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Research Strategic Plan

FY2027 – FY2031

Summary Document

Prepared by the Research Strategic Planning Task Force

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Introduction

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) has experienced a decade of significant research growth. Sponsored awards have increased from \$38.4M to \$65–70M annually, and research expenditures have grown from \$6.9M in 2015 to an estimated \$51.6M in 2025, a 650% increase. ETSU’s National Science Foundation HERD ranking has improved by over 120 positions, placing the university among the top 10% of regional public institutions.

Building on this momentum, ETSU convened a Research Strategic Planning Task Force charged with developing a five-year plan for research, scholarship, and creative activity. The task force engaged 49 stakeholder groups and held four campus town halls, gathering input from faculty, students, administrators, community partners, and research support units. This document presents the task force’s recommended key strategic actions and expected outcomes. Implementation will follow a phased approach, prioritizing coordination and foundational infrastructure in early years, followed by targeted expansion aligned with institutional capacity and available resources.

The plan is organized around four strategic pillars:

Pillar 1: Research Vision and Identity: Establishing a clear, mission-aligned research identity and five strategic emphasis areas.

Pillar 2: Infrastructure, Systems, and Investment: Strengthening the administrative, compliance, and operational foundations that support research growth and innovation.

Pillar 3: Student Success Through Research Engagement: Expanding ETSU recruitment and enrollment through expanded research pathways and resources for undergraduate and graduate students.

Pillar 4: Community, Industry, and External Partnerships: Deepening and coordinating external partnerships to advance research and regional impact.

Two cross-cutting commitments, artificial intelligence (AI) integration across the research enterprise and student research engagement as a driver of recruitment and success, are woven throughout the plan.

A full version of the Research Strategic Plan, including detailed rationale, implementation strategies, investment considerations, and expanded metrics, is available here: [Final Full Research Strategic Plan 4.12.26.pdf](#)

Pillar 1: Research Vision and Identity

Research Vision

To reflect both ETSU’s research growth and changes to the Carnegie Classification system, the task force recommends adopting a new research vision: ***ETSU is recognized, through funding, rankings, and impact, as one of the premier regional public research universities in the nation.***

This vision replaces the prior “premier R2” framing, eliminating dependence on classification metrics that shift over time while emphasizing scholarly quality, regional relevance, and public impact. Using FY23 HERD and (Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges) ARRC data, ETSU currently ranks 46th out of 474 regional public colleges and universities in research

expenditures and 13th among rural-serving RPCUs. The task force recommends setting a goal of achieving a top-20 (~\$90M in research expenditures) RPCU ranking by the FY31 reporting period.

The Trailblazers Research Identity

The Trailblazers identity, already well established across the university, provides the narrative frame for communicating ETSU's research priorities. The identity draws on ETSU's proximity to the Appalachian Trail and the spirit of exploration and discovery that trail blazing evokes, charting new paths in research, innovation, and community impact. The plan recommends transitioning from decentralized research promotion to a centralized marketing strategy that houses the institutional research vision under the Trailblazer brand, presenting ETSU faculty and students as problem solvers and innovators addressing regional challenges through innovation, with global application.

Five-Year Emphasis Areas

The task force recommends ETSU establish and invest in five research emphasis areas. These areas reflect documented institutional strengths or targeted growth opportunities, align with regional needs and current institutional initiatives, and were intentionally crafted to be broad enough to include scholars across multiple disciplines yet focused enough to guide investment, messaging, and partnership development.

1. Applied Technology and Engineering

Innovation: Leveraging strengths in applied and basic sciences, data and computational methods, and emerging engineering programs to translate discovery into real-world applications. AI, machine learning, and analytics will serve as cross-cutting enablers.

Investment: Faculty capacity aligned to applied research and industry partner needs, shared research infrastructure, interdisciplinary teams, and continued development of Valleybrook as a regional innovation hub.

Impact: Expand workforce-aligned academic pathways, increase applied and industry-sponsored research, and strengthen pathways from discovery to deployment.

2. Biomedical Sciences and Clinical Translation

Innovation: Advancing integrated approaches connecting biomedical and health sciences discovery with clinical, behavioral, and population health research, including clinical trials, prevention science, brain-based interventions, and practice-based research.

Investment: Clinical and translational research infrastructure, a centralized Clinical Trials Office, interdisciplinary team of investigators across institutions, biostatistical and regulatory support, and partnerships with Ballad Health, the VA, and regional providers.

Impact: Expand access to regional clinical trials, accelerate translation into practice, improve health outcomes in rural and underserved communities, and increase competitiveness for federal and industry funding.

3. Environmental Systems, Hazards, and the Outdoors

Innovation: Advancing research in environmental systems, natural hazards, and the outdoors, integrating strengths in weather, climate, land and water systems, and recreation and tourism.

Investment: Interdisciplinary research teams, field-based and data-driven infrastructure, and partnerships with regional, state, and federal agencies and outdoor and tourism sectors.

Impact: Improve hazard preparedness and resilience, support environmental stewardship, strengthen sustainable tourism and outdoor recreation, and position ETSU as a leader in applied outdoor and environmental research.

4. Rural Health and Appalachian Thriving

Innovation: Advancing place-based, interdisciplinary approaches integrating health, social, cultural, and community systems to achieve well-being across rural and Appalachian regions.

Investment: Cross-college research teams, rural systems research, data-sharing partnerships, and sustained collaboration with community organizations and regional stakeholders.

Impact: Strengthen regional partnerships, expand student engagement in community-based research, improve community, financial, physical, purpose, and social well-being, and position ETSU as a national leader in the art and science of rural thriving.

5. The Science of Education and Engagement

Innovation: Advancing research on how people learn, engage, and succeed across the lifespan, integrating teaching and learning science, digital environments, implementation science, and workforce and community engagement.

Investment: Research–practice partnerships, data and learning analytics, interdisciplinary collaboratives focused on implementation and scale, and student engagement in research.

Impact: 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.

Table 1. Pillar 1: Research Vision and Identity - Key Actions

Strategic Action	Timeline	Key Metric
Adopt institutional research vision as a premier regional public research university	FY 2027	Vision formally adopted and integrated across institutional messaging, planning, and recruitment materials
Establish and communicate five research emphasis areas to guide institutional priorities and investment	FY 2027–FY 2029	Emphasis areas endorsed; evidence of alignment in faculty hiring, proposals, and strategic initiatives
Launch a competitive internal funding mechanism aligned with research emphasis areas	FY 2028–FY 2031	Increase in interdisciplinary proposals and external funding leverage from internally supported projects
Implement a coordinated research marketing and communications	FY 2027–FY 2031	Increased visibility of research through media placements, storytelling, and external engagement metrics

approach aligned with the Trailblazer identity		
Conduct a needs assessment to position ETSU as a convening hub among regional public research institutions	FY 2028– FY 2029	Assessment completed; strategic opportunities identified for national positioning and partnerships

Pillar 2: Infrastructure, Systems, and Investment

Stakeholders consistently identified research infrastructure as the primary opportunity for strengthening ETSU’s research enterprise. Key themes included the need to strengthen staffing across the sponsored project lifecycle, improve coordination between pre- and post-award functions, reduce variability in support across colleges, and expand capacity for data, compliance, and clinical research. The following strategic priorities reflect a phased approach, beginning with strengthening coordination and foundational systems, followed by targeted investments in staffing, infrastructure, and capacity based on demonstrated need and available resources, rather than implemented concurrently.

Bolster Sponsored Projects Lifecycle Administration

ETSU will strengthen coordination and standardization across the full sponsored project lifecycle, from proposal development through award management and closeout. This includes clarifying roles, improving communication between research administration and financial operations, and implementing structured post-award onboarding for newly funded projects.

Develop a Coordinated Research Administration Network

ETSU will develop a flexible, scalable research administration network that aligns centralized OVPR expertise with college- and unit-level support. This model will include embedded, shared service, and hybrid approaches tailored to unit needs. Research administration personnel will maintain a coordinated relationship with OVPR to support consistency in training, compliance, and policy alignment, while preserving unit-level responsiveness.

Strengthen Research Administration and Support Staffing Capacity

ETSU will evaluate and strategically increase staffing capacity across key research support functions, including pre-award, post-award, compliance, and research development, to align with peer institutions and support continued growth in sponsored research activity.

Establish the Trailblazer Research Hub

ETSU will develop a coordinated research support ecosystem, the Trailblazer Research Hub, to enhance access to expertise, resources, and collaborative opportunities. Rather than a single centralized unit, the Hub will function as a connected network of services spanning research development, library services, data and methodological support, research computing, and faculty development. ETSU will also evaluate organizational structures to strengthen research development leadership and coordination across this ecosystem.

Strengthen Research Compliance and Integrity

ETSU will establish an Office of Research Compliance and Integrity to coordinate oversight of IRB, IACUC, biosafety, conflict of interest, and research integrity. The office will centralize guidance and training, streamline review workflows, and expand staffing capacity to support a service-oriented culture of compliance.

Formalize a Centralized Clinical Trials Office

ETSU will formalize a coordinated Clinical Trials Office (CTO) infrastructure to support clinical and practice-based research, including feasibility assessments, regulatory submissions, contract negotiation, and compliance monitoring. The CTO will operate in partnership with ETSU Health, Ballad Health, and regional clinical partners to expand access to clinical trials across Appalachia.

Modernize Research Systems and Shared Infrastructure

Priorities include improved integration of research administration systems, development of institutional research dashboards, governance of shared research equipment, and strategic reinvestment in facilities such as Valleybrook. The university will also evaluate administrative processes supporting creative scholarship to ensure equitable infrastructure across disciplines.

Table 2. Pillar 2: Infrastructure, Systems, and Investment - Key Actions

Strategic Action	Timeline	Key Metric
Evaluate and determine the most effective organizational model for post-award administration and grant accounting	FY 2027	Organizational model defined; roles and responsibilities clarified across ORSPA, academic units, and financial operations
Standardize and coordinate the sponsored projects lifecycle across pre-award and post-award functions, including cross-unit coordination with HR, Procurement, Payroll, ITS, and Facilities	FY 2027–FY 2029	Standardized workflows implemented; reduced proposal processing and award setup times; improved faculty satisfaction
Implement a coordinated research administration network with embedded and shared service models to ensure access across all colleges	FY 2027–FY 2029	Increased access to research administration support across colleges; improved consistency in service delivery
Invest in research administration staffing, systems, and shared service capacity to support lifecycle management and research growth	FY 2027–FY 2031	Increased research administration capacity relative to baseline; improved faculty/staff satisfaction with research support
Establish the Trailblazer Research Hub as a coordinated, networked model for research development and methodological support	FY 2027–FY 2029	Increased faculty engagement, consultations, and interdisciplinary proposal development

Optimize integration of research systems and data infrastructure (e.g., ETSURGe, Voyager)	FY 2027–FY 2030	Improved real-time visibility into proposal, award, and expenditure data; increased data accessibility and reporting efficiency
Establish an Office of Research Compliance and Integrity to coordinate regulatory oversight and support efficient compliance processes	FY 2027–FY 2029	Standardized compliance workflows implemented; reduced protocol revisions; sustained review timelines within benchmarks; reduced audit findings
Formalize a Centralized Clinical Trials Office to support clinical and practice-based research	FY 2027–FY 2030	Clinical Trials Office operational; increased clinical trial activity and partnerships
Strengthen infrastructure supporting scholarship and creative activity	FY 2027–FY 2029	Gaps addressed; increased participation and visibility of scholarly and creative work

Pillar 3: Student Success Through Research Engagement

Student engagement in research emerged as one of ETSU’s most distinctive strengths and a powerful driver of recruitment, retention, and success. At the same time, stakeholders identified significant opportunities: graduate stipend competitiveness varies across programs, undergraduate research pathways depend too heavily on informal networks, faculty mentorship is often invisible in workload and promotion processes, and research opportunities lack centralized visibility. The following strategic priorities address these challenges.

Strengthen Graduate Research Support and Competitiveness

OVPR will support Graduate School-led efforts to strengthen graduate assistantship competitiveness, standardize research training (compliance, data management, responsible conduct of research), and expand graduate student participation in externally funded research.

Create Structured Pathways into Research at All Levels

ETSU will develop clear and accessible pathways from early undergraduate exposure through graduate education, expanding early research experiences, improving access across colleges, and strengthening onboarding for graduate students in thesis- and research-based programs.

Recognize and Support Faculty Mentorship

Mentorship of student researchers will be more clearly reflected in workload models and considered within tenure and promotion processes. OVPR will collaborate with Associate Deans for Research to promote effective, evidence-based mentoring practices.

Enhance Coordination and Visibility of Opportunities

ETSU will develop a centralized digital platform to serve as a hub for research opportunities, funding, training resources, and mentor connections, improving visibility and access for students across all colleges.

Optimize Institutional Structure for Undergraduate Research

A short-term working group will evaluate and recommend an institutional model for undergraduate research, including the organizational placement of the Office of Undergraduate

Research and Creative Activity, and assess ETSU’s alignment with national best practices, such as the Council on Undergraduate Research’s 11 Characteristics of Excellence.

Expand Funding for Student Research and Dissemination

ETSU will assess and align existing support for student research activities, mini-grants, travel awards, and related funding, to improve awareness and utilization, with opportunities to expand if the participation grows.

Table 3. Pillar 3: Student Success Through Research Engagement - Key Actions

Strategic Action	Timeline	Key Metric
Support Graduate School efforts to strengthen graduate assistant competitiveness and expand inclusion of graduate students in externally funded research	FY 2027– FY 2031	Increase in sponsored awards including graduate assistant support; improved competitiveness of graduate funding packages
Develop and implement coordinated onboarding for thesis- and research-based graduate students	FY 2027– FY 2028	Onboarding approach developed and implemented; increased student preparedness and participation in research
Develop and launch a centralized platform for research opportunities, funding, and mentor connections as part of the Research Hub	FY 2027– FY 2029	Platform launched; student usage and faculty participation tracked across colleges
Recognize and support faculty mentorship of student researchers through alignment with workload and promotion processes	FY 2027– FY 2029	Mentorship practices reflected in workload models and promotion guidelines; increased faculty participation in mentoring

Pillar 4: Community, Industry, and External Partnerships

External partnerships emerged as one of ETSU’s most distinctive assets, grounded in deep community roots and relationships with partners including Ballad Health, the VA, regional school districts, and community organizations. However, stakeholders consistently noted that coordination varies across the institution, partnership processes lack predictability, and visibility of partnership impact could be strengthened. The current approach is often ad hoc and faculty-dependent, with opportunity to bolster institutional support structure to achieve its full potential.

Strengthen Coordination and Access for Research Partnerships

ETSU will develop more connected and accessible approaches to partnership engagement, including exploring a coordinated point of entry (“front door”) for external partners and improving alignment across OVPR, the ETSU Research Corporation, and the Office of Community Engagement.

Deepen Anchor Partnerships with Ballad Health and the VA

ETSU will strengthen collaboration in research coordination, data access, and co-developed initiatives, improving alignment of processes and identifying shared priority areas. These partnerships represent critical opportunities to advance research, training, and community impact.

Cultivate Strategic Industry Partnerships

ETSU will expand engagement with regional industry partners, including Eastman Chemical Company, pharmaceutical manufacturers, advanced manufacturing, and emerging sectors, to support applied research collaboration, innovation, and workforce-aligned partnership development.

Embed Reciprocity and Community Voice

ETSU will engage partners in shaping research questions, approaches, and dissemination, sharing findings in accessible formats and supporting practices grounded in mutual benefit and sustained collaboration.

Improve Visibility and Storytelling of Partnership Impact

ETSU will enhance communication of partnership outcomes to external audiences through accessible formats, strengthened impact storytelling, and platforms such as a Research & Innovation Summit and the Tennessee Innovation Exchange (TNIX).

Establish a University–Industry Advisory Structure

ETSU will establish an advisory structure, in collaboration with the Research Corporation and external partners, to align research priorities with regional needs and create opportunities for structured engagement with industry, healthcare, nonprofit, and public-sector partners.

Table 4. Pillar 4: Community, Industry, and External Partnerships - Key Actions

Strategic Action	Timeline	Key Metric
Establish a coordinated and accessible approach (“front door”) for external research partnerships across OVPR and partner units	FY 2027–FY 2029	Coordinated approach defined; partner inquiries tracked; response timelines and engagement outcomes monitored
Optimize and integrate existing platforms (e.g., PURE, TNIX, web tools) to enhance visibility of research expertise and partnership opportunities	FY 2027–FY 2030	Increased partner inquiries and engagement; documented connections between partners and faculty/research units
Strengthen research collaboration with Ballad Health through coordinated engagement and shared priorities	FY 2027–FY 2029	Regular leadership engagement; priority areas identified; co-developed research activities tracked
Strengthen research collaboration with VA partners through coordinated engagement and shared research activities	FY 2027–FY 2029	Collaboration opportunities identified; joint proposals, publications, and initiatives tracked

Strengthen reciprocity through consistent return of findings and partner-informed dissemination practices	FY 2027–FY 2029	Approach defined; increased use of partner-facing outputs; evidence of partner engagement in dissemination
Enhance visibility of ETSU research and expand external engagement through coordinated storytelling and convenings (e.g., Research & Innovation Summit, TNIX)	FY 2027–FY 2029	Events and platforms implemented; partner participation and engagement tracked
Establish a University–Industry advisory structure to inform research priorities and strengthen external alignment	FY 2027–FY 2028	Advisory structure convened; recommendations generated and informing research and partnership priorities

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.

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)
- Be a model for coordinated, efficient research infrastructure and administrative systems that support growth across the research lifecycle. (Pillar 2)
- Measure and model optimal student engagement in research across undergraduate and graduate programs, strengthening recruitment, retention, and academic success. (Pillar 3)
- Expand and optimize external partnerships with regional 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, ETSU charts a path for advancing research that improves lives, strengthens communities, and expands opportunity across Appalachia and beyond.