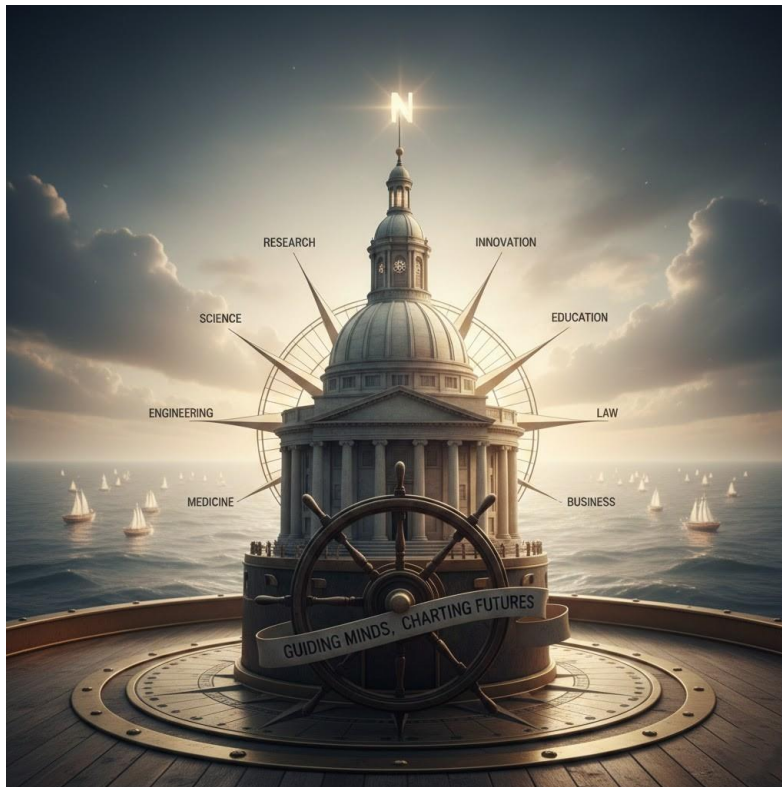


# The University as Navigator

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## Introduction

Let's take a break from all the negativity directed at higher education for a moment and think about the role universities can play that would be both welcomed and valued by many Americans. Let's put a pin in all the criticism, accusations, and sweeping brushstrokes that paint higher education so negatively. Let's take a step back and, in the process, rediscover higher ed's many strengths, unique capabilities, and mission-aligned priorities – those that best serve not only students but society at-large. And then let's look ahead to our greatest and most urgent needs, our shared goals and the current threats that could stand in the way of achieving them.

Our great universities possess something that no other institutions have: everything. They are knowledge integrators, knowledge interpreters, and knowledge factories. Most of our major universities possess deep and wide expertise in nearly every domain of knowledge, and through their networked connections to other universities, laboratories, and agencies, they can access even more of that know-how. They have experts who have both the time and the mandate to dive deeply into their fields, prepare the next generation of inquisitors and experts, and create entirely new domains of knowledge and both scholarly and scientific disciplines. They maintain unique facilities, laboratories, equipment, and expertise. They purposefully integrate the arts and

humanities into their curriculum and their campus programming. They welcome and celebrate international students and cultures. They possess among the most powerful and accessible computing environments. And they support world-class performing arts and athletics programs for their campus and regional communities. Many are situated on bucolic, park-like campuses. Others are integrated into vibrant urban settings. All offer places for deep study, active learning, and quiet reflection.

Universities have long played, perhaps unwittingly at times, the roles of facilitator, guide, and even nurturer for their primary charges, their students. Perhaps those that reflect more deeply will see they also play the role of facilitator (and often integrator) for faculty members, supporting both their roles as educators and their scholarly inquiry. But let's look ahead to the future unfolding in front of us, one of rapid change, growing uncertainty, widening gaps, and increasing threats to everything from the survival of our democracy to our planet's ability to sustain and nurture us. This may be the best time and place for our universities to deploy, to lean in, and to serve.

Enter the University as Navigator.

## **Beyond the Porter and the Pedagogue**

Higher education, much like a great historic vessel, has weathered countless storms, from economic downturns to ideological shifts. But the turbulence of the current era – marked by unprecedented technological acceleration, political animosity, and structural decay – demands more than mere survival. For decades, the university enjoyed the luxury of being a passenger of progress, passively borne along by a strong current of federal funding, global prestige, and a guaranteed student pipeline.

This passive model created its own complacency-induced neglect and self-inflicted wounds: isolationist attitudes, resistance to structural evolution, and a stoic rigidity mired in pomp and circumstance. Higher educational institutions viewed themselves as a simple and outdated metaphor, the Porter or Sherpa – a service provider whose only role was to carry the load (the student) from base camp to the summit. But this analogy fails completely in a world where the paths are constantly shifting and the landscape is shrouded in fog. The University can no longer be viewed simply as a carrier; it must be viewed as both Cartographer and Guide, *i.e.*, the Navigator.

The challenges facing our nation – everything from securing technological supremacy in AI and quantum computing to restoring the public trust compact – cannot be solved by institutions that are simply “carrying on” (even if generally trekking upward). They require institutions capable of setting and following a strategic direction and, in the process, forging and leveraging broader connections.

This is the imperative for the new role: The University as Navigator.

Navigators do not simply follow pre-printed maps; they read the stars, chart new routes through storms, and use sophisticated instruments to link multiple points of interest. They are guides for the students, connectors for communities, facilitators for business and industry, and strategic partners for the Nation.

The contemporary university must shed its passive, service-oriented roles and fully embrace its systemic responsibility as a multi-stakeholder Navigator, guiding the individual student journey while strategically charting the course for the Nation and global society through waters that are becoming ever more complex and uncertain. The choice is no longer 'to what end?' but 'where to next?' – and the University must take the helm, confidently and hopefully.

## **Guiding the Individual: The Student’s Journey (The Personal Map)**

The Navigator's first and most immediate duty is to the individual sailor, the student. For too long, the University’s compact with students has been transactional: in exchange for tuition, we offer credentials. This outdated model assumes a linear, predictable voyage; and yet, today’s student launches into a chaotic, multi-crisis sea where the path from freshman year to a meaningful career is anything but clear. The University must transition from a degree-granting entity to an active strategic guide, equipping students to read the currents of change, not just memorize historical facts surrounding previous journeys.

### Charting the Career Course: The Literacy of Purpose

The greatest service a Navigator provides is foresight. Today, that means helping students acquire career literacy, a concept far broader than simple job placement. The current paradigm, where students choose a major and hope the job market cooperates, is a recipe for the very irrelevance against which we have cautioned.

The University’s response cannot be a mere increase in optional career planning workshops; it must be a structural commitment. A core reform, for example, could be the adoption of a mandatory, *scaffolded Four-Year Career Literacy Roadmap* that shifts the burden of preparedness from the student’s optional choice to the University’s commitment to their post-graduate success. To enforce this as a mission-critical function, the University should elevate a Career Readiness Office to report directly to the Provost/Chief Academic Officer, signaling that career literacy is an *academic outcome*.

Hence, the Navigator University must:

1. *Facilitate Interdisciplinary Skill Synthesis*: Universities must move beyond their current departmental structures, which are highly siloed. The modern workforce demands what IBM first termed “T-shaped” graduates – those with deep expertise in one field and a broad capacity for collaboration, communication, and critical thinking across many other disciplines. This is a structural challenge that requires mutual leveraging strategies across colleges and departments.
2. *Guide for Resilience*: Curricula must anticipate change, not merely reflect the past. This means teaching students how to learn and relearn (the essential skill for a world increasingly dominated by AI), guiding them away from a static job title and toward a more flexible career portfolio. The student must leave with a compass (knowing how to use it effectively) and not just a map to a single destination.

## The Four-Year Scaffolding: From Discovery to Launch

The Navigator's job is to ensure students acquire the tools necessary for their voyage, making each year progressively more focused and specialized through mandatory milestones. One example of a scaffolded Four-Year Career Literacy Roadmap, Plan, or Compact might be:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Focus: The Navigator's Goal</u>	<u>Core Mandates and Milestones</u>
1	Discovery and Orientation: Asking "Who Am I?"	Students complete required strengths assessments, drafting a tentative <i>Career Map</i> of 3-5 potential sectors, and meeting with an academic advisor dedicated to discussing these results and core curriculum choices.
2	Exploration and Skill Matching: Asking "What Do I Need?"	Students conduct a <i>Skill Gap Analysis</i> by auditing their coursework against professional needs, completing a minimum of three information interviews with alumni/professionals, and developing a polished, professionally reviewed core resume/CV.
3	Application and Experience: Asking "How Do I Compete?"	Students must demonstrate completion of a <i>significant professional experience</i> (internship, research, co-op). Mandatory workshops focus on professional networking, interviewing, and the crafting of a personalized "value proposition."
4	Launch and Transition: Asking "Where Do I Land?"	Students finalize and document their specific <i>post-graduation plans</i> , participate in at least three graded mock interviews, and complete mandatory training on salary negotiation and benefit analysis to prepare them for the transactional realities of the job market.

## Navigating Social and Ethical Complexity: Reclaiming the Core

The Navigator must also be a moral and ethical guide. When the core purpose of education is lost to external agendas or internal factionalism, the student is left without a working ethical framework to navigate a contentious society.

The University must return to its immutable core values by replacing often ideologically driven, politically charged "gen ed requirements" with a robust Core Curriculum that reflects the institution's distinctive mission. This core should be the *stabilizing gyroscope* for the student: It instills the analytical rigor needed to discern misinformation from fact, making students immune to being merely activists or passive consumers of ideology. It functions as a civic ballast, forcing exposure to diverse, often uncomfortable, perspectives – the necessary foundation for responsible

engagement in a pluralistic democracy. Bottom line: Universities need to reestablish the role of teaching students *how to think*, not what to think.

## **Connecting the Local: Communities and States (The Regional Ecosystem)**

Navigators are useless if they sail in isolation, don't understand their current position, or lack a clear destination. The modern Navigator University must establish a bidirectional, mutually leveraging partnership, becoming the strategic *connector* and *engine* that fuels the local and state ecosystem. This is not altruism, but rather institutional resilience. As funding models become fragile and federal support is fraught with uncertainty, the University must strategically embed itself as an indispensable asset to its regional stakeholders.

### The Connector for Economic Vitality: The Applied Research Engine

The most powerful local guidance the University can offer is economic foresight. This requires universities to focus their research enterprise on areas of local, strategic interest.

- *Targeted Investment*: The majority of universities cannot afford the “strength in all areas” model. They must establish tiered priorities for research, making institutional investments and placing bets on domains that directly intersect with state-level needs. One example of such a strategic focus could be ‘Critical Bioscience Infrastructure and Biomanufacturing,’ a sector that meets the dual demands of national security (supply chain) and regional economic diversification. Committing to this focus forces the institution to:
  - Talent Anchor: Become the anchor for a regional Bio-Tech Hub by creating specialized labs and translational research centers.
  - Infrastructure Leveraging: Leverage existing facilities to create shared, fee-for-service biomanufacturing clean rooms or bioprocess pilot facilities, immediately addressing a high barrier to entry for regional startups.
- *New Paradigms with Industry*: The Navigator acts as the pipeline between fundamental academic discovery and localized commercial application. This necessitates replacing the transactional “contract-for-deliverables” model with true New Paradigm partnerships. The University’s role is to facilitate innovation, providing the talent, ideas, and specialized infrastructure that anchor regional economic clusters.

### Mutual Leveraging: The Workforce Compact

To execute these strategic shifts, the Navigator must forge partnerships across the entire educational spectrum. Staying with the biomanufacturing example, a *Mutual Leveraging Strategy* could be envisioned that is efficient, effective, and deeply beneficial to the state workforce:

- *The Seamless Pathway*: A Research 1 institution partners with a regional Technical/Community College network to create a seamless, stackable credential pathway. Students earn an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) in Bioprocess Technology from the community college, which articulates perfectly into the R1 university's bachelor's program in a related field.

- *Shared Assets*: The community college handles the initial, cost-effective, high-volume hands-on training, while the R1 provides access to its specialized, high-cost research facilities for the final two years. This sharing of expensive infrastructure creates significant economies of scale.
- *The Outcome*: This zero-friction pathway ensures students are immediately employable after two years (a clear win for local industry) while ensuring continuous upward mobility to a four-year degree.

### Guiding Policy and Workforce: The Civic Compass

The University's capacity for non-partisan, evidence-based research makes it an invaluable guide for state policy and workforce development in two interrelated ways: as an Expert and as an Exemplar.

- *Evidence-Based Guidance*: Faculty expertise must be leveraged to inform critical state decisions, from public health planning to infrastructure investment. The University acts as the source of trusted data, guiding civic conversations away from ideological skirmishes and toward pragmatic, informed solutions. This is the Navigator as *Expert*.
- *Administrative Efficiency*: Jointly managed services (libraries, purchasing, registrar functions) between institutions represent the necessary elimination of wasteful spending, creating savings that can be redirected into support for students, workforce readiness and internships programs. This is the Navigator as *Exemplar*.

### **Driving Innovation: Industry, Nation, and Society (The Global Compass)**

The final, highest calling of the Navigator is to chart the course for civilization itself. Given the severity of the threats to the U.S. research enterprise, the University is now an indispensable primary actor in *securing our national future*.

#### Strategic Navigator for National Security and Supremacy

The federal government's redirection of priorities toward domains like AI, quantum computing, and semiconductor manufacturing requires the research University to focus and leverage its resources and talent toward the greatest advantage of these (and any other) national highest priorities. Many universities will need to downsize (focus, align) their sprawling research footprints to focus resources where the national strategic interest is highest. This will require difficult (and unpopular) decisions to be made to eliminate research activities that are no longer mission-critical or financially sustainable. And universities will no longer be able to count solely on federal funding. The Navigator must be skilled at helping universities to diversify sources of support for research, *e.g.*, through philanthropy (passion projects), industry support, and self-funded institutional investment (repurposing/redirection of internal funding). All of this will require strong leadership, rapid decision-making, partnership cultivation, and effective governance structures.

## The Governance Imperative: Shifting the Board's Focus

This high-stakes environment demands a radical shift in how the Governing Board engages with the administration. The Board must abandon the mindset of a stable asset's fiduciary and adopt the posture of a strategic venture capitalist. This shift is codified by asking three essential questions that demand accountability from the Navigator's strategic direction:

1. *The Questions of Distinctiveness and Capitalization*: "Why should we invest in this area? Are we uniquely positioned to drive progress, achieve national visibility/reputation in this area, does it serve a regional economic development need that the state has identified and is willing to invest in? What is the financial plan, who are the investors/partners, what are the federal funding opportunities, competitive or otherwise?" This forces the administration to prove strategic alignment across all stakeholders and demand a fully diversified financial plan before committing university capital.
2. *The Question of Measurable Impact*: "What are the milestones and metrics you will track and report?" This requires the administration to link investment to the RPT reforms and *Societal Impact Scores* being implemented at the faculty level. Metrics must be outcomes-based (IP yield, policy adoption, VC raised), not input-based (grant applications submitted).
3. *The Question of Accountability and Sunset Planning*: "What is the sunset plan if goals are not achieved and/or higher priorities emerge?" This question instills institutional discipline and counters the "Achilles' heel" of programmatic rigidity. A Sunset Clause ensures that programmatic disinvestment is planned, not just reactive, allowing resources to be systematically recycled back into a Permanent Investment Fund to seed the *next* strategic priority.

Here, Navigators must share freely and openly their compass and transit, their ledger and field notes, with their governing boards.

## Resetting Expectations: The Internal Compass

To meet current challenges, and those that may arise in an uncertain (and faster paced) future, Universities must undergo profound internal reform. The institutional paralysis of the past is fatal to the Navigator's mission. A Permanent Investment Funds (PIF) may be considered the *Navigator's Strategic Capital*, e.g., the critical financial mechanism that provides the Navigator University with the necessary internal venture capital to make timely, strategic investments.

- *Building a PIF*: The fund is built not through external fundraising, but through the hard decisions of internal reallocation and efficiency gains. The primary sources are documented Administrative Efficiency Gains (from shared services and cost savings) and the redirected cost avoidance from Programmatic Disinvestment (from eliminated low-yield, low-productivity, or low-impact areas, or others that are not aligned with strategic highest priorities). Crucially, a binding Governing Board resolution must explicitly prohibit the use of PIF principal or its annual disbursement for covering unforeseen or routine operating deficits.
- *Governance and Agility*: The annual competitive disbursement should be overseen by a small, high-level Strategic Investment Council, primarily composed of the institution's most

distinguished faculty members, along with select senior administrators responsible for the fund’s maintenance and disbursement. The President retains the ultimate strategic authority to veto or postpone funding any project in a given year, allowing the fund to accumulate discipline for truly transformational, large-scale opportunities.

The University must also fundamentally *reset faculty expectations* to reward contributions aligned with the PIF strategy. This likely will require a complete overhaul of reappointment, promotion, and tenure (RPT) criteria to focus on outcomes over inputs. One example might be:

<u>Category</u>	<u>Navigator Metric to Be Added/Modified</u>	<u>Rationale (Value to the Navigator)</u>
Funding Diversification	Diversified Capital Secured (Weighted Equally): Include secured capital from Private Venture Capital/Angel Investment (for startups), Corporate Sponsored Research Contracts, and Documented Private Philanthropic Research Gifts.	Rewards faculty for actively reducing the institution’s dependence on fragile federal funding and for Diversifying the research portfolio, a core resilience strategy.
Innovation and Commercialization	Translation and IP Yield: Metrics to include Number of Patents Filed/Issued, License Agreements Executed, and Founding/Co-Founding of University Spin-out Companies.	Directly rewards engagement in the entire IP/Tech Transfer space, tying faculty output directly to regional economic growth, a function of the <i>Connector</i> role.
Societal and Policy Impact	Documented Impact Score: Requires evidence of quantifiable public good and policy influence, such as: Adoption of research-informed policy recommendations by state/federal legislative bodies; Documented cost savings realized by a public entity; or Measured increase in a quality-of-life indicator.	Elevates the IMPACT of scholarship above the venue of publication. Rewards faculty for their role as non-partisan <i>Guides</i> for civic and governmental bodies, fulfilling the University’s compact with the public.

## **Conclusion: Embracing the Role of the Modern Navigator**

So, yes, let’s step back from talking about all the ills confronting higher education. Let’s talk about something more exciting and certainly more productive: the *possibilities*.

The University as Navigator is a bold articulation of the university’s necessary future: active, connected, strategic, and self-aware. It calls upon leaders and boards to act decisively, apply the tourniquet, make the hard cuts, take stock of and embrace the new operating guardrails. By sharpening their distinctiveness and leveraging their resources to serve public good, fuel economic

growth, and advance national priorities – including economic and national security – universities can realign, reform, and restate their highest priorities, crafting a compelling new narrative for a new generation.

This is more than adaptation; it is transformation.

The University must re-tool and reframe itself to successfully navigate uncharted waters while guiding others toward prosperous futures. The seismic shift we face is a *clarion call* and *opportunity* to reframe, reform, and restore higher education’s compact with the American people. Initiatives like the *Four-Year Career Literacy Roadmap* launch graduates with purpose, while the PIF and RPT reforms create the internal financial and intellectual agility that are essential for survival. Finally, the adoption of strategic board accountability ensures a true north orientation – one that is anchored in impact.

The task before us is nothing less than reclaiming public trust and restoring the compact with the American people by proving that the University is the essential guide, the capable Navigator, and the steady hand charting a sustainable course for the future.

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**N.B.** The Navigator continues the nautical metaphor first employed by one of the authors (Rosowsky) in his essay, “Come Sail Away: Riding Out the Shifting Tides in Higher Education” (Apr. 2025).

<https://www.elsevier.com/connect/come-sail-away-riding-out-the-shifting-tides-in-higher-education>