



URA Virtual Research Policy Forum Report

Building Public Trust in the Research Universities Perform

September 17, 2026

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Report Overview

The sixth in the series of biannual virtual Research Policy Forums presented by Universities Research Association (URA) was held September 16, 2026. The goal of the Forum series is to stimulate discussion around trends, issues, and opportunities of topical interest to URA member universities. This Forum focused on the vitally important need of **building public trust in the research universities perform**.

Motivation for this Forum stems from the fact that public trust is vital to the success of the virtuous cycle (Figure) involving the productive activity of university research, realization of its benefits, and support for sustaining and growing it and its impact. However, it is easy to take for granted that public trust is built simply by the flow from the scholarship that university faculty members and students perform to societal benefits - including technologies and knowledge that improve well-being, sustaining the nation's workforce, helping to drive the economy, and resulting in well trained and informed citizens.

Rather, building public trust requires proactive engagement, having an open dialog, and having both a broad-band outreach and one that is highly focused on the needs and interests of individuals and social groups. Only then can public opinion and engagement reinforce that of other stakeholders – local and national government, industry and business, academic communities and associations, and other consumers and beneficiaries of new knowledge and new workers.

Therefore, key questions addressed by the Forum include “*How can we better demonstrate the tangible benefits universities deliver to society?*” and “*How can universities, industry, and communities engage more meaningfully and impactfully?*”



Figure: The “virtuous cycle” of university research, societal benefits, public trust, and stakeholder support.

To memorialize the workshop for its participants and for URA member university Senior Research Officers and others, what follows is a summary of the ideas presented and discussed along with the “Top 10” key takeaways from the Forum, composed with the aid of AI.

The Appendices then include the agenda and similarly generated brief summaries and takeaways from the individual presentations by our much-appreciated speakers from the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, Michigan State University, the American Physical Society, Texas A&M University, Intel Digital Readiness Programs, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and the American Association of Colleges & Universities.

[Videos of the presentations are available on the URA Research Policy Forum webpage.](#)

Forum Summary

Across all seven presentations, a consistent message emerged: public trust in university research is not primarily a problem of scientific quality or public knowledge. Rather, it is a challenge of relationships, trustworthiness, institutional culture, and public relevance. Speakers repeatedly emphasized that universities cannot assume trust based solely on expertise. Instead, trust must be earned through sustained engagement, demonstrated public value, transparency, and responsiveness to societal needs.

Several presenters argued that trust is fundamentally tied to the concept of public impact research, defined broadly as research that addresses societal challenges, engages communities, and produces benefits beyond academia. Building trust therefore requires moving research closer to the public through partnerships, co-creation, public scholarship, and efforts to ensure that research outcomes are relevant and useful to the communities they intend to serve. Universities

become more trustworthy when community members can see how research improves lives and contributes to solving real-world problems.

A second major theme was that trust-building is an ecosystem challenge. Researchers operate within a network of universities, funders, publishers, disciplinary societies, industry partners, government agencies, and community organizations. Lasting progress requires these stakeholders to coordinate their incentives, policies, and assessment systems. Multiple speakers stressed that reforms promoting public engagement will succeed only if promotion and tenure systems, funding mechanisms, publication practices, and professional recognition all value societal impact alongside traditional academic achievements.

The workshop also highlighted the importance of direct engagement between researchers and the public. Presenters challenged the traditional “information deficit” model, which assumes that more facts automatically lead to greater trust. Instead, trust grows through dialogue, humility, empathy, listening, and repeated positive interactions. Scientists and scholars must be prepared not only to communicate their expertise, but also to build relationships, understand community perspectives, and participate in meaningful conversations about societal concerns.

Institutional leadership emerged as another critical factor. Universities must move beyond relying on individual faculty champions and instead create structures that support engagement. This includes leadership commitment, dedicated resources, professional development, recognition programs, reduced bureaucratic barriers, and evaluation systems that reward public-impact activities. Public trust was framed as an institution-wide responsibility requiring coordinated action across campuses.

Several presenters also connected trust to broader concerns about higher education, including affordability, workforce preparation, responsiveness to community needs, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. Universities must demonstrate that they are adapting to societal change, acting as responsible stewards of public resources, and preparing students to address complex future challenges. Trust in research cannot be separated from trust in the institution that produces it.

Finally, speakers emphasized the importance of telling a clearer and more compelling story about the value of university research. Research excellence alone is insufficient if its benefits remain invisible to the public. Universities must document, communicate, and celebrate research impacts in ways that resonate with public values and illustrate the indispensable role that higher education plays in advancing economic opportunity, community well-being, scientific innovation, and democratic society.

Top 10 Key Takeaways

- **Trust is built through relationships, not simply through information.** Facts and expertise matter, but trust grows through dialogue, listening, empathy, transparency, and sustained engagement with communities.

- **Public impact research is central to public trust.** Research that visibly benefits communities and addresses societal challenges is more likely to be viewed as valuable and trustworthy.
- **Trust-building requires an ecosystem approach.** Universities, funders, publishers, disciplinary societies, industry, government, and community partners must work together to align incentives and expectations.
- **Promotion, tenure, and reward systems must evolve.** Universities cannot expect researchers to prioritize public engagement if institutional incentives continue to favor only traditional scholarly outputs.
- **Community engagement should be collaborative, not transactional.** Effective engagement involves partnerships, co-creation, and respect for local knowledge rather than one-way dissemination of expertise.
- **Institutional leadership is essential.** Building trust requires visible commitment from presidents, provosts, deans, department heads, and other leaders who can embed public impact into institutional culture.
- **Scientists and scholars need training in relationship-building skills.** Communication, listening, humility, facilitation, and community partnership skills should be developed alongside research expertise.
- **Public engagement benefits both society and students.** Engagement activities strengthen public understanding while also improving students' communication skills, professional identity, leadership abilities, and career readiness.
- **Trust in research is influenced by perceptions of the broader university.** Affordability, workforce preparation, responsiveness, transparency, and accountability all affect how the public views university research.
- **Universities must communicate their impact more effectively.** Demonstrating how research improves lives, solves problems, and serves the public is critical to strengthening trust and reinforcing the value of higher education.

Appendix 1. Forum Agenda



URA Research Policy Forum on Building Public Trust in the Research Universities Perform

Wednesday, September 16, 2026, 11:00 am – 2:30 pm ET
virtual via Zoom

AGENDA

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| 11:00 | Welcome |
| 11:05-11:40 | Kacy Redd , <i>Associate Vice President, Research & STEM Education, Association of Public and Land Grant Universities</i> – Fostering a Public Impact Research Ecosystem |
| 11:40-12:00 | Elyse Aurbach , <i>Assistant Provost, University Outreach and Engagement, Michigan State University</i> – Individual and Collective Actions Towards Institutional Change to Support the Public Impact of Research in Universities |
| 12:00-12:35 | Claudia Fracchiolla , <i>Head of Public Engagement, American Physical Society</i> - From Correction to Connection: Rethinking Scientists’ Role in Building Public Trust |
| 12:35-12:55 | Tatiana Erukhimova , <i>Marsha L. ’69 and Ralph F. Schilling ’68 Chair for Physics Outreach at Texas A&M University</i> - Creating Science Ambassadors Through Hands-On Public Engagement |
| 12:55-1:30 | Anshul Sonak , <i>Principal Engineer and Global Director, Intel Digital Readiness Programs</i> – Best Practices for Industry – Academia Collaboration |
| 1:30-1:50 | Robert Kelchen , <i>Professor and Department Head of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, University of Tennessee, Knoxville</i> - Higher Education's Workforce Impact - Serving the Public and Garnering Their Support |
| 1:50-2:25 | Felicia Fullilove , <i>Associate Director, American Association of Colleges & Universities</i> - The Trust Agenda: A Framework for Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education |
| 2:25-2:30 | Closing |

Appendix 2. Presentation Summaries

Summary: *Fostering a Public Impact Research Ecosystem*

Kacy Redd, Associate Vice President, Research & STEM Education, Association of Public and Land Grant Universities

Key Take Aways

- Building public trust in university research requires an ecosystem-wide approach in which universities, funders, publishers, disciplinary societies, and community partners align incentives and expectations around public impact.
- Public impact research can strengthen trustworthiness by engaging communities directly, addressing societal challenges, and producing research that is more relevant, usable, and responsive to public needs.
- Universities should intentionally communicate the public value of their research through coordinated storytelling, impact documentation, leadership support, and participation in national initiatives that promote publicly engaged scholarship.

In this presentation, Kacy Redd asserted that building public trust in university research depends on strengthening and expanding what she describes as “public impact research” (PIR): research that directly benefits society through community engagement, public scholarship, policy translation, research-practice partnerships, and other mechanisms that connect academic knowledge to real-world needs.

A central theme of the presentation was that public trust is not simply a communications challenge, but an ecosystem challenge. Redd emphasized that researchers operate within a complex network of institutions, funders, publishers, disciplinary societies, and community partners. Because incentives and reward systems are interconnected, no single organization can successfully reform research practices on its own. Universities may encourage more publicly engaged research, but meaningful change will stall if funding agencies, publication systems, hiring committees, and promotion processes continue to reward more traditional forms of scholarship.

Redd argued that increasing public engagement in research can make universities more trustworthy by strengthening relationships with communities, producing research that is more relevant to public needs, and improving the likelihood that research findings will be adopted and used. However, she noted several barriers to achieving this goal, including disciplinary silos, misaligned funding structures, time-intensive community partnerships, regulatory burdens, and the lack of broadly accepted standards for assessing public impact. While many indicators of impact already exist, she contended that the research community has not yet reached consensus on how public impact should be evaluated across disciplines and institutional settings.

The presentation also highlighted APLU's ongoing efforts to support institutional change through research, convenings, case studies, and national partnerships. Redd stressed the importance of leadership at all levels of the university, along with coordinated communication strategies that clearly demonstrate how research benefits communities. She encouraged institutions to connect local initiatives to broader national movements, use external networks and recognition programs to build momentum, and create narratives that help the public understand the value and societal contributions of university research.

Summary: *Individual and Collective Actions Towards Institutional Change to Support the Public Impact of Research in Universities*

Elyse Aurbach, Assistant Provost, University Outreach and Engagement, Michigan State University

Key Take Aways

- Building public trust in university research requires action at multiple levels, including researchers, institutions, and the broader research ecosystem, with each level playing a distinct but interconnected role.
- Universities must align policies, infrastructure, funding, and especially promotion and tenure systems to support and reward research that creates public value and societal benefit.
- Lasting change depends on coordinated collaboration among universities, funders, disciplinary societies, and other stakeholders to create shared norms, incentives, and approaches for evaluating research impact.

In her presentation, Elyse Aurbach focused on the institutional and systemic changes needed to support public impact research and, by extension, strengthen public trust in university research. Drawing on national studies and her work with Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU), she argued that universities must move beyond viewing public engagement as the responsibility of individual researchers and instead create environments that systematically support research with societal benefit.

Aurbach organized her remarks around three levels of action: individuals and partnerships, institutions, and the broader research ecosystem. At the individual level, she emphasized the importance of equipping researchers and community partners with the skills, knowledge, and capacity needed to engage in ethical and effective partnerships. Trustworthy research, she suggested, depends on relationships in which both academic and non-academic participants can contribute meaningfully and collaboratively.

At the institutional level, Aurbach argued that universities have a critical role in creating the policies, procedures, infrastructure, and incentives that enable publicly engaged research to thrive. She highlighted the need for institutional leaders to explicitly connect public impact to their university's mission and identity, while also reducing bureaucratic obstacles that can hinder

collaboration with community partners. Examples included revising administrative processes, supporting partnership-building, providing seed funding for impact-oriented research, celebrating successful public engagement efforts, and preparing students to pursue research that benefits society. Most importantly, she emphasized that promotion, tenure, and faculty evaluation systems must recognize and reward public impact if universities expect researchers to prioritize it.

At the ecosystem level, Aurbach stressed the importance of coordinated action among universities, funders, disciplinary societies, and national organizations. These actors can help shape a culture that values societal impact by aligning funding priorities, recognition systems, and assessment practices. She highlighted several collaborative initiatives working to build shared frameworks for evaluating research impact and supporting institutional change. Her overarching message was that building public trust requires coordinated action across all levels of the research enterprise, with each sector contributing to a culture that values and rewards research that demonstrably benefits the public.

Summary: *From Correction to Connection: Rethinking Scientists' Role in Building Public Trust*

Claudia Fracchiolla, Head of Public Engagement, American Physical Society

Key Take Aways

- Public trust in science is not built through facts alone; it depends heavily on relationships, perceived trustworthiness, and whether scientists are viewed as open, transparent, respectful, and willing to listen.
- Effective public engagement requires moving beyond one-way dissemination of information toward dialogue, empathy, curiosity, and relationship-building with communities.
- Universities and research organizations must support trust-building by providing training, resources, recognition, and career incentives that value public engagement as a core component of scientific work.

In her presentation, Claudia Fracchiolla challenged the common assumption that public trust in science can be strengthened primarily by providing people with more information. Drawing on the society's Science Trust Project, she argued that while scientific facts and evidence remain essential, knowledge alone is rarely sufficient to change attitudes, behavior, or trust. Instead, trust is fundamentally relational and depends on how scientists engage with the public.

Fracchiolla explained that traditional science communication has often relied on the "information deficit" model, which assumes that skepticism or resistance to science results from a lack of knowledge. Research and experience, however, suggest that people's decisions are influenced by a broader set of factors, including personal experiences, values, identity, relationships, and whether they feel connected to scientific institutions. Building public trust therefore requires moving beyond one-way communication toward genuine engagement that recognizes and respects the perspectives people bring to conversations about science.

A central theme of the presentation was that trust is built not simply through expertise, but through perceived trustworthiness. While the public generally views scientists as competent and knowledgeable, trust is also shaped by perceptions of integrity, transparency, openness, reliability, and benevolence. Fracchiolla noted that surveys consistently show strong confidence in scientists' expertise but weaker perceptions of scientists as good communicators, attentive listeners, or people who understand public concerns. These findings suggest that opportunities to strengthen trust lie less in demonstrating additional expertise and more in fostering meaningful relationships with communities.

The Science Trust Project was developed to help scientists cultivate these relational skills through training in reflective listening, empathy, curiosity, humility, and values-based communication. Early results indicate that such skills can be learned and can shift scientists from a correction-focused mindset to one centered on connection and dialogue. Fracchiolla emphasized, however, that individual training is not enough. Universities and research institutions must also align incentives, provide training and resources, recognize engagement activities, and incorporate public engagement into promotion and career advancement systems. Sustained public trust, she concluded, will emerge not only from excellent research but from institutional cultures that support ongoing, respectful, and authentic engagement between scientists and society.

Summary: Creating Science Ambassadors Through Hands-On Public Engagement

Tatiana Erukhimova, Marsha L. '69 and Ralph F. Schilling '68 Chair for Physics Outreach at Texas A&M University

Key Take Aways

- Public trust in science is built through repeated, personal interactions that allow community members to engage directly with scientists and experience science as a shared community endeavor.
- Hands-on, participatory engagement activities are particularly effective because they create opportunities for dialogue, relationship-building, and meaningful discussions about research and its societal relevance.
- Sustainable public-engagement programs require institutional support, leadership commitment, and recognition, while also serving as high-impact educational experiences that strengthen students' communication skills, professional identity, and career readiness.

In her presentation, Tatiana Erukhimova provided a practitioner's perspective on building public trust in science through sustained, community-centered engagement. Drawing on more than two decades of experience leading large-scale outreach initiatives, she argued that trust does not emerge from isolated communications efforts but from repeated interactions that allow members of the public to encounter scientists as approachable, passionate, and invested members of their

communities. Erukhimova reinforced a theme echoed throughout the workshop: trust is built through relationships rather than through one-way transmission of information.

The central focus of the presentation was the role of public engagement events in creating opportunities for these relationships to develop. Using examples such as the Texas A&M Physics and Engineering Festival, science demonstrations, teacher-development programs, and community-based events, she described how universities can create welcoming environments where scientists and the public explore science together. These efforts are most effective when they move beyond a model in which experts simply explain research and instead create shared experiences that encourage curiosity, participation, and dialogue. Hands-on activities were highlighted as particularly valuable because they lower barriers to engagement and provide natural opportunities for conversation about research and its relevance to everyday life.

Erukhimova also emphasized that successful public-engagement programs require institutional commitment. Strong support from departmental and university leadership, recognition of engagement activities, and long-term investment are necessary to build a culture in which outreach is viewed as an integral part of the university mission rather than an optional activity. She argued that public engagement should be valued not only because it strengthens relationships with communities but also because it provides significant educational benefits for students. Participation in outreach helps students develop communication, leadership, and teamwork skills, strengthens their sense of belonging and professional identity, and better prepares them for future careers

The presentation concluded with the argument that universities can simultaneously strengthen public trust and enrich student learning by embedding public engagement into their institutional culture. By meeting people where they are, partnering with community events and organizations, and supporting scientists and students in meaningful public interactions, universities can foster stronger connections between research and society while demonstrating the public value of their work.

Summary: Best Practices for Industry – Academia Collaboration

Anshul Sonak, Principal Engineer and Global Director, Intel Digital Readiness Programs

Key Take Aways

- Public trust in science is built through repeated, personal interactions that allow community members to engage directly with scientists and experience science as a shared community endeavor.
- Hands-on, participatory engagement activities are particularly effective because they create opportunities for dialogue, relationship-building, and meaningful discussions about research and its societal relevance.

- Sustainable public-engagement programs require institutional support, leadership commitment, and recognition, while also serving as high-impact educational experiences that strengthen students' communication skills, professional identity, and career readiness.

In his presentation, Anshul Sonak explored the role that industry-university partnerships can play in strengthening public trust in research, particularly in an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence. He argued that public trust is becoming a central challenge as rapid technological advances raise concerns about governance, transparency, societal impacts, and the pace of innovation. From an industry perspective, building trust requires not only producing new knowledge and technologies but also developing collaborative research ecosystems that connect universities, industry, government, and communities around shared goals and shared responsibility.

A major theme of the presentation was the importance of long-term investment in research capacity and workforce development. Sonak highlighted examples of collaborative initiatives involving universities, industry, and federal agencies that support research infrastructure, faculty development, curriculum innovation, and student training. Such partnerships, he argued, help create locally rooted research ecosystems that expand access to cutting-edge technologies while addressing broader societal needs. Public trust is strengthened when universities are active partners in shaping research agendas and preparing the next generation of researchers rather than simply serving as recipients of external funding.

Sonak identified several emerging issues that are shaping public perceptions of research and technology. These include concerns about the impact of AI on jobs, the effects of AI on human learning and critical thinking, and questions related to safety, ethics, privacy, and intellectual property. He suggested that universities have an important role in helping society navigate these challenges by fostering original thinking, supporting lifelong learning, and preparing students to exercise judgment, leadership, and trust-building skills that cannot easily be automated. As AI assumes a larger role in research and work, these human-centered capabilities become increasingly important.

Throughout the presentation, Sonak emphasized that trust is built through sustained relationships rather than one-time initiatives. Effective partnerships require faculty engagement, local ownership, consistent investment, and open collaboration rather than attempts to direct research solely through corporate interests. He argued that successful research ecosystems are created when industry contributes resources, expertise, and practical use cases while respecting the autonomy of academic institutions. This collaborative model, grounded in responsible and trustworthy innovation, can help universities demonstrate both the societal value and the public accountability of the research they conduct.

Summary: Higher Education's Workforce Impact - Serving the Public and Garnering Their Support

Robert Kelchen, Professor and Department Head of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Key Take Aways

- Public trust in universities is influenced by perceptions of affordability, workforce preparation, and institutional responsiveness, not solely by attitudes toward research itself.
- Universities have adapted substantially to public, and policy demands through growth in workforce-oriented programs, STEM education, and new credential models, but these changes carry financial and operational challenges.
- Maintaining trust during a period of rapid change will require universities to be transparent, accountable, and proactive in using their internal expertise to navigate challenges related to AI, funding, workforce needs, and institutional sustainability.

In his presentation, Robert Kelchen examined how public perceptions of higher education are shaped by concerns about affordability, workforce preparation, institutional responsiveness, and the rapidly changing environment facing colleges and universities. While his remarks focused primarily on higher education policy and finance, they offered important insights into the broader challenge of building and maintaining public trust in university research and higher education institutions.

Kelchen noted that public confidence in universities varies significantly across different areas. Research universities continue to receive relatively strong recognition for advancing research and innovation, suggesting that the public still values the knowledge-generation mission of higher education. However, concerns about affordability, student debt, workforce outcomes, viewpoint diversity, and institutional relevance have created challenges for public trust. In his view, these concerns shape how the public evaluates universities, including their research enterprises.

A major theme of the presentation was that higher education has often been more responsive to public and policymaker demands than critics acknowledge. Universities have expanded programs in STEM, health professions, and other workforce-oriented fields in response to labor market needs, while also experimenting with shorter credentials, workforce-focused training programs, and new degree structures designed to accelerate entry into employment. These adaptations demonstrate an institutional willingness to evolve, even when doing so creates significant financial and operational challenges.

Kelchen also highlighted the uncertainty created by artificial intelligence, changing workforce demands, shifting research funding environments, demographic changes, and evolving government policies. These forces are reshaping both research and education, often requiring significant institutional investments before benefits are fully understood. In this context, maintaining public

trust will require universities to demonstrate both adaptability and transparency as they navigate complex changes.

Looking ahead, Kelchen argued that universities should make better use of their own expertise when responding to these challenges. He emphasized the importance of shared governance and engaging faculty knowledge in institutional decision-making. His broader message was that public trust depends not only on the quality of research itself, but also on whether universities are perceived as responsive, accountable, effective stewards of resources, and capable of addressing society's evolving educational and workforce needs.

Summary: The Trust Agenda: A Framework for Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education

Felicia Fullilove, Associate Director, American Association of Colleges & Universities

Key Take Aways

- Public trust in higher education is built through demonstrated trustworthiness, meaningful community relationships, and institutional actions that consistently serve the public good.
- Universities should adopt institution-wide strategies that include community engagement, inclusive excellence, organizational innovation, and more effective communication about higher education's societal value.
- Research strengthens public trust when it is conducted with integrity, addresses community needs, produces visible public benefits, and is communicated in ways that help people understand its real-world impact.

In her presentation, Felicia Fullilove addressed the challenge of declining public trust in higher education and presented a framework for rebuilding confidence in colleges and universities through institutional trustworthiness, community engagement, and mission-driven leadership. Drawing on AAC&U's Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education Initiative, she emphasized that public trust is not simply a communications problem but a relationship between institutions and the communities they serve. Trust is built when colleges and universities consistently demonstrate that they are acting in the public interest and delivering tangible benefits to society.

Fullilove noted that concerns about higher education stem from multiple factors, including rising costs, broader declines in trust in public institutions, perceptions of elitism, and a sense that universities can sometimes appear disconnected from the communities around them. She highlighted the importance of addressing these concerns through genuine engagement rather than relying solely on institutional messaging. In particular, she argued that universities must move beyond approaches that treat communities as passive recipients of expertise and instead foster mutually beneficial partnerships that recognize and incorporate local knowledge and lived experience.

The presentation outlined AAC&U's five-part trust agenda: accelerating institutional innovation, prioritizing community engagement, recommitting inclusive excellence, telling a clearer story about higher education's public value, and coordinating collective efforts to defend the broader mission of higher education. These recommendations are intended to help institutions become more responsive, transparent, and accountable while strengthening their connections to the public. Fullilove stressed that building trust should be viewed as an institution-wide responsibility requiring the active involvement of university leadership and coordinated action across campuses.

She also drew a direct connection between research and public trust. Research conducted by universities, she argued, contributes to trust when it is carried out with integrity, addresses real-world challenges, engages communities, and clearly demonstrates societal impact. Moreover, research provides powerful stories that illustrate the unique value higher education brings to society. By making the benefits of research more visible and by ensuring that research practices reflect openness, quality, and community engagement, universities can strengthen both their trustworthiness and their public standing.