Turning on the RADAR: Detecting Signals and Navigating Higher Education's Complexity

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Introduction

When storms gather in the skies, pilots rely on radar – not guesswork – to chart a safe course. Radar provides real-time information about approaching weather systems, turbulence, and potential hazards, allowing pilots to anticipate danger and steer clearly around all hazards. By scanning the skies for patterns of precipitation and wind shear, radar helps aviators map alternative routes, avoid severe conditions, and maintain stability even in the most unpredictable environments. Without radar, pilots would be flying blind, vulnerable to sudden shifts and unseen threats.

In much the same way, higher education leaders need a system that scans the horizon of public opinion, detects emerging patterns before they become crises, and filters out the static of sensational headlines.[1] This system must distinguish genuine signals – shifts in priorities, expectations, and trust, among other critical variables – from the noise of partisan rhetoric and

[1] Of course, the same could well be said in terms of the need to stand watch for headwinds associated with state and federal legislation, as well as forecasting financial market trends that also might buffet higher education in part or in full.

fleeting trends. Like radar guiding a pilot through turbulence, such a framework enables leaders to chart alternative routes, anticipate obstacles, and adjust course with precision and confidence. But just as radar requires skilled interpretation, universities need their own version of air traffic controllers – professionals who can translate signals into coordinated action. Without such guidance, universities risk flying blind into storms of public skepticism, vulnerable to sudden policy shifts and eroding confidence.

Yet, astonishingly, many university leaders operate as if such radar systems and advanced warning personnel are unnecessary. They rely on instinct, tradition, and anecdote rather than systematic intelligence about public sentiment. This complacency leaves institutions exposed to sudden storms of criticism, legislative backlash, and declining trust – forces that could have been anticipated and mitigated with the right tools. In an era where perception often drives policy, ignoring the signals on the horizon is not just shortsighted; it is perilous. Universities cannot afford to fly blind when the skies are darkening, or worse.

Radar alone does not keep planes safe, however. Pilots depend on air traffic controllers, those trained professionals who interpret radar signals, anticipate conflicts, and coordinate responses across a complex network of flights. Controllers do more than relay information; they provide judgment, prioritize risks, and issue clear instructions that keep everyone aligned.

Higher education needs its own version of air traffic controllers. These are members of leadership teams who not only monitor public opinion dashboards but also help to translate signals into coordinated action. They interpret patterns, weigh competing priorities, and communicate decisions across governance structures. Just as controllers maintain situational awareness for multiple aircraft, university leaders and their teams must maintain awareness across multiple constituencies – students, faculty, legislators, and the public – thus ensuring that responses are timely, coherent, and strategic.

Without this human layer, even the most sophisticated radar system – or the most advanced AI – falls short. Data without interpretation is noise. Signals without coordination lead to confusion. The air traffic controller metaphor reminds us that leadership is not passive; it is active, interpretive, and relational. Universities need leaders who can see the big picture, anticipate turbulence, and guide their institutions safely through crowded skies, even as AI becomes part of the cockpit.

Building Out a Public Opinion Radar System

The solution begins with building a true “public opinion radar”—a system grounded in continuous, data-driven listening rather than sporadic surveys or reactive PR. This means investing in longitudinal panels, sentiment analysis, and predictive modeling powered by AI to track shifts in trust, expectations, and priorities over time. Such a framework should integrate insights from diverse stakeholders – students, parents, alumni, legislators, and community members – into an intelligent dashboard that leaders can consult routinely, much the same as

pilots who check their radar and other instruments. Yet, as in aviation, instruments alone are not enough; universities need interpreters – air traffic controller equivalents – who ensure that signals lead to timely, strategic decisions. By institutionalizing these sorts of activities, universities can move from guesswork to foresight, transforming turbulence into navigable airspace.

And make no mistake, public universities (as well as their private counterparts) are flying through some very turbulent skies right now, a near perfect storm of political polarization, rising costs, uneven enrollment trends, and eroding trust. For example, we see from various Gallup and Pew Research Center polls that confidence in higher education has dropped from 57% in 2015 to 36% in 2023, with only a modest rebound to 42% as reported in 2025 (Fry et al., 2024; Gallup & Lumina Foundation, 2025; Jones, 2024). These shifts in confidence are reflective of evolving public expectations about any number of issues and concerns, including funding priorities, financial aid fairness, rural vs. urban engagement, and rankings (Gavazzi & Gee, 2022).

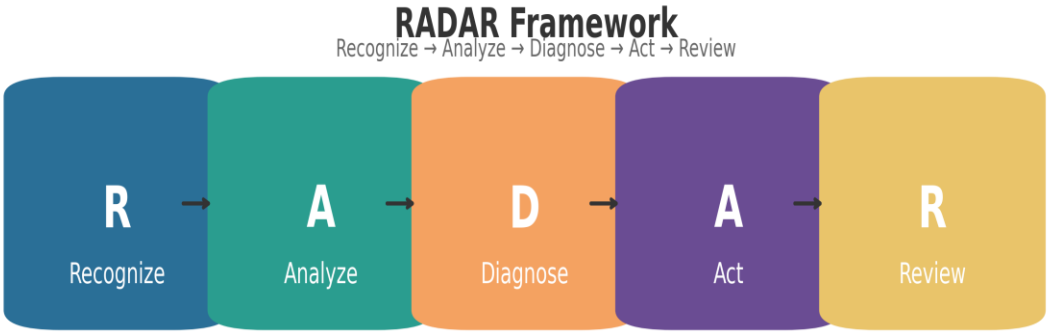
If universities are to navigate these turbulent conditions successfully, leaders need more than awareness – they need a disciplined framework for scanning, interpreting, and responding to signals from the public. This is where the concept of a "radar system" moves from metaphor to method. Just as pilots rely on structured protocols to interpret radar data and adjust their flight paths, higher education leaders require a systematic approach to monitoring public sentiment and translating insights into action.

RADAR Framework

One such framework, adapted from organizational safety practices, is the RADAR model (Mandt System, 2017), which offers practical guidance for anticipating risks and making informed decisions. As applied to the realm of higher education, RADAR can become much more than a metaphor – ultimately, it is a framework for action. More specifically, each letter represents a critical function in building an early warning system that continuously monitors and responds to public sentiment:

- **R – Recognize** emerging signals by systematically gathering data from diverse stakeholders and sources on issues that specifically pertain to higher education.
- **A – Analyze** patterns and trends using rigorous methods, including longitudinal data gathering procedures, that help to distinguish meaningful shifts from background noise over time.
- **D – Diagnose** the implications of these trends for institutional priorities, policies, and reputation.
- **A – Act** on insights through proactive strategies that address concerns before they escalate into crises.
- **R – Review** outcomes and recalibrate the system to ensure continuous improvement and responsiveness.

Together, these steps can create a dynamic feedback loop – a true radar system that helps university leaders and other higher education constituents anticipate turbulence and make course corrections, all the while maintaining trust within an increasingly unpredictable environment.



Applying the RADAR System

To illustrate how the RADAR system might work in practice, our attention turns to a recent longitudinal study that was completed on public perceptions of higher education. Findings from the first wave of data collection, which were gathered in spring of 2021 during the early months of the Biden administration, have been comprehensively reported elsewhere in the *What's Public About Public Higher Ed?* book that was written by two of us (Gavazzi & Gee, 2021). Using the American Population Panel, a team of researchers contacted respondents across nine states to examine several key issues that were thought to shape how everyday Americans view higher education, including how universities use taxpayer money, their focus on climbing national rankings, how they support students through financial aid, and the balance they strike between service to rural and urban communities.

Your authors wrote about this effort in a 2022 article in Inside Higher Ed. In general, we asserted that public universities often fail to communicate their values to citizens, focusing instead on prestige-driven metrics like rankings and amenities that most people do not care about (Rosowsky, Gee, & Gavazzi, 2022). More specifically in terms of the survey work we covered, we noted that the initial findings suggested that Americans – regardless of political affiliation – wanted taxpayer dollars spent primarily on teaching (about $46 of every $100), with the remainder split between research ($28) and community outreach ($26). This bipartisan consensus was thought to offer a strategic roadmap for universities and legislators to align funding priorities with public expectations, rebuild trust, and emphasize accessibility, affordability, student success, and community engagement over superficial branding efforts.

Now fast forward to the follow-up survey that was administered in the spring of 2025, during the early months of the second Trump administration. Using a longitudinal approach – asking

the same individuals the same questions at multiple points in time – this study is thought to provide a rare and insightful look at how Americans' views on public higher education had evolved over a four-year period (Gavazzi, 2025). In fact, the findings from this effort tell a story of both change and continuity. For example, using taxpayer dollars to support university teaching activities grew stronger, even as enthusiasm for community engagement efforts declined. Views on student financial aid moved toward balance, with more respondents favoring an equal mix of need-based and merit-based assistance. Geographic equity also gained traction, as citizens increasingly endorsed the idea that universities should be serving rural and urban communities equally. At the same time, the perceived value of national rankings – seen as important by a little less than half of the participants – stayed pretty much the same.

However, perhaps most striking of all findings was the fluidity of political identity within the sample of survey participants, and how that orientation impacted perceptions of higher education. Astonishingly, nearly 30 percent of participants changed their party affiliation during the study period, and those changes were all over the map. Democrats became Republicans, Republicans became Independents, and so on. Additionally, whether or not a survey respondent kept or changed their political orientation really mattered in terms of their viewpoints on higher education issues. For example, those participants who shifted their political orientation to a Democratic affiliation in 2025 were significantly more likely to support increased university spending on teaching than were more longstanding Democrats. In fact, these newly affiliated Democrats placed a higher priority on teaching expenditures than any other political group, including both longstanding and newly affiliated Republicans.

These sorts of findings underscore the importance of moving away from one-time snapshot analyses of public opinion and toward more longitudinal methods. This is especially critical when examining the connection between political affiliation and attitudes toward higher education. In reality, knowledge of a respondent's current political affiliation at any single point in time tells only half the story. Understanding how and why that affiliation has shifted over months or years provides deeper insight into what the public truly expects from higher education.

Equally important, these analyses should not remain at the national level alone. Regionalized and local studies can uncover variations in opinion shaped by state policies, community values, and economic conditions – factors that often exert more influence on institutional reputation and enrollment than broad national trends. By combining longitudinal tracking with geographically nuanced research, universities can move beyond surface-level interpretations and develop strategies that resonate with the communities they serve. Just as air traffic controllers maintain situational awareness across multiple flight paths, universities need experts who can synthesize diverse data streams – national, regional, and local – into coherent strategies.

More broadly, these findings underscore a central truth: public opinion is dynamic, and universities that fail to track the evolution of public sentiment over time risk flying blind into storms of skepticism and policy backlash. Which gets us back to the illustration of how the

RADAR system might work in practice. Recall that the first step is to recognize emerging signals, and that requires systematic listening. The longitudinal study using the American Population Panel described above, which followed respondents across nine states over four years, captured how attitudes toward public higher education evolved in real time. Unlike cross-sectional surveys that offer only a single snapshot, this design revealed dynamic changes in priorities such as growing support for teaching, declining emphasis on community engagement, and bipartisan movement toward balanced financial aid. By committing to this sort of continuous listening, universities can detect early indicators of change before they crystallize into crises.

Recognition alone is not enough, however. Universities must analyze these signals to separate meaningful trends from background noise. The longitudinal study illustrates why rigorous analysis matters: tracking the same respondents over time uncovered ideological divides in certain funding priorities, and yet also established broad political consensus on issues like rural versus urban engagement. These patterns would have been invisible in a one-time survey. Robust analysis transforms raw data into actionable intelligence, ensuring that leaders respond to enduring trends rather than reacting to short-term fluctuations.

Once patterns are analyzed, institutions must diagnose their implications for strategy and reputation. For example, declining support for community engagement suggests that the classic public university mission – to apply teaching and research activities directly into the public domain – may be losing visibility in the public eye. Similarly, tepid concern about national rankings may signal the need to purposefully shift away from prestige-based metrics and thus move more squarely toward practical concerns like affordability and fairness. Diagnosing these shifts in sentiment will allow leaders to anticipate where public expectations are headed and to align institutional priorities accordingly – before external pressures force more reactive change.

Diagnosis subsequently must lead to decisive action. The longitudinal evidence generated from the study portrayed above points to clear opportunities: when respondents expressed growing support for teaching and balanced financial aid, universities could respond by reallocating resources toward instructional quality and balanced student aid programs. Likewise, bipartisan consensus on rural and urban engagement should drive renewed investment in community partnerships across geographic divides. Acting on these data-driven insights allows universities to position themselves as proactive rather than reactive, reinforcing sustained trust and continued relevance in the process.

Finally, universities must review outcomes and recalibrate strategies through continuous feedback loops. Our study underscores why this is critical: nearly 30% of respondents changed their political affiliation between 2021 and 2025, and in the process reshaped their views on funding priorities and engagement. Public opinion is not static. Instead, it evolves with political identity, economic conditions, and cultural narratives. By institutionalizing processes such as the RADAR system described throughout this chapter, universities can remain agile, adjusting themselves as new data emerge and maintaining alignment with the values of the communities they are designed to serve.

Conclusion

The RADAR model offers higher education leaders a practical framework for anticipating turbulence and steering toward stability. By recognizing signals, analyzing patterns, diagnosing implications, acting decisively, and reviewing outcomes, universities can move from guesswork to foresight. In an era where perception often drives policy, turning on the RADAR is not optional – it is essential for maintaining trust and relevance in an increasingly unpredictable environment.

It is worth noting that most higher education leaders are not trained to conduct public opinion surveys, just as aviators rely on specialists to interpret radar data. Pilots depend on air traffic controllers to translate complex signals into actionable guidance. In a similar way, university leaders should recognize that turning on their "radar system" (i.e., valuing and investing in public opinion research) is only the first step. The real impact comes from partnering with experts who can analyze and interpret that data to inform strategic decisions. Increasingly, these experts can leverage AI-driven analytics to detect patterns, forecast trends, and provide leaders with timely insights that go far beyond what traditional methods can deliver. Ultimately, what matters most is a more sustained commitment to listening; those institutions that pay attention to public sentiment are far better equipped to earn trust and navigate the challenges ahead.

Further, the interpretation of what radar scans are revealing requires specialized skill sets. This means seeking out and empowering internal experts – social scientists, institutional researchers, and communication specialists – who can analyze patterns, diagnose implications, and recommend strategies. These professionals serve as the academic equivalent of air traffic controllers; in essence, they transform raw signals into navigable flight paths. Without their expertise, even the most sophisticated listening systems will produce little more than noise. Leadership in this context is not about doing everything alone; it is about building teams that combine foresight with interpretive skill, ensuring that universities respond with clarity and confidence in turbulent skies.

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