AI in Action: A Collaborative Cohort to Advance Library Operations

Fall 2026

Purpose and Rationale

Academic libraries are at an inflection point: as artificial intelligence (AI) rapidly reshapes research, teaching, and institutional operations, libraries face both opportunity and uncertainty. While many leaders recognize AI's transformative potential—from metadata creation and collections management to patron services and workflow optimization—few have systematic insight into where AI can most effectively streamline operations or how to implement these tools responsibly.

This cohort will bring together 15–20 academic library institutions to collaboratively explore, test, and assess how AI can improve or streamline library operations. The goal is to produce actionable, shared insights that strengthen the sector's collective capacity for innovation, while maintaining alignment with library values of equity, transparency, and care.

Research Questions

This cohort project will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What library operations are most amenable to AI-driven efficiency or automation (e.g., acquisitions, cataloging, analytics, public services, or assessment)?

2. How can libraries integrate AI tools in ways that reduce administrative burden while maintaining research integrity and ethical standards?

3. What organizational or cultural barriers inhibit AI adoption in library operations?

4. How can AI initiatives be evaluated for strategic impact or cost-effectiveness? What metrics might be most effective for libraries to demonstrate the impact of AI?

5. What governance models and skill sets within libraries best support responsible and sustainable AI use?

Cohort Design

Duration: 12 months

Participants: 15–20 academic library institutions (mix of research, comprehensive, liberal arts, and community colleges)

Each institution will designate a Project Lead and a Core Team (2-4 staff members) from areas such as technical services, digital initiatives, metadata, assessment, or library administration.

Phases

Phase 1: Orientation & Landscape Scan (Months 1–2)

Virtual cohort kickoff meeting in which the project's structure, timeline, and milestones are outlined

- Ithaka S+R baseline survey administered to participating institutions focusing on current AI literacy, tools in use, perceived opportunities and risks within the library environments
- Environmental scan conducted by cohort members and the Ithaka S+R team (literature review + case studies)
- Deliverable: Document of overall cohort landscape goals

Phase 2: Pilot Design (Months 3–5)

- Each institution identifies one operational area to target for a pilot project (e.g., metadata generation, chatbot-based reference, scheduling, space analytics)
- Cohort workshops on AI tools, prompt engineering, data governance, and ethical use
- Development of project charters by each institution outlining goals, metrics, and anticipated outcomes
- Deliverable: Draft AI Pilot Proposal from each institution

Phase 3: Pilot Implementation (Months 6–9)

- Institutions test and document use of AI tools
- Monthly virtual cohort meetings for peer learning and shared support
- Shared repository for templates, prompt libraries, and process maps
- Deliverable: Interim synopsis produced by Ithaka S+R

Phase 4: Reflection & Collective Analysis (Months 10–12)

- Analysis of successes, challenges, and cross-institutional insights
- Synthesis workshop to identify patterns and lessons learned

- Final deliverable: ran issue brief, webinar, or blog post-produced by Ithaka S+R to broadly dissipate the results of this cohort

Project Deliverables

- Shared documentation of pilot case studies highlighting KPIs and other strategic planning documents produced by participating institutions
- Ithaka S+R publication of findings
- Training and discussion around AI ethics, governance, and readiness
- Optional public webinar series or conference presentations

Institutional Commitment

Each local team will contribute approximately four weeks full-time equivalent over the year-long project. This includes periodically attending virtual cohort meetings, symposia, and workshops. Other project commitments include gathering and creating documentation related to their institution's policies and services, and creating and sharing materials to present outcomes to fellow cohort members.

At the conclusion of the project, each institution will have piloted new AI tools and will identify appropriate KPIs or OKRs for their libraries in the adoption of new tools to explore how best to define what constitutes successful implementation.

To defray the costs of coordinating the cohort, developing training materials, and conducting centralized research, each institution will make a cost-sharing contribution of $12,000 to the project. *AI in Action* will launch in late 2026. If your institution is interested in participating, please send an expression of interest to Tracy Bergstrom by December 1, 2026.

About Ithaka S+R

Through research, collaboration, and innovation, Ithaka S+R informs policy, guides strategies, and builds evidence-based tools to broaden access to postsecondary education, improve student and workforce outcomes, and advance scholarship. Ithaka S+R is part of ITHAKA, a nonprofit with a mission to improve access to knowledge and education for people around the world. We have a strong track record of working on strategy and leadership issues for research libraries across North America.