

# *Higher Education Strengthens Lives, Communities, and Our Democracy*

An Affirmative Narrative for Turbulent Times

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Metropolitan Group  
the power of voice



Drawing from their ongoing research on higher education and democracy narratives, Spitfire Strategies and Metropolitan Group have prepared this communications brief for AAC&U. It is intended to help campus leaders communicate in ways that advance public trust in their institutions and in colleges and universities as a whole.

## Higher Education Strengthens Lives, Communities, and Our Democracy: An Affirmative Narrative for Turbulent Times

### How to Use This Framework

Created in collaboration with leaders and organizations across the higher education sector, this narrative guidance is designed to ensure our messages, stories, and data points can better make the case for higher education's foundational role in serving our students and communities and strengthening our democracy. This message framework serves as a cohesive, aligned core narrative for campuses to inform and guide communication materials. We recommend all campuses tailor the framework to connect with key audiences and highlight campus-specific opportunities for engagement and calls to action.

The framework is intended as a starting point, not a script, for campus leaders communicating about the role of higher education. It can help guide speeches, op-eds, reports, website copy, social media content, talking points, advocacy materials, and campus communications that make the case for why higher education matters to students, communities, the economy, and public life.

Colleges and universities can and should feel free to develop content inspired by the framework, mindful of their institution's audience, context, and communications goals. A campus president might use it to frame a public address about the value of higher education in a divided civic environment. A communications team might use it to develop

a story series that shows how students, faculty, alumni, and community partners are helping to solve local challenges. A government relations team might use it to speak with policymakers about the connection between higher education, workforce preparation, research, innovation, civic learning, and community well-being. A faculty member might use it to describe how liberal education, dialogue across differences, and community-based learning help shape the broader civic space and benefit students and communities.

In all of these cases, the narrative will be stronger when it is specific and grounded in local proof points. Rather than repeating the full message in every setting, campus leaders can select the elements of the messaging most relevant to the moment: the challenge they need to name, the solution they are advancing, the benefits they can demonstrate, and the action they want their audience to take.

We recommend pairing the narrative with concrete examples from campus life, student success, research initiatives, workforce programs, civic learning efforts, and campus-community partnerships. In doing so, institutions can move from broad claims about the value of higher education to clear, credible stories about how higher education strengthens lives, communities, and democracy in everyday life.

## Narrative and Message Framework

<b>Narrative</b>	Higher education strengthens lives, communities, and our democracy.
<b>Core Message</b>	Colleges and universities prepare students for good jobs, power local economies, and bring people together from all walks of life. They help communities tackle real challenges—from improving health care to strengthening small businesses—while driving research and innovation that makes us all more secure and shapes our shared future. They also help prepare people to participate more fully in community life by encouraging critical thinking, open dialogue, and taking part in the decisions that affect their lives. That is how our democracy works in everyday life. Higher education isn't perfect—cost and access are real challenges that deserve practical solutions. But when we strengthen higher education, we expand freedom, opportunity, and shared prosperity, helping communities across the country thrive and keeping our democracy strong.
<b>Challenge</b>	Growing distrust, rising barriers to access, and political attacks are weakening higher education's role in public life. At a time when many Americans feel divided and disconnected, the challenge is not only to build trust but to ensure higher education remains a relevant, accessible, and inclusive force that expands opportunity, strengthens connection, and supports the freedom to participate fully in civic life.
<b>Solution</b>	Strengthening higher education's role in public life requires rebuilding trust, protecting open inquiry, and expanding affordable, flexible pathways for learners at every stage of life. Deeper community connection and stronger public support can help higher education create more opportunity, strengthen participation, and reinforce its value to the people and places it serves.
<b>Benefits</b>	When higher education is accessible, trusted, and connected to community life, it expands opportunity, strengthens local communities, and prepares the people and professions we rely on every day. Research and innovations promote our health, safety, and security. Our colleges and universities also help build a more informed and engaged public by creating space for critical thinking, dialogue across differences, and shared problem-solving.
<b>Call to Action</b>	Strengthening an affirmative narrative for higher education and its crucial place in a healthy democracy is something we can do together to expand opportunity and keep our communities connected and strong. By advocating for higher education's wide-reaching potential for students and our communities alike, we help ensure more people have the freedom to learn, contribute, and shape the future we share.

## Narrative and Messaging Pillars

The narrative framework and message platform are informed by, and respond to, the following narrative/messaging pillars identified by Metropolitan Group through extensive qualitative and quantitative research and testing.<sup>1</sup> They reflect the approach to pro-democracy and higher education narrative and messaging most likely to be successful.

Narrative/Messaging Pillars	Examples of how they're showing up in the core message
<b>Center</b> recommended core values that resonate in the context of higher education and democracy (especially freedom, fairness, and fearlessness) <sup>2</sup>	“But when we strengthen higher education, we expand freedom, opportunity, and shared prosperity, helping communities across the country thrive and keeping our democracy strong.”
<b>Define</b> inclusive and participatory democracy beyond elections, including the role played by Higher Education in our democracy	“They also help prepare people to participate more fully in community life by encouraging critical thinking, open dialogue, and taking part in the decisions that affect their lives.”
<b>Amplify</b> the benefits that higher education best advances in a democracy (including freedom and safety/security)	“When higher education is accessible, trusted, and connected to community life, it expands opportunity and promotes economic security, strengthens local communities, and prepares the people and professions we rely on every day. Research and innovations promote our health, safety, and security. It also helps build a more informed and engaged public by creating space for critical thinking, dialogue across differences, and shared problem-solving.”
<b>Connect</b> higher education to people’s everyday lives.	“Colleges and universities prepare people for good jobs, power local economies, and bring Americans together from all walks of life.”
<b>Remind</b> people that it’s a shared responsibility	“Strengthening an affirmative narrative for higher education and its crucial place in a healthy democracy is something we can do together to expand opportunity and keep our communities connected and strong.”
<b>Acknowledge</b> democracy broadly and specifically in the context of higher education isn’t perfect and we can improve it together.	“Higher education isn’t perfect—cost and access are real challenges that deserve practical solutions.”  “By advocating for higher education’s wide-reaching potential for students and our communities alike, we help ensure more people have the freedom to learn, contribute, and shape the future we share.”

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Metropolitan Group’s U.S. Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook and Message Guidance, visit: <https://prodemocracynarrativeplaybook.org/guide/>

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Metropolitan Group’s core values to evoke in communicating about democracy, visit: <https://prodemocracynarrativeplaybook.org/guide/>

## Supporting Messaging

Growing distrust, rising barriers to access, and political attacks are weakening higher education's role in public life. At a time when many Americans feel divided and disconnected, the challenge is not only to build trust but to ensure higher education remains a relevant, accessible, and inclusive force that expands opportunity, strengthens connection, and supports the freedom to participate fully in civic life.

- **Erosion of public trust and relevance.** Growing skepticism toward institutions, expertise, and higher education itself is making it harder for colleges and universities to be seen as trusted partners in solving community problems and supporting informed participation in public life.
- **Public narratives that narrow understanding.** Higher education is often seen only through the lens of elite institutions or job training, making it harder for everyday people to recognize its broader role in strengthening communities, supporting civic participation, and expanding opportunity and supporting a healthy democracy.
- **Affordability, access, and an uneven democratic promise.** Rising costs, student debt, and structural barriers are making it harder for many people to access higher education, limiting pathways to opportunity, economic mobility, and the freedom to fully participate in public life.
- **Polarization and social disconnection.** Misinformation, isolation, and growing difficulty in working across differences are straining civic life and making it harder for people to build trust, solve problems together, and engage constructively in their communities.

## Solution Statement Detail

Strengthening higher education's role in public life requires rebuilding trust, protecting open inquiry, and expanding affordable, flexible pathways for learners at every stage of life. Deeper community connection and stronger public support can help higher education create more opportunities, strengthen participation, and reinforce its value to the people and places it serves.

- **Strengthen public trust.** Demonstrating higher education's real-world value through clear, visible contributions to students, families, and communities can help rebuild confidence in its role in public life and democracy.
- **Protect the freedom to teach, learn, and research.** Defending higher education from political interference helps preserve the open inquiry, debate, and discovery that allow people and communities to think critically and shape their own futures.
- **Expand access across all stages of life.** Making higher education more affordable, flexible, and accessible for working adults, parenting students, and lifelong learners would help ensure that more people can benefit from it.
- **Grow public investment and shared responsibility.** Strengthening support from government, business, and other sectors can help higher education serve more people, deepen community impact, and remain a pathway to opportunity.
- **Deepen community partnerships and connections.** Higher education can strengthen democracy by working more intentionally with communities to address shared challenges, expand opportunity, and demonstrate its value beyond the campus.
- **Prepare people for civic and economic participation.** Supporting programs that build critical thinking, civic literacy, dialogue across differences, and practical skills can help people thrive in a changing economy and participate more fully in democracy.

## Benefit Statement Detail

When higher education is accessible, trusted, and connected to community life, it expands opportunity, strengthens local communities, and prepares the people and professions we rely on every day. Research and innovations promote our health, safety, and security. Our colleges and universities also help build a more informed and engaged public by creating space for critical thinking, dialogue across differences, and shared problem-solving.

- **Broader opportunity and lifelong pathways.** Higher education expands access to credentials, skills, and learning that help people of all backgrounds build opportunity, contribute to their communities, and pursue the lives they want.
- **Stronger communities and local partnerships.** Higher education strengthens communities by creating jobs, supporting local economies, and working alongside schools, nonprofits, and civic organizations to address shared challenges.
- **A more informed and engaged public.** Higher education helps people develop critical thinking, media literacy, civic knowledge, and the ability to engage across differences: skills that strengthen participation, public discourse, and accountability.
- **Workforce preparation and real-world contribution.** From community colleges to research universities, higher education prepares the teachers, firefighters, nurses, researchers, public servants, and other professionals that communities rely on every day.
- **More connection, dialogue, and democratic life.** Higher education creates spaces where people from different backgrounds can learn, debate, collaborate, and build the habits of participation that help communities and democracy thrive.
- **Makes us all more secure.** Higher education increases economic security in an unpredictable world, not just for individuals, but also for communities and our nation. Through research and innovation, higher education also protects the health and safety of people and the planet, and contributes to our national security.

## Call to Action Detail

Strengthening pro-higher education narratives is something we can do together to expand opportunity and keep our communities connected and strong. By advocating for higher education's wide-reaching potential for students and our communities alike, we help ensure more people have the freedom to learn, contribute, and shape the future we share.

We recommend that each institution identify a specific call to action tailored to its audience, context, and communications goal. Depending on the moment, this could mean inviting community partners to collaborate on local challenges, encouraging policymakers to protect and invest in higher education, asking alumni and employers to speak publicly about the value of a college education, encouraging students and families

to explore available pathways and support, or inviting campus communities to participate in civic learning, dialogue, service, and public problem-solving. The strongest calls to action will be concrete and achievable, helping audiences understand not only why higher education matters, but also what they can do to support it, strengthen it, and connect it more fully to community and democratic life.

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



The [Trust Agenda](#), released in June 2026 by AAC&U, presents proactive recommendations for campus leaders to advance public trust in higher education. It provides a framework to help college and university leaders build a new social

contract with the faculty, staff, students, campuses, and communities they serve without having to make false choices between resistance and accommodation or autonomy and reform.

**AAC&U**