150 FORWARD REACHING HIGHER ACTIVATION

OVERVIEW

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Reaching Higher

Building on record-breaking momentum, the University of Arkansas is reaching higher to boost student success, improve lives through research and innovation, and expand its impact on the state of Arkansas.

The activation of the 150 Forward Reaching Higher strategic plan provides transformational goals, a clear path to reaching them and unprecedented support to ensure success.

Three Phases

The 150 Forward Reaching Higher activation is the result of three phases of strategic planning and implementation.

150 Forward Strategic Plan

PHASE I

Established through a campuswide effort, the 150 Forward Strategic Plan fueled record-breaking momentum by providing a guide for colleges and units to align their own strategic plans with the university's top priorities, defined by the three pillars of student success, research excellence and enhancing the institution's status as an employer of choice.

150 Forward Reaching Higher

PHASE II

Defined two specific goals:

- Reaching an 80% graduation rate
- Growing to $500 million in annual research expenditures

150 Forward Reaching Higher Activation

PHASE III

The current phase further refines transformational goals, provides a clear roadmap to reaching them and establishes an office to support the campus as it mobilizes to accelerate our progress and maximize the university's impact. The planning process for the third phase kicked off in January 2026 with campuswide engagement and external guidance, with campus activation beginning in Fall 2026.

Activating the Plan

The 150 Forward Reaching Higher activation includes transformational goals, a clear roadmap to reaching those goals and a newly established office to support the effort.

Transformational Goals

- Achieving an 80% graduation rate
- Reaching $500 million in annual research conducted by 2032

New or Refined Initiatives

- Growing graduate student enrollment by 2,000
- Providing at least one experiential learning opportunity for every undergraduate student
- Ensuring AI literacy for all undergraduates

Clear Roadmap

- Integrate Student Success
  - An Integrated Student Success approach including targeted financial assistance, increased academic support and opportunities aligned with the state's workforce needs, and comprehensive wrap-around student services.
- Grow Research in Priority Areas
  - This includes college and unit-level plans, disciplined investment and the growth of priority research areas while supporting all of the university's research, scholarship and creative endeavors.
- Support Data-Enabled Decisions
  - A truly transformational shift focused on continuous improvement by embracing data-enabled decision-making, using shared dashboards, allowing better visibility into performance, faster risk assessment and timely adjustments.

Transformation Management

A newly created Transformation Management Office (TMO) supports the activation of 150 Forward Reaching Higher by ensuring strategic alignment, coordinating campuswide collaborations, tracking and reporting milestones, and discovering and implementing ways to accelerate the work.

Pillars:

Strategic Pillar I:

Student Success

150 Forward Reaching Higher Activation

To support Student Success, the strategic plan activation includes a transformational goal and other new or refined objectives, a roadmap to achieving the goal and objectives, and focused initiative areas supported by the transformation management office.

Transformational Goal

- Increase graduation rate to 80%

Refined initiatives:

- Provide at least one experiential learning opportunity for every undergraduate student
- Ensure AI literacy for all undergraduates
- Grow graduate student enrollment by 2,000

Roadmap to Success

- Integrated student success approach
  - An Integrated Student Success approach including targeted financial assistance, increased academic support and opportunities aligned with the state's workforce needs, and comprehensive wrap-around student services.
- Support for data-enabled decision making
  - Developing and utilizing centralized, accurate and robust data dashboards to identify students who need academic assistance and providing proactive academic support to those students.

Focused Initiative Areas

- Initiative leads for each area coordinate strategy, implementation and progress with executive sponsors and the transformation management office to ensure success.
- Experiential learning
- AI literacy
- Retention and graduation
- Graduate enrollment
- Data capabilities

Transformation Management Office (TMO)

- Supports the full activation of the three pillars by ensuring strategic alignment, coordinating campuswide collaborations, tracking and reporting milestones, and accelerating the work.

Student Success Priorities, Goals and Objectives

The University of Arkansas will offer unparalleled access to a holistic education that is designed to help our students grow, contribute and thrive throughout their lives and in their communities from matriculation to graduation. To achieve this, the University will focus on these four Student Success priorities:

- Academic success & intellectual engagement
- Career readiness
- Affordability
- Wellness & belonging

Academic Success & Intellectual Engagement
Ensure students are aware of practices that lead to academic success, understand the opportunity to experience the full array of intellectual engagement afforded through a college education. Students will know where to find resources to help them design a personal plan for success that marries personal, professional and intellectual goals.

Career Readiness
Create opportunities for every student to define and attain their individual career or post-graduate pathway.

Affordability
Make education more affordable, particularly for Arkansans with financial need, thereby demonstrating that the University adds value to the entire state by offering an accessible education that yields a significant, lifelong and generational return on investment.

Wellbeing and Belonging
Ensure students feel a sense of belonging in the campus community and form lasting ties with the University. Ensure students have access to, are aware of and utilize university programs that promote their mental, physical and financial wellness, and civic engagement.

Transformational Goal

- Increase graduation rate to 80%**

Objectives:

- Increase retention and graduation rates across demographics including narrowing of gaps between populations
- Increased financial support for all students and particularly in meeting cost of attendance for students in need
    - In support of this goal, the university is working to increase scholarship funding for Arkansans in financial need by $200 million with the Land of Opportunity Scholarship, providing additional access to deserving students in Arkansas while helping them stay in school and graduate with ongoing mentoring, academic coaching, financial planning assistance, and career readiness support.
- Provide at least one experiential learning opportunity for every undergraduate student***
- Ensure AI literacy for all undergraduates***
- Grow graduate student enrollment by 2,000***
- Improved time-to-completion rates for doctoral students
- Increased success rates for historically dropped, withdrawn and failed courses
- Growing percentage of students served by career coaching, student involvement and participation in high-impact practices
- Continuous reporting of post-graduate plans and outcomes by majority of student body

***Refined as a part of Phase II: 150 Forward Reaching Higher*
****Refined or added as a part of Phase III: 150 Forward Reaching Higher activation.*

Strategic Pillar II:

Research Excellence

150 Forward Reaching Higher Activation

To support Research Excellence, the strategic plan activation includes a transformational goal, a roadmap to achieving that goal by catalyzing faculty success and growing five research priority areas with the support of the transformation management office.

Transformational Goal

- Reach $500 million in annual research expenditures by 2032

Roadmap to Success

- Grow research in five key areas

  This includes college and unit-level plans, disciplined investment and the growth of priority research areas while supporting all of the university's research, scholarship and creative endeavors.
  - reachinghigher.uark.edu/student-success-pillar
- Support for data-enabled decision making

  Data optimization across campus will allow for improved data-enabled decision-making, with shared dashboards that provide better visibility into performance, faster risk assessment and timely adjustments.

Focused Initiative Areas

Initiative leads for each area coordinate strategy, implementation and progress with executive sponsors and the transformation management office to ensure success.

- College and Division productivity growth
- Faculty expansion
- Centers and Institutes activation
- University-wide research support

Transformation Management Office (TMO)

Supports the full activation of the three pillars by ensuring strategic alignment, coordinating campuswide collaborations, tracking and reporting milestones, and accelerating the work.

Research Excellence Goals
A comprehensive research university with significant emerging strength in applied research, the University of Arkansas relentlessly pursues its land grant mission by promoting knowledge creation, scientific inquiry and creative works.

We seek to:

- Attain a lasting reputation for deep faculty expertise, high quality education and research outputs.
- Align the research enterprise with society's needs, and the economy across the region, state, nation and world – including research commercialization, workforce training, and other economic and cultural development that advances all Arkansans.
- Achieve a sustainable, shared research enterprise that adopts and develops best practices in: research administration; growing research facility size and support; faculty recruitment, retention, and success; graduate education; and undergraduate participation in the research enterprise.

Transformational Goal

- Reach $500 million in annual research expenditures by 2032***

Research Excellence Goals:

- Increase research expenditures
- Increase scholarly productivity percentile, an algorithm that combines citations, books, chapters, patents, and trials among other measures relative to the size of the faculty
- Regularly attain highly prestigious faculty awards
- Increase patent production-to-expenditure ratio and technology transfer
- Improve retention of faculty
- Grow graduate student enrollment by 2,000***
- Increase the number of doctoral students

****Refined or added as a part of Phase III: 150 Forward Reaching Higher activation.*

We are among the top research universities in the nation with $252.9 million in research expenditures (FY25). As a public land-grant university and R1 flagship institution, we support all faculty in all disciplines to create knowledge that enriches Arkansas and the nation. Our research success is supported by our unprecedented investments in our research enterprise including three leading-edge applied research facilities that have opened in the last few years – the Institute for Integrative and Innovative Research (I^3R), the Multi-User Silicon Carbide Research and Fabrication Facility (MUSiC), and the Anthony Timberlands Center for Design and Materials Innovation.

Strategic Pillar III:

Employer of Choice

150 Forward Reaching Higher Activation

To enhance the university's status as an Employer of Choice, the strategic plan activation includes the continued implementation of seven initiative areas with support from the transformation management office.

Focused Initiative Areas

- Classification and Compensation projects including consistently working to align with the market
- Enhancing employee onboarding
- Acting on employee feedback including implementing and responding to Employee Engagement Survey and COACHE survey
- Adopting an 'Employee Value Proposition'
- Offering full-service talent acquisition support
- Planning and adopting a comprehensive Performance Framework
- Talent and leadership development
- Developing and supporting Career Pathways

Transformation Management Office (TMO)
Supports the full activation of the three pillars by ensuring strategic alignment, coordinating campuswide collaborations, tracking and reporting milestones, and accelerating the work.

Employer of Choice Goals and Objectives

The University of Arkansas is committed to fostering a work environment where everyone feels a sense of belonging, works toward a meaningful purpose, and has the data, resources, connections and foundation of support to be most effective, grow and advance their careers, and thrive in their personal and professional lives.

This will be accomplished when we:

- Attract and match the best talent to the right roles at the right time, through proactive outreach and offering candidates a top-notch hiring experience to meet the evolving needs of candidates, employees and the university.
- Engage and retain faculty and staff by helping them fulfill their career aspirations and caring for their well-being
- Strengthen university's land-grant mission through a high-performance culture that drives results and continuous improvement

Employer of choice objectives:

- Completion and adoption of employee value proposition
- Continual high employee engagement / satisfaction
- Reduction in annual turnover rate

Priority Research Growth Areas

While all of the university's research, scholarship, and creative endeavors is highly valued and impactful to society in different ways, five priority growth areas have been identified to meet growing needs identified by the state, nation and private industry including several areas where the University of Arkansas has existing research capability and strength.

Materials, Semiconductors & Power Electronics
Positioning Arkansas as a national hub for next generation semiconductor and power electronics manufacturing.

- Includes development, fabrication and characterization of advanced materials for power electronics, quantum, defense and energy applications.

Food Systems & Nutrition
Strengthening the state's agricultural economy while addressing food insecurity and nutrition disparities across rural Arkansas communities.

- Includes food production, safety, processing, nutrition science and food technology; and spans agricultural systems, food security, dietary behavior and nutrition interventions.

Metabolic Health
Addressing the chronic disease crisis disproportionately burdening rural Arkansas communities including diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular conditions and breast cancer.

- Includes prevention, treatment and reversal of chronic disease; and encompasses basic science, clinical research, biomedical devices and population health interventions.

Supply Chain & Contested Logistics
Strengthening America's supply chain infrastructure from Arkansas – home to the largest concentration of retail and logistics industry partners.

- Includes design, optimization and resilience of complex supply chains under disruption; and spans logistics modeling, defense supply networks and AI-driven optimization.

Lithium & Critical Minerals
Securing domestic critical mineral supply chains from the state's Smackover Formation.

- Includes extraction, processing, characterization and application of critical minerals including lithium, rare earth elements and battery materials.

Fulfilling Our Research Mission

As a comprehensive public land-grant research university, the University of Arkansas has a responsibility to create new knowledge and provide meaningful impact to the state, nation and world. Faculty advance knowledge through scientific discovery, scholarship, creative activity, applied research, professional practice and other forms of inquiry appropriate to their disciplines.

Because every discipline advances knowledge and provides impact in different ways, research excellence is not defined only by research expenditures or any single measure. Growing externally funded research and research expenditures is an important university priority because it expands our capacity for discovery, innovation and impact. In disciplines where competitive grants, sponsored research, patents and commercialization are central indicators of excellence, we should aspire to perform at the highest levels nationally.

But those measures do not capture the full spectrum of knowledge creation at a comprehensive research university. Across other fields, excellence may be demonstrated through influential books and articles, citations, prestigious fellowships and awards, major commissions and creative works, performances and exhibitions, policy or professional impact, public scholarship, community-engaged research, or expertise that shapes institutions, industries and communities.

The U of A strives to provide a supportive environment for faculty in every field to do consequential work at the highest level, and to recognize, measure and communicate that excellence in ways that strengthen the university's impact and national reputation.

FAQs

Student Success

Why 80%? What's the significance of achieving this specific six-year graduation rate goal?

- Every one percentage point increase equates to about 70 more students graduating annually, based on an incoming class of 7,000. And every additional student who graduates is better prepared to enter the workforce and start a successful career, strengthening communities across the state while driving economic impact.
- The impact will be multiplied by 10 when the university increases its graduation rate from 70% to 80%, which will result in an additional 700 students graduating every year based on an incoming class of 7,000.
- While 80% is a stretch goal, the university believes it is attainable due to record incoming GPAs, record graduation rates and record scholarship funding to help students overcome financial obstacles, combined with other initiatives to enhance student success included in the activation of 150 Forward Reaching Higher.
- It took the university 25 years to increase its graduation rate from 55.3% (2000) to 70.9% (2025), but the U of A is focused on accelerating that timeline to reach 80% much sooner.

How many more students will graduate each year when the university reaches an 80% graduation rate?

- With a 70% graduation rate, about 4,900 students out of an incoming class of 7,000 graduate within six years.
- With an 80% graduate rate, about 5,600 students out of an incoming class of 7,000 graduate within six years.
- So, about 700 more students will graduate each year based on an incoming class of 7,000.

How will the university achieve an 80% six-year graduation rate?

- Recruitment and Admissions
  - Recruiting and admitting larger numbers of the top students in Arkansas and beyond, combined with enhanced student support, helps all students and boosts retention and graduation rates.
- Scholarship Support
  - Growing scholarship support will help the university attract high-achieving students and eliminate financial burdens for students in need, helping students stay in school, succeed and graduate. The $200 Million Land of Opportunity Scholarship is an example of how the university is actively working to increase scholarship support and promote student success.
- Integrated Student Success Approach
  - Developing and utilizing centralized, accurate and robust data dashboards to identify students who need academic assistance and providing proactive academic support to those students.
  - In addition, the university is working to provide at least one experiential learning experience and achieve AI literacy for all undergraduate students.

How long will it take to get to 80%?

- To reach an 80% six-year graduation rate, the university must first achieve a 90% first-year retention rate.
- Current estimates show that with the full activation of 150 Forward Reaching Higher, the incoming cohort of students could reach this retention milestone in the next four years.
- Six years later, the graduation rate for that cohort of students will be known.
- So, if the university's incoming class of 2030 achieves a first-year retention rate of 90%, that class could reach the 80% six-year graduation rate by 2036.

What are the four primary student success initiatives?

- Retention and Graduation
- AI Literacy
- Experiential Learning
- Graduate Enrollment

Research Excellence

Why $500 million? What's the significance and impact of reaching this annual research expenditures goal?

- Growing the university's research grows the university's impact including improving lives, strengthening the state's economy, supporting industry and growth, and expanding human knowledge.
- While all of the university's research provides meaningful impact, the state, nation and industry have identified specific areas where they need additional research support.
- Doubling the university's research expenditures to $500 million by 2032, while growing research in specific need areas, will significantly grow the impact the university provides.
- Increasing research expenditures also raises the university's national profile, making it easier to recruit exceptional faculty and graduate students, compete for major grants and attract industry partners.
- As the university's reputation grows, it becomes easier to recruit talented colleagues, build partnerships, attract resources and create opportunities across the institution.
- Everyone benefits from working at an institution whose reputation is rising. Faculty have a stronger platform for their scholarship. Staff have more opportunities to do meaningful work and advance professionally. Students and alumni benefit from the growing value and recognition of a University of Arkansas degree.
- While reaching $500 million is a stretch goal, the university believes it is attainable due to several years of record-breaking research expenditure totals including one of the top percentage growth rates in the SEC, and record investments in research facilities, combined with the roadmap and other initiatives included in the full activation of 150 Forward Reaching Higher.

How will we reach $500 million in annual research expenditures?

- With $252.9M (FY25) in research expenditures today, reaching the $500 million goal will require:
  - College and Division Productivity Growth (+$125M)
  - Faculty Expansion (+$75M)
  - Centers and Institutes Activation (+$30M)
  - University-Wide Research Support (+$50M)

How long will it take to get to $500 million?

- The university has set a stretch goal to reach $500 million in annual research expenditures by 2032, requiring the U of A to nearly double its research conducted in just six years.

What are the five priority growth areas for research?

- Materials, Semiconductors & Power Electronics
- Food Systems & Nutrition
- Metabolic Health
- Supply Chain & Contested Logistics
- Lithium & Critical Minerals

Why were these areas chosen over other research areas?

- In addition to supporting all of the university's research, scholarship and creative endeavors, the five priority growth areas were designated to meet growing needs identified by the state, nation and industry including several areas where the University of Arkansas has existing research capability and strength.

Are disciplines that don't seem to be included as a part of the research priority growth areas still important to the university?

- Yes. As a comprehensive public land-grant research university, the University of Arkansas has a responsibility to create new knowledge and provide meaningful impact to the state, nation and world. Faculty advance knowledge through scientific discovery, scholarship, creative activity, applied research, professional practice and other forms of inquiry appropriate to their disciplines.

  Because every discipline advances knowledge and provides impact in different ways, research excellence is not defined only by research expenditures or any single measure. Growing externally funded research and research expenditures is an important university priority because it expands our capacity for discovery, innovation and impact. In disciplines where competitive grants, sponsored research, patents and commercialization are central indicators of excellence, we should aspire to perform at the highest levels nationally.

  But those measures do not capture the full spectrum of knowledge creation at a comprehensive research university. Across other fields, excellence may be demonstrated through influential books and articles, citations, prestigious fellowships and awards, major commissions and creative works, performances and exhibitions, policy or professional impact, public scholarship, community-engaged research, or expertise that shapes institutions, industries and communities.

  The U of A strives to provide a supportive environment for faculty in every field to do consequential work at the highest level, and to recognize, measure and communicate that excellence in ways that strengthen the university's impact and national reputation.

What are the research excellence initiatives?

- College and Division Productivity Growth
- Faculty Expansion
- Centers and Institutes Activation
- University-Wide Research Support

Employer of Choice

Why was so much attention given to the Classification and Compensation effort?

- As a part of its commitment to keeping and attracting the highest caliber employees, the university needed to develop a more consistent and transparent foundation for job and compensation architecture, along with associated pay practices to provide more competitive compensation for employees. This foundation sets up the system to continue building on the other employer of choice initiatives.

Did the University work to increase faculty compensation as well?

- Yes. The university regularly reviews faculty compensation as compared to the market and peer institutions as part of its strategic priority to strengthen its status as an employer of choice. The last comprehensive faculty compensation market analysis was conducted in 2023 and 2024. As a result, faculty salaries were adjusted over a two-year period, starting in 2024 and continuing in 2025. In addition, academic rank promotions were increased. This project also established an ongoing process for reviewing faculty compensation as it relates to peer institutions and the market.

How much did the university invest in faculty and staff compensation as a part of the 'Class and Compensation' and 'Faculty Compensation' efforts?

- The university invested more than $18 million to provide more competitive compensation for faculty and staff as a part of a two-year market adjustment project.

Will the university work to adjust compensation in relation to market changes in the future?

- Yes. The university tracks market compensation on an annual basis and has set a goal to reassess current pay practices for employees every three years.

What are the eight primary employer of choice initiatives?

- Classification and Compensation projects including consistently working to align with the market
- Enhancing employee onboarding
- Acting on employee feedback including implementing and responding to Employee Engagement Survey and COACHE survey
- Adopting an 'Employee Value Proposition'
- Offering full-service talent acquisition support
- Planning and adopting a comprehensive Performance Framework
- Talent and leadership development
- Developing and supporting Career Pathways

What's the current status of the employer of choice initiatives?

Initiative	Planned	Underway	Implemented
Classification & Compensation	✓	✓	✓
Employee Onboarding	✓	✓	✓
Employee Feedback	✓	✓	✓
Employee Value Proposition	✓	✓	
Talent Acquisition	✓	✓	
Performance Framework	✓	✓	
Talent & Leadership Development	✓	✓	
Career Pathways	✓		

Graduate Assistant Support

Is the U of A investing to increase compensation for graduate assistants?

- Yes. In the first phase of the Graduate Assistant Compensation Project, the university increased the minimum graduate assistant base pay rate by approximately 10% on July 1, 2024 (August 12, 2024, for 9-month GAs), and another 10% on July 1, 2025 (August 11, 2025, for 9-month GAs).
- In the second phase of the effort, the university is increasing the graduate assistant base wage rate to $25,000 for 9-month doctoral GAs and $21,000 for 9-month masters GAs by July 1, 2027 to help support existing graduate students and attract prospective graduate students.
- The university is investing nearly $12 million in both phases of this effort.

General Activation Questions

How is the university financially supporting the 150 Forward Reaching Higher activation?

- The university has identified several potential financial levers to support the activation including:
  - Voluntary retirement option for tenured faculty
  - Central and unit-level reserves
  - Strategic allocation of revenue streams
  - Other operational optimization strategies
  - Philanthropy
  - Student tuition and fees

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150 FORWARD

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