

**TECHNOLOGY**

# Parade of robots takes over UT Austin campus to mark end of 'Year of AI'



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The University of Texas' Speedway Mall was taken over Friday afternoon by parading robots, a mariachi band and community members flashing pictures in the culminating event of UT's "Year of AI."

Texas Robotics and UT Mariachi hosted the robot parade and a show-and-tell to highlight the machines, artificial intelligence, and collaborations that undergraduate and graduate students alike have created in the classroom.

The robots, which ranged from fully autonomous or navigation-based to interactive or service-based, were created in collaboration with students and professors and across departments in the university's robotics program.

"All the robots going in front of you are all part of a bunch of different research that's happening, cutting edge researching surgery and rehabilitation and exploration," Peter Stone, director of Texas Robotics, said during the event.

UT launched an undergraduate program for robotics with 50 students last fall and added 50 this year. Stone said high school students who are applying to UT may now apply for the Texas Robotics program straight through the common application for the first time.

"This is unusual," Stone said. "Usually at universities, you first get admitted to the university, and then you can apply to robotics. So when you're making your decision of which university to go to, you don't know if you're going to be able to do robotics. We're going to provide an opportunity for students to make that informed decision if they want to do robotics, that they will have a guaranteed admission to the program.

"We're one of the first in the country to do that."

Stone also told spectators that UT will have a living and learning community where the robotics students can live in the same dorm — possibly among university-built robots.

Justin Hart, former director of Texas Robotics and an assistant professor, said robots are not meant to stay in a lab forever; advancing the study of robotics requires integrating them in the real world and everyday life.

That's partially what the parade and other initiatives are meant to accomplish, Hart said.

“You look at where most robots exist now; they exist in factories or warehouses — really controlled environments,” Hart said. “You want to go into the real world, where people are. I can't do stuff like draw a line around where the robot's allowed to go and where it's not allowed to go if it's going to interact with people.”

The one built in Hart's lab, named Dobby, is a social interaction robot focused on assisting with everyday tasks: answering questions, giving tours and providing directions.

Other robots, like one built by UT research assistant Huihai Wang, were focused on other services such as food and package delivery.

“We're trying to deploy this system in the real world,” Wang said. “We want to expand its service areas and its service to not only food delivery and campus.”

Brainy — controlled by Anastasiia Melnichuk, Alex Michael and Pearo Semanatto — is a robotic wheelchair created in a lab collaboration between engineering and neuroscience students. The user wears a cap to communicate how to manipulate or move the chair.

“This is really, really life-changing for people who are completely paralyzed,” Melnichuk said.

Culminating the “Year of AI” with the Texas Robotics parade is important because robotics is a core area of AI research, Hart said.

Stone said robotics is interdisciplinary, just like AI, and using them together is how the loop is closed.

“That's all what artificial intelligence is about, trying to put intelligence into the robots. ... We think of robotics as a way to study embodied intelligence, just in the same way that we make decisions with our brains inside our bodies. We're trying to put artificial intelligence onboard robots, so that intelligence is embodied and can interact with the world.”

## UT's Year of AI

The university designated 2024 as the Year of AI in early January, with the intent to highlight UT's research in artificial intelligence and other technology over the past few years.

Over the course of 2024, UT held workshops, seminars and meetings to highlight and discuss the research on campus and the effects AI has on society and higher education in the present day.

Stacey Ingram Kaleh, manager of partnerships and programs for Good Systems Ethical AI, told the Statesman on Friday that the universitywide effort was meant to celebrate and share something that the university faculty, staff and students have been researching and studying for going on 50 years.

Good Systems Ethical AI is a university research initiative that promotes cross-sector collaboration for responsible artificial intelligence. Kaleh said Good Systems works with robotics and computer science personnel as well as philosophy, communication and more within UT and branches to collaborate and advise government, industry and nonprofits.

AI is not something brand new, Kaleh said, but is something the university has thought of intentionally for a long time and therefore wanted to highlight its successes through the yearlong celebration.

The Year of AI ended this week with three days' worth of events, called AI Live, that included seminars, workshops and the Texas Robotics parade. UT researchers and students held presentations and discussions about the presence of artificial intelligence, with AI Live hosting different tracks: research, health care, entrepreneurship, education and ethical AI.

The sessions ranged from interactive workshops about how AI can help address food insecurity in Austin to a live taping of the "Two Guys on Your Head" podcast with one of the hosts appearing as an AI-generated avatar.

