

Princeton University Strategic Framework
June 2023 Update

Introduction

On January 30, 2016, the Princeton University Board of Trustees adopted a strategic framework designed to “guide important choices by the University’s trustees, administration, and faculty.” The board noted at the time that “[t]he plan’s objective is not to specify all of the University’s future initiatives, but to create a planning framework for determining them and for understanding the trade-offs among them.” The board and the administration committed to “conduct a thorough review of the framework and publish an updated version on a quadrennial basis.”

The Board first updated the framework in 2019. It completed another planning cycle this year. Over the course of this academic year and the preceding one, the board examined significant trends relevant to the basic premises of the framework and its goals, considered the state of the University’s academic enterprise and resources, and explored recent developments that either bore upon the framework’s vitality or raised new questions deserving the University’s attention.

These deliberations took place during a period of turbulent change and uncertainty. In the four years since the 2019 update, we have experienced a global pandemic, participated in a national reckoning with racism, and witnessed an unprecedented assault on the United States capitol. Concerns about climate change, free speech, inclusivity, mental health, political polarization, racial equity, and other topics intensified.

Fundamental to several of these trends, and independently important, was the continuing and rapid evolution of technology, including especially online media and artificial intelligence. As the 2016 framework observed and the 2019 update reaffirmed, “technology—especially but not exclusively information technology—is reshaping fields of research, forms of pedagogy, the economy, the organization of society, and the challenges for which we must prepare our students.”

In the years since 2016, technology’s transformative impact on society has become ever more apparent in ways both beneficial and disturbing. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption and spread of some new technologies. We now have powerful new ways to communicate with one another, acquire information, and perform tasks. These same capacities, however, have created new threats to emotional well-being, civic discourse, national and cyber security, and social institutions.

The world’s future will depend upon the ability to integrate new technologies with cultural norms and social practices well suited to support human flourishing. At Princeton, that project will require that all the University’s scholarly disciplines and fields remain vibrant on their own terms, and that they find new forms of interdisciplinary cooperation with one another and lively connection to the world beyond our campus. Princeton must continue to invest in the

humanities and the social sciences as well as in engineering and the natural sciences, and it must encourage new collaborations among scholars from all these fields.

The 2016 framework anticipated the importance of technological change to the University’s mission, and it has guided the University well over the past seven years. The board accordingly concluded the current planning cycle by reaffirming once again the major strategic premises and directions articulated in the framework. In particular, the board remains convinced that “Princeton University’s long-standing mission—as a residential research university committed to an expansive vision of the liberal arts that encompasses engineering—is robust, valuable, and important to the world.”

The board also identified additional principles and priorities to inform the University’s decision-making in the years ahead.

The board focused attention on the need to sustain a culture of learning that embraces vigorous discussion and interaction across multiple perspectives, and that enables all members of the campus community to flourish and grow.

It underscored the case for an historic, multi-year investment in the School of Engineering and Applied Science that will fully realize Princeton’s potential to integrate world-leading study of technology with deep humanistic understanding and insight.

It agreed that the University should plan both to renovate existing undergraduate and graduate housing and to add new forms of housing with the goal of accommodating the needs of all students and allowing for additional expansion of the student body in future years.

Finally, the board recognized Princeton’s opportunity and responsibility to experiment with new research and pedagogical projects that would supplement the University’s core model, including investments in shared computational infrastructure and teaching initiatives designed to reach new populations of students.

Free Speech and Inclusivity

The 2016 strategic framework includes a formal mission statement for the University. It begins by declaring Princeton’s commitment to “advance[e] learning through scholarship, research, and teaching of unsurpassed quality, with an emphasis on undergraduate and doctoral education that is distinctive among the world’s great universities, and with a pervasive commitment to serve the nation and the world.”

The mission statement then enumerates several “characteristics and aspirations” that are essential to Princeton’s model of teaching and research and that speak to the importance of an inclusive, truth-seeking, and supportive culture.

For example, the mission statement declares Princeton to have a “commitment to innovation, free inquiry, and the discovery of new knowledge and new ideas...”; “a human scale that nurtures a strong sense of community, invites high levels of engagement, and fosters

personal communication”; and “a commitment to welcome, support, and engage students, faculty, and staff with a broad range of backgrounds and experiences, and to encourage all members of the University community to learn from the robust expression of diverse perspectives.”

These commitments are at once crucial and fragile. They are visibly under threat within American society, where we see evidence of growing intolerance of other groups or opinions, and of an unwillingness to listen to, learn from, and associate with viewpoints different from one’s own.

The trustees agreed that Princeton has a responsibility not only to sustain a culture of learning, openness, and mutual respect on its own campus, but also to lead on these issues within the higher education community, where they appropriately draw heightened scrutiny.

To do so, the University must cultivate norms of courageous inquiry, thoughtful discussion, engaged debate, and an appreciation for the importance of hearing differing views in scholarly and other arguments. Princeton must also be genuinely diverse and inclusive, so that people of widely varying backgrounds, identities, and perspectives can feel fully welcome and able to express themselves on our campus.

Emphasizing Well-Being as Critical to the University’s Mission

The Board noted that our society is also experiencing a mental health crisis that is especially acute within student-aged populations. This crisis directly affects many of Princeton’s faculty, students, and staff, compromising their lives and their participation in the University’s mission.

A commitment to the well-being of the campus community is arguably implicit in several of the characteristics enumerated in the University’s mission statement, but the Board thought the principle important enough to add a provision making it explicit.

The new provision affirms Princeton’s “commitment to support and promote the mental and physical well-being of its students, staff, and faculty so that they have a genuine opportunity to thrive and engage fully with the University’s mission of research, teaching, and service.”

The board endorsed the administration’s campus-wide, integrated approach to well-being, which emphasizes the role of all campus departments in promoting well-being through a continuing, careful examination of policies, procedures, and practices.

The University is already actively engaged in a range of initiatives to promote the well-being of the entire campus community, including through the redesign and enhancement of the University’s health center and recreational facilities, the addition of positions and programs in the residential colleges and in University Health Services, improvements to the University’s health plan, and the establishment of the TigerWell initiative. TigerWell grants program funds to faculty, students, and staff to support innovative and impactful activities, programs, projects, or research that promote well-being in the campus community.

It also encouraged the University to continue to innovate on its own campus and to cooperate with peers to support mental well-being in college-aged populations, collect information and share research, and generate attention to this critical issue in the broader public sphere.

Diversity and Mission

Princeton recognizes that talent exists in every sector of society. The University's excellence depends on enabling people from all backgrounds to thrive and engage fully with the perspectives that a diverse community brings to learning, research, and campus life.

The 2016 framework focused particular attention on the need to increase socioeconomic diversity along with other forms of diversity that had received attention in the past. In the 2019 update, the board was able to report that the University had become "a nationally recognized leader in attracting and supporting low-income students."

The University has continued those efforts, including through participation in the leadership of the American Talent Initiative and a range of other partnerships, as well as through expansion of its transfer program, which focuses almost exclusively on military veterans and community college students. The board encouraged the University to push forward with these initiatives and, in particular, to plan for additional growth of its transfer program.

In 2022 and 2023, the University announced major improvements to both its graduate stipend program and its undergraduate financial aid program. These improvements make the University even more accessible to low-income and middle-income students, and they help to ensure that those students will be able to participate fully in all University programs. As of fall 2023, most families earning up to \$100,000 annually will pay nothing for their children to attend Princeton; the University anticipates that more than one-quarter of its undergraduate students will receive this level of support. The expansion of the University's undergraduate student body, discussed below, has also aided Princeton's efforts to attract more students from a wider variety of backgrounds.

During the period since the last strategic framework update, the University also launched initiatives designed to promote racial equity throughout its divisions and operations. The board reviews and supports these initiatives through its own Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, and was pleased to recognize the improvements that have been made over the course of the current planning cycle.

As the board completed this update, the United States Supreme Court had pending before it a case that might alter or significantly limit the University's ability to use race as one factor among others in a holistic admission process. The University is carefully monitoring that case. While it is impossible to design a specific response without knowing the Court's ruling, the board agreed that the University should act vigorously within the law to achieve the racial and other forms of diversity that are essential to Princeton's excellence and America's future.

Financial Strength Amidst Uncertainty

The four years since the last update to the strategic framework, and indeed the last two decades, have been a time of tremendous economic volatility. Markets plunged precipitously at the beginning of the pandemic, then soared dramatically before declining sharply in 2022. In 2021 and 2022, inflation surged and interest rates rose. In the first half of this year, sudden bank failures surprised even very savvy economists and investors.

Princeton manages its endowment mindful of this volatility and with a commitment to the long-term financial health of the University. The guiding principle for these efforts is the idea of “intergenerational equity,” which insists that the University’s endowment ought to benefit future generations of students as much as current ones. This principle is a demanding one that requires investment returns large enough to fund annual transfers to the University’s operating budget and cover the effects of inflation.

Thanks to superb stewardship of the endowment by the Princeton University Investment Company (PRINCO), the University has met and surpassed the requirements of its commitment to intergenerational equity over the past decade. The University also benefits from strong operating margins, excellent credit ratings, and loyal and generous support from alumni and friends.

PRINCO’s success and the University’s overall financial strength enabled it to make the previously mentioned enhancements to its graduate stipend and undergraduate financial aid programs, thereby reinforcing Princeton’s position as one of the most affordable colleges or universities in the world. It has also enabled transformational investments in research and scholarship like those described below.

Economic downturns will inevitably come, and the board noted that the University must maintain the budget discipline necessary to deal with financial adversity. The board also recognized, however, that wisely chosen investments in human and physical capital will benefit later generations of Princetonians as much or more than financial capital.

The board accordingly reiterated its judgment, expressed both in the 2016 framework and the 2019 update, that the University should deploy resources boldly to leverage gifts and broaden the University’s impact.

Princeton is fortunate that its resources have continued to grow since the publication of the framework and the first update to it, even after significant new expenditures on construction, financial aid, and other programmatic improvements. Additionally, the Venture Forward Campaign, which was launched in late 2021, will further enhance the financial strength of the University. Under these circumstances, the University has not only the capacity, but also an urgent responsibility, to seize opportunities and expand the scope of its teaching and research mission.

Continued Investment in Research and Educational Excellence

The 2016 framework observed that “[i]n light of the value and robustness of the University’s longstanding mission, its first priority must be to make the investments needed to ensure the continued excellence of its teaching and research programs.”

During its deliberations, the board reviewed evidence showing that the quality of Princeton's faculty and students has risen consistently and significantly over the past century. Sustaining that trajectory requires a commitment to academic freedom and rigorous scholarly standards. It also depends upon judicious investment in new fields of inquiry and in the facilities and other infrastructure necessary to support excellence.

The University campus is currently undergoing a period of intense construction with projects encompassing a new art museum, facilities for engineering and the environmental sciences, and graduate student housing, among other projects.

Princeton's administration presented information about a compelling and timely opportunity to build upon and expand the University's research excellence in quantum science and engineering. The board agreed that the University should seize this opportunity. Planning is now underway for a new institute and a facility to house it.

Though construction projects always involve some level of inconvenience or disruption, they are essential to the future quality of the University. The trustees affirmed the need to continue enhancing the campus through renovation and new facilities while also planning carefully to minimize programmatic disruption when possible.

The board also received a briefing on multi-disciplinary proposals requiring large data sets or computational resources to investigate scholarly questions relevant to fields throughout the University. The board encouraged the University to support projects of this kind and to cultivate initiatives that would leverage Princeton's strengths in the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences to address technology's impact on culture, ethics, and society. Some of these possibilities, which might benefit from consortia of universities and other partners, are discussed at greater length below.

An Historic Commitment to the School of Engineering and Applied Science

The 2016 framework recognized that “in the 21st century, a great liberal arts university requires a great engineering school.” The board also observed that although “Princeton is fortunate to have a superb engineering faculty that is notable for its interdisciplinary character and its commitment to liberal arts education,” the University “will need to invest aggressively to support both the School's existing programs and new initiatives in emerging fields.”

The School's prospects have become even more exciting since the framework was published. The evolving trajectories of fields such as bioengineering, quantum science, and artificial intelligence play to Princeton's strengths at the intersection of the applied and natural sciences. These research and teaching opportunities make the moment ripe for a game-changing investment in the University's engineering departments and related interdisciplinary units.

Initial portions of the transformative improvements envisioned in the 2016 framework are now manifest in the large construction project along Western Way. The board and the administration agreed that it will be important for Princeton to continue the planning and

investment required to complete this historic enhancement of the University's engineering program and facilities.

Residential Life and Expansion

A major priority of the 2016 framework was to expand the undergraduate student body by 125 students per year, beginning in 2022 and extending to 2025 for a total of 500 additional students. That expansion is now in full swing: Yeh College and New College West opened this fall, and the University admitted the largest first-year class in its history. The two new residential colleges also provided the University with needed capacity to renovate or reconstruct existing housing. A project to replace First College with Hobson College is underway.

The board observed in 2016 that “over time it is likely that there will be an additional increase in the number of undergraduates” and that the University would need “flexibility to improve existing residential facilities while it adds new ones.” Similar considerations apply to the University's graduate housing stock.

In light of the large number of outstanding first-year and transfer students applying for admission to Princeton's undergraduate program, the board believes that the University should continue planning to grow its student body after the current expansion and the renovation of Hobson College are complete. Because the board also reaffirmed the importance of on-campus living and learning to the University's model of liberal arts education, this growth will require the construction of additional undergraduate housing.

At the same time, the success of the University's new residential colleges has emphasized the need to improve extant undergraduate housing that is less well suited to the requirements of today's students. The board also noted the desirability of building apartment-style housing that would better accommodate the University's growing population of transfer students, some of whom are older than other undergraduates and may arrive at Princeton with families.

The board agreed with the administration that renovating the University's older residential colleges would have significant benefits to inclusivity and belonging, enabling the University to better support the well-being of the University's students of all backgrounds, groups, gender identities, and physical abilities. The board accordingly approved the administration's recommendation to prioritize those projects in its planning. The board also noted that it would be essential for the University to preserve “swing space” in its residential stock so that it has the capacity to continue the renovation of current stock, including upperclass dormitories, in the future.

Because the University has limited construction and planning capacity, there are trade-offs between adding new housing and improving extant housing. The board encouraged the administration to look for creative ways to minimize these trade-offs and accelerate progress. The board hopes that it will be possible both to renovate current stock and to add new apartment-style units over the course of the next ten years.

Innovating Beyond Princeton's Core Model: Research

Princeton's core model integrates world-class research, outstanding teaching and personal mentorship, a liberal arts ethos, and a vibrant co-curricular program on a residential campus. That model has been brilliantly successful, and the board and the administration are fully committed to maintaining and protecting its exceptional quality and distinctive characteristics.

Princeton has also, however, sometimes reached beyond its core model to undertake other important projects, including management of the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory for the Department of Energy and collaboration with the Department of Commerce's Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory. Princeton's involvement with these laboratories, both of which are located across Route One from the historic campus, has added significantly to the scope of the University's research and impact.

The board agreed that current circumstances may present the University with opportunities to launch new teaching or research ventures that leverage some of Princeton's strengths without replicating all features of its core model. Because projects related to the core model will have priority within the University's capital plan, the most attractive supplementary projects will likely be ones that do not require the construction of new or renovated facilities on campus.

As noted earlier, the board heard presentations about promising possibilities for the creation of shared computational or data resources for researchers at Princeton or broader consortia of institutions and scholars. It learned that the pace of progress in artificial intelligence (AI) has accelerated to a level that surprises even experts in the field. These innovations increasingly happen at large scale—in datasets, in computation, and in technical staff—that are challenging to academic research models even at well-resourced universities.

The administration proposed, and the board agreed, that it is important for research and education in AI to remain broadly and easily accessible in the public sphere so as to enable greater technological advances, applications across a range of academic disciplines, thoughtful consideration of societal implications, and the education of future leaders.

Princeton has a unique capacity to meet this challenge. The University has built strong foundations in machine learning methods, data-science applications, and AI ethics and policy. Going forward, Princeton can lead in creating and understanding large-scale AI models and applying them to the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and engineering. The University can also play a crucial role in creating scalable shared platforms for collecting and analyzing data about our increasingly information-driven world.

The board agreed that the University should seek opportunities to make bigger and bolder investments in AI, including shared research infrastructure for computation and technical staff. It encouraged the administration to develop processes and standards appropriate to such initiatives that would permit "venture-style" investing in early-stage ideas while also providing for appropriate managerial and governance oversight.

Innovating Beyond Princeton's Core Model: Teaching

The board also heard presentations about teaching initiatives that are reaching students who do not have access to Princeton's traditional undergraduate or graduate programs. For example, the University will launch two pilot programs this summer designed to help promising community college students make a successful transition to four-year degree programs at colleges and universities in New Jersey and across the country. Both pilots will permit participating students to earn Princeton course credits.

Another program, the Princeton Prison Teaching Initiative (PTI), is a grassroots project of Princeton students, faculty, and staff. Founded in 2005, PTI has drawn support from more than 750 volunteers (including more than 490 graduate students, 110 post docs, and 40 faculty members) in the past seven years alone. It has also attracted significant alumni participation and support.

PTI has become recognized as a leader in the education of incarcerated people. For example, it has developed innovative lab-based science classes that have become models for other prison-teaching programs. PTI was a founding member of New Jersey Scholarship and Transformational Education in Prisons (NJ-STEP), a statewide consortium that is now one of the largest prison-teaching programs in the United States.

Programs of this kind have many strengths and benefits. They leverage Princeton's distinctive commitment to teaching. They broaden the range of students that Princeton can reach, and they may help to remedy the low completion rates that plague much of American higher education, especially in community colleges. They enable Princeton to build partnerships with other colleges and universities in the region. Princeton participants in these programs also report that they learn from the perspectives and insights of students whom they would not otherwise encounter.

The administration proposed, and the board agreed, that the University should seek to develop replicable or scalable programs that might build on the pilot programs mentioned above and the Prison Teaching Initiative. As the University considers new pilot programs, the board encouraged it to experiment with models that combine online and in-person instruction, since such programs might eventually reach a greater number and range of students.

Both the board and the administration noted that the University should be prepared to proceed iteratively. The programs that the University ultimately develops in this space may look significantly different from the pilots with which it begins.

Conclusion

Though we live in a time of rapid change and significant uncertainty, this much seems clear: to seize the opportunities and confront the challenges ahead of us, our society will require both the truth-seeking scholarship produced by great research universities and the critical thinking and leadership skills developed by high-quality liberal arts education programs.

Princeton is well-positioned to meet that need, and the strategic framework continues to guide it well. The board applauds the progress that has been made over the past four years, and

it encourages the administration to push forward with projects that will uphold the University's core principles, expand the beneficial impact of its teaching and research, and provide needed leadership in the public sphere.