

# Lumina Foundation: Racial Equity In-depth Interview Analysis

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As Lumina Foundation explores how to effectively communicate about racial equity and message to those who don't typically think or talk about equity, we had conversations with leaders, communications experts and policy directors from Lumina grantees, including:

- The Education Trust
- Equal Measure
- HCM Strategists
- Institute for Higher Education Policy
- State Higher Education Executive Officers

Through conversations with Lumina Foundation grantees, we sought to better understand how grantees communicate about equity and inform an equity frame for the foundation and the field. Specifically, we sought to:

- Gain a better understanding of how grantees understand and describe equity.
- Learn grantees' insights and ideas for how to effectively communicate about racial equity, and challenges they face communicating about equity.
- Better understand grantees' reactions to and attitudes towards concepts for language about racial equity.
- Explore tools or resources that could help grantees address challenges they face when communicating about their work.

The insights that follow will inform language, image and engagement ideas to test with audiences and incorporate into an equity frame for the foundation and the field.

# Equity Allies

We identify those who are broadly open to and invested in equity as “allies” in the foundation’s work. Equity allies tend to fall into two groups:

## ACTIVISTS

Activists believe it is important to push the envelope and be explicit about race, achievement gaps and systemic racism in their and their organization’s communications. In their view, language can and must be a main driver to changing actions. Activists tend to be women and/or people of color who are more comfortable speaking and addressing race directly.

## ADVOCATES

Advocates tend to agree that race plays a factor in equity gaps, but are hesitant to engage the subject directly because it may alienate policymakers sensitive to the dispositions of white conservatives. The language they use is more heavily focused on economics rather than race, and they tend to use general and broad language when addressing racial gaps. Advocates rely on the progressive language of activists to create opportunities to elaborate and move terminology and conversations forward. Advocates are more likely to be allies working in conservative states and are not as comfortable addressing race explicitly.

For equity messages and tools to be most valuable, they should be flexible and versatile enough to help these different types of allies.

## What is Equity?

In our conversations, it is clear there is no shared definition of equity.

*“[Equity] means a whole lot of different things to different people, and not because we’re not clear. It’s because they don’t agree.”*

*“I tell people equity is like the new coconut water. Everyone is drinking it, but nobody knows what it is.”*

*“So many people are saying equity now, and we’re seeing ways in which people are saying it and attributing it in different ways. Equity [is spoken of] in income contexts but not racial contexts.”*

*“When we don’t have an explicit conversation about race, we can only get to surface agreement. And we end up back at the same place.”*

Allies are not working from a shared definition of equity, but use the term often in their work. This problem is recognized by allies but they are unsure how to solve it. When having conversations about equity, it is important for the Foundation to define your vision of equity, and your reasons for choosing it, to ensure everyone is on the same page.

## Grantees are looking for strong leaders to set the table on equity conversations.

While the partners we spoke to have strong feelings about what equity is, there isn't a consistent definition of or message on equity within the field that audiences understand. And some organizations and grantees are unable to be as race-forward as they'd like to be in their messaging because they are constrained by what their audiences will believe and support. They believe foundations play a unique role bringing general alignment to the field and being on the frontlines of fraught language debates about race and equity.

*"We have to have one drum, one sound. We can't be an organization, in the equity space, that doesn't. We have to get that right."*

*"[We need to] develop a coalition of those who feel the need to speak and want to, so that we can do it with a unified voice, and it can be shown to be more of a movement than just one person's opinion."*

*"I feel like Lumina has way more resources than we do, of course, but taking this and putting their resources to disseminate what you hear, [they can] build a campaign around it, continue to convene people to talk about it."*

### **IDEA** Lumina is uniquely positioned to set the table and be a leader in conversations about equity.

As a funder and a recognized leader in conversations about post-secondary education, Lumina has the opportunity to be race-forward—and support your messaging with stories about partners, students and grantees who are champions of Lumina's vision of equity. By crafting a definition of equity and sharing your explanation on your choice of language, you can pave the way for others to join a conversation around race and equity.

## Interviewees value specific language when talking about race and ethnicity, but some terms alienate those they are used to describe.

Respondents uniformly expressed uncertainty about the language they use internally and externally to describe racial and ethnic groups. Race-descriptive language is often alienating to whites but can also alienate the people it's used to describe.

The terms "*people of color*," "*brown*" and "*underrepresented*," for example, are not specific. As a result, some racial or ethnic groups do not see themselves reflected in those phrases, even if organizations intended to include them. While there is a preference for terms like *Latinx* and *Black* because of their inclusiveness, they can cause message consistency problems since data typically reflect terms found in the census, like "*Hispanic*" and "*African-American*."

<b>Underrepresented, Underprivileged</b>	Too general of a term, and can also be used to include identifiers other than race.
<b>Hispanic</b>	This term is used in the census however it is seen by advocates as being too broad and antiquated.
<b>Brown</b>	Very general term, could include too broad of an audience.
<b>People of Color</b>	Latino/Latina populations do not always see themselves reflected in this term.
<b>Latinx</b>	This term, used instead of Latino or Latina, is used to avoid gendering language. Though no interviewee took issue with it, some others are uncomfortable with its use. When used to explain data points, it's not accurate.
<b>Black</b>	Activists preferred this term—spelled with a capital “B”—because it's inclusive of all members of the African diaspora. However they expressed concern it could obscure the diversity that exists within the community.
<b>American Indian</b>	Although this term is used in policy, allies felt uncomfortable with this term because they did not believe it accurately reflected the wishes of the community.

*“We did focus groups with African American and Latino parents maybe three years ago. And we kept saying ‘people of color’ to Latino audiences, and to them people of color meant black people.”*

*“If ‘brown’ is meant to include everybody who is a person of color who is not black, then I think that some work needs to be done to develop some shared understanding of what is meant. If really what that means is Latino, or Hispanic, then it should say that.”*

*“When you say ‘brown,’ I don’t know what that means initially. That could mean Native, that could mean Latinx, that could mean interracial. Hispanic is a bit antiquated.”*

**IDEA** Consider the leadership role Lumina is willing to play when it comes to naming race and ethnicity. For example, Lumina could use language already found in the census, or could commit to using language it wants to see in the census.

## Words aren't the only tool to define equity: visuals makes the concept of equity less complicated without alienating potential allies with definitive language.

Partners often default to using the same “baseball field” image to illustrate equity. While this example is widely used and recognizable, it is an illustration of equity that might not resonate with all audiences. As we look to hold conversations on equity, it's important to visualize equity in practice.

*“There is a kind of an opportunity to visualize equity in new and better ways. So many people use some version of the kids on the blocks, looking at a field.”*

*“We're always looking for higher ed images that we can use that are great and diverse.”*

*“So we're very careful to show ... images where there's a sense of pride in the people that we're showing.”*

### **IDEA** Illustrate equity in a simple, novel way consistently in your messaging.

New visuals and photographs that illustrate both equity in practice, and the goal of equity, can help everyone see the future Lumina envisions. Additionally, images or graphics that are diverse and inclusive allow you and grantees to make language choices that are responsive to your unique audiences.

## Comparing the success of students of one race to an aspirational goal, as opposed to measuring them against students of other races, provides clear benchmarks and minimizes zero-sum thinking.

Messaging that compares the successes and progress of students of different races falls into the trap of using one race as a standard for success. When presenting and analyzing data, researchers often compare the achievement gaps of race/ethnicities to each other, usually underrepresented racial groups are compared to the success of white students. While this may be intended to highlight outcome disparities, this language also pits races and ethnic groups against each other.

*“Particularly because for a lot of progressives, or social justice activists, when you use the achievement gap language you then make white the norm, and everyone else is the other.”*

*“As long as the gap is to an aspirational goal and not to another targeted population. Because then you're comparing types of people to one another and that's not constructive.”*

*“[There needs to be a] unifying goal that is the aspirational goal that we have for an organization, a program, an initiative, a society, whatever it is. And then being very crystal clear about what variety of segments and target populations need in order to achieve that goal. So it's not comparing African-American and Latino student performance to white student performance.”*

### **IDEA** Create a goal statement that speaks to a shared aspiration to keep from relying on comparisons.

By reframing messages to measure students against an aspirational goal, you can more readily discuss differences in resources, opportunities and achievement without making potential allies defensive.

## Grading systems, score cards or messaging that highlights deficits in states or organizations to show equity gaps can make potential allies defensive and less likely to engage in conversations about equity.

While this method of data communication can identify states or organizations who need resources and support, it can prevent potential allies from engaging or supporting policies that promote equity.

*“[I was speaking to] a leader of higher education in a southern state that after [a] report was pretty critical of outcomes by race, ethnicity and denied the incredible improvements by family income and educational [in their state]... [he said] I’m tired of being referred to by them as a racist.”*

*“You don’t want to come out with such hard messaging that you alienate people that might be on the outer edges of the bell curve.”*

**IDEA** Lead with examples and narratives that connect to the shared aspirations of different communities. Highlighting states or organizations that others can aspire to and learn from can motivate others to follow those examples.

## When discussing equity with more conservative audiences, allies don’t identify specific individual actions or motivations that lead to inequity.

Instead, allies use messages that point to broken systems and the barriers they create. By removing a focus on individuals, this messaging prevents blame for achievement gaps from being shifted onto students.

*“There are systemic barriers put in place that limit opportunity for these students. They don’t have information they need, they have less access to the information they need, they need to be invested in.”*

*“[We are] making sure that whenever we’re talking [about equity] that we’re always saying, the systems, the systems, the systems.”*

*“[I] say,”The way the system is set up right now, students who are from lower income families and students of color typically have fewer resources, fewer opportunities, and that means there isn’t actually the kind of equal opportunity that we say there should be in the education system.”*

*“We want to avoid language that seems to put the onus on the individual, in terms of the differential outcomes by group, and we’ll talk about students who have not been served well by the systems that we should be helping them, as opposed to students who aren’t well-educated or something, or students who are failing exams, or something like that.”*

**IDEA** Contribute the reasons why inequities exist to bureaucratic systems rather than individuals. Painting a picture of how broken systems impact individual experiences can help audiences understand inequity. Systems can be fixed with greater support and resources, which is a goal for allies.

## Examples of how equity benefits society help allies garner support for policies that support equity.

Equity is complicated. Sometimes policymakers don't understand the impact of equity or falsely believe that in order to have equity, limits need to be imposed on high achieving students. By highlighting tangible benefits, you show what an equitable world looks like in a way everyone understands.

*“[I’m] starting to see some messaging there around equity issues and how it ties into a thriving economy and that type of thing. So I think you’re going to start to see some of our states willing to jump out there in this regard where they haven’t been willing to before.”*

*“You need to educate...underrepresented populations and we have to figure out credentials in a manner that’s going to meet their workforce needs. So I tend to approach it from that angle, and that tends to also be how they tend to address this with their state legislatures and their governors.”*

*“[When discussing equity] I break down what that vision would look like and what would need to be achieved for the various target populations that happen to reside in that community and that area and that locale and that institution, etc.”*

*“If we’re going into a Republican audience, we always switch to like workforce development: the census that says most of the country is going to be majority minority soon, and what does this mean if we don’t educate these kids.”*

### **IDEA** Describe the economic benefits of equity.

Talking about economic incentives—e.g., higher employment rates, higher incomes, and more state revenue from taxes—will help audiences unfamiliar with equity understand equity’s benefits, and can turn them into potential allies.



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