College Quality and the American Dream: Shaping Narratives for Increased Public Engagement

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Agenda

Understanding the Context for Shaping New Narratives
• The American Dream and Postsecondary Education’s Role
• The Changing Media Landscape

Understanding Public Narratives: New Research Findings
• Mapping the Narratives about Postsecondary Education
• What’s Missing from the Landscape
• Stories that Resonate and that are Shaping the Narrative Landscape
• What’s Emerging in the Landscape

Key Take-Away’s for More Effectively Influencing Public Narratives
• Telling our Stories in Ways that Resonate and Connect
• Communicating Effectively Within the Evolving Media Perspective
The American Dream: An Evolving Concept

“A dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability and achievement…It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and recognized by others for what they are.”

James Truslow Adams, “The Epic of America,” 1931
“For many in both the working class and the middle class, upward mobility has served as the heart and soul of the American Dream, the prospect of "betterment" and to "improve one's lot" for oneself and one's children much of what this country is all about. Work hard, save a little, send the kids to college so they can do better than you did, and retire happily to a warmer climate" has been the script we have all been handed.”

The fading American dream?

Share of children making more than their parents

Source: Chetty et al., "The fading American dream: Trends in absolute income mobility since 1940"
The Role of Higher Education in Advancing Upward Mobility

- 11.5 million of the 11.6 million jobs created in the post-recession economy required postsecondary education;

- Workers with at least some postsecondary education now make up 65% of total employment in the US;

- The college wage premium was 36% in the 1970s. By 2007, it had risen to 82% for men and 75% for women

Caveat: Not all credentials result in positive returns on investment and not all institutions are equitably contributing to upward mobility for low and moderate income students.
Why Changing the Public Narratives is So Important

• More than 4 in 10 Americans agree that “for most high school students today, pursuing a college degree is not a worthwhile investment because it will lead to student debt with little chance of finding a good-paying job.” (Civis Analytics, 2017)

• 86 percent of the general public agree that “It’s easier to get a job with an education after high school—like a college degree or trade certificate—than it is to get a good job without one.” (Civis Analystics, 2017)

• Only 44 percent of US adults express confidence in colleges and universities today. (Gallup, 2017)
Influencing Narratives in Changing Media Environment

On Campus is a public media reporting initiative focused on higher education produced in Boston at WGBH.

How can we make college more accessible and affordable for all students?

All involved in higher education are constantly considering the answers to that question. And with the new year upon us, the answers will continue to grow more complex and difficult to navigate. On Campus from WGBH News shares stories that address the challenges we all face in higher education — and identifies potential solutions from across the country.

Costs / Access / New Business Models / Innovation / Competitiveness
Measuring and moving narratives

Lumina is working with Protagonist, Inc, a “big-data” consultant, to gain insights into what people believe about postsecondary education and social mobility based on mainstream, online news, blogs, and social media interaction:

- Measuring narrative landscape — proportion of conversation by storyline, based on content volume and audience engagement
- Working to influence existing narratives and creating “white-space” narratives such as the need for a new learning ecosystem.
- Measuring changes in the narrative landscape over time
- Examining core narratives in relation to “adjacent space” narratives about economic opportunity and social mobility
What Are Narratives?

Stories that articulate beliefs and motivate behavior in a Post-Fact World

Those values upon which our success depends -- honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity. These things have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history.

For too long, a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth.

Big Sugar is just like Big Tobacco, knowingly pushing addictive products that cause disease and death. They need to be taxed, regulated and taken down.

The only way to solve the skills gap in trades such as collision repair is to change America’s fundamental perception of the skilled trades.
What Is Narrative Analytics?
Systematic extraction, analysis, and tracking of the most important Narratives to you

Every Digital/Text Conversation from your target segments

Quantified Landscape of High-Impact Narratives

Data Acquisition  Cleaning & Formatting  Metadata Extraction

Filtering  Clustering  Tagging

PROTAGONIST PLATFORM

NARRATIVE EXPERTS

HUMAN

Narrative Articulation  Brand Signature  Trend Analysis

Strategy  Ongoing Monitoring  Playbook
• **Content:** Isolate topics related to postsecondary attainment, focusing on: college access, educational attainment, affordability, credentialing, labor-market demand, workforce development

• **Sample Sources:** Articles and blog posts from a variety of sources, including: The Huffington Post, University Herald, Bloomberg, Inside Higher Ed, The New York Times, USA Today, The Hill, Breitbart, The Hechinger Report, Brookings Institution, NPR, Fortune, APM, WGBH, Education Dive, PBS NewsHour

• **Timeframe:** December 2015 – November 2016
The Postsecondary Narrative Landscape: Categories

Postsecondary education narratives fall into three categories: Systemic Inequality, Expected Outcomes, and Affordability.

- **Systemic Inequality**: Narratives about barriers caused by systemic inequalities pose access and attainment challenges to postsecondary education. **3 Narratives**

- **Expected Outcomes**: Narratives discussing the advantages and disadvantages of four-year colleges and their alternatives. **2 Narratives**

- **Affordability**: Narratives about the financial burdens and implications of community and four-year colleges. **2 Narratives**
The Postsecondary Landscape, By Narrative
December 2015 – November 2016

- Sinking Without Support
- Uneven Playing Field
- Prisoners as Pupils

Expected Outcomes
- Education for Employment
- Buyer Beware

Affordability
- Protect Public Education
- American Dream Deferred

Systemic Inequality
- Sinking Without Support
- Uneven Playing Field
- Prisoners as Pupils
## Postsecondary Education Narrative Landscape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Narrative Impact*</th>
<th>Abridged Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protect Public Education</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>The burden of paying for public education must shift from the student back to the state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyer Beware</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Prospective students should weigh their options before they invest the time and money needed for a degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education for Employment</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>All forms of higher education should strive to boost students’ ultimate employability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uneven Playing Field</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Access to higher education is riddled with invisible access gaps for disadvantaged students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinking Without Support</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Underrepresented students lack the support and stability they need to make it to graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Dream Deferred</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>The high cost of a college degree today means that students who decided to take the plunge now can’t afford to start the lives they were promised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoners as Pupils</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>We need to invest in prison education to reduce recidivism rates and ease the burden on taxpayers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Narrative Impact is calculated based on volume of coverage and social engagement with each narrative.
Impact Scores by Volume and Engagement

- Expected Outcomes Narrative *Education for Employment* is driven by high volume, but has the lowest engagement score, suggesting minimal resonance in the public conversation.

- Systemic Inequality Narrative *Prisoners as Pupils* is both the lowest-volume and highest-engagement narrative, indicating the efficacy of current messaging strategies in encouraging audience resonance.

*Engagement measures the amount of social interaction—shares, likes, and comments—with a post or article; Volume measures total number of posts and articles, weighted by source credibility.*
A college degree used to be the best option for those seeking to further their careers. But **college is costly, time consuming, and not always necessary to succeed in today’s economy**. I’m not sure every 17-year-old is ready to commit to the full college experience, especially because a **degree doesn’t guarantee a high paying job**. There are more and more options available to get an education, so I feel young people should consider all opportunities before making a decision. A four-year degree might be the right choice for some, but starting out in a **certificate, vocational, or associate degree program** could actually be the better path for other students. One size does not fit all when it comes to **higher education**, so students should consider their readiness, finances, goals, and earning potential before investing the time and money necessary for a degree.

**Expected Outcomes**

Prospective students should weigh their options before they invest in the time and money needed for a degree.

**Subscriber Voice**

“Certificates tend to be more specific and job market oriented. They definitely give job seekers the training that sets them apart from those with only a high school diploma. But depending on the job... it can even sometimes give applicants an advantage over those with [a] four-year degree that isn’t directly related to the job.”

— Robert Legge, The Daily
Colleges used to provide students with the skills they needed to succeed in the professional world. But now shifting technology has changed the skills required of the workforce and universities curriculums have not adjusted at a comparable pace. As employers, we need to ensure that any employee, college-educated or not, comes to us with today’s essential skills. Advanced industry certificates, Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, digital badges, programming boot camps, and outcomes-based curricula allow all individuals to build and demonstrate their workforce readiness. These programs also benefit mid-career professionals who need to modernize their abilities. The development of competency-based education and partnerships between industry and universities will help colleges best prepare their students for employment. We need to value and develop all forms of professional training in order to bridge the skills gap in the American workforce.

All forms of higher education should strive to boost students’ ultimate employability.

15% IMPACT

Subscriber Voice

“While transcripts and diplomas are long-standing, trusted validations of student achievement, digital badges provide employers with more detailed, transparent aggregations of a student’s earned skills.”

– Peter Janzow, Pearson
American Dream Deferred

My parents were able to pay their college tuition on summers spent scooping ice cream. When it was my turn to enroll, my family and I pooled all of our resources together, and it wasn’t even enough to cover all four years of tuition. I took out loans, confident I would find a well-paying job after graduation. At 17, I didn’t understand what it meant to take out $60,000 in loans or how interest compounds over time. And I definitely didn’t realize the job market would be so tight when I graduated. I’d like to really start adulthood, but I live with my parents and am stuck with a low-paying job and so much debt. I feel like I’ve been priced out of the American dream. I wish I knew that this was the life I was going into when I signed on the dotted line. There must be a way to finance higher education that doesn’t require going into crippling debt.

The cost of a college degree means that students who have taken the plunge now can’t afford to start the lives they were promised.

Subscriber Voice

“I wish I really knew what I was getting myself into. When I signed up for that loan, I was 17 or 18 and the first one in my family to go to college. I had no idea what my monthly payment would be, or what to expect for my post-college income. ... With the economy the way it’s been, I’ve been working retail and a part-time marketing job.”

– Sarah Krenicki, Politico
### Landscape Insights

#### What’s in the Conversation

- Systemic issues related to equity, affordability, and outcome variability
- Uncertainty and skepticism of the value of traditional postsecondary education (e.g. 4-year colleges)
- Economic-based arguments – some highlighting the financial payoff and others the burden
- Problem-oriented discussion, reflecting a lack of optimism about what can be changed

#### What’s Absent

- Emphasis on adult learners and the unique challenges they face
- Solutions to connect existing financial and support resources to students in need
- A moral imperative arguing that education is a universal and essential human right and important for citizenship in a democracy
- Concrete evidence and examples of the benefits of higher education
- Nuanced discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of alternative options
What Counts as a Narrative--Identifying Emergent Narratives

Emergent narratives are surfaced according to measurements of their core narrative components alongside identification of metrics of sustainability.

### Narrative Components

- **Context**: Establishes the historical or current perception of a situation
- **Complication**: Introduction of perceived tensions or complications (positive or negative) that demand action or change
- **Call to Action**: Situates and defines the Call to Action as a benefit to subscribers
- **Resolution**: Language that urges the audience to do or believe something in order to resolve a conflict or bring about desired change

### Emerging Narrative Metrics

- **Sustained Presence**: Observation of narrative elements emerge over a period of time, indicating staying power
- **Relevance**: The Call to Action has a direct implication within the landscape’s focus
- **Coherence**: Content exhibits similarities both in narrative components and in linguistic patterns
- **Volume**: Volume of content meets narrative threshold and meaningfully shapes the landscape

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PROTAGONIST
Liberal Echo Chamber

Colleges have always been liberal, but I thought conservatives like me still had a welcome place on campus and a voice in the lecture halls. Now, I’m not so sure. Every day on the news, I see coverage of yet another ridiculous protest that interrupts purposeful learning, like ones over whether Mexican food in the cafeteria is “cultural appropriation” or if there should be trigger warnings included within great pieces of literature. I’ve even seen professors leading the charge, denigrating conservative politicians or our troops. When you go to college, you should expect an encompassing and exhaustive education. Your views should be challenged, rather than sheltered in some safe-space echo chamber. Yet today, colleges don’t educate, they indoctrinate. We must break the hegemony liberals have over academia. If colleges do not respect and include all views, they will continue to undercut the purpose of an education and drag this country down the drain.

Key Themes
- Left-leaning biases in academia
- Questioning of certain studies, especially those involving identity politics and cultural warfare

Sentiment & Emotions
- ANGRY about perceived open disrespect of conservatism
- EXASPERATED over the “coddling” of students

Subscriber Voice
“The bias is undeniable: Left-wing professors and students predominate, while conservative thought is often ignored, sometimes marginalized, and occasionally forbidden by oppressive speech codes or threatening mobs.”

Colleges fail to educate when they refuse to uphold intellectual diversity.
Landscape Reflects Narrative Concerns Over the Integrity of Options

- Reflecting a steady increase throughout 2017, *Uneven Playing Field* became the highest impact narrative in the landscape as the Department of Justice’s decision to investigate potential discriminatory effects of affirmative action prompted widespread debate.
- *Buyer Beware* nearly tripled in impact over last quarter, sparked by a spirited discussion around the perceived value of various postsecondary credentials.
- A new narrative, *Liberal Echo Chamber*, emerged with 9% impact, indicating that long-held perceptions of liberal bias in academia may prompt a loss of trust in higher education and drive decreases in enrollment.

### Narrative Impact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uneven Playing Field</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<td>Buyer Beware</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Protect Public Education</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education for Employment</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinking Without Support</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Echo Chamber</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoners as Pupils</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Dream Deferred</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Examples of Resonant Stories in Narrative Landscape

Buyer Beware / New Business Models
After Decades of Pushing Bachelor’s Degrees, US Needs More Tradespeople (Hechinger)
No Bachelor’s Degree? No Problem – 30M Jobs In The US Require Less Than A BA (WGBH)

Uneven Playing Field / Access and Affordability
How German Higher Education Controls Costs (WGBH)
A Faster, Cheaper Master’s Degree (WGBH/NPR):
As Decision Day Looms, Students Struggle With College Choices (WGBH/Hechinger)
College Decision Ceremony Mirrors NCAA’s National Signing Day (WGBH/Hechinger)

Liberal Echo Chamber
At Wellesley, An Effort To Burst The Liberal Bubble (WGBH)
How to Use Narrative Research: Deploy Strategy Types

**Attach**: propagate revised narrative with explicit role for your issue so stakeholders associate narrative with your cause

**Avoid**: refuse to engage narrative and stop actions that have previously unintentionally triggered your association with it

**Reframe**: change logic of unfavorable narrative for a more favorable call to action that benefits your issue

**Connect**: two or more narratives that have seemingly complementary components that could be mutually strengthened by each other

**Create**: take advantage of whitespace in the narrative landscape to plant and grow a new narrative among stakeholders

**Amplify**: deploy resources and messengers to articulate narrative as-is to increase its impact among stakeholders
Cognitive Biases Influence Beliefs

Natural human biases and tendencies affect how people interpret and process new information. Developing your own effective narratives requires you to leverage these biases to increase impact.

**Confirmation Bias**
We are more likely to believe ideas we find familiar, seek evidence that confirms opinions we already have, and discount evidence that counters what we believe. In fact, counter-evidence, no matter how credible, actually makes us “dig in our heels” and hold our opinions even more strongly.

**Familiarity**
Iideas that sound familiar are viewed as more credible and truthful.

**Framing Effects**
“Packaging” communications in a favorable or unfavorable context will change the audience’s impression.

**Causality**
We are wired to see cause and effect, actors and intentions, where there may be none.

**Simplicity**
We are attracted to simple explanations of complex situations, and we are much more likely to attach to ideas we can readily remember.

**Triggers**
Words are connected in our minds to a complex network of ideas and feelings.
Influencing Narratives

• Facts and data are not enough; emotional connections are key
• Don’t just tell—show human impact
• Frame your own meta-narrative shaped by cognitive biases—and use it as a filter
• Connect respectfully to genuine anxieties underlying existing narratives
• More solutions; fewer blame/problem-oriented stories
• Connect “education” stories directly to narratives about social mobility and economic opportunity (Big-idea first rather than education-first messaging)
• Don’t only rely on traditional media sources or outreach approaches (original content; pushed onto social media or alternative media platforms)
• Think Characters and scenes. “Someone is doing something for a reason.”