



Student and Community Roundtable Discussions Report

Dec 02, 2025

Executive Summary

On Oct 30, 2025, following the Keynote by Ruha Benjamin for the “AI, Data Centers and the Climate Change Challenge” Symposium, students and community members participated in a one-hour roundtable discussion formatted as two 25-minute rounds with a 5-minute rotation time. Participants self-selected one of the four designated topic tables: (1) AI and the Academic Experience, (2) Community Engagement, (3) Sustainability and Environmental Impact, and (4) Policy and Governance. Each table had a facilitator and a notetaker. Some participants opted to attend a Data Center 101 lecture instead of a roundtable; those notes are also captured. This report summarizes the discussions and key takeaways.

Participants’ Discussions - Overall Summary

Across the different table topics, three key themes arose:

1. **Pace:** The speed of technology adoption and infrastructure development is outpacing policy and governance development. Participants perceive a benefit to slowing down the development, deployment and/or adoption to minimize harm and maximize benefit.
2. **Fairness:** In building new technology, participants were concerned that marginalized voices are being excluded and perpetuating a power imbalance, as well as eroding critical thinking skills.
3. **Trust:** Participants expressed a lack of accountability and strain on local resources that can erode trust between developers, local governments, and community members.

Theme 1: Pace

- Fast, scale-up seems inevitable
- Slow down to max benefit/min harm
- Outpacing governance/guidance



Theme 2: Fairness

- Externalities on marginalized groups
- Power imbalance, excluded voices
- Critical thinking skills eroding



Theme 3: Trust

- Accountability and secrecy (NDA's)
- Need responsible development
- Strain on local resources

Participants' Discussions - Summary by Topic

AI and the Academic Experience

With growing AI use in the classroom, participants noted that faculty and staff are sharing complex opinions with them, acknowledging that AI can be both a useful tool for learning while also hampering student development and learning.

- **Complex Opinions and Approaches:** Several participants expressed reservations about their use of AI. In particular, they are concerned about their dependence on it for gathering information and writing, and have noticed that their writing style has changed after integrating AI into their work. However, others expressed that AI has been valuable in other areas of work, such as academic research.
- **Faculty and Staff Adaptation:** Participants noted that faculty and staff feel AI use in the classroom is inevitable, and instructors seek to update syllabi, stay current, and build shared frameworks for ethical, effective use.
- **Building Foundational Knowledge:** Participants identified the importance of building foundational knowledge and skills prior to AI adoption. Some suggested eliminating AI use in certain classes or disciplines to ensure students are learning writing and critical thinking skills.
- **Appropriate Use:** Participants expressed a desire for clear guidance on how and when to use AI.
- **Institutional Tensions:** The feeling of AI as inevitable drew concerns from participants who expressed that AI is pushed top-down and may be misaligned with U-M's evidence-based, human-centered values.
- **Future Direction:** Participants expressed that U-M should foster open dialogue, integrate student voices, and shift from critique to solution-oriented approaches aligned with Vision 2034.

Community Engagement

Participants expressed concern that data center infrastructure supporting AI is being built without thoughtful consideration of its impacts on the local community. Participants pointed to the UM High Performance Computing Facility proposed in Ypsilanti Township as an example of poor engagement of the broader UM community and Ypsilanti community members who will be impacted by this project. UM has an opportunity to be a leader in this space, showcasing what excellent community engagement might look like. Participants noted the following concerns:

- **Inclusion & Access:** Community voices—especially those of marginalized groups—are often left out of data center decision-making. Barriers like time, childcare, and a lack of clear information limit participation in discussions.
- **Transparency & Trust:** Proposed developments have felt secretive around water, energy, and land use, and participants expressed skepticism about promised economic benefits.
- **Environmental Equity:** Data centers are frequently located in lower-income areas, raising issues of pollution, health, and land use justice. Participants called for using brownfields and requiring on-site renewable energy.
- **Community Benefits:** Attendees emphasized the need for profit-sharing or community benefit agreements to ensure local gains in jobs, housing, and infrastructure.
- **Pace & Future Planning:** Participants urged slowing timelines, starting smaller, and planning for the long-term impacts of data center development. Many expressed that rapid technological growth is outpacing the public's understanding.

Sustainability and Environmental Impact

Participants expressed concern about the energy, water, and land use impacts of data center infrastructure, including facilities being built in the surrounding Ann Arbor area.

- **Energy and Water Usage:** Participants expressed deep concern about the immense energy and water demands of data centers supporting AI and the strain this will place on existing energy infrastructure and local water resources.
- **Bring Your Own Clean Energy:** Some suggestions included mitigating emissions and reducing energy use by powering data centers with clean energy. There was a significant emphasis on data centers bringing *new* clean energy resources.
- **Innovation in Data Center Design:** Participants proposed requiring utilities to build renewable energy facilities to serve these large-load customers and to consider how waste heat could be repurposed to generate electricity for local communities.

- **Personal Responsibility through AI Use:** There is concern about personal responsibility for environmental impacts when using AI. Participants are trying to balance this personal responsibility with the benefit AI provides.
- **Ensuring Sustainability Promotes Equity and Accessibility:** Participants felt that sustainability should promote equity through collective action, community engagement, and improved transparency, and data center development should adhere to this.

Policy and Governance

Participants discussed how governance of data center infrastructure and AI is reaching an inflection point as technological advancements outpace regulations. This dynamic is creating a reactionary environment, rather than a proactive one. The reactionary environment may not protect community interests and data privacy. Participants discussed the following:

- **Policy and Regulation Structures:** Policy and regulatory development move much more slowly than current technological advancements, leading to confusion and a lack of thoughtful implementation. One participant expressed that it feels like “we are building the plane as we fly it.”
- **Disempowered Local Governments:** Local governments often lack the technological expertise or financial resources to challenge data center development in their area when faced with lawsuits. Participants discussed potential protections to ensure local governments maintain control and agency over infrastructure in their jurisdictions.
- **Political Coordination:** Coordination between state and local governments is essential to ensuring effective and standardized governance around data centers and AI usage.
- **Cost Allocation:** Participants considered the role of regulators in how consumers bear the costs of infrastructure upgrades needed to meet increased energy demand from large data centers.
- **Accountability:** A system of transparency and accountability should be implemented to ensure that data centers and AI technologies do not harm the environment or local communities.