

CASE STUDY · ACADEMIC MEDICINE

How Rush University Medical Center Moved From Searching for Grants to Planning Ahead With Atom

OVERVIEW

Rush University Medical Center had a funding search tool on its books, but few investigators used it, so most grant searching fell back on researchers checking agency and foundation websites by hand. With federal funding uncertain and leadership asking for a more diverse research portfolio, Rush brought in Atom. Within months, investigators were getting matches in their inboxes, some were logging in every three days, and study teams had started drafting Aims pages for center grants that hadn't been announced yet.

INTERVIEWED FOR THIS CASE STUDY



Monica Lacas
Research Administrator,
Office of Research Affairs



Dr. Nicole Russo-Ponsaran
Research Director,
Rush NeuroBehavioral Center



Jennifer Garcia
Director, Sponsored
Programs Administration

The Challenge

Rush is a heavily federally funded research institution. As federal rules and funding shifted, its Office of Research Affairs made finding non-federal funding a priority. But the search process wasn't set up for that: finding opportunities was left to investigators and study teams, who watched NIH, Department of Defense and foundation dashboards on their own, and the search tool Rush already had saw little use.

> It's on your radar a year ahead of time, and then they shift things by a few weeks, and I might not have gotten the right announcement, or somehow it slipped through.



Dr. Nicole Russo-Ponsaran

- **A tool few people used:** reminders at every meeting didn't raise usage
- **Searching by hand:** researchers could spend an entire day tracking down opportunities, roughly once a quarter
- **Missed and late calls:** calls were easy to miss, or arrived with very tight turnarounds
- **Only known funders:** no easy way to find agencies researchers didn't already know

Why Atom?

Research leadership asked for a tool that was user-friendly, cost-effective and would help diversify Rush's portfolio. Atom builds each researcher's profile from publicly available information, checks eligibility for both the researcher and Rush as a nonprofit, and lets researchers flag funders so they get an email when a call opens.

> I love how it goes through and it identifies eligibility within a program announcement. To me, that just makes it so user friendly.



Jennifer Garcia

Proposal Development

The biggest change Monica Lacas has seen is in how teams prepare proposals. Rush has senior researchers well placed for large center grants, such as cooperative U-mechanism and P50 awards, and Atom's forecasted opportunities show those calls before they open.

> We've actually started to compile study teams and draft an Aims page in preparation for this to be announced. We're proactively looking and planning things now.
>
>  **Monica Lacas**

Submissions in the queue

Dr. Nicole Russo-Ponsaran and a colleague in her department are lining up a fall submission from opportunities she opened in Atom.

Implementation Process

1. **A kickoff with administrators:** the Atom team presented virtually to grant administrators across departments
2. **Clear messaging:** most early questions were about whether Atom replaced the previous tool
3. **Faculty presentations:** administrators presented Atom at college faculty meetings

Monica describes the integration as logistically very simple. Because the launch fell over the holidays, it took about a quarter to six months to reach everyone at Rush who works on research. Jennifer Garcia needed about 10 minutes in Atom before presenting it to faculty.

> From the kickoff of working with the folks at Atom to actually having our researchers start using it, it went so quickly.
>
>  **Jennifer Garcia**

Results & Impact

Rush is still early, and Monica expects firmer data as the first grants go to council. What the team sees so far:

Every 3 days
How often some investigators are in Atom

10 min
For the sponsored programs director to learn Atom

3–6 months
To reach everyone at Rush who works on research

Value for every kind of user

Some investigators never log in and just act on the emails Atom sends them. Others are in Atom every few days, adding interests and filtering for new opportunities. Jennifer also sees more non-federal applications on the submission board, and hopes Atom is part of the reason.

> Even for our least engaged user, it is substantially better than what we had previously.



Monica Lacas

Visibility for administrators

Monica can see what researchers in her departments have saved, and uses it to prepare her monthly meetings with them: "I see that you saved a few things on Atom recently, are we planning to prepare a submission?" It gives the sponsored programs office an earlier view of what's coming, and has helped define her workload.

Early-career researchers are the biggest fans

At Rush's Research Week open house, young investigators and residents came up to the research team to say how much they liked Atom, especially the fellowship calls sent to their inboxes. More established faculty valued having the AI assistant and all the key information in one place.

Matches that keep up with a researcher's direction

Nicole's research has shifted over the years. After she edited her interests in her profile, her matches improved, and the funders Atom surfaced lined up with the ones her team already applied to.

Looking Forward

Rush plans to keep growing adoption. Monica would like application checklists that Atom generates, and both she and Nicole are looking forward to collaborator search, to help researchers find colleagues across departments.

> We love Atom Grants. This has been an exciting project for us, and I do feel like it's working.



Monica Lacas

Advice for other institutions

> Have the meeting, check it out yourself. I think you'll be impressed immediately.



Jennifer Garcia

Key success factors

1. **A request from leadership:** a user-friendly, cost-effective tool to diversify funding
2. **Profiles built for researchers:** from public information, editable at any time
3. **Eligibility up front:** for the researcher and for Rush
4. **Forecasts and alerts:** teams hear about calls before they open
5. **Visibility for administrators:** an early view of what's coming

Ready to do the same at your institution?

Schedule a demo to see how Atom can help your researchers find and plan for more funding.

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