



Making Opportunity Real

A Framework for Communicating About Racial Equity

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Introduction and Background

How do we talk about equity and justice in an authentic way that drives meaningful change?

A commitment to racial equity is essential to achieving Lumina Foundation's strategic objectives: The right and moral way to equip today's students with meaningful credentials is to eliminate the barriers that keep Black, Native American, Hispanic, and Latino students from receiving them. To remove those unfair and unjust barriers, we need to engage the people who can effect change, and inspire the people who can either support us or get in the way.

That is why the way we talk about racial equity and justice matters. The words we write, the stories we tell, the images we share, and the data we elevate all set the tone for what we mean when we say we put equity first. This framework provides the Foundation a way to do that clearly, authentically, and with integrity. With this framing as a touchstone, we can open doors to partner with all kinds of people around the country without losing sight of our vision for a better world and the work we need to do to get there.

The language we use is a means to an end, but our communications can align us toward that end, where systems that serve students are more fair and just.

— **Jamie Merisotis**

President and CEO, Lumina Foundation



About This Message Manual

At Lumina, we and our grantees are committed to racial equity. But how can we ensure our audiences understand what we mean when we say “equity first?” And how can we engage authentically with people all around the country, from community college presidents to state policymakers, to inspire meaningful change?

This message manual is a resource to help communicators across the Foundation get clear and specific about what equity uniquely looks like in our work, apply best practices, and invite new people into the fold so that more students can earn meaningful degrees and other credentials.

The resources in this updated manual draw from communications best practices and in-depth research with Lumina staff and grantees, audiences, and the general public. They reflect the evolution of the Foundation and the world, including Lumina’s Commitment to Racial Equity, since the Summer 2020 version.

» Who you are talking to, and what do you want them to do?

We communicate for effectiveness, not self-promotion. To do that well, first we need to understand who we need to reach, and what action we want them to take. Effective communication begins with a clear understanding of who you are communicating with; how they can help you achieve your goals; and their current awareness, attitudes, or actions toward it.

Before drafting any communication, consider:

- **Audience:** Who am I talking to?
- **Objective:** What actions do I want them to take?
- **Communications Objectives:** What does the audience know or feel about the topic already, and how can my communications educate them, open their eyes, change their attitudes, or inspire them to act?

An Introduction to Framing

Framing is the first thing that you say about a topic, which influences the judgments and perceptions that follow.

Equity means different things to different people, and is associated with a wide range of concepts in people's minds. Because of that, we need to be explicit about what we mean when we're communicating about equity, and be aware of what kinds of connected ideas our communications are activating in our audiences' minds—even when they aren't consciously aware of it.

Framing a topic effectively means putting your audiences in the "right frame of mind," that is, using words, images, and ideas that reflect the values and beliefs they already hold, and which encourage them to actively support your goal or point of view. This makes messages more relevant and meaningful, and prevents messages from activating ideas that could raise opposition to your position.

We can also hold competing ideas at the same time: For example, we can believe both that, in America, "working hard leads to success" and that "it's not enough to work hard to get ahead." When we frame the conversation with one of these shared cultural ideas, we activate the related concepts that flow from it. For example, if "it's not enough to work hard," then "we need to invest in support systems that help those who are left behind."

Framing With Real Opportunity

Research shows that "opportunity" is an effective way to frame conversations about equity: People of all kinds understand the concept of opportunity, and generally support it. But in order for people to understand why racial equity is necessary, they first need to believe that opportunity isn't equal in the United States.

In your communications, start with a vision for opportunity to activate a shared concept and value, and activate the existing narrative that "opportunity isn't equal in the United States" to set the foundation for explaining the problem and solution.

» What is zero-sum thinking?

Zero-sum thinking is the idea that one person's gain is someone else's loss. We're primed to think of policy and education in zero-sum terms: There is only so much money, or so many slots at a school, to go around. This way of thinking (and sometimes reality) makes audiences less likely to support solutions that don't directly benefit them, but it doesn't have to be that way.

Here are some tips to minimize zero-sum thinking:

- When you tell stories or give examples of the people you support, **describe the values they share with your audiences**, not just their demographics.

For example, when discussing targeted funding, describe the asset, values, and goals of the people it benefits.

- **Focus on people's aspirations and contributions** to inspire empathy and respect.

For example, when talking about financial aid, talk about student's aspirations and show how college affordability is a systemic barrier to students being able to reach them.

- **Highlight the shared benefits** of the solutions you support to show how equity increases opportunity for everyone.

For example, when talking about the importance of increasing graduation rates, show how higher education is a public good and not just a private benefit.

Racial Equity Framework

How To Use the Racial Equity Framework

We communicate about racial equity because we want real change.

The equity framework is a simple set of ideas that show how equity shows up in people's lives, and orients audiences toward actions they can take. If you hit all of the elements in the framework, you can craft a successful message.

The framework isn't one-size-fits-all, and it isn't a script. Instead, it is the common denominator of what makes all kinds of racial equity communications effective. It's meant to inspire meaningful communications about racial equity, whether you're talking with an activist on the frontlines of social change, a learning advocate who might be skeptical about certain language, people who could be persuaded to support our work, or people who haven't given the effects of racism in education much thought.

» What is jargon?

Jargon is specialized language used by people within the same "discourse community." It can be difficult for those outside that group to understand.

For people who don't know the language, jargon creates distance, quashes comprehension and motivation, and raises skepticism. For those who are familiar, jargon can be an important tool to signal to other "in groups." However, it can also be confusing or counterproductive if groups define the language differently.

"Equity" is often jargon: Messengers and audiences aren't always on the same page about what it means.

With your audience in mind, take a look at your communications:

- What would be jargon to your audience?
- If they're using similar jargon, how might your definition differ?
- How can you replace or define jargon when it comes up?

**[This article](#) shows how phrasing such as "anti-racism" and "implicit bias" can be misunderstood and even contested by conservative audiences that include potential allies. It's best to be specific using plain language and to consider audience before using terminology that might lose or confuse people.*

Racial Equity Framework

Real Opportunity, with Real Outcomes, For All



Everyone has a right to real opportunity.

No matter where you come from, what you look like, or how much money your family has, everyone should have what they need to learn, grow, and thrive.



Opportunity isn't equal.

Opportunity depends on who you are and where you come from.



Our systems of education and training after high school unfairly hold some people back.

Policies, practices, and beliefs—rooted in history and still affecting people today—keep many Black, Native American, Hispanic, and Latino people from the education and skills they need.



Real actions with real outcomes make opportunity real for all.

We can remove barriers for students to right the wrongs and achieve just and fair outcomes for all.

Getting Specific

Real Opportunity, with Real Outcomes, For All



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Real actions with real outcomes can make opportunity real. We can remove barriers for students to right the wrongs and achieve just and fair outcomes for all.

» When you use the frame to craft communications:

Name the kinds of opportunities people seek. (e.g. having a good job, owning a home, saving for retirement, sending their kids to college, etc.)

Name the external factors that influence opportunity to keep from activating the “bootstraps” metanarrative that “as long as you work hard you can succeed.” (e.g. financial barriers, lack of social supports, etc.)

Provide specific, tangible examples of “the system” to expose hidden barriers that unfairly affect individual lives. (e.g. credit transfer policies, unequal allocation of resources, negative stereotypes, etc.)

Link the policies, practices, and beliefs that get in the way of real opportunity with the meaningful actions you are taking to remove them. (e.g. financial and social supports)

Supporting Data

Real Opportunity, with Real Outcomes, For All



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Our systems of education and training after high school unfairly hold some people back. Policies, practices, and beliefs—rooted in history and still affecting people today—keep many Black, Native American, Hispanic, and Latino people from the education and skills they need.



Real actions with real outcomes can make opportunity real. We can remove barriers for students to right the wrongs and achieve just and fair outcomes for all.

» The majority of Americans share the foundational belief that everyone has a right to real opportunity. In our 2022 national survey, 87% of people agreed with this statement with 57% agreeing strongly.

» According to our 2022 national survey, nearly two-thirds of Americans (65%) agree with this statement.

» Three in five Americans agree that “Policies, practices, and beliefs in our education systems unfairly hold back Black, Native American, Hispanic, and Latino people from achieving the education and skills they need.” (Lumina Racial Equity and Justice Survey, 2022)

» People recognize the importance of “real actions.” A majority of Americans (78%) agree that “We should remove barriers for students to right the wrongs and achieve just and fair outcomes for all.” (Lumina Racial Equity and Justice Survey, 2022)

Evidence

Specific examples are critical to making the case for solving the systemic problems that students—and the country—face. You can use quotes, data, vivid examples, or even analogies to help make your case. *Is there other evidence you see in your work?*



Everyone has a right to real opportunity.

Before the pandemic and repeatedly throughout the pandemic, adults (25 years and older) with a college degree were substantially less likely to be unemployed than adults with less education ([Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021](#)).



Opportunity isn't equal.

Only 43.8% of adults in America hold a credential beyond high school. That decreases to 32.4% of African American adults, and 25% of Native American and Hispanic adults ([Stronger Nation, 2020](#)).



Our systems of education and training after high school unfairly hold some people back.

Community colleges receive about \$8,800 less in revenue per full-time enrolled student than public four-year institutions, despite serving the highest shares of underrepresented students of color ([Center for American Progress, 2020](#)).



Real actions with real outcomes make opportunity real for all.

Four years after launching the No Excuses Poverty Initiative, a program to help students with rent, utility bills, child-care expenses, transportation, and legal services, the completion rates at Amarillo College went from being in the teens to 45 percent ([Focus Magazine, 2018](#)).

» Best Practices for Using Evidence

When it's possible, show the gaps in the system instead of between individuals.





- Instead of highlighting outcome gaps between students, compare outcomes for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students with a broader average or a universal goal.
- Show differences between the amount and quality of the services that Black, Native American, Hispanic, or Latino students receive and how unfairly distributed resources disproportionately hold them back.
- Share specific examples of actions, and show what's possible when schools, states, or systems take real action.
- Compare outcomes between places where systems are changing, and where they are not.

Communicating With Your Audiences

To effectively communicate with your audiences, it helps to understand their awareness and attitudes towards racial equity and justice—and what language might motivate, or demotivate, them. The 2022 Racial Equity and Justice survey identified five distinct audience mindsets based on similar levels of awareness of and attitudes about racial equity and justice: Frontline Activists, Budding Activists, Informed Skeptics, Uninformed Skeptics, and Unsupportive. The following pages offer an overview of each audience mindset and guidance on how best to tailor your communications.

Overview of Audience Mindsets

Audience mindsets are categorized by their awareness of and attitudes about racial equity and justice. Before crafting your communication, consider the mindset of your target audience. Are you trying to motivate and mobilize Frontline Activists, or inspire and persuade Informed Skeptics? Identifying your audience before crafting your communication can help you determine how best to communicate with them.

	Low Openness Issues of racial equity or racial justice are not very important.	High Openness Issues of racial equity or racial justice are important
High Awareness Familiar with concepts of racial equity or racial justice.	 Informed Skeptics (34%) Familiar with concepts of racial equity or racial justice Issues of racial equity or racial justice are somewhat important, somewhat unimportant, or not sure	 Frontline Activists (34%) Familiar with concepts of racial equity or racial justice Issues of racial equity or racial justice are very important
Low Awareness Not familiar with the concepts of racial equity or racial justice, or unsure.	 Uninformed Skeptics (8%) Not familiar with or unsure about concepts of racial equity or racial justice Issues of racial equity or racial justice are somewhat unimportant or not sure	 Budding Activists (16%) Not familiar with or unsure about concept of racial equity or racial justice Issues of racial equity or racial justice are somewhat or very important



Frontline Activists

Familiar with concepts of racial equity or racial justice
Issues of racial equity or racial justice were very important

Frontline Activists are allies and fellow champions of racial equity and justice work. They are already thinking about issues of racial equity and justice, understand that opportunity isn't equal, and are continuously learning and evolving.

When testing messages, more progressive language did not push Frontline Activists away—nor did it motivate them.

They're confident communicators who want to learn, grow, and bring others along with them. They can help pave the way for more equitable policies and practices by raising issues, questions, and pushing for inclusive, forward-looking language.

Frontline Activists are more likely to be:



Black Americans



Thought leaders/
influencers



Democrats/ Liberals



Young people
(ages 18-34)



Parents



Urban



College graduates

» Best Practices for Communicating with Frontline Activists

Frontline Activists deep awareness of racial equity and justice mean their definitions of these terms are nuanced, and may mean different things to different people. In your communications with them, be clear and explicit about what racial equity and justice mean to Lumina, and what these terms look like in practice. Point to the systems that need to change, and the solutions that Frontline Activists can help support.



Budding Activists

Not familiar with or unsure about concepts of racial equity or racial justice
Issues of racial equity or racial justice were somewhat or very important

Budding Activists feel that issues of racial equity and justice are important, but they aren't confident in their knowledge about these concepts.

Many people within this group were hesitant to say that they were familiar or unfamiliar with racial equity or justice, but knew they should be thinking and caring about these issues.

Budding Activists can be champions of racial equity and justice, but they need to clearly see what it means and looks like in practice and feel confident talking about it in their own authentic way.

Budding Activists are more likely to be:



Not registered
to vote



Native Americans



High school or
less



Lower income
(Less than \$50k)



Independent/
Moderate

» Best Practices for Communicating with Budding Activists

Since Budding Activists are more likely to be unfamiliar with the definitions of racial equity and justice, they might be turned off by content that begins with abstract terms. Instead, it's important to craft communications using language they understand—such as equal opportunity, fairness, and equal outcomes.

In communications, include specific, straightforward examples that define racial equity and justice. Tell stories that paint a picture of what racial equity and justice look like in people's lives—and show them when and where racial equity and justice are achieved.



Informed Skeptics

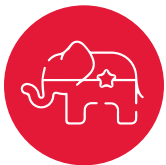
Familiar with concepts of racial equity or racial justice
Issues of racial equity or racial justice were somewhat important, somewhat unimportant, or not sure

Informed Skeptics are confident in their understanding of what racial equity and justice mean, but currently see them as buzzwords.

While Informed Skeptics have a foundational understanding of racial equity and justice issues, they were not as likely to be top of mind and didn't have strong feelings about them.

However, this audience is open to learning and growing: A majority of Informed Skeptics became at least somewhat more familiar with issues of racial equity and justice over the last two years, and these issues became more important for nearly half of this group.

Informed Skeptics are more likely to be:



Republican/
Conservative



White



Lower income
(Less than \$50k)



Men

» Best Practices for Communicating with Informed Skeptics

Communications with Informed Skeptics need to show how issues of racial equity and justice are relevant to their own lives, values, and aspirations. Ground the conversation in the issues they already care about, then show how racial equity and justice are important to these issues.

Communicate with them using the values they understand, such as equality and fairness, when talking about racial equity and justice—and highlight the shared benefits of achieving racial justice and equity.



Uninformed Skeptics

Not familiar with or unsure about concepts of racial equity or racial justice
Issues of racial equity or racial justice were somewhat unimportant or
not sure

Uninformed Skeptics are uncertain about racial equity and justice, don't engage with these issues, and are ambivalent about the importance of racial equity and justice.

Many Uninformed Skeptics aren't often thinking about issues of racial equity and justice, and aren't seeking to learn new information about these issues.

Uninformed Skeptics aren't unsupportive of racial equity and justice issues, they are simply apathetic towards them.

Uninformed Skeptics are more likely to be:



Not registered
to vote



Native Americans



High school or
less

» Best Practices for Communicating with **Uninformed Skeptics**

Uninformed Skeptics need to learn why racial equity and justice are imperative to achieving a world where opportunity—and outcomes—are equal for all.

Communications can reach them where they already are with language they already understand—such as fairness and opportunity. They believe in the shared value of opportunity, but they need examples of how injustice and inequity create unequal opportunities for many people.

Racial Equity Framework in Practice

For meaningful communication—whether it’s a blog, speech, or social media post—it’s important to **first determine your audiences and objectives**. In other words, “Who you are talking to, and what do you want them to do?” Across the next few pages are examples of the equity frame tailored for different audiences and objectives. All examples are shortened from their original format.

Equity Frame in Practice: Examples

[Hoosier leaders must act to curb racial injustice by creating real opportunity through higher learning](#)

Jamie Merisotis

Audience: Indiana leaders working within higher education

Objectives: 1) Make audiences aware of present day racial discrimination in higher education

2) Persuade audiences to take action to remove barriers in higher education for Black, Native American, Hispanic, and Latino people



The promise of American opportunity has always been in sharp contrast with our nation's legacy of racial discrimination and oppression. That's why at Lumina Foundation—which advocates for more of Americans and state residents to get the education and training after high school necessary to succeed in a changing world—racial justice and equity are at the heart of our mission.

Asserts that everyone has a right to real opportunity, and that opportunity isn't equal.



In Indiana, a lack of access to quality learning after high school, complemented by real academic, financial and social supports, has denied Black, Hispanic, and Native American people opportunities to learn beyond high school, grow individually, and thrive economically. While Indiana has made gains in recent years, the gaps in educational access and college degree or certificate attainment are stark. Current attainment for Black students in Indiana is 28 percent behind Lumina's 60 percent attainment goal, and current attainment Hispanic students is even more, at 35 percent behind.

Points to the hidden barriers—a lack of "real academic, financial, and social supports"—that unfairly affect individual lives.



We must be explicit about antiracism in a world of racial injustice by improving higher education attainment among people of color. We can do this by allocating more state resources to colleges, universities, and workforce providers that serve large segments of the state's Black, Hispanic, and Native American people—and hold all recipients of these public funds accountable for achieving fair and just outcomes.

Links the policies, practices, and beliefs that get in the way of real opportunity with the meaningful actions audiences can take to remove them.

Equity Frame in Practice: Examples

Equity Narratives: I was an 'accidental racist' who helped deny education to others

Scott Jenkins

Audience: Leaders in academia

Objectives: 1) Help audiences recognize the ways in which they're contributing to racial inequality

2) Convince audiences to commit themselves to advancing racial equity and justice



...If you believe, as I do, that education leads to human emancipation, my actions, looking back, seem as destructive as making it more difficult for people of color to vote.

Asserts that education is a part of real opportunity.



Far too recently, I finally recognized that my white perspective had blinded me to the damage I had caused by helping to create policies that exacerbated disparities in educational achievement among people of color. I realized that policies and programs lacking a commitment to racial equity, without fail, lead to unjust results for Black and brown Americans.

Orients to the external factors—"policies and programs lacking a commitment to racial equity"—that influence opportunity.



Leaders in academia today who stop a Black or brown student's course transfer from a community college to the university probably don't believe they are racist. They might think they are ensuring the academic integrity of their institution, because they don't believe the course taught at a community college by a peer (who is more than likely a person of color) can meet the rigorous standards of their institution (which is more than likely predominantly white). Can you see how unfair that is?

Provides specific, tangible examples of barriers that unfairly affect individual lives.



Today, I recognize that we must build policies, programs, and organizations with equity as the binding mortar (as Lumina Foundation tries to do every day). Only in this way can we truly aim toward outcomes that are anti-racist and, thus, serve all Americans, regardless of skin color or ethnicity.

Highlights the meaningful actions audiences can take to remove unfair barriers and achieve just and fair outcomes for all.

Resources

Best Practices

When communicating about racial equity, we always strive to:

1. **Be specific.** Are you being as clear as possible about the people you're supporting and the systems that are getting in the way of their success?
2. **Orient toward action.** Is your message setting up solvable problems, and solutions that can address them?

Use these tips to create smart content that engages all kinds of audiences:

DO THIS:

Start with a positive vision of the world you're working to create.

"Every college campus should provide the financial, social, and academic supports that every student needs to thrive."

Be specific about the identities of those who face unfair and unjust barriers.

"Black male students often encounter negative stereotypes and microaggressions on campus."

Show how people's lives are directly and meaningfully changed.

"Marcus can now transfer his community college credit and graduate on time."

Use active language to name specific policies, practices, and beliefs that hold some people back.

"Decision-making bodies have historically excluded students of color from the input process."

Point out unfair disparities in the resources people of color receive, and unjust outcomes as a result.

"Community colleges with more Black attendees receive less funding, meaning students don't have the resources they need to earn a meaningful degree."

NOT THIS:

Avoid negative framing and deficit language.

"At risk, poor, disadvantaged, minority, underserved"

Avoid talking about "the system" in general, without describing how systems adversely affect students.

"Our system unfairly impacts students of color. It needs to change."

Avoid language or data that frame the person as the problem.

"While 49% of White Americans have a higher education degree or credential, only 32% of Black Americans do."

Avoid listing solutions without connecting them back to students' lives.

"We need equity-minded education and workforce policies and practices."

Key Definitions and Style Guide

To ensure consistency in our communication, we have defined how we talk about racial equity, racial justice, and our target populations.

Key Definitions:

Equity-First: Lumina’s work is specifically aimed at facilitating the success of Black, Hispanic, Latino and Native American populations.

Racial Justice: When policies, practices, systems, and other causes of unjust outcomes are eliminated.

Racial Equity: When outcomes such as having a college degree or other quality credential can no longer be predicted by race or ethnicity.

Racial and Ethnic Identifiers:

In general, Lumina Foundation uses: **Black, Hispanic, Latino, and Native American**

Tailor to specific regions or organizational language, as appropriate

When talking about specific ethnicities, be as specific as possible

Use “people of color” only after it is defined whenever possible

Avoid language that labels people by what they’re not (e.g., minority, underrepresented, disadvantaged, low-income)

Learn More

While communications about racial equity are ever-evolving, the research and resources below provide a foundation and best practices for effective communications about race and equity.

1. Lumina Foundation [National Survey](#)
2. The Opportunity Agenda's [Messaging Reports](#)
3. Dēmos' [Race-Class Narrative Research](#)
4. Hattaway Communications' [American Aspirations Research](#)
5. Race Forward's [Moving the Race Conversation Forward Report](#)
6. Trabian Shorters on [Asset Framing](#)



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