

CASE STUDY · HIGHER EDUCATION

How Bradley University Turned a Full Day of Grant Searching into Minutes with Atom Grants

OVERVIEW

Bradley University, a primarily undergraduate institution in Peoria, Illinois, runs its Office of Sponsored Programs with two people. Before Atom, faculty had a keyword search tool few of them used, so most only heard about funding when the office sent it out, and building a short list of good fits could take the office's director an entire Saturday. Since rolling out Atom in January 2026, that search takes minutes. Faculty now bring opportunities to the office instead of waiting for them, and grants nobody had found before are turning into submitted proposals. Next, the office is moving into Atom's proposal tools: checklists built from the NOFO and AI review of drafts against it.

INTERVIEWED FOR THIS CASE STUDY



Brad Andersh
Executive Director, Sponsored Programs



Michelle Eaton
Associate Director, Sponsored Programs



Anant Deshwal, PhD
Assistant Professor of Biology



Sara Erlichman, PhD
Assistant Professor of Communication

The Challenge

Bradley's Office of Sponsored Programs went three years without a director. When Brad Andersh, a chemistry professor for 31 years, stepped in as Executive Director with NSF support to rebuild the office, the goal was to get more faculty and staff writing grants. With a staff of two, nobody in the office could spend days searching on faculty's behalf.

> Prior to Atom, I would spend an entire Saturday going through and finding maybe 5 opportunities that I thought would be applicable for our faculty. With Atom, we're able to do that in a matter of minutes.
>
>  **Brad Andersh**

The old discovery tool ran on keyword searches. Faculty said they spent too long sorting through results that did not apply, so few used it, and the main way they heard about funding was the notices the office sent out. Faculty who searched on their own paid for it in lost days.

> Sometimes you'd spend a day or two going through those details, one grant after the other, and then I have nothing to show for the two days I've spent on this grant.
>
>  **Anant Deshwal, PhD**

Several obstacles stood in the way:

- A keyword search tool with little faculty buy-in
- Faculty relying on office notices to hear about funding at all
- Days lost checking whether a single grant was a real fit
- Grants found too late, sometimes two days before the deadline
- Niche research areas with no obvious funder to match

Why Atom?

The office compared what it had with what Atom offered, and three things decided it.

1. Search that reads research, not keywords

Faculty drop in an abstract and get back the two or three grants that fit, not fifty.

2. A closed system faculty can trust

> It is a closed system, so they don't have to worry about their intellectual property leaking out, as opposed to AI search tools they may use on their own.



Michelle Eaton

3. A fit score before the deep dive

Each match shows how closely a grant aligns with the researcher's work and how competitive they are likely to be, so poor fits are ruled out before they cost a day.

Implementation Process

1. **Spring forum launch:** a live demo in January 2026, with faculty and staff logging in during the session
2. **College by college:** visits to every college and department, plus one-on-one walkthroughs
3. **Ready-made outreach:** emails and texts from Atom, adapted to campus culture
4. **Champions and refreshers:** OSP Fellows in each college, and a new round of training every fall

Faculty needed very little training. Sara Erlichman, PhD, onboarded a colleague the same day as the forum, and even skeptics came around fast.

> I had already rejected it. I think it was the first, or second, or third search, I'm talking less than an hour, and I was like, this thing is producing things that are going to be helpful.



Anant Deshwal, PhD

Results & Impact

1 day → mins
To build a short list of grants that fit faculty research

50 → 2–3
Results a researcher sorts through to find the real fits

< 1 hour
For a skeptical professor to trust the results

Faculty now bring the opportunity

Atom's weekly email reaches faculty directly, so they now come to the office with a grant in hand and ask what to do next. Michelle Eaton counts at least three faculty who brought in an opportunity Atom found; most have submitted or are writing the application now.

> Many times our faculty are coming to us with an opportunity already identified. It allows us to more quickly transition to project execution, proposal submission, rather than spending a significant amount of time trying to find the right opportunity for them.



Brad Andersh

Grants nobody had found

Sara Erlichman studies parasocial relationships, a field she had struggled to match to funders. Acting as her college's OSP Fellow, she set up alerts for a health communication program her department wanted to build. An Arthur Vining Davis Foundations grant came in, and the college submitted a proposal. Anant Deshwal, PhD, found a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers program he had never been able to track down, the exact programs inside NSF, USGS, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife, and foundations he did not know existed.

> It came in on one of the alerts one day, and I was like, this is an amazing opportunity. I was able to submit one. I probably would have never found that grant otherwise.



Sara Erlichman, PhD

Looking Forward: Proposal Development

With discovery handled, Bradley is taking Atom into the next stage: turning a NOFO into a finished proposal. The plan is a checklist generated from each solicitation, a shared workspace for the researcher, their collaborators, and the office, and an AI check of drafts against the NOFO before submission.

> Being able to find a NOFO that you're interested in and quickly generate a checklist of all the required materials you'll need for that.
>
>  **Brad Andersh**

> Having it review the language to ensure that it aligns with the notice of funding opportunity. If they're working at home on the weekend and we're not available, they won't have to wait for us.
>
>  **Michelle Eaton**

Key success factors

1. **Relevance:** semantic matches close enough to faculty research to earn the click
2. **Trust:** a closed system, and summaries that hold up when checked by hand
3. **Easy rollout:** ready-made outreach and very little training
4. **Campus champions:** OSP Fellows promoting Atom inside each college
5. **Past discovery:** checklists and NOFO checks that carry grants through to submission

Ready to do the same at your institution?

Schedule a demo to see how Atom can help your faculty find and win more funding.

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