

Meeting of the Minds

Marc Ballon (<https://viterbischool.usc.edu/author/mballon/>) | October 11, 2017

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CAIS CO-DIRECTOR MILIND TAMBE, CAIS OPERATION COORDINATOR HAILEY WINETROBE, CAIS ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR PHEBE VAYANONS AND CAIS CO-DIRECTOR ERIC RICE (PHOTO/VALENTINA SUAREZ)

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About 75 of the country's leading experts in artificial intelligence and social work, along with USC Viterbi students, gathered Wednesday, Oct. 4 at USC's Davidson Conference Center to discuss how to make artificial intelligence, or AI, a force for social good.

The all-day conference, sponsored by the USC [Center for Artificial Intelligence in Society](https://www.cais.usc.edu/) (<https://www.cais.usc.edu/>). (CAIS) – one of the first such university-based institutes dedicated to studying AI as a force for good – featured presentations, panel discussions and question-and-answer sessions. Topics explored ranged from employing AI to improve city traffic to

teaching robots to better collaborate with humans, from using mobile and digital tools to promote health and prevent disease to employing AI to thwart illegal wildlife trade by detecting questionable online ads.

CAIS cofounders and co-directors [Milind Tambe](http://teamcore.usc.edu/tambe/) (http://teamcore.usc.edu/tambe/) – the Helen N. and Emmett H. Jones Professor at the [USC Viterbi School of Engineering](https://viterbischool.usc.edu/) (https://viterbischool.usc.edu/) – and Professor [Eric Rice](https://sowkweb.usc.edu/faculty/eric-rice) (https://sowkweb.usc.edu/faculty/eric-rice) of the [USC Suzanne Dworak Peck School of Social Work](https://sowkweb.usc.edu/) (https://sowkweb.usc.edu/), set the day's tone in their opening remarks.

"The problems that we address involving AI clearly must have impact and benefit all of society, especially low-resource communities," Tambe said. "I don't think that we as a group should be driven by commercial interests."

That USC convened the conference and recently launched CAIS illustrate the university's growing prominence in the field of AI for social good, said [Phebe Vayanos](http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~vayanou/) (http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~vayanou/), CAIS associate director and an assistant professor in the Daniel J. Epstein Department of Industrial & Systems Engineering.

"I think this conference is really important for both USC and CAIS as it helps position the center as a leader in this space," she said.

Added Rice: "We want to move beyond being just one center at one university to becoming a leader in this intellectual field."

In addition to Tambe and Rice, several distinguished scholars delivered remarks. Speakers included Harvard University's [Barbara Grosz](https://grosz.seas.harvard.edu/) (https://grosz.seas.harvard.edu/), one of the forum's two keynote speakers; Professor Mark Fox, director of the Center for Social Services Engineering at the University of Toronto; and Professor Michael Littman, co-director of the Humanity Centered Robotics Initiative at Brown University.

Conference participants said they found the meeting valuable.

"It's really great to see what is happening using technology across all these disciplines," said [Sheana Bull](http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/PublicHealth/Academics/departments/CommunityBehavior), (http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/PublicHealth/Academics/departments/CommunityBehavior) professor and chair at the Colorado School of Public Health and one of the forum's keynote speakers. "This is also a great networking opportunity. I can see possible new research partners here."

Over the past year, USC Viterbi has moved aggressively into the field of AI for social good, including the CAIS launch in October 2016.

This spring, Tambe and Rice jointly taught a new class for graduate students about artificial intelligence for social good. A few months later, CAIS sponsored the Summer Fellowship Program that brought together 12 postdocs and Ph.D. students from Harvard, Carnegie Mellon and USC, among other institutions.

The CAIS co-directors recently teamed up with Los Angeles social workers at [Safe Place for Youth](http://www.safeplaceforyouth.org/) (<http://www.safeplaceforyouth.org/>) to help prevent the spread of HIV among homeless youth. Tambe and other USC Viterbi computer scientists have created an algorithm to identify the most influential young people who can encourage their homeless friends to have AIDS tests. The algorithm becomes more effective as it leverages any new information gained about friendships during the intervention.

“We want to establish some sort of leadership role in this new space,” Tambe said. “In a way, we’re trying to spread the word about our center and the activities there.”

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