

NNCI Collaborative Intelligence Research Awards

Request for Proposals

About the Northwestern Network for Collaborative Intelligence (NNCI)

The NNCI's mission is to harness Northwestern's interdisciplinary strengths to advance responsible, high-impact, world-class research and education in data science and AI.

We envision redefining the future of collaborative intelligence by making Northwestern the global epicenter where human ingenuity and AI together solve society's most urgent challenges.

Overview

The Northwestern Network for Collaborative Intelligence (NNCI) invites proposals for the **Collaborative Intelligence Research Awards**, a new internal seed funding opportunity designed to catalyze innovative, interdisciplinary research at the intersection of artificial intelligence, data science, and domain-specific inquiry, while building a connected community of researchers advancing collaborative intelligence across Northwestern.

These awards aim to accelerate projects that:

- Leverage AI and data science in unique, innovative, and impactful ways
- Foster collaboration across Northwestern's schools, departments, and research units
- Advance NNCI's mission to harness Northwestern's interdisciplinary strengths to advance responsible, high-impact, world-class research and education in data science and AI
- Provide catalytic support to advance existing projects, enabling them to reach the next stage of impact, scale, or external funding

Program Goals

The NNCI Collaborative Intelligence Research Awards are designed to:

- Advance AI+X research across disciplines (e.g., AI + medicine, AI + humanities, AI + engineering, etc.)
- Seed high-impact projects that can grow into external funding opportunities
- Strengthen cross-campus collaboration and build durable research networks
- Activate Northwestern's data and compute ecosystem in new and strategic ways
- Position Northwestern as a leader in collaborative, responsible, and innovative use of AI
- Create a cohort of NNCI awardees to foster ongoing connections, shared learning, and visibility across projects

Eligibility

- Open to Northwestern University faculty and staff investigators
- Principal Investigators (PIs) must be affiliated with a Northwestern school, institute, or administrative unit

- Teams may include:
 - Co-PIs from multiple departments or schools
 - Research staff, postdoctoral scholars, and students

Collaboration Incentive

All proposals must include collaboration across at least two distinct departments, schools, or administrative units within Northwestern University.

Projects must demonstrate:

- Meaningful integration of expertise across participating units
- Clear added value resulting from the collaboration (beyond what could be achieved by a single unit)
- Shared ownership of project goals, execution, and outcomes
- Proposals that reflect deeper or broader collaboration may be considered for enhanced funding levels (final award tiers to be determined).

Funding Scope

NNCI anticipates committing up to \$350,000 in total funding for this award cycle. The program is designed to support a broad portfolio of projects across the university, prioritizing the distribution of funds across multiple teams rather than a small number of large awards.

To advance this goal, NNCI expects to fund multiple projects at a funding level of ~\$35,000, with an emphasis on smaller, high-impact awards that enable exploratory work, pilot studies, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Funding is intended to support:

- Direct costs
- Research activities and implementation
- Data acquisition and management
- Students and Post Docs
- Workshops, convenings, or stakeholder engagement
- Prototyping, pilot studies, or proof-of-concept work

Funding levels will vary based on project scope, level of collaboration, and available resources.

Applicants should propose reasonable, well-justified budgets aligned with the scale of work and one-year project period. Final award amounts will be determined during the review process.

Important Restrictions

- Funds may NOT be used to hire permanent staff or faculty, create new staff or faculty positions, or offset the cost of current staff or faculty salaries
- Funds should not support indirect costs or administrative overhead unless explicitly approved
- Projects should be scoped to achieve meaningful outcomes within a one-year period

Proposal Requirements

Proposals should be concise, accessible to a broad interdisciplinary audience, and include the following:

1. Project Summary (1 page maximum)

- Problem statement
- Proposed approach
- Role of AI and/or data science
- Anticipated outcomes and impact

2. Collaboration Plan (half page maximum)

- Participating units and roles
- How collaboration enhances the project
- Plans for sustained partnership beyond the funding period

3. Impact Statement (half page maximum)

- Potential scholarly, societal, or translational impact
- Alignment with NNCI's mission
- Future funding or scaling potential

4. Budget and Justification

- High-level budget
- Clear explanation of how funds will be used

Review Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated based on:

- Alignment with NNCI mission (AI, data science, and collaboration)
- Innovation and originality
- Interdisciplinary strength and integration
- Feasibility and clarity of execution within a new or existing project
- Potential for impact and scalability
- Effective use of Northwestern resources and infrastructure
- Cross-school or cross-unit collaboration
- Projects that activate shared data or computing assets
- Early-stage ideas with high long-term potential

Award Expectations

Award recipients will be expected to:

- Participate in NNCI programming related to this funding (e.g., research showcases)
- Share progress and outcomes with the NNCI community
- Contribute to building a collaborative research network at Northwestern
- Acknowledge NNCI support in publications and presentations
- Complete a 2-minute video summarizing the outcomes of the project

Timeline

- RFP Release: July 1, 2026
- Proposal Deadline: July 31, 2026
- Award Notification: September 1, 2026
- Project Period: 1 year

Submissions

Please email your complete proposals to NNCI@northwestern.edu in PDF format by Friday, July 31, 2026.