Vision for Impact: The Open Lab Institution

**Penn State Behrend
Strategic Plan 2026-2030**

CONTENTS

PennState
Behrend

Message from the Chancellor

I am pleased to present Penn State Behrend's Strategic Plan for 2026–2030—a bold, forward-looking blueprint that aims to position Behrend as a national model for impact-driven higher education.

This plan reflects the ambition and dedication of our community. Over the past months, our Strategic Planning Committee engaged in hundreds of conversations, collected and reviewed extensive data, and wrestled with difficult questions about priorities, capacity, and tradeoffs. I am grateful for the committee's rigor, candor, and commitment to Behrend's future.

Importantly, this plan was shaped by the voices of our broader community. Faculty and staff across the college contributed ideas, challenged assumptions, and helped refine our priorities through town halls and surveys. The Board of Directors of our Council of Fellows provided invaluable insight. Students shared their experiences, reminding us that every decision we make must ultimately serve their success.

What emerged from this process is not just a plan—it is a shared vision that is purposefully aligned with the Penn State Strategic Plan. By 2030, Penn State Behrend will amplify the University's impact by serving as the defining national model for the Open Lab approach, where students graduate with résumés, not just degrees; where research solves real problems; and where partnerships drive regional prosperity.

This plan commits us to difficult choices: redesigning programs, realigning resources, and investing strategically in what matters most. It also commits us to a growth agenda: expanding enrollment, increasing research, and ensuring every student gains the career-connected experience that defines the Behrend Open Lab.

The work ahead will challenge us. It will require discipline, innovation, and a willingness to change. I believe that together, guided by the principles of accountability, partnership, and personalization that define our college, we can and will deliver on these commitments.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this plan. Now comes the hard part—making it real. I look forward to working alongside all of you to turn this vision into impact.

Ralph M. Ford, Ph.D.
Chancellor, Penn State Behrend
March 2026

Penn State Behrend: The Open Lab Model for 2030

Our vision is to be an Open Laboratory that prepares thinkers, leaders, and innovators to make a sustainable impact on our region and an interconnected world.

By 2030, Penn State Behrend will be nationally recognized for its Open Lab Model—demonstrating how higher education can drive tangible impact for communities while transforming student outcomes. Through this framework, we do more than transfer knowledge: We cultivate the Behrend Advantage.

Our graduates enter the workforce possessing a unique capacity to navigate ambiguity, tackle complex challenges, and co-create solutions from day one. Prospective students will choose Behrend because they know they will graduate with a résumé, not just a degree. This isn't just a theoretical model; it is our strategic identity.

The Open Lab ethos shapes how we teach, how we research, and how we serve as the anchor research institution for the region and as a hub for Penn State University. Every Behrend graduate will be uniquely equipped to lead in an AI-driven economy, having completed documented real-world work through our industry and community partnerships. Every student, regardless of major, will graduate with field-specific AI fluency and competencies.

Our Five Bold Commitments for 2030

1. **A High-Impact Academic Portfolio.** We will refine our academic portfolio, using data-informed reviews to develop, redesign, reinvest in, or phase out programs to ensure each is mission-aligned and strategically differentiated. We will reinvest in high-growth areas and update programs to focus resources on long-term institutional impact.

2. **The Open Lab Commitment.** We guarantee that every student will complete at least one documented Open Lab experience—such as an internship, industry-sponsored research project, or community-based collaboration— before graduation.

3. **National Distinction in Applied Research.** We will achieve national recognition in five signature areas that matter to our region, and to the nation—manufacturing and materials innovation; community outreach and mental health; bio-translational and women's health; waterways and Great Lakes health; and business resilience. We will reach $15 million annually in research expenditures, accelerated by the opening of the Center for Manufacturing Competitiveness (CMC).

4. **Regional AI Open Lab Innovation Hub.** All students will graduate with AI literacy (ethics and basic understanding) and competencies relevant to their specific fields. Behrend will be the region's "go-to" institution for AI knowledge, workforce training, and collaborative projects.

5. **A Top 10% ROI and Career Mobility Engine.** Ranked in the top 10% of institutions nationwide for return on investment, Behrend delivers value that lasts a lifetime. We will expand this advantage to lifelong learners by becoming the premier destination for career-pivoting professionals—offering second-degree options, flexible credentials, and accelerated pathways that build upon existing skills.

The Operating System: Principles and Trade-Offs

Our Behrend Principles: The Differentiator for Excellence

These four principles define how we differentiate ourselves and serve as the criteria for the strategic trade-offs that are required to reach our goals:

- **Return-on-Investment (ROI):** Every investment of time and resources must yield a measurable educational and economic return.

- **Accountability:** We foster a culture of professional follow-through and constructive dialog, where we honor our commitments and model the trust, clarity, and responsiveness of a world-class institution.

- **Partnerships:** We are the region's convener, joining forces across industry, government, and the University, including Penn State's research institutes, to accelerate innovation.

- **Personalization:** We design tailored pathways for students, faculty, and partners that respond to unique goals and contexts.

Trade-Offs: The Difficult Choices

To reach our 2030 goals, we will make difficult and deliberate trade-offs and choices in order to focus on our capacity and resources:

- **Financial Discipline:** We will shift from an incremental budgeting model to a data-informed, performance-based model that preserves funding for innovation and strategic initiatives.

- **Administrative Efficiency:** We will de-prioritize non-core administrative functions, identifying and dropping those that are not necessary and shifting toward new, AI-enabled workflows that offer clear value and efficiency.

- **One University:** We will capture value from University centralization and research institutes, maintain core functions locally, and advocate for an optimal balance between campus and central capabilities. Doing so will reduce costs and redirect our resources toward our core mission.

2030 Impact Scorecard: How We Measure Success

The following targets represent our commitment to students, partners, the University, and the Commonwealth:

The Student Advantage

- **Open Lab Commitment:** Every graduate will complete a résumé-worthy Open Lab experience before graduation.

- **Early Career Readiness:** All students will engage in formal career development in their first and second years.

- **A Culture of Persistence:** By personalizing support, we will reach an 85% first-to-second-year retention rate and target a 75% six-year graduation rate.

The Innovation Engine

- **$15 Million in Research Expenditures:** We will grow our annual research expenditures to solve real-world challenges in materials, manufacturing, health, and business resilience.

- **Field-Specific AI Competency:** All students will graduate with AI literacy (ethics and basic understanding) and competencies relevant to their specific fields.

- **Knowledge Park Innovation:** Seventy-five percent of the park's tenants will be in a structured engagement model. Five firms will operate in a Level 4 Innovation and Research Partnership.

Scale of Influence and Growth

- **5,000 Total Learners:** We will expand our reach to 3,600 residential and 1,400 World Campus students, including a target of 200 residential graduate students and 35 research-based graduate students. This will serve as a major driver of talent.

- **Leading National ROI:** We will maintain or improve our top 10% return-on-investment for our degrees as validated by external sources.

- **$100 Million in Philanthropic Fuel:** We will accelerate our strategic priorities through scholarship growth, faculty excellence, and capital investment.

Our Strategic Priorities: How We Make It Real

Priority A: Student Success and Engagement

Ensuring every student—residential and online—has the support to translate learning into impact

We will make Penn State Behrend a place where every student can thrive personally, academically, and professionally. Success at Behrend is not defined solely by retention, but by access, belonging, and the ability to translate learning into impact. Through coordinated advising, early engagement, and success coaching, we will ensure that every student's journey—from enrollment to career—is intentional and supported. We are committed to closing the persistence gap for our 1,400 World Campus students, ensuring they receive the same "Behrend Advantage" as our residential learners.

Key Initiatives

- **Belonging and Readiness:** We will expand mentoring and advising networks, linking students with alumni, advisory boards, and the Women's Engagement Council, and will enhance mental health services and peer-led wellness programs that foster a deep sense of community.
- **Expand Access and Growth:** We will increase residential enrollment to 3,600 students and World Campus enrollment to 1,400 students through targeted recruitment and barrier-removal for underserved students. Simultaneously, we will expand our talent pipeline by growing High School Dual Credit participation to 200 students annually.
- **The Open Lab Commitment:** We will embed high-impact experiential learning into every curriculum map, enabled by a centralized tracking and support system.
- **Predictive Success:** We will integrate student success dashboards with predictive analytics to trigger proactive human outreach for at-risk learners.
- **World Campus Parity:** We commit to closing the persistence gap for World Campus learners to ensure they achieve an increased graduation rate.

Sarah's Story

Sarah, a sophomore Mechanical Engineering major, struggles in her second semester. Her adviser receives an early alert via the student success dashboard and immediately reaches out. Within days, Sarah is paired with a peer mentor and introduced to a company partner working on an Open Lab project. These connections reignite her motivation; she finishes the semester strong and later joins that company as an intern.

METRIC	RESIDENTIAL TARGET	WORLD CAMPUS TARGET
First-to-second-year retention	85%	75%
Six-year graduation rate	75%	65%
Graduates with Open Lab experience(s)	100%	100%
Career development engagement (years 1 and 2)	100%	100%

Priority B: Academic Excellence and Innovation

Delivering agile, market-relevant programs that serve as a regional "lifelong learning hub"

Penn State Behrend will deliver high-quality, market-relevant academic programs through continuous innovation and a deep commitment to real-world application. As the pool of traditional students shifts, we will diversify by designing flexible, modular pathways for learners at all stages, blurring the lines between credit and non-credit learning. This includes second-degree programs for career-pivoting professionals and accelerated pathways that respond to labor market needs.

Key Initiatives

- **Strategic Portfolio Management:** We will utilize APPR data to review all academic programs and to redesign, reinvest in, or sunset 10–15% of our programs by 2030. This data-informed process will ensure that our portfolio remains academically excellent, market-relevant, and mission-aligned.
- **Adult and Fast-Track Pathways:** We will launch four new accelerated or second-degree programs (e.g., Nursing, Engineering Technology), support the development of 7-week course structures where applicable, and formalize credit-by-portfolio processes for career-pivoters.
- **AI Curricular Integration:** We will require field-specific AI literacy milestones in 100% of programs, supported by faculty development.
- **Evidence-Based Excellence:** We will implement a college-wide initiative to train 90% of faculty and staff in evidence-based teaching and advising practices that maintain high expectations while removing unnecessary barriers to student persistence.
- **Modular Learning:** We will launch 10 or more modular or non-credit offerings that are accessible, stackable, and clearly articulated to degree pathways.
- **Graduate Pathway Growth:** We will increase research-integrated graduate enrollment to 35 students and professional enrollment to 200 students through new governance-approved pathways.

Dr. Vance's Story

Dr. Vance, a history professor, collaborates with the Center for Educational Innovation to radically redesign his Archival Methods course. He develops a field-specific AI literacy milestone where students use Large Language Models to analyze patterns in centuries of unstructured census data, identifying historical migration trends that were previously invisible. Instead of replacing critical thinking, the technology amplifies it—allowing his students to ask deeper questions and present their original findings to the local historical society as a true Open Lab contribution.

METRIC	2030 TARGET
New accelerated/second-degree programs	4 launched
Modular/non-credit offerings	10+ launched
Programs reviewed/redesigned	All/>25% of portfolio

Priority C: Research and Applied Scholarship

Solving real-world challenges through signature research pillars

Penn State Behrend will become a nationally recognized center for applied research that fuels regional innovation. Our distinct research identity is rooted in five signature pillars: Applied Materials and Manufacturing; CORE (Social Sciences); Bio-Translational/Women's Health; Waterways and Great Lakes Health; and Applied Business/Policy Research. We will integrate research and graduate education to serve as an R&D resource for regional companies. To amplify our impact, we will deepen strategic partnerships with University research institutes, including the Materials Research Institute (MRI), the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI), and the Institute for Computational and Data Sciences (ICDS), connecting Behrend's applied strengths to Penn State's global discovery enterprise.

Key Initiatives

- **Signature Pillar Excellence:** We will grow annual research expenditures to $15 million by prioritizing internal seed funding for cross-disciplinary proposals, establishing the Applied Polymer and Composite Innovation Hub within the CMC, and expanding CORE's community-engaged research.
- **Major Awards:** We will secure at least four awards greater than $1 million and two awards greater than $2 million by 2030.
- **Federal Funding Pathways:** We will pursue Behrend's own Federal Wide Assurance (FWA) designation. Securing this classification is a foundational milestone that will unlock eligibility for NIH R15 (AREA) awards and other major federal mechanisms, specifically benefiting our bio-translational and social science research ecosystem.
- **Workload and Talent Optimization:** To support expanded research, we will implement flexible workload models that provide course releases where needed to accelerate high-impact work—while ensuring that teaching, mentoring, and student-success contributions are recognized and rewarded.
- **Undergraduate Discovery:** We will increase undergraduate research participation to 25% by graduation and will integrate exposure to research experiences into first-year seminars and gateway courses.
- **AI-Enabled Research:** We will expand capacity for AI modeling and analytics in areas that include materials, psychology, environmental systems, and business domains.

Dr. Chin's Story

Dr. Chin, a Biology professor, requests a flexible workload to focus on a critical collaborative study with the Magee-Womens Research Institute. By leveraging Behrend's new Federal Wide Assurance (FWA) designation, she secures a major NIH R15 award to study maternal health biomarkers. The grant doesn't just advance science; it funds an undergraduate research team that works alongside clinical practitioners. Two of her students go on to co-author papers and are accepted into top-tier medical programs.

METRIC	2030 TARGET
Annual sponsored research expenditures	$15 million
Major awards (≥ $1 million)	4 awards ≥$1 million; 2 awards ≥$2 million
Undergraduate research participation	25%

Priority D: Land-Grant Mission and Economic Impact

The regional anchor institution driving economic growth and civic vitality

We connect academic excellence to regional needs, serving as a "solutions partner" for northwest Pennsylvania. Through Knowledge Park and our Innovation Commons, we provide organizations with direct access to talent and applied research capability. We are dedicated to social mobility, preparing students not just for jobs, but for public leadership and civic contribution. By leveraging Penn State's vast alumni and industry networks, we bridge regional ambition with global opportunity.

Key Initiatives

- **Knowledge Park Growth:** We will implement a structured engagement model that advances student success and innovation. By leveraging our R&D assets, the CMC, and talent pipeline, we aim to attract new partners in advanced manufacturing, healthcare innovation, and data science.
- **Western Campus Synergy:** We will execute a minimum of three synergistic partnerships with Penn State Beaver and Penn State Greater Allegheny to share facilities and industry convenings and develop clearly defined degree-completing pathways for students.
- **Civic Learning Mission:** We will foster free speech, open inquiry, and civil discourse for all by integrating civic and community-based learning into general education and major courses. We will encourage interdisciplinary collaborations that promote civic engagement and foster environments for civil discourse and service learning.
- **K-12 and STEAM Outreach:** We will expand community-engaged learning and STEAM outreach by scaling youth education programs and expanding high school partnerships to create seamless pathways to postsecondary success.

Jamal's Story

Jamal, a Project and Supply Chain Management major, leads a student team to help a local startup scale its operations. Using AI-enabled data analytics and the Open Lab framework, his team identifies a critical distribution bottleneck, saving the company $150,000 in the first year. His experience doesn't just earn him a degree; it helps anchor a growing company in Erie, creating three new local jobs.

METRIC	2030 TARGET
Knowledge Park innovation	75% of partners in engagement model; 5 at Level 4
Youth outreach	40,000 youth engaged annually
Western Campus partnerships	3 successful partnerships

Priority E: Institutional Vitality and Operational Excellence

Building the infrastructure and financial model to sustain our mission

Vitality requires financial sustainability and a culture of accountability. We will move away from traditional incremental budgeting to a model that rewards performance and explicitly protects resources for our most critical strategic priorities. We will utilize University-wide infrastructure and centralized systems where they offer the efficiency and value that drive our local mission. By modernizing our cost structure and capturing value from University-level shared services, we will ensure our staff and faculty can focus on high-value mission work rather than administrative friction.

Key Initiatives

- **Strategic Resource Allocation:** We will implement a new financial model that rewards performance and preserves central funds for strategic initiatives, in sync with University resource optimization.
- **Philanthropic Fuel:** We will accelerate the $100 million campaign for scholarships, faculty excellence, and special initiatives, including a $2.5 million Behrend Lions Fund to support our NCAA Division III teams.
- **Campus Master Plan:** We will update the plan to guide construction, modernization, and optimization, ensuring our physical spaces align with our strategy.
- **Culture of Improvement Science:** We will embed Improvement Science methodologies into our operations, empowering staff to use data to solve problems quickly and optimize workflows iteratively. By automating 75% of high-friction administrative workflows in HR and finance, we will increase institutional agility.
- **Workforce Engagement and Optimization:** We will realign faculty and staff expectations to reward High-Impact Practices, research supervision, and community-engaged scholarship while expanding leadership development and mentoring to support career growth across all units.
- **Culture of Recognition and Transparency:** We will strengthen accountability by publishing an annual "State of the College" report to provide transparent updates. We will actively recognize and reward units and individuals who exemplify high standards of excellence and student success.

Marcus's Story

Marcus, a financial aid coordinator, spends his peak season manually processing approval forms. By applying Improvement Science methodologies and adopting a new automated workflow, he reduces processing time by 60%. Marcus re-invests those saved hours into direct student support, using the predictive success dashboard to proactively reach out to families struggling with tuition gaps, helping retain twelve students who might otherwise have withdrawn.

METRIC	2030 TARGET
Total philanthropic funds raised	$100M
High-friction workflows automated	75%
Staff/faculty engagement score	+15% from baseline

Acknowledgments

I want to extend my gratitude to our vice chancellors, Dr. Greg Filbeck and Dr. Alicyn Rhoades, for their leadership in co-chairing our Strategic Planning Committee. Their dedication to this rapid, data-informed process was instrumental in delivering a bold blueprint that will define the next chapter of Penn State Behrend.

I also want to thank the other members of the committee for accepting this ambitious charge and working tirelessly to move beyond the status quo to establish a high bar for our future success. The members were:

- Dr. Amy Bridger, Assistant Dean for Innovation and Corporate Strategy
- Dr. Ozgun Demirag, Director of the Black School of Business
- Amanda Eller, Administrative Support Manager for the Black School of Business
- Andrea Konkol, Director of Enrollment Management
- Zane Lewis, Student Government Association President
- Kelly Shrout, Director of Student Affairs
- Dr. Lena Surzhko Harned, Associate Teaching Professor of Political Science

The committee's work in leveraging AI tools to model scenarios and project resource needs has helped to ensure that our goals are both visionary and implementable. Their willingness to engage in difficult discussions regarding trade-offs and priorities has provided us with a clear, trackable roadmap to 2030.

Finally, I am grateful to the faculty, staff, students, and the Council of Fellows Board of Directors whose voices and expertise helped shape this shared vision.

Thank you for your candor, your discipline, and your unwavering commitment to Penn State Behrend.