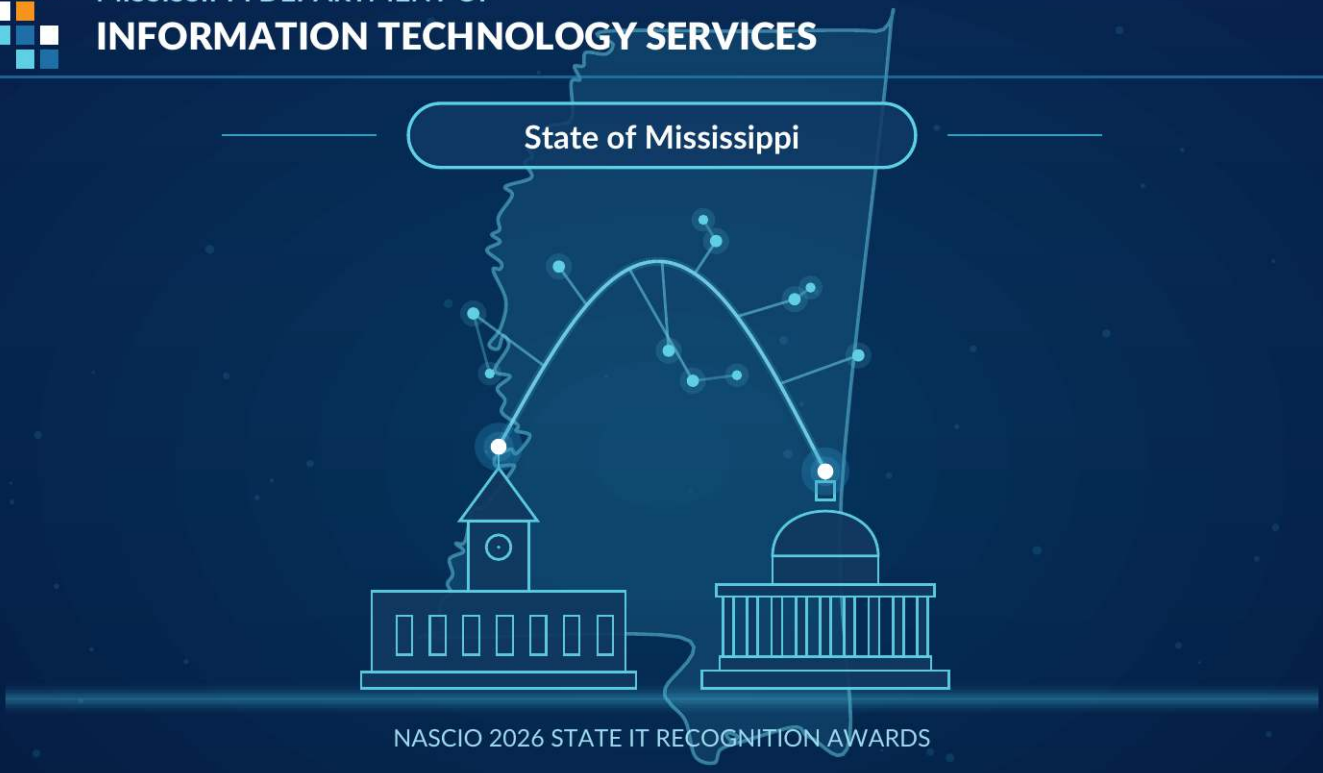
MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES



NASCIO 2026 STATE IT RECOGNITION AWARDS

PROJECT TITLE

Campus to Capitol. Many Partners, One Hub.

Mississippi's Statewide Partnership Model for Practical, Responsible AI through the AI Innovation Hub

CATEGORY
Cross-Boundary Collaboration

PROJECT START DATE
January 10, 2025

PROJECT END DATE
Present (Ongoing)

CONTACT INFO
Shelley Thompson | shelley.thompson@its.ms.gov

Executive Summary

Mississippi launched the AI Innovation Hub (the Hub) to answer a question facing every state: how can government adopt artificial intelligence responsibly and at scale when the expertise, data, business knowledge, and workforce required are scattered across many organizations? Rather than fund another isolated pilot, ITS built a standing, cross-boundary operating model. Led by ITS and joined by AWS and the Mississippi Artificial Intelligence Network (MAIN), the nation's first statewide AI initiative, the Hub connects state agencies, universities, and student teams around real agency problems. Agencies contribute operational use cases; universities organize and supervise student teams; AWS provides technical mentorship; MAIN provides connections to Mississippi's broader AI ecosystem and higher education partners; and ITS supplies a secure cloud sandbox, governance, and coordination.

The model lets an agency test an AI solution in a 6-8 week sprint instead of committing to a costly, multi-year procurement before a concept is proven, while building an AI-ready workforce and giving Mississippi graduates a reason to build their careers in state government. A statewide AI inventory had already shown adoption emerging unevenly (98 entities responded; roughly half reported at least one AI use), creating real risk of duplicated pilots and inconsistent safeguards. The Hub converts that risk into a governed pipeline that aligns governance, cybersecurity, procurement, privacy, and workforce goals.

The Hub's first proof-of-concept (PoC), Procurii, shows the pathway end to end: a student-built procurement-knowledge tool that ITS is now moving into production, with the original students hired as contractors. That progression illustrates the Hub's core value: it is not merely a showcase model; it is a bridge between ideas and operational modernization. It allows Mississippi to identify promising solutions, validate them with agency partners, and create a path for continued development when a concept proves useful. Since its February 2026 launch, the Hub has engaged 17 student teams from three institutions across 10 use cases from six agencies. The result is a repeatable, public-private model that strengthens government capacity, workforce readiness, and responsible AI adoption at the same time through one integrated, statewide public-private collaboration.

Project Description

Idea

What problem or opportunity does the project address?

Picture a state procurement officer fielding the same policy question for the tenth time in a week, with the authoritative answer scattered across manuals and held mostly in the memory of one or two veteran staff. Multiply that friction across dozens of agencies, each curious about AI but unsure where it could safely help, and you have the everyday reality the Hub was built to address.

State agencies were under growing pressure to adopt AI but lacked a safe, affordable way to learn which use cases were worth pursuing. Few had in-house AI talent, a secure cloud environment, or the budget to experiment responsibly, and traditional procurement forced them to commit significant funding before knowing whether a solution would work. At the same time, Mississippi's

universities were graduating skilled students who too often left the state. The Hub closes both gaps at once: it gives agencies a low-risk path to validate AI solutions and gives students hands-on experience solving real public-sector problems inside state government.

The business problem was not a lack of technology; it was the lack of a coordinated pathway from AI interest to tested, documented, responsibly governed use. The Hub solves this by turning agency operational challenges into collaborative PoC projects with defined sponsors, student teams, mentors, review points, and transition decisions.

Why does it matter?

Without a collaborative approach, every agency exploring AI would duplicate the same expensive groundwork: procuring cloud capacity, hiring scarce specialists, and navigating security and acceptable-use requirements alone. That is slow, costly, and inconsistent, and it risks either falling behind or adopting AI without guardrails. By centralizing experimentation in one governed Hub built on cloud landing zones ITS already operates, the state avoids redundant spending, applies its AI Acceptable Use Policy uniformly, and lets agencies build on one another's work. The Hub directly serves citizens by accelerating improvements to services they rely on, from food assistance to workforce resume support to procurement. Additionally, the Hub provides students an opportunity to use real government challenges as applied learning opportunities and show students that public service offers meaningful technology careers right here at home.

What makes it different?

Many states have launched AI task forces, policies, or vendor pilots. However, the Hub is an enterprise innovation operating model. It deliberately blends sectors that seldom build software together: agencies supply the problems, secure infrastructure, and project management; a statewide initiative supplies connections and coordination; universities supply talent and academic rigor; and industry supplies funding and mentoring. It operationalizes collaboration as a standing, governed platform, not a one-time initiative, that continuously intakes real use cases, matches them to interdisciplinary student teams, and delivers a working PoC in a typical 6-8 week sprint. A post-showcase pathway lets promising PoCs to move into validation and production planning rather than ending as on-time demonstrations. The Hub is further distinguished by its commitment to publishing every proof-of-concept as open source, enabling agencies and the broader community to benefit from and expand upon prior AI efforts rather than duplicating foundational work. The model treats AI adoption as a workforce-development engine as much as a technology program.

What makes it universal?

Every state faces the same pressures: rising AI demand, uneven agency capacity, cybersecurity and privacy expectations, constrained budgets, and the need to modernize services without eroding public trust. The Hub aligns with several State CIO priorities: artificial intelligence, modernization, cybersecurity and risk management, digital government, fiscal management, and consolidation/optimization. The Hub's model is easily transferable having been inspired by previous comparable efforts in other states and academic cloud innovation centers. Its core components (cloud landing zones, centralized use-case intake, risk-aware selection, cross-sector

teaming, human oversight, documentation, showcase presentation, and transition planning) can be replicated by any state with agencies, universities, and technology partners willing to work together through a shared governance and sprint structure, and the Hub is glad to help others replicate the model.

Implementation

What was the roadmap?

ITS structured the Hub to move from strategy to repeatable execution. It first framed AI innovation as part of statewide technology governance and, on January 10, 2025, announced a partnership among ITS, MAIN, and AWS called the AI Innovation Hub. ITS then hired staff to operationalize the Hub within its Emerging Technology team, studied comparable efforts in other states for lessons learned, and invited agencies to submit operational use cases reflecting real pain points. A rubric scored use cases on strategic alignment, citizen and agency impact, replicability, scalability, and feasibility; selected cases were scoped for objectives, success metrics, timeline, data, cadence, customer owners, and next steps. Interdisciplinary student teams then applied for use cases, built PoCs with agency feedback and partner mentoring, demonstrated them at a public showcase, and, where there was operational promise, entered transition planning for refinement, validation, and potential production use.

The Hub follows an iterative, sprint-based delivery model:

A pilot ran in late Fall 2025 to test the program's standard operating procedures, policies, and governance; adjustments were made, and a full launch followed in February 2026. Each project has a defined agency sponsor, team cadence, mentor support, checkpoints, and a culminating presentation evaluated by the submitting agency.

The Hub measures success across four dimensions (operational impact, governance readiness, workforce development, and scalability), and because most efforts remain at proof-of-concept stage, assessment focuses on whether a project demonstrates measurable value, reduces risk, and is suitable for responsible expansion rather than on whether it has reached full production. It tracks participation indicators (agencies, student teams, university partners, completed use cases, conversion to production, and students hired into government) and operational measures (time saved, reduced manual work, response consistency, adoption, output quality, and staff satisfaction). Success is defined not by the number of PoCs produced, but by whether agencies receive actionable solutions or actionable learning and whether students build job-ready skills. To date, the Hub AI projects are performing as expected for their maturity level, with primary outcomes including increased agency engagement, stronger governance readiness, successful proof-of-concept development, improved workforce capacity, and an emerging scalable model for responsible AI adoption across Mississippi government.

Who was involved?

The Hub has succeeded because the work is shared across boundaries. **ITS** originated and operates the Hub: secure cloud landing zones, governance, statewide coordination, agency engagement, program management, and transition planning. **AWS** provides environment credits, expertise, mentorship, and AI/ML curriculum. **MAIN** connects the Hub to Mississippi's broader AI ecosystem and higher-education partners and coordinates training. **State agencies** supply the business problems, subject-matter experts, validation feedback, and adoption decisions. **Universities** recruit and supervise interdisciplinary student teams and connect the work to educational pathways. **Student teams** serve as builders, analysts, presenters, and documenters.

Buy-in was secured top-down and bottom-up by tailoring the value proposition to each stakeholder while aligning to one public purpose. The State CIO publicly championed the initiative at launch. ITS, AWS and MAIN were given a structured role supporting state priorities, a value add to each. Agencies were offered a low-risk, low-effort way to test AI against real needs; universities, a bridge between academic programs and state workforce needs and recognition of student work; and students, real-world experience, mentorship, training, visibility, and a path to be hired to move PoCs into production. Awareness was built through agency and university outreach, use-case intake, student-team engagement, executive briefings, and a highly publicized statewide showcase in May 2026 that brought teams, agencies, and industry together to demonstrate PoCs, reinforcing awareness, adoption, and momentum across the coalition.

How did you do it?

The Hub was designed to be resource-efficient by sharing what each partner already had. Rather than new capital outlay, the Hub used ITS program leadership, agency staff time, university coordination, student participation, partner mentoring, cloud and development environments, and structured review processes. ITS leveraged its existing cloud landing zones; AWS funded the PoCs through environment credits and provided curriculum; universities provided student labor and staff supervision; and MAIN organized training. Students build in a sandboxed environment inside the ITS-operated cloud, which keeps experimentation isolated from production systems while still applying enterprise security and the state's AI Acceptable Use Policy. It converts student learning time into public value while giving students professional experience that is difficult to replicate in a classroom. The model also reduces the cost of discovery because agencies can learn from PoCs before launching large procurements or committing staff and salaries to production-scale work.

The technical architecture matters less for what it contains than for what it enables: a governed, repeatable space where many small AI experiments run in parallel, cheaply and safely, so the state can learn fast and scale only what proves valuable. Hub projects are built around advisory, human-in-the-loop AI rather than autonomous decision-making, using approved source materials, retrieval-based responses, auditability, and clear escalation to human review, with attention to data sensitivity, explainability, security, business ownership, and transition readiness.

Impact

What did the project make better?

Before the Hub, an agency curious about AI faced a daunting, expensive path and frequently chose to do nothing; promising ideas stalled for lack of a safe place to test them or internal expertise, and the state's AI talent dispersed after graduation. After the Hub, agencies have an open front door: they submit a use case and, within weeks, receive a working PoC built by a supervised student team at little to no cost and no risk to production systems, then decide whether to refine, retire, or transition it to production. The Hub made Mississippi government better by creating a practical way to explore AI without separating innovation from accountability. The state also gained a stronger culture of collaboration around AI, with agencies, universities, students, and partners working from a common process. In its first year the Hub moved from announcement to a live portfolio of PoCs spanning food-insecurity analytics, Secretary of State policy operations, and ITS procurement, with a growing backlog of agency-submitted ideas and a structured pathway that keeps skilled graduates engaged with Mississippi government. Just as importantly, it created a structured pathway that keeps skilled graduates engaged with Mississippi government and industry.

How do you know?

Since its full program launch in February 2026, the Hub has engaged:

17	3	10	6
Student teams	Institutions	Use cases	Agencies

Additionally, at the public showcase in May 2026 where student teams demonstrated PoCs to agencies and industry partners, participation was high with 108 registered attendees plus 50 students, 4 school mentors and 7 Hub partners. Qualitatively, agency sponsors have used the Hub to compare solution approaches, identify process gaps, and determine whether AI is appropriate for a given workflow before pursuing larger investment. Many agencies are still contemplating next steps for their PoCs; however, ITS has already hired the Procurii student team as contractors to move it into production, allowing real-work experience and workforce connections for the students. This production build is expected to be completed by July 2026.

Direct stakeholder testimony includes:

Secretary of State Michael Watson: *"Through Mississippi's new AI Innovation Hub, I've seen firsthand how the program has challenged our state's future leaders to confront existing government issues with bold yet practical solutions. By applying their skills and ideas for developing and harnessing AI, we have an opportunity to make Mississippi's government more efficient, more responsive, and better focused on the people it serves."*

Swayamjit Saha, student participant: *"It is a great opportunity for students who may not have previous hands-on experience solving real-world projects. I strongly recommend students join the Hub to learn new skills and gain practical experience."*

What now?

The Hub is built to endure. ITS will maintain it as a standing program within Emerging Technologies, with continuous use-case intake, a renewable pipeline of student teams each academic term, and an advisory committee guiding responsible scaling. Lessons learned feed back

into program refinement, statewide AI policy, acceptable-use guidance, procurement practices, and training. PoCs that prove their value graduate from sandbox toward production within the same enterprise cloud, while published documentation and a shared use-case library let every agency learn from prior projects.

The investment is justified by compounding returns: each sprint costs little yet either advances a valuable solution or retires a bad idea cheaply, and every cohort strengthens the state's AI workforce. Continued investment sustains a self-reinforcing engine of modernization, economic growth, and talent retention, demonstrating that cross-boundary collaboration, more than any single technology, is what turns AI's promise into public value for Mississippi. Ongoing funding can also support a paid fellowship pathway for outstanding students, deepening their connection to state government and AI implementation over time.

Supplemental Information

Mississippi ITS AI Innovation Hub: https://www.its.ms.gov/services/innovating/AI-Innovation-Hub

Mississippi Artificial Intelligence Network (MAIN), statewide AI priorities: https://mainms.org/mississippi-statewide-ai-priorities/

Public coverage of Procurii, the Hub's first pilot: https://www.govtech.com/artificial-intelligence/mississippi-ai-innovation-hubs-new-chatbot-targets-procurement