



2024 – 2029

Research Strategic Plan

**COLLABORATIVE • TRANSLATIONAL
STUDENT-FOCUSED • COMMUNITY-FOCUSED
LOCAL AND GLOBAL**

 **GILLINGS SCHOOL OF
GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH**



Background

The Gillings School's six-year research strategic plan provides a roadmap for action.

The Gillings School is a research powerhouse, consistently producing high quality, high impact research addressing the broadest range of health issues and cutting across methods and approaches from cells to society. As evidence of these strengths across our eight departments, Gillings researchers have brought in over \$1 billion in research dollars since 2016 (FY 2023). We are the top public school of public health for NIH funding in the nation.

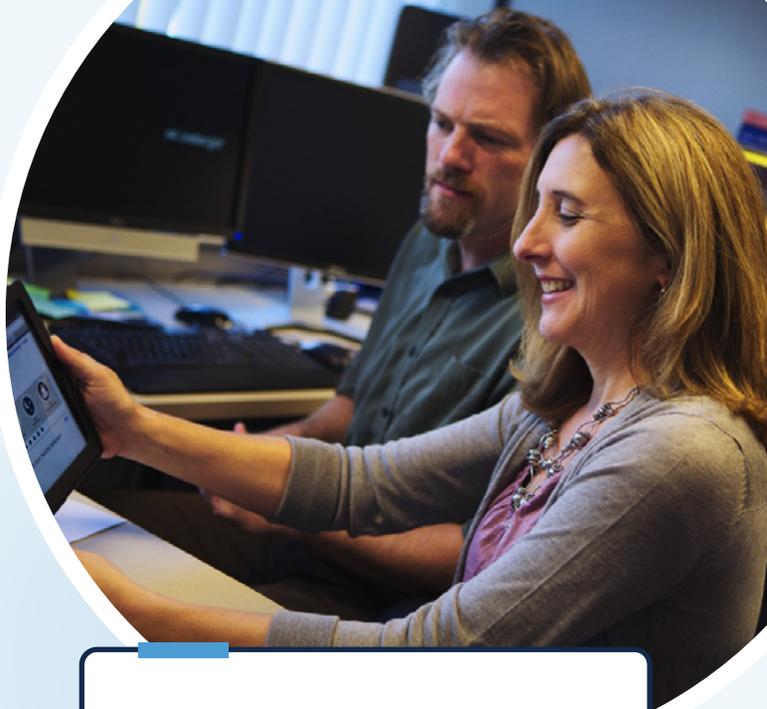
Even with these strengths, Gillings could increase our research capacity, and the uptake and impact of our findings, through key infrastructure investments and strategic planning, enhancing our ability to:

- Respond to emerging or reemerging public health issues;
- Recruit and retain exceptional, diverse faculty, staff and students;
- Make significant progress on large-scale, complex public health problems, including health inequities locally and globally.

To extend our research impact and reach, the Gillings Research Strategic Planning Task Force, empaneled in April 2023, recommends an ambitious plan aimed at:

- Strengthening our research infrastructure;
- Better supporting collaboration and community engagement;
- Creating a more inclusive, supportive research environment; and
- Accelerating and communicating our impact with other researchers and academic institutions, prospective students, and key constituents such as practitioners, community members, funders, legislators and policy makers, and the media.

These research goals complement Gillings' current strengths and vision for practice, academics, global health and inclusive excellence. The Task Force advises that **strengthening our research infrastructure** is critical to advancing all other parts of the plan and harnessing our full research strengths.



ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS

FOCUS GROUPS

- Faculty (2 sessions)
- Students (6 sessions)
 - BIPOC
 - International
 - Doctoral (2 sessions)
 - Master's/BSPH
 - All
- Research Staff / postdocs
- BIPOC faculty, staff, postdocs
- All employees (fac/staff/postdocs)
- Research Council
- Business Managers
- Chairs' Committee
- Dean's Council

GUEST SPEAKERS

- Inclusive Excellence research subcommittee
- Innovation team
- Associate dean for practice
- Senior associate dean for academic & student affairs
- Global team
- Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research team

OUR PLANNING PROCESS

Starting in April 2023, the Gillings Research Strategic Planning Task Force, comprised of faculty, staff, and students from across the school, convened with the aim of articulating a future vision for Gillings research and to develop goals and strategies to achieve that vision. This initiative is part of larger schoolwide strategic planning efforts at Gillings.

Specifically, the Task Force considered how our research enterprise can maximally contribute to improving the public's health and eliminating health inequities across North Carolina and around the world. The Task Force was also asked to recommend ways to: (a) strengthen approaches to identifying and responding to emerging research topics; (b) determine priority areas for investment and communications; and (c) achieve the configuration of personnel, services, resources, and organization that would best help the school to achieve its research goals. As part of an engaged process, the Task Force:

- Reviewed materials from a landscape scan, plus research strategic planning materials, from a 2020 planning effort;
- Attended flash talks and discussion with nine Gillings leaders on research, innovation, global health, inclusive excellence, practice, academics and communications;
- Convened 17 engagement sessions and interviews with Gillings faculty, staff, students, and other key constituencies and reviewed themed summaries from all engagements.

In total, Task Force members interacted with over 130 people across faculty, staff, students, alumni, campus partners, and friends to understand strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, plus ideas for strengthening our research.

An initial set of six themes emerged from these information and engagement sessions. The Task Force developed write-ups for each theme. A day-long retreat for the Task Force revealed significant areas of overlap across several of the themes. After reorganizing inputs from across all write-ups, the Task Force was able to group recommendations into four interconnecting themes:

- 1 **Strengthen research planning and infrastructure for local to global impact.**
- 2 **Support research collaboration, with key focus on global health, health equity, community-engaged research, and ethical conduct of research.**
- 3 **Provide an inclusive and supportive research environment.**
- 4 **Accelerate and communicate research impact.**

Task Force members agreed that fulfilling infrastructure goals within Theme 1 is central to helping us meet all other research plan goals.

The Gillings School's Dean's Council and department chairs provided feedback on the draft plan in January 2024, after which the Task Force (re)prioritized recommendations based on urgency, feasibility, cost, and potential impact. Priorities also will depend on real time opportunities. An implementation committee will help guide and implement the plan. We will share progress with Gillings constituents via an online tracker, meetings, Gillings's Front Lines newsletter, and other Gillings news and information channels.

A student works in the Nutrition Kitchen at the Gillings School.



Gillings Research Vision 2029

We envision that research at Gillings paves the way for direct public health action. Grounded in innovative, interdisciplinary science from cells to society, our work aims to discover, test, implement and evaluate approaches to improve the health of individuals and communities and eliminate health inequities locally and globally.



VIEW OUR INTERACTIVE
PROGRESS TRACKER AT
[GO.UNC.EDU/RESEARCH-PLAN](https://go.unc.edu/research-plan)

- Collaborative • Translational
- Student- and community-focused
- Local and Global

THEMES

GOALS 2029

1 **STRENGTHEN RESEARCH PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL IMPACT.**

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- **1.1** By 2029, Gillings will have an effective process to identify and respond to current and anticipated public health priorities and/or potential opportunities.
 - **1.2** By 2029, Gillings will have robust research support infrastructure, including pre- and post-award support, that sufficiently supports researchers across departments.
 - **1.3** By 2029, Gillings will have stronger administrative support for the unique demands of global health research.
 - **1.4** By 2029, Gillings will have robust infrastructure and training resources to support student and postdoc research.
 - **1.5** By 2029, Gillings will have research spaces fit for purpose, with adequate facilities for researchers to carry out their work.

To see our strategies to meet these goals, visit go.unc.edu/research-plan

2 **SUPPORT RESEARCH COLLABORATION, WITH KEY FOCUS ON HEALTH EQUITY, GLOBAL HEALTH, COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH, AND ETHICAL CONDUCT OF RESEARCH.**

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- **2.1** By 2029, Gillings will have structures in place for potential collaborators — including students and post-docs — to identify each other.
 - **2.2** By 2029, Gillings will have structures in place to strengthen ethical conduct of research with individuals and communities historically excluded from research participation.

To see our strategies to meet these goals, visit go.unc.edu/research-plan

3 **PROVIDE AN INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT.**

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- **3.1** By 2029, Gillings students, post-docs, faculty and staff across ranks will experience our research environment as inclusive and supportive.
 - **3.2** By 2029, Gillings will have additional mechanisms to support development and recognition of individual faculty members.
 - **3.3** By 2029, Gillings will have ensured fair (equitable) work standards for students and post-docs conducting research at Gillings or on behalf of Gillings PIs.

To see our strategies to meet these goals, visit go.unc.edu/research-plan

4 **ACCELERATE AND COMMUNICATE RESEARCH IMPACT.**

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- **4.1** By 2029, the Gillings School will have established a thriving culture and infrastructure around innovation, entrepreneurship, and translation for impact.
 - **4.2** By 2029, Gillings will better define, measure and quantify the impact of our work.
 - **4.3** By 2029, Gillings will enhance our facility in communicating the impact of our research for multiple constituencies and audiences.

To see our strategies to meet these goals, visit go.unc.edu/research-plan

Future Vision for Research

BACKGROUND. Research at Gillings is aimed at identifying interventions and solutions to improve the health of individuals and communities through innovative multidisciplinary and team science. As the top *public* school of public health in the nation, we are committed to a future where our research drives policy, practice, and interventions and other approaches that significantly improve equitable health outcomes and quality of life for all populations in North Carolina, the United States, and around the world.

IN THIS CONTEXT, GILLINGS RESEARCH IS:



Translational. Our cells to society research perspective and capacity ensure a comprehensive individual and population-level approach to understanding and tackling multifactorial health issues. Gillings researchers are national and global leaders in developing and applying a range of innovative methodologies to address complex public health research questions – from the basic lab science necessary for vaccine development to therapeutics development to interventions and policies that prevent gun violence and much more.



Student-focused. Students and early career researchers are key to the Gillings research enterprise and the future of public health research more broadly. We provide them with unparalleled training opportunities guided by a commitment to mentorship and within a school culture that vigorously fosters inclusivity.



Collaborative. We foster strong partnerships across academic disciplines within the school, across UNC, and with other leading institutions – including local and regional HBCUs and universities in other countries, as well as government agencies, NGOs, non-profit organizations, and the communities we serve. These partnerships broaden our scope, deepen our impact, and ensure that our work is informed by and responsive to a range of perspectives and experiences.

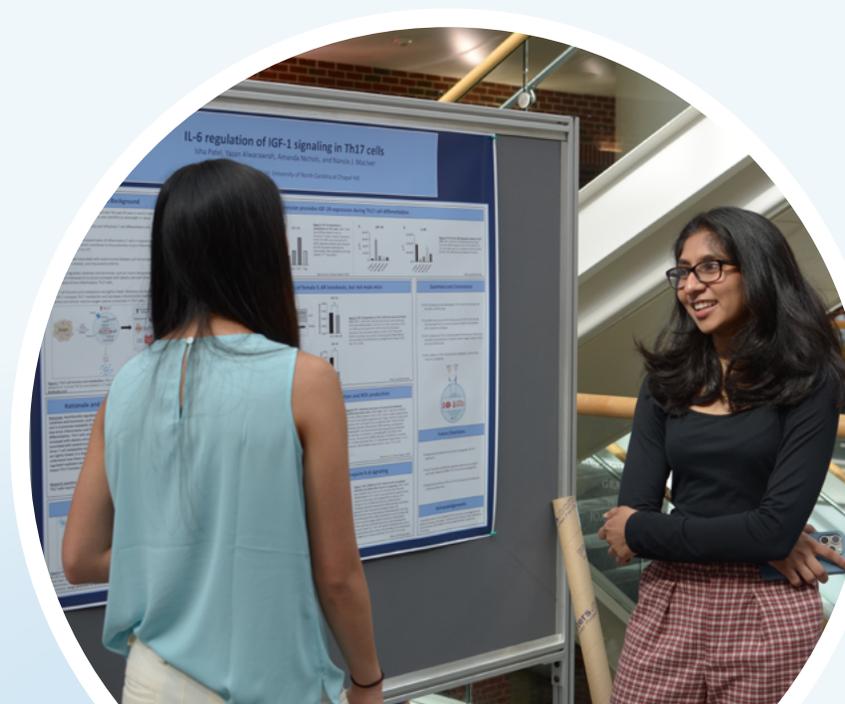


Community-focused. Situated in the heart of North Carolina within a proudly public university, Gillings leverages our unique position and mission to advance research responsive to the needs of diverse communities through collaboration in engaged research. This work is grounded in long-term respectful, committed multidirectional community partnerships.



Local and global. Our research reaches across all counties in North Carolina and many countries around the globe. Across all settings, we uphold a commitment to the highest ethical standards, collaboration, community focus, and translation. Our research informs evidence-based policies and interventions to achieve health equity locally and globally. 🏛️

Two students discuss research during a poster presentation in the Armfield Atrium at the Gillings School.





Dr. Ralph Baric talks with colleagues in the Baric Lab.

1 STRENGTHEN RESEARCH PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL IMPACT.

GOAL 1.1. By 2029, Gillings will have an effective process to identify and respond to current and anticipated public health priorities and potential opportunities.

BACKGROUND. Many public health issues are complex, urgent, and extend well beyond one health topic. The Gillings School has a very deep bench of researchers capable of tackling such issues but needs to develop infrastructure and processes to identify and respond to such research challenges more quickly. Taking these steps can improve our ability to prepare for funding opportunities, avoid missed opportunities, and accelerate our contributions to public health problem solving through research. A couple of recent examples where such infrastructure could help us respond more quickly include responding to future pandemics or identifying how to leverage generative AI for public health research and applications.

STRATEGY 1.1.1:

Further develop systematic approaches to assess and prioritize future public health research opportunities for investment; and then develop internal research capabilities to respond to these needs. Types of investment could range from monetary (i.e., GIL awards), to administrative support for individuals and teams pursuing work priority areas. To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- Develop a more formalized mechanism to scan the horizon for emerging or future public health needs, forecast priorities, and bring these areas for discussion with Gillings academic leaders so they can prioritize areas and mechanisms for investment as a school.

GOAL 1.2. By 2029, Gillings will have robust research support infrastructure, including pre- and post-award support, that sufficiently supports researchers across departments.

BACKGROUND. This goal prioritizes ensuring that all researchers receive an agreed-upon baseline of grants administrative and management support.

Robust grant and contracts infrastructure is critical to supporting high-quality public health research. The Gillings School, and the university more broadly, have excellent resources to support researchers, including:

- The Gillings Research unit, which helps identify funding opportunities and resources; facilitates team science and collaborations; supports proposal development; provides workshops and training opportunities; and helps with research compliance.
- UNC research centers, which bring together researchers from across campus to help solve major cross-cutting problems, and to provide them with important resources for that work. Many are critical for Gillings researchers, including the Carolina Population Center; Center for AIDS Research; Center for Environmental Health and Susceptibility; Center for Health Promotion/Disease Prevention; Injury Prevention Research Center; Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center; Sheps Center for Health Services Research and others.

Even with these resources, we could make improvements. For example, not all researchers are aware of Gillings or university resources. For their part, Centers do not (nor are they designed to) support the full spectrum of Gillings research, even as the school's fiscal vibrancy depends on us also having a healthy

research portfolio within Gillings. In FY 2023, for example, approximately 64% of our funding portfolio came from grants and contracts submitted through the school.

What is more, research administration capacity currently varies across departments, with many faculty reporting that they spend significant time on grants administration and regulatory demands that could be better spent on scientific and training aspects of their work. In addition, the school has no economies of scale to accommodate specialization among research staff. This situation has resulted in: (a) disparities across faculty in their access to research support (i.e., a fairness issue); (b) missed responses to funding opportunities, including team science awards that support the kind of multi-disciplinary research that help us make headway on complex public health problems; (c) instances in which faculty have accepted offers from other institutions, in part because of our onerous research administrative demands; (d) potential non-compliance with administrative and regulatory requirements; and (e) instances where researchers route their grant applications through centers that are otherwise not the most appropriate partners because of insufficient infrastructure in their home departments.

A scan of peer schools' research staff FTE as compared with external funding generated suggest that the implementation committee needs to conduct more nuanced benchmarking to better understand the wide ranges of support reported to the ASPPH. Regardless, the theme heard throughout focus group sessions was that researchers perceive themselves as overburdened with administrative aspects of submitting and managing grants relative to their peers at other universities. In a focus group with eight BIPOC faculty members, one individual noted - and others in the group agreed - that "if we do not prioritize this goal, we will not be able to meet our other strategic goals for research, including our goal of

providing an inclusive research environment." In short, faculty in this focus group affirmed that improving support would be as or more important in supporting their job satisfaction, growth and progression through the ranks as other ideas put forth in the research plan.

STRATEGY 1.2.1:

Conduct an assessment of Gillings' relationships with key UNC research Centers, with guidance on optimizing those relationships and resources while cultivating the strength of school resources.

STRATEGY 1.2.2:

Conduct additional benchmarking across UNC and other peer schools of public health to determine current practices and trends for research staffing; and then determine options for, and identify, an efficient, effective and fair system to support the research enterprise across Gillings. The system should ensure that all researchers receive an agreed-upon baseline of grants administrative and management support. The implementation task force will examine trade-offs of different possible models. Currently, we are the only school at UNC with decentralized support, with research staff nested in departments. It may be feasible to more effectively build on strengths that exist within departments. An example of how we could be structured moving forward could include a hybrid system in which some staff would remain within departments while some would be housed within Gillings Finance or Research units, as appropriate. Those reporting within the central school office could constitute a pool of "floating" staff who could provide "just in time"/shared FTE support, together with research staff members with specialized skills (e.g., global

“If we do not prioritize this goal, we will not be able to meet our other strategic goals for research, including our goal of providing an inclusive research environment.”



At Cane Creek Reservoir in Chapel Hill, N.C., Dr. Greg Characklis (at map) and his research group discuss reservoir management and its impact on water supply. (Photo by Johnny Andrews/UNC)

health grants management, as described below). Key factors the implementation committee should consider include whether and how we should prioritize such resources (for example, for junior faculty or for other key priority groups). As we move towards implementation, we will develop qualitative and quantitative metrics – including metrics aimed at understanding equity in distribution of resources, to determine when we have achieved our goals. Task Force members agreed that fulfilling this strategy is central to helping us meet all other research plan goals. To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- **Review models** at UNC and at other Tier 1 schools of public health for pre- and post-award support. Factors to consider include: efficiency; fairness (i.e., standardized approaches to allocating support when resources are limited); equity considerations (i.e., what groups may be helped or harmed by each model); compliance with research standards; responsiveness to needs of researchers, departments, and the school, including researchers who conduct global and community-engaged research; and potential pathways for staff career advancement.

- **Recommend a funding model and staffing plan**, for consideration by the dean and school leaders, based on a thorough review of specialized staffing needs, best practices, and our own context. This model and plan should include specialized administrative staff for global health and community-engaged research (see below, Goals 2 and 3). It should also include plans for recruiting and retaining high-quality research administrative support staff in phases.
- **Evaluate the model** at about the 18-month point to determine whether the new model is working well and to improve as needed.

STRATEGY 1.2.3:

Better ensure that Gillings researchers are aware of relevant school and UNC core resources (including Centers, see 2.1) to facilitate the efficient conduct of high-quality research and how to leverage UNC resources available to them. Investigate potential processes and resources needed to fill gaps where identified. To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- Survey Gillings researchers regarding current and anticipated needs for, and experiences with, current cores, often situated in Centers.
- Assemble inventory of Gillings and UNC research resources, working with OVCR to do so, and identify gaps based on needs.
- Work with Centers and others to investigate opportunities to develop or expand resources or to better integrate our resources with theirs, as appropriate.

GOAL 1.3. By 2029, Gillings will have stronger administrative support for the unique demands of global health research.

BACKGROUND. Global health research often involves complex ethical considerations, regulatory requirements, and adherence to national standards. Specialized staff support for those whose grants are not being submitted through one of the Centers is essential to ensure compliance and ethics and to identify and mitigate potential legal, financial, and operational risks. Administrative staff also play an important role in building research capacity in-country in local institutions and communities, and in communicating research findings to partners, policy makers and the public.

As an example, an administrative staff member

with expertise in global research could work from the Gillings business office but liaise closely with the Gillings Global team while also working with global partners to walk them through complexities of NIH grant applications or cutting through red tape to get global partners hired. The connectivity among global researchers created by such efforts promotes interdisciplinary collaboration, resource sharing, and the potential for greater impact in addressing global health challenges, which often require multidisciplinary approaches that integrate insights from many fields.

STRATEGY 1.3.1:

Assess needs for (i.e., skill set and FTE), and then strengthen specialized staff support for global health. To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- Develop and implement a funding model for supporting increased administrative support as part of the Goal 1 strategies.
- Define needed administrative position(s), roles and responsibilities, and hire staff in phases; and
- Establish a plan for high functioning administrative infrastructure that includes: systems and structures to ensure appropriate financial management; appropriate adoption and use of technologies; SOPs for various administrative functions; efficient communication channels; creation and promotion of a global research community (note, a handbook for global research is in development); and more.

GOAL 1.4. By 2029, Gillings will have robust infrastructure and training resources to support student and postdoc research.

BACKGROUND. Supporting students and postdoctoral researchers is key to the school's mission to train the next generation of public health researchers and to carry out research underway at Gillings. The current infrastructure and training to support student and postdoctoral research proposals is siloed across departments and is generally ad hoc. This includes our departmental or ad-hoc approaches to grant writing courses and other types of professional development and research compliance. Training grants, specifically T32s and Diversity Supplements, are a critical resource for supporting trainees and important recruitment tools for doctoral students. The current departmental-level strategy for managing T32 data makes processes more labor intensive, leads to variations in data management, and embeds information within units that is needed by researchers and administrators across Gillings.

STRATEGY 1.4.1:

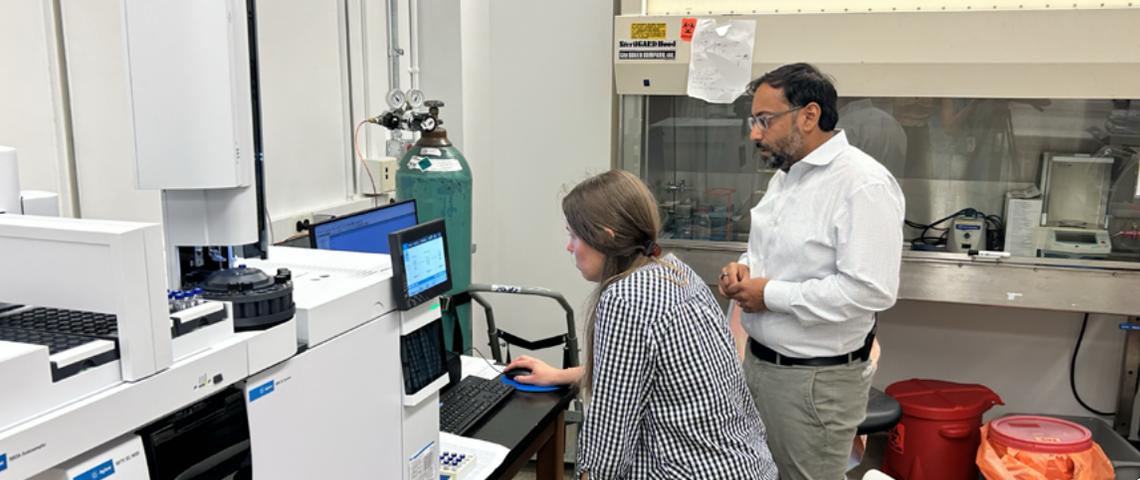
Improve infrastructure and training resources to support student and postdoctoral research.

To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- Inventory existing professional development and training sessions and develop new ones focused on grant budgeting, financial management, and research compliance;
- Offer grant writing classes across the school and departments, including working with departments that have specific grant writing classes;
- Consider a trainee cohort structure to enable collaboration on projects;
- Create centralized shared resources for T32 applications and trainee tracking and reporting systems; and
- Construct and maintain a school-wide webpage and listserv to better support postdoctoral research.

GOAL 1.5. By 2029, Gillings will have research spaces fit for purpose, with adequate facilities for researchers to carry out their work.

BACKGROUND. Adequate physical space (“wet and dry”) for research is critical for the school's research mission. Though outside the purview of this Task Force, the school's space planning working group will address priority needs and resources (including UNC's Translational Research Building), including needs for students. It will be imperative that research-related recommendations from that process be assessed and implemented. Strategies and implementation plans are pending from that group and will be developed and phased with awareness of the major funding constraints that accompany significant redesign, renovation, upfitting and/or acquisition of space.



Erin Tracy and Dr. Nabarun Dasgupta analyze a sample in the UNC Street Drug Analysis Lab.

2 SUPPORT RESEARCH COLLABORATION, WITH KEY FOCUS ON HEALTH EQUITY, GLOBAL HEALTH, COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH, AND ETHICAL CONDUCT OF RESEARCH

GOAL 2.1. By 2029, Gillings will have structures in place for potential collaborators — including students and post-docs — to identify each other.

BACKGROUND. Many urgent public health issues are complex and require that researchers from different backgrounds work together to understand, and develop responses to, those issues. This challenge extends to students and post-docs as much as to faculty. Focus group sessions across groups emphasized that these needs are especially acute for those engaged in global health, health equity, and community-engaged research. Yet the school lacks comprehensive mechanisms for researchers to identify potential collaborators and for students to connect with those who share their interests — or who could help them with skills attainment in specific areas. The challenges raised by this absence of mechanisms for connecting is especially acute for junior faculty and those new to the Gillings School.

These challenges are also acute for those who engage in health equity and community-based research. For example, a wide range of factors associated with individual, community, and system-level inequities are associated with adverse health effects. A synergistic, multi-level transdisciplinary approach *across the Gillings research portfolio* could help further describe associations and mechanisms; identify protective factors; and define, implement, and assess interventions to ameliorate inequities. The Gillings School does not yet have mechanisms in place to capture such synergies. As well, an urgent need is research into strategies that reduce health inequities rooted in racism, social deprivation, geography, and other inequities at

individual, community and system levels. Gillings is well-positioned to be a national leader in this area, but advancement requires a focused, well-structured and resourced collaborative approach and infrastructure.

Strengthening resources and processes to facilitate collaboration and team science in these and other areas will:

- Strengthen the school's ability to respond to emerging public health needs;
- Help us expand our global portfolio and impact;
- Strengthen our capacity to tackle, and make progress on, complex, cross-cutting health equity research;
- Improve the ability of faculty and researchers new to Gillings to get their research under way; and
- Create a more supportive research community for people of all backgrounds, including additional natural pathways for skills attainment, mentoring, and other support.

STRATEGY 2.1.1:

Create and sustain a variety of mechanisms and resources for Gillings researchers to identify potential collaborators, with a special focus on junior faculty. To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- (Re)invest in a searchable web-based database (ideally powered by AI) of faculty and student expertise; and organize faculty profiles in one place, searchable by key word, also ensuring that the database accounts for expertise in practice and academics. Note: This is also a key strategy for recruiting students and communicating our impact.

- Establish efficient, effective methods for communicating information about upcoming opportunities.
- Facilitate networking events such as poster days or flash talks in the atrium, and further cultivate working groups among researchers with shared interests to address current and anticipated research priorities.

STRATEGY 2.1.2:

Strengthen global health and community-based researcher networks within Gillings and with other institutions. Global health and health equity are both themes that cut across all our work at Gillings and are a core part of our mission and need support to reduce silos and elevate visibility nationally and globally. To implement this strategy, Gillings will establish global and community-based research networks.

- **Establish and sustain global health networks.** Expand participation in webinars and global research conferences; facilitate participation in global health-focused social media groups and online communities; increase volume of research published in international journals and platforms. Invest in deep collaborative relationships likely to produce long-term partnerships and joint research projects. Approaches may include: expanding the Gillings hub model (see Gillings Practice Strategic Plan); implementing a global visiting scholars program; better supporting researcher exchanges; and offering global research fellowships or grants to support UNC affiliates and colleagues in traveling to and collaborating with foreign research institutions.
- **Further develop and sustain health equity research networks, including community-engaged research networks.** In addition to *strengthening institutional supports for health equity research (see Goal 2)*, Gillings will develop and implement approaches to:
 - » **Strengthen health equity researcher networks** within Gillings and across other institutions and connect them with tools, including those available through NC TracCS.
 - » **Create opportunities for health equity researchers to stay current** with emerging definitions, methods and applications in this area.

- » **Promote and synergize health equity research** within the school and key partners, building on strengths and focusing on work that is reducing inequities on health outcomes.
- » **Ensure that those engaging in health equity research within the school, including community-engaged research, do so ethically by providing robust toolkits and supporting networks at Gillings.** These approaches can better ensure that we provide norms and resources so that researchers don't simply take advantage of current funding available in this area but are fully equipped in all ways to commit to this work.

GOAL 2.2. By 2029, Gillings will have structures in place to strengthen ethical conduct of research with individuals and communities historically excluded from research participation.

BACKGROUND. Gillings has long emphasized a strategic focus on health equity. Yet much of this research continues to underrepresent populations and communities historically excluded from research. Their historical and ongoing exclusion from research translates to a cascade of problems: urgent health needs of these populations are not addressed appropriately or at all; research results are biased and only fully applicable to a narrow subset of people; and more. To strengthen ethical conduct of research at Gillings, we need to broaden inclusion of communities and participants in our research by supporting researchers' capability with building trust over time, engaging with communities, and eliminating a range of barriers to participation (e.g., language, literacy, physical access).

Community engagement in research is central to Gillings' mission around research translation and impact and is one key method for working with communities in respectful ways that build trust and prioritize their research needs. Engagement with communities could range from co-developing research questions; recruiting research participants; collaborating on data analysis; communicating research findings; and working with communities on next steps after research findings are shared — for example, translating research findings into solutions to address health inequities and other community needs.

UNC is now developing plans to address key institutional impediments to meaningful community engagement

with regard to both research and practice. These impediments include: barriers to funding research participants; providing appropriate resources so that community members can be equitable partners with faculty in collecting and analyzing data (e.g., offering CITI research ethics training for IRB certification to community partners); and insufficient understanding of which communities UNC is engaged with so we can avoid “over researching” some communities. With this awareness, Gillings can participate in, align closely with, and extend beyond University efforts in better supporting community-engaged research.

STRATEGY 2.2.1:

Develop a Gillings technical assistance team to help researchers improve inclusion of participants from communities historically excluded from research. To implement this strategy, the staff specialist and assistance team will:

- Document the extent to which Gillings research focuses on, and includes, communities that have traditionally been excluded from public health research, and how such research has responded to the communities’ needs and priorities;
- Collaborate with the university to pilot a tracking system, if feasible, to stay up-to-date with inventories of community-engaged work. (*Community-engaged research is distinct from practice in that the primary focus is creation of new knowledge as distinct from provision of skills or resources.*);
- Identify best practices; establish minimum standards; and provide recommendations for ethical and effective engagement and recruitment activities with different communities traditionally excluded from research;
- Be a liaison with university-wide efforts (including those underway with NC TraCS, and the Sheps Center) in place to reduce barriers for engaging and recruiting participants into research (IRB processes, participants’ payment incentives, etc.)
- Facilitate community-engaged activities to increase/improve Gillings/community connections, raise UNC Gillings brand awareness, improve understanding of community needs, convey research needs and findings in ways that are useful to the communities themselves, and increase communities’ trust in Gillings and public health research;

- Develop and strengthen accountability mechanisms to the communities we work with; and
- Align with Gillings Practice Plan team to connect with Academic Health Department and Public Health Partnership Hubs initiatives. These connections may contribute to our goal of including historically excluded populations and communities in our research and our practice goal of making a measurable impact on the health and well-being of the communities we partner with.
- Ensure dissemination of research includes communities themselves and is in forms and formats useful to them.

STRATEGY 2.2.2:

Specify needs for (i.e., skill set and FTE), and then strengthen specialized staff support for fostering the research approaches delineated in Goal 2, including leveraging TraCS resources in this area as fully as possible.

To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- Develop and implement staffing plan for these attributes, assessing and aligning current resources and strengths and identifying gaps.

“Gillings is well-positioned to be a national leader in [reducing health inequities]; advancement requires a focused, well-structured, and resourced collaborative approach and infrastructure.”



Dr. Orlando Coronell works with a colleague in the lab of the Coronell Research Group.

3 PROVIDE AN INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

BACKGROUND. The Gillings research enterprise depends on researchers' ability to secure competitive grants to fund their work. Yet the backgrounds, interests, networks and funding opportunities for Gillings faculty are extremely diverse; and the structure of our school and university is complex and often siloed. As is emphasized in Theme 2, collaboration — and access to research networks — is vital for individual researchers' success. More broadly, junior faculty need strong institutional supports — including a culture of inclusion; excellent mentoring; and up-to-date APT guidelines that support multiple creative pathways — to ensure their success as researchers, along with the success of the students and staff who work with them. Broadly strengthening inclusion across Gillings, partnering with the Inclusive Excellence team to do so; strengthening our mentoring mechanisms; increasing support for less traditional research pathways, and providing all researchers with several new opportunities for support and recognition, would contribute significantly to our school's goal of retaining a diverse and highly talented faculty that, as a whole, can help us improve the public's health.

GOAL 3.1. By 2029, Gillings students, post-docs, faculty and staff across ranks will experience our research environment as inclusive and supportive.

STRATEGY 3.1.1:

Support a research environment that enhances research contributions of faculty, students, post-docs and staff, including those from communities historically excluded from research along the lines of race and ethnicity, gender and sexual diversity, place, and other factors, while also creating

an environment where communities traditionally excluded from research are involved as participants. In addition to the networking and collaboration approaches outlined in Theme 2, Gillings will:

- Develop and sustain a strong collaboration and networking program for underrepresented faculty in the context of research, building on the recently established Gillings Community Development Academy;
- Provide training and mentoring opportunities for students and post-docs from communities traditionally excluded from research, including via workshops, robust pursuit of diversity supplements and other such opportunities; and sustained resources for fostering an inclusive research perspective and environment (see Inclusive Excellence plan for details);
- Provide training and mentoring opportunities for international students to ensure they are well connected with available resources and have access to paid research opportunities they are eligible for; and

STRATEGY 3.1.2:

Formally recognize, via SPH APT guidelines and departmental expectations, two key research areas (community-engaged research; innovation and translation) essential for fulfilling the Gillings mission but not yet sufficiently supported in how we develop, retain or promote our faculty. To implement this strategy, Gillings will prioritize development of department and school-level APT guidelines that reflect the significance, value, and impact of:

- **Community-engaged research** for those who undertake this work locally and globally. Currently, community engagement straddles APT criteria for research, practice and service, and criteria for assessing such research methods are vague. Refreshed APT criteria should reflect that deeper levels of engagement are more resource intensive but also critical for ethical conduct of research with communities historically excluded from research.
- **Innovation and translation work**, which is often supported by non-traditional funding sources. Also, outputs are not necessarily (or only) peer reviewed publications, but often have strong potential for — or documented — impact on the health of the public. Refreshed guidelines should specify innovation work and include metric(s) that frame this work as “in place of”, not “on top of”, other measures of productivity and impact.

GOAL 3.2. By 2029, Gillings will have additional mechanisms to support development and recognition of individual faculty members.

BACKGROUND. Many Research I universities have key perks (sabbatical programs; a return of a small proportion of F&A from grants) that Gillings does not have. These perks put other universities at a competitive advantage in terms of further developing, recognizing and retaining their faculty

STRATEGY 3.2.1:

Identify and support research professional development initiatives, including creative mechanisms for faculty sabbaticals or mini-sabbaticals. To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- Assess whether and how different Gillings departments support faculty sabbaticals and collaborate to recommend a more standardized approach for supporting them.
- Work with Gillings Advancement to fundraise for a competitive school-level sabbatical program.

STRATEGY 3.2.2:

Return a small portion of faculty grant F&A to PIs.

STRATEGY 3.2.3:

Strategically recognize our faculty for their research contributions. To implement this strategy, Gillings will establish a Gillings Awards Committee to:

- Identify major national or international awards our researchers could be competitive for; and
- Identify and nominate Gillings researchers who would be competitive for those awards.

GOAL 3.3. By 2029, Gillings will have ensured fair (equitable) work standards for students and post-docs conducting research at Gillings or on behalf of Gillings PIs. This goal is being explored by a chairs’ working group and will be more fully developed, with implementation plans, by that group. We advise that the chairs’ working group tasked with this initiative consult materials in Appendices E-1 and E-2, which include results from six focus group sessions with Gillings students and post-docs held in November/December 2023, together with data from student surveys.

“Refreshed APT criteria should reflect that deeper levels of engagement are more resource intensive but also critical for ethical conduct of research with communities historically excluded from research.”



Dr. Ammerman serves her heart-healthy vegetarian chili at a community event in eastern North Carolina. Her applied research on diet, culture, and food systems in the southeast U.S. is helping to improve cardiovascular health in the “stroke belt.”

4 ACCELERATE AND COMMUNICATE RESEARCH IMPACT

GOAL 4.1. By 2029, the Gillings School will have established a thriving culture and infrastructure around innovation, entrepreneurship, and translation for impact.

BACKGROUND. Research findings, when applied, can impact health in different ways, from incremental improvements in behaviors to significant changes in health policy, to scale-up of inventions; and research translation can happen at different cadences, points in a faculty member’s careers, and at different spatial scales. In recognition of the highly applied nature of public health research, a key aspect of the Gillings mission is to translate, and bring to scale, a subset of our research into solutions to improve the public’s health. Gillings is seen as a leader in these spaces, but impediments to realizing our full potential include the need for:

- Shared definitions of research innovation, entrepreneurship, translation, and impact, and examples so researchers can chart pathways for themselves in these domains, leveraging the work they already are leaders in;
- Increased awareness of existing resources that support these areas;
- Additional training to sharpen researchers’ capacity to realize their goals in these domains; and
- Approaches that would help us continue to shift negative perceptions around conflict of interest, so researchers work with the school to disclose and manage conflicts as early as possible.

While many funders require researchers to submit plans for sustainability once the term of a grant has ended, many researchers struggle with this requirement. We can use this challenge as a launch pad to help researchers

identify realistic paths to sustainability and impact from the beginning of their work, folding in approaches to identifying and managing conflicts along the way. Currently, the Gillings School has a small team that has developed a core of resources. This core needs to develop into a significantly more robust network and infrastructure so researchers, and the school, can be better resourced to translate their work into impact.

STRATEGY 4.1.1:

Strengthen translation resources to increase the number (percentage) of researchers who engage in this work. To implement this strategy, the Innovation team and others will:

- **Develop additional professional development resources and actively pair faculty and researchers with these resources.** Develop and offer short courses, lectures and other highly visible resources (the Gillings School’s Real World Impact Project, under way now, is an example) to help faculty and post-docs better connect their research to translation. Current students already draw on these resources heavily. These just-in-time, practical resources would help participants answer such questions as: how does an evidence-based intervention get implemented in a sustainable way after a research project ends? How do materials developed from a research lab get scaled up and disseminated in a maintainable way? How is research output used to change policy? And how can researchers plan for impact at a project’s outset?
- **Develop champions in all academic units/across key CAUs.** Develop a subset of faculty and staff in departments and key CAUs (Research, Academics,

Operations, Strategy) who can serve as exemplars whereby colleagues can see themselves and each other in this work and develop a community of innovators to coach others and connect them with resources and colleagues to amplify impact.

STRATEGY 4.1.2:

Increase innovation infrastructure, along with visibility and awareness of that infrastructure, to increase numbers of Gillings faculty who take their innovative ideas to the next step.

To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- **Increase infrastructure for innovation**, and raise visibility, by providing partial salary support for a Gillings faculty member who successfully engages in innovation and would be an influential guide for others. [Use outputs from Real World Impact project for this effort.]
- **Connect our people with resources.** Closely coordinate with UNC's innovation groups such as Innovate Carolina and their three divisions: Technology Commercialization, Design & Innovation for the Public Good, and Innovation Hubs & Engagement; the Institute for Convergent Science; Eshelman Institute for Innovation; etc. to connect Gillings faculty with these resources as early as possible in their innovation work.

STRATEGY 4.1.3:

Ensure the Innovation team actively forges close connections with Gillings Practice

to ensure engagement with highly developed resources available via the practice team and the NC Institute for Public Health.

GOAL 4.2. By 2029, Gillings will better define, measure and quantify the impact of our work.

BACKGROUND. The impacts of Gillings research across time are profound. But as of yet, we have not developed the strong systems needed to be able to fully identify and communicate the interconnections among, and the impact of our work, across researchers and over time. Some nascent systems are in place (i.e., mechanisms for faculty to report impact; efforts by Communications to report on research with an eye for capturing/telling impact stories) but would benefit from further development.

STRATEGY 4.2.1:

Define a continuum of research impact and map our research to this continuum.

To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- **Establish shared definitions** of innovation, entrepreneurship, translation, and impact.
- **Create (or adapt) a Gillings-specific model of the continuum of research impact/translation** that our school generates, and **map examples** of Gillings research to the continuum.
- **Incentivize faculty to report** on where their research has an impact.
- **Capture impact in compelling ways.** Identify methods for assessing (qualitatively and quantitatively) research impact beyond traditional measurements (e.g., number of publications, citations, awards amounts). This could include estimates of illnesses or deaths prevented, etc. Assist researchers in their attempts to quantify impact.

STRATEGY 4.2.2:

Develop structures and key deliverables to ensure we have mechanisms in place to elevate our impact.

- **Assemble a work group to review faculty impact data** annually, in concert with Gillings news articles, to identify themes, make connections across areas of work, and amplify important, underrecognized achievements. Ensure that key Gillings stakeholders have access to findings from this review, including Gillings Communications, Chairs' Committee, the Gillings Awards Committee and others.
- **Establish an annual Impact Prize** to incentivize faculty reporting and recognize the high impact of a researcher or research team's work. Impact could be defined broadly.
- **Work with the Gillings Strategic Analysis/ Business Intelligence (i.e., institutional data) and Communications units to develop impact report outs** through compelling infographics and other easily grasped, high level snapshots of our work.

GOAL 4.3. By 2029, Gillings will enhance our facility in communicating the impact of our research for multiple constituencies and audiences.

BACKGROUND. Gillings has potential to more effectively communicate with the different — and critical — audiences and constituents it serves, demonstrating how our research contributes to the school's mission to improve the public's health. Once we establish better ways to quantify our impact (see Goal 1, above), for

example, we need more memorable ways to synthesize our broad research themes; illustrate how our researchers' work connects to each other; and demonstrate how our work collectively creates impact across time. We also need refreshed approaches to disseminating our research within and beyond academia (and over and above amplification via the media), including sharing our research outcomes directly with those who can benefit from it. Drawing on outputs from Theme 6, Goal 1 (above), several Gillings central units (Research, Communications, Advancement, Dean's Office, and our SABI team) can better align and collaborate to strengthen how we communicate research impact to other researchers within/across Gillings and across institutions nationally and globally, as well as with donors, community members, legislators, public health practitioners, and, of course, prospective students. It is not so much that we need more communication, but we need improved approaches so potential students, reporters, legislators, donors community members and others can more quickly understand our strengths and impact and who works in what areas. We could also improve effectiveness of our communication through persuasive and memorable infographics, "social math" and other approaches. Staff across our Advancement and Admissions teams have asked for such tools for years; prospective and current students have asked for better, simpler tools to connect them with researchers who share their interests; and communications experts advise regularly on the persuasive power of plain language and compelling visuals. Such tools could serve multiple purposes.

STRATEGY 4.3.1:

Facilitate a process to identify, and keep updated, a key subset (no more than 5) of impact areas where we are national and global leaders, and identify approaches to amplify those strengths with simple,

visual, memorable outputs that can be tailored to defined audiences (e.g., other Gillings researchers; community members; philanthropists, potential students, legislators; the broad public; etc.).

STRATEGY 4.3.2:

Elevate the visibility of researcher strengths and how they connect with other Gillings researchers. To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- Develop a keyword searchable tool for identifying faculty working in various areas;
- Feature all faculty in one web location (in addition to by department), and link the keyword tool to this mechanism, making interconnections across faculty more visible to internal and external constituents.

STRATEGY 4.3.3:

Broadly communicate our impact with new tools and mechanisms. To implement this strategy, Gillings will:

- Capture and amplify more impact stories and examples from researchers, highlighting the journey from funding through innovation/translation of programs and mechanisms to realized impact and all the resources used along the way.
- Publicize the highly synthesized, visual snapshots of the impacts we have in Goal 1 (e.g., faculty reporting; impact prizes; faculty awards; etc.) across our communications platforms, including the Gillings Impact Report, with university leaders, donors and legislators, and with other deans of schools of public health.
- Promote additional opportunities for faculty to further develop their skills in communicating their research and its impact via the media, with communities, and across other channels.

“Gillings is seen as a leader in these spaces, but to reach our full potential, we need for shared definitions of research innovation, entrepreneurship, translation, and impact, and examples so researchers can chart pathways for themselves in these domains.”