

MORRILL ACT 250 BLUEPRINT

Morrill Act 250: Reinterpreting the Public Research University Compact as Civic Trust in America's Third Century

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

*As America approaches its 250th birthday, many people are asking what role our public universities should play in a time of rapid technological change, political division, and growing skepticism about higher education. **Morrill Act 250** offers a clear and hopeful answer. Building on the nation's long land-grant tradition, this paper lays out a practical plan for how universities can recommit themselves to the public good by focusing on five essential priorities: rebuilding trust, expanding digital and AI access, aligning education with real-world needs, strengthening transparency, and ensuring their own systems are ready for the future. Taken together, these priorities offer a modern blueprint for how universities and communities can work side by side to expand opportunity, solve problems, and strengthen our democracy for the next century.*

Introduction

America's land-grant tradition was born from a simple, radical premise: public institutions of higher education should convert knowledge into shared prosperity. The 1862 Morrill Act – and the federal statutes that followed – stood up a uniquely American compact that married practical education to public purpose, embedded research in the nation's problem-solving efforts, and extended learning far beyond the campus. Over more than a century, this compact has been refreshed and widened – through the Hatch Act's commitment to publicly supported research, the 1890 Morrill Act's expansion to institutions serving Black Americans, the Smith-

Lever Act’s cooperative extension system, and the inclusion of Tribal Colleges and Universities in the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994 – yielding a durable framework for broad access and applied learning in service to society. Yet the conditions under which that framework earned public confidence have changed. Heightened political polarization, rapid advances in artificial intelligence, and persistent gaps in digital connectivity have complicated the routes by which universities demonstrate value, earn trust, and sustain their social license.

At the same time, much of today’s public conversation reduces a diverse higher-education ecosystem to caricature. Sweeping, “broad brush” narratives – circulating through media, politics, and even segments of industry – flatten institutional differences and replace evidence with simplifications about cost, bias, value, and outcomes. These narratives have real consequences: they erode legitimacy, encourage reactive governance, and crowd out the patient, contextual analysis needed for sound policy. If universities are to renew their compact with the American people, they must make nuance visible and verifiable through specific practices, measures, and public reporting that withstand oversimplification.

In response, we propose to reinterpret the land-grant compact for the nation’s semiquincentennial through this present *Morrill Act 250* paper. In essence, we offer to readers a policy blueprint that preserves what must not change (public purpose, access, practical education) while reimagining what must be adjusted (trust-building, digital and AI access, regional innovation, and co-governed accountability). In this framing, universities do not claim legitimacy by historical mandate alone; they earn it through civic trust, attested by the public itself and monitored with the same rigor that universities apply to other core outcomes. Our argument stands on our four precursors of collaborative writing that together diagnose the problem, define a constructive role for universities, supply an operating method, and demonstrate early operational evidence.

Precursive Source Materials

First, we will borrow from our [Higher Ed’s Broad Brush Dilemma](#) paper, which locates the trust problem in the public discourse itself, documenting how reductive claims about ideology, administrative “bloat,” and the supposed worthlessness of certain majors together obscure complex realities and invite counterproductive policy. That essay’s restorative solutions are both methodological and cultural: policymaking and institutional strategy require a bigger palette (better data, larger context) and finer brushes (more nuance, greater differentiation), not lurid and ever-widening strokes. This insight establishes the normative baseline for our project. To wit, rebuilding trust is not just about *what* universities do; it is about *how* they demonstrate it: plainly, patiently, and with evidence that matters.

Second, we build on our [*The University as Navigator*](#) paper, an article that offers a forward-leaning institutional identity equal to the moment. Rather than a passive porter that carries students through a fixed curriculum, we argued that the university must become a *Navigator* – a cartographer and guide for students, regions, and the nation. For students, this entails a mandated, scaffolded four-year career-literacy roadmap that treats workforce readiness as an academic outcome and emphasizes T-shaped capabilities and resilience in an AI-shaped labor market. For regions, it means acting as a connector – focusing research bets where the state’s needs are greatest, building seamless stackable pathways with community and technical colleges, and sharing high-cost infrastructure to accelerate local innovation. For the nation, it calls for board-level venture discipline (distinctiveness, measurable impact, and sunset clauses), the creation of Permanent Investment Funds from documented efficiencies and intentional disinvestment, and promotion and tenure criteria that reward translation, diversified capital, and societal impact. Here, the Navigator role supplies the “*what*” of institutional transformation.

Third, our [*Turning on the RADAR: Detecting Signals and Navigating Higher Education’s Complexity*](#) paper supplies us with another “*how*” – in this instance, an operating system for continuous listening and course correction. The RADAR (Recognize, Analyze, Diagnose, Act, Review) model reframes leadership work from episodic reaction to disciplined foresight: universities deploy longitudinal panels and integrated dashboards to *recognize* signals in public sentiment; *analyze* patterns with methodological rigor; *diagnose* implications for mission and reputation; *act* visibly and transparently; and *review* outcomes to recalibrate strategies. Equally important, the RADAR framework clarifies the human capacity required: institutions need an “air-traffic controller” function – professionals who translate signals into coordinated action across the governance triad of board, president, and faculty.

Fourth, we also plumb our [*Restoring Trust: Continuous Listening and the Civic Mission of Universities*](#) paper to demonstrate early operationalization on a priority domain: trust and civic education. The 2025 results of our recent higher education study indicate that civic knowledge is uneven, yet public appetite for civic education is strong – a critical opening for institutions. The analysis clarifies that trust is multidimensional: *outcome-based trust* (providing a good education) tends to be strongest; *process-based trust* (teaching neutrality) is weaker; *knowledge-based trust* (research accuracy and integrity) and *civic-based trust* (citizenship preparation) are middling. The paper outlines immediate, visible actions: embedding civic competencies across the curriculum, protecting and demonstrating classroom neutrality, expanding open-science practices, engaging skeptics directly, and publishing a Trust Dashboard that tracks standardized indicators over time. These steps model what it looks like to move from listening to action and, in the process, create the measurement architecture that can verify public value.

Taken together, we believe these precursive papers justify and enable a semiquincentennial refresh of the land-grant compact. Our premise of this *Morrill Act 250* paper recasts access to include universal digital connectivity and AI fluency, reframes practical education around regional innovation ecosystems and civic resilience, and places trust-building and social repair on par with economic mobility as core outcomes. Central to this higher education blueprint for the future is co-governed accountability: universities, communities, and policymakers together agree on a small set of trust and civic indicators, institutions report them publicly on standardized dashboards, and governing boards use RADAR cycles to allocate resources, scale what works, sunset what does not, and explain decisions in plain language.

The Four Sections of This Paper

This paper proceeds in four moves. We first synthesize the historical logic of the land-grant model and identify those non-negotiable principles from the nineteenth century that we must preserve. Second, we then specify contemporary conditions in the twenty-first century that require reinterpretation, focusing on political polarization, AI-driven disruption, and the digital divide. Third, we articulate a *Morrill Act 250* blueprint that relies on the RADAR framework to deliver measurable public purpose. Fourth and finally, we turn to the question of how this blueprint might take shape in practice, inviting readers to consider which policy and funding levers (federal, state, philanthropic, and institutional) hold the greatest promise, and to explore how an implementation pathway for 2026 and beyond might unfold through shared reflection on potential risks, emerging opportunities, and a research agenda capable of deepening our understanding of how community engagement efforts influence public trust over time.

The nation's 250th anniversary is an apt moment to reaffirm the land-grant promise and to demand of ourselves a compact that is empirically legible to the people we serve. If the original Morrill Act built a public infrastructure for practical education, we envision *Morrill Act 250* as nothing less than an effort to build an infrastructure for public confidence, where legitimacy is earned through continuous listening, visible action, and results the public can recognize as its own.

I. The Historical Logic of the Land-Grant Model and Its Non-Negotiable Principles

The land-grant system did not emerge accidentally. It was a deliberate redesign of the relationship between knowledge, democracy, and national development, a conviction that higher education should not simply mirror society but also materially improve it. When Abraham Lincoln signed the first Morrill Act in 1862, the nation was at war, its economy was unstable, and its civic foundations were under strain. Yet Congress chose that very moment to invest in a radically new educational infrastructure built around three intertwined propositions: that knowledge should be broadly accessible, publicly purposed, and practically applied. These

ideas became the scaffolding for an institutional model that has endured for more than 160 years.

Four Historical Acts

The 1862 Morrill Act reoriented American higher education away from an elite classical tradition and toward a democratic theory of human capacity. By granting federal lands to states to establish public colleges, the Act insisted that higher learning should be available to “the industrial classes,” a term that signaled both economic inclusion and civic expansion. Instead of producing only clergy, lawyers, and statesmen, these new institutions would prepare farmers, builders, engineers, teachers, and public servants. Practical knowledge would carry the same dignity as classical knowledge, and both together would strengthen the nation. In essence, these land-grant-oriented activities would create and effectively maintain a sizable middle class that could fully realize the American Dream.

Over the next several decades, Congress operationalized this idea into the full system of higher education we know today. First, the Hatch Act of 1887 added a publicly funded research engine, embedding scientific inquiry into state-level problem solving. Knowledge would not remain speculative or sequestered in laboratories. Rather, it would be directed toward improving agricultural productivity, public health, infrastructure, and community well-being.

Next, the Second Morrill Act of 1890 required states to extend land-grant benefits to Black Americans, either by opening existing institutions or establishing separate ones. While imperfect in execution and shaped by segregationist policies, the 1890 institutions represented an enduring federal statement: the land-grant compact must widen, not narrow, educational opportunities and economic advancement over time.

Third, the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 completed the translation pathway from research to public use by establishing Cooperative Extension Services, a national infrastructure for taking university-generated knowledge directly to farmers, families, youth, and communities. Through this act, universities became not just producers of ideas but transmitters and translators of them.

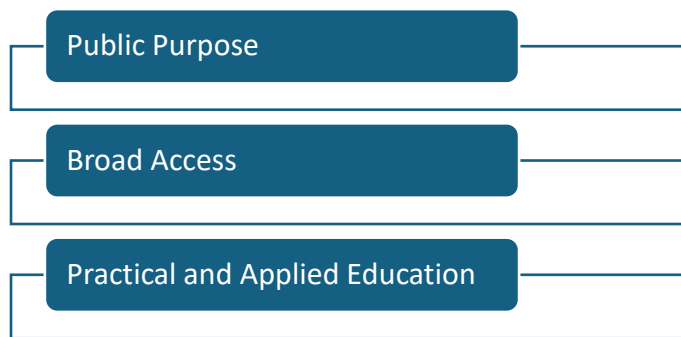
Fourth and finally, the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994 extended land-grant status to Tribal Colleges and Universities. In doing so, the congressional action corrected a long-standing omission and marked federal recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, community-driven education, and the responsibility to invest in Native futures.

By the end of the twentieth century, these legislative layers produced a uniquely American knowledge commons – essentially, a set of institutions tasked with expanding opportunity, creating scientific and social innovation, and embedding themselves in the everyday life of the nation.

Non-Negotiable Elements

What distinguishes the land-grant model is not simply the legislation that created it but the structural design principles that have remained consistent. Across the system's evolution, three elements have functioned as part of a non-negotiable identity. The first element is public purpose, such that land-grant universities were built to serve the whole of society, not only enrolled students. From the outset, their mission was grounded in the idea of generating knowledge that tangibly improves life for communities, industries, governments, and citizens. Public purpose is therefore not a rhetorical aspiration but rather serves as a constitutional condition of existence. To wit, these institutions were built for the people, are funded by the people, and must be accountable to the people.

Figure 1: Non-Negotiable Elements



The second non-negotiable identity element is broad access. The original Morrill Act democratized higher education for rural and working-class Americans. Next, the 1890 institutions expanded the compact to Black Americans. Finally, the 1994 institutions extended it to Tribal Nations. Across these expansions runs a moral through-line: access is not a matter of enrollment management, but rather a democratic obligation. A land-grant university loses its legitimacy the moment it becomes inaccessible to any part of the many communities it was created to uplift.

The third non-negotiable identity element is the focus on a practical and applied education. The land-grant tradition insists that education must be grounded in the needs of a nation: its farms and factories, its towns and cities, its people and problems. This was not an abandonment of the liberal arts but instead would become an act of rebalancing. Here, universities would teach classical disciplines, but they would also teach agriculture, engineering, military science, home economics, and applied arts. Students would graduate with the ability to work, to adapt, and to contribute as citizens in a changing society.

One might ask: Why do these principles remain non-negotiable in 2026? The United States enters its 250th year in a radically different context: data abundance, AI-driven work, political

polarization, demographic shifts, and widening distrust of institutions. But none of these pressures undermine the core land-grant commitments. In fact, they *heighten* the need for them. Public purpose remains essential because this sort of fragmented information ecosystem requires trusted institutions that can produce verified knowledge for public use. Broad access must now encompass digital connectivity, post-traditional learners, rural and urban divides, and AI-fluency gaps just as earlier land-grant expansions responded to agricultural, racial, and sovereignty inequities. As well, practical education must evolve toward new forms of applied learning – regional innovation ecosystems, stackable credentials, civic capacities, and digital problem-solving – while retaining the classical and scientific foundations that enable long-term societal leadership.

In this moment, therefore, the land-grant compact does not need to be rewritten so much as *recast* for the next generation. The principles remain constant; however, the world around them does not. The opportunity before the nation’s public research universities is to renew these commitments in ways the public can clearly see, understand, and trust.

II. Contemporary Conditions Requiring Reinterpretation of the Land-Grant Compact

The previous section established the durable logic of the land-grant compact – public purpose, broad access, and practical, applied education – as the non-negotiable identity of America’s public research universities. We have argued that those principles have not expired; rather, the world around them has changed in ways that test how they must now be expressed and verified. This next section turns from historical argument to contemporary diagnosis, identifying the specific conditions – political polarization and eroding institutional trust, the transformational pressures of artificial intelligence, a deepening digital divide, and escalating expectations for accountability – that require a reinterpretation of the compact equal to the nation’s semiquincentennial moment.

The land-grant model has endured for more than 160 years, adapting its core commitments when necessary, though often at a pace reflective of a slower-moving society. Today’s far more rapid and destabilizing changes make the need for reinterpretation sharper and more urgent than in prior eras. The pressures now bearing down on public higher education differ in both scope and speed from prior eras. Partisan polarization has unsettled legitimacy; AI is reorganizing knowledge, learning, and work; digital inequities threaten access and civic participation; and the public at large increasingly demands verifiable evidence of value. Again, these conditions call not for abandoning the land-grant inheritance but for *recasting* it, translating first principles into twenty-first-century institutional commitments that the public can see, understand, and trust.

Volatility of Public Opinion

As we argue both here and elsewhere, public confidence in higher education has become more fragmented, volatile, and filtered through politically charged identities. Those more specific “broad brush” narratives we have written about previously – claims of ideological capture, administrative excess, elitism, or weak workforce alignment – flatten a diverse ecosystem into caricature and invite reactive policymaking. Such narratives do not merely bruise reputation; they destabilize governance and funding by shifting debate away from evidence and nuance. A renewed compact therefore begins with trust-building as a core outcome: universities must demonstrate neutrality in teaching, integrity in research, and responsiveness in civic education, accompanied by transparent reporting that makes complexity legible.

In recent public perception research that we have conducted at both the [state](#) and more [national level](#), trust appears *multidimensional*: outcome-based trust (providing a good education) remains comparatively strong; process-based trust (political neutrality in the classroom) is weaker; and both knowledge-based trust (accuracy and impartiality of research) and civic-based trust (preparing citizens) remain uneven. The volatility of political identification over short intervals further amplifies swings in opinion and priority-setting. In this context, institutions need continuous listening systems and agile strategy processes so that shifts in sentiment are recognized and addressed before they metastasize into crisis.

The Emergence of AI

The transformational pressures from Artificial Intelligence are perhaps the most significant challenge facing higher education (let alone humanity) today. AI is reorganizing economic sectors, labor markets, and the public’s expectations of what a university is supposed to do. The pressures AI is already exerting on learning, work, and research are significant, but the far larger challenge may be the profound uncertainty surrounding its future trajectory, a level of unpredictability that higher education has never before had to navigate. This combination of visible disruption and deep uncertainty places unusual pressure on universities to rethink not only what they teach, but how they prepare learners for a future that is no longer reasonably forecastable.

If nineteenth-century land-grant innovators democratized access to practical learning for an industrial nation, today’s analog is a commitment to AI fluency – for students, educators, staff, and communities. We have asserted that the university’s identity must evolve from a passive porter of knowledge to a *Navigator* that equips learners to chart non-linear careers, to adapt and reskill themselves over time, and to work alongside increasingly capable machines. Curricula should scaffold technical literacy with human-distinctive capabilities – judgment,

ethics, collaboration, and problem framing – while advising and credentialing systems that become more dynamic and data-informed.

AI also compels a strategic realignment of research. National priorities in AI, quantum computing, and advanced manufacturing alike all require universities to focus their portfolios, strengthen translation pathways, and reward impact. This entails board-level discipline (clarity of bet selection, sunset mechanisms), diversified capital strategies (e.g., Permanent Investment Funds derived from efficiencies), and promotion and tenure criteria that value team science, open practices, and societal outcomes. In short, the original land-grant expectation – research in service to regional and national needs – now includes technological leadership and innovation strategy as public purposes.

Digital Divide

Relatedly, if access is a non-negotiable, then overcoming the digital divide is its twenty-first-century expression. As learning, advising, assessment, and research increasingly operate through digital and AI-enabled systems, students without reliable broadband, adequate devices, or the skills to use them are structurally disadvantaged. The resulting inequities map onto rural-urban and socioeconomic fault lines, converting what was once a peripheral infrastructure issue into a primary equity challenge with economic and civic consequences. Reinterpreting access therefore means committing to universal connectivity, device adequacy, and AI literacy as prerequisites for educational and democratic participation, delivered through campus offerings, K-12 partnerships, Cooperative Extension, and collaborative community anchors.

Moreover, the digital divide is not only about pipes and hardware; it is about sense-making. Communities without strong digital and civic literacies are more vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation, including broad brush narratives about universities themselves. Updating the land-grant commitment to citizenship thus requires embedding digital discernment and civic capacities across the curriculum and outreach, so that access includes the ability to evaluate information quality and to participate productively in civic life.

The Demand for Transparency

All of this is occurring amidst changing public expectations and accountability pressures on higher education. Americans now expect these institutions to show their work; that is, to provide clear, comparable indicators of performance, integrity, and impact. For higher education, this translates into visible, standardized reporting on what the public cares about most: trust, learning outcomes, affordability, research relevance, and community benefit. As we have argued previously, a practical starting point is a *Trust Dashboard* that tracks a small set of validated indicators (e.g., overall provision of a good education, teaching neutrality, research

integrity, and citizenship preparation) and reports them publicly alongside methodological notes that *invite* scrutiny rather than deflect it.

Transparent accountability also means governance for distinctiveness and impact. Boards should ask disciplined questions about where their university must be excellent, how that excellence is evidenced, what should be continuously supported versus what should be immediately stopped (or eventually sunsetted), and how resources will be shifted accordingly. Continuous-listening operations such as the RADAR (Recognize, Analyze, Diagnose, Act, Review) model we have presented previously should provide the feedback loops that allow leaders to recognize signals, act visibly, and review outcomes in public. These expectations mark a shift away from legitimacy presumed by mission and toward a legitimacy that is earned through measurement, explanation, and iteration.

In summary, the present environment does not diminish the land-grant mission; it *sharpens* it. Polarization demands transparent practices that rebuild civic trust. AI requires rebalanced curricula, research strategies, and evaluation systems that are aligned to national needs. The digital divide reframes access as connectivity plus literacy. And evolving public expectations compel universities to verify value with standardized, public reporting and continuous listening. These conditions set the stage for the next move: a semiquincentennial reinterpretation – our *Morrill Act 250*, as it were – that preserves first principles while re-designing operations so that public purpose, access, and practical education are visible, measurable, and trusted by the people they serve.

III. The Blueprint: *Morrill Act 250* for America's Third Century

As noted above, the *Morrill Act 250* framework serves as a policy blueprint that renews the public research university compact by marrying the timeless principles of the land-grant tradition – public purpose, broad access, and practical education – with a set of institutional responsibilities suited to the demands of the twenty-first century. In this reformulated compact, universities protect what must remain unchanged while evolving what must be reinterpreted in an era shaped by polarized politics, accelerating artificial intelligence, the digital divide, and heightened expectations for transparency and accountability. Legitimacy in this model is not presumed. Rather, it is earned, demonstrated, and verified through continuous listening, visible action, and reporting practices that the public can see, understand, and trust.

The *Morrill Act 250* blueprint rests on three core premises. First, it affirms that the foundational commitments of the land-grant system – advancing public purpose, ensuring broad and equitable access, and delivering practical, applied education – remain essential and non-negotiable. These anchors continue to define the identity of public research universities and must be preserved as constant values, even as the surrounding environment continues to

change. Second, the blueprint recognizes that, in a society reshaped by digital technologies and increasingly fractured public discourse, universities must make their value empirically verifiable. Public trust must therefore be elevated to the status of a core institutional outcome, standing alongside economic mobility, research relevance, and educational quality. Third, the blueprint integrates a paired role and method: the “University as Navigator” concept provides a future-facing institutional identity, while the RADAR system (Recognize, Analyze, Diagnose, Act, Review) supplies an operational framework for continuous listening and iterative leadership. Together, these elements offer a disciplined approach for rebuilding and sustaining public confidence over time.

These core premises in turn give rise to the five pillars of our *Morrill Act 250* blueprint – the 5 R’s of Recentering, Redefinition, Reframing, Reinforcement, and Realignment – each representing a critical dimension of a renewed land-grant compact:

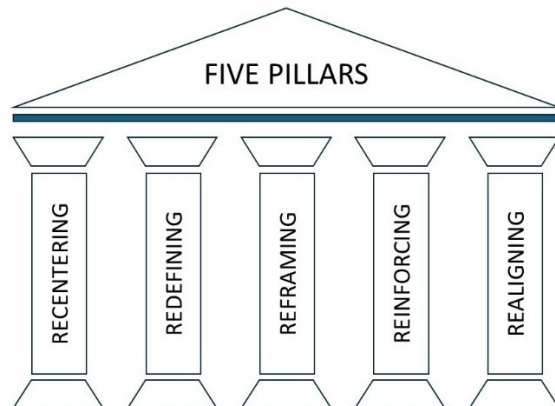
- 1) Recentering of public trust and social repair.
- 2) Redefining access to include universal digital connectivity and AI fluency.
- 3) Reframing of practical education around regional innovation, national competitiveness, and civic resilience.
- 4) Reinforcing standardized accountability and community co-governance.
- 5) Realigning internal operations to ensure that universities can execute the compact with discipline, distinctiveness, and measurable public impact.

These five pillars operate not as discrete initiatives but as interdependent components of a single institutional architecture designed to renew the land-grant compact for America’s third century. Together, they offer a coordinated strategy for translating enduring values into contemporary practice. Trust in higher education now moves along multiple dimensions, digital and AI inequalities shape the very possibility of access, economic and civic resilience are closely linked, and the public expects to see verifiable evidence of institutional integrity and impact. Our five-pillar structure therefore provides a scaffold that integrates these realities: it links trust building to access, access to practical education, practical education to regional vitality, and all of these to transparent accountability supported by internal systems capable of acting with discipline and speed. In this sense, the pillars form a unified operating logic rather than a set of parallel reforms, each reinforcing the others to create a credible and empirically visible institutional compact.

These pillars were selected because they represent the smallest set of institutional commitments capable of addressing the most significant pressures facing public research universities today while remaining faithful to the land-grant tradition. Public confidence, once underwritten by historical mission, now requires demonstrable neutrality, clarity, and responsiveness. Hence, public trust emerges as an essential outcome rather than a secondary

aim. In turn, digital access and AI fluency have become the new threshold conditions for educational and economic participation, requiring a reinterpretation of “broad access” that mirrors earlier expansions in the land-grant system.

Further, practical education must now include not only workforce preparation but also the competencies needed for regional innovation and civic resilience in an era defined by technological and informational volatility. Accountability must evolve from diffuse reporting to standardized indicators that the public can examine and understand. And finally, internal systems must be redesigned to execute these commitments consistently, ensuring that aspirations can be implemented and measured. These five pillars therefore represent a deliberate selection: each is necessary, none is sufficient alone, and together they supply a comprehensive and future-ready blueprint for renewing the public research university’s civic compact.



Pillar 1: Recentering of public trust and social repair.

The first central pillar of this renewed compact is the recentering of public trust and the broader goal of social repair. The blueprint rests on the assumption that universities must treat trust building as a measurable institutional responsibility expressed through neutrality in teaching, integrity in research, transparent communication, and intentional preparation of students for citizenship. Our research shows that trust in higher education is multidimensional: the public tends to express stronger confidence in universities’ ability to provide a good education, weaker confidence in classroom neutrality, and more variable confidence in research impartiality and civic preparation. These distinctions underscore the need for purposeful design. Universities must demonstrate institutional impartiality through visible instructional practices that encourage civil discourse and viewpoint diversity. They must affirm research integrity through plain-language summaries, transparent data practices, and advisory structures that align research with community needs while clarifying the safeguards that protect accuracy and

balance. And they must elevate civic learning through curricular and co-curricular efforts that strengthen evidence appraisal, institutional literacy, dialogue skills, and collaborative problem solving. In this way, institutions push back against oversimplified “broad brush” narratives not through counter-messaging but by making nuance visible in their everyday practices.

Pillar 2: Redefining access to include universal digital connectivity and AI fluency.

The blueprint also redefines access for the digital and AI-shaped era. Just as earlier phases of the land-grant movement expanded educational opportunity for rural communities, Black Americans, and Tribal Nations, the present moment demands that access include universal digital connectivity and AI fluency. Reliable broadband, adequate devices, and the skills required to use them are now prerequisites for full participation in education, employment, and civic life. The blueprint calls for partnerships among universities, states, municipalities, internet service providers, and philanthropy to close remaining connectivity gaps and ensure that students’ digital needs are treated as core elements of need-based support. It further recommends that universities develop institution-wide AI literacy sequences that span ethics, prompting, evaluation, and domain-specific applications. This framing positions AI fluency not as a technical specialization but as a baseline competency comparable to information literacy or quantitative reasoning. Instructors, too, must be supported through professional development, clear guidelines, and transparent course-level policies that articulate responsible uses of AI in teaching and assessment.

Pillar 3: Reframing of practical education around regional innovation, national competitiveness, and civic resilience.

In parallel, the blueprint reimagines practical education by advancing a new ethos, one inspired by the spirit of Cooperative Extension but adapted for the demands of regional innovation, national competitiveness, and civic resilience. Public research universities are called to align talent development, research portfolios, and advanced infrastructure with state, metropolitan, and national needs, including the nation’s priorities in economic vitality, technological leadership, and long-term security. This includes building seamless stackable pathways with community and technical colleges, especially in high-priority sectors such as biomanufacturing, semiconductors, and climate technology. It also involves shifting research strategy from diffuse strength in all areas to a disciplined selection of distinctive clusters chosen in consultation with state and national partners. Boards are urged to exercise venture-style discipline—clarity about expected impact, explicit sunset provisions, and mechanisms to reallocate resources from lower-yield activities to higher-impact opportunities. Moreover, the blueprint positions civic resilience and national capacity-building as measurable educational outcomes, emphasizing community problem solving, risk preparedness, evidence use, and dialogue across differences

as practical skills essential for both local vitality and the nation’s long-term democratic and economic health.

Pillar 4: Reinforcing standardized accountability and community co-governance.

Reinforcement of standardized accountability and community co-governance forms an essential component of the renewed compact. The blueprint calls for reinforced, transparent accountability systems built around standardized measures of trust and civic outcomes, publicly reported through a *Trust Dashboard* that includes indicators such as overall trust in the institution, perceived research integrity, teaching neutrality, educational quality, and citizenship preparation. These indicators must be collected and reported consistently, accompanied by clear methodological notes and year-over-year comparisons that allow the public to track progress, identify areas of concern, and observe institutional responsiveness. The RADAR cycle becomes the governance backbone for this work: institutions reinforce accountability by recognizing signals from the public, analyzing them with methodological rigor, diagnosing implications for mission and strategy, acting visibly, and reviewing outcomes in public. Just as importantly, the blueprint strengthens community voice by embedding co-governance structures – including business, education, civic, and community partners – who review dashboard results, help design interventions, and participate in ongoing reflection. In this way, accountability shifts from a compliance exercise to a reinforced, shared, and publicly visible practice that builds legitimacy through openness, reciprocity, and continuous learning.

Pillar 5: Realigning internal operations to ensure that universities can execute the compact with discipline, distinctiveness, and measurable public impact.

To execute the blueprint, internal systems must be realigned so that institutional operations are capable of responding with discipline and speed. The blueprint proposes a Permanent Investment Fund seeded by documented efficiencies and intentional disinvestment, protected from being used to backfill operating deficits, and deployed competitively to scale initiatives with the greatest potential for public impact. Boards assume the role of venture stewards by requiring proposals to address questions related to distinctiveness, measurable impact, and sunset planning before institutional capital is committed. Promotion and tenure criteria must likewise evolve to value translation, societal impact, diversified capital strategies, and collaborative research, complementing traditional disciplinary outputs rather than replacing them. In doing so, the institution becomes “Navigator-ready,” capable of executing the commitments outlined in the renewed compact.

IV. Translating the Blueprint into Practice: Questions, Possibilities, and Pathways Forward

The preceding sections sketch a renewed compact grounded in public purpose, broad access, practical education, civic trust, and continuous listening. Where Section III offered a blueprint,

this concluding section invites readers to join in exploring how such a vision might unfold in practice. Rather than prescribing the path, it poses certain questions that can guide leaders, faculty, students, policymakers, philanthropic partners, and communities as they consider how to bring *Morrill Act 250* to life in ways that fit local context and honor diverse perspectives.

At the level of public policy, it may be helpful to begin by asking which levers can be pulled that are most likely to matter for the people and places a given institution serves. At the federal level, readers might consider how existing programs in digital connectivity, open science, place-based innovation, and responsible AI could be interpreted through the lens of a civic compact rather than solely through a compliance frame. At the state level, it may be worth asking how performance expectations can evolve in ways that recognize not only workforce alignment but also trust, civic preparedness, and regional resilience, and how such expectations can remain supportive rather than punitive. Philanthropic organizations in turn might reflect on how to advance transformative goals while maintaining respect for community wisdom and context, ensuring that investments reinforce community priorities rather than imposing them. Within institutions, leaders and faculty can examine where current mechanisms (budgeting, promotion and tenure, advising, etc.) already align with a “Navigator” identity and where misalignments reveal opportunities for constructive redesign. These questions do not seek a single answer. Instead, they invite a shared assessment of what is possible, with whom, and at what pace.

In thinking about implementation, readers can treat “sequence” not as a fixed recipe but as an opportunity to design rhythms of learning. One starting point is to ask what it would mean to lead with listening. Publishing transparent baseline measures of trust, however imperfect, can signal a willingness to “show the work” and to hear how different subgroups within the larger public sphere interpret the same information. Institutional leaders might then reflect on where early momentum is most likely to arise. Small trial efforts – whether testing new classroom practices, experimenting with updated advising approaches, exploring new ways of translating research for the public, or piloting fresh extensions of community outreach – can offer visible evidence of commitment without overpromising, so long as they are designed to generate learning and remain open to revision.

Governance questions naturally follow. Board members, faculty, students, and community advisors can consider how shared decision-making will determine which interventions expand, which evolve, and which sunset. Finally, the cadence of reflection matters. Adapting a “recognize, analyze, diagnose, act, review” rhythm to local conditions can help the work feel purposeful rather than bureaucratic, especially when the results are shared publicly in accessible language. The point is not to march through a predetermined roadmap, but rather to

cultivate a durable cycle of inquiry, action, and explanation that the public can recognize as trustworthy.

Any effort of this kind invites a candid discussion of risks. Transparency can empower; it can also make institutions vulnerable to misinterpretation. Universities can therefore ask where the boundary lies between openness and exposure and how to communicate method and uncertainty in ways that build credibility rather than suspicion. For example, efforts to safeguard neutrality in teaching may raise legitimate questions about who defines neutrality and how viewpoint diversity is nurtured without silencing scholarly responsibility. As well, expanding AI and digital literacy can generate new inequities alongside new opportunities, so readers might inquire about which students and communities are likely to be unintentionally left behind and how to design supports before gaps widen.

Trust building itself may become politicized despite the best of intentions, which raises further questions about how to keep the work grounded in shared purposes rather than partisan frames. This possibility invites institutions to think carefully about what trust looks like across different publics and what values – such as fairness, openness, listening, and reciprocity – are broad enough to hold diverse perspectives. It encourages leaders to reflect on who should help define the goals of trust-building, how those goals can be communicated in language that resonates across political identities, and what it means to remain accountable to communities that do not always agree with one another or with the university.

Acknowledging these tensions at the outset, rather than encountering them only when controversies arise, can change the character of the work. When institutions openly name the risk of politicization, for example, they make space for more honest conversation about how different groups perceive neutrality, what kinds of evidence they find credible, and how the university can demonstrate responsiveness without appearing to take sides. When universities revisit these hard questions as part of their normal listening practice rather than only in moments of crisis, political tension becomes less of a danger to sidestep and more of a helpful boundary that clarifies how their work can be more thoughtful and effective.

In parallel with these implementation questions, there is a pressing need to develop a rigorous research agenda capable of clarifying *how* community-engaged practices actually influence trust trajectories. While universities frequently assume that engagement breeds confidence, the empirical basis for this belief remains fragmented, episodic, or confined to narrow program evaluations. A semiquincentennial reinterpretation of the land-grant compact therefore requires moving beyond anecdote and toward systematic inquiry: Which forms of engagement matter most? For which communities? At what cadence? And through what mechanisms do these interactions affect perceptions of neutrality, responsiveness, and shared purpose?

Such a research agenda would necessarily be longitudinal and mixed-method, integrating regular public-opinion tracking (through panels, trust dashboards, and RADAR cycles) with qualitative approaches that surface how different portions of the public interpret the same engagements. This work must also examine dosage and design: for example, whether sustained partnerships yield different trust patterns than single-touch programs; how co-created research compares to traditional outreach in shaping perceptions of integrity; and how digital forms of engagement – including but not limited to AI-enabled advising tools, virtual extension services, and open-science platforms – either strengthen or complicate the public’s confidence in universities across demographic and political lines. Evidence of this kind can help institutions avoid unwarranted assumptions, challenge ineffective strategies, and elevate practices that demonstrably contribute to civic trust.

Finally, a robust research program must be attentive to variation across institutional types and land-grant lineages. The trust dynamics surrounding institutions established through the 1862, 1890, and 1994 federal acts, for example, differ not only because of historical context but also because communities bring distinct expectations about whose knowledge counts, what neutrality looks like, and how reciprocity should be enacted. Cross-institution learning networks could illuminate patterns that no single campus could detect, enabling a shared empirical foundation upon which the next era of engagement (and the next chapter of the Morrill compact) can be built.

Coda

The original Morrill compact did not settle every question in advance. Rather, it opened a national conversation about what higher education could become in service to a democratic society, inviting the nation to imagine a system of learning that grew alongside its people. The *Morrill Act 250* blueprint extends that invitation to our own moment in time, asking not for certainty but for a renewed willingness to inquire, adapt, and build together. The central question we pose is both straightforward and profound: *what might change if universities and communities wrote the next chapter of the public research compact together, rather than having it written for them?*

The answers will surely differ by state, region, and institution, reflecting the diverse histories, capacities, and aspirations that shape each place. Yet the spirit of the work remains consistent: progress will come through collaborative imagination that bridges differences; through disciplined listening that treats every community as a partner in defining shared purpose; through transparent practices that make institutional decisions legible to the public; and through results that citizens can recognize as their own contributions to the nation’s civic life. What the original compact offered in aspiration, the *Morrill Act 250* reinterpretation seeks to

offer in practice: an evolving, collective effort to align knowledge with the public good in ways that strengthen trust, expand opportunity, and fortify democracy for America's third century.

MORRILL ACT 250 BLUEPRINT