AI-Powered Materials Discovery

Opportunities, Challenges, and a Vision for Collaboration

Workshop at Great Plains

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Dongming Mei

University of South Dakota

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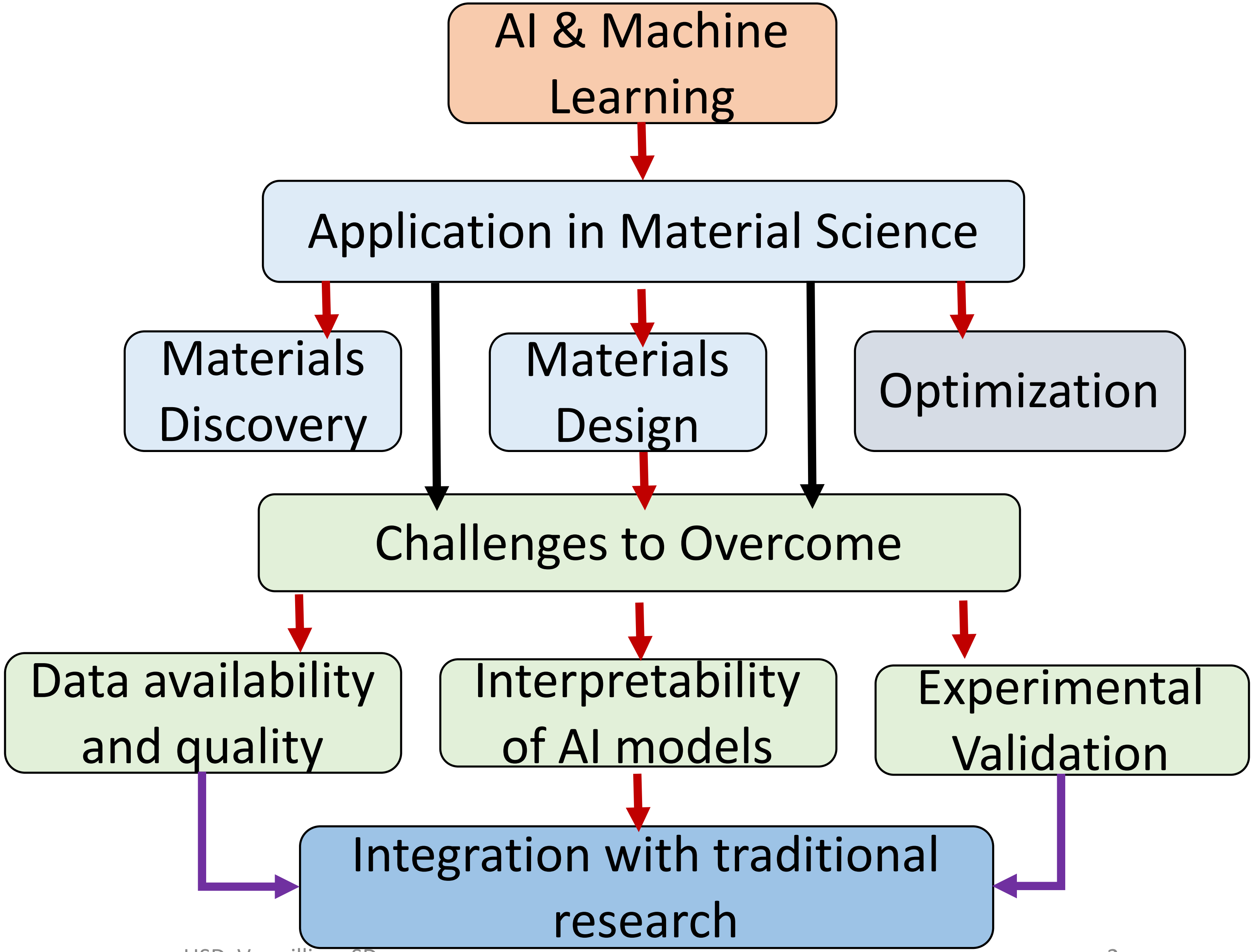
Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming materials research by accelerating discovery, design, and optimization of materials. However, several challenges must be addressed to fully leverage AI's potential in this domain.



Key Challenges in AI-Driven Materials Research

1. **Data Availability and Quality**
   - **Limited Experimental Data**: High-quality datasets are scarce due to time-intensive synthesis and characterization.
   - **Data Inconsistency**: Different labs use varied techniques and formats, making integration difficult.
   - **Small Datasets & Extrapolation Issues**: AI models struggle with generalization due to limited training data.

Example:
The Materials Project and AFLOW are two major open-access databases that provide computational materials data. However, experimental validation is often required to confirm AI-predicted materials.

Key Challenges in AI-Driven Materials Research

2. Computational and Theoretical Challenges

- **Computational Cost**: AI models often depend on expensive simulations such as Density Functional Theory (DFT) and Molecular Dynamics (MD).
- **Bridging Multi-Scale Modeling**: AI needs to integrate atomic, molecular, microstructural, and macroscopic data.
- **Explainability & Interpretability**: Many deep learning models act as black boxes, making it difficult to extract meaningful insights.

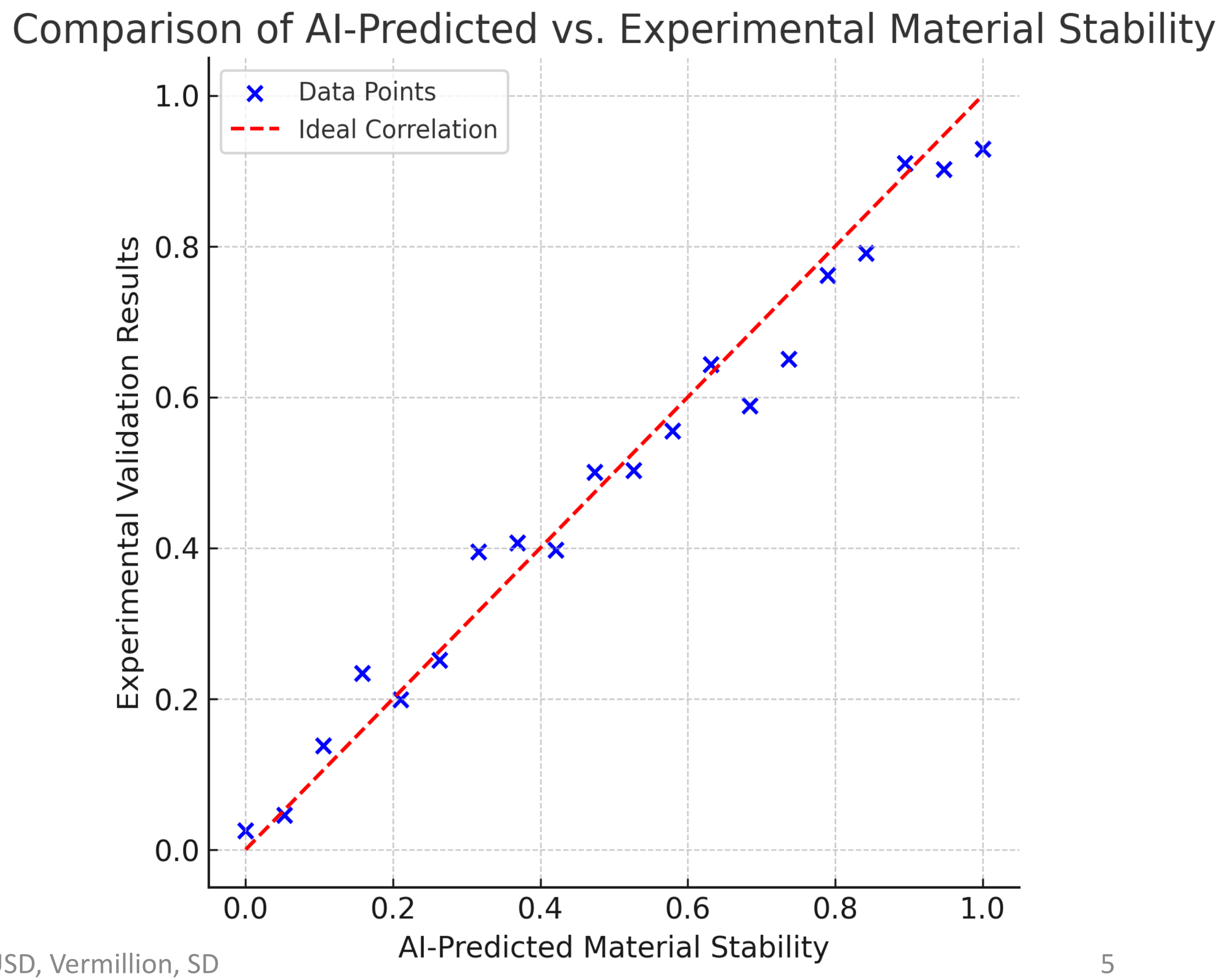
Example:

Google's DeepMind used AI to predict the stability of over **2.2 million new materials**, demonstrating the power of machine learning in computational materials science.

Key Challenges in AI-Driven Materials Research

3. Model Generalization and Transferability

- **Generalization to New Materials**: AI models trained on known materials may not predict novel compositions accurately.
- **Transfer Learning Limitations**: Pre-trained models may fail when applied to different materials systems.



Key Challenges in AI-Driven Materials Research

4. Experimental Validation and Integration

- **Gap Between Prediction and Experiment**: AI-driven predictions need validation through costly and time-consuming synthesis.
- **Automating Synthesis and Characterization**: AI needs integration with robotic synthesis and high-throughput experimental validation.

Example:
At **Northwestern University**, the A-Lab (Autonomous Lab) integrates AI with robotics to autonomously conduct and optimize materials synthesis experiments.

Key Challenges in AI-Driven Materials Research

5. Data Security, Sharing, and Standardization

- **Data Silos & Proprietary Restrictions**: Industry and research institutions often restrict access to materials data.
- **Lack of Standardized Datasets**: Variability in data structures across repositories like Materials Project, AFLOW, and NOMAD.
- **Ethical and Security Issues**: AI could discover dual-use materials with potential security concerns.

Example:
The FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) principles are increasingly being adopted to standardize materials data.

Key Challenges in AI-Driven Materials Research

6. AI Model Development and Selection

- **Choosing the Right Model**: Different problems require distinct AI approaches (deep learning, reinforcement learning, Bayesian models).
- **Bias in Training Data**: Models trained on biased datasets may fail to predict underrepresented materials.

Example:
Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) have been successfully used in materials informatics to predict **crystal structures and electronic properties**.

Key Challenges in AI-Driven Materials Research

7. Collaboration Between AI and Domain Experts

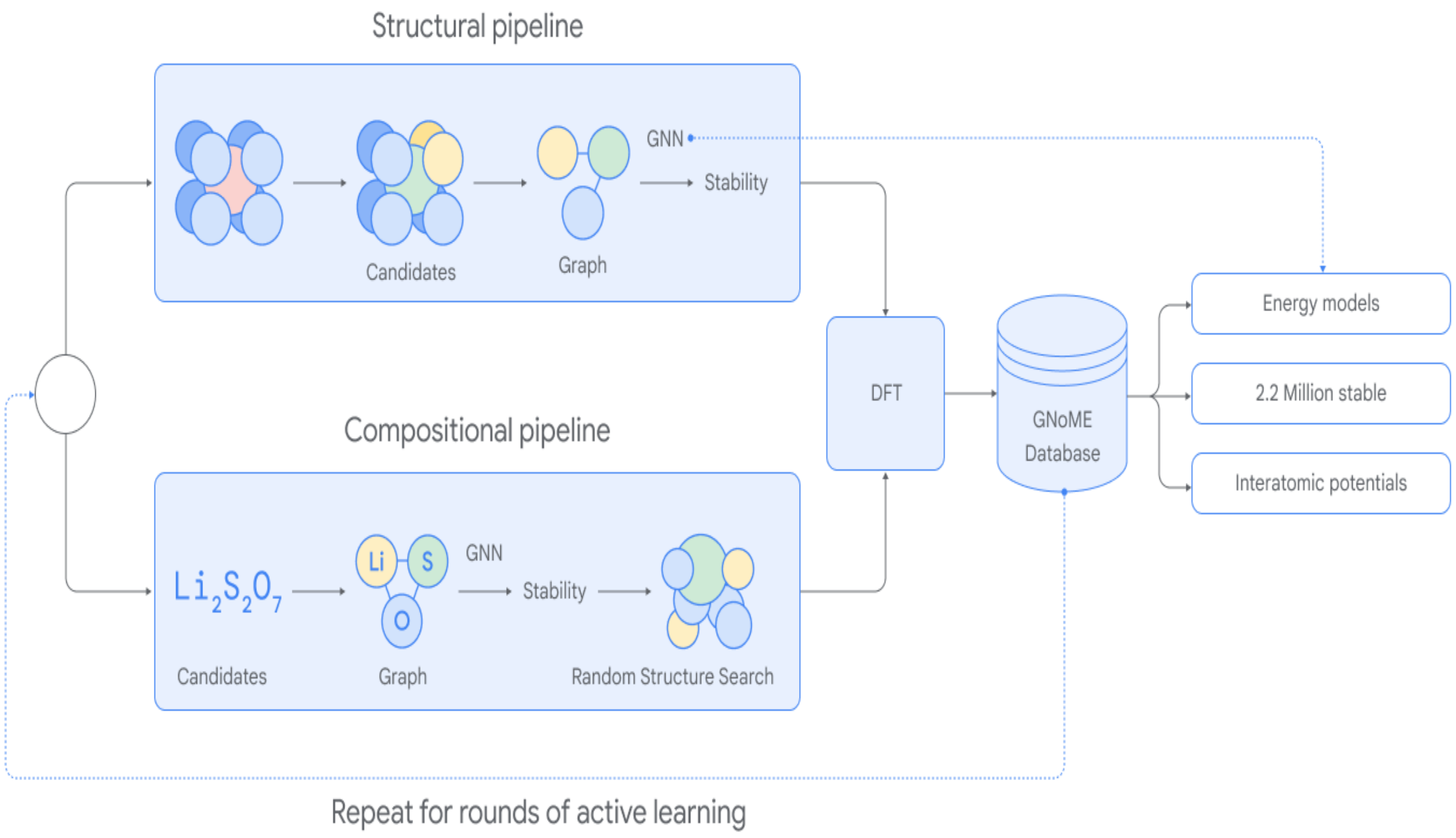
- **Lack of AI Expertise Among Materials Scientists**: Many researchers lack familiarity with AI/ML methods.
- **Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration**: Effective research requires collaboration between materials scientists, AI engineers, and experimentalists.

Example: Establishing Regional Collaborations, such as forming a new research network in the Great Plains.

Examples of AI Applications in Materials Science

1. AI in Materials Discovery

- **Example**: DeepMind's AI system discovered new inorganic materials using deep learning and crystal structure prediction.
- **Impact**: Accelerates the identification of novel materials for energy storage and semiconductors.

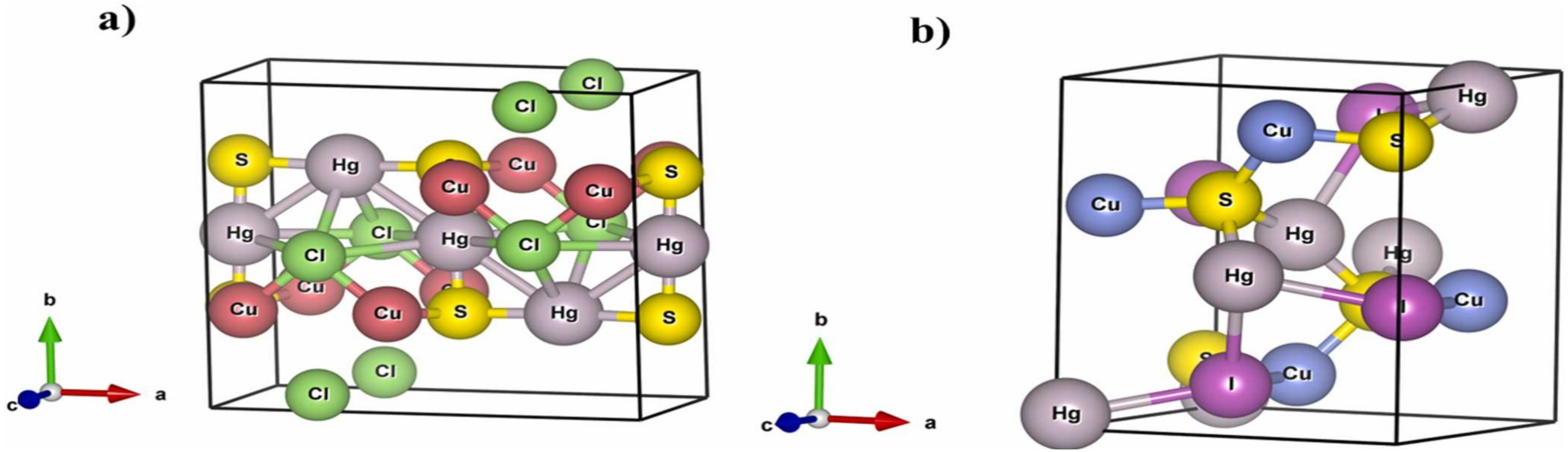


Nathan J. Szymanski, et al., Nature 624, 86 – 91 (2023)

Examples of AI Applications in Materials Science

2. Predicting Material Properties

- **Example**: AI models trained on DFT data predict electronic, mechanical, and thermal properties of materials.
- **Impact**: Reduces computational costs by orders of magnitude compared to traditional quantum simulations.



M. Hariharan and R.D.Eithiraj, materialstoday Communications, V 43, 111705 (2025)

Examples of AI Applications in Materials Science

3. AI-Driven Synthesis Optimization

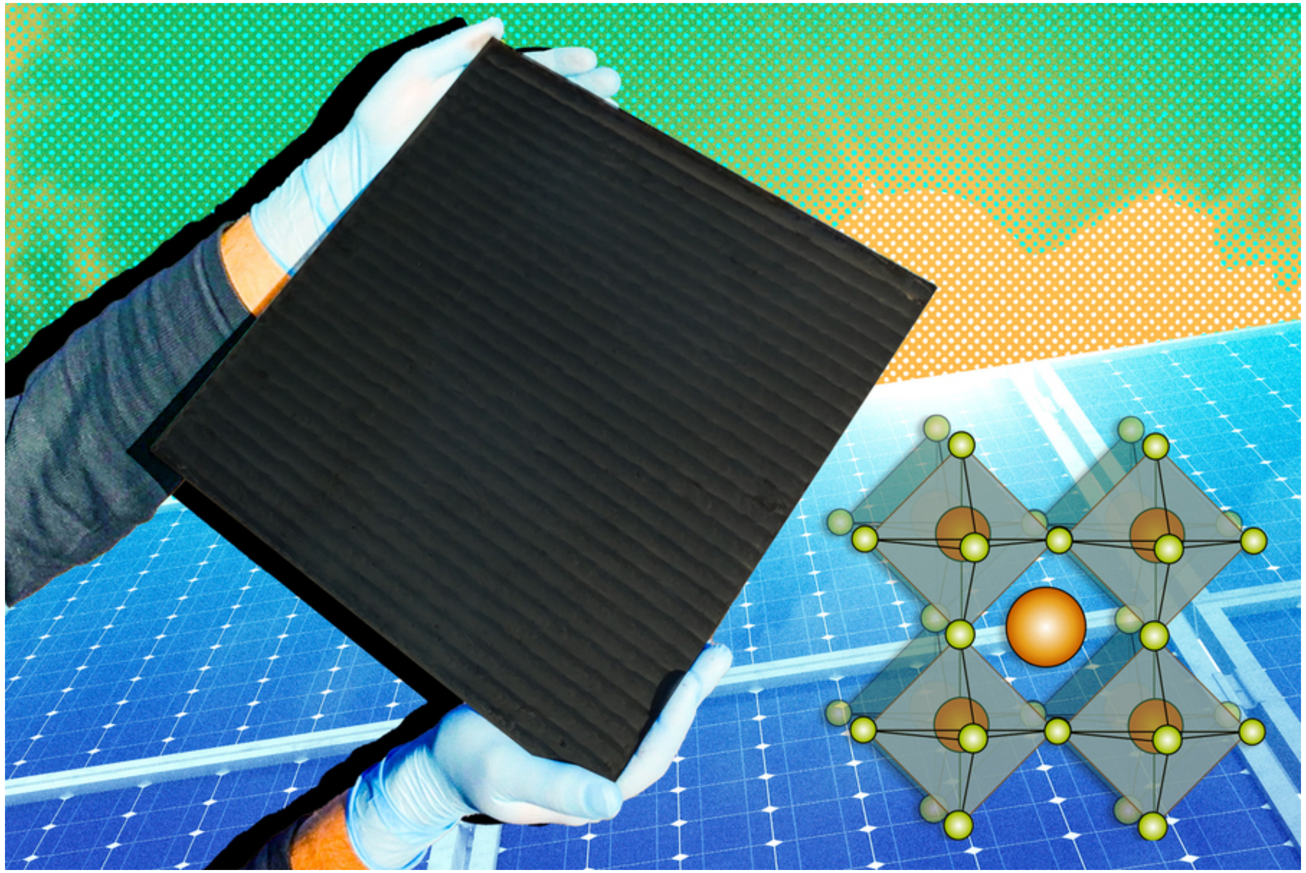
- **Example**: Autonomous labs like the A-Lab at Northwestern University use AI-driven robots for self-optimizing synthesis experiments.
- **Impact**: Speeds up the experimental process, reducing material waste and improving reproducibility.

Northwestern Mechanical Engineering

Examples of AI Applications in Materials Science

4. High-Throughput Screening

- **Example**: AI-based generative models suggest promising organic photovoltaic (OPV) molecules for solar cells.
- **Impact**: Reduces the need for trial-and-error experimentation in organic electronics.

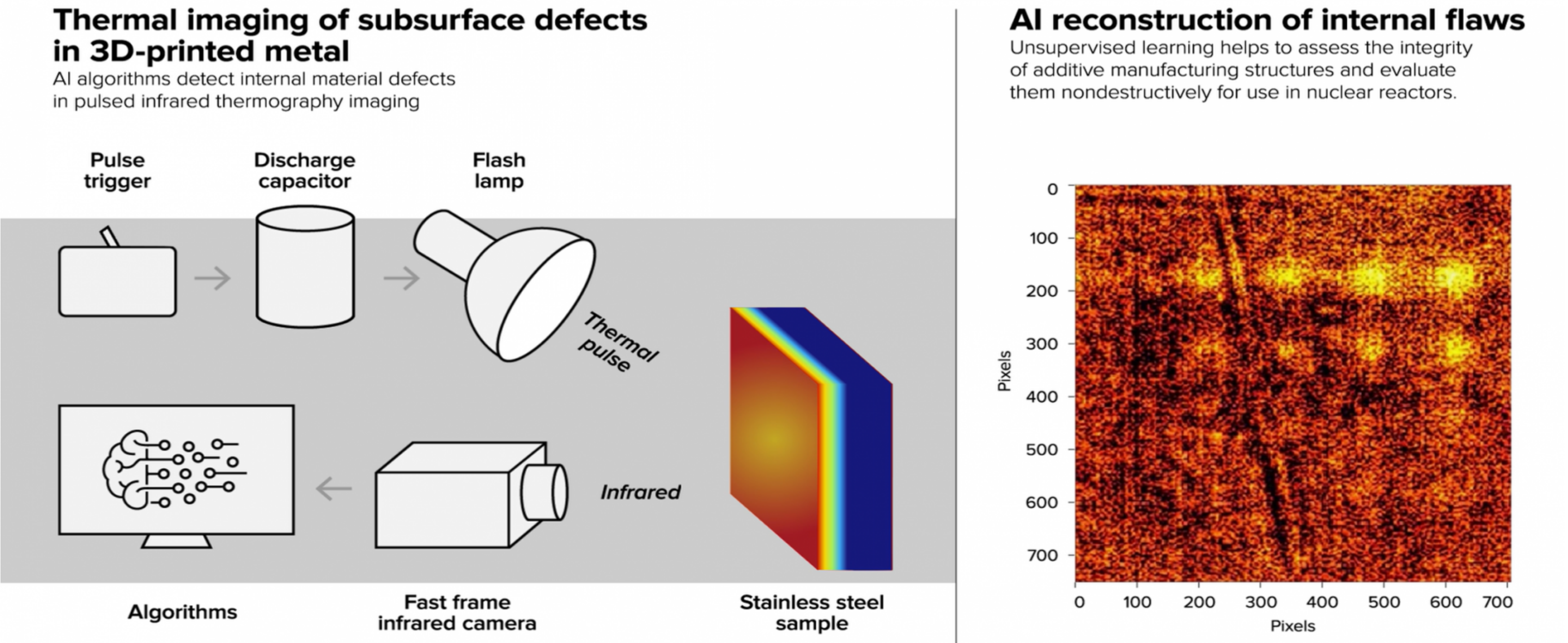


MIT News: Engineers enlist AI to help scale up advanced solar cell manufacturing

Examples of AI Applications in Materials Science

5. Defect Detection and Materials Characterization

- **Example**: AI-enhanced scanning electron microscopy (SEM) and X-ray diffraction (XRD) identify defects in materials at the nanoscale.
- **Impact**: Improves manufacturing quality control in semiconductors and superconductors.



Potential Solutions and Future Directions

- **Expand Open-Access Datasets**: Support initiatives like Materials Project, NOMAD, and AFLOW.
- **Develop Explainable AI (XAI) Models**: Improve interpretability for scientific discovery.
- **Integrate AI with Robotics & Automation**: Use autonomous labs for real-time validation.
- **Standardize Data Formats**: Follow FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) principles.

Example:
AI-driven inverse design methods, where desired material properties are specified first, and AI searches for candidate materials that match those specifications.

Goals of the Workshop

- Build interdisciplinary collaborations
  - Foster partnerships across materials science, AI, physics, biology, chemistry, and engineering to tackle complex challenges through joint projects and shared expertise.
- Establish shared data and model standards
  - Promote best practices for data sharing, model reproducibility, and open-access infrastructure to enable effective collaboration and benchmarking.
- Explore funding and project opportunities
  - Identify aligned federal and state funding calls and support team formation for multi-institutional proposals and strategic research initiatives.
- Promote regional innovation in materials discovery
  - Position the Great Plains as a hub for AI-driven materials innovation by leveraging local strengths, building industry ties, and investing in workforce development and education.

Building the Future Together

- Shared infrastructure for data/model exchange
  - Build open, interoperable platforms for sharing materials datasets and AI models to enable collaborative and reproducible research.
- Train AI-literate materials scientists
  - Equip researchers with AI and data science skills through interdisciplinary training, workshops, and curriculum integration.
- Leverage regional strengths for national leadership
  - Unite local expertise in manufacturing, energy, and quantum materials to position the Great Plains as a national leader in AI-driven discovery and education.

Conclusion

- While AI holds immense promise in materials science, addressing challenges related to **data quality, model generalization, computational costs, and experimental validation** is crucial. Future breakthroughs will require strong **collaborations between AI researchers and materials scientists**, improved datasets, and automation technologies.
- Equally important is **the development of a skilled workforce through high-quality AI education and training programs** that equip the next generation of scientists and engineers with interdisciplinary expertise in AI and materials science.