Discovery 2030 @ South: Moving Forward with Research at the University of South Alabama

CO-PRESENTED BY

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September 9, 2025

AGENDA
- Welcome
- ORED Presentation
- Pre-submitted Q&A
- Audience Q&A

USA

UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH ALABAMA

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The AI tool Gamma was used to assist with image generation and some formatting.

Today's Presentation

Winds of Change:

- The Road to Carnegie R1
- Fiscal Year 2025
- Enrollment Cliff
- Artificial Intelligence

Our Response:

- Open for business
- One-Year Plan
- Five-Year Plan

The Road to Carnegie R1

- We have a substantial research focus among many of our faculty and programs already.

- This means that the activities of these faculty will result in our reclassification in the next few years.

- **We need to figure out what to do when we cross that threshold.**
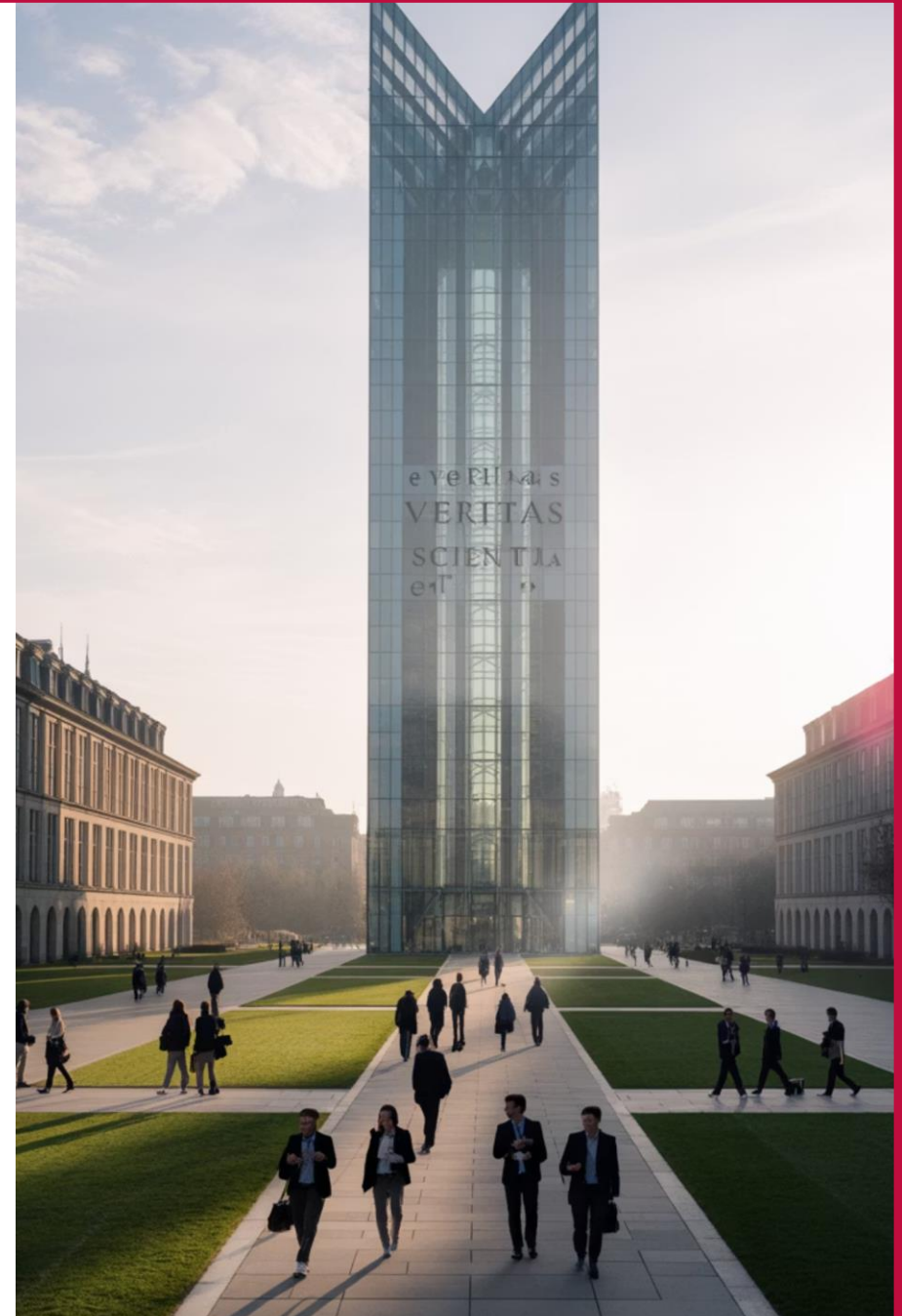
Carnegie Classifications of Research Institutions

R1: Doctoral Universities – Very High Research Activity

- Annual Research expenditures > $50M
- Annual Research doctorates > 70
- 187 institutions

R2: Doctoral Universities – High Research Activity

- Annual Research expenditures > $5M
- Annual Research doctorates > 20
- 139 institutions

USA $70.4M
59

RCU: Doctoral/Research Universities

- Annual Research expenditures > $2.5M
- 216 institutions

USA By the Numbers

University of South Alabama website — Flagship of the Gulf Coast — Find your place at South

$70.4M in research expenditures in FY2024

59 Research Doctorates in AY24-25

225th nationally in Total R&D funding (top quartile)

30th/150 nationally in research expenditures for Ocean and Marine Science

h-Index of 60

Where Are We Today?

Crossing the R1 threshold will happen in next few years

Metrics:
- $70M in FY2024 research expenditures (need $50M)
- 59 Research Doctorates (need 70)

R1-Level assets:
- LID BSL-3 lab
- Technology Park
- Mitchell Cancer Institute
- Some pre-eminent scholars with high profile articles and high h-indexes
- Hardware cybersecurity
- SAIL Lab for carbon capture
- Coastal resilience assets, including wave flume and SSOMES

Sustaining R1 will take intentionality and investment


Challenges:
- Small number of research-focused graduate students
- Recruiting and retaining faculty with limited R2-level resources
- Faculty teaching loads are high
- Need more research equipment and infrastructure
- Our limited portfolio makes us less competitive for the kinds of large-scale, transformative funding opportunities that would move the needle.

Two Pathways

The "Do Nothing" Pathway
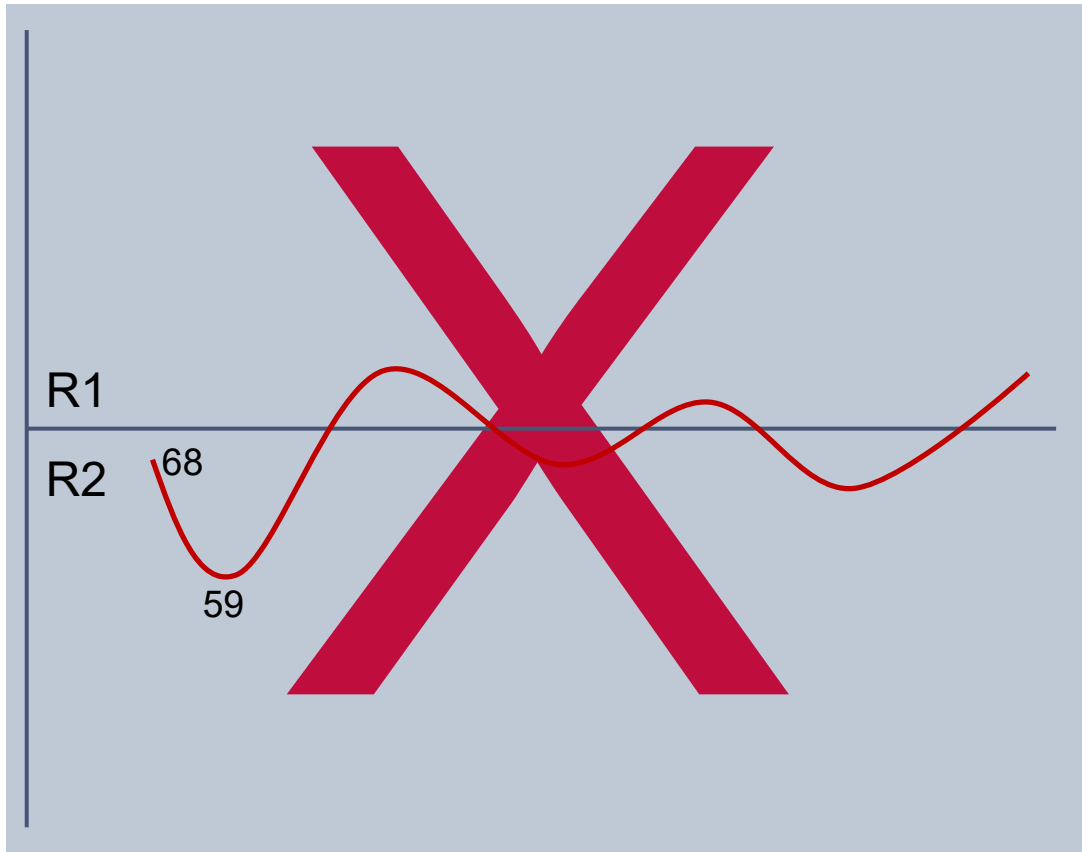
A Strategic, Sustainable Pathway
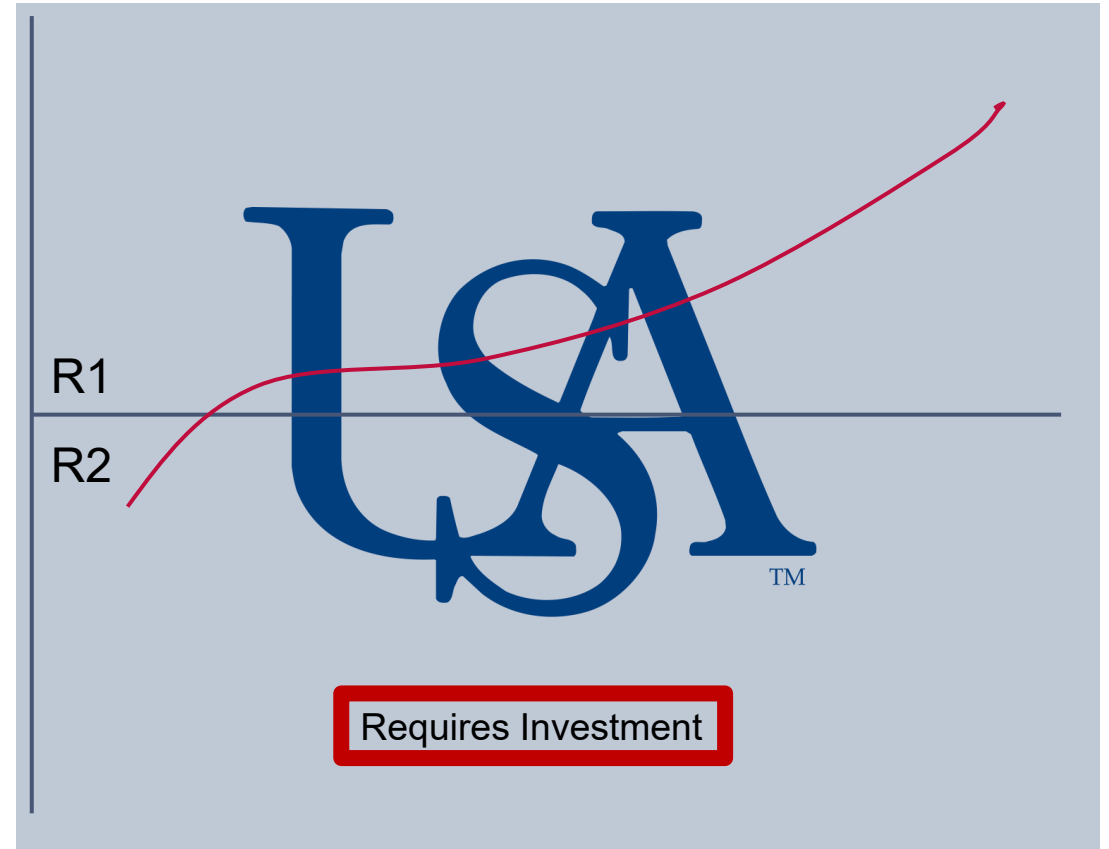
Two Ways to Invest for Growth

Capital-First Model

Large upfront investment in new resources

Immediate capabilities for community

Performance Expectations commensurate with investment

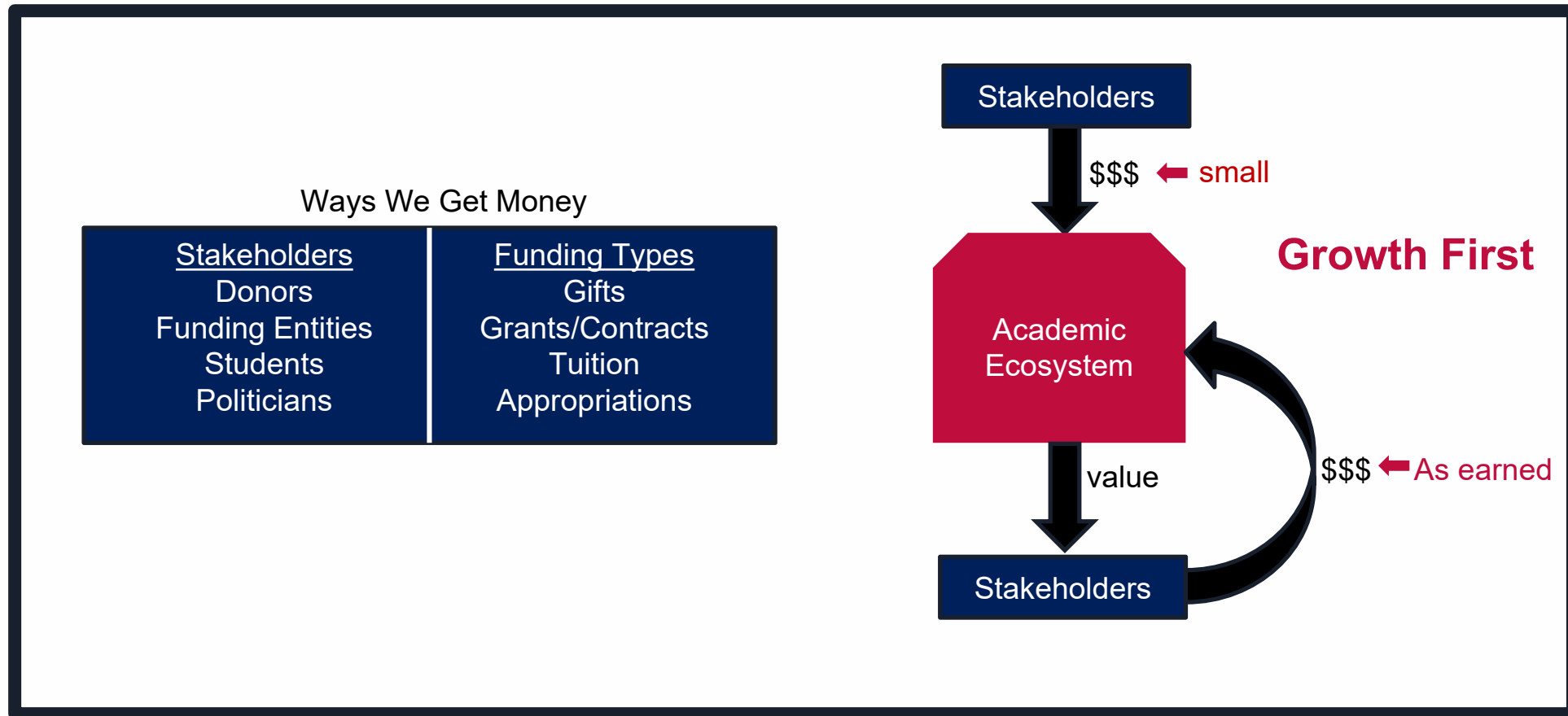## Growth-First Model

Inspire growth with limited capital

Revenue reinvested for expansion

Performance Expectations evolve with growth

Most universities choose the **growth-first** model for strategic expansion because they have to. We are no exception.

A Simple Investment Model

Ways We Get Money

Stakeholders	Funding Types
Donors	Gifts
Funding Entities	Grants/Contracts
Students	Tuition
Politicians	Appropriations

Stakeholders

$$\$\$\$ \leftarrow \text{small}$$

Growth First

Academic Ecosystem

value

$$\$\$\$ \leftarrow \text{As earned}$$

Stakeholders

Fiscal Year 2025

At USA we have had some researcher departures, policy shifts at the federal level, and leadership change in the research office. These areas have impacted the USA research enterprise.

University of South Alabama: FY2025 Research Awards

FY 2024 VS FY 2025 Awards to Date

FY2024 - $43,092,768
FY2025 - $26,398,028

FY 2024
FY 2025

$16.9M in SPA to be awarded
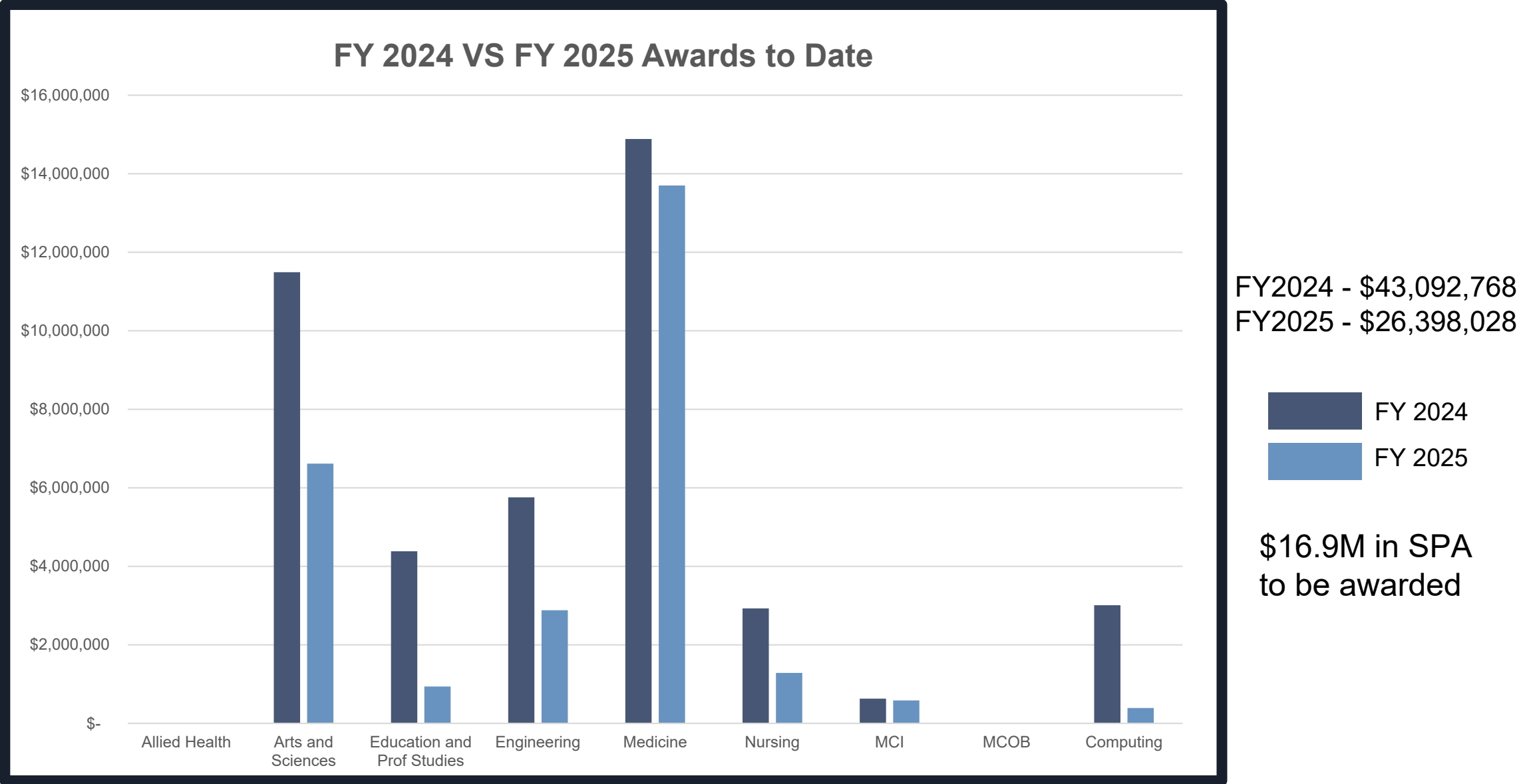
University of South Alabama: FY2025 G/C Expenditures

FY2024 vs FY 2025 Expenditures
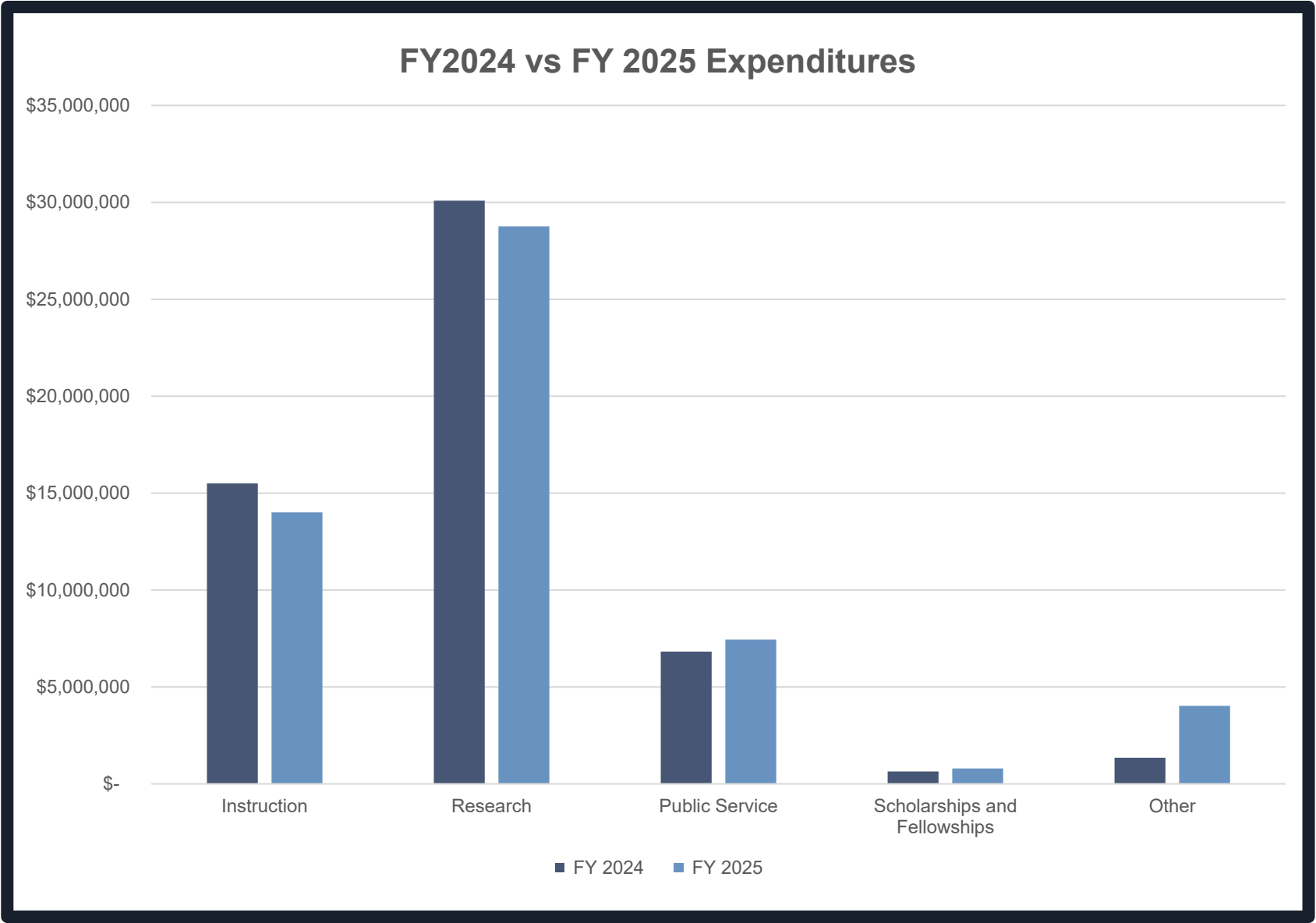
FY2024 - $54,406,240
FY2025 - $55,035,128

FY 2024
FY 2025

Federal Agencies and Funding: General Outlook

- It is still too early to know what the federal appropriations will be, or whether a budget will even be passed.

- However, we do know that appropriations committees in both houses rejected most of the topline cuts to R&D agencies.

- A likely scenario is that a continuing resolution will be passed for the remainder of the calendar year as Congress attempts to reconcile their funding proposals, although a government shutdown remains possible.

- Existing federal funding opportunities remain open, but few new opportunities are being issued currently due to the August 7 EO.

- Although many lawsuits are still ongoing, issuance of new awards has significantly slowed overall.

- The reduction in opportunities and awards is expected to continue in the near term.

Emerging Research Opportunities

Despite current challenges, strategic areas present significant avenues for growth and leadership.

Enhanced Industry Collaboration

Forge stronger partnerships with the private sector for new funding streams, shared resources, and applied research.

Strategic Priority Fields

Align research efforts with national priorities: AI, national security, energy, advanced manufacturing, and workforce skills.

Seizing the Moment

Leverage this period of flux to attract top talent and lead in critical research areas while competitors hesitate.

Enrollment Cliff

Beginning in 2026, higher education faces a demographic challenge: a significant decline in student enrollment. This "cliff" is driven by a drop in birth rates decades ago, reshaping the landscape for colleges and universities nationwide.

The Numbers Tell the Story

15%	**2025**	**80**
Projected Decline	**Peak Year**	**Potential Closures**
Traditional college-age students, 2025-2029	High school graduates reach maximum before decline	Additional colleges at risk over four years

Northeast and Midwest hit hardest • South and West more stable

Pathways to Resilience

To navigate the enrollment cliff, institutions must strategically diversify their student populations and revenue models.

Broaden Student Base

Target adult learners, international students, and online programs to offset traditional declines.

Innovate Academic Offerings

Develop stackable credentials, vocational training, and interdisciplinary programs to meet new demands.

Strengthen Retention & Outcomes

Enhance student support services and career readiness to improve success rates and retention.

Diversify Revenue Streams

Explore corporate partnerships, applied research, and philanthropy beyond tuition.

AI's Transformative Role: Education & Employment

Exploring how artificial intelligence is reshaping academic landscapes and influencing the pathway for our students into the modern workforce.
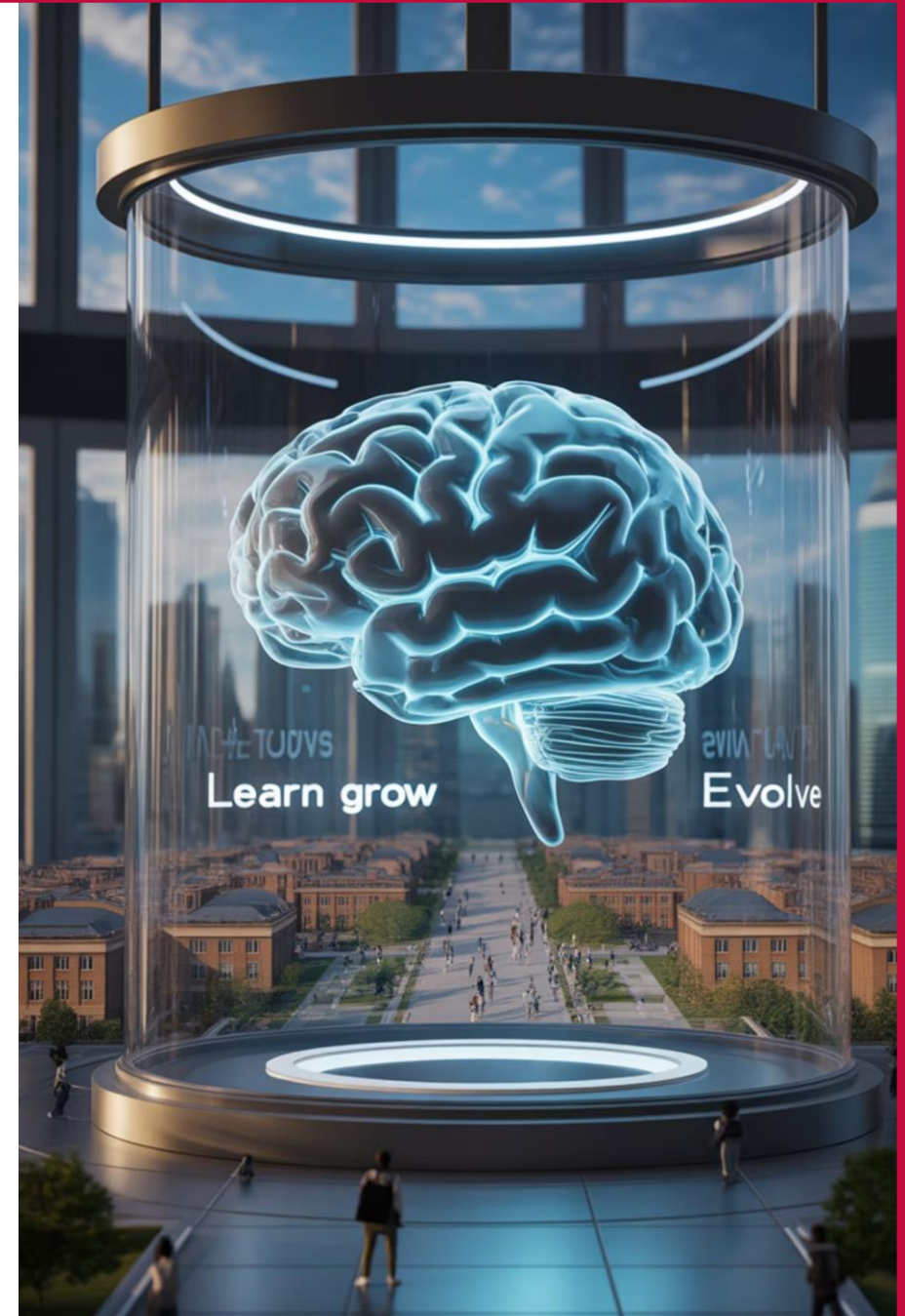
AI Has Reshaped Entry-Level Job Market

13% decline in employment for ages 22-25 in AI-exposed roles since late 2022

Automation Impact

AI eliminates routine tasks: debugging code, data entry, customer queries

Broken career ladder for new graduates

Skills Evolution

AI literacy now essential

Human skills valued: critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence

New Opportunities

Hybrid roles with AI-augmented tasks

Emerging jobs: prompt engineering, AI ethics, data curation

Blue-Collar Comeback

College graduates pivot to trades

Physical presence, human interaction remain AI-resistant

Hiring Revolution

AI screens resumes and video interviews

Skills and projects matter more than university prestige

⚠ **Bottom Line:** Four-year degree no longer guarantees a traditional white-collar job. Success requires adaptability and uniquely human skills.

University Adaptation in the AI Era

A university's research enterprise is uniquely positioned to help navigate AI's impact on entry-level jobs, transforming education from content-based to skills-based models.

1

Re-orient Academic Programming

Research informs curriculum shifts to emphasize AI literacy, critical thinking, and human-centric skills over rote knowledge. Programs prepare students for adaptability and lifelong learning.

2

Create AI-Augmented Campus

Develop AI tools for student support and personalized learning environments. The university becomes a living laboratory for AI integration and faculty training in new pedagogies.

3

Build Industry Partnerships

Collaborate on joint research, establish advisory boards, and focus on real-world problem-solving. This aligns academic offerings with industry needs, creating direct employment pipelines.

Winds of Change: Strategic Imperatives

1 **R1 Is Here**

Our research-active faculty are actively growing the institution towards achieving R1 status just by pursuing their individual professional activities.

2 **Defining Our R1 Future**

Our growth strategy must include investment in additional resources. Without that investment, we will remain on the margins of R1/R2.

3 **Research can help us in our teaching mission.**

There is a myriad of innovation needed to become resilient enough to respond to the enrollment cliff and to incorporate AI pervasively into our curricula. Our research enterprise can provide this innovation.
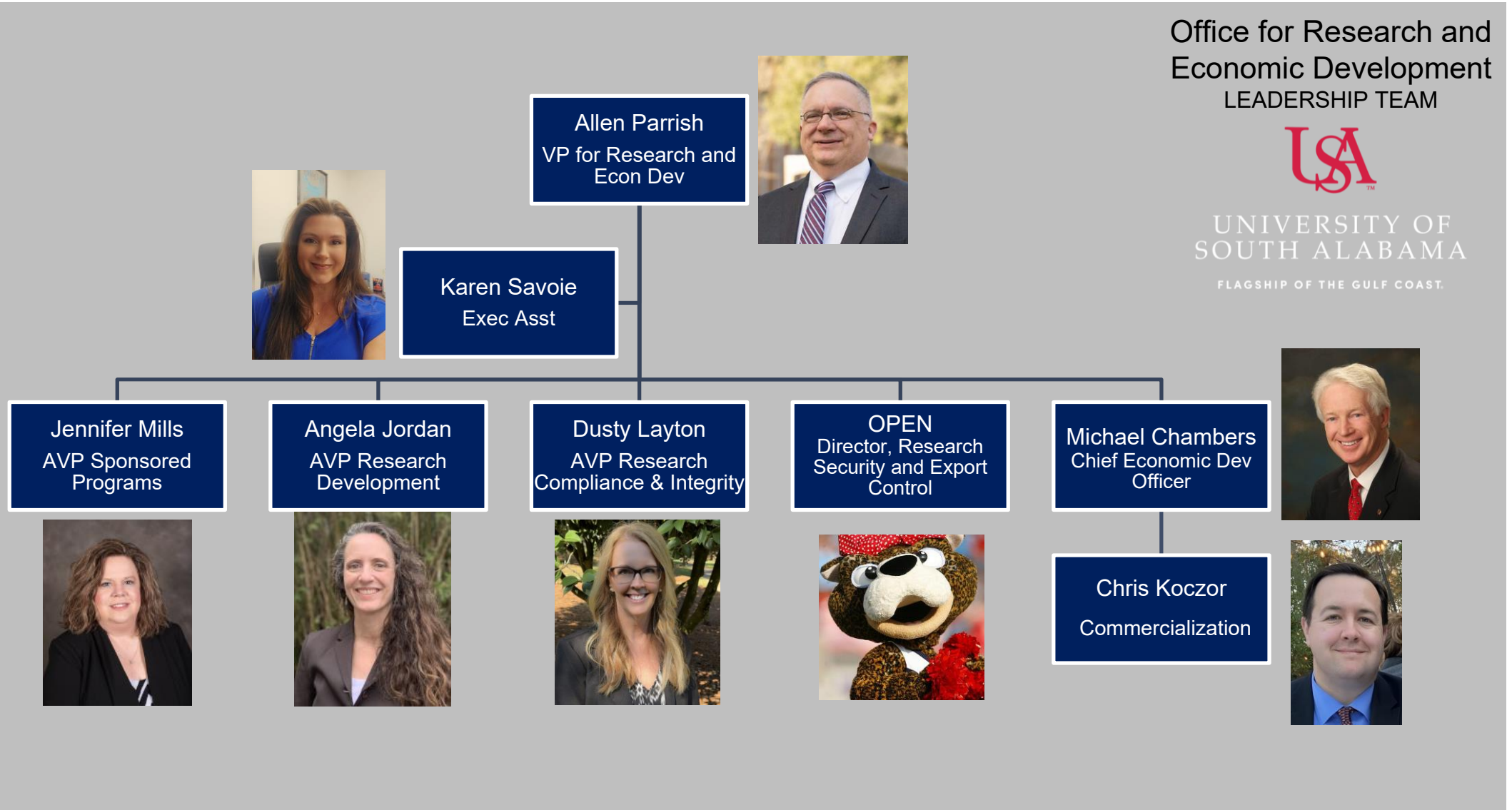
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Our Response:

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- One-Year Plan
- Five-Year Plan

Open For Business

Open For Business

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Michael Chambers Economic Development	michaelchambers@southalabama.edu (251) 460-8140	Business engagement, Economic Development, Coordination of services to support industry partners, innovation projects
Chris Koczor Innovation and Commercialization	cakoczor@southalabama.edu (251) 460-7905	Licensing, patents, intellectual property, commercialization
OPEN Research Security and Export Control		Research security, export controls, classified and CUI research, malign foreign influence

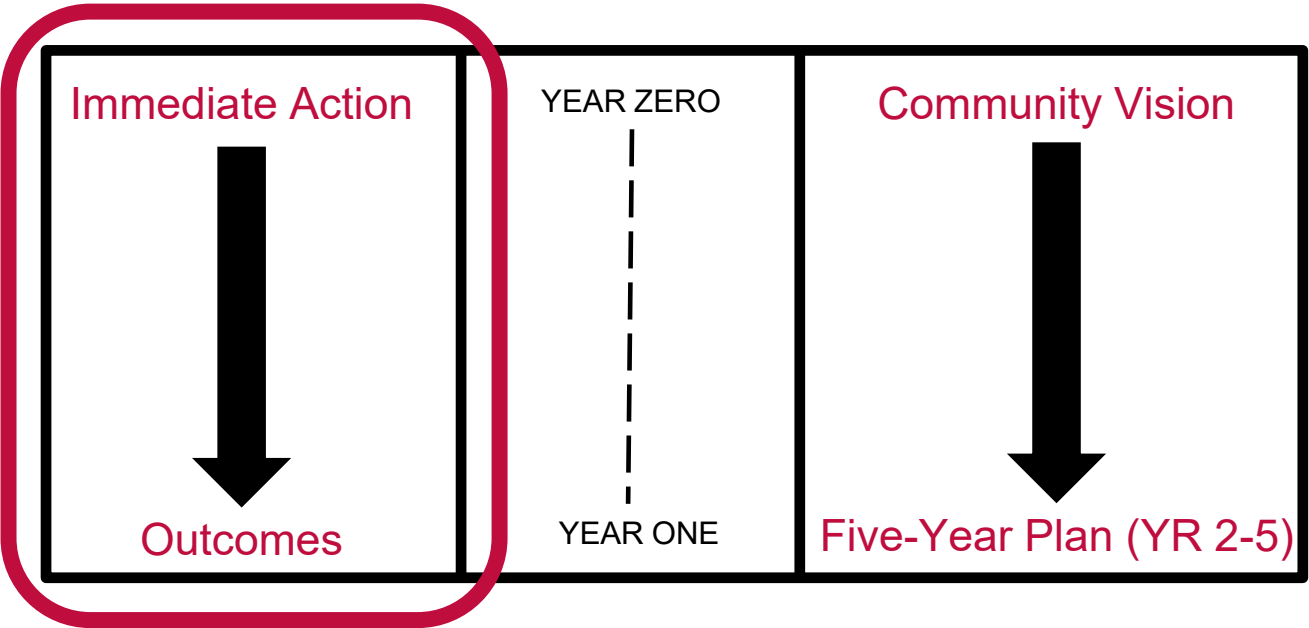# One-Year Plan

Immediate Action

Focused one-year research plan launching now

Community Vision

Collaborative five-year strategic plan developed with full research community

Immediate Action

↓

Outcomes

YEAR ZERO

YEAR ONE

Community Vision

↓

Five-Year Plan (YR 2-5)

ⓘ **Next Steps:** Quarterly reviews will integrate one-year outcomes with evolving five-year roadmap for shared success

Foundations of the One-Year Plan

Our strategic one-year plan is built upon three core pillars, designed to drive sustainable growth and enhance our overall impact.

Expanding Research Portfolio

We aim to significantly grow our research portfolio, fostering innovation and increasing our global impact in key scientific and technological domains. This portfolio will continue to support existing research & curiosity-driven research in general

Strengthening Industry Partnerships

Securing robust industry sponsorships and collaborations is crucial to diversify funding and complement traditional government engagement, ensuring long-term sustainability.

Connect Research to Education

Utilize the research enterprise to improve educational outcomes, align programs to employer needs, and provide experiential learning opportunities for students.

Expanding Research Portfolio

Goal
Increase grants and contracts.

Why?
Bring in money to expand research resources and infrastructure.

Strategic Approach
- Strengthen ORED as a customer service organization.
- Increase efficiency of research administration processes.
- Support legacy research already in place.
- Support curiosity-driven research of all kinds.
- Identify and broker grant opportunities.
- Lead strategic team science proposals.
- Positively impact the culture to get faculty interested and motivated to participate

Strengthening Industry Partnerships

Goal
Increase master service agreements with industry partners and provide integrated horizontal services to partners.

Why?
To grow research infrastructure, capacity, and opportunity.

Strategic Approach
- Create a "hub" to coordinate this activity.
- Identify areas where we can go viral and create breakthrough opportunities.
- Create strategic partnerships from the breakthrough opportunities.
- Provide horizontal services for each partnership.
- Deploy generative AI to create customized one-stop solutions for each partnership

Connect Research to Education

Goal
Perform workforce research and precision talent alignment to support the needs of industry through improved graduates and better alignment of university outcomes to employer needs.

Why?
Stronger employer connections drive expanded partnership opportunities and revenue streams

Strategic Approach

- Workforce Research – Identify industry workforce needs and demands, structuring the outcomes in a way that is useful for the university to meet.
- AI Powered Gap Analysis and Mitigation
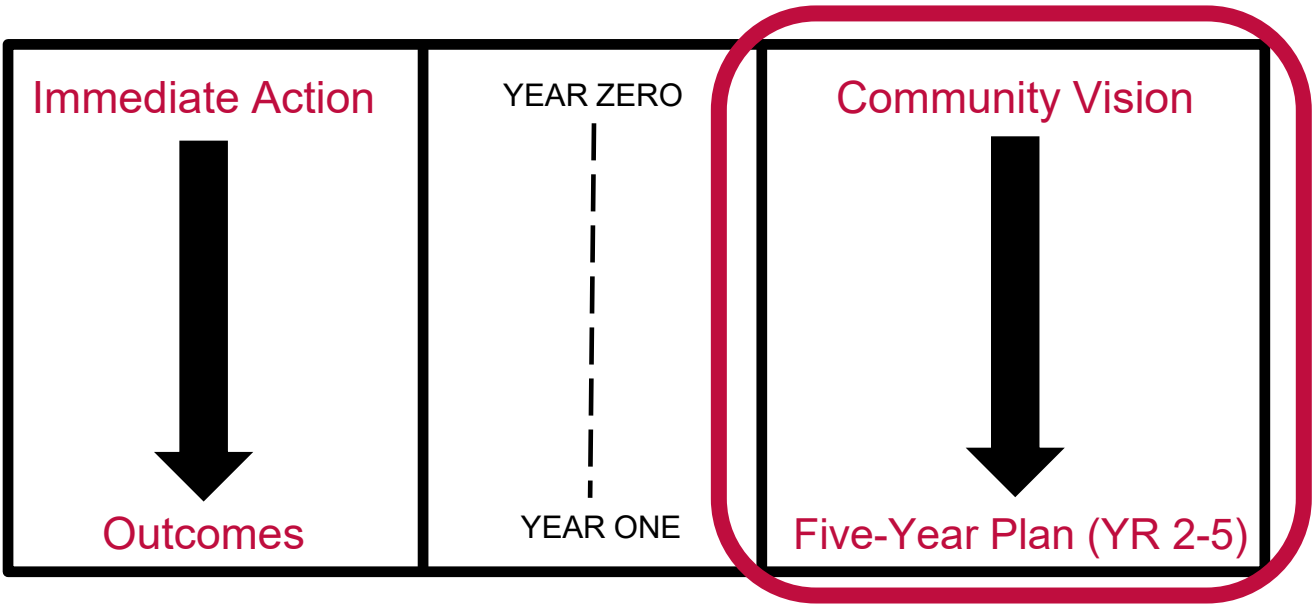- Provide experiential learning opportunities to fill some of the gaps.

Five-Year Plan

Immediate Action

Focused one-year research plan launching now

Community Vision

Collaborative five-year strategic plan developed with full research community

Immediate Action

YEAR ZERO

Community Vision

Outcomes

YEAR ONE

Five-Year Plan (YR 2-5)

ⓘ **Next Steps:** Quarterly reviews will integrate one-year outcomes with evolving five-year roadmap for shared success

Five-Year Plan

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Strategic Research Plan Development Initiative

Plan Development Framework

Year 1 Foundation   Building on current initiatives and establishing stakeholder engagement processes across all university divisions

Collaborative Development   Stakeholder-driven approach ensuring broad input from faculty, administrators, and research community leaders

Five-Year Vision   Strategic roadmap spanning 2025-2030 with measurable outcomes and milestone assessments

Strategic Funding Integration

Every strategy must align with identifiable funding streams from our four major revenue sources:

Philanthropic Gifts

Major donor initiatives and alumni contributions supporting breakthrough research programs

Contracts & Grants

Federal agencies, industry partnerships, and foundation awards driving innovation

Tuition Revenue

Graduate program expansion and research-integrated educational experiences

State Appropriations

Legislative support for public research mission and economic development impact

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Stakeholder Engagement

Extensive feedback sessions & other opportunities to p...

...ous Process

...alignment with organizational goals.

Strategic Plan Document

Comprehensive roadmap with actiona...

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A Research Strategic Plan

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✓ **Ready to Guide Ou**r

A clear roadmap for actionable growth.

It Takes A Village

Researchers

Driving discovery and innovation

Teachers

Inspiring minds and building futures

Student Success Staff

Supporting every step of the journey

Industry Engagement

Building bridges to real-world impact

Career Development

Preparing students for success

Continuing Education

Fostering lifelong learning

When we work together, we create something extraordinary

Research Strategic Planning Timeline

Phase 0: Develop Strategy Foundations

- Engage campus partners
- Develop strategic planning plan
- Prepare impact brief
- Develop funding strategies

Phase 1: Data Collection

- Town hall (September 9)
- Surveys
- College meetings
- Focus groups

Phase 2: Analysis & Action Plan

- Data analysis
- Town hall (early Feb)
- Surveys
- Action planning

Phase 3: Finalize & Operationalize

- Release Draft Plan
- Begin process to finalize & operationalize by Fall 2026

June 2025 — Fall 2025 — Spring 2026 — May 2026 — Fall 2026

Ways to Participate

- Surveys (Baseline, College, Ongoing Process Feedback, Midpoint)

- Town Halls (Kickoff, Midpoint, Roll-Out)

- "College" Meetings (includes colleges, schools, and USA Health)

- Focus Groups (by invitation; campus partners will be asked for names)

- Ongoing Campus Partner Engagement

- Suggestions for External Partner Engagement

- Visit our website for updates, documents, and other resources.

Acknowledgement: These Are Tough Conversations!

- We have many institutional constraints; resources are not limitless.

- We have many external pressures as part of the higher education industry, federal changes, and rapidly changing technology.

- As a community of diverse voices, can we imagine together what a thriving research future at South looks like?

- We need many conversations to help identify what is needed to get there.

- Our goal is to facilitate the conversations where this can happen…

- …but we need YOU to participate!

Resources

- Website:

  https://southalabama.edu/departments/research/strategicplan/

- Baseline Survey:

  https://tinyurl.com/USARSPQuestions

- Ongoing Process Feedback:

  https://tinyurl.com/usarspfeedback

Join Us!

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Why Join Us?

- Help us to identify opportunities to impact the local, regional and national communities.

- Contribute your unique skills and perspectives to drive impactful results.

- Provide alignment that will ensure that our efforts impact the economic growth and well-being of the Gulf Coast region.

- Help us make the world a better place and make the University of South Alabama a world-class institution that will catalyze our region.

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Pre-Submitted Questions

Thanks to those of you who submitted questions in advance!

We received over 30 questions.

We hope that our presentation has addressed some of them, but of course we can't get to them all today.

Today we will be answering a selection of questions from major themes.

We will post a full Q&A on our website.

How will the university attract and retain top-tier faculty, as well as retain existing faculty?

How will pre- and post-award research administrative support be functionally increased to meet the demands and requirements of faculty at an R1 institution?

Will there be planned investment in physical research infrastructure (e.g. labs, instrumentation, facilities)?

Do you expect to see increased investment across departments to facilitate increased research overall, or will it be confined to departments that are already research-intensive?

What supports can be provided to help faculty balance teaching and research?

Audience Q&A

Upcoming ORED Events

Research Services Orientation: Week of September 22nd

Annual Research & Technology Showcase: October 21

Fall Research Networking Event: Date TBD

Discovery 2030 College Meetings: occurring throughout the semester

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