

LOCAL PROOF STORYTELLING PLAYBOOK



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Americans agree: Colleges and universities can make people's lives better and our society stronger.

But research shows that trust is thin—and easy to lose. Many people don't see schools consistently delivering on that promise. Without clear, visible proof, confidence can quickly turn into doubt.

People need to see local action and local impact making a difference in people's lives.

This toolkit can help colleges build trust using breakthrough civic stories of local actions that show audiences what they're hoping to see.

Learn more about the research that informs this toolkit in the **TRUST IN HIGHER EDUCATION STARTS LOCAL** report from C&S.

A PLAYBOOK FOR LOCAL PROOF

UNDERSTAND WHAT PEOPLE WANT FROM COLLEGES ↗

- How is your school helping students become informed and effective citizens?
- How does your school connect with and support the community beyond campus?
- How is your school listening to people outside the campus—and changing based on what they need?

CRAFT A BREAKTHROUGH CIVIC STORY ↗

- Choose a topic that will grab people's attention.
- Start with a specific person, moment, and challenge.
- Take action—and connect it back to your values.
- Show how the impact radiates far beyond classrooms and campuses.

UNDERSTAND WHAT PEOPLE WANT FROM COLLEGES

People want colleges to play a civic role. When people see the school in their local community making a difference, they see the power of colleges to move our country forward. These are the kinds of actions people want to see:

PEOPLE WANT COLLEGES TO HELP STUDENTS BECOME INFORMED AND EFFECTIVE CITIZENS.

They want to see students building critical thinking skills, having productive conversations about difficult topics facing the country, and collaborating across differences.

<p>Some ways colleges are teaching powerful skills:</p>	<p>A “better conversations” course for all new students gives them practice having hard conversations and deliberating across difference</p> <p>Students host high-profile debates with the support of constructive dialogue training in a civil discourse club</p> <p>A “Tackling misinformation” symposium led by the journalism school teaches meaningful fact-checking skills for current events</p>
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How is your school equipping students with the knowledge and skills of civic life?

PEOPLE WANT TO SEE COLLEGES CONNECTING WITH AND SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY BEYOND CAMPUS.

Community members come to campuses to cheer and to learn, to visit and to vote, and they want to see their local schools actively involved in the community.

<p>Some ways colleges are serving as community hubs:</p>	<p>A partnership with the local economic development corporation provides paid internships at local small businesses</p> <p>IRS-certified accounting students provide free tax preparation and guidance to local residents</p> <p>Senior capstone team built a solar trailer to support local fire department and the city's sustainable energy initiatives</p>
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How does your school serve as a hub of community connection and civic action?

PEOPLE WANT TO SEE SCHOOLS LISTENING TO PEOPLE OUTSIDE CAMPUS—AND CHANGING BASED ON WHAT THEY NEED.

People want to see colleges discovering what works in the world today and adapting to meet the needs of tomorrow.

<p>Some ways colleges are serving as community hubs:</p>	<p>A new innovation center trains community members on in-demand skills</p> <p>Updated resources for prospective students help them understand the real costs of attendance</p> <p>A local town hall hosted by the college leads to more transparency around upcoming construction</p>
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How is your school learning and evolving based on what your community needs?

CRAFT A BREAKTHROUGH CIVIC STORY

People are most likely to trust their local colleges, and their local leaders. Use this checklist to craft stories that break through the noise and open people's eyes to your civic contributions:

1. CHOOSE A TOPIC THAT WILL GRAB PEOPLE'S ATTENTION.

Choose a concrete project, idea, moment, challenge, or solution based on the civic role people want colleges to play.

Does the topic or project feel new or surprising?

Does it relate to current events, issues, or topics in the news today?

Does it have powerful visuals? What photograph, video clip, or data would get people's attention?

2. START WITH A SPECIFIC PERSON, MOMENT, AND CHALLENGE.

Identify a main character your audience trusts and relates to, and start with them.

What does your protagonist want? What do they care about?

What challenge are they facing? How do they feel about it?

How can you transport people right into the action with specifics about the setting—the where and when—of the story?

Can you tell the story in first person?

3. TAKE ACTION—AND CONNECT IT BACK TO YOUR VALUES.

Show the before and after for your main character, thanks to your institutions' efforts.

- What kind of trial and error does your protagonist go through before your project shows up?
- How did your intervention change your protagonist's perspective, attitude, or power?
- How does this example reflect your school's values and mission?

4. SHOW HOW THE IMPACT RADIATES FAR BEYOND CLASSROOMS AND CAMPUSES.

Paint a picture of how the outcome reaches people beyond students themselves.

- How is this example making a difference in your community now? How might it?
- How does it set the foundation for a better world—e.g., more effective governments, companies or institutions that meet people's needs, or communities that work for everyone?

WANT TO GO FURTHER?

TAILOR CONTENT TO MEET AUDIENCES WHERE THEY ARE

Trust and confidence in higher education is shaped by the majority of Americans who believe in higher education, but want to see it evolve. This “**moveable middle**” is represented by audiences with distinct mindsets:



CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICS

Believe in higher education, but worry institutions have drifted from their core mission.

What they want to see:
colleges focused on educating students and developing citizens who can solve problems and work together.



CIVIC-MINDED REFORMERS

See colleges as important civic institutions, but want stronger community impact.

What they want to see:
colleges playing a stronger role in strengthening communities and civic life.



ROI SKEPTICS

Evaluate college primarily through economic value and career outcomes.

What they want to see:
colleges being honest about cost, and clearer connections between a degree and opportunity.

These audiences want colleges to succeed, AND they want it to change. To make the promise of college real, these are the ways people want to see colleges evolve:



CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICS

Opportunity:
 Demonstrate focus on your core education mission, and show follow-through on promises.

- What resonates:**
- teaching students how to think, not what to think
 - responsible leadership and student-first priorities
 - evidence that institutions are listening and evolving



CIVIC-MINDED REFORMERS

Opportunity:
 Highlight partnerships solving local challenges and show colleges working for everyone.

- What resonates:**
- partnerships with local organizations
 - students contributing to community problem-solving
 - dialogue across differences



ROI SKEPTICS

Opportunity:
 Recognize cost concerns and show real-world value.

- What resonates:**
- practical engagement around cost and tradeoffs
 - workforce partnerships
 - skill development tied to real jobs

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