


CASE STUDY · HIGHER EDUCATION

# How Middle Tennessee State University Increased Proposals by 45% After Switching to Atom

## OVERVIEW

Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) had a keyword search tool that returned about 50 results for every good fit, and the faculty who most needed funding were the ones least able to find it. MTSU switched to Atom halfway through FY26 and gave every faculty and staff member an account. By June, proposals were up 45% over the previous year, 30% more new PIs were asking the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs for help, and the office was building proposal checklists in a minute instead of an hour or two.

## INTERVIEWED FOR THIS CASE STUDY



**David Butler**
Chief Research Officer and Vice Provost for Research



**Michelle Willard**
Senior Research Administrator, Research & Sponsored Programs

# The Challenge

MTSU's chief research officer, David Butler, is measured on one thing: growing grant and contract activity every year. That depends on getting more faculty to apply, and that depends on faculty finding opportunities that fit. The old tool ran on keyword searches, and faculty had to build and update their own profiles, so results only matched the people who were good at maintaining them.

> You would get maybe 50 results from a search, and maybe one of them was a good fit if you're lucky.
>
>  **Michelle Willard**

- **Low accuracy:** about 1 good fit in every 50 results
- **Missed deadlines:** calls surfaced too late, or after the date had passed
- **No state portal:** finding Tennessee RFPs meant checking each agency's site daily
- **Faculty on the sidelines:** many believed there was no funding for their work

# Why Atom?

Before signing, David tested Atom with small, niche foundations his team had found over years of searching. Each opportunity Atom returns also shows whether the researcher is eligible and how closely it fits their work, and it reaches foundations and other non-federal funders for social sciences, humanities, arts and business, not just STEM.

> 100% of edge cases that I threw out there, Atom Grant was able to find. If it can find those that I'm aware of, it's gonna find all those other ones that I'm unaware of.
>
>  **David Butler**

# Proposal Development

Discovery is only the first step. Once an opportunity is in hand, Michelle Willard's pre-award team has to turn it into a submission, and that is where Atom is already saving hours.

### Checklists in a minute

A new pre-award research administrator got her first proposal from a faculty member who had found the opportunity in Atom. Michelle showed her how to ask Atom's assistant for a checklist. She still reads the full RFP, but she starts from a complete list of what the office and the PI each need to do.

> That process, just making the checklist, could be an hour or two. Within a minute she had that checklist for her.
>
>  **Michelle Willard**

### More people, and better proposals

Since launch, 30% more new PIs have come to the office for help with proposals. Michelle sees a change not only in the number of proposals but in their quality, and in the new faces coming in ready to apply.

### Every funder's rules, met

Federal agencies share most requirements. Private funders don't: one might want a 1,500-character narrative, no biosketch and its own budget form. Michelle expects offices to lean on tools like Atom to meet each funder's rules, so a strong proposal isn't rejected over an administrative mistake.

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# Implementation Process

1. **Soft launch in February, full launch in March**
2. **Everyone included:** every faculty and staff member got an account, with no selection
3. **Word of mouth:** David asks everyone he meets whether they've checked their weekly email

The response came fast. David says faculty told him on their own that they had used it and found something, which he rarely hears after a software launch.

# Results & Impact

**+45%**
Proposals vs. the previous year, by June

**+32%**
Proposals vs. the previous year, by May

**+30%**
New PIs asking for proposal help

**1 min**
To build a checklist that took 1 to 2 hours

### New people walking through the door

David's leading indicator is the number of unique PIs submitting grants: more PIs means more submissions, and more submissions means more awards. Every faculty and staff account now holds at least five RFPs they are eligible for. Even MTSU's environmental services staff submit roughly one grant a month, for projects like adding recycling points and cutting the campus carbon footprint.

> My leading indicator is number of unique PI submitting grants. You have to have RFPs in their lap ready to go. So Atom Grant was the tool I needed to help push my leading indicator.



**David Butler**

### Found in July, awarded in September

An assistant dean in the College of Liberal Arts wanted funding for a project built on the True Blue Pledge, the commitment every MTSU graduate makes at commencement. Atom sent a private funder to her inbox in July. She applied by the end of the month and was awarded the grant by September.

> This was served directly into her inbox, and Atom was like, "You're a 90% match for this with your project."



**Michelle Willard**

# Looking Forward

MTSU is moving with Atom from discovery into proposal development and collaboration across institutions. For a regional comprehensive university, David sees Atom as a way to compete with the top research universities that funders already come to.

> The product I need is not a grant search engine. It's a grant search engine and a collaboration module and a proposal development module, and eventually a method to submit the grant.
>
>  **David Butler**

### Advice for other institutions

Asked what she tells peers who are wary of AI tools, Michelle points to MTSU's own security review. Tennessee is strict about data security, and the university has dropped vendors that didn't pass.

> Atom Grant passed all of the tests that our IT department could throw at it. So your data is safe. AI shouldn't be scary, and you can use it to your advantage.
>
>  **Michelle Willard**

### Key success factors

1. **Accuracy that earns trust:** Atom passed David's edge-case test before MTSU signed
2. **Everyone on the platform:** accounts for all faculty and staff, not a selected few
3. **A clear first filter:** eligibility and fit scores on every opportunity
4. **Security that passed IT review:** including FERPA and HIPAA requirements
5. **Support past discovery:** checklists today, and proposal development next

## 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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