

Shift Terms, Not Values

Reaching Persuadable Audiences
on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion
in Higher Education

Overview

Leaders of higher education institutions are responsible for cultivating an environment on campus that fosters new knowledge, prepares students to enter the workforce, stimulates students' curiosity for learning, enables the success of all students and creates community. At this moment, leaders and institutions in higher education are the focus of an ongoing racialized misinformation attack on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and programs and the students, personnel and faculty who support those principles.

The purpose of this messaging guide is to empower field leaders by providing messaging and communications tools that assist them alongside other stakeholders and staff on campus in defining and defending diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in ways that resonate rather than agitate. Our goal is to offer messaging that is clear, concise and proven to move **persuadable audiences and decision-makers** across political ideologies to understand the purpose of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts; scale back attacks; and ultimately support academic freedom and higher education that is designed for the success of all students and our democracy.

To avoid this guidance being weaponized against our shared efforts, we ask that you please share this message guide with discretion and refrain from posting it on social media or other online venues. If you would like further information on the research that informs this messaging, [see here](#). To ask any clarifying questions or receive additional resources, please contact HigherEd@spitfirestrategies.com.

The content included is informed by thorough research led by Spitfire Strategies, who talked to dozens of stakeholders; conducted a landscape analysis; and, in partnership with HIT Strategies, held 12 focus groups with six distinct demographics (liberal Black, Latino and Asian registered voters; liberal white registered voters; conservative Black registered voters; conservative white registered voters; conservative Asian American and Pacific Islander registered voters; and conservative Latino general population) and an online survey of 2,000 people between Sept. 24 - Oct. 3, 2024.

Shift Terms, Not Values

One of the top findings in the research is just how much the opposition has effectively weaponized the phrase “diversity, equity and inclusion” and its acronym “DEI.” In our research, we found that both terms are alienating to participants across demographics and decreased support for the concepts behind DEI. We were successful at increasing support for the concepts behind DEI, however, when using language that describes the values and benefits of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts without naming them as such. In fact, after expressing vigorous support for the core concepts behind these efforts, as soon as we named that these values and benefits were exactly what diversity, equity and inclusion efforts ensure, the same focus group participants immediately dismissed the efforts as divisive, overly focused on race and often exclusionary of their experience. This was a consistent finding across our research methodologies and demographics of participants.

As extremists continue to manipulate the term “diversity, equity and inclusion,” we understand the instinct and desire to draw a proverbial line in the sand and double down on the term. Unfortunately, history and research both show that using words that many people do not understand and that oppositional forces have successfully defined simply doesn’t work — it instead undermines our goal of protecting and supporting this work and these goals. Replacing specialized jargon with common words that people use in their daily lives is a communications best practice. It is always beneficial to say what we mean in clear terms. Specifically, when speaking with persuadable audiences outside our base at this moment, it is essential to tap into aligned values using clear, concise words they can hear.

Similarly, our research found that the term “academic freedom” is often viewed as elitist and ambiguous and is not compelling across many audiences. There is not a shared

understanding of what it means. Instead, explaining the concept in descriptive language, such as “freedom to teach, study and pursue knowledge and research,” is a more helpful approach that allows for connection around shared values. Across both conservative and liberal participants in the HIT Strategies focus groups, there was a shared discomfort with the idea of universities being “prohibited” from engaging in activities such as funding DEI initiatives and programs. Participants felt that higher education institutions should have the autonomy to make their own decisions, even if participants did not fully agree with the implementation of policies. Again, we have the opportunity to build support around shared values by shifting our language.

Additionally, our research found that arguments about the value of higher education promoting democratic values or increasing civic participation are sometimes received as elitist, because these suggest that the only way to ensure civic engagement is to graduate from college. With 60% of the population not graduating from college, we cannot suggest that graduating or attending college is the only path to civic engagement or a healthy democracy. Similarly, arguments about colleges promoting a healthy democracy are received as politicized and raise fears about imposing a liberal political agenda. For persuadable audiences, our research found these arguments do not tap into the shared values and are not likely to be persuasive.

In the messaging below, we shift away from using the terms “diversity, equity and inclusion” and “academic freedom,” among others. When seeking to reach audiences outside of our base, we offer alternative language that maintains the values of the initiatives we all support. To be effective in this work, we are recommending that when you are communicating to persuadable audiences outside of the base, you shift your language but never your values.

Persuadable Audiences

Notably, this messaging is designed to move persuadable audiences only. It will not work to move the strong opposition that we define as nonpersuadable.

OUR PERSUADABLE AUDIENCES INCLUDE:

- State policymakers who are moderate or moderately conservative — not staunch opponents leading the weaponization of this work
- State policymakers in politically difficult climates who are facing consistent attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in higher education and who may be tempted to support legislation that limits diversity, equity and inclusion due to fear of political or legal retaliation or to protect other interests
- Administrators, faculty and staff in institutions of higher education who are moderate or moderately conservative — not staunch opponents leading the weaponization of this work
- Administrators, faculty and staff at institutions of higher education who work in politically difficult climates that are facing consistent attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and need to make the case to maintain their work
- Business leaders and other potential supporters of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in higher education who may withdraw prior support or remain on the sidelines due to fear of financial, political or legal retaliation or to protect other interests

The below messaging is likewise not designed to speak to allies and partners who actively advocate for protecting and expanding efforts and as such have a deep understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion and the importance of centering race in the work. These audiences understand the nuance and history behind your efforts and are far less susceptible to the opposition's disinformation. We instead hope that this guide will serve as a resource for members of your base that they can employ to persuade the audiences and decision-makers named above, whom we must reach to be successful in our efforts.

Values and Tone

While the opposition has intentionally corrupted the term “diversity, equity and inclusion,” audiences across backgrounds and demographics support the term’s core goals. To successfully reach persuadable audiences, it is critical to speak in terms of shared values and in a tone that invites your audience into the conversation. In our conversations with stakeholders and the focus groups that HIT Strategies conducted, values such fairness, opportunity, inclusion and competitiveness resonated with audiences across ideological lines. When communicating from common ground, we can convey a compelling moral argument for these programs and initiatives in simple and clear language. Reinforcing our audience’s values and striking the right tone are crucial elements to build support. Any communications should carefully consider these elements:

VALUES

Fairness: Frame diversity, equity and inclusion efforts as important because they provide all students, regardless of background, with a **fair chance** to learn and succeed. For conservative audiences, name that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts ensure everyone has a fair chance to demonstrate their merit.

Opportunity: Name the importance of **equal opportunity** in education and employment and access to resources and support for all students. To appeal to audiences across all ideological perspectives, emphasize that the **opportunity to succeed** is a right of all people.

Inclusion: Focus on the concept of inclusion over diversity, without using that specific term. Avoid any messages that suggest preferential treatment based on differences, including race. Instead focus on creating environments where **individuals from different backgrounds feel valued and respected**. This resonated across all audiences in our research.

tone

Be open to connecting around shared values: Research shows respondents across all ideological perspectives support examples of initiatives and policies that emphasize providing additional support for groups who don’t traditionally have access to equal opportunity because of where they come from, how much money they have or what they look like. Name specific examples of school initiatives or policies, such as accommodations for students with disabilities, that can help all students succeed no matter their backgrounds.

Avoid accusations and polarized terms: Our research shows that effective messaging requires clear and inclusive language to avoid ambiguity, moral superiority and polarization. Respondents prefer to avoid overly complex terms because they feel alienated by them. In particular, in our stakeholder interviews, we heard repeatedly that when attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion efforts were labeled “racist,” it actually fueled momentum to pass extreme legislation to shut down efforts. Our research leads us to believe language that is received as accusatory is likely to do more harm than good with persuadable audiences.

Acknowledge their part in the collective: Messaging should highlight how everyone benefits from efforts when we promote fairness and equal opportunities and create spaces where everyone can succeed. By engaging an inviting tone that acknowledges that the audiences we are speaking to are a part of this shared collective and encourages them to recognize the collective benefits of this work, we build support among persuadable audiences.

Core Messaging

The messaging below is intended to resonate across persuadable audiences. It is the foundation of our findings and what to return to as a touchstone as you develop your own materials.

In two instances below, we recommend leaning into the concepts or values behind inclusion and equity but not necessarily the term. We do so because the values of ensuring fairness and belonging in pursuit of stronger communities are something that tested well in the research. However, the politicization of the terms “inclusion” and “equity” raised flags among participants and pushed them away from our messaging.

Audiences:

These messages are intended for persuadable audiences (noted above). We do not recommend using this core messaging with nonpersuadables or the opposition leading attacks against diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. We do recommend that allies and partners working to protect and expand these efforts see and understand this messaging and ideally become well-equipped messengers when speaking to persuadable audiences. That said, you do not necessarily need to shift your language when speaking to your base audience.

Messengers:

These can include school officials, business leaders, community advocates or students (particularly unexpected messengers include students from rural areas and students who are veterans).

Summary:

Colleges, universities, community colleges and trade schools are responsible for creating an environment where learning is possible for students of all backgrounds, no matter where they come from, what they look like or how much money they have.

Messages

- **Explain equal opportunity:** Most of us agree that no matter where you come from, what you look like or how much money you have, everyone should have an equal opportunity to learn, secure a good job and provide for their families. But we also know that's not always the case.
 - By giving families that are working class, live paycheck to paycheck, or live below the poverty line support, we are ensuring they have equal access to these same opportunities.
- **Integrate the role that higher education plays in ensuring a fair shot:** Colleges, universities, community colleges and trade schools can help by removing barriers, such as the need for accessible facilities for students with disabilities and adding supports for first generation college students and military veterans, so that all students have a fair shot at reaching their potential.
 - *Additional examples that can be integrated to or replaced in the above message depending on your audience include:*
 - Labs and resources to improve the writing skills of students for whom English is not their first language
 - Opportunities for students to practice their faiths
 - Options for cultural activities such as Hispanic Heritage Month and Black History Month to ensure that all students feel welcomed
 - Access to housing
 - Offering child care for single parents
 - Increasing financial literacy
- **Pivot to the benefits to students:** Colleges are responsible for creating a stimulating environment and community where learning is possible so that all students can study and explore and are prepared to enter the workforce.
- **Introduce the concept of inclusion:** To create a culture where learning is possible, students of all backgrounds need to feel safe and seen enough to ask questions, explore ideas and learn from one another. Campuses should be a place where students feel a sense of mutual respect for each other across their differences, which will allow them to collaborate and learn together.
- **Name the benefits:** When colleges ensure that students are included and seen as people who can be successful, enrollment and graduation rates increase. That's why it's so important that institutions of higher education have the freedom to make their own decisions about how to pursue fair representation of students that reflects the real world.
- **Introduce concept of equity:** By offering truly equal opportunities for success, which can include but are not limited to ensuring the necessary levels of access to academic, professional, and financial resources to students who need it, public universities, colleges and trade schools will ensure that students from all backgrounds have a fair chance at reaching their full potential.

Message Frames for Specific Audiences

While the above core messaging is intended for all persuadable audiences (as listed above), the frames below are designed specifically to speak to one audience over another. We found in our research that the below frames tested particularly well with the named audience under each frame. These are not messages to transfer and use across all audiences but to give you additional guidance when speaking directly to moderate conservatives, business leaders, or libertarian policymakers or administrators respectively.

- **Frame 1:** Policies that stand in the way of fair opportunities for all students are causing harm to our local community.
 - **Audience:** Moderate conservatives
- **Frame 2:** A workforce with different backgrounds is good for business. Policies that allow for equal opportunities to access higher education make that possible.
 - **Audience:** Business leaders; moderate conservatives concerned about the local economy, employment rate and job growth
- **Frame 3:** Efforts to ban curriculum or areas of study and research are censorship and government interference.
 - **Audience:** Libertarian policymakers who are against government interference and censorship — notably, this is a small audience. You should not use this messaging with overall conservative policymakers. Research showed that, among conservative audiences, there is a sentiment that some censorship is needed to ensure that liberal ideologies do not indoctrinate students.

Frame 1: Policies that stand in the way of fair opportunities for all students are causing harm to our local community.

Audience: Moderate conservatives

Messengers: Officials from education institutions viewed as anchoring communities — community colleges, large public systems, historically Black colleges and universities, and minority-serving institutions — and trusted local community voices such as business leaders

Summary: Politics is getting in the way of what's best for local communities and fair opportunity.

Messages:

- **Name the need for access for all:** Every day, the people who make our local colleges run work to make sure all students have access to educational opportunities.
- **Name the value of higher ed:** We look to our local higher education institutions to anchor our communities and provide career and educational opportunities to keep towns and cities across the country alive.
- **Benefits to local communities:** Students enroll to gain skills to secure good jobs to provide for their families. Community and business leaders depend on local colleges as their talent development arm to overcome nursing and teacher shortages and prepare the workforce with the skills of tomorrow.
- **Name politics as a distraction:** Yet, politics is getting in the way of ensuring that every student who wants an education has a fair shot to get one — no matter their background. We should trust communities to know what is needed to ensure everyone has a fair opportunity **to gain skills that will help them get jobs** and help local employers have larger, skilled hiring pools.

Frame 2: A workforce with different backgrounds is good for business. Policies that allow for equal opportunities to access higher education make that possible.

Audience: Business leaders; moderate conservatives concerned about the local economy, employment rate and job growth

Messengers: Business leaders

Summary: Providing fair opportunities for all students is a means to build strong innovative teams for businesses.

Messages:

- **Name the benefit to students:** No matter your individual identity, the ability to work with people from different backgrounds is a necessary life skill that can make you a more qualified candidate for many roles and more likely to advance once hired.
- **Connect to values of business leaders:** As our society and our workforce are more and more made up of people from different backgrounds and experiences, employers increasingly understand the value of this skill because they need employees who can collaborate with a wide range of people to achieve shared goals.
- **Connect to higher education policies:** By supporting fair opportunities for all students in higher education, we are ensuring that the future workforce has experience collaborating alongside and building community with people from all backgrounds, setting them up for success in their careers and beyond.
- **Connect policies to business success:** Innovation is what makes American businesses competitive. It thrives on different perspectives and experiences. Policies that protect fair opportunities for all students create a hiring pool that comes from all different backgrounds, helping businesses build strong teams and making employees more likely to grow and succeed.
- **Connect to politicians' role:** Politicians must support policies that encourage business innovation and entrepreneurship by ensuring a competitive hiring pool. Those policies start with ensuring equal opportunity to higher education.

Frame 3: Efforts to ban curriculum or areas of study and research are censorship and government interference.

Audience: Libertarian policymakers who are against government interference and censorship — notably, this is a small audience. You should not use this messaging with overall conservative policymakers. Research showed that, among conservative audiences, there is a sentiment that some censorship is needed to ensure that liberal ideologies do not indoctrinate students.

Messengers: University administrators, faculty and staff; fellow libertarian policymakers

Summary: Colleges should have the authority to decide what is taught, learned and researched on their campuses without government interference.

Messages:

- **Explain academic freedom (without using that term):** Faculty and students should have the freedom to teach, study and pursue knowledge and research.
- **Frame limits to academic freedom as censorship:** Politicians dictating what students can study, write about or read in college is censorship, a threat to our freedoms and fundamentally un-American.
- **Lean into free speech:** In this country, we pride ourselves on our commitment to free speech where different perspectives are valued and everyone has equal opportunity to succeed, unlike other countries whose leaders censor what individuals can read, write or speak.
- **Lean into authority:** Colleges and universities should maintain their authority to do what they do best — determine what curriculum is taught on their campuses; what research their faculty conduct; and what services, offices and resources to offer students to guarantee their success.

Do's and Don'ts

Below you'll find a quick summary of our takeaways for easy reference that explain our messaging choices based on our research insights. This chart serves as a helpful reminder of words to embrace and words to replace when crafting your own messaging or to gut check materials or talking points before you finalize them for use with any of the above persuadable audiences.

Don't	Do	Why
Don't say: "diversity" "diverse perspectives" "diverse identities"	Do say: "fair representation" "different perspectives" "people of different backgrounds"	Naming "diversity" triggers audiences to think of race, which they experience as immediately divisive, likely due to how much the opposition has successfully weaponized "diversity, equity and inclusion." For some, it feels unnecessarily racialized or political, which they deem off-putting at best and offensive at worst. For others (the more conservative among them), it threatens their sense of fairness and the value they place in meritocracy. Replacing "diverse" with "different" helps bring people in, while naming fairness explicitly helps reinforce their key values.
Don't say: "equity"	Do say: "fair opportunity for all" "equal opportunity for all" "equal opportunity to succeed"	"Equality" both as a term and a concept resonates more deeply with our persuadable audiences over "equity." "Equity" has perhaps been too weaponized in its association with "diversity, equity and inclusion," and for some, it suggests preferential treatment. Leaning into equality and fairness resonates more deeply.
Don't say: "inclusion" "belonging"	Do explain what inclusion means by saying things like: "Students should be safe and seen enough to ask questions, explore ideas and learn from one another." "Students should be included and seen as people who can be successful, increasing graduation rates."	Of the three terms in "diversity, equity and inclusion," naming the importance of feeling "included" resonated more with persuadable audiences. We recommend speaking in plain language on what this means, like as seen here with feeling "safe and seen" or "included and seen as people who can be successful." Some receive the terms "inclusion" and "belonging" as communicating a liberal bias.
Don't say: "academic freedom"	Do say: "freedom to teach, study and pursue knowledge and research"	Across persuadable audiences, there is not a shared understanding of what the term "academic freedom" means. Explaining what it means in plain language offered clarity and resonated with most.

Don't	Do	Why
Don't label efforts as censorship with conservative audiences.	Label efforts as censorship only when communicating with libertarian audiences or audiences that are anti-government interference.	Among conservative audiences, there is a sentiment that some censorship is needed to ensure that liberal ideologies do not indoctrinate students. Despite valuing autonomy and authority, conservatives also believed that some government interference on policies in higher education institutions might be necessary. As such and as noted above, we only recommend using this frame with audiences who are against government interference.
Don't name race explicitly on its own.	Do use phrases like: “regardless of background” “people of all backgrounds.” Where possible, name race alongside other facets of identity or experience by using phrases like: “Equal opportunity for all across race, gender, income, etc.”	Persuadable audiences respond negatively or apprehensively to the direct mention of race, interpreting it too often to convey quotas or unfairness. They share the value of ensuring equal opportunity for all and understand that not everyone immediately has access to the same opportunities; however, solely focusing on race does cause apprehension and defensiveness for some.
Don't name the skill of understanding how to work with people from different backgrounds and identities defined as “marketable” or “attractive” to employers.	Do note that no matter an individual's identity, their ability to work with people from different backgrounds is “a necessary life skill” that can make them a more qualified candidate for many roles and more likely to advance once hired.	Centering benefits to employers over students reads in messaging as transactional and elicited a negative reaction. When using this frame, name benefits to students and employees.
Don't uplift the value of higher education as instilling democratic values, increasing civic engagement, or protecting or building a stronger democracy.	Do focus on the value of higher education providing an opportunity to collaborate alongside and build community with people from all backgrounds, setting students up for success in their careers and beyond.	Some audiences receive arguments about the value of higher education promoting democratic values or increasing civic participation as elitist, because these suggest that the only way to ensure civic engagement is to graduate from college.

Next Steps

For those interested, we have also developed an action toolkit that includes templates of needed materials — everything from talking points to template letters to university administrators pulling from the above messaging — and is available for distribution. If you are interested in learning more about the research or scheduling a training on how best to use this messaging, please feel free to email highered@spitfirestrategies.com.

About Spitfire

Spitfire is a woman-owned, strategic communications firm that has partnered with nonprofits and foundations working to make the world a better place for more than 20 years. Spitfire's values are rooted in one core principle: Everyone belongs and has the power to spark change. Our work reflects this. Our partners come to us with a desire to advance equity, save the planet from environmental destruction or create a society in which people can live their best possible lives — and sometimes all three at once. We help them build momentum and win. No matter the narrative or policy challenge needed, we'll put our heads together to navigate it.

