



**PRO
DEMOCRACY**
narrative playbook

NARRATIVE + MESSAGE GUIDE

Higher Education + Democracy

A NEW NARRATIVE TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES



AUGUST 2026

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Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. As part of that commitment, Lumina is working toward a system that prepares people for informed citizenship and success in a global economy.



Development of the core Pro-Democracy Narrative was supported in part by:



INTRODUCTION

Across the country—and around the globe—the majority of people believe democracy is the best form of governance. At the same time, many Americans are disappointed with how it does not always live up to its promise or provide all people with the freedoms, fairness, and opportunity they expect in a democracy.

Powerful narratives can advance or undermine democratic values, norms, and freedoms. They are the levers used by people across the political spectrum to make progress on every social issue, from health care, education, and religious liberty to economic opportunity, environmental justice, and civil rights. Narratives can decrease or increase polarization and they can either strengthen or weaken opportunities for progress and trust in our system of government and each other.

Democratic values, principles, and institutions are key to advance and protect our freedoms. Democracy means showing up for each other. It needs connection and collaboration to survive, systems that serve us all and places where, at their best, people put democratic promises into practice, building communities of care across differences. Higher education in the United States, in all its forms—community colleges and HBCUs, research universities and trade programs, small liberal arts schools and large public systems—is one of those places. From campus green to virtual classroom, lab to library, stadium to symposium, they are places where communities gather, ideas get tested against reality, and the crucial work of building a more equitable society actually happens.

That work is unfinished, and these institutions have not always been accessible or just. But at their core, colleges and universities remain anchor points in both rural towns and urban centers, trusted partners across industries and professions, and venues for the fundamental civic infrastructure that powers our democracy: candidate forums and polling sites, workforce training and community partnerships, and the ongoing effort to bring people from all walks of life together into fuller participation in the society we share. When higher education is strong, accessible and trusted, more people can participate in shaping our collective future together.

This narrative and message guide to advance higher education and democracy was developed based upon extensive research and in collaboration with practitioners from the field to ensure our messages, stories and data points can better make the case for higher education's foundational role in strengthening our democracy, and democracy's role in making sure our institutions of higher ed live up to their promise and potential. It is part of the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook, a non-partisan and collaborative initiative helping a broad coalition of organizations, associations, leaders, and communities advance an effective narrative to increase support for democratic principles. The initiative recognizes that powerful narratives aiming to delegitimize democratic norms—and intentionally seek to increase polarization—are an increasing trend both here in the United States and around the world.

To help advance a proactive democracy narrative and to better counter threats, the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook's partners have conducted extensive multi-methodology scans, and analysis of the most dominant and salient pro-democracy and pro-authoritarian narratives in 12 countries on five continents, including the United States. Based on this formative research, we developed, tested, and refined a set of effective pro-democracy narratives, grounded in core values and complete with supporting message frameworks. This research—and the Freedom Matters narrative arising out of it—has served as the foundation for the narrative and messaging described in this guide. As with the broader narrative and message resources created as part of the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook, we are openly sharing this guide (and similar guides focused on other issues) to help advocates across all sectors shift hearts, minds, and norms in support of democratic values. Narrative and messaging guides, research, tools, and resources are available at [Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook](#).



CORE VALUES

Values are the deeply held beliefs that ground a narrative, connect it to what people care about, and increase their likelihood of attention, adoption, and action. These nine core values come from extensive pro-democracy narrative research and resonate across the political and ideological spectrum.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	FEARLESSNESS / STRENGTH
REPRESENTATION	RESPONSIBILITY	SAFETY / SECURITY
HONESTY	PROSPERITY	FAMILY / BELONGING

FREEDOM	Connects with the broad range of freedoms that are important to people and are core democratic principles. These include the right to think and speak freely without fear, to worship as you choose, to exercise self-determination, to pursue liberation, and to live free from preventable harm. Recognizing that freedom is not currently guaranteed for all people, this value also evokes the aspirational value of a free society for all people.
FAIRNESS	Embodies justice, equity, and dignity for all people so that everyone has a chance to live the life they choose. It reflects the principle that everyone should be subject to the same rules under the law, regardless of their race, identity, background, position, or power. It also recognizes that people start from different places and face different barriers that must be removed and addressed to make it possible for everyone to have a real chance to thrive. Fairness also demands that systems are held accountable when they fall short.
FEARLESSNESS/ STRENGTH	A reflection of the strength, courage, and bravery that people like to associate with the American spirit—acknowledging that not everyone can be fearless in every context. It acts as a direct refutation of the fear-based appeals that authoritarians employ in their narratives and messaging.
REPRESENTATION	Reflects a commitment to equal participation, inclusion, personal agency, informed consent, and the ability to actively participate and have a voice in governance. It also reflects the belief that those entrusted with public power should represent the interests of the people, uphold democratic rules and norms, and remain accountable to those they serve.
RESPONSIBILITY	Connects with the idea that freedom is not just a right, but comes with the responsibility to respect and help protect the freedom of others. It also reflects the importance of being civically active, standing in solidarity with one's community, and the responsibilities of governments to their people, and of people to participate in democracy.

SAFETY/SECURITY	Defined in a broad sense in terms of security and safety, including security for individuals, their families, and their community's economic security, and cultural/identity security.
HONESTY	Associated with truth, trust, trustworthiness, authenticity, openness, access to information, and transparency. This value is triggered in contrast to concerns about corruption, lack of accountability, and disinformation.
PROSPERITY	Conveys benefits for the individual and the community. It affirms that everyone deserves the opportunity to thrive, pursue well-being, and build a good life for themselves and their families. It also means we all share in the prosperity we create together—strong communities, accessible jobs, and shared resources like quality education, health care, clean air and water, and safe neighborhoods that make opportunity possible. This value can also be related to macroeconomic progress for a community or country, such as economic vitality and growth.
FAMILY/ BELONGING	Connects people to their most important relationships, including family, kinship, and community, what they want for their children, and their sense of connection to—and responsibility for—each other. It can also uplift feelings connected to compassion, love, respect, tradition, and interdependence.

Pro-Democracy Narrative Pillars

While you are welcome to use the message frame described in this guide verbatim, it is not the only way to articulate a higher education and democracy narrative. This message guide is intended to provide pro-democracy advocates with grounding in a research informed narrative and message framework so that you can make your own decisions about how to articulate the narrative and adapt the messaging to best meet your specific needs and to resonate with your audiences and stakeholders.

To help you do so, the Playbook team drew on research conducted globally and in the United States to identify a set of pillars that are essential to effective pro-democracy narrative articulation and supporting messaging. We used these pillars in the development of the framework described in this guide.

We invite you to use these pillars in crafting your own messaging.

1. Center core pro-democracy values that are relevant to higher education and resonate across a broad audience, especially freedom.
2. Define inclusive and participatory democracy beyond elections, including the role played by Higher Ed in our democracy
3. Amplify benefits that are best advanced by higher education in a democracy.
4. Connect democracy and higher education to people's everyday lives.
5. Remind people that democracy is a shared responsibility.
6. Acknowledge that democracy and higher education aren't perfect and we can improve them together.

NARRATIVE AND MESSAGE FRAMEWORK

The core narrative message, shown below, is the most concise statement of the big idea, weaving together vision, benefits, challenges, and solutions. The narrative messages that accompany it—benefits, challenge, solution, and call to action—are the main ideas embedded in the narrative. You can use these messages as-is, but you don't have to; you can adapt them to your organization's voice, specific issues, and clear calls to action. You can mix and match them in any order. The aim is to align with the big ideas of the narrative so that your voice, and many other voices, contribute to a new way of seeing the world.

The core narrative and messages are color coded to align with the values described on pages 4-5.

Higher education **strengthen lives**, **communities**, and **our democracy**

CORE MESSAGE	Colleges and universities prepare people for good jobs , power local economies , and bring Americans 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 give people the knowledge and confidence to speak freely , engage in their communities , and take 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 .
CHALLENGES	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 .
SOLUTIONS	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 .
BENEFITS	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 .

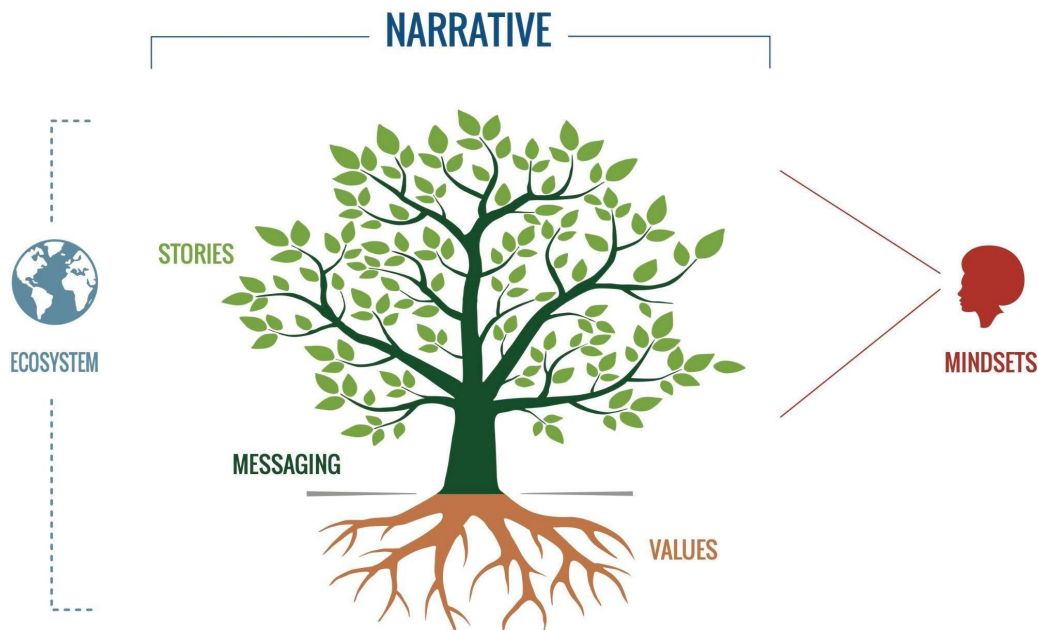
**CALL TO
ACTION**

Strengthening higher education is something **we can do together** to **expand opportunity** and keep **our communities connected** and **strong**. **By supporting it**, we help **ensure more people** have the **freedom** to learn, **contribute**, and **shape the future we share**.

APPENDIX A: NARRATIVE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Narrative¹ is a powerful tool to advance a more just, healthy, and sustainable world. Drawing on our decades of experience in social change, MG defines **NARRATIVE** as the articulation of a particular way of understanding the world and how it works that shapes what people think, believe, and do. Narrative informs our experiences, what we see as normative, how we filter what we believe, how we define problems and solutions, what we accept without challenge, and what we seek to change in systems, policies, and practices. No narrative exists in a vacuum. It is deeply influenced by—and in turn can influence changes in—the social, cultural, environmental, and political ecosystems all around us.

As seen in the illustration, narrative is created, expressed, and experienced through the following:



- **STORIES:** What people experience both literally (through social media, oral tradition, etc.) and figuratively (through policy, built environments, etc.) that aggregates to create a narrative.
- **MESSAGING:** The core ideas that provide the foundational structure for the narrative.
- **VALUES:** The deeply held beliefs that ground the narrative, connect it to what people care about, and increase their likelihood of attention, adoption, and action.
- People's **MINDSETS**, or collection of perspectives and attitudes, shape their receptivity or resistance to narratives and to changes in behavior, social norms, or policies/systems.
- All of this occurs within a narrative **ECOSYSTEM**—the contexts in which people are exposed to narrative, including their environment, lived experience, and their information echo chambers.

¹ This approach to narrative was created—and is deployed globally—by Metropolitan Group (MG) to build a just, healthy, and sustainable world. For more information about this approach, please visit [Narrative: A Powerful Lever for Social Change](#).

**APPENDIX B: NARRATIVE
APPLICATION WORKSHEET**

This worksheet is designed to help you create messages specific to your issue, audience, and call to action, aligned with the narrative.

Part 1 outlines your messaging goals, the audiences you want to engage, and what your audiences need. These questions are evergreen and can guide any of your communications.

Part 2 creates the message that is relevant to your context and audiences, layering in examples, stories, and data.

Part 1: Planning

Answer these questions before you develop messages. Then, after you draft messages, return to these questions to confirm or refine your communication.

1.1 Goal for your messaging: What do you want your messaging to help accomplish, e.g., what changes in understanding and/or actions? (This will inform the call(s) to action you will craft in Part 2.)

1.2 Audiences: Who is in a position to take the actions necessary to accomplish this goal?

1.3 Communication channels/messengers: What communication channel(s) will be most effective for reaching your audience? Who is the most effective (i.e., trusted) messenger for this communication? Or, who is the person already identified as the messenger (e.g., the person delivering a speech or presentation)? What are the strengths and limitations of the communication channel?

Communication Channels	Messengers

1.4 Audiences' values: Based on what you know from research—or can surmise from experience—identify which of the following core values are likely to be most motivating to your audiences.

✓	CORE VALUES	✓	CORE VALUES
	FREEDOM		SAFETY/SECURITY
	FAIRNESS		HONESTY
	FEARLESSNESS/STRENGTH		PROSPERITY
	REPRESENTATION		FAMILY/BELONGING
	RESPONSIBILITY		

Part 2: Message development

This section helps you apply the Human and Civil Rights Pro-Democracy Narrative to build messages for your particular issue. **Refer to the core narrative below and the supporting messages on pages 6-7.**

Higher education **strengthen lives, communities, and our democracy**

Colleges and universities **prepare people for good jobs, power local economies, and bring Americans 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 give people the knowledge and confidence to **speak freely, engage in their communities, and take 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.**

In crafting your message, **refer to the tips on pages 12-14** and remember the pillars:

- ☐ Center core pro-democracy values that resonate across a broad audience, especially fairness and freedom to speak, worship, organize, vote, and help shape the decisions that affect our lives.
- ☐ Define inclusive and participatory democracy beyond elections.
- ☐ Amplify benefits that are best advanced in a democracy.
- ☐ Connect democracy to people's everyday lives.
- ☐ Remind people that democracy is a shared responsibility.
- ☐ Acknowledge that democracy isn't perfect and we can improve it together.

TIPS	CORE MESSAGE (the summary)
<i>What is the most important idea you want your audience to remember?</i> <i>Include it here, trying to be as clear and direct as possible, making sure to frame the issue in ways that are relevant to your audience.</i>	

TIPS	CHALLENGE
<i>How would you define the problem or challenge you seek to address? Think of the tangible ways this problem impacts your stakeholders and audiences.</i> <i>Describe the situation here in ways that would be relevant to your audience. Consider references to local examples, if relevant.</i>	

TIPS	SOLUTION
<i>How can this problem or challenge be resolved in ways that reflect the identified core values (freedom, fairness, honesty, etc.)?</i> <i>Think about describing the solution in ways that would be perceived as relevant by your audience.</i> <i>Be sure to reference things the government can/should do, as well as actions that people might take to be part of the solution.</i>	

TIPS	BENEFITS
<i>How would your stakeholders and audiences benefit from your proposed solution? Identify benefits that are both tangible (e.g., access to health care or housing) and intangible (promoting freedom or fairness, access to opportunity, etc.).</i> <i>Think about ways people would benefit both individually and collectively.</i>	

TIPS	CALLS TO ACTION
<i>What specific, tangible, and realistic actions can your stakeholders and audiences take, and/or what can they demand of their government to help manifest the solution described above?</i> <i>Consider actions that can be taken both individually and collectively.</i>	

Once you have completed your message framework, use it to inspire the content of your communication. You might find it useful to periodically review this worksheet and make adjustments or refinements over time, based on your use of it and response from your audiences.

**APPENDIX C: GUIDELINES FOR
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

Decades of work in the development, dissemination, and evaluation of communication to create a more just, healthy, and sustainable world has led to the identification of six guidelines that make communication more effective. These guidelines are not unique or specific to pro-democracy communication; they can and should be considered “universally” applicable to all social purpose communication.

When used in alignment with the narrative and messaging pillars described above, however, they can help create stronger pro-democracy communication that is:

- **VALUES-BASED:** Center or highlight core values in all communications.
- **ASSET-FRAMED:** Focus on opportunity and benefits (assets) instead of challenges and shortfalls (deficits).
- **RELATIONAL, NOT TRANSACTIONAL:** Use language that focuses on what matters to people.
- **ACCESSIBLE:** Use everyday, easy-to-understand language.
- **CULTURALLY RELEVANT:** Use a cultural context lens when applying narrative and messaging, and in crafting stories.
- **ACTION-ORIENTED:** In your call to action, provide the specific actions that you would like your audience to take.

For more details on the Guidelines for Effective Communication, click [here](#).

**APPENDIX D:
ABOUT METROPOLITAN GROUP**

Metropolitan Group

the power of voice

Metropolitan Group (MG) and its sister company, Impacto Social Metropolitan Group (ISMG), are full-service, strategic, and creative global agencies that research, design, test, implement, and evaluate social impact initiatives. MG/ISMG develops and iterates innovation models on the impacts of narratives and social norms on policy, practice, behavior, attitudinal and culture change.

Our recent narrative work domestically and globally has included researching, developing, testing, and/or implementing new narratives to:

- Promote democracy and address rising authoritarianism in 12 countries on five continents, including North America.
- Address structural racism, advance environmental justice, promote reproductive freedom, increase health equity, and support healthy and sustainable food systems in the United States.
- Counter impunity and corruption, defend civic space, advance gender equity, address gender violence, and bolster support for addressing gross human rights violations in Mexico.
- Advance women's rights in Tunisia.
- Promote democracy and defend civic space in El Salvador.
- Advance adoption of clean and renewable energy standards in the United States and Europe.
- Shift narratives about individual wealth and economic growth to shared prosperity and collective well-being.

MG and ISMG partner with local, national, and international organizations to co-create and design social and behavior change (SBC) strategies to advance human rights and to build resilience against authoritarian and anti-democratic narratives that erode public trust in democratic principles and institutions. We work with public agencies, nongovernmental organizations, entrepreneurs, and the private sector. MG is the coordinating partner of the [Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook](#), an initiative to build open-source narrative infrastructure to support liberal democracy

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**APPENDIX E:
ABOUT SPITFIRE**

Spitfire is a woman-owned and woman-led strategic communication and advocacy firm rooted in the core principles that everyone belongs and has the power to spark change. For over 24 years, Spitfire has been the partner of choice for more than 3,000 organizations, from the grassroots to the global stage, because we lead with strategy and deliver results. In recent years, Spitfire has worked with leaders, institutions and coalitions across higher education to ensure that higher education is free from political interference, the free exchange of ideas is respected and that all students can succeed.

Project team:

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**APPENDIX F:
ABOUT PACE**

[Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement](#) (PACE) is a national core partner in the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook. PACE helps to disseminate learnings, make connections across philanthropy, and advance application of the Pro-Democracy Narrative across diverse movements and philanthropies centering civic engagement.

PACE is a philanthropic laboratory for funders seeking to maximize their individual and collective impact on democracy and civic life in America. The PACE community achieves this through learning, experimenting, collaborating, and modeling vibrant civic space. PACE (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement) is a membercentric philanthropic laboratory for funders seeking to maximize their impact on democracy and civic life in the United States. Our members share a belief that America will be healthier and more successful, resilient, and productive, if democracy is strong and the office of citizen is treated as central to how it functions.

PACE leads the [Civic Language Perceptions Project](#) that seeks to understand people's perceptions of the language associated with civic engagement and democracy work in the United States.

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