

Rebuilding Trust/Belonging & Legitimacy in Higher Education through Public Interest Communication (PIC)

The Value of Higher Education: 100 Years of APSU
Faculty Conference – Tuesday, August 11th 2026

Dr. Nader Dagher
Department of communication

Agenda

- Evidence of declining trust from the polls
- What is Public Interest Communication & how it can help?
- PIC & public trust & belonging in E.D.
- Participatory approach to diagnose & find solutions

Higher education and the public

Gallup Institute 2024:

Trust in higher education dropped to 36% that year.

Long-term trend: Decade-long decline in confidence.

Higher education and the public

Pew Research 2025:

70% of Americans say higher education is going on the wrong track.

Specifically, because of:

- High Tuition
- Weak Job Preparation
- Institutional performance concern

Higher education and the public

The Association of American Universities:

Americans' trust in higher education rose from 36% to 42% in 2025.

Overall trend since 1981



How do we understand these polls?



What is this phenomenon?

- With 70% of Americans having doubts about our direction
- 42% do not trust higher education
- Decade of declining trust

These are long-term values, not opinions

Public Interest Communication (PIC)

- Science-based strategic communication that aims to make positive, sustainable social change
- PIC is not Public Relations, but we do public relations
- PIC seeks long-term, sustainable change in the behavior, norms, and legislation through communication.
- PIC proposes a theory that we believe can make social change possible

Network Steering Committee

Members of the network's steering committee include faculty and researchers from:

- Austin Peay State University
- Columbia University
- Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University
- Fresno State University
- Georgia State University
- Marketing Mission
- Sonoma State University
- Hart Strategies
- Project South
- Temple University
- University of Florida
- University of Massachusetts Boston
- University of Minnesota
- University of Oklahoma
- University of Texas at Austin
- University of Washington

**PUBLIC INTEREST
COMMUNICATIONS
EDUCATORS NETWORK**

Public Interest Communication (PIC)

Goals:

- Social Change
- Nonprofit causes
- Public Interest
- Public Engagement



Our experts listed possible reasons for low trust:

- Affordability and student debt.
- Uncertainty about career outcomes.
- AI and changing workforce priorities have challenged higher education's value proposition.
- Institutional opacity and one-way communication.
- Political/ideology division



PIC approach to social change

- We use science to understand the phenomenon.
- We prioritize the public and their interest by listening to them.
- We promote ideas, behaviors, and policies that serve the public interest.

Theory of Change



HOW?

Activating the six spheres of influence



Policy: what policies are helping us/ not helping us?

Media: Our own, other, not /helping

Social norms/ values: what social norms are counter/productive?

Communities of influence: Who can/must act?, where are they? What do we know about them?

Activism: What can we do publicly/privately to make change happen?

The market: What the market can do for our cause? How does it contribute now?

Back of the Envelope (Four Questions)

Brainstorm

Q1: What are we trying to make happen that isn't happening now?

Q2: Who must act or do something differently for us to achieve our goal?

Q3: What would they believe about the issue that would motivate them to act?

Q4: How can we get that message in front of them?

Policy

- Do we know what policies, procedures, or regulations that govern the higher education institution's work? Do we want to change any? Propose any?
- How are these policies working for our students? Institutions? High education?

Media

What does **our media** say?

What do **mainstream media**, specialized media say about higher education

What do we want **each media** to say?

Social Norms

- How is H.Ed valued?
- Why is it so?
- How can we make changes to these?

Communities of Influence

- Who are these groups and individuals?

Activism

- What can be done in organizing for the cause?
- What groups can be in the lead?

The Market

- How do we play in the market/ economy?
- Are we as institution rising for the role/expectations?
- Are we able to influence business as usual to get the attention ?

As individuals ...

- We are part of the trust and belonging
- We are not only recipients, we are also actors in this phenomenon
- What we do or believe matters

Let's talk

Student challenge:

What do you want student to remember about you?

Let's talk

Connection challenge:

What do you do to connect with students on a personal level?

Let's talk

Community challenge:

What would the community lose if APSU disappeared?

Reflection 1

- ☐ Which faculty behaviors unintentionally weaken students' sense of belonging?
- ☐ Which faculty behaviors strengthen students' sense of belonging?

Reflection 1

What institutional changes are needed beyond communication?

Thank you!