

A Conversation with GUIRR Co-Chair, Mr. Alfred Grasso



Mr. Alfred Grasso is the former president and chief executive officer of The MITRE Corporation. He held the position from 2006 to 2017 and has continued to serve as Trustee and Consultant. Mr. Grasso was elected to the Board of Directors of NetScout Systems, Inc., in 2018, where he serves as chair of the Finance Committee and member of the Compensation and Governance and Nominating Committees. NetScout Systems, Inc., a publicly traded company, provides operational intelligence and performance analytics for service assurance and cyber security solutions. Mr. Grasso was elected to the Board of Trustees of Riverside Research in 2019. Riverside Research is a private scientific research company largely serving the federal government's needs. Mr. Grasso was elected to the Virginia Academy of Science, Engineering and Medicine in 2019 and now serves on its Board. He is serving a second term as a member of the National Academy of Science's (NAS) Government-University-Industry Research Roundtable where he was elected co-chair in 2018. Mr. Grasso is a former member of the NAS Defense Science Board and the Army Science Board and current member of the Policy and Global Affairs Committee. Mr. Grasso holds a

bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a master's degree in computer science from Worcester Polytechnic Institute. He is a graduate of the Program for Management Development at Harvard Business School. He lives in Oakton, Va., with his wife, Michele and he has three daughters, Alessandra, Lindsay, and Stephanie.

In celebration of GUIRR's 40th anniversary, GUIRR's own Co-Chair and consummate leader, Mr. Al Grasso reflects on his experience with the roundtable and shares his thoughts on the future of research with the GUIRR Community.

What initially inspired you to pursue a career in science and leadership?

My mother and father immigrated to the United States from Italy in the mid 1950's. Neither of my parents went to college nor completed a high school curriculum. They both worked in factories – my father as a machinist, my mother as seamstress. Although not well educated by current standards, they fully understood the value of education and worked hard to ensure both my brother and I were college bound. As a machinist, my father impressed the importance of engineering as a field to pursue. Both my brother and I followed his advice pursuing civil engineering and electrical engineering, respectively.

Leadership seemed to come more naturally. As an outcomes-focused individual, I found myself building teams and resources to accomplish the mission at hand. I espoused the values of a servant

-leader with a strong commitment to public service. Integrity and ethical standards remain as cornerstones of my leadership philosophy upholding transparency, accountability, and ethical decision-making.



Pictured above: Al enjoying time with family

I believe strongly in collaboration and teamwork. As a leader, forward-thinking, emphasizing innovation and the adoption of new technologies to solve complex problems was key to the organization's success. Equally important is the alignment of organizational goals with a clear vision and mission, ensuring that resources are effectively utilized to achieve long-term objectives while rapidly adapting to the changing technological landscape.

Pictured below: Al Grasso receives the AFCEA Sarnoff Award



I prioritize growing talent, supporting continuous learning and professional development, ensuring that team members have opportunities to enhance their skills and advance their careers.

What are some of the most memorable moments or interactions you've had with your colleagues at GUIRR?

It has always been about the people. GUIRR attracts intelligent, service-oriented individuals who seek to make a difference in the world. The GUIRR staff have made life easy for the co-chairs. The Council members engage in lively and diverse discussions about the current state of science and the keynote speakers have offered stirring talks on wide ranging topics to include health and health care, the changing ocean economy, innovation, research integrity and so much more. The topics are always

time relevant and thought provoking. Perhaps my most enjoyable moments were the small group dinners that we had with distinguished Government leaders, such as Walt Copan and Sethuraman "Panch" Panchanathan.

I am very excited about GUIRR's future, especially as we incorporate philanthropy as an integral component of the roundtable. I've been privileged to work closely with two tremendous co-chairs, Dr. Laurie Leshin, and Dr. Darryll Pines and I have full confidence that GUIRR's incoming co-chair, Dr. Danielle Merfeld will join Dr. Pines to lead GUIRR in addressing new and emerging research challenges and opportunities.

How do you envision the future of research development, and what key areas do you think will drive progress?

Research development begins with talent development and talent development in the sciences should begin at a very early age. We must make studying science accessible and challenge students to break through new frontiers. We must not leave anybody behind and be open to a supportive immigration system so that we may source international talent.

The resulting diversity in talent will lead to interdisciplinary collaboration. The boundaries between fields such as biology, chemistry, physics, computer science, and engineering will continue to blur, leading to more holistic and innovative approaches to solving complex problems. Enhanced digital collaboration tools and platforms will facilitate easier sharing of data and ideas across disciplines and geographic boundaries.

Are there any issues facing the research enterprise that you feel we need to bring more public attention and interest to? Are any big problems not being fully examined due to lack of access or diversity?

We will need to carefully balance the desire for global collaboration with the need to secure and protect intellectual property. Establishing trust between collaborators by promoting transparency, mutual respect, and ethical behavior is essential. Ethical considerations will become increasingly

important, ensuring that technological advancements benefit society as a whole and do not exacerbate inequalities.

Research funding and resources are often concentrated in high-income countries and elite institutions. This can lead to underfunding of research on issues primarily affecting low- and middle-income countries, such as tropical diseases, malnutrition, and water sanitation. Limited access to advanced education and training opportunities in many parts of the world restricts the pool of researchers who can contribute to global scientific advancements.

Research that fails to consider cultural contexts and ethical implications may miss critical insights or encounter resistance from local communities. For example, public health interventions may be less effective if they do not account for cultural practices and beliefs. This became especially evident during the Ebola crisis in West Africa in 2015-16 where distrust grew rapidly as patients were distanced from their families and not allowed to have traditional burials.

How has the research landscape evolved since you started, and what changes have you found most significant?

I believe that the research landscape has undergone significant change, driven by advancements in technology, shifts in funding priorities, increased emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration, and evolving societal needs. As an example, AI research has developed at an extraordinary pace, arguably faster than many other technologies in recent history. This is largely driven by rapid advancements in computational power, algorithmic innovation, data availability, and significant investments from both the public and private sectors.

Funding agencies have increasingly prioritized research that addresses global challenges such as

climate change, public health, and sustainable development. There has also been a focus on translational research that bridges the gap between basic science and practical applications. Again, there has been a growing trend towards interdisciplinary research, where complex problems are addressed by integrating knowledge from multiple fields. This approach has been particularly effective in areas like bioinformatics, environmental science, and materials science.



Pictured Above: AI Grasso with Jason Providakes at MITRE picnic

If you could give one piece of advice to a new GUIRR Partner, what would it be?

Use the opportunity to connect with other researchers. Introduce yourself, exchange contact information, and follow up on interesting discussions. Don't be afraid to share your insights and opinions during the discussion. Active participation enriches the conversation and helps you stand out. Look for potential collaborators who share similar research interests. Discuss possibilities for future joint projects or papers. Have fun!