



# Strategies for Communicating the Importance of Liberal Education

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Colleges and universities have let others – usually critics – tell a disparaging story about liberal education. To recapture that narrative, we must be proactive in explaining who we are, what we do, and why our work is important. This worksheet is intended to help you think through ways of creating a meaningful message not just about liberal education, but about your department, school, program or university.

## Where to start

A basic communication plan starts by articulating an audience, a purpose, and a strategy.

- ❖ **Audience:** Whom do you want to reach? We have many audiences for liberal education: students, parents, donors, colleagues, administrators, legislators, and the public. You may want to reach others, as well.
- ❖ **Purpose:** What is your goal? In broad terms, you may want to make a case for the importance of liberal education. More specifically, you may want students to enroll in your program, donors and legislators to fund your program, and colleagues, administrators and the public to support your program.
- ❖ **Strategy:** How will you reach your goal? A strategy generally has many components built around a core message. It considers ways to communicate that message (including word of mouth, publications, websites, video, audio, and social media), and how those components will work together and complement one another.

## Questions to consider

Before you create a message, reflect on what your program is, why it is unique, and why it is important. Then consider your audience, the reason you want to reach that audience, and how best to reach that audience. Here are some things to consider:

- ❖ **How do you define liberal education?**
  - This isn't a one-size-fits-all answer, and the way you answer can help articulate your strengths and values.
- ❖ **What makes your school, department or program unique?**
  - A message alone is worthless unless you can back it up with concrete examples and persuasive arguments.
    - What are your core values, and how do those guide your work?
    - What instructors, course design, teaching strategies, facilities or other things help you stand out?

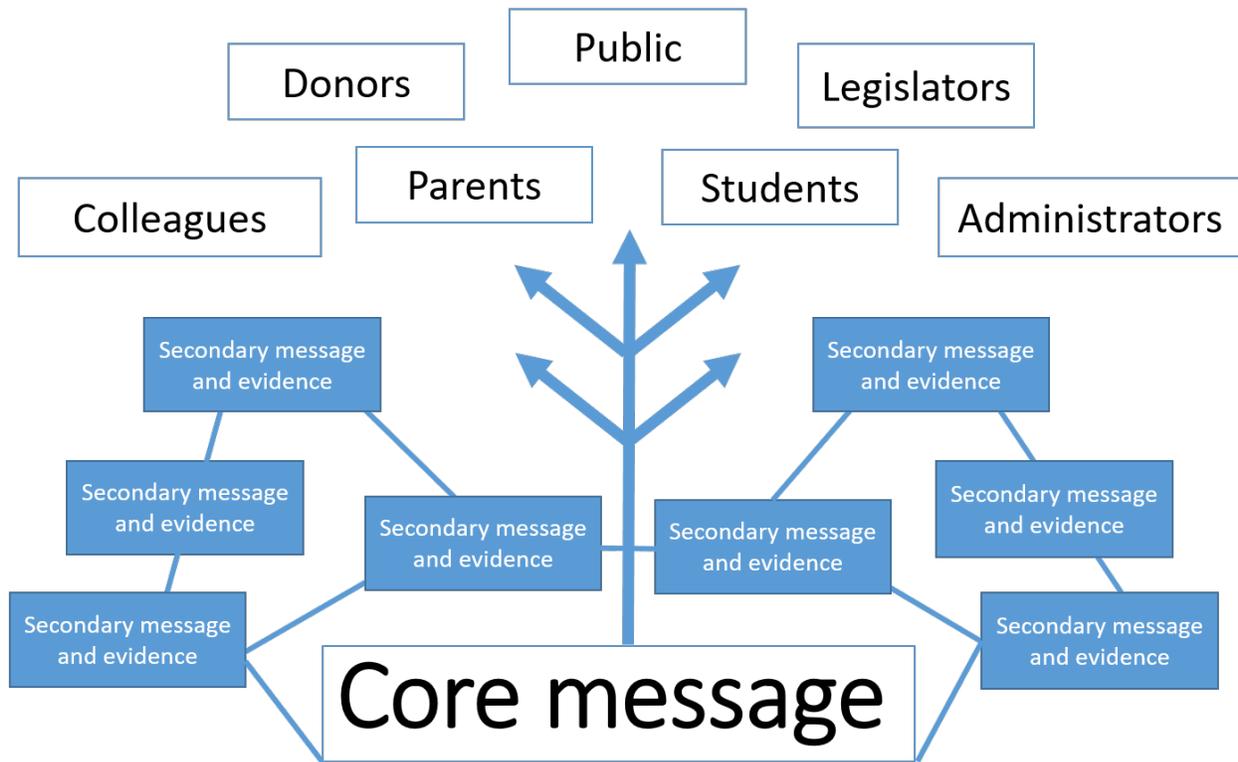


- What will students in your program do and how they will learn?  
This is crucial because it speaks to the *process* of education, those day-to-day activities that students will engage in.
- What success stories can you offer about students and alumni?  
These stories provide concrete examples for students and parents.
- ❖ **What is your audience?**
  - You probably have many audiences that need different messages. What does each need to hear?
- ❖ **How can you best reach that audience?**
  - Again, there is no single answer, so you should reach out to each audience in the most effective way. For instance, students consume information in vastly different ways from donors. Parents get information from different sources than administrators or legislators.

## Creating your message

Once you have considered the difficult questions of identity and values, and identified your audience, you can start to create your message. Create a core message with many branches you can draw on for different audiences. (See the chart on the next page.)

- ❖ **What is the story you want to tell?**
  - We all have stories to tell, but too often we let others tell stories about liberal education. So what is the story of your department, program, school or university?
  - Much of what we need to convey to students and parents involves teaching and learning. Unfortunately, this is a story that most university communications departments ignore. That makes it all the more important to explain. Here are a few things to consider:
    - What innovative teaching strategies does your department or university use? Are instructors using evidence-based teaching practices, high-impact practices, and other means that have proved effective in helping students learn?
    - How do buildings and classrooms provide settings for effective learning?
    - Do students have the flexibility of hybrid and online courses? If so, how do those formats help students learn?
    - What role does the advising staff play in helping students choose a coherent schedule of classes and in keeping students on track to graduate?
    - What skills will students learn in your program, and how will those skills help students once they leave college?
    - How will a liberal education lead to a job? How will you help them?
    - Will the jobs students get allow them to pay off loans?
    - Why should students choose liberal education over a professional degree?



***A model for message distribution.*** Develop a core message and then add secondary messages, examples and evidence for different audiences.

❖ **Create a core message.**

- Think in terms of a soundbite, an elevator speech or talking points for a particular audience. Those of us in academia don't generally think that way – and don't like to think that way. Pithy comments resonate with the public and stick in people's minds, though.
- Creating a core message doesn't mean you should rely on simplistic, empty slogans. Rather, a core message provides a starting point when you explain the mission and the purpose of liberal education and your program to prospective students and their parents; donors, and other important constituencies.

❖ **Branch out from that message with substantive examples.**

- Think of your message as a tree. (See the chart above.) The core message anchors and supports many offshoots. Put together, those elements provide form and substance.
- Those branches add to a core message, but they also provide different messages for different audiences. They also provide specific examples that the audience can relate to.

❖ **Emphasize *why* and *how* rather than *what*.**

- This is advice I give to instructors about teaching, but it applies here, too. The *what* of a program is certainly important, but lists of classes, course



- topics, and course requirements don't convey why liberal education is important or how students will learn and use the skills associated with it.
- This is especially important today because students and parents want to know *why* they should choose your school or major and *how* students will use those skills after graduation.
- This approach is crucial in articulating the value of liberal education. Those of us on the inside understand that value and believe in its importance. That means little if we can't explain it to those on the outside, including our critics.
- ❖ **Use concrete, accessible language.**
  - Avoid academic jargon and emphasize points that your audience can easily understand and remember.

## Distributing your message

Think in terms of webs of communication. That is, who is connected to whom and how can you reach key influencers who will help your message spread? How do different types of media complement one another or reach unique audiences? How can you use these approaches in tandem?

- ❖ **Talk about liberal education**
  - Word of mouth is an important means of spreading any message. Talk about liberal education with prospective students and parents, as well as donors, employers, graduates, administrators and colleagues.
  - Write to legislators about what liberal education means and what students are learning.
  - Invite key constituencies to campus and classes so they get a clearer picture of what you are doing.
  - Make sure current students understand what liberal education is and how it will help them in the future.
  - Draw on graduates for testimonials about the value of liberal education.
- ❖ **Write about your teaching**
  - University communications offices tend to focus on research, awards, and anything they think will convey prestige. Few of them put teaching into that category. For students, though, teaching and learning are at the core of liberal education. So it's crucial that we help others understand why teaching is important, what approaches instructors are using, and how high-quality teaching helps students learn. Teaching is something that most people relate to, so writing or speaking about your work can help strengthen ties to your community.
  - Here are some places you might reach out to:
    - *University publications*, including alumni newsletters and magazines.
    - *Blogs and social media*.
      - Share interesting photos or videos from class.



- Engage students in projects that help spread word about liberal education.
- *Local, regional and national media.*
  - Write op-ed pieces that explain liberal education or that push back against the criticism of liberal education. (See below.)
- ❖ **Reach out to local media**
  - Contact local newspapers, television stations, magazines and other media outlets with story ideas.
    - Class projects, service learning, and guest speakers provide “events” to cover, but pitch stories about innovative teaching and broader issues surrounding liberal education.
    - Activities with visual aspects are often easier to pitch, especially for television.
- ❖ **Share material with AAC&U.**
  - The organization posts links on the Liberal Education News Watch section of its website. <https://aacu.org/liberal-education-news-watch>

## Writing an op-ed piece

One way to apply what you’ve learned from this webinar is to write an op-ed piece about liberal education for your local newspaper or a local or national website. Here’s a relatively easy approach. As with other material for a general audience, avoid academic jargon, write in active voice, and use concrete examples.

- ❖ **Start with a headline**
  - Headlines that start with numbers tend to draw a lot of attention online because readers want to see how your list compares with theirs. Headlines that promise to explain “how” or “why” also work well.
    - *How liberal education is leading us into the future*
    - *10 job skills at the core of liberal education*
- ❖ **Create an opening that draws readers in**
  - The headline may get readers to your article, but it’s up to you to keep them engaged once they are there. The opening, or lead, of an op-ed piece should draw readers into a story. Within a couple of paragraphs, it should explain the focus of the article and why what you have to say is important.
    - **Example:** *Liberal education has taken a beating over the last 20 years.*
    - **Example:** *Liberal education has nothing to do with liberal politics.*
- ❖ **Use numbered or bulleted paragraphs to explain**
  - After the opening and overview, move into a list supports your argument and provides the elements the headline promised.
- ❖ **End with a memorable point**
  - You might reiterate a point from the introduction, urge people to take action, or simply leave them with something to think about.



## Readings and resources

*There are many excellent resources to help you think about ways to speak and write about liberal education. Here are some I'd recommend.—Doug Ward*

Association of American Colleges and Universities. "2018-22 Strategic Plan."  
<https://www.aacu.org/about/strategicplan>

Association of American Colleges and Universities, "Making the Case for Liberal Education." <https://www.aacu.org/leap/making-the-case>

*Bloom's Sixth* <http://cteblog.ku.edu/>. *This is my blog for the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas. I write frequently about innovative teaching techniques, the importance of good teaching, and the future of higher education.*

Cronon, William. "Only Connect . . . The Goals of a Liberal Education," *The American Scholar* Vol. 67, No. 4 (Autumn 1998): 73-80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41200203>.

Davis, C., et al., "Social Media in Higher Education: A Literature Review and Research Directions," Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona, and Claremont Graduate University, 2012. <https://works.bepress.com/hfdavis/2/>

"Essential Learning Outcomes." Association of American Colleges & Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes>

Estes, Jenelle. "User-centric vs. Maker-centric Language: 3 Essential Guidelines," Nielsen Norman Group, 28 September 2013. <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/user-centric-language/>

Hill, Robert. "Thirty Years After Allan Bloom's Classic *The Closing of the American Mind: The Liberal Arts and What It Means to Be College Educated in 2018*," *The Evollution*, 21 March 2018. <https://evollution.com/programming/teaching-and-learning/thirty-years-after-allan-blooms-classic-the-closing-of-the-american-mind-the-liberal-arts-and-what-it-means-to-be-college-educated-in-2018/> *Hill looks into this question: How did the liberal arts disciplines go from once holding tremendous cachet to become a punching bag for politicians who continue to propagate the notion that liberal arts degrees cannot lead to jobs?*

"The LEAP Challenge." Association of American Colleges & Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/leap-challenge>

Skwarecki, Beth. "How to Write Like James Comey," *Lifehacker*, 8 June 2017. <https://lifehacker.com/how-to-write-like-james-comey-1795924247> This uses the work of the former FBI director to explain ways of writing that appeal to a general audience.

Ward, Doug. "Process Over Product," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 18, 2013.  
<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/07/18/colleges-need-emphasize-learning-over-credentials-essay> *This article elaborates on the product, process, promise model I spoke about in the webinar.*

"What Is a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Liberal Education?" Association of American Colleges & Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/leap/what-is-a-liberal-education>

Wiltenburg, Robert. "Liberal and Practical Education in the Twenty-First Century," in *Centennial Conversations: Essential Essays in Professional, Continuing, and Online Education*. University Professional and Continuing Education Association, 2018.  
<https://upcea.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Centennial-Conversations-Essential-Essays-in-Professional-Continuing-and-Online-Education.pdf>

Writing for the Web. Nielsen Norman Group. <https://www.nngroup.com/topic/writing-web/>  
*This is a collection of articles about online writing from one of the top researchers in online usability.*