

MESSAGING TO UNDERREPRESENTED POPULATIONS:

# DOS AND DON'TS OF MESSAGING



**Based on focus groups and survey results, Aspen gained insights into how to message the value of community college programs to opportunity youth, unemployed adults, and underemployed adults.** Based on those lessons, here is some guidance on how to talk about the programs your institution offers.

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## THE DOS

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- **Be specific about what skills students will learn and how they will apply skills to the real world.** Also consider including messages about program experience, highlighting attributes like flexible scheduling, accelerated training opportunities, and work-based learning.
- **Provide personal encouragement.** Convey messages about the future, stability, and good jobs.
- **Reference student supports.** Financial aid, transportation, childcare, and free tutoring are all significant attention-getters because they address very specific barriers.
- **Mention your community and local partners.** This builds trust with prospective students.
- **Provide real data about time-to-completion and post-graduation wages specific to the program/region.** Note that generalized data may be met with skepticism.
- **Use testimonials from students to make the message more believable and real.** This promotes the idea that “someone like me” can succeed, and prospective students are more likely to trust their peers.

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## THE DON'TS

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**Don't be overly familiar.** Being too personal comes across as disingenuous.

✘ **INSTEAD OF** ... Don't feel like you're alone anymore ... we're here to help!

✔ **TRY** ... As a student, you will be given free tutoring, monthly bus passes, and a strong advising system to ensure you succeed.

**Don't focus too much on the labor market generally;** hearing that jobs are available often does not resonate.

✘ **INSTEAD OF** ... Opportunities in healthcare in our region are exploding, and there are jobs for students at all levels.

✔ **TRY** ... Our programs offer learn-and-earn opportunities with employer partners that allow you to earn your degree while still getting a paycheck.

**When touting the value of a program, don't disparage four-year institutions,** as it can come across as self-serving and may not align with students' ultimate goals.

✘ **INSTEAD OF** ... Who needs a four-year degree when you can get a great job after two years?

✔ **TRY** ... 90 percent of our program graduates are employed in their field of study after completing their two-year degree.

**Don't talk about "in-demand" jobs to those who are struggling to find a foothold in the economy.** Individuals who have faced barriers to employment may be skeptical because their experience doesn't align with the message.

✘ **INSTEAD OF** ... Employers are looking for workers exactly like you, and community college programs are the way to get there.

✔ **TRY** ... Community college programs can get you on track for the stable job you want. Short-term programs allow you to upskill more quickly, meet employers who are hiring, and be more marketable.

**Don't try to group audiences together.** These are populations that have different mindsets, concerns, and experiences.

✘ **INSTEAD OF** ... Be like the thousands of graduates that have walked these steps before you, and enroll in a program today!

✔ **TRY** (*for unemployed and underemployed adult learners*) ... Whatever experience you bring to the table, we will work with you to create a flexible schedule that leads to your goals as quickly as possible.

**Don't rely exclusively on platitudes and general "marketing" language without grounding the message in clear examples.** Students are wary of "sales" language and are looking for the "catch."

✘ **INSTEAD OF** ... We are committed to transforming students' lives and enriching the community through academic excellence, innovation, and meaningful career opportunities.

✔ **TRY** ... We make it easy for students to attend, with four locations across the region and an online campus. Meetings with advisors before you register ensure that you'll be on the right track to getting a degree and a good job.

# AUDIENCE INSIGHTS

## TAILORING MESSAGES TO THE AUDIENCE



	UNDEREMPLOYED	UNEMPLOYED	OPPORTUNITY YOUTH
<b>WHAT WORKS</b>	<p><b>Practical reassurance:</b> Programs are flexible, and your goals are achievable.</p>	<p><b>Encouragement:</b> Programs help you succeed and get you on the path to a good job.</p>	<p><b>Aspiration:</b> Programs are flexible, you decide, and you have options for the future.</p>
<b>KEY LANGUAGE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Flexibility</li> <li>–Real-world skills</li> <li>–Be marketable</li> <li>–Financial aid</li> <li>–Free tutoring</li> <li>–Good jobs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Flexibility</li> <li>–Real-world skills</li> <li>–Financial aid</li> <li>–Free tutoring</li> <li>–Job placement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Flexibility</li> <li>–Financial aid</li> <li>–Free tutoring</li> <li>–Opportunities</li> <li>–Your work matters</li> </ul>

MESSAGING TO UNDERREPRESENTED POPULATIONS:

# KEY LANGUAGE AND COMMON PITFALLS



**The messages here were tested through a 2019 national survey with opportunity youth, underemployed adults, and unemployed adults. The chart on the next page demonstrates what works regarding each message, key language that resonates with audiences, and common pitfalls.** The most successful messages with all three target populations are “programs that fit your life” and “you’re worth the investment. Additional themes and language that resonated with each population we researched are reflected below.

### **Programs that Fit Your Life**

Today’s job training and education programs focus on real-world skills. They are designed for flexibility and for busy people like you. Students learn through hands-on training, mentoring, and internships. Classes include practical skills like how to search for and get good jobs. You can work while taking classes—so you’re earning money, building skills, and becoming more marketable. You’ll be ready to succeed in the real world with all the new skills you’ve gained.

### **You Are Worth the Investment**

The time and money it takes for job training or education can be intimidating. But you, and your loved ones, are worth the investment. Programs can be as short as a few weeks, and with financial aid and grants, they can be less expensive than you think. Today’s programs offer financial aid, free childcare, and transportation. And, when you’re done, they guarantee to help you find opportunities for work and career. Stop living paycheck to paycheck, and start toward a brighter future by investing in yourself today.

### **Your Path to a Great Job**

Good jobs inspire you to get out of bed in the morning. They are where you can make a difference. Great jobs allow you to be part of a team. They are where you can count on coworkers as much as the paycheck. Local job training and education programs are the path to following your interests and channeling your skills into great jobs. Explore the opportunities to go beyond stability and start on a path to the career you’ll love.

### **You Can Do This, and You Are Not Alone**

You might be thinking about job training or education, but you don’t think more school is right for you. The truth is that you’ve already got what it takes—the drive, the work ethic, and the ability. Today’s job training and education programs allow you to tap into a network if you need help in class or to find a job. Free tutoring and job placement are available for all students. There is a better job waiting for you, and every graduate before you is proof that you’ve got what it takes.

### **You Are In Demand**

Every news report will tell you that “STEM” fields are where the jobs are. Healthcare, advanced manufacturing, IT, and other industries are looking for people like you, and community college programs are the way to get there. Faculty come from industry, and they work with employers looking to hire. Most students will have jobs lined up before they walk across the stage at graduation. With training in these industries, you’re on the way to a better job, better pay, and a long-term career.

**Messaging to Underrepresented Populations: Key Language and Common Pitfalls**



Based on a nationally representative survey, this is a breakdown of what resonated and what fell flat from the five concepts we tested.

CONCEPTS	WHAT WORKS	KEY LANGUAGE	COMMON PITFALLS
PROGRAMS THAT FIT YOUR LIFE	Personalized experience Practical skills Accelerated training at convenient times of day	Hands-on training Internship Flexibility	Overpromising can make message feel hard to believe
YOU ARE WORTH THE INVESTMENT	Listing specific supports Specifying time to completion	Financial aid, grants, transportation, childcare Stop living paycheck to paycheck Brighter future	Can make college seem more expensive than it is in reality Not balanced with enough specifics to ring true
YOUR PATH TO A GREAT JOB	Language about following your passion (but not as main message) Highlighting local job training programs	Happier Make a difference Stability Inspire	Might make 'good jobs' (as opposed to 'great' ones) seem insufficient Not clear enough on how to make the great job a reality
YOU CAN DO THIS, AND YOU ARE NOT ALONE	Supports for all students allow prospective students to feel like they can be successful Encouraging language (but not as main message)	Network Free tutoring Job placement Better job	Find promise that 'every graduate will get a job' to be difficult to believe without data proof points Not concrete enough to be reliably convincing
YOU ARE IN DEMAND	Helping community Language around success post-graduation	Better job, better pay Jobs lined up	Does not resonate with those who have been looking for jobs unsuccessfully Messaging about specific fields doesn't resonate