

Communicating Internally and Externally

Communicating clearly, frequently and with consistency is key to sustaining a successful college- and career-ready agenda in your state. Regardless of what your state has done so far to communicate about the college- and career-ready agenda, it is important to continually build on and build up your efforts and become more strategic to expand and maintain support statewide.

Communicating with your internal core communications team first and then to those external audiences who need to be informed and/or influenced will be key. Keeping such diverse groups informed, engaged, and ready and willing to do their part will be no small task. Establishing and adopting a communications plan to guide the how, who and when of your outreach efforts is the best way to keep your team on track, your message consistent and your voice heard.

FIRST THINGS FIRST: “Internal then External”

Communicating internally – among yourselves and the identified members of your communications team – is where all communications efforts must begin. No campaign can be successful unless its own members and supporters are focused, energized and activated to help communicate the campaign’s key themes and messages. Once you have secured the understanding and support of your internal team, you can move your communications to the external audiences that you want to inform and/or influence.

Internal communications strategies can include:

- Host regular in-person meetings with your core communications team;
- Schedule conference calls when you cannot meet in person to allow for information-sharing and brainstorming as a team;
- Send a regular update to your core team, which can be as simple as an email news alert or electronic newsletter;
- Establish an email distribution list of those principal internal people who must be reached out to frequently to ensure they are informed and on board with your efforts. Send them relevant news coverage, new studies and reports, and other related materials. Using an email listserv is a no-cost way to keep other team members in the loop on current events and engaged; and
- Encourage team members to communicate within their organizations more broadly (i.e. the department of education’s communications director can send information to department staff on the college- and career-ready plans).

The key to the “internal then external” communications strategy is to prevent any surprises for your team members and their staffs. You never want one of your internal stakeholders to read about something you have done in the morning paper or hear about it first from a supervisor in their office. They are part of your team; make sure they feel like it and know it.

Internal communications is also critical to ensure message discipline. If your team includes stakeholders from your state’s governor’s office, department of education and state chamber of commerce, the governor, state superintendent of education and executive director should be on the same page and on the same talking points whenever speaking publicly.

Once you have communicated internally, then you can move to external audiences.

Communicating Internally and Externally

Moving From Internal To External

Target audiences. After getting your internal house in order, you must now identify your supporters and your opposition. While you must understand your opposition and what motivates them against the college- and career-ready agenda, these are not the audiences to which you will be primarily communicating.

You must focus first on speaking to your supporters and understanding what messages and tactics move them to champion the agenda. This will enable you to both grow your base of support and increase the intensity of your supporters. Start by simply listing the target audiences whose support you must gain and maintain. These likely include:

- Key legislators
- Key legislative committees
- The head of education agencies (K-12 and postsecondary)
- Key business and workforce leaders
- Key community groups in your state (e.g. parent, civil rights, religious, non-profit groups – it’s important to determine who is listened to by others in your state)
- Students
- The media (**Note:** While the media is often considered a target audience, you are not really looking to gain or maintain the support of the media. The media is actually a vehicle through which you can reach and influence your target audiences, thus, it should be included on your list.)

Next, you need to consider the messages that will motivate each audience.

Sizing up the competition. In addition to target audiences, you should also consider the competitive environment in which you are executing your communications plan. What other groups/ organizations operate in your space? How do they sell their messages? What are they communicating to your target audiences? You want to make sure that your messages and communications plan provide key differentiating benefits to drive your own relevance in the education reform debate.

Beyond like organizations with competing or overlapping missions, you must also take note of those organizations that may seek to advocate on behalf of a mission that is philosophically or politically at odds with your goals. While you may not be able to win them all over, knowing the opposition – and their particular messages, audiences and level of influence – is extremely important when crafting your own communications and outreach strategy.

Key Messages: The Key Three”

You should be able to boil down what you want to communicate to three central messages – the “key three.” Typically, the first message will define the issue; the second will outline the problem; and the third will explain the solution. The key three should be distributed to all internal team members and communicated consistently, without variation, at all times. The discipline of repetition should be carried across all communication channels. And while you will develop sub-messages for each target audience, those sub-messages should fit under the key three, and those overarching messages should be communicated at all times by all leaders/members to all media.

Communicating Internally and Externally

SAMPLE KEY THREE MESSAGES FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

1. *A high school diploma is no longer enough; now, nearly every good job requires some postsecondary education and/or training – such as an associates or bachelors degree, certificate, license, or completion of an apprenticeship or significant on-the-job training.*
2. *Currently, far too many students drop out or graduate from high school without the knowledge and skills required for success, closing doors and limiting their post-high school options.*
3. *All students deserve a world-class education that prepares them for college, careers and life. The best way to prepare students for life after high school is to ensure they graduate with a strong foundation in the core academic areas that will leave all doors open in the future.*

Channels for EXTERNAL Communication

Once you have laid out an internal communications plan, identified your target audiences, sized up the opposition, and established your key three messages, you can now turn to external communications. There are various types of communications channels that you may want to use. Several channels are available for communicating your messages to your target audiences, and certain channels might be more effective for reaching particular targets. No channel should be used in isolation; combining channels is very effective. Sometimes budget concerns will be the driving force behind the channel you choose, but there is a channel for every budget (See “*Communications Channels for Every Budget*”). The key is ensuring that no matter what channel you choose, you remain consistently on your key three messages.

Earned media. Earned media includes any media for which you do not pay. These are news articles, editorials, op-eds, broadcast talk show interviews – any kind of media that is free to obtain. Having strong, well-trained, articulate spokespeople who have notoriety in their field, is key to gaining earned media attention. Also, generating news hooks, for example commissioning and releasing the results of a survey or honoring a well-known supporter of education reform, is also a way to garner earned media attention.

Paid media. Paid media is anything for which you pay, including print and broadcast ads, advertorials, and audio news releases, to name a few. Often times budget restrictions will preclude a paid media component to your outreach campaign because to be successful, paid advertising normally has to saturate a market; however, sometimes, a paid ad can be timed and positioned in such a way that it does not have to cost a lot to get a big bang for the buck.

New media. New media includes blogs; social networking, such as Facebook and Twitter; Web 2.0 applications, such as online chats and instant online polling; and mobile interactions, such as text messaging. New media is often low cost if not no cost, and it has the benefit of reaching younger audiences, which you might want to begin cultivating now to train the next generation of torch carriers. You can also reach large groups of people through new media, and many new media outlets allow your target audiences to organize themselves, a phenomenon utilized with great success by the Obama campaign.

Communicating Internally and Externally

Events. Hosting events can provide solid opportunities for directly bringing your messages to your target audiences. Statewide events, such as a statewide press event or a governor’s meeting, are particularly well-suited for kicking off a major campaign. Local events like regional roundtables or town hall meetings at local high schools can be effective at bringing the messages down to the grassroots level. Any of these events should feature prominent spokespeople for the college- and career-ready agenda, and can either be stand alone or built around existing meetings like county commission, local school board, or rotary club meetings. While there is often some cost associated with hosting these events, they can often generate positive earned media.

Targeted Tactical Plans

Once you have defined your key messages and the various channels for communicating those messages, you next want to talk tactics. You should consider the specific actions you will take and the best channels in which to take them to meet each of your defined target audiences. Here is where you will also want to tailor your three key messages to speak to each target – never leaving the theme of the key three but rather simply diving in further to tease out specific points that will motivate a particular audience. A sample tactical outline is below.

SAMPLE STRATEGIC TACTICAL PLAN	
Target Audience	Define the target audience with specificity: STUDENTS
Objectives	Define the outreach objectives: To increase the number of students who complete the college- and career-ready curriculum by 50%.
Key Target Messages	Outline the tailored messages for this target group: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completing a college- and career-ready curriculum will help you get into and succeed in college and good, well-paying jobs. • Completing this curriculum opens doors today and keeps them open for tomorrow. • We believe in raising expectations because we believe in you: all kids are college material.
Channels/Vehicles	Identify the kinds of earned, paid and new media channels to reach this audience: Students will be targeted through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A series of interviews with recent graduates on how well-prepared they felt when they started college posted on the state department of education’s Web site and on YouTube. [New media; low-cost] • Email all students at the beginning and end of school year (starting with 7th grade) with tips for staying on track to college and career readiness and links to national or state resources on college and career planning. Post the same tips on all middle and high school Web sites [New media; no-cost] • A year-end awards ceremony / certificate for all students who completed the curriculum. [Potential for earned media; cost TBD] • Offer a contest for students to create their own campaign (be it print, video, audio, etc.) around the importance of rigorous graduation requirements. Publicize the contest and winners and use material on Web sites and new media outlets. [New media; no cost, potential for earned media. Possible paid media]
Measuring Success	Define what actions the target audience could take to show success: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor and publicly report annually on the increase in the number of students enrolling in the college- and career-ready curriculum. • Monitor how many students are viewing the state/national college and career planning resources being emailed to them.