

# DISCOVERY 2030 @ SOUTH

## Draft Strategic Research Plan Outline for Campus Community Review & Feedback

*University of South Alabama*

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This draft outline is published as a step in a community-engaged process to solicit constructive feedback on the strategic framework from faculty, staff, students, and regional partners prior to finalization. Please note that the final Discovery 2030 Strategic Research Plan will contain additional information, including metrics and processes to measure our progress toward 2030.

## 1. Executive Summary and Strategic Vision

The University of South Alabama (USA) stands at a pivotal juncture in our institutional history. As a vibrant 63-year-old institution, USA has established a robust foundation as a Carnegie R2 ("High Research Activity") doctoral university, positioning itself within the top 7% of U.S. colleges and universities for research activity. To fulfill our mission as the "Flagship of the Gulf Coast" and maximize our regional economic, health, and societal contributions, the university must accelerate its growth, remove operational barriers to scholarship, and elevate our national research standing.

The Discovery 2030 Strategic Research Plan presents a comprehensive, data-informed roadmap to systematically scale research activity, enhance doctoral education, and achieve national prominence. Designed around five core pillars, this plan directly responds to feedback gathered from a yearlong community-engaged process, and also integrates the strategic findings of the Ad Hoc Committee on Research Classification and Researcher Support (R1 Committee).

By targeting key national benchmarks—specifically aligning institutional growth with Carnegie R1 metrics (\$50M+ in annual research expenditures and 70+ research PhD graduates annually)—the Discovery 2030 plan provides a blueprint for expanding infrastructure, empowering faculty, streamlining administrative systems, and fostering external partnerships to support our faculty and students in research, scholarship, and creative activity with regional relevance and global impact.

## 2. Institutional Context and Empirical Foundations

### The R1 Committee Benchmark Framework

In 2023–2024, the Executive Vice President and Provost convened the R1 Committee to evaluate the university's research capabilities and chart a business strategy for institutional advancement. The committee's analysis highlighted that while USA's research expenditures have consistently hovered near or above the \$50 million threshold (\$54 million in FY2023), the primary deficit in reaching Carnegie R1 status lies in research doctorate production, which averaged 45.8 graduates per year over a five-year baseline.

To close this gap by 2030–2034, the R1 Report identified 24 potential strategies including targeted investments in doctoral assistantships, modernized post-award administration, competitive faculty

salaries, and expanded interdisciplinary centers. Progress has already been made on many of these strategies, including the development and implementation of new graduate programs (such as the new EdD program in education).

### Discovery 2030 Planning Process

In Summer 2025, the Vice President for Research and Economic Development initiated a research strategic planning process to identify a specific direction and actionable steps to develop and grow USA’s research enterprise in a measurable way by 2030. Complementing the R1 Committee’s macro-level metrics, the research office team conducted an intensive community-engaged process to ensure the plan reflects the unique culture and diverse voices of the university community, as shown in Table 1. As a result, we have established an ongoing campus conversation about research, one that can continue during plan implementation and assessment. Conducting this engagement phase has been a critical step in moving from "planning" to "operationalizing," ensuring that Discovery 2030 is not just a document, but a collective compact to grow our institution's quality, reputation, and impact.

Table 1: Engagement Activities

| Activity                 | # | Goal                                                                      |
|--------------------------|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Outreach Meetings        | 6 | Early conversations to get buy in from key campus partners <sup>1</sup> . |
| Town Hall Meetings       | 3 | Kickoff/mid/release meetings for broad campus engagement.                 |
| Surveys                  | 3 | Input opportunity for people who might not attend meetings.               |
| College Meetings         | 9 | Assess college climate, identify college-specific challenges.             |
| Focus Groups             | 5 | Deeper dive into identified issues with engaged participants.             |
| Action Planning Sessions | 4 | Input on priorities, research themes.                                     |

## 3. Strategic Pillars, Goals, and Strategies

### Pillar 1: Faculty-Led Research Enablement and Culture

**Goal:** By 2030, cultivate an empowering, low-friction research environment where faculty across all colleges actively lead scholarly initiatives, resulting in substantially improved faculty research satisfaction and a substantial increase in active, faculty-led sponsored projects.

- **Strategy 1.1:** Build institutional capacity for proactive funding intelligence and end-to-end support for complex, high-value proposal submissions.
- **Strategy 1.2:** Establish a research academy to cultivate scholarly leadership, cohort-based proposal writing, and grant-seeking competencies across all career stages.
- **Strategy 1.3:** Modernize academic and research policies, procedures, and structures to reduce

<sup>1</sup> This included the Faculty Senate Executive Committee, College Research Council, Institutional Planning and Assessment Committee, University Libraries, Staff Assembly, and Innovation in Learning Center.

administrative friction, protect faculty research effort, support scholarly productivity, and incentivize cross-college and external collaboration.

- **Strategy 1.4:** Institutionalize comprehensive recognition and internal advocacy networks to celebrate faculty achievements and embed research as a core university identity.
- **Strategy 1.5:** Build an integrated talent funnel that engages undergraduate students in faculty-led research and creates direct pathways into graduate research programs.
- **Strategy 1.6:** Partner with the University Library to support faculty in navigating Open Access publishing options, finding strategies to mitigate article processing charges (APCs), and expanding the reach of institutional scholarship.

## **Pillar 2: Research Operational Excellence**

**Goal:** By 2030, achieve top-tier performance in proposal processing times and post-award management while ensuring 100% regulatory compliance.

- **Strategy 2.1:** Transition to a unified, cross-functional research administration model—backed by integrated workflows and shared governance—to break down organizational silos and accelerate grant lifecycle velocity.
- **Strategy 2.2:** Establish a proactive research security and compliance framework to navigate evolving federal mandates and cultivate a shared culture of risk management across the university.
- **Strategy 2.3:** Implement a fully integrated Electronic Research Administration (eRA) architecture to automate the grant lifecycle, streamline compliance tracking, and provide real-time research analytics.

## **Pillar 3: Strategic Investment & Capacity Building**

**Goal:** By 2030, double the university's institutional research investment and establish shared cross-college research infrastructure that serves 100% of major research themes.

- **Strategy 3.1:** Build transparent institutional research inventory capabilities to maximize use of university assets, streamline cross-college team formation, and elevate the university profile.
- **Strategy 3.2:** Establish a centralized, permanent research investment fund and brokered co-investment framework to streamline and scale cross-college seed funding, faculty startups, and major infrastructure acquisitions.
- **Strategy 3.3:** Establish a standardized, federated governance and business model for university core facilities to ensure regulatory compliance, optimize F&A recovery, and maximize cross-campus use of university assets.
- **Strategy 3.4:** Establish a research impact framework to evaluate faculty performance, guide strategic resource allocation, and demonstrate regional economic and societal value.

## **Pillar 4: Strategic Priorities & Flagship Initiatives**

**Goal:** By 2030, double total external research funding in designated thematic priority areas and establish at least 3 nationally prominent, multi-disciplinary centers of excellence.

- **Strategy 4.1:** Position USA Health and the Colleges of Medicine, Nursing and Allied Health as a collaborative platform for integrated clinical research and cross-campus convergence with non-medical disciplines.

- **Strategy 4.2:** Develop a framework of interdisciplinary and translational research themes to provide strategic direction for the pursuit of federal, state, and institutional funding.
- **Strategy 4.3:** Establish a dynamic governance lifecycle for interdisciplinary centers and institutes — incorporating agile launch mechanisms, rigorous audit standards, and sunset protocols — to align resources with high-performing areas.
- **Strategy 4.4:** Build a nationally recognized research brand identity to elevate institutional prestige, attract top-tier faculty and graduate talent, and position the university for major external funding and corporate partnerships.

## Pillar 5: External Partnerships & Commercialization

**Goal:** By 2030, establish a steady-state pipeline acquiring 5–10 major corporate partners annually through licensing or master service agreements, while continually fueling the regional incubator ecosystem with university intellectual property and faculty ventures to accelerate startup creation.

- **Strategy 5.1:** Establish a centralized Corporate Engagement Gateway to unify industry access across research, talent, and technical capabilities, backed by flexible IP terms, agile contracting, and master agreement frameworks.
- **Strategy 5.2:** Establish an Innovation Hub as a physical and operational nexus for translational research, co-locating industry, health system, and federal agency partners with campus researchers.
- **Strategy 5.3:** Partner closely with the regional incubator and entrepreneurial ecosystem to connect university intellectual property, data, and faculty founders with external capital, venture mentorship, and startup creation resources.
- **Strategy 5.4:** Align university research assets and agile talent pipelines directly with Gulf Coast industry priorities.

## 4. Conclusion and Implementation Roadmap

The Discovery 2030 Strategic Research Plan is not merely an administrative exercise; it represents a commitment to empowering faculty, supporting students, and elevating the university's contribution to knowledge and society. By addressing operational bottlenecks, re-investing internal capital, and focusing resources on strategic priority areas, the University of South Alabama will secure its standing among the nation's premier research institutions.

Implementation will proceed under an adaptive governance model led by the Vice President for Research and Economic Development, working in close coordination with the Deans, Department Chairs, and the Faculty Senate. Annual evaluations tracking of research expenditures, PhD graduation rates, proposal development time, and faculty satisfaction will ensure that Discovery 2030 remains responsive, transparent, and aligned with the university's collective goals.

# APPENDIX: Strategic Mapping with Community Data

We have arrived at this point after a three-year journey, with two years of work by the R1 Committee, and one year of Discovery 2030 activities. The following tables demonstrate the empirical foundations of our proposed plan, and show that most recommendations from the R1 Committee are incorporated.

It is reasonable to ask why there was a need to extend the process and planning period. First, the R1 Committee was a group of faculty experts operating as a committee. While that committee was broadly representative of the university community, wider campus engagement activities were not part of the committee’s activities. Second, the R1 Committee was charged with making recommendations for meeting the Carnegie criteria for classification as an R1, not for all aspects of the research enterprise. Conversely, the Discovery 2030 Plan does not focus on PhD students, which is one of the two R1 classification criteria. And third, the R1 Committee was not charged with implementing its recommendations. The Discovery 2030 Plan is fundamentally about co-creating a project that will have broad adoption, implementing specific strategies and processes, and conducting formative assessments on identified metrics that will result in progress toward plan goals.

We share two directions in which to examine the connectivity between the two efforts:

- 1. **Backward:** Table 2 starts with the Discovery 2030 Plan and shows how those strategies are based on (a) Discovery 2030 input; and/or (b) R1 committee recommendations.
- 2. **Forward:** Table 3 starts with the R1 Committee Recommendations and shows how those recommendations are incorporated into Discovery 2030 strategies.

For the reasons discussed above, the mapping between Discovery 2030 and the R1 Committee recommendations is not 1:1. Some Discovery 2030 strategies arose from our stakeholder driven process and were not represented in the R1 Committee work; conversely, we felt that R1 Committee strategies that were specifically focused on graduate education were more appropriately addressed by the Graduate School.

## Backward Analysis

The following matrix illustrates how the specific strategies mapping across the five pillars correspond directly to empirical feedback and recommendations from the R1 Committee Report.

Table 2: Strategies mapped to community input and R1 report recommendations

| Pillar | Strategy                                                                     | Motivating Community Input                                                                | R1 Report Recommendation                                                      |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1      | Strategy 1.1 Proposal Intel and Support<br><br>Strategy 1.2 Research Academy | Increase focus on grant writing support, proposal mentoring, and targeted funding alerts. | Research Recommendation #8: Increase resources and support for grant seeking. |

| Pillar | Strategy                                                               | Motivating Community Input                                                                                                                      | R1 Report Recommendation                                                                                                                            |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1      | <b>Strategy 1.3 Modernized Research Policies</b>                       | In some cases, teaching loads limit available time for scholarship and grant submissions.                                                       | Competitiveness Recommendation #3: Establish transparent guidelines for teaching release time.                                                      |
| 1      | <b>Strategy 1.4 Research Recognition &amp; Advocacy</b>                | Elevate internal and external recognition for South research.                                                                                   | Not addressed                                                                                                                                       |
| 1      | <b>Strategy 1.5 UG to Grad Student Pipeline</b>                        | Develop more pipeline programs to attract and fund quality graduate students.                                                                   | PhD Recommendations #1–#7: Expand PhD production to meet the 70 graduates/year R1 benchmark.                                                        |
| 1      | <b>Strategy 1.6 Publication Support</b>                                | Need for guidance and support to assist faculty with rising publication fees (APCs) and Open Access options.                                    | Not addressed                                                                                                                                       |
| 2      | <b>Strategy 2.1 Unified Administration Model</b>                       | Facilitate the development of processes and support between administrative offices and faculty to improve efficiency and enhance collaboration. | Cultural/Policy Recommendation #2 & #3: Customer-service mentality & process simplification.                                                        |
| 2      | <b>Strategy 2.2 Proactive Compliance</b>                               | Continuously evolving federal regulatory requirements have made this a necessity, despite not being a major part of stakeholder input.          | Not addressed                                                                                                                                       |
| 2      | <b>Strategy 2.3 Integrated eRA Architecture</b>                        | Tool limitations (such as Banner) and manual post-award tracking.                                                                               | Research Strategy Recommendation #2: Modernize tracking systems and post-award software tools.                                                      |
| 3      | <b>Strategy 3.1 Inventory<br/>Strategy 3.3 Shared Core Facilities</b>  | Unequal access to equipment, lack of shared core lab facilities, high instrument costs.                                                         | Research Strategy Recommendation #10: Invest in upgrading research facilities and shared equipment.                                                 |
| 3      | <b>Strategy 3.2 Centralized Research Investment Fund</b>               | Need to enhance internal research investments.                                                                                                  | Research Strategy Recommendations #8, #10: Increase resources and support for faculty seeking external funding; invest in upgrading infrastructure. |
| 3      | <b>Strategy 3.4 Research Impact Framework</b>                          | ORED input regarding the importance of being able to measure our progress and assess how we are doing.                                          | Several of the recommendations require the identification of high-performing programs. Measuring research impact is critical to that.               |
| 4      | <b>Strategy 4.1 USA Health Integration</b>                             | Calls for better collaboration between main campus researchers and clinical health systems.                                                     | PhD Strategy Recommendation #7: Prioritize growth in programs complementing USA Health & Medicine.                                                  |
| 4      | <b>Strategy 4.2 Strategic Themes<br/>Strategy 4.3 Center Lifecycle</b> | Desire for collaborative, cross-college research hubs and sustained grant themes.                                                               | Research Strategy Recommendation #4: Facilitate and fund interdisciplinary centers and institutes.                                                  |
| 4      | <b>Strategy 4.4 Research Brand</b>                                     | Need for increased internal and                                                                                                                 | Not addressed.                                                                                                                                      |

| Pillar | Strategy                                                                         | Motivating Community Input                                                                                                                   | R1 Report Recommendation                                                                        |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|        |                                                                                  | external recognition for South research to increase our ability to recruit students and faculty.                                             |                                                                                                 |
| 5      | <b>Strategy 5.1 Corporate Gateway</b><br><b>Strategy 5.3 Regional Incubators</b> | Desire for industry sponsorships, commercialization pathways, and local business impact.                                                     | Executive Summary: Expand regional economic impact and leverage co-op industry doctoral models. |
| 5      | <b>Strategy 5.2 Innovation Hub</b>                                               | ORED input regarding the need for a structure within ORED proper to manage partnerships, investment, and strategic capture of opportunities. | Not addressed.                                                                                  |
| 5      | <b>Strategy 5.4 Regional Alignment</b>                                           | ORED input regarding the importance of institutional alignment with regional needs to capture regional partners.                             | Not addressed.                                                                                  |

## Forward Analysis

The matrix below simply lists each of the recommendations from the R1 report in the left column and then provides strategies from Discovery 2030 that are related to the R1 report recommendation.

*Table 3: R1 report recommendations mapped to Discovery 2030 strategies*

| R1 Report Recommendation                                                                                                                                         | Corresponding Discovery 2030 Strategies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cultural/Policy Strategy #1:</b> Include process improvement as a continuing component and survey research faculty for areas of targeted improvement.         | <b>Strategy 1.3:</b> Modernize academic and research policies to reduce administrative friction.                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Cultural/Policy Strategy #2:</b> Simplification (within context of required oversight) should be the goal of administrative staff and policies.               | <b>Strategy 2.1:</b> Transition to unified, cross-functional research administration model.<br><br><b>Strategy 2.2:</b> Establish proactive research security and compliance framework.<br><br><b>Strategy 3.4:</b> Modernize policies to reduce administrative friction. |
| <b>Cultural/Policy Strategy #3:</b> Wide-spread adoption of customer service-based mentality including rapid approval queues and tracking.                       | <b>Strategy 2.1:</b> Unified cross-functional research administration model.                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Cultural/Policy Strategy #4:</b> Department chairs and Deans strive to improve culture by retaining, promoting, and hiring high-expectation research faculty. | <b>Strategy 3.5:</b> Establish research impact framework and modernize faculty advancement pathways.                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Competitiveness Strategy #1:</b> Increase salary levels in research intensive departments to 50% of peer average.                                             | <b>Strategy 3.5:</b> Guide strategic resource allocation and modernize faculty advancement pathways.                                                                                                                                                                      |

| R1 Report Recommendation                                                                                                                             | Corresponding Discovery 2030 Strategies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Competitiveness Strategy #2:</b> Encourage and financially support Deans and Chairs to offer aggressive retention offers for top researchers.     | <b>Strategy 3.5:</b> Guide strategic resource allocation and modernize faculty advancement pathways.                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Competitiveness Strategy #3:</b> Reassigned/teaching release time awarded based on clear, transparent research productivity guidelines.           | <b>Strategy 1.3:</b> Realign faculty workload structures and teaching-release mechanisms.                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Research Doctorate Strategy #1:</b> Ensure forecasted PhD graduation rates are achieved and decrease time to graduation.                          | <b>Strategy 1.5:</b> Build integrated talent funnel into graduate research programs.                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Research Doctorate Strategy #2:</b> Increase self-supported or co-operative research doctorate students.                                          | <b>Strategy 1.5:</b> Build integrated talent funnel into graduate research programs.<br><br><b>Strategy 5.1:</b> Centralized Corporate Engagement Gateway for industry talent access                                                                                                                |
| <b>Research Doctorate Strategy #3:</b> Prioritize investment in existing research doctorate programs with current additional capacity.               | Out of scope for Discovery 2030. We expect that the Graduate School will lead the strategy development for increasing research doctorate graduates, with collaborative support from ORED.                                                                                                           |
| <b>Research Doctorate Strategy #4:</b> Prioritize investment in programs highly leveraged by extramural funding.                                     | <b>Strategy 4.1:</b> Position USA Health/health professions as collaborative research platform.<br><br><b>Strategy 4.2:</b> Develop a framework of interdisciplinary and translational research themes to provide strategic direction for the pursuit of federal, state, and institutional funding. |
| <b>Research Doctorate Strategy #5:</b> Increase funding for research doctorate assistantships as a mechanism to increase course/lab coverage.        | Out of scope for Discovery 2030. We expect that the Graduate School will lead the strategy development for increasing funding for research doctorate students, with collaborative support from ORED.                                                                                                |
| <b>Research Doctorate Strategy #6:</b> Identify high performing MS research programs for priority research doctorate development.                    | Out of scope for Discovery 2030. We expect that the Graduate School will lead the strategy development for increasing research doctorate graduates, with collaborative support from ORED.                                                                                                           |
| <b>Research Doctorate Strategy #7:</b> Prioritize programs that complement USA strategic investments (Medicine, USA Health, Coastal location, etc.). | <b>Strategy 4.1:</b> Position USA Health/health professions as collaborative research platform.<br><br><b>Strategy 5.4:</b> Align research assets with Gulf Coast industry priorities.                                                                                                              |
| <b>Research Strategy #1:</b> Improve record keeping and expense reporting of internal funds used for research expenditures.                          | <b>Strategy 3.2:</b> Establish centralized permanent research investment fund and co-investment framework.                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Research Strategy #2:</b> Increase complete spending on externally funded grants and contracts.                                                   | <b>Strategy 5.1:</b> Centralized Corporate Engagement Gateway for master agreements and grant execution.                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Research Strategy #3:</b> Encourage additional non-tenure track, Research Assistant, Associate, and Full Professors.                              | <b>Strategy 1.3:</b> Modernize academic and research policies, procedures, and structures to reduce administrative friction, protect faculty research effort, support scholarly productivity, and incentivize cross-college and external collaboration.                                             |

| R1 Report Recommendation                                                                                                             | Corresponding Discovery 2030 Strategies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Research Strategy #4:</b> Facilitate and support the establishment of research centers and institutes.                            | <p><b>Strategy 4.1:</b> Position USA Health as collaborative platform.</p> <p><b>Strategy 4.2:</b> Portfolio of strategic research themes.</p> <p><b>Strategy 4.3:</b> Dynamic governance lifecycle for interdisciplinary centers.</p> <p><b>Strategy 5.2:</b> Innovation Hub as translational nexus.</p> |
| <b>Research Strategy #5:</b> Provide post-award research support for faculty.                                                        | <p><b>Strategy 2.1:</b> Transition to an integrated full-cycle system for research administration, including post-award.</p> <p><b>Strategy 2.3:</b> Support eRA architecture to automate lifecycle</p>                                                                                                   |
| <b>Research Strategy #6:</b> Provide financial incentives for successful faculty members through indirect (F&A) return to PIs.       | <b>Strategy 3.4:</b> Modernize policies to incentivize cross-college collaboration.                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Research Strategy #7:</b> Create Associate Dean for Research positions in each of the Colleges and Schools.                       | <b>Strategy 1.3:</b> Modernize academic and research policies, procedures, and structures to reduce administrative friction, protect faculty research effort, support scholarly productivity, and incentivize cross-college and external collaboration.                                                   |
| <b>Research Strategy #8:</b> Increase resources and support for faculty seeking external funding for research and scholarship.       | <p><b>Strategy 1.1:</b> Build capacity for proactive funding intelligence and proposal support.</p> <p><b>Strategy 1.2:</b> Establish integrated research academy for grant-seeking competencies.</p>                                                                                                     |
| <b>Research Strategy #9:</b> Recruit additional tenure and non-tenure track faculty positions in critical and emerging technologies. | <b>Strategy 4.2:</b> Establish portfolio of strategic research themes and back with dedicated funding.                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Research Strategy #10:</b> Invest in upgrading research facilities, equipment, and technology infrastructure.                     | <b>Strategy 3.1:</b> Build transparent institutional research inventory capabilities.                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |