Data Science at BU: Decades in the Making

The story of computing and data sciences at Boston University (BU) – one of the largest private institutions in the US with 34,000+ students, 10,000+ faculty and staff, and 17 schools and colleges – dates back to the 1980s. With early investments in relevant research areas (e.g., artificial neural networks and high-performance computing) and in cognitive degree programs (e.g., in computer science, statistics, computer engineering, information systems, neuroscience, and bioinformatics), BU had the perfect runway to launch its ambitious journey into the world of computational and data-driven discovery and innovation. A notable milestone came in 2010 with a BU initiative to provide governance through the two-year bootstrapping phase of CDS, which resulted in a 380,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art iconic building for Computing & Data Sciences – a 19-story, 175,000-square-foot building designed and planned for this building, in the summer of 2018, BU assembled a task force to envision the future of data science research and education at the University.

A year later, on the recommendation of the task force, BU announced the creation of the Center for Computing & Data Sciences (CDS) – a university-wide, tenure-home and degree-granting academic unit, comprising scholars and researchers in aligned and overlapping areas of data science, computational, and data-driven inquiry. In December 2019, the faculty and staff of the Hari Institute for Computing & Data Sciences and the Data Science program at the College of Arts & Sciences were selected to co-create BU’s new academic unit as the inaugural Associate Provost for Computing & Data Sciences. Soon after, CDS appointed a set of thirty “founding faculty members” from across the university to provide governance through the two-year bootstrapping phase of CDS, primarily to oversee faculty recruitment and academic program development.

The organization of CDS as a university-wide academic unit allows it to develop “vibrant academic experiences” for BU students by introducing truly interdisciplinary programs that are more flexible than those aligned with cognate disciplines. As such, data science is not seen or treated as a specialization or track within a discipline, but rather as the transdisciplinary field it is. This allows programs offered through CDS at all levels to integrate key competencies such as ethical and responsible computing, experiential learning, and in-the-field training. Also, this allows for pathways with streamlined prerequisite structures, which are more inclusive of students interested in combining data science with other majors or minors, and more amenable to early engagement with external partners, facilitated by BU Spark, in support of research as well as curricular and co-curricular activities with real-world impact. Effectively, this empowers a more diverse body of students to follow their passions, build community, and develop the “soft” skills necessary for success in a world defined by data-driven discovery and innovation.

Our Goal?
To democratize access by students, faculty, and organizations to data-driven innovation in computing & AI.