

A business strategy for the University of South Alabama to transition from a Carnegie Research Classification of R2 to R1.



Presented to: Dr. Andrea Kent, Executive Vice-President and Provost, University of South Alabama

A Consensus report of the University's Ad Hoc Committee on Research Classification and Researcher support.

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Executive Summary

The University's *Ad Hoc* Committee on Research Classification and Researcher Support

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Improving the University's environment for research and doctoral education is a critical component of the University of South Alabama's (USA) growth and maturation as the Flagship of the Gulf. Currently, USA is ranked as a high research activity doctoral university (Carnegie R2), this is a remarkable achievement for a university just 60 years old and this achievement should be a source of pride for USA faculty, staff, students and alumni. USA is in the top 7% of all U.S. universities in terms of research accomplishments. In the Fall of 2022, The University President and Executive Vice President (EVP)/Provost authorized an *Ad Hoc Committee* to explore whether the University should pursue a Carnegie very high research activity (R1) ranking. The Committee recommended in March 2023 that the University should proceed with the development of an R1 Business Strategy. With approval, the Committee developed this plan to outline improvements to existing levels of support for research and graduate studies that would enhance the research and graduate education missions of USA and place USA in the R1 tier – the top 3% of universities. After a pause, as the Committee waited for Carnegie to disclose their plan to revise the ranking criteria, the process resumed in November 2023. The new ranking criteria resulted in two clear benchmarks that USA would need to meet in order to progress to R1 status: graduate 70 research doctoral students annually and reach annual research expenditures of \$50 million a year. Currently, USA research expenditures (internal and extramural) average \$48.9 million a year and Ph.D. research graduates have averaged 49 per year over the last four years. Last year (AY 2024 for graduates and FY 2024 for expenditures) showed the highest values for both parameters with 60 research doctorates and 55.2 million in research expenditures.

Because USA has continued a long-term trend of increasing grant expenditures and adding research doctorate programs, USA is on a trajectory to achieve R1 status. Accelerated investment may decrease the time frame necessary to achieve and maintain an R1 ranking. Improving the environment for research should be a goal of USA regardless of the Carnegie ranking because a more active research environment benefits faculty and students at all levels and furthers USA's mission. Achieving an R1 ranking is simply an outward sign to the state and nation, as well as prospective students and faculty, that USA is on a trajectory of continuous and sustained improvement. After presentation of detailed analysis of USA's growth in research and doctoral education, national university statistics, and a review of relevant R2 to R1 transition plans from other universities, the Committee's report offers action items and strategies under a four-part plan:

- I. University-Wide Cultural and Policy Changes Needed
- II. Increase Competitiveness in Retaining and Recruiting Outstanding Faculty
- III. Increase Research Doctorates Graduates
- IV. Increase Research Awards and Expenditures.

Many of the strategies the Committee suggests under these broad components have already been implemented and we offer suggestions for expansion and increasing their effectiveness. Other strategies represent new initiatives that have worked at other institutions who made the transition

to R1. Some of these strategies can be implemented or scaled at minimal costs, while other strategies involve additional investment. Where possible, the Committee has included cost estimates to better inform the University administration of the potential costs.

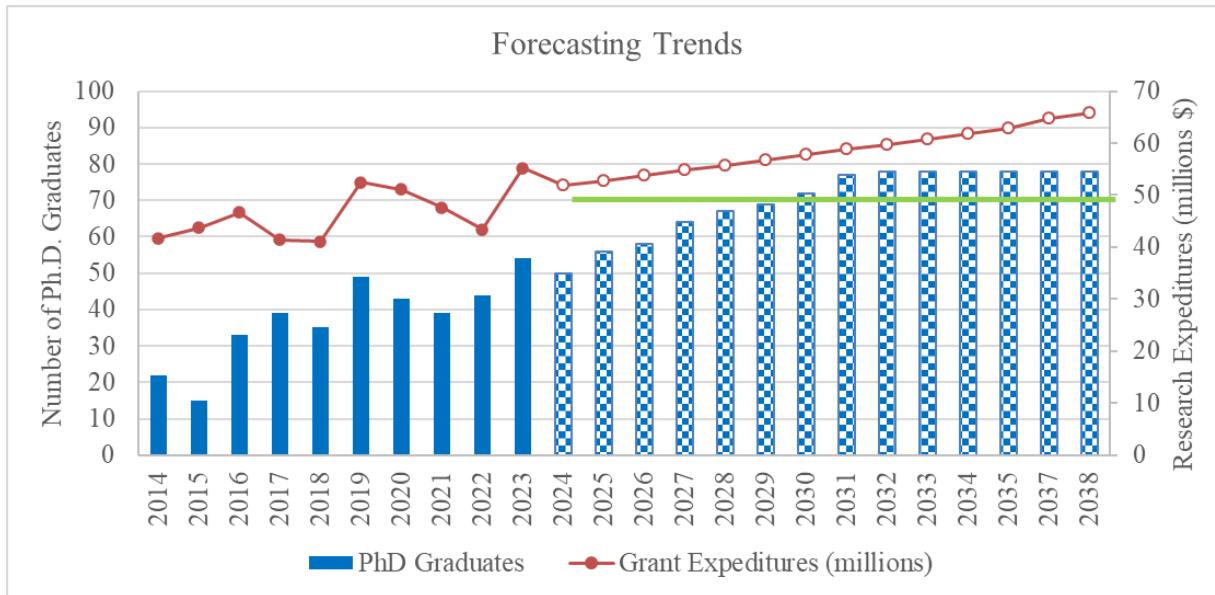


Figure. Growth in research doctorates (blue bars) and research expenditures (red line) over time at USA.

For research doctorates solid blue bars indicate actual historic values and blue checkered indicate forecasted trends from graduate coordinators with no additional investment other than those committed. Actual research expenditures are indicated by a solid red circle while open red circles are based on a 2.2% annual increase. Green line reflects the Carnegie 2025 target for separation between R1 and R2 (70 research doctorates and \$50 million in research expenditures).

The Committee's analysis demonstrates that if USA continues investment in Research doctorates programs at its current rate, then USA is on currently on a trajectory to meet the Carnegie benchmarks for the Carnegie Classification that will be conducted in 2034. Because degree completion requires time (3-5 years depending on program), the Committee acknowledges the obvious fact that USA will not be included in the R1 tier of universities in 2025. R1 ranking in 2028 would require a more rapid growth in research doctorates than forecasted. Immediate investment in existing research doctorates programs that can support enrollment growth and ensure relatively rapid matriculation (e.g. Business Administration, Systems Engineering) would be necessary. Even with this immediate investment, 2028 will require aggressive graduation timelines be met for current research doctorates students in all programs. Carnegie will use the three-year average (2025-2027) for their 2028 and later analyses and not the single year high point option that will be available in 2025. Achieving R1 during the 2031 is possible with relatively small increases in current forecasts and accelerated investment in existing research doctorate programs, aggressive monitoring of degree completion timelines and quick implementation of any new programs. Sustaining an R1 ranking following the 2034 classification will rely on continued expansion of existing research doctorate programs and the creation of at least two new research doctorate programs. Research doctorate graduates are the largest deficit USA faces in achieving an R1 ranking now. However, current and

predicted research expenditures at the current growth rate, which barely exceeds inflation, places USA precariously on the bubble of R1/R2 and highly vulnerable to the Carnegie Ranking Systems decision on what pace to increase the expenditure benchmark.

Priority strategies for achieving R1 in the near term are (1) implementing an accounting and tracking system that fully captures USA internally funded research expenditures and (2) continuing current and promised investments in existing and approved research doctorate programs. Both strategies come at relatively little additional costs above which has already been committed. A more costly component that must be implemented is to ensure continued increase in faculty salaries, which is necessary to ensure high research achieving faculty are retained. It is critical that these faculty be awarded competitive salaries. Sustaining R1 status will require other strategies be adopted over the longer-term. Importantly, real increases in internal research investment, which have decreased over the last decade, as well as increases in extramurally funded research awards, will be critical.

Summary Table. Four major components of the proposed USA R1 Business Strategy with specific strategies are listed under each major component. Note the Committee's strategy is not based on adoption of all strategies, but we offer the full list to facilitate choosing the set of strategies that fits USA's strengths and budget reality.

## I. UNIVERSITY-WIDE CULTURAL AND POLICY RELATED CHANGE

***Cultural/Policy Change Strategy #1: Include process improvement as a continuing component and survey research faculty for areas of targeted improvement.***

***Cultural/Policy Change Strategy #2: Simplification (with the context of reasonable and truly required oversight and compliance) should be the goal of all administrative staff and policies.***

***Cultural/Policy Change Strategy #3: Wide-spread adoption of a customer service-based mentality on the part of support staff and administrators that includes rapid attention to items in approval queues, tracking of necessary paperwork, and feedback to researchers as critical elements.***

***Cultural/Policy Change # 4: Department chairs and Deans should strive to improve departmental research culture by retaining, promoting and hiring research faculty that truly embrace a culture of high research expectations.***

## II. INCREASE COMPETITIVENESS IN RETAINING AND RECRUITING OUTSTANDING FACULTY

***Competitiveness Strategy #1: Increase salary levels in research intensive departments to 50% of peer average as soon as possible.***

***Competitiveness Strategy #2: Encourage and financially support Deans and Department Chairs to offer aggressive retention offers especially for faculty in the top 25% of extramurally funded researchers.***

***Competitiveness Strategy #3: Reassigned/teaching release time should be awarded only on the promise of high research productivity (publication, grantsmanship). Deans should establish clear guidelines (publication or grant submission targets) that should serve as an objective and transparent assessment of teaching release time.***

### III. INCREASE RESEARCH DOCTORATE PRODUCTION AT USA

**Research Doctorate Strategy #1:** Ensure forecasted Ph.D. graduation rates are achieved and where possible, decrease time to defense/graduation in existing programs.

**Research Doctorate Strategy #2:** Increase self-supported or co-operative research doctorate students.

**Research Doctorate Strategy # 3:** Prioritize investment in existing research doctorate programs with current additional capacity.

**Research Doctorate Strategy # 4:** Prioritize investment in programs where University funding can expect its investment to be highly leveraged by extramural funding sources at high ratios (1:2 to 1: 4).

**Research Doctorate Strategy # 5:** Increase funding for research doctorate assistantships as a mechanism to increase course (lab) coverage.

**Research Doctorate Strategy # 6:** Identify high performing MS research programs without current research doctorate programs for priority development.

**Research Doctorate Strategy # 7:** Identify programs that complement USA strategic investments (Medicine, USA Health, Coastal location, etc.).

### IV. INCREASE RESEARCH AWARDS AND EXPENDITURES AT USA

**Research Strategy #1:** Improve the record keeping and expenses reporting of internal funds used for research expenditures.

**Research Strategy #2:** Increase complete spending on externally funded grants and contracts.

**Research Strategy # 3:** Encourage additional non-tenure track, Research Assistant, Associate and Full Professors.

**Research Strategy # 4:** Facilitate and support the establishment of research centers and institutes.

**Research Strategy # 5:** Provide post-award research support for faculty.

**Research Strategy #6:** Provide financial incentives for successful faculty members through some level of indirect return to the PI.

**Research Strategy #7:** Create Associate Dean for Research positions in each of the Colleges and Schools.

**Research Strategy # 8:** Increase resources and support for faculty seeking external funding for research, academic innovation and scholarship.

**Research Strategy # 9:** Recruit additional tenure and non-tenure track faculty positions in critical and emerging technologies.

***Research Strategy #10: Invest in upgrading research facilities, equipment, and technology infrastructure.***

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