Preprint. Accepted for publication in IMPACT Journal.
The Version of Record is forthcoming and will be available from Sage Journals.

Commentary

A New Platform for Public Impact: How universities and funders can reshape perceptions of research

Graham Carr[1]

Abstract

At a time when public trust in universities is increasingly precarious, communicating the societal value of university research has become both more urgent and more challenging. While public opinion polls suggest that people generally appreciate the benefits of scientific research, they may give relatively little thought to the universities, researchers, partnerships and public investments that make those benefits possible. Addressing this disconnect requires more than showcasing individual research achievements. It calls for a collective effort to demonstrate what universities are good for, not simply what they are good at. Drawing on my experience with the Presidents and Chancellors Council on Public Impact Research, convened by the Pew Charitable Trusts, I argue that university presidents have a distinctive responsibility to advance this agenda beyond their individual campuses. While universities are increasingly embedding public impact into their research cultures, incentives and assessment practices, efforts to communicate their collective contributions to society remain fragmented and largely institution-focused. Inspired by collaborative communications initiatives such as The Conversation, Futurity and MadeAtUni, I propose that the Council, working with the Impact Funders Forum, develop an independent, purpose-driven, multimedia platform dedicated to communicating the societal impact of university research. Rather than privileging academic voices and institutional success stories, the platform would foreground the experiences of individuals, communities and organizations whose lives and work have been affected by research. Its credibility would depend on shared authority, editorial independence and a willingness to acknowledge unintended consequences and impacts that fall short of expectations. Such an initiative could provide a powerful vehicle for reshaping public understanding of university research, strengthening the legitimacy of the sector and demonstrating the transformative potential of collective leadership.

Introduction

Across the United States and internationally, a growing number of initiatives are seeking to strengthen the public impact of universities and university research. Among these is the Presidents and Chancellors Council on Public Impact Research, of which I've been a member since its inception in June 2024. Convened by the Pew Charitable Trusts and chaired by my colleague, Penn State President Neeli Bendapudi, the council works alongside the Impact Funders Forum, established by Pew in 2022 and led by Angela Bednarek.

The council involves a "diversity of North American research institutions, including public land-grant universities, private campuses, urban-serving, rural-serving, and minority-serving universities" (Olneck-Brown, 2024). Its goal is to share best practices for advancing and institutionalizing rigorous, innovative approaches to assessing impact and positioning universities' research more effectively with governments, industry, and the general public.

[1]Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

Preprint. Accepted for publication in IMPACT Journal.
The Version of Record is forthcoming and will be available from Sage Journals.

In parallel, the Impact Funders Forum regroups more than 80 philanthropies and public funding agencies worldwide that are working to design new approaches to foster and support engaged research that tackles grand societal challenges, from economic inequities and health disparities to climate change (Miyamoto & Bednarek, 2025). In both cases, the overall goal of the Pew initiative is to bring the funder community and the university research enterprise into greater alignment, leading to greater tangible impact and more sustainable outcomes for all.

At a time when trust in universities is precarious, these efforts aim to reposition them as forces for public good. Yet public opinion polls reveal an interesting paradox. Although Americans overwhelmingly support scientific research, fewer than a third reported thinking a lot about its impact on their everyday lives before the pandemic (National Science Board, 2024). Addressing this disconnect involves, in part, dispelling the lingering perception that universities are elitist, ivory towers. We need to show that we are anchor institutions in cities and communities, training grounds for tomorrow's talent, and stewards of research outcomes that improve the world. The communications challenge, then, is not necessarily that the public fails to appreciate the value of research, but that it may take its benefits for granted without recognizing the universities, researchers, partnerships, and public investments that make them possible.

Central to these efforts is a laser focus on impact. Research impact can take many forms: generating breakthroughs in health treatments, influencing public policies, developing new technologies, delivering environmental benefits for communities, improving food production, and much more. But ultimately, it comes down to demonstrating that university research—especially that supported by public funding—delivers tangible social and economic good.

The Limits of Traditional Measurements

Impact outcomes may seem an obvious point for universities to trumpet and celebrate, but the reality is that the academy has traditionally defined the value of its work very narrowly. The obvious example—the words alone are revealing about our collective mindset—is the pervasive influence of “impact factors” that measure how frequently articles in a particular journal are cited.

Peer-reviewed funding decisions by granting agencies, as well as departmental hiring and promotion decisions in many fields, have tended to prioritize these indicators, casting them as objective measures of what is meaningful in the work our researchers do. Yet while citation indices impress the academic community, they’re a meaningless abstraction for a public that wants to be convinced of the contribution of our research enterprise to the common good.

Among the efforts to address these limitations are the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, which challenges the reliance on narrow publication-based metrics, and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities’ SPIRIT initiative, which is exploring ways to better recognize and reward research that benefits society (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2024). Universities are increasingly taking up this challenge, exploring ways to embed a broader understanding of research excellence and impact into their institutional cultures and practices.

In addition to the meetings of the council’s presidents, since 2024, delegates from the universities—the academic administrative, research, and staff personnel on our various campuses who are leading impact initiatives—have been meeting to share examples of how their institutions are working to advance change-making outcomes (Penn State, 2024). Their work reflects the council members’ shared ambition to

Preprint. Accepted for publication in IMPACT Journal.
The Version of Record is forthcoming and will be available from Sage Journals.

embed public benefit into the culture and practices of universities, shaping how research is supported, conducted in collaboration with partners, assessed, rewarded, and communicated. The delegates' meetings highlight innovative and exemplary research projects—some fledgling, others well tested. This work, in turn, informs the presidents' meetings and the council's priority setting. But through empirical examples, it also better positions university leaders to foster an impact mindset on campus, incentivize outreach with community partners, and champion qualitative, multidimensional assessment criteria as markers of research impact.

After 2 years of mapping the research impact landscape, the member institutions of the council and the forum now find themselves at a critical juncture. The time has arrived to move beyond aggregating ideas and begin acting on them. This challenge requires thinking beyond the perimeters and successes of our individual institutions and collectively showcasing the impact of university research across our sector.

The Role of University Leaders

What role should presidents and chancellors play in advancing the impact agenda? At the very least, council presidents must champion it within their universities. The question is how to take that role beyond our respective campuses.

Most of us would agree that the primary job of presidents at research universities is to champion our institutions, providing strategic vision for the future and inspiring pride in what we accomplish. Research on university leadership underscores the distinctive role presidents play in shaping how stakeholders understand their institutions' identities, values, and public purpose. Brown (2021) describes this as "executive sensegiving"—the strategic use of communication by university leaders to shape institutional meaning and legitimacy. Admittedly, there's an element of friendly rivalry to how we sell our institutions. Every university has a clutch of other institutions on its radar that it views as competition. Our natural reflex is to try to differentiate ourselves by putting the spotlight on what's supposedly specific, extraordinary, and unique about each of our institutions.

In terms of advancing our collective impact agenda, however, the campus-first approach limits us: As champions and advocates, we seldom speak about our sector's work as a whole. Instead, we tend to delegate messaging about the overarching social value of research to umbrella organizations such as the Association of American Universities, Universities Canada, or the federal funding agencies: National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, or Canada's Tri-Agency. Those organizations do vital work. But research on presidential communications also points to the importance of presidents themselves in articulating the values and public responsibilities of universities (McNaughtan & McNaughtan, 2019). The time has come for presidents to move beyond delegation, transcend our institutional chauvinism, and embrace the responsibility of telling a greater story—one that connects the achievements of our individual institutions to the broader public purpose and collective contributions of universities.

Since the outset of our council meetings, an ironic motif has underpinned our proceedings. It begins with the premise that we're meeting because universities increasingly feel they're on the defensive, losing the battle of public opinion.

Inevitably, out of frustration, someone will say, "Our problem is communications. We don't do an effective job of explaining what universities do." Or, as one of our colleagues recently put it, "We're much better at describing *what we're good at* than *what we're good for*." Initially, we nod and agree that this is the crux of our problem until, in exasperation, someone disrupts the consensus and bristles that "we can't communicate

Preprint. Accepted for publication in IMPACT Journal.
The Version of Record is forthcoming and will be available from Sage Journals.

our way out of the problem."

Admonished, we let the comms discussion falter and channel the conversation elsewhere. Course correcting, we shift our attention to activities and behaviors—the nuts and bolts of impact measurement or best practices in collaboration—that we, as leaders, hope to instill in our individual campus cultures and introduce at an ecosystem level across the partner institutions. Important as these efforts are, the irony is that in turning to what universities need to do differently, we repeatedly sideline the equally pressing question of how to communicate more effectively what universities contribute to society. Yet research on presidential communications underscores what we risk overlooking: Communicating the public value of universities is not simply a task to delegate, but a strategic leadership responsibility that university presidents themselves must embrace (McNaughtan & Pal, 2019).

From Sharing Successes to Inspiring Impact

Having amassed useful information on shared best practices, we must now decide how to make our impact agenda resonate with a wider public. The stakes are high. That's why I believe we can't dodge the communications piece any longer. Now is the moment to ask what a communications plan to advance a university impact agenda should look like, how it could be delivered, and by whom. Because after all, if we can't find a way to translate our actions and ambitions into messaging bold and dynamic enough to shift popular opinion about our sector, we'll have failed the biggest impact test of all.

This is where the presidents, working in collaboration with the funders, have a vital role to play. Why? Because the ambition to reposition universities and their research as essential contributors to the public good requires a new form and style of communication beyond the scope of what individual universities traditionally do. Research on presidential communications underscores the strategic role presidents play in shaping institutional narratives and highlights the importance of deliberative, coordinated approaches to communicating them (McNaughtan & Pal, 2019). The challenge now is to extend that leadership beyond our individual institutions. It requires a very different messaging template, one capable of exceeding the conventional reach of our normal institutional communications.

Although it's surely the case that research success stories are key to building institutional reputation, much of what drives university communications strategies is a focus on recruiting prospective students, keeping current students informed, and boosting institutional pride among staff and alumni.

This is not to say that our comms teams don't actively showcase our research successes. But the current media environment—where local newspapers and broadcasters are vanishing, ephemeral social media is thriving, science journalism is under pressure, and influence is often more potent than evidence—makes it extremely challenging for stories about research impact to get noticed, let alone gain wider traction.

As presidents, we've all had board members and friends of the university learn about great research happening on our campus, only to ask, "Why aren't you communicating that?" Chances are we did, but the story either wasn't picked up, wasn't seen by the individual, or simply got lost in the morass of information swamping our newsfeeds.

How do we change this? If conventional university comms aren't the answer, and the obstacles to penetrating the current media structure are legion, perhaps the council and the funders need to create a new vehicle—one that's purpose built to communicate the impact agenda.

Preprint. Accepted for publication in IMPACT Journal.
The Version of Record is forthcoming and will be available from Sage Journals.

Scholarship Beyond Borders

Here I want to draw on the inspiring model of *The Conversation* project. Since its inception in Australia in 2011, *The Conversation* has become a global, collective media platform for communicating academic opinion and expertise, with regional editions across the Americas, Europe, the UK, Africa, Indonesia, New Zealand, and, of course, Australia.

The mantra of *The Conversation* is simple: inform readers on topics of the day by combining academic rigor with journalistic flair. In short, *The Conversation*'s mission is to make academic expertise accessible to a wider audience on all manner of topics, from current events to scientific breakthroughs, culture, religion, nature and the environment, technology, the economy, and more.

Presented on a slick, visually appealing, web-based platform and augmented by podcasts,*The Conversation* aligns with the mission of the Presidents Council and the Impact Funders Forum by taking university knowledge beyond the academy. The goal is to inform public discourse while fostering a more widespread appreciation for the contribution of scholarship to understanding our world.

Operating as a consortium,*The Conversation* is cofunded by universities, research centers, granting agencies, individual donors, and philanthropic organizations. Its regional operations have their own governance and advisory structures, involving representatives from the university and research sectors, while the editorial teams are led and staffed by journalists.

Critical to *The Conversation*'s success is the effort participating universities have put into persuading researchers that public communication helps build respect for our sector and encouraging them to invest time and energy in honing their media skills. *The Conversation* has also developed a tool to track its reach and readership, including how often articles are picked up by or reproduced in mainstream or social media.

Other initiatives offer complementary models. *Futurity,* launched in 2009 by a consortium of 35 research universities, provides a shared platform for communicating university discoveries to a wider audience. More explicitly focused on communicating the collective public value of universities are *MadeAtUni*, a campaign launched by Universities UK in 2018 to showcase how universities improve lives and communities, and *Universities Matter*, launched by Universities Australia in 2024 to highlight universities' contributions to national prosperity and societal well-being. Together, they show how universities can pool their resources to amplify their collective contributions.

The Potential of Impact-Focused Communications

Drawing inspiration from *The Conversation* and these complementary initiatives, I believe there's a golden opportunity for the council and the funders forum to design a similar communications platform specifically focused on research impact. To return to an earlier motif, if *The Conversation* is adept at demonstrating what we're good at—analyzing, diagnosing, explaining, forecasting—the research impact platform would illustrate what we're good for. Ideally, it would show how the outcomes of university research are ubiquitous in, beneficial to, and, in some cases, transformational for the world around us.

This is where the university partners need the support of the funders forum: to develop a highly strategic, purpose-driven, multimedia platform devoted to telling the story of university research impact writ large.

A critical element of that partnership would be financial. A bold venture like this would require smart investment in design, research to identify and segment target audiences, and a strategic understanding of how

Preprint. Accepted for publication in IMPACT Journal.
The Version of Record is forthcoming and will be available from Sage Journals.

best to reach them. To measure success and remain sustainable, the project will need to develop metrics that reflect the platform's influence while staying nimble enough to adapt to new media directions or political trends.

Beyond the financial investment, a second element of the partnership between the council and the funders involves leveraging their complementary political and professional networks to deliver content for this initiative. Unlike *The Conversation*, the most effective spokespeople to feature on research impact are not academics. Instead, the most compelling voices will be those of the individuals and groups outside the university sector who have tangible experiences of the positive difference research makes.

At a time when public trust in universities is precarious, it can be frustrating for presidents that many influential individuals we see as allies—whom we know are allies—are reluctant to speak out publicly on behalf of the work we do. But the reality is that, other than urging our allies to lobby political leaders, publish or cowrite op-eds, or reference the work of universities in their speeches, we haven't created a compelling vehicle for our allies to share their views. This would change if we could offer them a format and place where they will be read and heard and, more importantly, where their voices will be joined by others.

With an impact media platform in place, presidents could work together with the funders to mobilize our respective networks, reaching out to the myriad mayors, medical patients, farmers, tech giants, businesses, not-for-profits, community and cultural groups, policy makers, and public utility heads—the list goes on—for whom the work of our universities' research has been a resounding force for positive change.

More Than Simple Storytelling

As with *The Conversation*, however, several additional steps are required for this initiative to be successful from a communications standpoint.

One is to create the conditions and provide the support needed for partners to communicate their experiences in their own terms while helping them to draw on their professional and organizational communications tools and networks to maximize the influence of their voices.

The process must also be mutually beneficial for partners. To maintain the credibility of the research impact platform, it will be vital to feature the testimonies of people and organizations affected by research without turning the platform into an uncritical vehicle for university self-promotion.

Inevitably, institutions will be tempted to put forward their most enthusiastic partners and highlight the projects that, in the universities' eyes, have delivered the biggest results. But the risk here is twofold.

First, the platform's credibility could be undermined if the champions' voices—particularly those from more marginalized communities—were perceived as being instrumentalized to position particular universities as agents of public good.

Second, as much as the goal is to put the right foot forward on behalf of university research, the platform's credibility will actually be enhanced if it also makes space to tell the stories of, and glean lessons from, projects that failed to realize their expected impact, led to unintended consequences, or ultimately proved unsustainable—which means there must be some mechanism to monitor shifting patterns of impact over time.

To address these concerns, the platform leadership must be inclusive beyond universities and funders. Buy-in from partners will increase if there is openness to sharing authority with them. More importantly, this approach would bring a different, more experiential perspective to assessing and recounting research impact.

In this way, the platform could create a far more complex set of insights and sustain an innovative, genuinely bidirectional dialogue about the role of universities in the public domain. Ideally, it would foster a better understanding not only of how impact-driven research benefits partners and society but also how it inspires researchers to imagine their craft and professional purpose differently.

It's Time for a New Narrative

If, as presidents, we want to endorse one collective action that takes us beyond the limited horizons of our campuses while also engaging and enlisting the funders as impact partners for success, seriously tackling our communications challenge is the choice I would make.

Creating a credible, independent, purpose-driven, outcome-focused media platform devoted to research impact would position our work on a scale and scope that individual universities cannot attain. This could be a critical step in developing a new narrative around research impact, tailored for greater resonance across local, regional, national, and international contexts.

Just like the mission each of us embraces every day at our institutions, a platform of this nature could become a source of pride in and for our sector. And by helping transform public understanding of what universities are good for, it could have an immense impact in its own right.

References

Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. (2024, October). *APLU joins with four institutions to develop new approaches for supporting faculty in undertaking public impact research*. https://www.aplu.org/news-and-media/news/aplu-joins-with-four-institutions-to-develop-new-approaches-for-supporting-faculty-in-undertaking-public-impact-research/

Brown, J. T. (2021). The language of leaders: Executive sensegiving strategies in higher education. *American Journal of Education*, *127*(2), 265–302. https://doi.org/10.1086/712113

Futurity. (n.d.). *Futurity*. https://www.futurity.org/

McNaughtan, J., & McNaughtan, E. D. (2019). Engaging election contention: Understanding why presidents engage with contentious issues. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *73*(2), 198–217. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12190

McNaughtan, J., & Pal, P. R. (2019). Crafting the message: The complex process behind presidential communication in higher education. *Journal of Research on the College President*, *3*, Article 5. https://doi.org/10.54119/jrcp.2019.304

Miyamoto, B., & Bednarek, A. (2025, March 2027). *Funders tailor approaches to ensure research meets real-world needs*. Pew.org. https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2025/03/27/funders-tailor-approaches-to-ensure-research-meets-real-world-needs

National Science Board. (2024, February 14). *Public trust in science remains high, but engagement is low*. National Science Foundation. https://www.nsf.gov/nsb/updates/public-trust-science-remains-high-engagement-low

Olneck-Brown, B. (2024, June 12). *University leaders come together to spur positive change through research*. Pew.org. https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2024/06/12/university-leaders-come-together-to-spur-positive-change-through-research

Penn State. (2024, June 13). *President Bendapudi helps lead new higher ed council on public-impact research: New Presidents and Chancellors Council on Public Impact Research brings together higher education leaders, Pew Charitable Trusts and*

Preprint. Accepted for publication in IMPACT Journal.
The Version of Record is forthcoming and will be available from Sage Journals.

key stakeholders to advance impactful scholarship.
https://www.psu.edu/news/research/story/president-bendapudi-helps-lead-new-higher-ed-council-public-impact-research

The Conversation. (n.d.). *The Conversation*.
https://theconversation.com/global

Universities Australia. (n.d.). *Universities matter*.
https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/project/universities-matter/

Universities UK. (n.d.). *MadeAtUni*.
https://madeatuni.org.uk/