



**PennState**  
Social Science  
Research Institute

# SSRI Strategic Plan

2025 - 2030

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Social Science Research Institute's Strategic Plan charts a transformative path forward for the Institute's research enterprise in the next five years, 2025-2030. It is anchored on **three interconnected goals** that will continue to position SSRI as a national leader in the social and behavioral sciences.

First, SSRI will continue **catalyzing high quality interdisciplinary and impactful research in the social and behavioral sciences**. We will help recruit and retain research leaders, offer them outstanding infrastructure and services, and provide them networking, mentorship, training, and financial support. At the same time, we will build on funded research in our core research areas (e.g., military-connected individual and family well-being; child maltreatment; population research; substance use and addiction; environmental and climatic change) while also supporting cutting-edge and compelling research areas (e.g., validation and replicability of AI generated data; community-engaged research; health in rural areas). We will marshal these efforts to help increase the number of social and behavioral science departments recognized in top 15 reputational rankings and support Penn State's goal to "become a top 15 research university."

Second, SSRI will **enhance the public impact in the Commonwealth and beyond through public engaged research**. To do so, we will create pathways that help develop and expand mutually beneficially partnerships with local communities, state agencies, and policy stakeholders. We will also support scholarship of consequence and help translate research into accessible information, programs, and products that enable stakeholders to guide evidence-based policy and practice. Our work will contribute to Penn State's goal to "Grow research that positively impacts lives in the Commonwealth, the nation, and the world," and help advance its public service mission as a land-grant institution.

Finally, SSRI will work to **streamline and optimize its operational functions**. We will create shared services for research support, financial tracking, and project management for large grants. We will also create shared IT and computing services and maintain a centralized communications team to ensure our public impacts are widely known. In addition, SSRI will maintain an efficient internal grant program using administrative data to better identify the common factors that predict external funding success. We will develop and implement an evaluation plan that will lead to continuous quality improvement.

Overall, **these goals advance SSRI's longstanding mission** to bring together cutting-edge researchers across disciplines to address critical human and social problems. Importantly, however, **they also respond to the broader institutional call to better serve the public interest**. The **next step** in this process will be to build a five-year implementation plan, with specific steps and timelines, tied to measurable process outcomes and measures of impact.

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Keith Aronson, PhD, Associate Director  
Danilo Contreras, PhD, Assistant Director

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work could not have been completed without the outstanding leadership of Keith Aronson, PhD, Associate Director and Danilo Antonio Contreras, PhD, Assistant Director. Their hard work engaging people from across Penn State, and thoughtful synthesis of their input and recommendations, made this a plan that meaningfully represents the perspectives of faculty and staff and provides SSRI with the direction we need to navigate the current climate.

I also want to recognize the tremendous contributions of [The Implementation Group](#) who provided some critical national benchmarking and led two days of conversations with staff, faculty, and leadership that supported the development of this plan. Finally, I thank all of the staff and faculty who donated their time to the work of planning this Spring and Summer and believe the entire SSRI community will benefit from their perspectives and insights.

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## Strategic Plan: Goals, Objectives, Strategies and Key Metrics

The Social Science Research Institute's Strategic Plan charts a transformative path forward for the Institute's research enterprise in the next five years, 2025-2030. It is anchored on **three interconnected goals** that will continue to position SSRI as a national leader in the social and behavioral sciences and are aligned with the goals of the Penn State Strategic Plan. Responsibility for the successful implementation and tracking will be led by the Director, Managing Director, and Associate Directors with well-defined portfolios.

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### **Goal 1. Catalyze and support high quality interdisciplinary impactful research in social and behavioral sciences**

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SSRI will ensure faculty, staff, and students are provided state-of-the-art research support and a welcoming climate, thus creating an innovative and vibrant community that conducts social and behavioral sciences research that will help tackle the most pressing challenges facing the Commonwealth, nation, and world. This goal closely aligns with Penn State's goal to **"Become a top 15 research university"** and will be the responsibility of the Director with support of the Executive team, unit and workgroup leads.

**To achieve this goal, we will pursue three major objectives:**

**Objective 1:** Become a top destination university for interdisciplinary social and behavioral science researchers who work at the cutting edge of their fields.

**Objective 2:** Enhance Penn State's strong national reputation in the social and behavioral sciences by increasing the number of social and behavioral science departments recognized in top 15 reputational rankings.

**Objective 3:** Support continued growth of novel, innovative, and groundbreaking interdisciplinary social and behavioral sciences research by expanding into new research areas.

#### **Goal-level KPIs**

1. Social and Behavioral Science Departments in Top 15
  - *Metric:* # of social and behavioral science departments in top 15 based on R&D and reputational rankings (NSF HERD and US News)
  - *Goal:* Increase by 1 department per year
2. Overall and Interdisciplinary Research Expenditures
  - *Metric:* Total external research expenditures for SSRI-supported PIs/teams both overall and by interdisciplinary teams with  $\geq 2$  colleges or institutes represented.
  - *Goal:* +10% YoY (adjusted for macro funding cycles).
3. New Large Grant Proposals or Awards
  - *Metric:* # of new multi-investigator proposals or awards including center/training grants.
  - *Goal:* +2–3 new proposals submitted per year by FY30.
4. Interdisciplinary Collaborations

- *Metric:* Share of publications from SSRI-supported\* research with co-authors from across 2 or more Penn State colleges/institutes/campuses or 2 or more disciplines (WoS/Scopus fields).
  - *Goal:* ≥50% of publications by FY28 (baseline-dependent).
5. Secure Foundation-Based Funding
- *Metric:* Count & total \$ of new proposals to foundations
  - *Goal:* 4-5 new submissions, 2-3 new funded awards per year by FY28.
6. Climate & Support Satisfaction
- *Metric:* Mean satisfaction with SSRI support assessed by annual faculty survey
  - *Goal:* Maintain satisfaction ≥4.0/5

\*SSRI-supported: any faculty member who has received instrumental or dollars in support from SSRI in the form of salary support (eg. salary-cofunding, funding for a course release and/or summer salary), a seed grant, faculty fellowship, matching funds, has used a core facility (eg. SRC, PRI, SLEIC, FSRDC, or other core unit) support from a research center (eg. PRI, CMCR, CMSN, CSUA), or workgroup support.

### **Objective-Level Strategies and KPIs**

**Objective 1:** Become a top destination university for interdisciplinary social and behavioral science researchers who work at the cutting edge of their fields.

1. In partnership with colleges and Commonwealth campuses, continue to recruit and retain social and behavioral scientists to build on our strengths in interdisciplinary research and align with local, national, and global research priorities.
2. Strengthen Penn State’s research infrastructure by increasing and optimizing the capacity of the SSRI core facilities, providing training, consultation and concierge services.
3. Ensure networking, mentorship, outreach, and training opportunities for faculty, staff, undergraduate and graduate students, and post-docs to catalyze interdisciplinary research collaborations across units (departments, colleges, other institutes, and campuses) and with community partners to create a more unified, generative, and collaborative community.
4. Develop and maintain state of the art support for data intensive social science (e.g. NIH controlled-access data repositories, Real World Data platforms) by providing a data and analytic environment that meets state and federal agencies cybersecurity requirements for use of sensitive data, as well as by building comprehensive resources (e.g., AI, real world and administrative data) to support advanced computational analysis or critical research in the social and behavioral sciences.
5. Build support for the conduct of policy relevant and community-engaged research (e.g. participatory research, research practice partnerships, science communication, dissemination, and implementation).

***KPIs for Objective 1:***

- Recruitment Success
  - *Metric:* % Offers accepted for faculty positions that are co-funded or include SSRI funding in start-up package or retention.
  - *Goal:* ≥70% yield
- Retention Rate

- *Metric:* 1 – (exits /# faculty).
- *Goal:* ≥90% 5-year.
- Training Reach & Outcomes
  - *Metric:* # participants in training events including workgroups and institutes; % reporting skill gains (post-survey).
  - *Goal:* +20% YoY participants; ≥80% report skill gain.
- Time-to-External Grant Submission
  - *Metric:* Median days from start date to 1st external proposal submission or active project.
  - *Goal:* ≤180 days.
- Core Facility Utilization, Quality & Timeliness
  - *Metric:* # unique investigators served; satisfaction with services.
  - *Goal:* +15% YoY unique users, maintain satisfaction 4.0/5
- Time-to-Access Controlled Data
  - *Metric:* Median days from request to usable access (e.g., NIH dbGaP).
  - *Goal:* ≤30 days (policy-permitting).
- Outreach and Engagement Opportunity
  - *Metric:* % SSRI groups/workgroups with documented strategy for engagement (Research Practice Partnership, dissemination/implementation plan, Community Advisory Board).
  - *Goal:* 80% by FY27.

**Objective 2:** Enhance Penn State’s strong national reputation in the social and behavioral sciences by increasing the number of social and behavioral science departments recognized in top 15 reputational rankings.

1. Continue to employ internal funding mechanisms (e.g., seed grants, mentored fellowships, workgroup support) and develop new mechanisms as needed to a) support post-docs and faculty and their undergraduate and graduate students across career stages and b) develop productive, impactful, and externally recognized research projects and programs.
2. Support interdisciplinary and policy research in key topical areas by continuing to invest in SSRI research units, faculty-led research workgroups, and by partnering with university initiatives.
3. Focus mentoring, training, grant development and other resources on mid-career and senior faculty to help them successfully compete for and direct large institutional center and training grants.
4. Support and encourage faculty in the social and behavioral sciences to participate in research leadership roles across the University, their profession, the Commonwealth, nationally and internationally, as well as help faculty obtain recognition for national and international awards and accolades.
5. Provide undergraduate, graduate, and post-doctoral students with career-stage appropriate experiential and research opportunities, professional development, training, research support, and mentorship to better support faculty research and enhance post-graduation outcomes.

### ***KPIs for Objective 2:***

- Seed-to-External Grant Conversion Rate
  - *Metric:* # external proposals stemming from seed/fellowship/workgroup / # awards issued.
  - *Goal:* ≥0.8 proposals per funded effort; ≥25% external success within 3 years of initial funding.
- Large Proposal Submission & Success Rate
  - *Metric:* # ≥\$3M new and renewal proposals, center grants and training grants submitted; % funded.
  - *Goal:* 2 new submissions/year; ≥50% funded over a 2–3-year period by FY30.
- Leadership Roles
  - *Metric:* # SSRI-affiliated faculty in university/institute governance, professional society roles, national panels.
  - *Goal:* +10% YoY. Alternate: 25% of faculty in any given year.
- Faculty Awards and Accolades
  - *Metric:* # nominations submitted; # awards; % conversion.
  - *Goal:* ≥10 nominations/year; ≥25% conversion.
- Training programs (e.g. summer, graduate, post-doc, and faculty fellowship) to build on the strong interdisciplinary research programs.
  - *Metric:* # new programs piloted; # new programs launched; satisfaction (survey)
  - *Goal:* 1 new program piloted and launched each year; maintain satisfaction ≥4.0/5.

**Objective 3:** Support continued growth of novel, innovative, and groundbreaking interdisciplinary social and behavioral sciences research by expanding into new research areas.

1. Establish an External Advisory Board to bring a national perspective on the changing research landscape and potential opportunities for continued growth.
2. Identify opportunities to shift or expand research activities (e.g. seed grants, faculty fellowships, workgroups, external proposals) in alignment with state and local needs as well as federal and other funding opportunities.
3. Leverage the rich Penn State research environment by identifying areas to recruit new faculty, forge new collaborations with other OSVPR interdisciplinary research institutes, professional schools (College of Medicine and School of Nursing), and Commonwealth campuses.

### ***KPIs for Objective 3:***

- EAB Membership
  - *Metric:* Percentage in leadership positions at local institutions and with national reputations in the social and behavioral science
  - *Goal:* ≥90% reflect targeted faculty profiles from Objective 1 and 2
- New Opportunity Pipeline
  - *Metric:* # new research activities; # advanced to internal seed grant, workgroup, faculty fellowships, or external proposal.

- *Goal:* ≥1/year; ≥40% move to seed grant/workgroup/proposal.
- Cross-Institute/Center/School Collaborations
  - *Metric:* # continuing/new formal collaborations (workshops, seed grant calls, joint events, joint external proposals, co-funded faculty searches)
  - *Goal:* +25% YoY.

**Goal 2. Enhance our public impact in the commonwealth and beyond through engaged research.**

SSRI supports scholarship of consequence and helps translate research into accessible information, programs, and products that have positive impacts within and beyond the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This goal aligns with Penn State’s “Research or Regress” campaign and its institutional goal to **“Grow research that positively impacts lives in the Commonwealth, the nation, and the world.”** The SSRI Director, with the support of the SSRI Executive team and SSRI Unit and Workgroup Directors, will be responsible for this goal.

**To achieve this goal, we will pursue two major objectives:**

**Objective 1:** Enhance SSRI’s commitment to the land-grant mission and increase the policy relevance and translation of Penn State research by supporting the growth of sustained, mutually beneficial, and trusting partnerships with policymakers, state agencies, community organizations, and members of the local community.

**Objective 2:** Enhance the skills and capacity of faculty, students, and fellows to conduct policy relevant and community-engaged research, including effective science communication and dissemination.

**Goal-level KPIs**

1. Community-Engaged and other Public Impact Research
  - *Metric:* # SSRI-supported projects (seed grants, fellowships, units, workgroups) with documented community or agency partner.
  - *Goal:* +20% YoY.
2. Policy & Practice Influence
  - *Metric:* # policy citations, testimonies, briefings, advisory roles, implementation partners.
  - *Goal:* +20% YoY.
3. Community Partnership Strength
  - *Metric:* # active MOUs; community/partner satisfaction.
  - *Goal:* +15% YoY; maintain satisfaction ≥4.0/5.
4. Community Trust
  - *Metric:* Community satisfaction, equity/transparency score, partner retention rate.
  - *Goal:* Satisfaction ≥4.5/5; Equity/Transparency ≥80%; Retention ≥70%
5. Public-Facing Research Outputs & Reach

- *Metric:* # lay summaries, op-eds, podcasts, webinars; citations in policy briefs and reports, participation in Penn State’s *Research or Regress*; cumulative reach/engagement including presentations to lay audiences.
- *Goal:* +20% YoY; ≥10 pieces/year.

### Objective-level Strategies

**Objective 1:** Enhance SSRI’s commitment to the land-grant mission and increase the policy relevance and translation of Penn State research by supporting the growth of sustained, mutually beneficial, and trusting partnerships with policymakers, state agencies, community organizations, and members of the local community.

1. Engage policymakers, agencies, community organizations, and individuals to build new and expand existing mutually beneficial research-practice partnerships, as well as pursue community-engaged scholarship, including participatory research, that seek to achieve tangible and actionable solutions for communities in the Commonwealth and beyond.
2. Work with Cooperative Extension, including with Extension faculty, to develop collaborative research partnerships.
3. Create expectations and generate incentives for all SSRI research groups and workgroups to generate pathways that can lead to community-engagement, including opportunities for developing research practice partnerships and translational and/or applied research.

#### **KPIs for Objective 1:**

- Engagement Activity
  - *Metric:* % SSRI groups/workgroups with documented pathway for engagement (Research Practice Partnership, dissemination/implementation plan, Community Advisory Board).
  - *Goal:* 80% by FY27.
- New & Sustained Research Practice Partnerships
  - *Metric:* # new research-practice partnerships formed/MOUs in place; % sustained ≥2 years.
  - *Goal:* 1 new/year; ≥70% 2-year sustainment.
- Extension-Linked Partnerships and Research Projects
  - *Metric:* # research projects engaging Extension networks/staff; \$ value of collaborative proposals and awards.
  - *Goal:* 1 new/year by FY27, +20% YoY \$ value.
- Policy Engagement Activities and Outputs
  - *Metric:* # faculty participating in meetings, briefings, testimonies, membership on advisory panels, expert witness.
  - *Goal:* +20% YoY.

**Objective 2:** Enhance the skills and capacity of faculty, students, and fellows to conduct policy relevant and community-engaged research, including effective science communication and dissemination.

1. Provide training and resources to support the development of research-to-policy strategies that influence policy and practice through our units and the School of Public Policy in partnership with college centers, professional schools (College of Medicine, School of Nursing), the Commonwealth campuses, and the other OSVPR interdisciplinary research institutes.
2. Develop and implement a plan focused on science communication, building faculty and student skills in dissemination and the translation of scientific research for stakeholders and the public.
3. Create an institutional culture that supports and rewards the pursuit of translational and policy relevant research at all career stages.
4. Create opportunities for students and faculty to gain experience working with community partners.

***KPIs for Objective 2:***

- Policy/Translational Credit in Annual Review and Promotion
  - *Metric:* % primary social and behavioral science departments incorporating translational criteria in annual review and P&T.
  - *Goal:* ≥50% by FY27; 80% by FY30.
- Internal Funding Allocated to Translational Work
  - *Metric:* \$ and % of SSRI internal funds; # projects supported.
  - *Goal:* ≥25% of SSRI internal funds; +25% YoY.
- Engagement with Partners and Agencies
  - *Metric:* # students and faculty working in community-partner settings; partner satisfaction.
  - *Goal:* +25% YoY; maintain satisfaction ≥4.0/5.

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**Goal 3: Streamline and Optimize SSRI Operational Functions**

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SSRI is growing, and we need to increase personnel to meet increasing demands on operations staff. The SSRI will make operational improvements to maximize efficiency, responsiveness, and service quality, including aggregating data to track progress on our metrics, by hiring highly qualified professional staff and fully implementing a shared resource model across the institute. These improvements and centralization of staff will align with and leverage broader institutional goals to optimize operational efficiency and decrease administrative burdens of our researchers, such as the Research Support Transformation Project (RSTP) and Optimized Service Teams (OST). Further, enhanced operational efficiencies will support the recruitment and retention of faculty, help increase the community’s trust in Penn State research and science, and enhance the public’s understanding of science. This goal aligns with Penn State goal “**Transforming Operations**” and will be the responsibility of the new SSRI Managing Director (first day 12/4/2025) with the support of the directors of SSRI core facilities and shared services. *We are in the process of developing KPIs for this goal.*

**To achieve this goal, we will pursue two major objectives:**

**Objective 1:** Provide high-quality and sustainable operational support by creating a central model of shared services tailored to the needs of social and behavioral science research.

**Objective 2:** Continuously improve the functioning, supports, and services of the Operations Unit.

### **Objective-level Strategies**

**Objective 1:** Provide high-quality and sustainable operational support by creating a central model of shared services tailored to the needs of social and behavioral science research.

1. Create research support shared services including pre- and post-award, financial tracking, research project management to support the development, implementation, and evaluation of large and complex multi-investigator (e.g. center and program project grants) and training grants.
2. Optimize IT and computing resources shared services to support the research needs of faculty.
3. Maintain a communications team responsible for sharing the story and public impact of SSRI and Penn State social and behavioral science research via a dynamic website, the production of reports, newsletters, social media, and other communications strategies internal and to audiences external to Penn State to build potential collaborators, students, and funders, as well as collaborate with Strategic Planning.
4. Maintain an efficient internal grant program (including seed grants from SSRI research units) that organizes calls for proposals, a robust developmental review process, ensures resource stewardship, and annual tracking of outcomes.
5. Employ and promote human-centered and ethical uses of AI and/or other technologies to optimize SSRI's operations.

**Objective 2:** Continuously improve the functioning, supports, and services of the Operations Unit.

1. Enhance the capacity of SSRI's operations teams
2. Conduct annual process evaluations of the operational unit to ensure that personnel positions and duties correspond with the needs of the SSRI and identify areas for quality improvement across functions (e.g., efficiency, effective use of resources, services, and survey research).
3. Continue to exercise strong financial stewardship of the SSRI
4. Support training and career development for SSRI administrative staff to ensure excellence and job satisfaction.