Journey

- Guide students through a startup-style experience to design real solutions and build confidence, business, and teamwork skills.



## Immersive Technologies (AR & VR)

- AR/VR simulations bring entrepreneurship to life — letting learners prototype, test, and refine ideas in immersive, interactive environments.



## AI as a Thought Partner

- Learners collaborate with GenAI tools to tackle real problems with human-centered, ethical, and inclusive innovation.



## Community Building & Celebration

- Students connect virtually across IL sites, share ideas, and engage with local circular-economy businesses in a culminating showcase event.

# Who We Serve

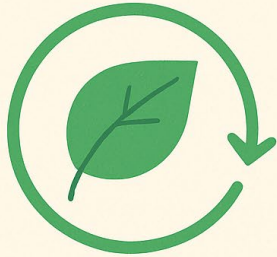


High school-aged students  
from underserved urban and rural communities



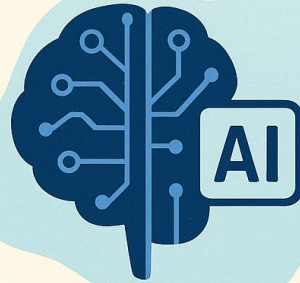
Free access, transportation, and meals

# WHO WE ARE



**Dr. Anne-Marie Hanson**

Environmental Studies  
Circular Economy



**Dr. Neetu Singh**

AI  
Organizational  
Impact



**Dr. Hei-chi Chan**

Immersive  
Technologies and  
Learning Design

## AI CAMPUS LEARNING COMMUNITY (AICLC)

### Benefits for Sustainability and Innovation

- 1 Interdisciplinary AI Engagement**  
Fosters cross-sector collaboration and bridges technology with human-centered contexts
- 2 Empowering Students with AI Tools**  
Provides hands-on programming to prepare future innovators and expand STEM opportunities
- 3 Focus on Ethics, Equity & Sustainability**  
Ensures tech innovation supports just and inclusive sustainability goals
- 4 Community Outreach & Lifelong Learning**  
Maximizes local impact through civic AI literacy and outreach initiatives



# UIS

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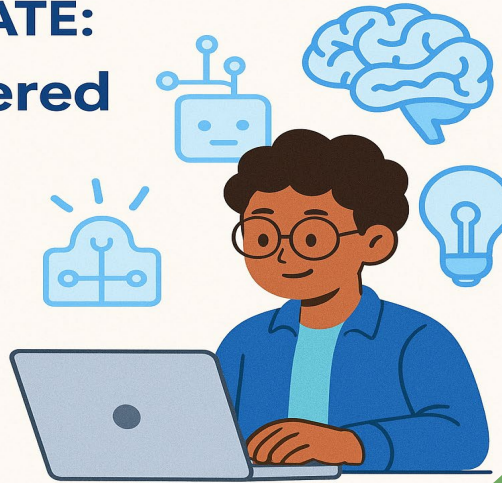


[uis.edu/ai/aiclc](http://uis.edu/ai/aiclc)



# OUR BROADER PROGRAMS

**SAVE THE DATE:  
UIS AI-Powered  
Student  
Leadership  
Bootcamp:  
October 17**



**Music**  
ILLINOIS  
SPRINGFIELD

**AI and Performance:**  
Music, Medicine, and Mental Health

**March 18, Noon to 1pm**  
Student Union Ballroom



#### Panelist

Associate Professor of  
Philosophy

Affiliate Faculty,  
Carle Illinois College  
of Medicine

UIUC



**Nir Ben-Moshe**

#### Panelist

Clinical Associate  
Professor of Music

Rueff School of Design,  
Art, & Performance

Purdue



**Kristen Yeon-JI Yun**

#### Panelist

Assistant Professor of  
Philosophy

Assistant Professor of  
Women & Gender in  
Global Perspectives

UIUC



**Alison Kerr**

**Enjoy a complimentary pizza lunch**

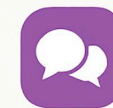
UIS Music Performance Psychology Panel Series  
UIS AI Campus Learning Community



Unveiling AI bias through a multidisciplinary lens: Navigating AI's  
impact on diversity, communication, and equity



## AI Tools for Student Organizations



Communication  
& Collaboration



Event Planning  
& Outreach



Membership  
& Engagement



Ethics &  
Governance



# AI 4 INCLUSIVE SUSTAINABILITY

## Opportunities



### Citizen Science & Monitoring

AI-driven tools for local environmental data collection & analysis



### Community-Led Solutions

Optimize local interventions (waste, urban greening, climate resilience)



### Equitable Governance

Support policy advocacy & environmental justice



### Ethics & Literacy

Promote environmental AI literacy & bias awareness

## Challenges



### Access to Infrastructure

Costly hardware, training resources, cloud services



### Technical & Data Capacity

Lack of AI skills & structured local data



### Trust & Ethics

Concerns over bias, transparency, social trust



### Power & Equity Concerns

Risk of reinforcing unequal power dynamics



## Looking Ahead

- How can AI design reflect the lived realities of climate-vulnerable communities and in disaster-prone areas?
- Can advanced platforms be adapted for less-connected regions?
- Our SRI 2025 session opened the door to critical dialogue and shared solutions.

# IMPACT GOALS



Build confidence and skills in sustainability and entrepreneurship



Foster collaboration across communities



Evaluate scalability and effectiveness



Strengthen ties with local industries

# FUTURE VISION



Annual program expansion



Integration into university and workforce training



Partnerships with audience like you, schools, businesses, and tech innovators



A sustainable, inclusive innovation ecosystem



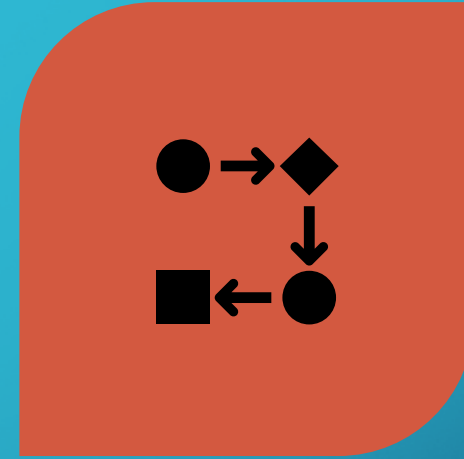
**Where do you see the greatest potential for emerging tech (AI, AR, VR) to support circularity?**





**If You Could Add One Wild, Brilliant, Or Unexpected Feature To This Program—what Would It Be?**

- 💡 A Vr Tour Of Illinois' Green Businesses?
- 🤝 A Mentorship Network Powered By AI?
- 🌍 A Student-led Sustainability Challenge?



**And What Would You Love To See In A Partnership With Us?**

Let's Co-create The Next Chapter Of Circular Innovation In Illinois.

# Call To Action!



Let's talk! How can we partner with you?  
What questions do you have? What modules  
can we link with your work?



Together, we can empower the next  
generation of innovators to build a more  
equitable and sustainable Illinois.

Technology is transforming  
leadership—student leaders  
can harness AI to amplify  
their vision.

AI literacy is essential for staying ahead  
and driving organizational impact

This bootcamp bridges the gap  
between learning AI and applying it  
strategically in student leadership





<https://share.google/images/K2MDhd3JfuGn3j2Tb>