

Compete Connect

September 2026 Edition

From the CEO's Desk



Deborah L. Wince-Smith
President and CEO
Council on Competitiveness

Dear Council on Competitiveness Community,

Forty years after our founding, the Council on Competitiveness' mission has never been more important: advancing innovation-led productivity growth, inclusive prosperity, the success of U.S.-created and U.S.-developed goods and services in global markets, and resilience and security for Americans. Nor has the Council's National Competitiveness Forum (NCF), where we work to set the national competitiveness agenda, been more consequential.

On December 16, we will gather at the Willard InterContinental in Washington, D.C., for our 40th Anniversary Gala Dinner, followed on December 17 by the 2026 NCF. Mr. David Ricks, Chair and CEO of Eli Lilly and Company and a Council National Commissioner, will deliver the morning keynote at NCF. This month, Forbes ranked Lilly No. 1 on its 2026 list of America's Most Innovative Large Companies. At a moment of extraordinary technological and economic disruption, Mr. Ricks brings a powerful perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing U.S. competitiveness, and on what it will take to translate innovation into growth, investment, and production here at home.

At NCF, we will launch a series of strategic reports and recommendations, including work building on our proposal for a new approach to place-making innovation in the United States: our Advanced Innovation and Manufacturing (AIM) Zones concept. Emerging from the Council's longstanding efforts in defining and measuring regional innovation ecosystems and our recent, successful series of ["Competitiveness Conversations Across America,"](#) AIM Zones would concentrate assets needed to move critical sectors from research and development all the way through to

production -- connecting talent, technology, innovation, infrastructure, and capital to strengthen U.S. competitiveness in the defining technologies of the *next economy*.

Space at the NCF is limited, so please make sure to [register](#) soon. Council members receive a significant registration discount; please email [Chad Evans](#) for your code.

I also ask you to consider sponsoring the 40th Anniversary Gala and 2026 NCF. Sponsorship is critical to the success of NCF and to the work we carry forward throughout the year. As a sponsor, your organization will take its place at the center of the Council's 40th anniversary celebration and provide greater authority to our national competitiveness agenda. Please [review the sponsorship brochure](#) and contact Chad to discuss opportunities.

I want to thank those who have already committed their support to the Council this year, including Bank of America, IFF, Procter & Gamble, Resource Resolutions, Ltd., the University of Colorado Boulder, the University of Texas at Dallas, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Notre Dame Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Triad National Security, the University of California, Davis, the University of Texas at San Antonio, the University of Georgia, and MITRE. I am very grateful for their support, and I hope many more of you will join them.

This fall, the Council will release a new wave of work emerging from our convenings across the country and our national working groups. Together, these efforts are informing the evidence, insights, and recommendations that will help underpin the 2026 Call to Action we will launch at NCF.

- Our work to advance the U.S. bioeconomy is a good example. Following bioeconomy-focused conversations in Indiana and Nebraska, last month we launched a six-session, six-week virtual working series under the auspices of our National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers. The first two sessions brought together Council members and subject matter experts to examine how to accelerate commercialization, build demand, strengthen manufacturing capacity, and compete in global markets. The series continues through October, and you can find session summaries [here](#). If you would like to contribute and participate in future sessions, please reach out to [Mike Nelson](#).
- We are also publishing the latest insights from our [“Competitiveness Conversations Across America.”](#) The Nebraska summary, “Leading the New Frontier in the Global Bioeconomy,” is now available [here](#), with reports from Maryland and San Diego to follow in the coming weeks.
- Our Technology Leadership & Strategy Initiative (TLSI) has likewise released its [summary report](#) from Dialogue 32, hosted by Lockheed Martin in June at its F-35 Lightning II production facility in Fort Worth. The discussion focused on advanced technologies, national security, scaling innovation, and the Council's emerging AIM Zone recommendation. TLSI will reconvene for Dialogue 33 on November 18 in Washington, D.C.

And on October 1, the Council team will open the doors to our new headquarters at 801 18th Street NW, just steps from the White House. We look forward to welcoming you to our new home.

I look forward to joining you at the Willard in December to mark this milestone together, celebrate four decades of the Council's work, and set the course for the decades ahead. Thank you, as always, for your partnership and your commitment to advancing U.S. competitiveness.

Sincerely,

Deborah L. Wince-Smith
President & CEO
Council on Competitiveness

Council News

Celebrate 40 Years of Impact. Help Us Chart the Next 40.

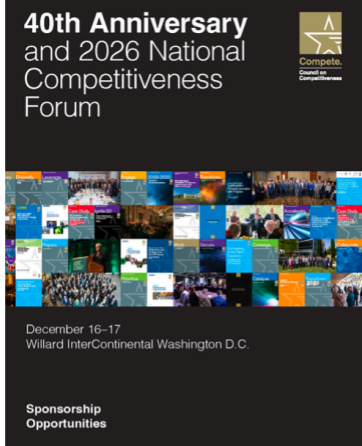


Join us December 16–17 at the iconic Willard InterContinental in Washington, D.C., for the capstone of the Council's 40th year. We will open with the 40th Anniversary Gala Dinner and the presentation of the 2026 National Competitiveness Awards. The next day, the 2026 National Competitiveness Forum (NCF) will bring together Council members and leaders from industry, academia, labor, the U.S. Department of Energy national laboratory enterprise, and government to set the competitiveness agenda for the next economy.

[Register now to join us for the Council's 40th.](#)

(Council members: contact [Chad Evans](#) for your discount code.)

Become a 2026 NCF Sponsor

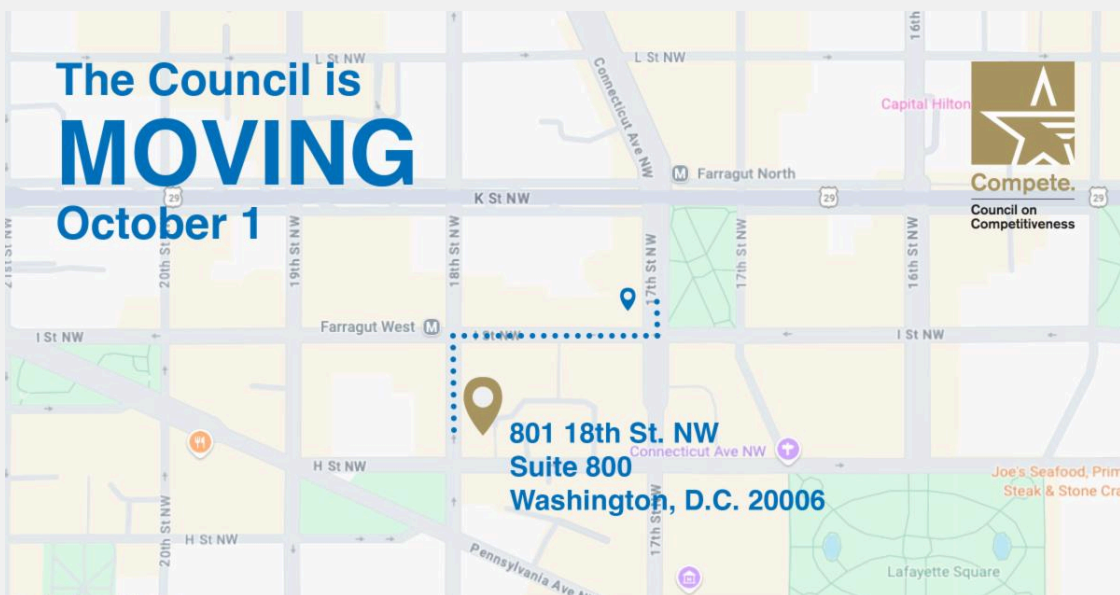


Sponsors earn prominent visibility at the 40th Anniversary Gala Dinner and the 2026 NCF, and across the digital platforms surrounding this flagship event, while supporting the Council's ongoing work to advance U.S. competitiveness. [You can review the 2026 sponsorship brochure here](#), and contact [Chad Evans](#) with sponsorship inquiries.

Thank you to our early sponsors:

- Bank of America
- The University of Colorado Boulder
- The University of Texas at Dallas
- IFF
- Procter & Gamble
- Resource Resolutions, Ltd.
- The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
- Notre Dame Research
- Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory
- Triad National Security
- The University of California, Davis
- The University of Texas at San Antonio
- MITRE
- The University of Georgia

The Council Has a New Address Starting October 1, 2026



We're moving! As we shared in last month's Compete Connect newsletter, the Council opens its new Washington, D.C., headquarters tomorrow, October 1, 2026.

Please update your records, including accounts payable, payment systems, and mailing lists, with our new address:

Council on Competitiveness
801 18th Street NW
Suite 800
Washington, DC 20006

Council's Bioeconomy Virtual Working Sessions Gain Momentum

The Council's Bio+ Initiative, under the auspices of the National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers, is bringing together the leaders needed to build a stronger U.S. bioeconomy. Over the past two weeks, our first two working sessions convened leaders from industry, academia, national laboratories, and government to tackle the practical challenges of moving from scientific strength to commercial scale. The six-session series builds on the Council's previous leadership meetings while expanding the conversation to more subject matter experts to help identify priorities and develop actionable recommendations for U.S. bioeconomy leadership. The sessions continue through October. Learn more [here](#), and contact [Mike Nelson](#) if you wish to take part.

GFCC Heads to Sofia for the 2026 Global Innovation Summit



The Global Federation of Competitiveness Councils (GFCC), the Council's sister organization, will hold its 2026 Global Innovation Summit (GIS) in Sofia, Bulgaria, October 19–22.

GFCC Chair Chad Holliday, GFCC President Deborah Wince-Smith, and GFCC Member Glavbolgarstroy Holding (GBS) will co-host the Summit under the theme "Powering Competitiveness: Energy, Infrastructure and Digital Innovation for Economic Transformation." Senior leaders from dozens of nations will gather at the 2026 GIS to examine energy security, next-generation grids, energy resilience, and the infrastructure investments that drive economic transformation.

[Explore the 2026 Global Innovation Summit page](#) to learn more about the program and the GFCC's work to power global competitiveness. **The GFCC invites Council on Competitiveness members to take part (email [Chad Evans](#) for more information).**

Danone Recognizes IFF with Business Impact in Innovation Award



Photo credit: IFF

IFF, led by CEO and Council Chair Erik Fyrwald, received the Business Impact in Innovation Award from Danone, the large food and beverage corporation, at this year's Partner for Growth event in Paris. The award recognizes IFF's partnership and shared work to develop innovative solutions, highlighting the role of collaboration in advancing innovation and delivering business impact. [Learn more about the Partner for Growth program.](#)

Council Members' Companies Make *Forbes* List of America's Most Innovative



Image credit: Forbes

Forbes' 2026 list of America's Most Innovative Large Companies ranks Eli Lilly No. 1, recognizing the company's leadership in developing new products, technologies, and markets. We are very excited David Ricks, CEO of Eli Lilly, will keynote the 2026 National Competitiveness Forum. Several other Council Members' organizations, including John Deere, Procter & Gamble, and Lockheed Martin, also earned recognition, highlighting the breadth of innovation leadership across the Council. See the full [Forbes list](#) and explore the companies shaping America's innovation landscape.

Council Leaders Advance Quantum Innovation



Photo credit: Business Wire

Chattanooga's electric utility, EPB, has launched a commercial quantum computing and networking hub anchored by an IonQ quantum computer, with Vanderbilt University as a development partner. IonQ Chairman and CEO Niccolo de Masi and Vanderbilt Chancellor Daniel Diermeier, both Council Executive Committee members, backed the initiative, which brings industry, utilities, and higher education together to move quantum technologies toward real-world use. [Learn more.](#)

Quantinuum Advances U.S. Quantum Leadership with \$100 Million CHIPS R&D Award



Quantinuum, led by CEO and Council Executive Committee member Rajeeb Hazra, has secured a \$100 million CHIPS R&D award from the U.S. Department of Commerce to accelerate the development and domestic manufacturing of its trapped-ion quantum computing technology. The award will help scale next-generation systems while strengthening the U.S. quantum supply chain through partnerships with GlobalFoundries and Monarch Quantum. Read the release [here](#).

Photo credit: Quantinuum

University of Maryland Opens Discovery Center, Welcomes Quantum World Congress



*Pictured: UMD President Dr. Darryll Pines, second from left, and Governor Wes Moore, center
Photo credit: John T. Consoli for the University of Maryland*

On September 22, Governor Wes Moore joined University of Maryland, College Park (UMD) President and Council National Commissioner Dr. Darryll J. Pines and others to open the Discovery Center, a new quantum research center. The next day, UMD welcomed more than 2,000 registrants as Lead Academic Partner for the 2026 Quantum World Congress. The week built on the momentum the Council saw firsthand at the [Maryland edition](#) of "Competitiveness Conversations Across America" in March. Read more about the [Discovery Center](#) and [Quantum World Congress](#).

PNNL Hosts Washington State Fusion Week to Drive Regional Clean Energy Innovation



*Pictured: Washington Governor Bob Ferguson and Dr. Deborah Gracio, Laboratory Director, Pacific Northwest National Laboratory
Photo credit: PNNL*

Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL), led by Laboratory Director and Council National Commissioner Dr. Deborah Gracio, hosted the Tri-Cities portion of 2026 Washington State Fusion Week, bringing together researchers, industry partners, and policy leaders to shape the future of commercial fusion energy. Washington Governor Bob Ferguson joined researchers and innovators at PNNL to highlight the state's expanding role in advancing next-generation energy technology and industrial competitiveness. [Learn more about the event.](#)

Mr. Jim Stutelberg Keynotes Commercializing Industrial Biotechnology Conference



Photo credit: Primient

Primient CEO and Council National Commissioner Jim Stutelberg delivered a keynote address at the 2026 Commercializing Industrial Biotechnology conference, hosted by the Society for Biological Engineering, September 22–24 in Chicago. The conference brought together leaders and practitioners across agriculture, manufacturing, research, and industry to advance the commercialization of industrial biotechnology and biomanufacturing. Mr. Stutelberg has also been a major leader of the Council's work to grow the U.S. bioeconomy. [Read more about the event here.](#)

NSF Awards CU Boulder \$37.5 Million Grant to Advance Quantum Innovation

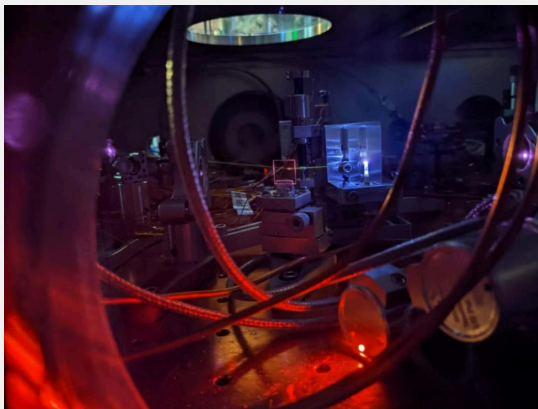


Photo credit: Ye Lab / JILA/CU Boulder

The U.S. National Science Foundation awarded \$37.5 million to the University of Colorado Boulder to lead the next phase of the NSF Q-SEnSE center. The award accelerates the translation of laboratory discoveries into real-world applications, including next-generation atomic clocks and advanced biomedical sensors. Council Executive Committee member and CU Boulder Chancellor Justin Schwartz called the award the latest chapter in more than 60 years of quantum science breakthroughs at CU Boulder, JILA, and NIST. Read the full [news release](#).

UC San Diego Launches NSF National AI Research Resource Operations Center



Image credit: The National Science Foundation

The National Science Foundation (NSF) has awarded the San Diego Supercomputer Center (SDSC) at UC San Diego, where Council Executive Committee member Pradeep K. Khosla serves as Chancellor, a \$35 million, five-year cooperative agreement to establish and operate the National AI Research Resource Operations Center (NAIRR-OC). Working with partners, SDSC will build the operational backbone for a sustained national AI research infrastructure. [Read more about the announcement.](#)

University of Vermont: Advancing Snow Science and the Outdoor Economy

The University of Vermont is leading a \$5.9 million National Science Foundation investment to advance snow science and strengthen the outdoor recreation economy across northern New England. The project, known as Snow STORE (Science and Technology for Operations, Research, and Economic Development in Northern New England), brings together 11 academic, government, industry, and nonprofit partners across Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine to build a regional network for continuous snow and weather monitoring and advanced modeling. National Commissioner Marlene Tromp, President of UVM, is helping advance the university's leadership in this effort. [Read the UVM press release.](#)

University of Nebraska Welcomes Czech President Petr Pavel



Photo credit: University of Nebraska

Council Executive Committee member Dr. Jeffrey P. Gold, President of the University of Nebraska System, welcomed Czech President Petr Pavel to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln on September 24, celebrating longstanding educational and cultural partnerships between Nebraska and the Czech Republic. The campus visit was part of a daylong Nebraska tour, during which President Pavel met with state leaders and discussed expanding ties between businesses, universities, and people, including in new technologies, agriculture, and water management. [Read more.](#)

Competitiveness News

Palisades Moves Closer to First-Ever U.S. Nuclear Plant Restart

Michigan's Palisades plant has started loading fuel into its reactor, moving closer to becoming the first permanently shuttered U.S. commercial nuclear plant to return to operation. Up to \$1.52 billion in U.S. Department of Energy loan financing supports the restart, which will restore 805 megawatts of round-the-clock power using existing site and grid infrastructure. [Read the latest update from Holtec.](#)

President Declares National Emergency to Secure U.S. Bulk-Power System

On August 26, President Trump issued Executive Order 14421, declaring a national emergency over foreign threats to the U.S. bulk-power system and authorizing the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) to restrict high-risk foreign equipment like transformers, inverters, and industrial control systems. The Administration cited rising demand from AI, data centers, and advanced manufacturing as a reason to shore up grid security and reduce reliance on foreign supply chains. DOE launched implementation on September 9 with a Request for Information and will accept comments through October 9. Final implementing rules are due by December 24, 2026. [Read the DOE Request for Information.](#)

Council Insight

Student Skills Are Slipping Just When the AI Economy Needs Them Most

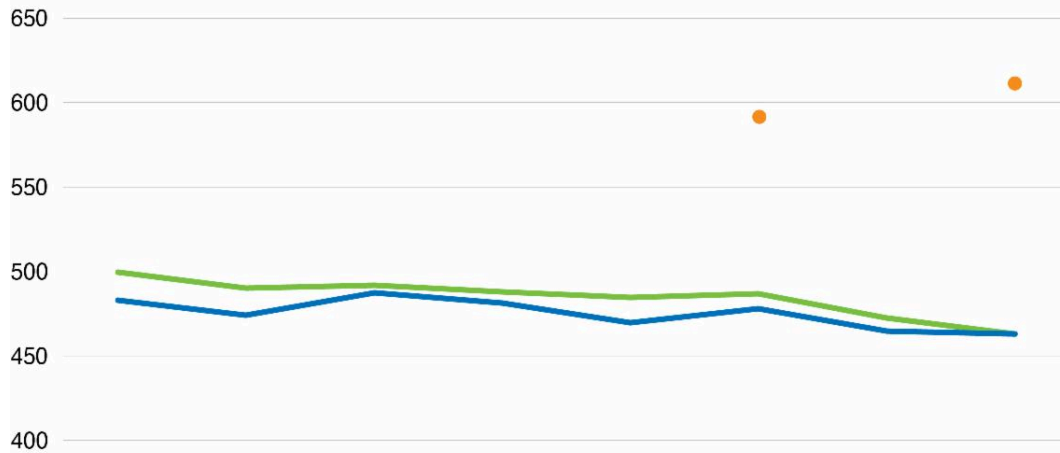
PISA Trends for OECD Countries, the U.S. and Select Cities in China

Average scores for 15-year-olds

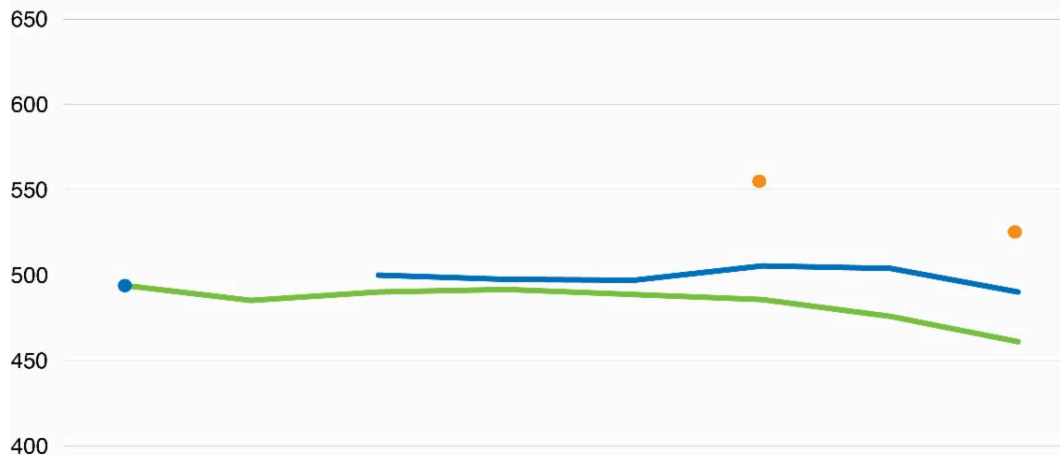
Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2022 Reading, Mathematics and Science Assessments.

■ International Average (OECD) ■ United States ■ China (B-S-J-Z)*

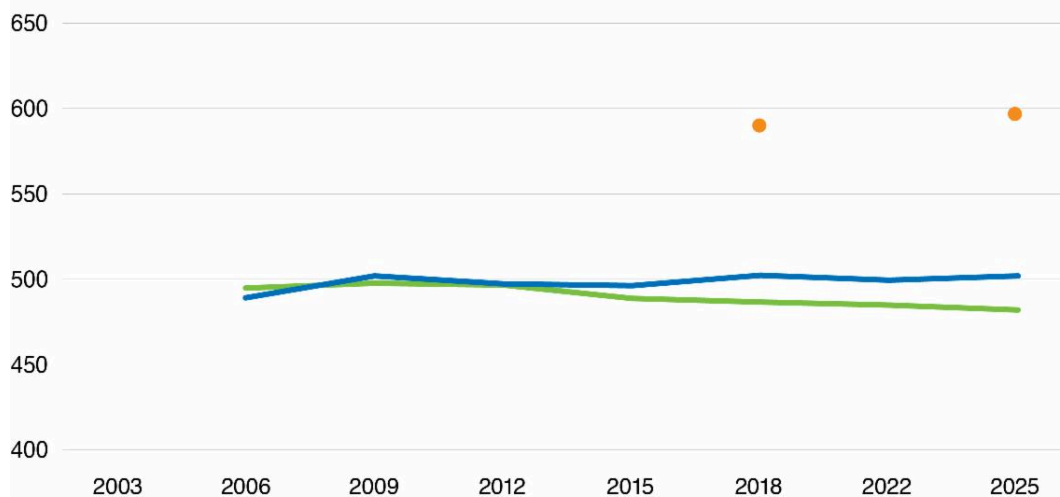
Mathematics



Reading



Science



NOTE: The Reading, Mathematics, and Science scales range from 0 to 1000. Some apparent differences between estimates may not be statistically significant.

* PISA does not test all of China as a national sample. The comparable China entry is B-S-J-Z (China): Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang.

New results from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) offer a sobering

signal. Across OECD countries, average performance among 15-year-olds reached its lowest recorded level in mathematics and reading in 2025. Since 2015, reading scores have fallen 28 points, equivalent to roughly a year and a half of learning, while mathematics scores have fallen 22 points, or just over a year of learning. Science performance has also declined over the decade, although the most recent results held broadly stable. Today, one in five students across the OECD is a low performer in all three subjects, a one-quarter increase since 2022.

In the United States, students continue to perform above the OECD average in reading and science and close to the OECD average in mathematics. But since 2015, U.S. mathematics and reading performance have each fallen 7 points, while the share of students performing below the baseline level has grown by six percentage points in mathematics and seven percentage points in reading.

The OECD found that declines in reading are particularly pronounced on tasks requiring students to evaluate and reflect, integrate information across multiple sources, and sustain attention through longer texts. The study also found an increase in "hasty" responses: students answering quickly and incorrectly rather than engaging with difficult questions. These are precisely the capabilities that will become increasingly valuable as AI takes on more routine cognitive work and extends further into analytical, professional, and technical tasks.

The more capable our technology becomes, the greater the premium on human judgment. From a competitiveness standpoint, how do we build a workforce capable of learning and adapting at the pace of technological change?

New to Our Community



Mr. Niccolo de Masi
Chairman and CEO
IonQ

Mr. de Masi joins the Council as a National Commissioner and member of the Executive Committee.

Photo credit: IonQ



Dr. James Holloway

President
University of Toledo

Dr. Holloway joins the Council as a Member.

Photo credit: University of Toledo



Mr. Paul V. Rancatore

CEO
OUEA LLC

Mr. Rancatore joins the Council as a Member.

Photo credit: OUEA LLC



Dr. Victor Dzau

Chancellor emeritus and James B. Duke
Distinguished Professor, Director of
Mandel Center at Duke University
Past President, National Academy of
Medicine

A former Member, Dr. Dzau joins the Council as a Distinguished Fellow.

Photo credit: Duke University

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