



EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

Research Strategic Plan

FY2027 – FY2031

Prepared by the Research Strategic Planning Task Force

Co-Chairs: Drs. Saurabh P. Mehta and Pamela J. Mims

Executive Summary

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) is at a pivotal moment in the evolution of its research, scholarship, and creative activity enterprise, hereafter referred to as research. Over the past decade, the university has experienced substantial growth in research funding, infrastructure, and scholarly activity, positioning ETSU as a rising regional public research institution. At the same time, changes in the national research landscape, including the expansion of artificial intelligence, data-driven methods, and interdisciplinary and translational approaches, require a renewed and forward-looking strategy.

This Research Strategic Plan (RSP) for FY2027–FY2031 establishes a clear and cohesive vision for ETSU’s research future. The plan reaffirms the university’s commitment to advancing knowledge, strengthening regional prosperity, and improving community well-being through research, scholarship, and creative activity. Central to this vision is the adoption of a refined institutional identity: ETSU as a **premier regional public research university**, recognized not only for research funding and rankings, but also for meaningful impact within the region and beyond.

The plan is organized around four strategic pillars:

- (1) Research Identity and Vision;
- (2) Infrastructure, Systems, and Investment;
- (3) Enhancing Enrollment and Student Success Through Research; and
- (4) External Engagement, Innovation, and Partnerships.

Together, these pillars provide a comprehensive framework to guide institutional priorities, strengthen research capacity, and ensure alignment with ETSU’s mission and regional context.

Key priorities outlined in this plan include leveraging existing areas of strength and establishing clearly defined research emphasis areas, strengthening research infrastructure across the sponsored project lifecycle, expanding student engagement in research, and building more coordinated and impactful external partnerships. The plan also emphasizes strategic investment in research development, compliance infrastructure, clinical and applied research capacity, and systems that support collaboration and visibility.

By 2031, ETSU aims to achieve measurable growth in research expenditures, increase its national visibility among regional public universities, expand student participation in research across disciplines, and deepen partnerships that drive innovation and community impact. Importantly, this plan positions research not as a standalone activity, but as an integrated driver of student success, workforce development, and regional thriving.

Through intentional investment, building on recent growth and existing strengths, coordinated infrastructure, and a clearly articulated identity, ETSU is well-positioned to advance its role as a leader among regional public research universities and to deliver meaningful impact for the communities it serves.

I. Context for a New Research Strategic Plan

The national research landscape is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI)¹, the expansion of data-driven methods², and a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary and translational research^{3,4}. As a public university, ETSU strives to catalyze innovation, strengthen regional prosperity, and advance community well-being through research, scholarship, and creative activity.

ETSU's Research Landscape

Research has long been central to ETSU's mission, with scholarly activity contributing to the public good since the institution's founding in 1911. Importantly, while the word 'research' is used throughout this report, the task force is defining research broadly to include traditional academic research, scholarship, creative activity, applied inquiry, community-based and clinical research, translational work, and innovation. Since 2015, when the last research strategic plan was crafted, ETSU's research and sponsored programs awards, expenditures, and identity have changed remarkably. ETSU transitioned from a doctoral research university (i.e., R3) to a doctoral research university - high research (i.e., R2) in 2018. Sponsored awards have increased from \$38.4M to \$65-70M annually, and research expenditures have increased from \$6.9M in 2015 to an anticipated \$51.6M in 2025⁹, a 650% increase. The institution's National Science Foundation (NSF) Higher Education Research and Development (HERD) ranking has increased over 120 positions⁹, placing ETSU among the top 10% of regional public institutions. Succinctly, the past decade has been one marked by positive momentum in terms of research fiscal metrics and rankings at ETSU.

While the institution should be proud of and celebrate a decade of success, the task force perceives that, building on this strong foundation, ETSU has further opportunities to contribute to the region, state, nation, and globe through research. Regional public universities like ETSU are well-positioned to advance their missions by integrating research, teaching, and community service, as outlined by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)⁵ and supported by national benchmarking data on regional public institutions¹¹. In our context, research continues to strengthen the extent to which the university meets its mission, positively contribute to student recruitment and success, deepen community engagement, improve regional health, and broadly benefit the public good.

II. Charge and Scope of the Research Strategic Planning Task Force

Charge from University Leadership

The RSP Task Force was convened by university leadership and charged with developing a comprehensive five-year strategic plan for research, scholarship, and creative activity at ETSU. The charge directed the task force to articulate a clear institutional research vision, identify long-term goals, and recommend key strategies to guide growth, investment, and implementation. Where appropriate, the task force was also asked to consider fiscal implications and practical considerations related to the execution and sustainability of recommended strategies.

The charge identified four areas for the task force:

1. **ETSU's Research Vision and Identity** –
 - Reevaluate ETSU's premier R2 research vision and brand strategy in light of changes to the Carnegie Classification and considering the university's mission and vision.
 - Identify ETSU's core research strengths and emerging opportunities. Recommend five priority areas for strategic emphasis and investment.
2. **Strengthen Infrastructure and Processes** –
 - Identify opportunities to optimize institutional research infrastructure, including pre-through post-award research support, research compliance operations, research policies, and central vs. decentralized infrastructure.

- Recommend strategies to expand ETSU’s clinical research and clinical trial infrastructure and operations.
- 3. **Enhancing Enrollment and Student Success Through Research –**
 - Identify strategies to enhance the role of research in undergraduate and graduate enrollment, recruitment, and retention.
 - Recommend strategies to bolster student engagement in research and graduate stipend competitiveness.
- 4. **External Engagement, Innovation, and Partnerships –**
 - Identify opportunities to increase research- and innovation-related partnerships with industry, alumni, and philanthropic supporters.
 - Recommend strategies to build on ETSU’s assets by fostering strong partnerships across the Research Corporation, the Office of Advancement, the Office of Community Engagement, the Center for Global Engagement, and the ETSU Alumni Association, and the Office of the Vice Provost for Research.

III. Process and Methodology

The RSP Task Force was led by two co-chairs, Drs. Saurabh P. Mehta and Pamela J. Mims, who guided the overall planning process, facilitated weekly task force meetings, coordinated subgroup work, and ensured alignment with the charge from university leadership. The process included 49 stakeholder group meetings and four campus town halls. Stakeholder meetings engaged college leadership, university administration, department leadership, student groups, research support units, and research centers. Input from these sessions and the subgroup white papers informed the draft strategic plan.

Task force members were organized into four subgroups aligned with the focus areas identified in the charge. The task force met weekly, and subgroups worked independently as needed. Each subgroup developed a white paper corresponding to its assigned area, which was submitted by December 22, 2025. The task force co-chairs synthesized feedback from the white papers, stakeholder group meetings, and town halls to draft the RSP. The preliminary RSP was reviewed by the task force and presented to the president and provost for review and input. Moreover, the taskforce provided a final endorsement of the RSP. The final approved version of the RSP was released for implementation for FY 2027-2031.

Taskforce Members (listed alphabetically)

Dr. Amber Arsenault, College of Nursing
 Dr. Biju Bajracharya, College of Business and Technology
 Dr. Joe Bidwell, College of Arts and Sciences
 Dr. Stacy Brown, Gatton College of Pharmacy, Council of Chairs Representative
 Dr. Debbie Byrd, Gatton College of Pharmacy
 Dr. Quincy Byrdsong, Ballad Health
 Dr. Karen Carver, College of Nursing
 Mr. Anthony Cuzzo, Graduate Student, Quillen College of Medicine
 Ms. Wendy Eckert, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs Administration
 Dr. Cerrone Foster, Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities
 Dr. Daniel Gahreman, College of Health Sciences
 Dr. Paul Garton, Clemmer College of Education and Human Development

Dr. Justin Gass, Quillen College of Medicine
Dr. Meredith Ginley, College of Arts and Sciences
Dr. Nick Hagemeyer, Office of the Vice Provost for Research
Dr. Amal Khoury, College of Public Health
Dr. Stephen Marshall, ETSU Research Corporation
Dr. Brian Maxson, College of Arts and Sciences
Dr. Saurabh Mehta, College of Health Sciences (Co-Chair)
Mr. Michael Meit, College of Public Health
Dr. Pamela Mims, Clemmer College of Education and Human Development (Co-Chair)
Dr. Jonathan Moorman, Quillen College of Medicine
Ms. Jacy Richardson, College of Business and Technology
Ms. Ashley Sergiadis, Sherrod Library
Ms. Shawnee Shuler, Division of Business and Finance
Mr. Jonathon Taylor, College of Arts and Sciences

Data Sources and Synthesis

The task force utilized multiple sources to gather and triangulate the data. These sources included campus and community listening sessions, one-on-one stakeholder meetings, input from undergraduate and graduate student groups, and contextual review of peer-reviewed and gray literature. Conversations during stakeholder meetings were guided by a standard questionnaire that was reviewed and approved by the task force. Subsequently, a structured synthesis approach was adopted to integrate listening data and subgroup white papers into a coherent strategic framework. Common themes, points of alignment, and areas of divergence were identified across data sources through iterative discussion and review. Emphasis was placed on identifying strategies that addressed cross-cutting needs while allowing for disciplinary variation.

A qualitative methodologist analyzed the data from all the sources using MAXQDA¹⁴ to identify themes. Findings were organized by the four charge areas and compiled into a master matrix by the co-chairs. Subgroups completed their work independently and met as needed to coordinate and synthesize their analyses. Institutional data (e.g., HERD, grant trends, student data) were consulted as needed to clarify or contextualize findings.

Implementation of this plan will follow a phased and prioritized approach over the five-year period. Early efforts (Years 1–2) will focus on strengthening coordination, clarifying roles, and building on existing infrastructure. Subsequent phases (Years 3–5) will emphasize targeted expansion, scaling of successful initiatives, and strategic investment aligned with institutional capacity and available resources. This approach is intended to ensure that progress is both sustainable and responsive to evolving opportunities and constraints.

IV. Focus Areas and Action Framework

Pillar 1: Research Identity & Vision

What We Learned

Listening sessions and the Vision and Identity white paper revealed a strong desire for a more clearly defined and cohesive research identity that reflects ETSU's strengths, mission, and regional context. These perspectives build on a foundation of existing institutional strengths

across biomedical and clinical research, community-engaged scholarship, and emerging areas of innovation such as data science, artificial intelligence, and applied technology. Stakeholders consistently emphasized a shift from a narrow rural health focus to a broader, asset-based framework of Rural Thriving, one that integrates health, education, economic vitality, culture, innovation, and regional resilience.

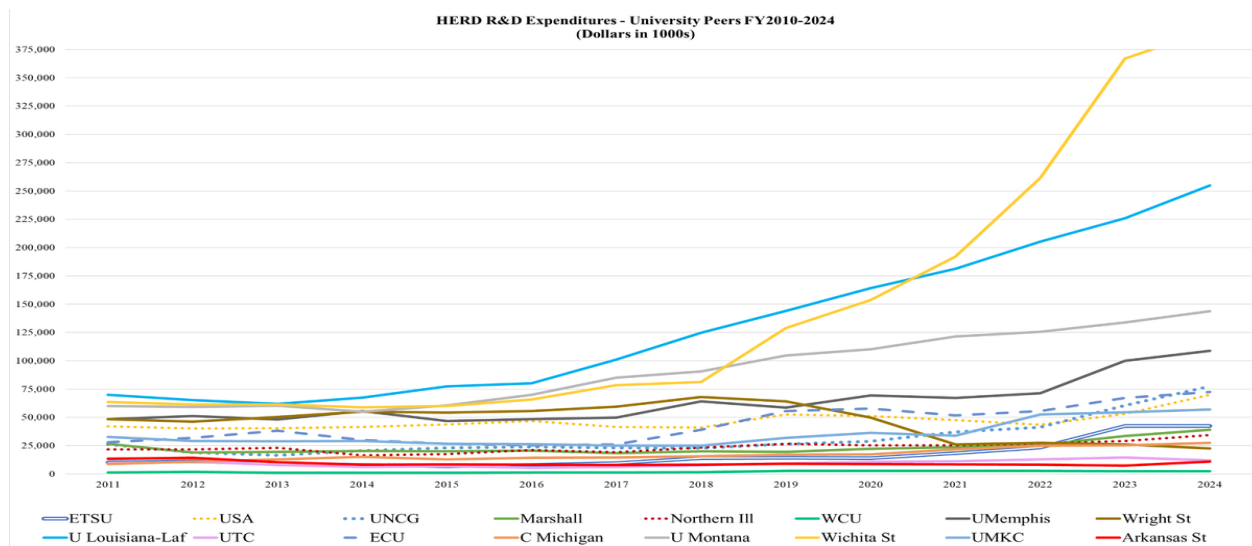
Participants also highlighted the importance of identifying a limited number of signature emphasis areas to strengthen visibility and guide investment, while ensuring the framework remains inclusive, interdisciplinary, and flexible to adapt to emerging trends (e.g., AI), align with evolving funding priorities, and support research that advances ETSU's mission. There was broad recognition of existing strengths in biomedical and clinical research, growing momentum in emerging technologies such as AI and data science, and a strong call to elevate the arts, humanities, and creative scholarship as central to research identity, storytelling, and public impact.

At the same time, faculty expressed concern about potential exclusion, underscoring the need for a research identity that is broad enough to include diverse scholarly contributions while still providing strategic focus. Overall, stakeholders called for an identity that is both distinct and adaptable, one that is capable of guiding institutional priorities while supporting innovation, collaboration, and emerging opportunities.

Research Vision

ETSU's current research vision – that the university be recognized, through funding and program rankings, as one of the premier R2 research universities in the nation – originated from the work of the Committee for 125: Chapter 2 (125.2)⁷ in 2021 and 2022. The [Carnegie Classification](#) research designation (i.e., R1, R2, R3) is commonly used by universities that conduct research as a signal of research strength. When the 125.2 report was published, ETSU was an R2 institution using the classification scheme in place at the time. While *premier* was not defined in 125.2, to become a premier R2 in terms of research funding was certainly aspirational. The annually reported HERD data is the primary source of information for institutional comparisons. ETSU's reported HERD research expenditures in FY20 were \$13.9M (**Figure 1**). Using research expenditures required to be in the top 20% and top 10% of R2 institutions as a proxy for premier, ETSU would need to grow research expenditures to approximately \$70M to be in the top 20% of R2s and \$110M to be in the top 10% of R2s in FY20.

Figure 1. HERD Expenditures for ETSU FY 2010-2024



In 2023, the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Carnegie Foundation) announced there would be significant changes made to research classifications of institutions of higher education beginning in 2025¹⁰. While the methodology historically used to determine the threshold between R1 and R2 institutions was multifactorial and complex, the threshold, and hence the R1 or R2 designation, now is determined by two variables: 1) research expenditures of at least \$50M annually as reported in HERD data; and 2) production of at least 70 research doctorates annually as reported in IPEDS data. ETSU consistently graduates 130-140 research doctorates per year; therefore, this requirement to be classified as an R1 institution is already met. In February 2025, [the new classifications were released](#) using FY23 data. In FY23, ETSU reported \$42.3M in research expenditures (**Figure 1**) and the production of approximately 140 research doctorates. Since research expenditures were below the \$50M threshold, ETSU was classified as an R2 institution. FY24 research expenditures were reported as \$42.5M (**Figure 1**). However, since the data were reported, the task force has learned that the FY24 number underreported ETSU's institutional research expenditures. ETSU's FY25 HERD expenditures reported to NSF in February 2026 were \$51.6M. While classifications will only be updated on a three-year cycle, ETSU is at the threshold of R1 versus R2 status. Given that the classification system on which ETSU's current research vision is based has changed significantly, and given increases in research expenditures, it is prudent to evaluate and potentially update the current premier R2 vision.

Building on ETSU's recent growth in research capacity and visibility, and in response to changes in the Carnegie Classification of research universities, as well as to better embrace ETSU's regional place and mission, the task force recommends adopting the following vision: **ETSU is recognized, through funding, rankings, and impact, as one of the premier regional public research universities in the nation.** The new vision statement emphasizes scholarly quality and reputation, and regional relevance. It also eliminates dependence on classification metrics that shift over time. While premier regional public does not tie ETSU's identity to a ranking or designation, the task force recommends giving attention to ETSU's HERD rank among regional publics as defined by both the [Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges \(ARRC\)](#) and the AASCU. Using FY23 HERD and AARC data, ETSU is currently ranked 46th out of 474 regional public colleges and universities (RPCU¹¹) in terms of research expenditures. Eight of ETSU's institutional peers are ranked higher than ETSU, including Wichita State University (#2),

University of Louisiana at Lafayette (#6), University of Montana (#14), University of Memphis (#15), East Carolina University (#28), University of Missouri-Kansas City (#37), University of South Alabama (#39), and University of North Carolina at Greensboro (#44). The committee recommends reporting ETSU's ranking on an annual basis and setting a goal of being a top 20 RPCU. The committee also recommends framing ETSU's ranking in our rural-serving context, as many of the RPCUs ranked higher than ETSU are urban-serving institutions. ETSU is currently ranked 13th among rural-serving regional public colleges and universities in terms of HERD data. Being a top 5 or top 10 rural-serving RPCU is achievable.

The task force did consider the unintended consequences of using *regional public* in the research vision statement. For example, US News and World Report (USNWR) categorizes ETSU as a national¹², rather than regional, university based solely on the university's Carnegie research classification (R2). Likewise, USNWR's regional college designation is based solely on institutions being Master's level universities. Given recent changes to the Carnegie classification system, USNWR will likely have to update its categorization of academic institutions. Succinctly, there are differences in the way regional is defined by USNWR as compared to AASCU and AARC. Overall, the task force perceives that the regional language in the vision accurately reflects the students and region we serve, aligns with the institution's mission, and differentiates our identity from that of, for example, the University of Tennessee - Knoxville.

The Trailblazers Research Identity

Shortly after the premier R2 vision was disseminated, and in alignment with both the 2015 Research Strategic Plan Report⁶ and the report of the 2019 Working Group on Research and Innovation⁸, the Office of the Vice Provost for Research (OVPR) and the Office of University Marketing and Communication (UMC) created an externally facing "Research" tab on the main ETSU webpage that includes Research Trailblazer messaging targeted at current and potential students. The research landing page continues to employ the Research Trailblazer narrative. While the premier R2 vision and the Research Trailblazer narrative are distinct, we deemed it prudent to evaluate the Research Trailblazer narrative frame while evaluating the research vision

The *Trailblazers* identity, already well established across the university, provides a cohesive narrative that aligns research, innovation, and scholarly impact. Its strong presence and demonstrated engagement make it an effective means of communicating research priorities and reinforcing our *premier regional public* identity. To maximize the benefits of this identity, ETSU must transition from decentralized research promotion to a centralized marketing strategy. The status quo decentralized approach highlights individual or unit-specific research achievements but does not bolster a broader institutional narrative. Centralization is required, and the Trailblazer narrative frame is the perfect brand to house the institutional research vision and continued storytelling around priorities. Additionally, task force listening sessions indicated a need for clearer explanation of the roles of the OVPR, the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs Administration (ORSPA), the Office of Community Engagement, and the ETSU Research Corporation. A centralized research identity will help articulate each unit's value, internally and externally, while demonstrating how they collectively support research, innovation, and community impact.

Trailblazers presents ETSU faculty and students as problem solvers addressing regional and global challenges through innovation. As a central digital storytelling platform, it communicates the university's core research pillars, strengthens stakeholder understanding, and serves as the

primary entry point for partnerships and community engagement. Organizing ETSU's research web presence around this identity will create a consistent and compelling narrative that links scholarly innovation to regional advancement and strengthens long-term institutional return on investment.

Five-Year Emphasis Areas

ETSU's research portfolio spans the full range of research and creative activities, encompassing diverse forms of inquiry, scholarship, and innovation across disciplines. The university's aspiration to be a leading regional public research institution is built upon and inclusive of this breadth, reflecting contributions from faculty, staff, and students across colleges, schools, administrative units, and both undergraduate and graduate programs. Within this broad and diverse landscape, the task force has identified five areas of strategic emphasis to guide focused investment, growth, and partnership development over the next five years.

The five emphasis areas were selected because they build on documented institutional strengths while also reflecting targeted opportunities for growth, aligning with regional needs and ongoing institutional initiatives. Presented in alphabetical order, these areas are intentionally defined broadly to include scholars across multiple disciplines, while remaining sufficiently focused to guide institutional priorities.

1. Applied Technology and Engineering

Innovation

ETSU will leverage strengths in applied and basic sciences, data and computing, and emerging engineering programs and synthetic biology investments to translate discovery into real-world applications. Artificial intelligence, machine learning, and analytics will serve as cross-cutting enablers, supporting technology development and workforce-aligned innovation in partnership with industry.

Investment

Strategic investments will focus on faculty capacity aligned to applied research and industry needs, shared research and instructional infrastructure, interdisciplinary applied teams, and continued development of Valleybrook as a regional innovation and biomanufacturing hub. Partnerships with industry and public agencies will be expanded to support research, workforce pipelines, and commercialization.

Impact

ETSU will expand workforce-aligned academic pathways, increase applied and industry sponsored research, and strengthen pathways from discovery to deployment, positioning ETSU as a distinctive contributor to regional economic growth and innovation.

2. Biomedical Sciences and Clinical Translation

Innovation

ETSU will advance integrated approaches that connect biomedical discovery with clinical, behavioral, and population health research, including clinical trials, prevention science, mental health interventions, epidemiology, and practice-based research.

Investment

ETSU will invest in clinical and translational research infrastructure by formalizing a Clinical Trials Office or a coordinated clinical trials infrastructure, expanding interdisciplinary

investigator capacity, and strengthening biostatistical and regulatory support, in partnership with Ballad Health, the VA, and regional providers.

Impact

These efforts will expand access to clinical trials, accelerate translation into practice, improve health outcomes in rural and underserved communities, strengthen student research engagement, and increase competitiveness for NIH and industry funding.

3. Environmental Systems, Hazards, and the Outdoors

Innovation

ETSU will advance research on environmental systems, natural hazards, and outdoor environments, integrating strengths in weather, climate, land and water systems, and outdoor recreation and tourism to address challenges facing Appalachian and rural regions.

Investment

Strategic investments will support interdisciplinary research teams, field-based and data-driven infrastructure, and partnerships with regional, state, and federal agencies, as well as the outdoor and tourism sectors.

Impact

These efforts will improve hazard preparedness and resilience, support environmental stewardship, strengthen sustainable tourism and outdoor recreation, and position ETSU as a leader in applied environmental research.

4. Rural Health and Appalachian Thriving

Innovation

ETSU will advance place-based, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate health, social, cultural, and community systems to support well-being and resilience across rural and Appalachian regions.

Investment

Investments will support cross-college research teams, rural systems research, data-sharing partnerships, and sustained collaboration with community organizations and regional stakeholders.

Impact

These efforts will strengthen regional partnerships, expand student engagement in community-based research, improve physical, mental, and social well-being, and position ETSU as a national leader in rural-serving, place-based research.

5. The Science of Education and Engagement

Innovation

ETSU will advance research on how people learn, engage, and succeed across the lifespan, integrating teaching and learning science, digital and media-rich environments, implementation science, and workforce and community engagement.

Investment

Strategic investments will support research–practice partnerships, data and learning analytics, interdisciplinary collaboratives focused on implementation and scale, and student engagement in research.

Impact

These efforts will generate scalable, evidence-based models that improve learning and engagement, strengthen educator and workforce pipelines, and position ETSU as a leader in education research for rural-serving regions.

The timelines associated with the strategic actions for Pillar 1, as well as other pillars, reflect a phased approach, with early years focused on foundational actions, followed by implementation and expansion, and later years focused on scaling, refinement, and evaluation. This approach is intended to balance early momentum with a realistic pace of implementation across the five-year period.

Table 1 shows the summary of the proposed actions, the responsible entities, and metrics with a timeline for the RSP recommendations for **Pillar 1. ETSU’s Research Vision and Identity.**

Table 1. Pillar 1: ETSU’s Research Vision and Identity

Strategic Action	Responsible Entity	Fiscal Year	Metrics/Outcomes	Expenses
Adopt new vision statement- ETSU is recognized, through funding, rankings, and impact as one of the premier regional public research universities in the nation.	President (lead); OVPR; Provost; University Marketing & Communications	FY 2027	Vision formally adopted and communicated across institutional platforms (website, strategic documents, messaging); Vision integrated into college/unit planning, recruitment materials, and research development communications	No cost
Adopt the following five emphasis areas as <u>strategic priorities</u> : 1) Applied Technology and Engineering 2) Biomedical Sciences and Clinical Translation 3) Environmental Systems, Hazards, and the Outdoors 4) Rural Health and Appalachian Thriving 5) The Science of Education and Engagement	VPR; Deans	FY 27- FY 29	Emphasis areas formally endorsed and communicated	No cost

Establish and implement a competitive internal funding mechanism for initiatives aligned with emphasis areas.	OVPR (lead); Deans; ORSPA; Research Development	FY 28 - FY 31	Funding mechanism developed (criteria, review process, alignment expectations), RFP released Number of mechanism-funded interdisciplinary proposals submitted and funded, and external funding leverage from internally funded projects	\$100K/year recurring
Create a shared services position in the Office of University Marketing and Communications to champion and operationalize research-related brand and marketing strategy.	University Marketing & Communications (lead); OVPR; HR	FY 27 - FY 31	Position created and hired; centralized research communication strategy developed Research stories, media placements, and coordinated messaging tied to Trailblazer identity; improved visibility of research priorities and outcomes	\$85K recurring
Conduct a needs assessment for ETSU serving as a hub for regional public college and university (RPCU) convenings, research, and branding.	OVPR (lead); President's Office; External Relations; Institutional Research; AASCU/ARRC partners	FY 28- FY 29	Needs assessment completed	No cost

Pillar 2: Infrastructure, Systems, and Investment

What We Learned

Listening sessions and subgroup analysis consistently identified research infrastructure as a primary opportunity for strengthening ETSU's research enterprise. These needs build on existing infrastructure and administrative strengths that have supported ETSU's recent growth in research activity. Across colleges and units, stakeholders emphasized the need for more coordinated administrative support, modernized systems, and sustained investment in core research infrastructure. The university's current infrastructure reflects earlier stages of research growth and will require continued investment to support expanding activity.

Key themes included the need to bolster staffing across the sponsored project lifecycle, improve coordination between pre- and post-award functions, and reduce variability in research support across colleges. Participants also highlighted the importance of reliable and integrated research systems, transparent and navigable processes for faculty, and expanded support for data, compliance, and clinical research activities.

Additional priorities included recurring investment in research equipment and facilities, expanded access to specialized support roles (e.g., data, statistical, and regulatory expertise), and infrastructure to support collaboration with external partners. Collectively, these findings point to the importance of a coordinated, scalable, and service-oriented research infrastructure to support continued growth in research activity and impact.

ETSU's continued growth as a premier regional public research university depends on coordinated investment in research infrastructure that supports the full sponsored project lifecycle, from idea development through award closeout. These needs point not only to improved coordination, but also to targeted investment in staffing, systems, and shared research infrastructure to support continued growth. Given the scope and complexity of infrastructure development, implementation of these priorities will be sequenced and iterative rather than simultaneous. Initial efforts will prioritize coordination, process improvement, and optimization of existing systems and personnel. Subsequent investments in staffing, systems, and infrastructure will be phased based on demonstrated need, institutional capacity, and available resources, rather than implemented concurrently. The following strategic priorities outline key areas for this investment.

Strategic Priorities

1. Bolster Sponsored Projects Lifecycle Administration Infrastructure

A sustainable research enterprise requires coordinated management across the full sponsored project lifecycle, from proposal development through award management and closeout. This is particularly important at a university like ETSU where a majority of scholars often have significant teaching and service responsibilities.

At ETSU, responsibilities for pre-award administration, post-award financial management, and compliance oversight are distributed across multiple units. While these functions are essential and have supported substantial growth in sponsored activity, stakeholders consistently identified opportunities to optimize coordination, communication, and consistency across the lifecycle.

The task force recommends that ETSU strengthen alignment and coordination across the sponsored projects lifecycle, with initial efforts focused on clarifying roles and workflows and streamlining post-award processes. Key strategies include strengthening leadership and coordination of post-award activities, improving connections between research administration and financial operations, and developing shared approaches to training, communication, and process improvement.

These efforts will enhance fiscal stewardship, reduce administrative burden, and support more efficient and compliant management of sponsored projects.

To improve project management, enhance faculty experience, and reduce compliance and financial risk, ETSU will strengthen early-stage coordination for newly funded projects through a structured grant startup process. This process will align investigators and relevant support units at the outset of each award, with clear expectations for project scope, budget management, reporting requirements, and compliance responsibilities, while allowing flexibility based on project size and complexity. By improving alignment at the start of the award lifecycle, ETSU will reduce downstream administrative burden, minimize the need for corrections, and support more efficient project execution.

2. Develop a Coordinated Research Administration Network

Peer and aspirational institutions consistently maintain dedicated compliance and research administration infrastructure to support the full lifecycle of sponsored projects¹³. As illustrated in Table 2, peer institutions generally demonstrate greater staffing capacity across research administration and compliance functions, though structures vary in how responsibilities are distributed between central research offices and financial units¹³. In comparison, ETSU operates with more limited capacity in several key areas, particularly in post-award coordination and regulatory support, requiring greater reliance on distributed effort across units.

Table 2. Grant-Related FTE Staff Across Peer Institutions

GRANT-RELATED FTE CATEGORY	ECU	UMKC	USA	ULL	UM	ETSU
Parent Office of Research (not including OSP)	16	n/a	n/a	9	n/a	3
Pre-Award <i>within</i> OOR/OSP	8	7	5	6	7	5
Post-Award <i>within</i> OOR/OSP	11	6	9	0	10	0
Post-Award in <i>separate</i> Finance/Accounting department	0	0	8	14	7	5

ETSU will implement a coordinated research administration framework that integrates centralized expertise with college- and unit-level support through a combination of embedded, shared services, and centrally supported roles. This approach allows colleges to align support with their size, needs, and research activity while maintaining institutional coordination through OVPR.

Key components of this approach include:

- **Flexible College- and Unit-Level Research Administration Support**

Colleges will have the ability to establish or access research administration support through embedded positions, shared service models, or a hybrid approach. This flexibility allows units to determine appropriate levels of effort and contribution while ensuring faculty have access to timely, discipline-informed proposal development, pre-award, and post-award support.

- **Coordinated Relationship with OVPR**

In partnership with deans, research administration personnel, whether embedded or shared, will maintain a coordinated (e.g., dotted-line) relationship with OVPR to support alignment in training, policy interpretation, compliance, and sponsor requirements. This approach ensures consistency while preserving unit-level responsiveness.

- **Shared Services and Flexible Staffing Model**

OVPR will maintain the capacity to provide shared services and flexible staffing support for units without dedicated research administration or during periods of high demand, transition, or growth. This model promotes equitable access to support across colleges.

- **Post-Award Coordination and Financial Alignment**

ETSU will strengthen coordination of post-award functions across ORSPA, academic units, and Grant Accounting by establishing clear roles, standardized processes, and regular communication mechanisms to support award setup, financial management, and compliance with sponsor and institutional requirements.

- **Cross-Training and Professional Development**

Research administration personnel across the network will participate in ongoing cross-training and professional development to promote shared standards, consistent workflows, and continuity of service.

Through this coordinated and flexible network, ETSU will strengthen faculty support, improve communication across units, ensure consistent compliance and sponsor engagement, and build scalable infrastructure to support continued growth in sponsored research activity.

3. Establish the Trailblazer Research Hub and Research Development Ecosystem

In addition to strengthening administrative infrastructure, faculty, staff, and students require coordinated support for developing research questions aligned with sponsor and programmatic priorities, designing rigorous studies, and advancing projects across the full lifecycle of research.

ETSU will develop a **Trailblazer Research Hub**, a coordinated and evolving research support ecosystem designed to enhance access to expertise, resources, and collaborative opportunities across campus. Rather than a single centralized unit, the Hub will function as a connected network of research support services and expertise, aligned to support investigators from idea generation through dissemination and impact. Initial steps toward this model are already underway, with key stakeholders identified and formative meetings initiated to help shape the structure and priorities of the Research Hub.

ETSU has established strengths in research development, library services, methodological support, research computing, and faculty development, with units across campus already providing consultation, data support, and training to investigators. The Research Hub will build

upon and better connect existing strengths across the institution, creating greater visibility, access, and coordination of available supports.

Through this coordinated approach, the Research Hub will expand and streamline access to support across the research lifecycle, with the flexibility to adapt services over time in response to faculty needs, emerging priorities, and funding opportunities. Areas of support may include research design consultation, methodological guidance, proposal development, and strategies for dissemination and public impact.

As ETSU continues to strengthen its research development capacity, the university may evaluate organizational structures that further support proposal development, interdisciplinary initiatives, and external funding growth. As evidenced at other institutions, this could include consideration of additional leadership roles in the OVPR to coordinate research development activities, support large-scale and strategic proposals, and align institutional efforts across colleges and units.

By improving coordination and access to existing expertise, ETSU will strengthen research capacity across disciplines, reduce barriers to engagement, and enhance competitiveness for external funding.

4. Strengthen Research Compliance and Integrity Infrastructure

ETSU maintains established compliance processes and oversight structures that support responsible conduct of research and regulatory adherence across disciplines. As ETSU's research enterprise grows in scale and complexity, the university must ensure that regulatory oversight systems remain efficient, responsive, robust, and supportive of investigators.

The task force recommends ETSU establish an **Office of Research Compliance and Integrity** to coordinate institutional review and regulatory oversight functions, including:

- Institutional Review Board (IRB)
- Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC)
- Biosafety oversight
- Conflict of interest management
- Research integrity and misconduct processes

Key priorities of this office will include:

- Providing centralized guidance and training for investigators navigating compliance requirements.
- Streamlining review workflows to meet regulatory requirements and minimize delays.
- Strengthening coordination between compliance units, OVPR, and college-level research administrators.
- Expanding staffing and training capacity to support a service and development-oriented culture of compliance.

5. Formalize a Clinical Trials Office

Clinical research represents a significant opportunity for ETSU to expand regional impact, strengthen partnerships, and diversify research funding. While clinical research activity is currently distributed across units, there is an opportunity to enhance coordination, streamline processes, and expand institutional capacity to support inpatient and outpatient clinical trials and practice-based research.

The task force recommends ETSU formalize a Clinical Trials Office (CTO) with centralized reporting to provide coordinated infrastructure across and beyond the academic health sciences center colleges. This office will support:

- Study feasibility assessments
- Regulatory submissions and coordination
- Contract negotiation and budgeting
- Study activation and sponsor engagement
- Compliance monitoring and reporting

The CTO will strengthen ETSU's ability to support both industry-sponsored trials and investigator-initiated studies. The CTO should operate in partnership with ETSU Health, Ballad Health, and regional clinical partners to expand access to clinical trials across Appalachia, strengthen industry and community partnerships, and position ETSU to grow its role in clinical research.

6. Modernize Research Systems and Shared Infrastructure

ETSU's research enterprise requires modern enterprise systems and coordinated management of shared research infrastructure. ETSU currently utilizes a range of administrative and research systems that support proposal development, compliance, and reporting, providing a foundation for future integration and enhancement.

Key priorities include:

- Improved integration of research administration systems
- Development of institutional research dashboards
- Inventory and governance of shared research equipment
- Strategic reinvestment in research facilities such as Valleybrook

These investments will reduce administrative inefficiency and provide leadership with real-time visibility into institutional research activity.

7. Evaluate Infrastructure for Scholarship and Creative Activity

ETSU's research enterprise includes a broad range of scholarly and creative activities.

To ensure equitable infrastructure support across disciplines, ETSU should evaluate administrative processes and infrastructure needs to support creative scholarship, exhibitions, performances, and community-engaged work.

The university should also consider renaming the Office of the Vice Provost for Research to reflect the full scope of scholarly activity supported by the institution.

Table 3 shows the summary of the proposed actions, the responsible entities, and metrics with a timeline for the RSP recommendations for **Pillar 2. Infrastructure, Systems, and Investment**.

18 **Table 3. Pillar 2: Infrastructure, Systems, and Investment**

Strategic Action	Responsible Entity	Fiscal Year	Metrics /Outcomes	Expenses
Evaluate and determine the most effective organizational model for post-award administration and grant accounting, including roles, responsibilities, and alignment between ORSPA, academic units, and financial operations.	VPR; CFO; ADRs	FY27	Internal or external evaluation conducted Research expenditures report accurately produced monthly	FY27: \$25-50K one-time
Standardize and coordinate processes across the full sponsored projects lifecycle (from pre-award through post-award) by clarifying roles, implementing consistent workflows, and strengthening coordinated startup and management practices. In partnership with key administrative units and academic colleges,	VPR; CFO; ADRs	FY 28 - FY 30	Roles, workflows, and lifecycle expectations defined and communicated; startup meeting model implemented Reduced proposal processing and award setup times; improved faculty satisfaction with lifecycle support	No Cost

ETSU will designate research-focused points of contact across HR, Procurement, Payroll, ITS, Facilities, and related areas, while ensuring all colleges have access to research administration support through embedded or shared service models to enable efficient and consistent execution.				
Using benchmark data and best practices, strategically invest in research administration staffing, systems, and support infrastructure to enable efficient, consistent, and scalable management of the scholarly project lifecycle. This includes implementing shared services models for pre-award and post-award support, expanding	VPR; Provost; CFO	FY 27- FY 31	FTEs added from baseline Faculty/staff research administration, compliance, and development satisfaction Infrastructure (e.g., offices) established	FY27: \$100-125K FY28: \$250K FY29: \$350-400K recurring

professional development for research administration personnel, and strengthening institutional capacity to support growth in sponsored research activity.				
Establish and scale the Trailblazer Research Hub as a coordinated, networked model for research development, methodological support, and interdisciplinary collaboration.	VPR; Deans; ITS	FY 27 - FY 29	Hub defined and initial services coordinated Faculty engagement, consultations, and interdisciplinary proposals developed	\$40K recurring
Optimize system to system communication (e.g., ETSURGe, Voyager) in support of administrative excellence.	VPR; CFO; CIO	FY27	Voyager data pushed to ETSURGe Improved real-time visibility into proposal, award, and expenditure data across integrated systems, including enhanced monitoring of sponsored project burn rates relative to project timelines	None

Establish an Office of Research Compliance and Integrity to coordinate oversight of IRB, IACUC, biosafety, conflict of interest, and research integrity. This office will streamline processes, improve coordination across units, and provide clear, accessible guidance to support efficient and compliant research activity.	VPR	FY 27- FY31	Standardized compliance workflows and guidance implemented across all regulatory areas Increased investigator satisfaction with compliance processes and support Reduced need for protocol revisions due to incomplete or incorrect submissions Timely and consistent compliance reviews maintained within established benchmarks Reduction in compliance findings, audit issues, or corrective actions	35K one time; \$100K reoccurring
In partnership with an external consultant, conduct inventory and analysis of research equipment and core facilities	VPR; ADRs	FY27	Inventory and analysis conducted	\$50K one time

Formalize a Clinical Trials Office (CTO) through partnerships with other entities to reduce duplication and phase institutional investment.	VPR; Deans of Health Colleges; Regional health care entities	FY 27- FY 30	Increase in number of clinical trials (industry + investigator-initiated) Reduced study start-up timelines Growth in clinical research partnerships Increased clinical trial participation across the region Growth in clinical research expenditures	\$250K one time; \$600K reoccurring
Strengthen support for scholarship and creative activity to ensure equitable infrastructure, administrative pathways, and alignment with institutional policies	VPR; Provost; Deans	FY 27- FY 30	Gaps in support identified Administrative pathways implemented Increased participation in creative/scholarly outputs	No Cost

Pillar 3: Student Success Through Research Engagement

What We Learned

Across listening sessions, stakeholder meetings, and workgroup white papers, a consistent message emerged: student engagement in research is one of ETSU's most distinctive strengths and a key driver of recruitment, retention, and student success. This engagement is evident across undergraduate research initiatives, graduate training, and discipline-specific capstone and experiential learning opportunities, with opportunities to expand access to more students.

Graduate stipends emerged as a commonly identified concern across listening sessions. Faculty, administrators, and students noted variability in stipend levels and graduate assistant role expectations across programs, which may influence recruitment, retention, and the overall research experience, particularly in research-intensive disciplines. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of competitive graduate funding models, as well as clearer alignment between graduate assistant responsibilities and research training objectives. The Task Force recognizes that efforts are already underway within the Graduate School to strengthen graduate funding and role structures, and these considerations are intended to align with and support those ongoing initiatives.

Undergraduate research is recognized as a strength at ETSU, with strong programs and initiatives led by the Honors College, Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA), Boland Research Day, and discipline-specific capstone experiences. Stakeholders noted the absence of a shared institutional framework that clearly defines pathways into undergraduate research, communicates available opportunities, and supports faculty mentorship across colleges. Students from diverse educational backgrounds, including transfer students and those balancing work and other responsibilities, reported uncertainty about how to access research opportunities or whether they are prepared to participate. Faculty also emphasized the need to evolve existing approaches to better align with the needs of a diverse and changing student population.

Mentorship was consistently described as both a strength and an area needing attention. Faculty expressed strong commitment to mentoring undergraduate students in research, but also noted that this work, especially with students from diverse educational backgrounds, rural settings, online programs, or clinically focused tracks, is often time-intensive and not always visible in workload or tenure and promotion processes. Overall, there was broad agreement that mentorship responsibilities vary widely and could benefit from clearer recognition and support.

Student preparation for research was frequently identified as an area for improvement. Stakeholders noted variability across programs in how students are introduced to core research expectations and processes, particularly in areas such as human subjects protections, responsible conduct of research, and data management. In response, the Task Force proposes a more coordinated and standardized onboarding approach across colleges. For graduate students in thesis- and research-based programs, this may include structured first-semester onboarding, while at the undergraduate level, earlier exposure to these core elements can support engagement in research activities. Emphasis is placed on ensuring consistency in these foundational areas across programs.

Communication and visibility of research opportunities were identified as ongoing challenges. Students and faculty noted the absence of a centralized location for research opportunities, faculty projects, funding, and related resources. As a result, information is often dispersed across

departments and programs, making it more difficult for students, especially those without established faculty connections, to identify and access opportunities. Participants expressed interest in a more accessible, searchable system that connects students with faculty mentors and research opportunities across disciplines.

Participants also emphasized that ETSU's strengths, particularly its emphasis on hands-on learning, robust health sciences infrastructure, regional partnerships, and commitment to student-centered education, provide a strong foundation for research engagement. Building on these strengths, they highlighted the need for clearer and more consistent pathways across programs to ensure that research engagement is accessible to all students, not only those already familiar with how to navigate the system.

Strategic Priorities

Based on stakeholder input and evidence from peer institutions, the following strategic priorities will guide ETSU's efforts to enhance student success through research engagement.

1. Strengthen Graduate Research Support and Competitiveness

The task force recommends that the OVPR support the Graduate School and relevant institutional units to enhance the competitiveness, preparation, and effectiveness of graduate assistants engaged in research. This includes supporting and advocating for implementation of the Graduate School's graduate assistantship stipend proposal, collaborating on standardized training for research graduate assistants (e.g., research compliance, data management, and responsible conduct of research), improving coordination between OVPR and the Graduate School to expand access to training and research development resources, and exploring opportunities to increase graduate student participation in externally funded research. Collectively, these efforts will strengthen the role of graduate assistants in ETSU's research enterprise while aligning institutional support structures with student success and research growth.

2. Create Structured, Broad-based Pathways into Research at All Levels

Research engagement should not depend on informal networks or prior knowledge. ETSU will develop clear and accessible pathways, from early undergraduate exposure through graduate education, that connect students to research opportunities. This includes expanding early research experiences, improving access to undergraduate research opportunities across colleges, and strengthening onboarding for graduate students entering research and thesis-based programs. These efforts will support broader participation in research among students from diverse educational backgrounds.

3. Recognize and Support Faculty Mentorship as Essential Work

Recognizing faculty mentorship of student researchers as essential work will require alignment across institutional policies and practices. It is recommended that mentorship be more clearly reflected in workload models and considered within tenure and promotion processes.

4. Enhance Coordination and Visibility of Student Research Opportunities

To improve visibility and access to research opportunities, ETSU will develop a student-facing research opportunities platform as part of the Trailblazer Research Hub. This platform will integrate existing opportunities across colleges and units, providing a centralized, searchable

interface that connects students with faculty mentors, research projects, and funding opportunities across disciplines.

By embedding this functionality within the Research Hub, ETSU will align student engagement efforts with broader research development infrastructure, improving coordination, reducing fragmentation, and expanding access to research and creative activities for students across the institution.

5. Optimize Institutional Structure for Undergraduate Research

Undergraduate research at ETSU is currently supported through multiple structures, including Honors College programs, URCA, and discipline-specific initiatives across colleges. ETSU will establish a short-term working group or engage an external consultant to evaluate the placement of the Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity within ETSU's structure and assess alignment with the Council on Undergraduate Research's 11 Characteristics of Excellence. This process will include input from the Honors College, URCA, the Provost's Office, faculty, students, and relevant administrative units, and will build on existing programs and practices to identify opportunities for improved coordination, access, and visibility. Recommendations will be provided to the Provost within the first two years of plan implementation.

6. Expand Funding for Student Research Activities and Dissemination

Supporting student participation in research requires accessible and well-aligned funding mechanisms. ETSU will assess and align existing support for undergraduate research, including mini-grants, travel awards, and related funding, to improve awareness, utilization, and coordination across colleges. As participation in research activities grows, opportunities to expand funding will be explored to support student engagement and dissemination at regional and national venues, while enhancing ETSU's visibility as a student-centered research institution.

Table 4 shows the summary of the proposed actions, the responsible entities, and metrics with a timeline for the RSP recommendations for **Pillar 3. Student Success Through Research Engagement**.

Table 4. Student Success Through Research Engagement

Strategic Action	Responsible Entity	Fiscal Year	Metrics/Outcomes	Expenses
Support Graduate School efforts to strengthen competitive and sustainable graduate assistant funding models and promote inclusion of graduate assistant support in externally funded research	VPR	FY 2027-FY2031	Increase in the number of sponsored awards annually, with graduate assistantship included	No cost
Convene a Graduate School-led workgroup to develop a coordinated first-semester onboarding approach for thesis- and research-based graduate students, with support from OVPR	Graduate School Dean; Deans; VPR	FY 2027-FY2031	Workgroup convened; existing training resources identified; recommendations developed for the first-semester research onboarding approach	No cost
Develop and implement a student-facing research opportunities platform as part of the Trailblazer Research Hub to connect students with faculty projects and funding opportunities	OVPR; ETSU IT Services; URCA; Colleges	FY 2028-FY2030	Portal developed with initial opportunities populated; baseline user engagement established Portal launched across colleges; student usage and faculty participation tracked	Integrated within the Research Hub

In partnership with the Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity and Student Life and Enrollment, explore the feasibility of a first-year research and innovation experience.	VPR; Honors College Dean; Deans; Provost; URCA	FY2028-FY2031	Feasibility assessed; experience created, and implemented	FY29: \$25-50K recurring
In partnership with UMC, create and disseminate updated research vision across recruitment websites, stories, and marketing materials and create premier regional public university student-focused branding	CMO; VPR	FY2027-FY2031	Website, stories, materials produced Web and social media metrics	FY27: \$20K one time FY28-FY31: \$10K recurring
Establish an internal working group or engage an external consultant to evaluate the placement of the Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity within ETSU's structure and assess alignment with the Council on Undergraduate Research's 11 Characteristics of Excellence.	VPR; Honors College Dean; Provost	FY 2027-FY2029	Evaluation conducted; report with recommendations submitted to the Provost	FY27: \$0-25K one-time

Pillar 4: Community, Industry, & External Partnerships

What We Learned

Across listening sessions, stakeholder meetings, and white paper analyses, external partnerships emerged as one of ETSU's most distinctive assets and a critical driver of regional impact. ETSU maintains strong relationships with a wide range of partners, including Ballad Health, the Johnson City VA system, local school districts, community organizations, and industry leaders such as Eastman Chemical Company. These partnerships are often built through sustained faculty and staff engagement and reflect deep community connections.

At the same time, stakeholders noted that partnership efforts are often decentralized, faculty-dependent, and variably supported across colleges and units, with limited shared visibility and continuity. As a result, partnerships can be difficult to sustain over time and challenging for external partners to navigate.

Ballad Health and the VA were consistently identified as key anchor partners with significant opportunities for expanded research collaboration. Faculty and partners expressed interest in deeper engagement but noted challenges related to data access, IRB processes, and identifying clear pathways for initiating joint work. Industry partnerships were also highlighted as an area of growth, with interest across sectors including advanced manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, and emerging technologies, though stakeholders emphasized the need for clearer entry points and more coordinated engagement.

Community partners emphasized the importance of reciprocity and accessibility, including sharing research findings in user-friendly formats and engaging partners earlier in the research process. Across stakeholder groups, there was consistent uncertainty about how partnership activities are coordinated and who serves as the primary point of contact, reflecting the distributed nature of responsibilities across multiple institutional units.

Overall, ETSU's location, mission, health sciences infrastructure, and community relationships provide a strong foundation for partnership-driven research. Strengthening coordination, visibility, and shared processes will be essential to ensuring partnerships are sustainable, accessible, and mutually beneficial over time.

Strategic Priorities

Based on stakeholder input and evidence from peer institutions, the following strategic priorities will guide ETSU's efforts to strengthen community and external partnerships:

1. Strengthen Coordination and Access for Research Partnerships

ETSU will strengthen coordination of research partnerships by developing more connected and accessible approaches to engagement, including exploration of a coordinated "front door" model. This approach will support multiple entry points for partners while improving internal coordination across OVPR, the Research Corporation, and the Office of Community Engagement, ensuring flexibility without creating rigid or duplicative processes.

2. Deepen Anchor Partnerships with Ballad Health and the VA Systems

ETSU will work with Ballad Health and VA partners to strengthen collaboration in areas such as research coordination, data access, and co-developed initiatives. Efforts will focus on improving alignment of processes, supporting joint research activities, and identifying shared priority areas

for collaboration. These partnerships represent important opportunities to advance research, training, and community impact, and may serve as models for sustained and reciprocal engagement.

3. Cultivate Strategic Industry Partnerships with Regional Employers

ETSU will strengthen engagement with regional industry partners, including Eastman Chemical Company, pharmaceutical manufacturers, advanced manufacturing, and emerging sectors. Efforts will focus on expanding opportunities for applied research collaboration, innovation, and partnership development, while improving connections between faculty expertise and industry needs. These efforts will build on existing mechanisms for engagement and support the development of sustained, mutually beneficial partnerships.

4. Embed Reciprocity and Community Voice in Partnership Practice

ETSU will strengthen partnership practices grounded in reciprocity by engaging partners in shaping research questions, approaches, and dissemination. Efforts will include sharing research findings in accessible formats and supporting approaches that reflect mutual benefit and sustained collaboration with community partners. Approaches will be explored to recognize dissemination back to partners within faculty evaluation and promotion frameworks, reinforcing the value of reciprocal engagement.

5. Improve Visibility and Storytelling of Partnership Impact

ETSU will enhance visibility and communication of partnership activities and outcomes to external audiences. This includes sharing research in accessible formats, strengthening storytelling around impact, and using events and platforms to highlight how partnerships contribute to regional priorities and community outcomes.

6. Establish a University-Industry Advisory Structure

ETSU will establish a University–Industry advisory structure with a defined charge to provide recommendations on alignment between research priorities, workforce needs, and partnership opportunities. The structure may include sector-based subgroups (e.g., healthcare, advanced manufacturing, tourism) aligned to ETSU’s emphasis areas and will include clear reporting pathways to institutional leadership (e.g., VPR, Vice President for Community Engagement, Research Corporation).

Table 5 shows the summary of the proposed actions, the responsible entities, and metrics with a timeline for the RSP recommendations for **Pillar 4: Community, Industry, & External Partnerships**.

Table 5. Pillar 4: Community, Industry, & External Partnerships

Strategic Action	Responsible Entity	Fiscal Year	Metrics/Outcomes	Expenses
Establish a coordinated “front door” within OVPR for external research partnerships	VPR; ETSU Research Corporation; Office of Community Engagement; Advancement; Center for Global Engagement	FY2027-FY2029	Front-door approach defined and established; processes for managing partner inquiries established Partner inquiries tracked; response timelines monitored; summary of partnership activities reported	Variable
Expand the Boland Research Day (BRD) to an event that convenes industry, community, government, and philanthropic partners to showcase ETSU scholars, identify collaboration opportunities, and strengthen partnerships	VPR; RC CEO; VP for Engagement; VP for Advancement; CMO	FY2028	BRD attendance BRD add-on events	FY28: \$20K, recurring thereafter
Optimize and better integrate existing platforms (e.g., PURE, TNIX, and web-based tools) to enhance visibility of research expertise and partnership opportunities, while evaluating the	VPR; UMC/Marketing; ETSU IT Services; ETSU Research Corporation; Office	FY2028-FY2030	Platform developed by integrating existing systems and external platforms (e.g., Pure, TNIX) Baseline partner inquiries and engagement established	Integrated within the Research Hub

effectiveness of these tools in supporting external engagement.	of Community Engagement		Increased partner inquiries and engagement tracked; connections to faculty and research units documented	
Strengthen research collaboration with Ballad Health through coordinated engagement, processes, and shared priorities	OVPR (lead); ETSU Health leadership; Ballad Health partners	FY2027-FY2030	Leadership engagement established with a regular meeting schedule; priority areas for collaboration identified; baseline coordination processes and joint activities documented Improved coordination demonstrated; co-developed research activities tracked; progress across priority areas documented	No cost
Strengthen research collaboration with Mountain Home and Asheville VA partners through coordinated engagement and shared research activities and priorities	VPR; Colleges; VA partners	FY2027-FY2031	Collaboration opportunities identified Joint research activities (e.g., publications, proposals, appointments) tracked and reported	\$1K recurring

Strengthen reciprocity in research partnerships through consistent return of findings to partners	VPR; ETSU Research Corporation; Office of Community Engagement; Colleges	FY2028-FY2030	Approach for returning findings defined; baseline practices established Increased use of partner-facing outputs documented; engagement with returned findings tracked	No Cost
Establish a University–Industry advisory structure to inform research priorities and partnership opportunities	OVPR (lead); ETSU Research Corporation; Office of Community Engagement; external partners	FY2027-FY2029	Advisory structure designed; membership identified; scope and expectations defined	\$5K-10K recurring

VI. Conclusion: Advancing Research for Northeast Tennessee and Beyond

ETSU's research enterprise is not defined solely by classification metrics or funding totals. It is defined by its public mission: to improve lives, strengthen communities, and expand opportunity across Appalachia and beyond.

This strategic plan outlines a path to position ETSU as a premier regional public research university, one that pursues excellence in teaching, research, engagement, and service; embraces interdisciplinary collaboration; and advances rural thriving as a framework for innovation and impact.

The commitments outlined in this plan require sustained investment, coordinated participation of different academic and administrative units (e.g., colleges, Provost's office, OVPR, to name a few), and clear accountability.

This Strategic Planning envisions that by 2031, ETSU will:

- Be recognized as a leading regional public research university with a clearly defined research identity and strategic emphasis areas. *(Pillar 1)*
- Maintain coordinated, efficient research infrastructure and administrative systems that support growth across the research lifecycle. *(Pillar 2)*
- Increase student engagement in research across undergraduate and graduate programs, strengthening recruitment, retention, and academic success. *(Pillar 3)*
- Expand and sustain external partnerships with healthcare systems, industry, and community organizations. *(Pillar 4)*
- Demonstrate measurable public impact through research that improves health, education, innovation, and regional vitality. *(Cross-cutting)*

Through this strategy, the task force recommends a path for advancing research that improves lives, strengthens communities, and expands opportunity across Appalachia and beyond.

Appendices

Appendix A – References and Benchmarking References

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The remainder of this appendix summarizes the peer comparisons and national guidance that informed Pillar 1: Research Identity & Vision. These references helped ensure that ETSU's strategic direction reflects both institutional strengths and national best practices for public regional research universities.

Peer and Aspirational Institution Comparisons

In developing the research identity framework and evaluating potential priority areas, the subgroup reviewed publicly available research strategic plans and research identity messaging from ETSU's peer and aspirational institutions.

1. Research Strategic Plan Availability

Among ETSU's peer institutions:

Some maintain research-office-specific strategic plans (e.g., Northern Illinois University, University of Memphis, East Carolina University).

Others publish institution-wide research strategic plans (e.g., University of Louisiana at Lafayette, University of Montana).

Several peer institutions do not maintain distinct research strategic plans separate from institutional plans.

This review confirmed that while not all regional publics formally name priority research areas, institutions that do tend to benefit from clearer messaging, stronger branding, and more focused investment alignment.

2. Research Priority Area Models

The subgroup examined how peer institutions identify and organize priority research areas.

Common features included:

Limited number (typically 4–6) of broadly defined thematic areas.

Emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration.

Alignment with regional strengths and economic priorities.

Integration of applied and translational dimensions.

Examples included:

Central Michigan University: Protecting Michigan Waters; Safeguarding Digital Environments.

Northern Illinois University: Climate Science; Nanoscience; STEM Education.

Marshall University: Advanced Energy; Aviation; Health Sciences.

University of Missouri–Kansas City: AI, cybersecurity, digital humanities.

University of Tennessee Chattanooga: Quantum Technologies; Sustainable Energy Systems.

This benchmarking reinforced the value of articulating a limited number of thematic anchors that are broad, interdisciplinary, and place-informed.

3. R1/R2 Messaging Review

The subgroup also reviewed how institutions classified as R1 communicate that status, particularly institutions that recently transitioned to R1. This analysis revealed:

Institutions often emphasize research growth and impact rather than classification thresholds.

Messaging typically integrates research identity with workforce and regional impact.

Few institutions define identity solely by Carnegie classification.

Given recent changes to Carnegie methodology and ETSU's position near classification thresholds, the subgroup recommended shifting identity language away from "Premier R2" toward the more durable "Premier Regional Public Research University" framing.

National Reports and Research-Informed Guidance

In addition to peer comparisons, the subgroup drew on national reports and peer-reviewed scholarship to inform ETSU's research identity and priority area framework.

1. National Academies – Research Universities and the Future of America

The National Research Council emphasizes that research universities must set bold, mission-aligned goals that integrate research with national prosperity and societal needs. The report underscores that strategic clarity improves competitiveness, accountability, and public impact.

2. Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU)

APLU's Public Impact Research framework encourages institutions to:

Align research agendas with public good.

Modernize scholarship to strengthen societal relevance.

Organize research identity around clear thematic priorities.
Build infrastructure and incentives around mission-driven impact.
These principles strongly informed ETSU's Big 5 anchor model.

3. American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)

AASCU guidance emphasizes that regional public universities should:
Frame research priorities around regional needs.
Strengthen workforce development and economic alignment.
Demonstrate public value and accountability.

This guidance reinforced ETSU's emphasis on Rural Thriving and applied innovation.

4. Research Impact Strategy Literature

Peer-reviewed analyses of research impact strategies indicate that institutions that:
Articulate a limited number of thematic priorities,
Align incentives and infrastructure around those themes,
Clearly identify priority beneficiaries, are more successful in achieving measurable public impact.

This scholarship informed ETSU's decision to adopt five Research Identity Anchors supported by cross-cutting commitments.

Summary of Benchmarking Implications

Benchmarking findings shaped the strategic plan in the following ways:
Encouraged adoption of a durable identity framework not tied solely to Carnegie labels.
Validated the use of 4-6 thematic emphasis areas.
Reinforced the importance of place-based mission alignment.
Supported integration of interdisciplinary and applied research models.
Highlighted the role of research branding and communication in institutional visibility.

Together, peer comparisons and national guidance affirm that ETSU's approach aligns with best practices among regional public research universities while maintaining a distinctive Appalachian-centered identity.

Appendix B. Key Definitions and Terminology

To support a shared understanding of concepts used throughout the ETSU Research Strategic Plan (FY2027–FY2031), the following definitions are provided. These terms reflect how key concepts are used within the context of this plan and may differ from usage in other settings.

Applied Research

Research designed to address practical, real-world problems and generate solutions that can be directly implemented in professional, community, or industry settings.

Community-Engaged Research

Collaborative research conducted in partnership with community stakeholders to address locally relevant issues and produce mutually beneficial outcomes that integrate knowledge and action.

Coordinated Research Administration Network

A flexible, institutionally aligned model that integrates centralized research administration expertise (e.g., OVPR/ORSPA) with college- and unit-level support through embedded, shared services, or hybrid approaches to ensure consistent, high-quality support across the university.

Creative Activity and Scholarship

Scholarly and creative work that contributes to knowledge, culture, and society, including but not limited to performances, exhibitions, design, and other forms of intellectual and artistic expression.

Dotted-Line Relationship

A coordination structure in which personnel maintain primary supervision within a college or unit while aligning with a central office (e.g., OVPR/ORSPA) for training, policy guidance, compliance, and standard practices.

Emphasis Areas (Strategic Research Priorities)

Broad, interdisciplinary areas of focus identified by ETSU to guide research investment, collaboration, and external positioning over a defined period (typically five years). These areas are intended to provide strategic direction while remaining inclusive of diverse scholarly contributions.

Embedded Research Administrator

A research administration professional located within a college or academic unit who provides direct, discipline-informed support to faculty while maintaining coordination with central research administration offices.

HERD (Higher Education Research and Development Survey)

An annual survey conducted by the National Science Foundation that measures research expenditures across U.S. higher education institutions and serves as a primary benchmark for research activity and institutional comparison.

Interdisciplinary Research

Research that integrates perspectives, methods, and expertise from multiple disciplines to address complex questions or challenges that cannot be fully addressed within a single field.

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs Administration (ORSPA)

The central administrative unit responsible for supporting sponsored projects at ETSU, including proposal submission, sponsor compliance, and coordination of pre-award and select post-award activities.

Premier Regional Public Research University

An institutional aspiration reflecting ETSU's goal to achieve national recognition for research excellence, impact, and funding among regional public universities, while maintaining a strong commitment to regional engagement and public service.

Regional Public Colleges and Universities (RPCUs)

Public higher education institutions, often aligned with definitions from organizations such as AASCU and ARRC, that primarily serve regional populations and play a critical role in workforce development, community engagement, and applied research.

Research (ETSU Definition)

At ETSU, research is defined broadly to include traditional academic research, scholarship, creative activity, applied inquiry, community-based and clinical research, translational work, and innovation.

Research Compliance and Integrity

Institutional systems and processes that ensure research is conducted in accordance with ethical, legal, and regulatory standards, including oversight of human subjects (IRB), animal care (IACUC), biosafety, conflict of interest, and research misconduct.

Research Development

Activities that support the identification, preparation, and submission of competitive proposals, including grant writing, team formation, strategic positioning, and alignment with sponsor priorities.

Research Ecosystem

The interconnected set of people, processes, infrastructure, and resources that support the full lifecycle of research, from idea generation through dissemination and impact.

Rural Thriving

An asset-based, interdisciplinary framework that integrates health, education, economic vitality, culture, environmental resilience, and community well-being to support sustainable development and quality of life in rural and Appalachian regions.

Shared Services Model

A staffing and support approach in which research administration services are provided across multiple units or colleges, rather than dedicated to a single unit, to improve efficiency, flexibility, and access to expertise.

Sponsored Projects Lifecycle

The full continuum of externally funded research activity, including idea development, proposal preparation and submission (pre-award), award management (post-award), and project closeout.

Trailblazer Research Hub

A coordinated, networked ecosystem of research support services at ETSU that enhances access to expertise, resources, and collaboration opportunities across the research lifecycle. The Hub is not a single unit, but a connected system of services that may include research development, library services, data and methodological support, research computing, and faculty development.

Translational Research

Research that moves findings from basic discovery into practical application, including clinical, educational, community, or policy contexts, with the goal of improving outcomes and impact.

Workforce-Aligned Research

Research that is intentionally connected to workforce needs, industry partnerships, and economic development priorities, contributing to career pathways and regional or sector-specific workforce development.