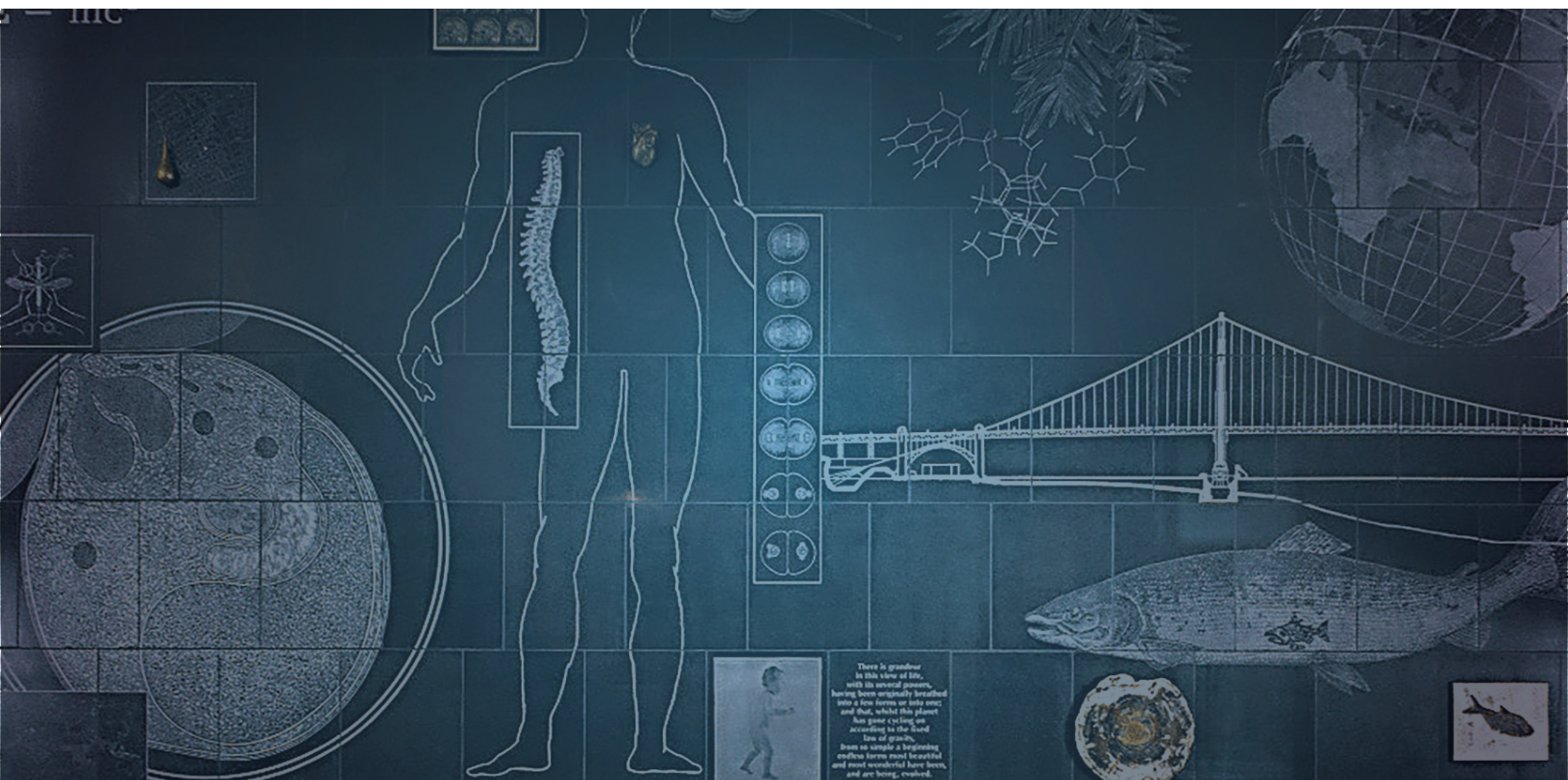


NRC STRATEGIC PLAN

2021–2026



The National Academies of
SCIENCES • ENGINEERING • MEDICINE

Preface

The National Research Council (NRC), the operating and principal programmatic arm of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, has long played a unique role in developing evidence-based advice to the United States and the world. In 2019 the NRC Governing Board embarked on developing a strategic plan to ensure the long-term success of the organization. This strategic plan builds on a history of excellence at the NRC and sets a bold vision and far-reaching new directions for its future. The pivotal events of 2020 helped shape the strategic plan as they required the NRC to mobilize the scientific, engineering, and medical communities to (1) respond in accelerated, creative new ways to the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) develop interdisciplinary approaches to systemic racism while upholding the organization’s rigorous standards.

Achieving the strategic plan’s goals will require dedicated resources and a long-term commitment from staff and leadership throughout the organization along with NRC volunteers. The execution of this plan is the next phase in a journey started 2 years ago to shift the organization’s culture to be more proactive, innovative, and efficient. To identify paths to meet the goals set out in the strategic plan, the NRC staff are developing an implementation plan delineating metrics, timelines, and assessments of progress. The measurement of actions taken toward achieving the strategic goals will be critical to the NRC’s success of becoming a more proactive, sustainable organization. The implementation plan will be acted on by the NRC leadership with the community of staff and volunteers. We appreciate the dedication and hard work that will be required to implement this plan, and look forward to being part of the NRC of the future.

This plan reflects the collective thinking of the organization and its volunteers. We are grateful for the rich ideas, suggestions, and critiques provided by staff, volunteers, and members of the three Academies during the past year through surveys, interviews, and conversations. We appreciate the support provided by Samantha Chao and Shelly Cooke of the NRC staff and would also like to thank consultants Susan Stickley and Paul Izzo for guiding our work.

NRC Strategic Planning Committee
February 2021

NRC Strategic Planning Committee

VICTOR J. DZAU (*Chair*), NRC Vice Chair

CORALE BRIERLEY, Brierley Consultancy

ELIZABETH CANTWELL, University of Arizona

ELLEN CHOU, National Academies

MONICA FEIT, National Academies

LYNN GOLDMAN, George Washington University

DIANE GRIFFIN, Johns Hopkins University

SUSAN HANSON, Clark University

EVE HIGGINBOTHAM, University of Pennsylvania

JAMES HINCHMAN, National Academies

NEIL JACOBSTEIN, Singularity University

STEVEN KOONIN, New York University

DAVID MAY, National Academies

RICHARD MESERVE, Covington & Burling LLP

THOMAS POLLARD, Yale University

JAMES RISPOLI, North Carolina State University

J. SANFORD SCHWARTZ, University of Pennsylvania

ROBERT SPROULL, University of Massachusetts Amherst

GREGORY SYMMES, National Academies

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Vision, Mission, and Core Values

For more than 100 years the NRC has provided independent, objective scientific advice to the nation and the world as the operating and principal programmatic arm of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. This strategic plan sets the vision, mission, and core values to guide the organization during the next 5 years (2021–2026).

VISION

A nation and a world that rely on scientific evidence to make decisions that benefit humanity.

MISSION

The National Academies provide independent, trustworthy advice and facilitate solutions to complex challenges by mobilizing expertise, practice, and knowledge in science, engineering, and medicine.

CORE VALUES

Independence, Objectivity, Rigor, Integrity, Inclusivity, Truth

Building the NRC of the Future

The 2021–2026 strategic plan positions the NRC as a facilitator of solutions to complex challenges and a trusted source of evidence-based advice involving science, engineering, and medicine. Fulfilling this mission will require bold innovation and a radical shift in the ways the organization collaborates across its own units as well as with stakeholders and communities. This significant pivot will result in an NRC that more proactively prepares society to adapt and respond to rapidly evolving challenges. By being more dynamic and responsive, the NRC of the future can inform decisions that will lead to a better world.

Four enduring tenets guide the strategic goals presented in this plan:

Expand with whom and how we engage and partner. The NRC can better fulfill its mission by expanding with whom and how it engages and partners beyond its traditional communities. The organization needs to strengthen its relationships with existing sponsors and aggressively pursue new opportunities to widen the array of entities that seek the work of the NRC, including sponsors, opinion leaders, and global institutions.

Design for diversity, equity, and inclusion¹ in all we do. As the NRC expands with whom and how it engages and partners, it must intentionally build deep, interactive relationships with diverse communities. Listening to and learning from these communities will enrich and alter how the NRC conducts its work; for example, by challenging each activity to consider how dimensions of equity and inclusion could apply. Broadening the NRC's aperture and involving a wider range of perspectives, experiences, and evidence throughout its analyses will improve the quality, relevance, and accessibility of its work.

Embrace continuous learning and innovation. The NRC must learn from past experiences and become a continuous learning organization, evolving over time with a mindset of willingness to constantly innovate. The NRC should foster a culture that takes calculated risks—even with a risk of failure—and

¹ *Diversity* is defined as the broad spectrum of experiences, cultures, and physical attributes within a community, including, but not limited to, race or ancestry, national origin, religion, age, ability, gender, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and perspective. *Equity* is the absence of barriers, biases, and obstacles that impede equal access, fair treatment, and opportunity for contribution by all members of a community. *Inclusion* is a culture comprising a framework that allows an individual to effectively engage and thrive in a community. The framework includes social policies and processes that provide access to opportunities and information, the capacity to influence accepted institutional norms and behaviors, the security in the organization to fully express inherent skills and talent, and the ability to exercise one's own informal or formal power.

evaluate the outcomes. The NRC can learn from its partners and should actively invite suggestions for improvement from an expanded, broadened group of stakeholders.

Enhance the NRC’s capabilities through strategic investments in advanced technologies. The NRC recognizes the importance of cutting-edge tools, systems, and technologies to support its work. Vigorous and sustained investments are needed to advance its capabilities. Technology investment underpins redesigned workflows and operating procedures and can be transformational in the NRC’s work, supporting entirely new products and the development of more relevant and timely evidence-based advice.

Strategic Goals

The plan presents three strategic goals to increase the impact of the NRC on the nation and the world through trusted evidence-based advice that facilitates solutions to complex challenges (see the figure on p. 14 for a visual depiction of the plan).

1 Anticipate and prepare society for current and future challenges and opportunities

An increasingly important role for the NRC is to inform citizens, governments, and other sectors of society domestically and internationally on current and emerging problems and opportunities facing humanity by defining their characteristics and suggesting appropriate responses. Forecasting methodologies such as scenario planning will be essential.

The NRC is uniquely suited to tackle complex challenges and provide evidence-based advice on long-term as well as more immediate issues. It is able to bring together a wide array of extraordinary talent across a full range of disciplines. Collectively, the experts convened are able to step back from the day to day to think strategically about a path forward.

The NRC must continuously anticipate and prepare to meet the needs for advice based in rapidly advancing (and often converging) fields of science, engineering, and medicine. In so doing, the NRC should chart a steady course via rigorous analysis that differentiates critical and important issues that evoke significant change from those with more limited impact. The achievement of this goal requires the adoption of three strategies:

Strategy 1a.

Proactively identify critical current and emerging problems and opportunities facing humanity and identify appropriate responses

To become more proactive, the NRC should identify emerging issues by harvesting ideas from many sources and by applying forecasting methodologies to prepare for possible and probable futures. Such issues may arise from scientific, engineering, and medical advances that create severe societal challenges (e.g., gene editing); emerging secular trends in science, society, and geopolitics; and high-impact/low-probability disasters (e.g., volcanoes, solar storms, pandemics, extreme weather, or economic collapse).

Strategy 1b.

Build diverse and deep networks of partners to develop a forward-looking portfolio

Strategy 1a will necessitate involving a broad range of stakeholders to chart a path for the future, requiring that the NRC engage experts from a broad range of disciplines and backgrounds. Anticipating and preparing citizens, governments, and all of society for critical problems facing humanity necessitates that the NRC draw on and learn from the expertise and knowledge of members of the three Academies, volunteers, and staff. Networks of partners must be built in all sectors of the economy and at the international, national, regional, state, and

metro and local community levels. Developing bidirectional relationships with these various communities and stakeholders will shift interactions with sponsors to be less reactive and more forward looking. Strengthening internal collaborations within the NRC and with its volunteer bases will encourage the development of interdisciplinary approaches to problems and help build a more comprehensive portfolio.

Strategy 1c.

Develop new mechanisms and use state-of-the-art methodologies to anticipate and solve problems

The NRC of the future will serve an expanded array of sponsors, including current partners such as federal agencies, Congress, and foundations, with an added focus on the business community and international, state, and local governments. The NRC will continue to deliver its core products and create new mechanisms for delivering advice and facilitating solutions while staying true to the organization's core values. Coupled with these new mechanisms, state-of-the-art planning tools and methodologies will help drive NRC activities. As efforts to develop predictive analytic capabilities continuously evolve, the NRC will need to adopt advanced technologies, such as machine learning tools, to fully enable this capacity.

2

Expand the NRC's impact in the world

To fulfill its vision, the NRC must expand its impact by strategically diversifying and expanding its already rich portfolio of high-quality products designed to meet the needs of target audiences. Effective products will require insights from a diverse network of partners. Disseminating these products will require both traditional and modern methods of communication as best suited to the rapidly changing environment.

The distinctive attributes of the NRC traditionally include independence, access to expertise, and the ability to build consensus by convening broad groups of stakeholders. Collectively, these attributes provide a foundation for the work of the NRC.

Strategy 2a.

Design NRC activities to be diverse and inclusive to enhance impact

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are foundational to increasing the organization's impact. Having a more diverse and inclusive base of staff and volunteers will broaden the organization's perspective, while long-term connections with diverse communities will enable more comprehensive responses to the concerns of the communities. The enhanced network of partners discussed in Goal 1 will help to identify a wider range of issues and build lasting connections with diverse communities.

Fundamental to the success of this strategy is for the NRC to listen closely to diverse audiences, and within each audience, learn how the NRC's advice has come to be trusted. Understanding

how the organization can develop its reputation as a reliable source within these communities will guide the ways in which the NRC engages with its stakeholders. For example, learning how different audiences share the NRC’s work with their own networks will help the NRC strategically communicate in an environment of misinformation and disinformation.

Strategy 2b.

Enhance the impact of the NRC

An aggressive execution of the strategic plan will help enhance the impact of the NRC. To ensure the NRC focuses on high impact actions, a system to measure the impact of the NRC needs to be developed. The collection of evidence on the types and quantity of impact the NRC generates will be an important first step. How the NRC contributes to changes in science, engineering, and health policy requires a baseline understanding of its current and potential new audiences, including who they are, why they engage with the NRC, and how the NRC best interacts with them. Consistently measuring progress and strategically building the organization’s body of work to align with its unique strengths and opportunities will help enhance the NRC’s impact. Weaknesses will need to be identified, evaluated, and addressed. The NRC will also need to better leverage the volunteers and members of the three Academies as messengers and promoters of its work.

Strategy 2c.

Adopt advanced technologies for communication

Enhancing the impact of the NRC will require significant ongoing attention, adaptability, and investment to update and extend the influence of both its existing and new work. Examples include expanding the use of virtual convening mechanisms to reach new partners in innovative ways and digitizing the development of its products and publications. As the external environment evolves, the NRC must deliver its advice through media that are relevant to its primary audiences. The NRC should continue to enhance its external digital platforms and outreach to ensure it is communicating effectively through media that diverse and global audiences find most accessible and influential.

3

Strengthen all aspects of the NRC to achieve Goals 1 and 2 and ensure its continued creativity, resilience, and sustainability

The fulfillment of the aspirations outlined in Goals 1 and 2 will require ongoing strategic oversight and insight and organizational resilience and agility. The fundamentals of a sustainable organization reside in the strength of its governance, adherence to its purpose and core values, and its ability to take risks while recognizing the realities of societal challenges. With these concepts in mind, the following strategies will strengthen the NRC of the future by enhancing its creativity, resilience, and sustainability.

Strategy 3a.**Strengthen the governance of the NRC**

The Articles of Organization of the NRC state “the purpose of the National Research Council is to help improve public policy, understanding, and education in matters of science, technology, and health. To accomplish this purpose, the Council promotes the increase and dissemination of knowledge in the natural and social sciences, mathematics, engineering, and medicine, and the use of this knowledge to benefit the public welfare.” In 1933, Executive Order 12832 and subsequent executive orders strengthened this purpose by reaffirming the unique role of the NRC in serving the nation. Modernizing the governance of the NRC can, however, further reinforce the purpose and mission of the organization.

Three specific areas of governance require attention: (1) general organization and governing documents, (2) roles and performance of the Governing Board, and (3) organization and performance of NRC units.

3a1. Deepen the purpose and enhance the functional role of the NRC by refining the Articles of Organization

The NRC should refine the Articles of Organization and create bylaws as needed to outline explicitly the scope of governance controlled by the NRC Governing Board. Governing documents should provide specific guidance for the operations of the NRC Governing Board; clarify the process of appointing or electing members of the NRC Governing Board; and codify voting procedures. Guidance should also be provided on the internal structure of the organization, such as mechanisms to create and discontinue committees, programs, and/or divisions, and general guidelines for key NRC management positions.

3a2. Optimize the use of the NRC Governing Board

The meetings of the NRC Governing Board should provide strong support and guidance for the leadership of the National Academies and the staff. The Governing Board should carefully consider and implement changes to reach this goal based on best practices such as frequency and format of the meetings, persons participating in the meetings, and strategies to engage the Governing Board in making decisions and advising the presidents of the three Academies. The possibilities include biannual self-evaluations to determine if the Governing Board is currently meeting its primary purpose. The Governing Board should also evaluate the organization, responsibilities, and effectiveness of its committees.

3a3. Ensure the optimization of the program/division structure

In consideration of the objectives to reaffirm creativity, collaboration, and sustainability, the NRC should establish an episodic process to systematically evaluate the organization, responsibilities, and structures of divisions and boards. For example, the NRC recently centralized many

communications and financial functions previously conducted by division staff. Standardized procedures across the organization would facilitate staff movement among units; it would also offer the opportunity to link staff development, empowerment, and continuity to optimizing program and division structures.

To realize the full potential of convergence and collaboration among units and with external organizations, the NRC will need to identify creative ways to overcome current barriers, including the perverse incentives embedded in a soft money environment.

Strategy 3b.

Sustain, support, and enhance staff

Staff play an essential role in fulfilling the NRC’s mission and are critical to the success of this strategic plan. It is therefore important that the NRC develop its human capital by continuing to hire and retain excellent, diverse staff in all parts of the organization and build staff capacity. The NRC commits to a comprehensive staff development effort that cultivates staff skill sets and career paths, develops future leaders, and rewards cross-program collaboration. Staff training will also be critical to support the ability of staff to adopt new tools and technologies as described in Goals 1 and 2.

Strategy 3c.

Provide relevant and timely evidence-based guidance through continuous learning and innovation

Innovation in the spirit of expanding the NRC’s impact must be a continuous process of trying new things and learning from them. This willingness to embrace innovation should permeate every level of the NRC. New, dynamic approaches to conducting the work of the NRC must be continually developed and routinely evaluated, with feedback loops to ensure that learning is multi-directional. The box below provides examples of dynamic approaches that could be implemented. Tools will need to be developed and adopted to support NRC staff as they evolve into a continuous learning organization. It will be important to recognize and champion best practices developed by staff throughout the organization and to reward innovations that fail. Metrics will need to focus on what is important.

Examples of Dynamic Products

The NRC has recently faced the need to develop dynamic products, as exemplified in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which required extremely rapid evidence-based guidance. The NRC should also explore other innovative approaches to develop timely advice. For example, many NRC reports contain sections that could be updated, reviewed, and published at different times to create “living documents” to revise constantly changing data. Carefully controlled checks would have to be employed when the data indicate that revisions to findings, conclusions, or recommendations are needed. The process for developing a living document could be enabled through the adoption of advanced technologies.

The “argument map” is another example of a dynamic structure that might be adapted for promoting evidence-based analysis. Argument maps are visual depictions of the structure of an argument. They allow for the consideration of discrediting statements on a topic and invite curated audience comments and refutation to build an argument and a course of reason.

Strategy 3d.

Develop new business models and methods

The NRC must develop new business models and methods to enhance its ability to fulfill its mission and ensure its financial sustainability. Reaching this goal will require new types of products and services that meet the needs of the expanded set of sponsors and communities as articulated in Goals 1 and 2. For example, subscription services for continuous updates and research on sponsored topics or programs offering continuing professional development credits could come with substantial fees that provide predictable and recurring revenue.

Comprehensive strategies are needed to explore the potential of targeting engagements with specific communities such as Congress; federal, state, and local governments; and business communities on policy issues involving science, engineering, and medicine. The COVID-19 pandemic provided many examples of issues where evidence could be used to inform key decisions by business communities that would also benefit society as a whole, such as guidelines for reopening facilities and the effectiveness of social distancing practices in the workplace. A robust set of criteria will need to be established to decide when it is appropriate for the NRC to provide such assistance. Creating new business models and methods will require adherence to the aforementioned core values through the vigilant application of the guardrails in the Appendix.

Strategy 3e.

Deploy technology to improve NRC operations

Successful deployment of technology in the NRC entails both a long-term commitment to explore how technology can transform the way the NRC conducts its work and a shorter-term commitment to implement better technology to improve efficiency and effectiveness. These

near-term investments will include technology to strengthen budgeting and forecasting, improve the management of projects and workflow, facilitate collaboration, and enhance the stewardship of member and volunteer relationships. Longer-term technology projects could monitor new technology possibilities for transforming and enhancing NRC products and workflows. The budgets for new technologies will need to account for training staff in the use of the technology, reengineering workflows, and measuring process improvements.

Strategy 3f.

Balance priorities

The NRC must remain sustainable while innovating to achieve the aspirational goals of this strategic plan. To balance priorities, a framework of leading and lagging indicators is needed to assist the NRC Governing Board in tracking the success of this strategic plan. Leading indicators will focus on processes and organizational infrastructure that will drive the optimization of creativity as well as inclusivity and diversity, and identify innovative approaches to perform the work of the NRC. Lagging indicators will include goals that ensure resilience and sustainability by addressing financial stewardship and stakeholder satisfaction.

To ensure that the NRC strengthens its creativity, resilience, and sustainability, it must balance priorities in multiple domains: meeting stakeholder needs and satisfaction; strengthening organizational infrastructure and key processes; remaining economically sustainable; and staying within the guardrails to ensure that the organization keeps true to its core values.

Actions

The following actions are required to carry out the goals of the NRC strategic plan. They are listed based on the order of the goals and strategies as presented in the strategic plan, not priority.

1. Horizon-scanning projects

Develop new mechanisms and use state-of-the-art methodologies to anticipate and solve problems facing humanity. (Strategies 1a, 1c, 2a)

Examples.

- Groups of volunteers such as the NRC boards and divisions, and cross-Academies volunteers such as the Committee on Science, Engineering, Medicine, and Public Policy could be tasked with identifying significant emerging national and international issues that are not part of the NRC's current agenda
- The expertise and knowledge of members of the three Academies, volunteers, and staff could be drawn on systematically

2. Partnerships and collaborations

Develop strategies to build broad and deep networks of partners and collaborators within the NRC, as well as international, philanthropic, and business communities. (Strategies 1a, 1b, 2a)

Examples.

Identify a point of responsibility for creating a strategy around innovative models of collaboration and cultivating new partnerships with communities external to the NRC. New partners could include the private sector, state and local governments, and national and international organizations representing stakeholders who currently are not participating in the NRC deliberations, such as:

- Global organizations (e.g., United Nations, World Health Organization, International Energy Agency)
- Federal agencies that have not traditionally worked with the NRC (e.g., Bureau of Indian Affairs)
- Agencies and organizations with which the NRC has not previously partnered (e.g., for co-use agreements and support of classified and controlled work)

3. Diversity, equity, and inclusion

Aggressively advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in the NRC among staff and volunteers. (Strategies 1a, 2a, 3b)

Examples.

- Staff: Identify untapped sources of candidates to expand the pool of potential staff members, particularly in leadership positions. Create pathways to professional growth open to all staff to ensure equity
- Volunteers: Foster inclusivity by stressing common purpose; help staff create inclusive committee environments; and strengthen volunteer feedback mechanisms

4. Increase impact

Develop ways to reach and be inclusive of a broader range of audiences. (Strategies 2a, 2b, 2c)

Examples.

- Change culture to continuously evolve messaging and communication vehicles
- Establish benchmarks for measures of influence and impact such as awareness, trust, and recommendation
- Strengthen the relationships with more diverse communities
- Develop strategies to engage with international audiences

5. Evaluate and improve governance

Strengthen the governance and oversight of the NRC. (Strategies 3a1, 3a2, 3a3, 3f)

Examples.

- Revisit the Articles of Organization
- Clarify the membership and role of the NRC Governing Board
- Periodically reassess the organization, responsibilities, and structures of divisions and boards, including the NRC Governing Board

6. Continuously learn and innovate

Identify a strategy for fostering a culture of continuous learning and innovation. This strategy should include incentives to back innovative products and processes and support for high-risk projects. (Strategies 1c, 2b, 3c)

Examples.

- Experiment aggressively with new business models and radically different ways to partner with external organizations

- Create mechanisms to update and re-release prior work as new evidence becomes salient
- Evaluate pilot projects and incorporate lessons across the organization
- Seek outside funding to launch pilot projects and make internal funding available as needed for innovative projects

7. Sustain, support, and enhance staff

Provide training and development to cultivate staff skills and build clear career paths. (Strategies 2a, 3b)

Examples:

- Recognize excellence, develop opportunities for continued growth, and create leadership roles at multiple levels throughout the organization
- Develop rewards to promote cross-program collaboration and innovation

8. Develop new business models

Develop new, innovative business models to fulfill the mission, taking into account financial and staffing constraints, including the perverse incentives embedded in a soft money environment. (Strategies 1c, 3d)

9. Adopt new technologies and methods

Launch an initiative on new technologies and methods for continuous improvement to accelerate the National Academies' product workflows and transform publications, convening methods, online communication, and impact. (Strategies 1c, 2c, 3e)

NRC STRATEGIC PLAN OVERVIEW

VISION	A nation and a world that rely on scientific evidence to make decisions that benefit humanity
MISSION	The National Academies provide independent, trustworthy advice and facilitate solutions to complex challenges by mobilizing expertise, practice, and knowledge in science, engineering, and medicine
CORE VALUES	Independence, Objectivity, Rigor, Integrity, Inclusivity, Truth

GOAL 1 Anticipate and prepare society for current and future challenges and opportunities

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STRATEGIES

- a. Proactively identify critical current and emerging problems and opportunities facing humanity and identify appropriate responses
- b. Build diverse and deep networks of partners to develop a forward-looking portfolio
- c. Develop new mechanisms and use state-of-the-art methodologies to anticipate and solve problems

GOAL 2 Expand the NRC’s impact in the world

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STRATEGIES

- a. Design NRC activities to be diverse and inclusive to enhance impact
- b. Enhance the impact of the NRC
- c. Adopt advanced technologies for communication

GOAL 3 Strengthen all aspects of the NRC to achieve Goals 1 and 2 and ensure its continued creativity, resilience, and sustainability

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STRATEGIES

- a. Strengthen the governance of the NRC
- b. Sustain, support, and enhance staff
- c. Provide relevant and timely evidence-based guidance through continuous innovation and learning
- d. Develop new business models and methods
- e. Deploy technology to improve NRC operations
- f. Balance priorities

Appendix: Guardrails to Protect the Reputation and the Legacy of the NRC

The following principles serve as guardrails to protect the reputation and the legacy of the NRC. They will be particularly important when embarking on new work and engaging with new stakeholders.

- Seek the truth in conducting the work of the NRC but acknowledge uncertainties presented in the evidence.
- Remain nonpartisan and evidence based to continue to serve as a neutral, objective source of advice.
- Honor the charter and applicable laws. The NRC was established through Executive Order 2859 by President Woodrow Wilson in 1918. The importance of the NRC was further affirmed by Executive Orders 10668 and 1283 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956 and President George H.W. Bush in 1993, respectively. The work of the NRC must align with the functions identified in these executive orders. As part of a charitable organization under 501(c)(3), the NRC must avoid political campaigning or lobbying for specific legislation. Other laws that apply to the work of the NRC include Section 15 of the Federal Advisory Committee Act.
- Manage and disclose conflicts of interest. The NRC must carefully consider and manage any conflicts of interest—actual or perceived—in its volunteers, staff, and sponsors.