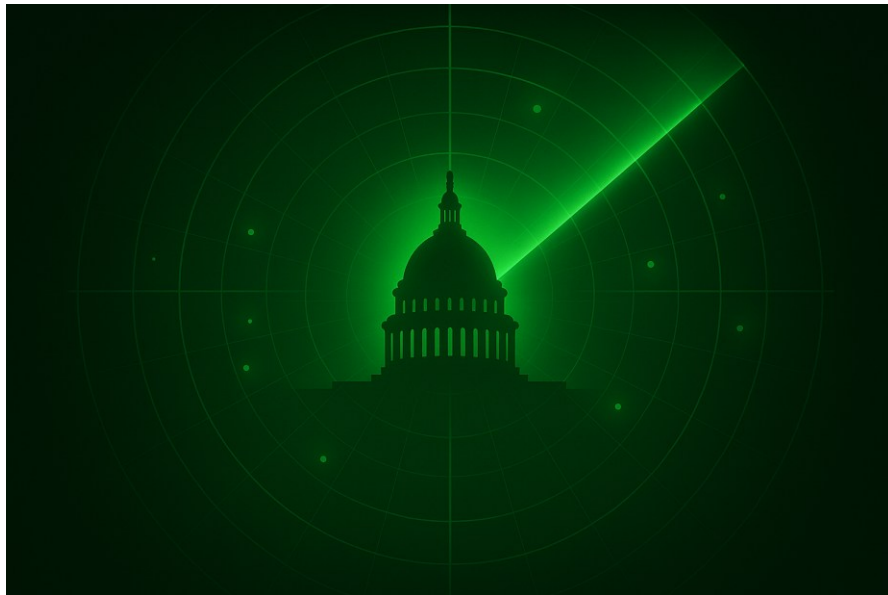


Restoring Trust: Continuous Listening and the Civic Mission of Universities

Stephen M. Gavazzi, David V. Rosowsky, and E. Gordon Gee



Introduction

American higher education stands at a crossroads. Public confidence in universities is uneven, civic literacy gaps persist, and political polarization continues to shape perceptions of what colleges should teach and how they should operate. At the same time, universities are being asked to do more than confer degrees – they are expected to prepare graduates for democratic participation and to demonstrate integrity in teaching, research, and community engagement. These expectations raise a critical question: How can institutions track and respond to signals about trust and civic education before they become crises?

This paper advances the **RADAR model** as a practical framework for continuous listening and action. Rather than relying on isolated data points or reactive strategies, RADAR emphasizes five interconnected phases – Recognize, Analyze, Diagnose, Act, and Review – that enable leaders to identify emerging trends, interpret their meaning, and respond in ways that strengthen public trust. We apply this model to recent survey findings on civic knowledge and trust in public universities, using these data as an early warning system for higher education leaders. Our goal is to move beyond passive observation and toward an active strategy: leveraging today's insights

to inform decisions that build credibility, expand civic learning, and create a foundation for longitudinal tracking. With those objectives in mind, we turn on the RADAR.

The RADAR Model in Plain English

The RADAR model is a simple way for university leaders to move from one-off data points to continuous, actionable listening in five phases:

- **Recognizing** signals that matter by asking the public the right questions regularly.
- **Analyzing** what the signals mean by translating numbers into plain language and practical insights.
- **Diagnosing** the implications for mission, brand, and relationships with communities.
- **Acting** on findings in visible, credible ways.
- **Reviewing** what changed and recalibrating, ideally with longitudinal tracking of the same indicators.

In our [original article](#) introducing the RADAR model, we illustrated how longitudinal data transforms leadership from a reactive approach to a more proactive stance by enabling continuous listening and action. Our public perceptions of higher education study included survey responses first collected in the spring of 2021 during the early months of the Biden administration; we then returned to those same respondents four years later, at the start of the second Trump administration. More specifically, this study's findings revealed dynamic shifts in public priorities – such as growing support for teaching, steady funding for research, a declining emphasis on community engagement, and evolving views on financial aid, service to urban and rural communities, and local versus international impact – alongside fluid political identities that impacted the value that survey participants placed on these higher education issues.

This study's design allowed us to track changes in public opinion over time, revealing dynamic shifts in priorities that would have been invisible in a single snapshot. For higher education leaders, this survey approach offers a strategic advantage: it provides foresight into emerging trends, enabling institutions to anticipate challenges and align their actions with evolving public expectations rather than reacting after the fact.

Much of the evidence summarized in the present article comes from several cross-sectional survey questions that were fielded in 2025 as part of CHRR at The Ohio State University's multiyear effort to listen to the public about higher education. The cross-sectional nature of this data means we are looking at a snapshot in time rather than following the same responses repeatedly to see how they might change. As a result, we cannot make causal claims ("X causes Y") or say how opinions are shifting month-to-month or year-to-year. What we can do is shine a

spotlight on some important signals we are detecting – most specifically, patterns in civic knowledge and trust – that universities should begin to track longitudinally. In particular, trust is exactly the sort of variable leaders should monitor over time, along with related indicators like perceived political bias, confidence in academic research, and support for civic education.

Here, we apply the RADAR model to the 2025 trust and civic education findings, which – as we noted above – represent only a single point in time (for now). Our goal is to demonstrate how these data can serve as an early warning system for university leaders and governing board members. Specifically, we highlight the signals that demand immediate attention and outline the indicators that should be monitored going forward. By doing so, we aim to move beyond passive observation and toward a more active strategy: using today’s insights to inform decisions that strengthen public trust and civic engagement, while building a framework for tracking trends that will reveal whether interventions are working over longer time periods.

R — Recognize: What the Public is Telling Us

What we learned first: civic knowledge has gaps, but the appetite for civic education is real. When asked a straightforward question – *Does your state have its own constitution?* – only 57% of respondents answered correctly (all states have their own constitution). Roughly a third said “don’t know.” That’s a simple, telling measure of civic literacy. Yet when asked how much emphasis public universities should place on civic education, a strong majority leaned positive: nearly two-thirds said universities should place “quite a lot” or at least “some” emphasis on civic education. People who demonstrated higher civic knowledge were more likely to value civic education. In plain terms: the more people understand the basics of government, the more they want universities to teach those principles.

What we learned next: public trust is uneven across what universities do. Trust remains highest when people think about the core promise of a good education, with roughly six in ten respondents expressing “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust on that dimension. Trust is lowest around the idea that teaching is free of political bias, where fewer than half of the respondents express high trust. In between sit trust in research (“accurate and unbiased”) and trust that universities prepare good citizens. The takeaway from these results: the public distinguishes between different roles universities play, and their confidence varies accordingly.

A — Analyze: Plain-Language Interpretation of the Signals

Civic literacy is uneven, but support for the role that universities play is broad: The mix of “correct,” “incorrect,” and “don’t know” responses on a basic civics question suggests the public is not uniformly grounded in civic facts. Still, people across the spectrum – left, right, and center – see value in universities doing more with civic education. That is an opening, not a barrier.

Trust is multi-dimensional: It is helpful to think of trust not as a single element but as a multifaceted concept that offers different lenses for understanding public confidence in higher education. *Outcome-based trust* refers to whether universities provide a good education, and this dimension tends to be relatively strong. *Process-based trust* focuses on whether teaching remains free of political bias, which is comparatively weaker. *Knowledge-based trust* concerns whether university research is accurate and unbiased, falling somewhere in the middle. *Civic-based trust* relates to whether universities adequately prepare students to be citizens, which is somewhat middling. The bottom line is that if we only ask the general question, “Do you trust universities?” we miss these nuances – and with them, the opportunity to improve on the specific dimensions where trust is weakest.

Trust and civic education move together—at least in this snapshot: People who report higher trust in their state’s public universities also tend to express more support for civic education. In a cross-sectional picture, that’s a modest but meaningful positive relationship. It does not prove cause and effect, but it strengthens the argument that civic education and trust are linked in the public mind.

D — Diagnose: What it Means for Mission and Reputation

Civic education is both a service and a signal: Expanding civic education – assuming it is done well – helps students learn how institutions work, how to engage productively across differences, and how to contribute to community life. Equally important, it signals to the broader public that universities are showing up for the health of our democracy, not just the economics of the degree.

Trust deficits concentrate around perceived bias: Concern about political bias is a pressure point. If the public doubts the neutrality of instruction, it can erode confidence across other areas, even where outcomes (like graduation or job placement) are strong. Universities need to name this concern and show how they safeguard viewpoint diversity, academic freedom, and classroom neutrality.

Research trust matters beyond the lab: Skepticism about whether research is “accurate and unbiased” has consequences for everything from public health to environmental policy to local economic development. The trustworthiness of the research enterprise must be protected and explained, and definitely not assumed.

A — Act: Practical Steps Universities Can Take Now

First, universities should make civic education tangible and visible. This means embedding civic competencies across general education courses, such as understanding how local government works, evaluating evidence, and participating civilly in public discourse. Universities also should offer community-based civics labs where students and faculty collaborate with local

governments, schools, and nonprofits to address real-world issues. In addition, institutions can host regular civic forums – structured, moderated dialogues across differences – with transparent ground rules and clear learning objectives to foster constructive engagement.

Second, higher education institutions need to protect and demonstrate classroom neutrality. Universities should publish clear statements at the department level affirming their commitment to viewpoint diversity and academic freedom in teaching. Faculty can reinforce this transparency by including learning objectives, evidence standards, and norms for civil debate in their syllabi. Institutions also should provide professional development to help instructors facilitate discussions across differences and separate analysis from advocacy. Finally, inviting external reviewers to observe and advise on courses that address controversial topics can further strengthen public confidence in the neutrality of classroom instruction.

Third, institutions of higher learning need to strengthen research trustworthiness and public understanding. Universities should adopt plain-language summaries for public-facing research that clearly explain methods and limitations. Expanding open science practices – such as data access, reproducible code, pre-registered studies, and open publishing – can further demonstrate transparency. Institutions also should partner with local media and community organizations to explain what “unbiased research” means and then strengthen all appropriate safeguards to ensure integrity. Finally, creating community advisory boards for research-intensive institutes – composed of local educators, nonprofit leaders, business representatives, and civic organizations – can help improve relevance and build trust by involving stakeholders directly in the process.”

Fourth, skeptics should be engaged directly and respectfully. Universities should identify communities where trust in higher education is lowest and invite residents to participate in listening sessions led by neutral facilitators. These conversations need to focus on hearing concerns rather than defending institutional positions. Building on this input, institutions can then engage in a structured co-design process – such as those facilitated by the [University Design Institute](#) – to develop pilot projects with local leaders that address pressing civic needs, including improving access to voting information or supporting public health initiatives. Finally, universities should report back regularly on what was heard, what actions were taken, and what outcomes were achieved, ensuring transparency and accountability throughout the process.

Fifth, universities need to build a “Trust Dashboard” and turn it on. Here, there should be a strong commitment to tracking the five core trust indicators introduced in our higher education study – overall trust, trust in research, trust in teaching neutrality, trust in providing a good education, and trust in citizenship preparation – on a regular schedule. These trust measures should be paired with metrics on civic education, including availability, participation, and perceived value. Results then could be broken down by region, community type, and/or

stakeholder group as needed and desired in service to identifying noteworthy patterns and then targeting more problematic areas with appropriate interventions. Finally, institutions should share these findings through a public dashboard that explains definitions, trends, and actions taken, reinforcing transparency and accountability.

R — Review: What to Monitor over Time (and Why Longitudinal Studies Matter)

The cross-sectional snapshots highlighted here may provide valuable early warning signals, but they cannot show how opinions evolve over time. Longitudinal tracking – repeatedly measuring the same indicators with the same or carefully matched respondents – reveals both direction and momentum. For trust and civic education, universities should measure these indicators at regular intervals, perhaps biannually but at least once a year, and keep the questions identical to enable trend analysis. They should also track changes within specific cohorts, such as graduating classes or communities engaged in pilot efforts, to assess whether actions are influencing trust. In addition, institutions should look for leading indicators, such as shifts in perceived neutrality that might precede changes in overall trust. Finally, universities should publish year-over-year comparisons with clear, plain-language explanations of what changed and why, ensuring transparency and accountability.

What This Means Right Now

First, there is evidence that the public clearly wants universities to play a role in civic education, and those with greater civic knowledge feel this most strongly. This creates a clear mandate to invest in civic learning that is nonpartisan, skills-based, and connected to communities. Second, trust is highest when it comes to outcomes – such as providing a good education – and lowest when it comes to teaching neutrality. Universities should acknowledge concerns about bias openly and demonstrate the safeguards in place to protect neutrality in the classroom. Third, trust and support for civic education appear linked in this snapshot of data we have collected. While we cannot claim causality, it is reasonable to test the hypothesis that credible civic education efforts can help rebuild trust, and that trust-building may, in turn, increase support for those efforts. Finally, universities should build a trust dashboard, commit to regular measurement, and share progress publicly. Continuous listening – especially around trust – must become a routine part of how universities lead, serve, and contribute to the common good.

Closing: Turning Turbulence into Navigable Air

In aviation, radar doesn't make the storm go away, or course. It helps pilots see the storm soon enough to make course adjustments. Higher education faces its own turbulence: political polarization, rising costs, and uneven confidence, to name but a few of the major headwinds faced by higher education at this moment in time. Turning on the RADAR model for developing greater trust and strengthening civic education offerings means listening continuously, acting visibly, and reviewing honestly. If universities do this work – especially with a focus on trust as a multidimensional concept – they will not only navigate the weather with greater ease. Along the way, they will earn the confidence of the very citizens they are committed to serving.