10 YEARS OF DATA SCIENCE IN ACTION

MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY
NATIONAL STRATEGIC PLANNING & ANALYSIS RESEARCH CENTER
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utilizes data science, the field of study that examines new methods for the use of data, to develop innovations that further human progress. NSPARC has several focuses within data science, including data analytics, predictive analytics, machine learning, artificial intelligence, system of systems, data governance, cybersecurity, cloud technology, and high-performance computing.

Known primarily for its work in support of smart government, NSPARC has achieved national prominence with its use of data science in economic development, workforce development, education, and delivery of human services at all levels of government.

NSPARC has extensive experience converting research and scholarship in any substantive area (e.g., health, energy, etc.) into the application of data science in every major area of enterprise software development, data security, and IT infrastructure, including:

» Case management system design and coding
» Mobile development
» Reporting and regulatory requirements gathering
» User experience and user interface design
» Electronic and digitized paper record handling
» Real-time consumption of third-party sources of information
» Interagency coordination systems
» Data security and monitoring
MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

OUR MISSION at Mississippi State University is codified as part of our longtime university seal in the words “Learning, Research, and Service.” Perhaps no academic component of the university exemplifies that commitment in a more tangible way than the National Strategic Planning and Analysis Research Center.

Over the last decade, NSPARC has proven to be a highly effective and highly visible research center that not only serves the state of Mississippi and our public system of institutions of higher learning but also provides nationally and globally relevant research that is redefining how data contribute to public policy and decision-making.

The forward-thinking nature of NSPARC’s work dovetails nicely with MSU’s current academic trajectory as Mississippi’s leading research university—one in which more than half of all funded academic research accomplished in Mississippi universities is conducted on our campus.

NSPARC’s work doesn’t speak simply to the volume of university research at MSU; it speaks to the quality of that research as well. Data-driven solutions to complex problems have become an academic expectation necessary to move the public policy needle. I am extremely pleased with the confidence expressed in NSPARC’s work by our partners in local, state, and federal government entities and in the private sector.

I am proud to salute NSPARC on its 10th anniversary, and I invite you to examine the formidable role this center plays in MSU’s overall research infrastructure.

Mark Keenum
MESSAGE FROM THE VICE PRESIDENT

OUR COMMITMENT to impactful research at Mississippi State University is one that is demonstrable and visible in every division, college, and academic center on our campus. From MSU’s rich land-grant heritage as the “Agricultural and Mechanical College of the State of Mississippi” at its founding in 1878, our university has produced research that offers Mississippians better lives and enhanced economic circumstances.

From the university’s initial national renown in the field of seed technologies to its research for NASA on space shuttle missions, and from our groundbreaking research in aerodynamics for manned and unmanned flight in the 1940s to our recent designation as the Federal Aviation Administration’s National Center of Excellence for Unmanned Aircraft Systems, MSU has been at the forefront of significant research that fosters both economic development and an improved quality of life.

The National Strategic Planning and Analysis Research Center is one of the latest in a long line of accomplished academic centers at MSU that has drawn national acclaim. Over the last decade, NSPARC has emerged as one of the nation’s leading data-science centers—one that state government in Mississippi turns to for clear answers to complex questions. Increasingly, NSPARC is attracting attention from across the United States.

NSPARC “rings true” as a cornerstone of MSU’s ongoing research renaissance, and I join in this tribute to a decade of accomplishment and excellence.

[Signature]
MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

DR. MIMMO PARISI

NSPARC Executive Director
has always been that data can be an essential resource. But as with any great idea, it can take decades to achieve great success, and it takes the right people to make things possible. It’s been about 20 years since I started this effort with my student and, now, colleague Dr. Mike Taquino, and it’s been 10 years since our research center received its official name: NSPARC.

Our 10th anniversary as NSPARC is a great opportunity to thank everyone who realized that data can transform and drive human progress in Mississippi. It takes courage and faith to promote something that’s not mainstream and that calls for all of us to work together. Just as I am eternally grateful for the continued support of Mississippi State University and the hard work of all of the staff at NSPARC, I very much appreciate the people and leaders of this state for their commitment to a new way forward.

From the beginning, we wanted to tell a good story about this wonderful state, and we wanted to do this in a way that allows Mississippians and people in other states to recognize how far Mississippi has come—rather than defining it by its past.

NSPARC, along with the many people who have supported it, has demonstrated that Mississippi is a state of innovation and progress. It’s a place where people can live, work, and be proud. Mississippi is a national model for using data to improve education outcomes, prepare the workforce, help people find jobs, grow the economy, invest in early childhood, and so much more.

As such, we would like to extend our sincerest thanks to everyone who believed in NSPARC and who made a variety of nation-leading and award-winning data innovations possible in Mississippi. This book is for you.
NSPARC’S APPROACH
DATA SCIENCE
NSPARC is based on founder Dr. Mimmo Parisi’s distinct perspective on data. While the mainstream typically sees data as a byproduct of activities, Parisi views data as an asset that can play a critical role in business operations. NSPARC has always been driven by a question: how can you make data valuable to an organization or society at large?

The answer to that question is data science, a field that examines how data can be utilized. During NSPARC’s infancy, data science mainly focused on predictive analytics, which is a way to look at patterns and trends in order to make decisions. Part of NSPARC’s mission has been to expand this traditional role of data—to develop new methods to advance human progress.

Human progress can only be achieved, however, if you have a way to put the power of data into the hands of people. NSPARC does this through data innovations, which require four parts:

1. A new idea created through research and scholarship
2. A practical innovation, such as a mobile app
3. Access to real-time data in a secure manner
4. Public policy that embraces data use
Many government agencies in Mississippi have partnered with NSPARC to address a variety of important issues in the 21st century. These entities have also built and strengthened connections between each other in a focused effort to improve programs, services, and the economy. In addition to this unprecedented level of coordination in the state, stakeholders and leaders have fostered a culture where data, not personal beliefs, drive new ideas and innovation. As a result, Mississippi has become a national model for smart government.
GOOD STORIES ABOUT MISSISSIPPI
THE PEOPLE BEHIND NSPARC'S EVOLUTION
YEARS
10 YEARS OF DATA SCIENCE IN ACTION
Mississippi has become a national leader in workforce preparation. The federal Workforce Innovative and Opportunity Act called for every state to create a plan to help individuals get the services they need to become competitive in the labor market. With the help of NSPARC, Mississippi was the first state to submit its plan and to have it approved by the U.S. Department of Labor. The plan established a system that can place any job seeker on a customer-specific pathway to attain any education and training they might need to get a job. This system was possible thanks to an NSPARC-developed hub that collects and combines data from multiple state agencies.
THE PEOPLE BEHIND NSPARC'S EVOLUTION
YEARS
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HELPING PEOPLE FIND JOBS

Following Gov. Phil Bryant’s vision that everyone who wants a job should be able to find a job, Mississippi has empowered job seekers with the latest in data-driven technology from NSPARC. Mississippi Works is a web and mobile application that matches users with available jobs in the state based on the user’s educational and work background. The Mississippi Works system has received several honors, including a Digital Government Achievement Award, and has led to the creation of a similar system for Colorado.
Mississippi has the ability to connect specific individuals to potential jobs through real-time education and workforce training data generated by NSPARC. This model, called “Workforce on Demand,” significantly reduces the uncertainty of prospective businesses and gives Mississippi a competitive advantage over states with larger populations. With this model, Mississippi has convinced several top manufacturers, including Nissan, Toyota, Yokohama, and Continental, to build plants in the state.
Mississippi takes pride in its ongoing efforts to streamline and improve its services to low-income families. A new NSPARC-developed app called MyMDHS allows those who receive assistance from the Mississippi Department of Human Services to access their benefits information instantly through their smartphones. MDHS, along with the state community college system, is also implementing an innovative $20.5 million pilot program for food-stamp recipients. This program, designed and supported by NSPARC, places individuals on tailored education and training pathways so that they can pursue the jobs of their dreams.
MISSISSIPPI HAS REDEFINED HOW CITIZENS CAN REPORT SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE. THE MDCPS REPORT CHILD ABUSE APP, DEVELOPED BY NSPARC, COLLECTS ALL THE INFORMATION NEEDED TO INVESTIGATE CHILD ABUSE IN AN INTUITIVE AND TIME-SAVING FASHION. BEFORE THIS APP WAS RELEASED, REPORTING A SUSPECTED CASE OF CHILD ABUSE COULD TAKE 15 MINUTES OR LONGER. NOW, A REPORT CAN BE SENT IN ABOUT FIVE MINUTES, GREATLY INCREASING THE LIKELIHOOD THAT THE REPORTING PROCESS WILL BE COMPLETED AND THAT CHILDREN WILL GET THE PROTECTION THEY NEED.
Mississippi has garnered national spotlight for its all-encompassing approach to early childhood care and education. NSPARC has assisted the state with developing and implementing an early childhood plan that accounts for the well-being of the whole family. This state plan has received attention from policymakers in Washington, D.C., as well as groups like Save the Children. As testified by the Mississippi Superintendent of Education before the U.S. Congress, Mississippi meets all 10 quality standards for preschool, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research. The state’s many accomplishments in early childhood have been possible because of its focus on using data to align programs and services, an approach that NSPARC has fostered and continues to support.
Improving Education

Education stakeholders across Mississippi have embraced a culture where data are shared and used to support and evaluate various programs. LifeTracks, a state longitudinal data system developed and maintained by NSPARC, allows educators—whether from the K-12 system, community colleges, or universities—to drill down into county-, district-, and school-level data to answer policy-related questions. Such research enables schools to learn about what works, what doesn’t work, and what groups are affected. State leaders attribute various successes, such as Mississippi’s recent nation-leading gains in fourth-grade reading and math, to the data culture around LifeTracks.
THE PEOPLE BEHIND NSPARC'S EVOLUTION
YEARS
10 YEARS OF DATA SCIENCE IN ACTION
PRESERVING LIVES

As the opioid crisis continues to perplex the nation, NSPARC is working to find a data-driven solution to address the issue. With the use of machine-learning techniques, NSPARC is examining how data science can advance the use of Prescription Monitoring Program information to identify factors associated with overprescription of opioids. This effort will both inform public policy and lead to the development of a warning system for prevention of opioid abuse.
ENHANCING PUBLIC SAFETY

SPARC is now working to identify how data science can assist local law-enforcement agencies with meeting the requirements of the National Incident-Based Reporting System. This effort will result in far more detailed information on crime incidents, suspects, and victims and will set the stage for a more fluid exchange of information between departments at the local, regional, and federal levels. This project will help advance a nationwide data-driven initiative that will increase public safety.
THE PEOPLE BEHIND NSPARC’S EVOLUTION

Although this section cites many figures who have been important to our history as a research center, it would be impossible to name every person who has significantly contributed to the success of NSPARC. We know that thousands of people have helped the state come together and engage in data-driven initiatives. We sincerely thank all of you because we could not exist without you.

The Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning officially established NSPARC as a stand-alone research center in 2008. NSPARC was previously a research unit under Mississippi State University’s Social Science Research Center since 1998.
During fall 1998, Chris Christmas met Dr. Mimmo Parisi by chance. After some discussion, Christmas recognized that data expertise would be critical for assessing the effects of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act. He identified the need for innovative reports that would examine the populations most impacted by the reform. Thanks to the partnership between Parisi and Christmas, Mississippi State University was able to secure the first U.S. Department of Agriculture research initiative grant for scholarly work in state history. As a result, the state was able to meet federal reporting requirements and receive additional incentives for meeting and exceeding the expectations of the Welfare Reform Act. Christmas effectively jumpstarted Mississippi’s interest in the application of data science in state government, which led to the creation of LifeTracks, the most sophisticated state data system in the country.
“NSPARC’s approach to data is very exciting. Before NSPARC, we had a wealth of TANF and SNAP data, but the information wasn’t used much. NSPARC changed that and helped instill a different culture for policymaking and program evaluation.”

— Chris Christmas
George Schloegel
CHAIR (2004-2009)
STATE WORKFORCE INVESTMENT BOARD

After meeting Dr. Mimmo Parisi in 2000, George Schloegel immediately saw how data could be utilized to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of state programs. As a banker, he knew that one cannot afford to make a bad decision in business, so the importance of using data to make informed choices in government rang crystal clear to him. As chair of the State Workforce Investment Board, Schloegel established a committee dedicated to performance-based management and called on Parisi as a technical assistant. Never afraid of failure, Schloegel showed courage in placing his confidence in Parisi’s data-science approach.
“Traditionally, one of the most serious drawbacks to improved education and training is accountability and tracking of programs. Dr. Parisi and his team at MSU developed a program that gauges success and tracks results over time for classroom and training activities. There is an old axiom that states, ‘If you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it.’ Dr. Parisi’s program successfully measures it.”

— George Schloegel
In 2004, Haley Barbour was sworn into office as governor of Mississippi. Soon he signed into law the Mississippi Comprehensive Workforce Training and Education Consolidation Act, which aimed to integrate resources and programs and to assess the state’s return on investment for education and workforce initiatives. Barbour chose George Schloegel to be chair of the State Workforce Investment Board and charged the board with developing a performance-based management system. As part of this effort, Schloegel informed Barbour of how NSPARC could help him accomplish state goals. From that point forward, Barbour became a champion of using data science as a vehicle to improve workforce and education outcomes.
“When I was elected governor in 2003, Mississippi was still in a recession, and voters expected me to improve the economy and create more and better-paying jobs. At a summit before my inauguration, business leaders said improving the quality of our workforce was one of the top things state government should accomplish.

Today our state’s workforce is far superior for several reasons.

We created an aggressive State Workforce Investment Board and more than doubled what we spend at our community colleges on skills training. Just as importantly, we measured results to achieve accountability. NSPARC developed a system that tracks workforce training results, streamlines the process for posting and finding jobs, and enables the state to analyze data in real time to make fact-driven policy decisions about workforce training. This state-of-the-art data system has been used to attract economic development projects and to make better decisions about skills training and workforce development. Current industries use the system, the Mississippi Development Authority uses it, and prospective employers use it.

I applaud NSPARC for its important work to improve Mississippi’s economic outlook through increased accountability and strategic planning.”

– Haley Barbour
TOMMYE DALE FAVRE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (2004-2009)
MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT SECURITY

In 2004, Gov. Haley Barbour named Tommye Dale Favre the executive director of the Mississippi Department of Employment Security. Favre was charged with aligning components of the state’s workforce system to improve employment opportunities. After meeting with NSPARC, she recognized that workforce alignment was a data project, not an IT project. As a result, Favre and NSPARC laid the groundwork for a system that would later make Mississippi Works, an initiative of Gov. Phil Bryant, possible.
“In my tenure as executive director of the Mississippi Department of Employment Security, the agency was responsible for oversight of the State Workforce Investment Board. The data NSPARC provided allowed the board to make educated decisions regarding the allocation of workforce dollars. The data also held entities, which were vying for funding, accountable for their performance. Suddenly, Mississippi’s data system was in demand nationwide.”

— Tommye Dale Favre
Larry Otis, former mayor of Tupelo, played an early essential role in linking NSPARC to various state agencies. Otis served as chair of the accountability committee for the State Workforce Investment Board, and in that position he conveyed the value of data and articulated the expertise of NSPARC. He was able to build a consensus with state leaders around the notion that data are essential to aligning resources. He believed NSPARC could help transform the way that state entities work together.
“It was my honor to identify with NSPARC at an early point in the start-up and to see the potential that data could have on the citizens of Mississippi. We have to remember that improving the lives and work skills of all Mississippians will move our state to a higher standard of living and productivity. The ability to collect key data on Mississippi and its people has made the state a national leader in data system design. NSPARC is making a significant impact on the economic development of Mississippi and helping to shape policy in many state agencies and institutions. I am forever grateful for NSPARC’s leadership, especially Dr. Mimmo Parisi and his staff.”

— Larry Otis
Robert “Doc” Foglesong
President (2006-2008)
Mississippi State University

Former Mississippi State University president Robert “Doc” Foglesong was instrumental in helping NSPARC become a stand-alone research center. As a risk-taker, Foglesong appreciated NSPARC’s innovative approach and took a chance supporting something that some could not yet understand or explain. With the goal of “strategically winning” in mind, he identified NSPARC as a resource that could provide growth and opportunities for the university. Foglesong is also the reason that “N,” which stands for “national,” was added to “SPARC,” the center’s original name. Foglesong always envisioned NSPARC as a force that could impact the entire nation with its emphasis on practical data science.
“Innovation and success often start with a risk. NSPARC was an unusual proposition, but I knew it could help give Mississippi State University a broader reach in the state and in the country. After all these years, it’s impressive to see what NSPARC has accomplished, and it’s exciting to imagine what impact it can have even further into the future.”

— Robert “Doc” Foglesong
In his role as executive director of the Mississippi Community College Board, Dr. Eric Clark united Mississippi’s 15 community colleges on the importance of using data to improve workforce and education outcomes. As such, his leadership proved essential to helping NSPARC advance a data-science approach throughout Mississippi. Clark also played a pivotal role in promoting transparency in terms of sharing information on outcomes with the public.

Eric Clark becomes MCCB executive director.
“In the 21st century, our citizens are demanding government at all levels to be more efficient. Federal, state, and local resources are being stretched very, very thin. Reliable data and reliable data analysis are crucial to reaching our state’s goals. NSPARC can play a critical role in Mississippi’s future by measuring our challenges and measuring our progress in meeting them.”

– Eric Clark
PHIL BRYANT
GOVERNOR (2012-PRESENT)
MISSISSIPPI

When Gov. Phil Bryant delivered his inaugural speech in 2012, his main focus was that anyone who wants a job should be able to find a job. The question was how these jobs could be connected to the people seeking them. Bryant believed that NSPARC was the answer, and he trusted experts to bring their best efforts to the table and produce something that would transform the state. Through NSPARC, Bryant created Mississippi Works and one of the most advanced smart governments in the United States.
“The vision behind Mississippi Works is that every Mississippian, regardless of background, should have an opportunity to get a good job. NSPARC over at Mississippi State has brought us closer to that ideal through its approach to data science and technological innovation. We would not be where we are today without NSPARC’s help.”

— Phil Bryant
LAURIE SMITH
SENIOR POLICY ADVISOR (2012-PRESENT)
MISSISSIPPI GOVERNOR’S OFFICE

Driven by her passion to make a difference in the lives of children, Dr. Laurie Smith became familiar with the data science of NSPARC and realized it could serve as a means to improve the educational outcomes of children, ages 0 to 5. She also recognized how NSPARC could help connect the state early childhood system to the other educational systems in Mississippi, including K-12, community college, and university entities. Through data science, Smith seeks to promote a continuity of learning and services for children in a systematic way by monitoring program performance and child outcomes throughout the state.

Laurie Smith becomes senior policy advisor for Gov. Phil Bryant.
“NSPARC has improved the lives of children and families in Mississippi by providing the data used to craft public policy that governs education, workforce training, and economic development.

As a result of education reforms informed by the NSPARC-developed Lifetracks system, Mississippi fourth-grade students were the only ones in the country to demonstrate significant increases in 2015 NAEP scores for both reading and math, the high school graduation rate has reached an all-time high, the average ACT score is on the rise, and Mississippi ranks No. 4 in the nation for number of National Board Certified teachers.”

— Laurie Smith
MARK HENRY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (2012-PRESENT)
MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT SECURITY

As a leader dedicated to digital governance and the improvement of Mississippi’s workforce system, Mark Henry has utilized NSPARC to bring his imagination to life through data science and technology. As executive director of the Mississippi Department of Employment Security, he has led the effort to augment the Mississippi Works system to better serve job seekers across the state. With the help of NSPARC’s development team, Henry created MS Grad Jobs, a system that matches college graduates with jobs that align with their educational credentials. He was also chair of the State Workforce Investment Board when Mississippi and NSPARC developed the state’s Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act plan, which was the first in the country to be approved by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Mark Henry becomes MDES executive director.
“From creating our cutting-edge job-match technology to developing our innovative WIOA state plan, NSPARC does a superb job of providing Mississippi policymakers with the reliable data and analytical tools they need to make informed decisions about the future of our state.”

— Mark Henry
An ally of NSPARC since the Barbour administration, Jay Moon knew that data would complete the puzzle of workforce development in Mississippi. Through his leadership as chair of the State Workforce Investment Board, Moon demonstrated how making workforce available to businesses was just as important as training the workforce. He would go on to become chair of the State Longitudinal Data System Governing Board, which institutionalized the NSPARC-developed reporting system, LifeTracks.
“NSPARC’s brand of data science has significantly impacted the manufacturing landscape of Mississippi. The evidence is in the world-class corporate businesses, such as Nissan, Toyota, Yokohama, and Continental, that have located or expanded here in the last several years.”

— Jay Moon
ANDREA MAYFIELD
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (2015-PRESENT)
MISSISSIPPI COMMUNITY COLLEGE BOARD

Dr. Andrea Mayfield has been instrumental in furthering NSPARC as a mechanism to connect education to workforce and economic development in Mississippi. Specifically, she has realized the need to align community college training programs with specific industry needs. As part of this goal, she sees the value of utilizing data to assess training programs in order to ensure that community colleges are equipping the workforce with the skills that existing and new industry jobs require.
“Dreamers have vision beyond the ordinary and the will to make those dreams become reality. NSPARC, under Dr. Parisi’s leadership, has led the way here in Mississippi with the development of Mississippi’s state longitudinal data system. This visionary work makes Mississippi the leader for others in the nation to attempt to follow. Dr. Parisi and his team are shining examples of the talent we have in Mississippi. Utilizing the SLDS and the unique talents of the NSPARC team positively impacts how we educate, train, and connect people to work.”

— Andrea Mayfield
JOHN DAVIS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (2016-PRESENT)
MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

As executive director of the Mississippi Department of Human Services, John Davis has strived to change the culture of his organization, often with the assistance of NSPARC. He approaches government services as something that can have a meaningful impact on the entire family rather than as punctuated programs that end the moment eligibility is completed. With data science through NSPARC, Davis has formulated innovative methods to build a more self-sufficient future for families across Mississippi.
“NSPARC has been a significant partner for the Mississippi Department of Human Services in developing and implementing technology to provide connectivity for the gen+ approach over the past several years. The gen+ approach starts with MDHS participant and family assessments, which lead to a holistic way of assisting families along their pathway to self-sufficiency and independence. Referrals begin in the county MDHS offices and other internal divisions, as well as external partners such as Families First for Mississippi. As a social science leader and developer of cutting-edge technology, NSPARC has certainly positively impacted human services for generations of Mississippians.”

— John Davis
THANK YOU TO EVERYONE AT NSPARC

OVER THE YEARS, numerous people have come and gone at NSPARC, and every last one of them played a unique role in pushing the research center and the state of Mississippi forward. While I personally recognize the value of every single person, there is not enough space in this book that would allow me to articulate how each individual has contributed to the success of NSPARC. But I can say, from the bottom of my heart, that it has been a tremendous honor to work with so many talented, committed, and hard-working people. You deserve all the credit I can give you. Thank you for all that you have done to advance research and scholarship and to improve the well-being of the state, the region, and the country.

[Handwritten signature]