AI Adoption in Research Administration

At Emerging Research Institutions

13th Apr 2026

Agenda

1. **Introductions**
2. **Talk:** AI Adoption in Research Administration
3. **Q&A**

Atom Grants

Speakers

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ITHAKA S+R

AI Adoption in Research Administration at Emerging Research Institutions

U.S. National Science Foundation

*This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant. No. 2437518. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation

Project Overview: Advancing AI at Emerging Research Institutions

The U.S. National Science Foundation **Growing Research Access for Nationally Transformative Economic Development program** (**GRANTED**) seeks to strengthen and transform the administration of scientific research and workforce at U.S.-based organizations.

By supporting innovation in how organizations engage in or support research, the program empowers researchers across the U.S. to compete in the global research enterprise.

Project Overview: Advancing AI at Emerging Research Institutions

- Ithaka S+R, Montclair State University, and Chapman University received an NSF GRANTED planning grant to support responsible implementation of generative AI (GAI) at Emerging Research Institutions (ERIs).

- The project responded to the growing need for investment in infrastructure, staffing, governance, and training related to GAI, needs many ERIs cannot meet on their own.

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Project Overview: Advancing AI at Emerging Research Institutions

- The project focused on seeding collaborative relationships to share the cost of computing infrastructure and AI tools, expand professional development across research administration, libraries, and IT, and incubate cross-institutional research initiatives to improve competitiveness.

- The project convened two full-day workshops, one at Montclair State University, and one at Chapman University, with participants from institutions local to each region.

- Written in collaboration with project team members from Montclair and Chapman, Ithaka S+R published a public report with findings from our workshops.

First Workshop: Montclair State University

- Full-day, in-person workshop hosted at Montclair State University on September 12, 2025
- Brought together 31 participants from 13 academic and medical institutions
- Participants included:
  - Senior Leadership, Librarians, IT leaders, Research compliance officers, a representative from Cayuse
- Regional focus: New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania

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Second Workshop: Chapman University

- Full-day, in-person workshop hosted at Chapman University on December 5, 2025
- Brought together participants from 13 academic institutions
- Participants included:
  - Senior Leadership, Librarians, IT leaders, Research compliance officers, a representative from Cayuse
- Regional focus: Southern California

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First Workshop Opening Panel: Montclair State University

- Opening Panel and Discussion featured panelists: Libby Barak (Montclair), Kevin Cooke (APLU), Eric Hetherington (NJIT), Todd Slawsky (Rutgers) Moderated by Stefanie Brachfeld (Montclair State University)

- Explored the role of AI in the research enterprise from multiple professional perspectives

- Topics discussed included:
  - Rising operational and compliance costs amid shrinking budgets
  - AI's current suitability for entry-level tasks and implications for workforce training
  - Risks of deepening inequities if institutions hesitate to engage with AI
  - Importance of trust and transparency in training and adoption
  - Concerns about the energy and infrastructure costs of AI

Broad Consensus: AI literacy needs are significant. AI should augment, not replace, human judgment in research administration.

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Second Workshop Opening Panel: Chapman University

- Opening Panel and discussion featured panelists: Sylvia Bradshaw (Southern Utah University), Brett Pollack (UC San Diego), Ed Clark (California State University System) Moderated by Esraa Nawar (Chapman University)

- Representing diverse institutional types, they discussed the benefits and challenges in AI implementation as they apply to: a small public ERI, a large R1 university, and a multi-campus state system

- Sylvia Bradshaw shared how her team uses AI to: Automate budget availability reports to flag high-risk expenditures, fill specialist knowledge gaps (e.g., tech transfer) at a small, generalist-staffed institution

- Brett Pollack described UCSD's development of TritonGPT, a custom AI platform now in use at five other institutions, and the importance of careful and well-considered change management

- Ed Clark discussed the process for enrolling the whole CSU systemwide application and emphasized shared governance as critical for aligning AI initiatives across CSU campuses

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Workshop Breakout Sessions

Breakout Sessions:

1. Assessing Current Capacity and Needs: where participants identified gaps in staffing, governance, training, and inter-unit collaboration.

2. Experiments with AI: where attendees shared pilot initiatives and informal experimentation with AI tools.

3. Developing AI Strategies: where groups brainstormed long-term goals and drafted initial strategies for ethical, effective AI adoption in support of research through lightening round discussions. Tried to focus around topics of governance, infrastructure and support services, and research development.

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Key Findings

- **Data security, quality, and governance are enduring concerns:** Data security concerns are making some research administrators wary of using third-party AI tools.

- **Trust, transparency, and reliability are non-negotiable:** Many administrators and faculty are skeptical that AI is sufficiently reliable to be trusted to meet rigorous legal, ethical, and fiscal standards required for compliance

- **Institutional initiatives and operational reality are often misaligned:** AI can add stress to already strained relations between staff and senior leaders, especially as these leaders are sometimes perceived as pushing impractical or counterproductive AI practices.

- **AI literacy is uneven and confusing:** Gaps in understanding, across units and especially among support staff, make using AI and implementing at a more systemic level difficult, and at times, frustrating.

Key Findings

- **Institutional readiness and adoption vary widely:** Many campuses are just forming AI governance groups. AI is used for tasks like email and scheduling, but system-level adoption is limited. Faculty interest varies, and time constraints limit engagement with training.

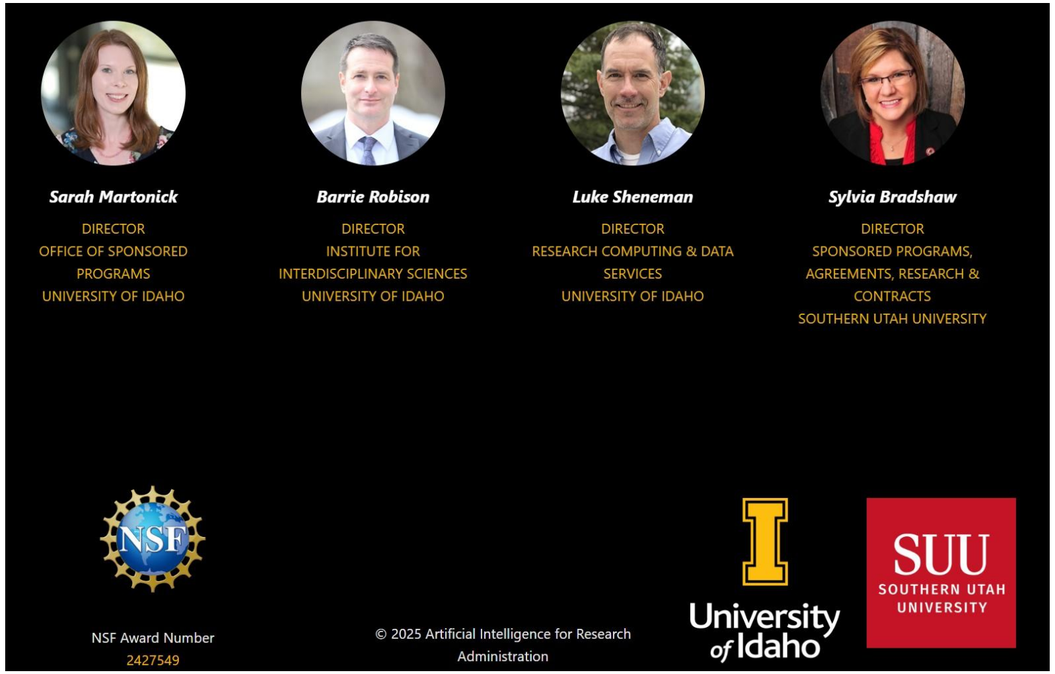
- **Equity concerns are central:** Participants raised issues around access, hidden curriculum, and cultural bias in AI tools, warning that uneven adoption could deepen existing inequities.

- **Shared language, training, and support infrastructure are lacking:** There is a clear need for common vocabulary, cross-unit interoperability, and coordinated AI literacy training, including microcredentials and support services.

- **Affective and cultural dimensions of AI implementation matter:** Anxiety about job security and unclear governance are slowing adoption. Opinions about the workforce implications of AI are simultaneously fraught with worry and hope Participants emphasized the importance of change management and acknowledging these concerns.

Areas with potential

- Using AI to assist with risk-based proposal and compliance reviews
- “Process-palooza” events or “use-case showcases” to facilitate the lateral and upwards flow of ideas and practices.
- TritonGPT, developed by UCSD, which is now available as SaS, and The Vandalizer (funded by the NSF GRANTED program) and developed at the University of Idaho.



Future Research Considerations

- How are IRBs responding to the spread of AI as a research tool and to what extent are researchers disclosing use in accordance with IRB guidelines? What questions do IRB boards need to ask, what questions do researchers need to prepare for?

- How can the return on investment for AI tools be assessed, and what are the appropriate metrics?

- What implementations of AI at emerging research institutions are associated with growth of their research revenue, impact, and competitiveness for grants?

- Does the use of AI – especially agentic AI - in research administration at ERIs impact their institutional risk profiles? Are there specific uses of AI in research administration that pose higher risks for data sovereignty, export controls, and national security vulnerabilities? What guardrails need to be in place to ensure risk to research security is minimized?

Questions?

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Q&A

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Watch our latest interview with Erika Cottingham

- **25 years in the trenches**: Erika Cottingham on research admin's biggest bottleneck.
- **Amplify, don't replace**: How Auburn builds AI agents that keep humans in charge.
- **150 admins surveyed**: 85% want AI to reduce friction, not replace them.

👆 Scan to watch

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