

# Contextualizing social impact business research: institutional and local drivers at ETSU's College of Business and Technology

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to examine how institutional and local characteristics influence social impact business research within the context of East Tennessee State University's College of Business and Technology. The authors explore how these characteristics align with the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)'s criteria for impactful research and contribute to building organizational legitimacy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using an iterative-pragmatic case study approach, the authors engaged 22 faculty and administrators over a six-month period in a multiphase process that included workshops, document reviews, interviews and coding of social impact activities. Data were analyzed against AACSB's impactful research criteria and dimensions of legitimacy theory (moral, pragmatic and cognitive).

**Findings** – Results highlight three primary enablers of impactful research: (1) alignment of vision, mission and strategy with societal needs; (2) distinctive cross-disciplinary structures linking business and technology; and (3) engagement with high-need regional contexts. Projects demonstrate how institutional and regional conditions can foster AACSB-aligned research and enhance its legitimacy.

**Originality/value** – This paper extends legitimacy theory by linking institutional and local enablers to AACSB's impactful research framework, offering practical insights for how business schools can leverage regional context and organizational structures to foster impactful, socially relevant scholarship.

**Keywords** Social impact, AACSB, Legitimacy theory, Higher education, Business school research, Societal impact

**Paper type** Research paper



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## Introduction

A growing movement in business scholarship emphasizes the importance of research that delivers societal benefits (AACSB, 2026). Scholars are increasingly examining the economic and social effects of business activity (Rawhouser *et al.*, 2019), and academic journals are increasingly prioritizing social impact assessment in business studies (Haley and Jack, 2023). For example, case-based and empirical research on social enterprises and impact-driven ventures in emerging economies, including studies of inclusive employment models and impact investing, illustrates how business activity can advance outcomes aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while simultaneously navigating tensions between social missions and financial viability (e.g. Ghalwash *et al.*, 2021; Bacuilima *et al.*, 2023; Young and Grinsfelder, 2011). These shifts have been fueled by the growth of social entrepreneurship (Rawhouser *et al.*, 2019; Saebi *et al.*, 2019) and calls from organizations like the Global Business School Network, urging business schools to address major societal challenges (GBSN, 2019). The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) now expects schools to demonstrate societal impact for accreditation (Steidle and Henderson, 2023) and has further elaborated this expectation through guidance on how schools can conceptualize and document societal impact across teaching, research and service (AACSB, 2020; AACSB, 2023). Consequently, social impact business research is expected to accelerate.

It is challenging to define social impact business research because there is no consensus on the definition of social impact (Rawhouser *et al.*, 2019). Impact can broadly be defined as “an influence or alteration in the realms of the economy, society, culture, public policy, service, health, the environment, or overall quality of life” (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2024, p. 1). Social impact has been used to describe changes in all these spheres. The term has also been used interchangeably with societal impact and related terms (Rawhouser *et al.*, 2019).

Scholars often define social impact research by using examples linked to goals such as equality, sustainability and poverty (Meyer, as cited in Haley and Jack, 2023). AACSB offers a complementary definition of impactful research as cross-disciplinary, situated at the intersection of academia and practice and creating real change (AACSB, 2026). We adopt this definition because it provides clear criteria and shapes standards for business schools.

As societal expectations continue to evolve, legitimacy theory suggests that conducting social impact research enables organizations to build trust by demonstrating value, integrity and purpose (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy theory explains how organizations gain acceptance by aligning their actions with socially constructed norms and expectations. Accordingly, it provides a valuable lens for understanding why business schools emphasize certain areas of scholarship to reinforce their societal relevance. This theoretical grounding also clarifies how legitimacy pressures influence emerging research agendas and institutional strategies. Thus, it underscores the importance of social impact within business schools.

Building on this theoretical framing, accreditation standards also play a formative role in shaping which forms of scholarship are viewed as legitimate and valued. The inclusion of societal impact in AACSB standards and the clarity provided on how AACSB defines impactful research shape stakeholder expectations and can serve as a benchmark for what contributes to a meaningful scholarship portfolio and legitimate success for business schools. Still, some schools may be better positioned to pursue social impact research than others, due to differences in mission, strategy and program alignment, as well as incentives, structures and the salience of regional societal needs. These variations also point to broader questions about how business schools will cultivate the institutional and contextual conditions needed for impactful social impact research in the future. Although several business schools and higher education bodies have reported efforts to systematize or evaluate their societal-impact

portfolios, often through case-based or descriptive accounts of specific institutional initiatives and rating frameworks, this work remains relatively fragmented and under-theorized, particularly in relation to accreditation expectations and legitimacy building (e.g. [Dyllick and Muff, 2020](#); [Australian Business Deans Council, 2026](#); [Kjellander et al., 2024](#)).

To explore how these conditions operate in practice, we use East Tennessee State University's (ETSU) College of Business and Technology (CBAT), based in the USA as an example and apply the lens of legitimacy theory and AACSB's impactful research criteria as a dual analytic framework for answering our research questions: "What institutional and local characteristics affect social impact business research?" and "How do these characteristics contribute to meeting AACSB impact criteria and building perceived legitimacy?"

### **Foundations: legitimacy theory and impactful business scholarship**

Legitimacy theory provides a lens for examining the institutional drivers behind business school research agendas. Legitimacy reflects how organizations align their values and actions with societal expectations ([Suchman, 1995](#)). Recent shifts in accreditation and scholarship highlight the growing importance of social impact for relevance and competitive standing in higher education ([AACSB, 2026](#)). Legitimacy, as defined by [Suchman \(1995\)](#), is "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (p. 574)." Three types of legitimacy, moral (judged by normative approval), pragmatic legitimacy (grounded in stakeholder self-interest) and cognitive legitimacy (based on comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness), can help clarify how business schools approach their research agendas.

AACSB's impact criteria for business school research translate dimensions of legitimacy into practical expectations. Impactful research is cross-disciplinary, addressing complex challenges through collaboration. Research is also expected to integrate with practice to align with the priorities of external stakeholders, such as businesses, government and nonprofit organizations. Research must also create tangible, positive change for diverse groups. Advancements in business practices, policy contributions and improvements to community well-being are cited by AACSB as [AACSB International \(2021\)](#). Aligning with AACSB's framework enables business schools to show stakeholders the relevance of their work, articulate core values in practice and fulfill key institutional objectives. To this point, [Table 1](#) illustrates the intersection of cross-disciplinary research, academic-practice integration and real-world change with legitimacy.

In this paper, legitimacy theory and AACSB's criteria for impactful research are used as a framework to illustrate how institutional and regional characteristics shape social impact business research at ETSU's CBAT.

### **Phased approach and coding framework**

We apply methods from the iterative-pragmatic case study approach ([Steenhuis, 2015](#)) to address our research questions. The multiphase, six-month process included 22 faculty and leadership team members and culminated in a systematic coding of activities.

#### *Phase 1: establishing the societal impact plan and data collection foundation*

CBAT's strategic planning committee, with faculty from each department and three CBAT leaders, conducted an inventory of social impact activities and identified a preliminary impact priority aligned with the United Nations's Decent Work and Economic Growth goal (SDG 8). This process revealed important questions and observations about social impact

**Table 1.** Mapping AACSB research impact criteria to types of legitimacy

| AACSB<br>impactful<br>research<br>criterion | Pragmatic legitimacy                                                                                                                           | Moral legitimacy                                                                                            | Cognitive legitimacy                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cross-<br>disciplinary<br>research          | Recognized as useful to stakeholders who need solutions that are informed by insights and expertise from multiple fields                       | Seen as an ethical response to complex problems that cannot be solved by one discipline alone               | Viewed as normal and expected when embedded in the institution’s mission and structures                                    |
| Academic–<br>practice<br>integration        | Builds trust and support from local businesses, nonprofits and government through collaboration and research that responds to real-world needs | Perceived as responsible because it bridges the gap between theory and action in addressing community needs | Understood as a natural extension of the university’s mission when collaboration with practitioners is frequent and valued |
| Real-world<br>change                        | Provides tangible benefits that stakeholders value, such as job creation or improved processes                                                 | Reflects a civic duty to serve society and improve communities                                              | Becomes part of the university’s identity when real change is routinely expected and recognized                            |

business research and led to the creation of a social impact subcommittee for further exploration.

*Phase 2: identifying gaps in existing activities*

The subcommittee, including the dean, associate dean and two department chairs, engaged in deeper discussions and reviewed organizational documents, news and research to capture additional impact activities and research at CBAT. This surfaced advantages that position the college to conduct impactful research. The team then sought additional insights and expanded the discussion to a larger group of CBAT leaders.

*Phase 3: broadening engagement with college leaders*

A workshop with college leaders and faculty explored institutional and local characteristics supporting social impact research and identified projects aligned with key priority areas. Inclusion criteria required meeting at least one AACSB impactful research criterion.

*Phase 4: conducting supplemental data collection*

Members of the subcommittee reflected on the insights emerging and unanswered questions. For example, the workshop surfaced social impact research projects previously unknown to some members. Therefore, supplemental data was gathered through interviews with scholars who were conducting these projects. A review of local needs assessments and government websites helped contextualize environmental and regional issues.

*Phase 5: coding and evaluating data*

Two coders classified projects by focus, AACSB impactful research criteria alignment and type of perceived legitimacy. A binary scheme (1 = met, 0 = not met) was applied, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. In the following section, we present selected examples of scholarship that highlight institutional and local drivers enabling CBAT to

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conduct research aligned with AACSB's impactful research criteria and potential contributions to legitimacy.

### **Institutional and local characteristics that facilitate an impact advantage at College of Business and Technology**

#### *Vision and mission alignment*

CBAT is well-positioned to conduct social impact business research because the vision and mission of the university and college are grounded in community impact. ETSU's vision directly speaks to real-world positive change, aiming to "develop a world-class environment to enhance student success and improve the quality of life in the region and beyond" (ETSU, 2025a, Vision). This aim mirrors AACSB's description of improving quality of life for targeted communities (AACSB, n.d., p. 10). The university's mission balances liberal arts and professional preparation, which, while not required for impactful research, supports AACSB's cross-disciplinary, applied definition of impactful research.

CBAT's mission and vision flow directly from the university's guiding principles. The college envisions itself as a place where quality education ignites innovation, collaboration fosters growth and inspiration creates leaders who drive transformative change in service to society. Its mission to educate, innovate, collaborate and inspire encourages students and faculty to partner across disciplines and with regional stakeholders to drive meaningful change. The result is almost perfect alignment between ETSU and CBAT's aims and AACSB's definition of social impact research.

However, mission alignment alone is not enough. Many business schools stray from their stated missions (Alajoutsijärvi *et al.*, 2015), and the risk of decoupling words from actions is well-documented (Snelson-Powell *et al.*, 2016). CBAT mitigates this risk by embedding opportunities for applied, stakeholder-engaged research into its programs and partnerships, as illustrated in examples throughout this article. This alignment positions CBAT as an institution where producing impactful, cross-disciplinary research is natural and expected, thereby enhancing moral and cognitive legitimacy.

#### *Programmatic and strategic focus alignment*

In addition to mission and vision alignment, CBAT's distinctive structure, institutional priorities and strong commitment to community engagement position it for cross-disciplinary collaboration and high-impact research. Unlike many schools with only traditional business departments, CBAT unites business and technology, reducing barriers to collaboration and enabling faculty to address complex problems from multiple perspectives. This integration is a clear advantage, as no single field holds all the knowledge needed to solve today's challenges (Edmondson, 2016). Recent academic restructuring has expanded opportunities further, adding units such as media and communication and creating collaborations like a School of Marketing and Media, which has established community-facing initiatives that connect academia and practice.

Our cross-disciplinary advantage is reinforced by institutional priorities that value both research and community engagement. ETSU is Carnegie-classified as an  $R^2$ : Doctoral University – High Research Spending and Doctorate Production (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2025a) and aims to be a premier  $R^2$  institution (ETSU, 2025b) while maintaining a strong commitment to community stewardship. The university has earned the Carnegie Elective Classification for Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2025b), an evidence-based designation recognizing reciprocal, mutually beneficial partnerships with the community. With dedicated offices, funding and professional development, creating change, assessing impact and bridging academia and practice have become the norm. Research and community impact are viewed as complementary, with the

chief research office noting, “ETSU researchers literally improve the quality of life of the people of the region and beyond through the work done here” (ETSU, 2025b).

#### *High-need regional environment*

The regional context for the university is the area served by ETSU, where CBAT programs and partnerships are concentrated, from Chattanooga, TN, in the southwest, to Bristol, Virginia, in the north and east to the North Carolina border. ETSU is based in Johnson City, TN, in the Appalachian region, spanning Washington, Carter and Sullivan Counties. While most CBAT activities occur in the Appalachian Mountains of East Tennessee, we compare regional needs with those of the broader state and nation to contextualize local deprivation and risk. The Appalachian areas of Tennessee offer significant opportunities for social impact business research, as evident in current CBAT projects and future research potential.

#### *Regional characteristics reflected in College of Business and Technology projects*

*Health disparities and chronic disease factors:* Tennessee ranks among the lowest in the USA for overall health outcomes (Chavez-Lindell *et al.*, 2024; Smith, 2025). This ranking reflects disproportionately high rates of chronic conditions (e.g. diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity), and elevated rates of disability, preventable hospitalizations, maternal and infant mortality and lower life expectancy compared to national averages. Negative health outcomes are pronounced among disadvantaged groups, for example, Black and Hispanic residents, rural residents and low-income households (Chavez-Lindell *et al.*, 2024). Access to health care and preventive services is also limited in many areas (Chavez-Lindell *et al.*, 2024; The Sycamore Institute, 2025). Between 2019 and 2023, TN’s uninsured rate exceeded that of 39 other states, with residents in rural eastern counties more likely to be uninsured than those in other parts of the state (The Sycamore Institute, 2025).

Tobacco use exacerbates these health disparities and is a major contributor to chronic disease in the region. Tennessee is one of the twelve US states that comprise “Tobacco Nation,” where smoking prevalence is 50% higher than the rest of the country. Nearly 19% of Tennessee adults report smoking tobacco use. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded this challenge, as the state diverted 100% of tobacco prevention funding to the pandemic efforts and struggled to regain traction (Truth Initiative, 2023).

Although health disparities present challenges for the medical community, their economic and operational effects on the business community are also significant, and thus present opportunities for social impact business research. ETSU’s College of Public Health and CBAT’s Department of Economics and Finance studied the economic effects of smoke-free policies in Tennessee (Mamudu *et al.*, 2022). Their findings supported the passage of SB 2219/HB 2705, a landmark law allowing local governments to regulate smoking in age-restricted venues – authority previously preempted by state law. By demonstrating both economic and health benefits, the team influenced statewide policy that protects patrons and employees, exemplifying AACSB’s criteria for impactful, practice-integrated research that drives real change. This work enhances ETSU’s moral and cognitive legitimacy as an institution capable of addressing multifaceted societal issues. As highlighted by CBAT researcher Dr. Bhattacharjee in Mamudu *et al.* (2022), “It is a major achievement when economic theory can pave the path for policy changes that have important implications for community health” (as cited in Johnson City Press, 2022). Taken together, the regional prevalence of health disparities and ETSU’s demonstrated capacity to address them underscore why this domain represents an important and legitimacy-enhancing area for social impact business research.

*Workforce skills gap:* Tennessee faces acute workforce shortages, particularly in “middle-skill” roles that require less than a four-year degree but more than a high school diploma. The

state has a persistent shortfall of about 58,000 workers, and even if every unemployed Tennessean were placed in a job, the gap would remain. Tennessee's Worker Shortage Index is 0.72, meaning there are 72 available workers for every 100 open jobs, compared to the national index of 0.88 (Gore, 2025; Cates and Melhorn, 2024). Shortages are most pronounced in skilled trades, manufacturing, information technology, logistics and health care. Talent scarcity is more severe in East Tennessee (Andreason *et al.*, 2018; National Skills Coalition, 2024). This hinders economic growth, limits industry's ability to address complex challenges and creates opportunities for social impact business research to help improve workforce outcomes.

CBAT's BlueSky Tennessee Institute tackles the region's information technology (IT) shortage by providing and systematically studying an alternative educational pathway. BlueSky is a partnership between CBAT and BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee (BCBST), the state's largest health benefit plan provider. In 2019, TN had 4,161 unfilled IT positions but only 1,461 qualified graduates (Burning Glass Technologies, 2019), forcing BCBST to outsource many jobs. To address this gap, BCBST and CBAT codesigned an accelerated model that takes students from entry to job placement in 2.5 years through year-round coursework culminating in an ABET-accredited BS in Information Systems. Students study at BCBST headquarters, complete three internships over a year and a half, and receive extensive coaching from BCBST leaders. Beyond its educational mission, BlueSky operates as a living laboratory for researching the impact and scalability of this innovative model.

BlueSky's cohort demographics and outcomes point to meaningful impact. Nearly half of the students come from Hamilton County, which the Appalachian Regional Commission classifies as "transitional," reflecting below-average economic indicators (ARC, 2025). BlueSky's 91% retention rate far exceeds the national average of 68% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). Graduate job placement is 100%, with all graduates to date voluntarily accepting IT positions with BCBST. These results show the program expands opportunities for underserved populations, closes regional skill gaps, supports local businesses and advances ETSU's mission to improve lives in the region. In doing so, BlueSky builds moral and pragmatic legitimacy by creating real value for both students and employers. These dynamics position workforce development, alternative educational pathways and employer partnerships as particularly fertile areas for social impact business research.

*Limited entrepreneurship and innovation infrastructure:* Tennessee's innovation infrastructure shows growth in some areas but remains limited compared to other states. Startup support and resources are unevenly distributed, with early-stage funding and innovation assistance scarce. Even resource-rich Knoxville has lacked sustained state-level support for early-stage funding. Leaders interviewed for the *Tennessee Innovation Road Map* cited a limited entrepreneurial mindset, insufficient entrepreneurial opportunities, scarce venture capital and inadequate business support services. The report also identified gaps in incubators, lab facilities and research parks. Compared to innovation leaders, TN struggles to attract and retain top talent in science and engineering, secure venture capital and provide specialized facilities for high-tech industries. These factors may contribute to its low share of employees in small businesses (Kimbarovsky, 2024).

Given this context, CBAT research activities that can help strengthen the region's entrepreneurial ecosystem and expand innovation capacity are critical. In response, a cross-disciplinary team of CBAT faculty from the management, marketing, economics, finance disciplines partnered with the Appalachian Highlands Women's Business Center (AppH-WBC) to examine the challenges, goals and needs of women entrepreneurs and small business owners in the region. The AppH-WBC was established to serve ten counties in Northeast Tennessee, seven of which are considered "distressed [1]" or "at-risk" of becoming distressed, by providing development opportunities and programs to support early-stage entrepreneurial activity. By

systematically analyzing the needs of women entrepreneurs in the region, the center was able to design initiatives explicitly aligned with stakeholder needs.

CBAT faculty also have opportunities to engage with the ETSU Research Corporation, which has partnered with a local organization to launch “2681 CORE—Catalyst of Rural Entrepreneurship,” a new initiative. The Research Corporation and the 2,681 initiative provide resources, networks and support for translating academic expertise into real-world solutions, thereby strengthening the entrepreneurial landscape. With institutionalized support for cross-disciplinary projects, applied research and startup development, CBAT has opportunities to address regional challenges in distinctive ways. As CBAT builds momentum in leveraging these opportunities and partnering with agencies like AppH-WBC, it can reinforce the college’s cognitive and moral legitimacy as a partner for engaged problem-solving in the community. These conditions reveal entrepreneurship and innovation capacity-building as promising areas for impactful, practice-integrated business research that directly responds to high-need regional challenges.

#### *Regional characteristics presenting future social impact research opportunities*

While CBAT researchers have engaged in several social impact business research projects aligned with high-need regional characteristics, other regional characteristics are also conducive to social impact research and present future research opportunities. These include, for example, the region’s economic characteristics.

East Tennessee faces higher poverty, lower income and greater deprivation than much of Tennessee and the USA ([The Sycamore Institute, 2025](#)). The region’s average poverty rate is 16.3%, above state (14%) and national (11.1%) levels, with some counties exceeding 30%. Child poverty is especially severe, with rates surpassing 40% in certain areas ([Benson, 2023](#); [Smith, 2025](#)). Median household income averages \$57,577, well below the Tennessee median of \$67,097 and the national median of \$80,610 ([Guzman and Kollar, 2024](#)). Although Tennessee is not considered a high-cost state, 44% of households face financial hardship and in some counties, up to 66% are classified as ALICE, working families earning too little to cover basic expenses ([United for Alice, 2025](#)). These socioeconomic challenges highlight both the depth of need and the potential for social impact business research to strengthen resilience, expand economic participation and improve quality of life in the region.

#### **Structures and centers**

Institutional structures and incentives have long been recognized as key drivers of faculty priorities and behavior ([Kerr, 1975](#)) and can thus constrain or encourage social impact business research. Some scholars contend that research topics are often determined by established patterns, such as the interests of senior faculty ([Welsh and Bremser, 2005](#)), tenure and promotion requirements ([Haley and Jack, 2023](#)), and, to a lesser degree, what external sources are willing to fund ([Fabbri et al., 2018](#)). While these legacy effects remain influential, we do not believe they disproportionately determine how CBAT faculty choose research areas.

CBAT values impact contributions alongside discipline-based, practice-based and pedagogical work in its AACSB faculty qualifications processes. While not unique to CBAT, this emphasis is not yet common across all business schools. Recognizing impact fosters an environment where faculty pursue research addressing stakeholder needs. Activities like shaping policy and conducting community-engaged research align with AACSB’s definition of impact and can generate opportunities for social impact business research. CBAT is also revising promotion and tenure criteria to further reward impactful work.

CBAT’s centers, initiatives and partnerships can also play a role in facilitating social impact business research. For example, the Center for the Study of Finance (CSF) aims to promote financial literacy, build connections among business, government and academia, and conduct

research on financial topics. Given its focus, CSF is well-positioned to lead studies that can improve the financial well-being of the local community. Similarly, the Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BBER) provides data and expertise on economic and community development for both the state and the Appalachian Highlands region. BBER could also be leveraged to study the regional impact of workforce development offerings.

While CSF and BBER have focused on education, outreach and applied data analysis, their capabilities position them as platforms for AACSB-aligned impactful research that integrates academia and practice. Their relationships with business and government could create avenues for funding, data-sharing and evaluation. Although neither CSF nor BBER has conducted large-scale social impact research to date, cross-disciplinary collaborations with CBAT faculty suggest strong potential.

Social impact business research should be encouraged not only through tenure and promotion criteria or collaborations, but also by providing targeted funding. At ETSU, a newly established strategic initiative fund supports initiatives that advance the university's strategic plan. The fund distributes resources through the annual budget hearing process, with proposals submitted to division leaders and final decisions made by the university president (ETSU, 2025c). While the extent to which social impact research will be funded remains to be seen, it aligns closely with two of the university's strategic goal areas, including community stewardship and research and innovation (ETSU, 2025d). These funding priorities align with AACSB's impactful research criteria, particularly in supporting applied, cross-disciplinary work that addresses real-world challenges.

## Discussion

In this paper, we illustrate that aligning institutional priorities, strengths and structures with regional needs and with AACSB's impactful research criteria can serve as a pathway to advance social impact business research. Our guiding questions were: "What institutional and local characteristics affect social impact business research?" and "How do these characteristics contribute to meeting AACSB impact criteria and building perceived legitimacy?" Our analysis explains how a cross-disciplinary structure, dual commitment to research and community engagement and embedded partnerships and collaborations can enable stakeholder-focused research, and how linking these conditions to AACSB criteria can inform strategies for real-world change. Collectively, these insights also contribute to broader conversations about the future of social impact business research by demonstrating how accreditation expectations, institutional focus and design and regional needs will continue to shape research priorities and legitimacy-building strategies moving forward.

## Theoretical contribution

This study advances theoretical conversations on social impact business research by integrating legitimacy theory with AACSB's impactful research framework. This theoretical lens provides an explanatory foundation for understanding *why* institutional and regional characteristics shape research agendas and how business schools build credibility as expectations for societal value intensify. We propose that institutional and local characteristics shape the pursuit of impactful scholarship in ways that build legitimacy.

We illustrate that three distinct types of legitimacy (moral, pragmatic and cognitive) may be bolstered by leveraging institutional and local characteristics to advance social impact business research. For example, CBAT's mission alignment with community impact enhances moral legitimacy, its cross-disciplinary college structure supports cognitive legitimacy and its partnerships with industry create pragmatic legitimacy. By linking

institutional conditions to AACSB criteria and types of legitimacy, we enhance the explanatory power of legitimacy theory in the context of impactful research.

Moreover, we emphasize the role of regional social and economic contexts as underexplored enablers of impactful research. Appalachian poverty, health disparities and workforce shortages not only create societal need but also amplify the salience of socially impactful scholarship for legitimacy-building. In doing so, our study highlights how business schools located in high-need regions may have unique opportunities to demonstrate relevance and strengthen legitimacy.

Finally, this work demonstrates how cross-disciplinary structures, in this case, uniting business, technology and media, expand the scope of societal challenges that can be addressed. By showing how institutional and local conditions intersect with AACSB's definition of impactful research, our paper extends legitimacy theory. It provides a framework for understanding how business schools can strategically leverage their contexts to build trust, relevance and purpose.

**Practical implications**

Our findings carry important implications for business schools seeking to strengthen their research portfolios and meet AACSB's expectations for societal impact. We illustrate how institutional and local characteristics can be deliberately aligned with AACSB's criteria for impactful research, thereby advancing both scholarly contributions and legitimacy among stakeholders.

While additional operational strategies could be elaborated in future research, due to space constraints, we provide [Table 2](#) as a concise framework that synthesizes the most actionable pathways for aligning institutional and regional enablers with AACSB's impactful research criteria. This framework can guide administrators and faculty in:

- (1) **Aligning mission with research practice**, ensuring that stated commitments to societal impact are operationalized in research projects, mitigating the risk of symbolic compliance.

**Table 2.** Linking institutional and local characteristics to AACSB impact criteria and legitimacy

| Institutional/local characteristic                                          | AACSB impact criteria supported                  | Legitimacy type enhanced | Illustrative example                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mission and vision alignment with community impact                          | Applied, cross-disciplinary, practice-integrated | Moral and cognitive      | CBAT's mission-driven projects in regional economic development |
| Cross-disciplinary college structure (business + technology + media)        | Cross-disciplinary, real-world change            | Cognitive                | School of marketing and media                                   |
| Commitment to community engagement (Carnegie classification and funding)    | Applied, practice-integrated                     | Moral and pragmatic      | Public health–business collaborations on smoke-free policy      |
| High-need regional context (poverty, health disparities and workforce gaps) | Real-world change, societal relevance            | Pragmatic and moral      | BlueSky Tennessee institute addressing IT workforce shortages   |
| Partnerships with local agencies and businesses                             | Applied, practice-integrated                     | Pragmatic                | 2,861 CORE initiative, bolstering the economic ecosystem        |
| Centers and institutional supports (CSF, BBER, research corporation)        | Applied, cross-disciplinary                      | Cognitive and pragmatic  | AppH-WBC collaboration to support women entrepreneurs           |

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- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                        |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(2) Leveraging cross-disciplinary structures, breaking down silos between business and other fields to address complex societal challenges more effectively.</li> <li>(3) Engaging regional needs as a research agenda, positioning high-need contexts (e.g. workforce shortages, health disparities, entrepreneurial gaps) as opportunities for impactful, AACSB-aligned research.</li> <li>(4) Partnering with external stakeholders, building pragmatic legitimacy by cocreating solutions with industry, government and community organizations.</li> <li>(5) Institutionalizing support mechanisms, revising promotion and tenure policies, providing targeted funding and empowering centers (e.g. finance, economic research, innovation labs) to prioritize impactful scholarship.</li> </ul> | Journal of Social<br>Impact in<br>Business<br>Research |
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For business schools globally, our study underscores that impactful research is not achieved solely through individual faculty initiatives. Instead, it emerges when institutions strategically align vision, structures and partnerships with both accreditation standards and regional needs. The implication is clear: by intentionally designing their research ecosystems, business schools can simultaneously deliver societal value, meet accreditation requirements and strengthen their legitimacy with diverse stakeholders.

### Limitations and future research

Its illustrative and formative nature limits the findings of this article, and comprehensive longitudinal studies are still needed to assess long-term impact. The study focuses on a single institution, so conditions may not be fully generalizable to other regions or partners. The proposed links between social impact business research and legitimacy types were not empirically tested. Certain institutional features (e.g. strategic initiative fund) may present challenges for replication. While we highlight how centers and formal structures can facilitate social impact business research, we acknowledge that not every business school requires a dedicated center to engage in and support societally impactful scholarship. Due to space constraints and ongoing data collection, we are unable to provide a comprehensive inventory of initiatives. Future research should address these limitations, examine how leaders can optimize resource allocation decisions between social impact work and other strategic priorities, and explore equitable approaches to funding, given that some faculty research aligns more directly with social aims than others. Future longitudinal research will be essential to assess how these institutional and regional characteristics influence social impact business research trajectories over time.

### Note

- [1.] *Distressed counties*: In Tennessee, “economically distressed” counties are those that rank poorly on key indicators such as income, poverty, unemployment and population growth. Of the state’s 95 counties, 24 are at-risk of becoming distressed, and 11 are distressed, with most of these concentrated in the eastern region ([Transparent Tennessee, n.d.](#)).

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