

Op-Ed Storytelling Tool

Meaning “opposite the editorial page,” op-eds express the opinions of an author not associated with the publishing news outlet. These opinion pieces can be effectively deployed to elevate a community’s shared voice, bring awareness to an issue and identify recommendations for policymakers.

Op-eds are a tool to argue persuasively and sway public opinion and, ultimately, even public policy. Op-eds are brief, typically 750 words or less, and usually cover one major point that relates to a current event, like a public health crisis.

IHEP designed this tool to support you in writing effective op-eds based on an example by Chandra Scott, Director of Strategic Outcomes at Mobile Area Education Foundation, Lead Partner for Lumina’s Mobile Talent Hub. This op-ed was crafted during COVID-19 to bring attention to how the pandemic exacerbated the digital divide in Alabama and negatively impacted college access and persistence for students from populations underrepresented in higher education. It was published on [May 13, 2020 on AL.com](#).

PLANNING

1. Determine the Best Author

Is it better to hear from the college president, an employer, a faculty member, a parent, or a student? The best author depends upon whom you are trying to reach and why.

2. Own Your Voice

Many people may doubt they have the expertise required to write an op-ed. Lived experience can equate to the most powerful expertise, and equitable representation in the voices we amplify is vital. Use a personal tone and share your own experiences.

3. Identify the Problem, Cause, and Solution

Clearly identify the problem you want to address, its cause and possible solutions, as these factors will inform how you present the problem. You do not need to articulate a complete solution to the problem, but you do need to know who can take action to make change.

4. Know Your Audience and the “So What”

Who is your primary audience and what do they value? Why should they care about the problem you have identified? The answers to these questions will determine how you frame the issue.

5. Identify Target Media Outlets

Identify ideal media outlets for your op-ed. Does your target audience read these publications? If not, which other outlets would enable you to reach them? Familiarize yourself with submission requirements and follow them closely. If online submission is required, submit your piece prior to emailing staff directly for follow-up.

6. Identify Target Release Date

Etiquette requires you pitch to only one media outlet at a time. Build sufficient time into your timeline to pitch, not get accepted, and then pitch to additional outlets before your target release date. Ideally your op-ed relates to something timely, such as recent news, a policy change, or a new study. Consider this connection when selecting your target release date to ensure it is well-timed for the most impact.

WRITING

Establish Your Credibility

Ensure something in your op-ed lets your audience know you have experience or expertise in your topic. It may be as simple as your title, or you may need to signal the audience with phrases like “In my 17 years as an administrator” or “As a student who stopped-out”.

Grab Attention

Even before COVID-19, but especially now, many topics are competing for your audience’s attention. Your opening needs a “hook” to intrigue your audience to keep reading. Hooks include surprising facts, examples, brief stories, and strong claims.

Make Your Point

Authors can get swept up in a story and not realize they haven’t made a clear argument. Use short sentences and paragraphs and avoid jargon for clarity.

Consider a Counterargument (or Not)

Sometimes it’s a good idea to acknowledge a counterargument. In other cases, you could be simply giving visibility to your critics. Consider whether you are preemptively addressing your readers’ questions or creating doubt. If the answer is the latter, skip the counterargument.

Support Your Point

Use evidence and examples to support your point and provide context to frame quantitative evidence like data.

Conclusion

Your conclusion should relate back to your introduction and offer some form of solution. You need to identify who can do what to make change and ideally provide a specific call to action.

OPINION

Lack of broadband access is a hidden barrier to our pandemic recovery

Posted May 13, 2020 | By Chandra Scott | Director, Strategic Outcomes Mobile Area Education Foundation

Alabama has a goal of growing its workforce to 500,000 highly skilled employees over the next five years. With an unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic, is this goal still possible?

One alarming outcome of the pandemic is the transition from traditional learning to virtual learning in both K-12 and postsecondary institutions. Lateshia C. is a 27-year-old, single mother of two who attends community college with the hopes of becoming a nurse. With an unforeseen novel COVID-19 pandemic [sic], Lateshia’s path to attaining a degree has become challenged with the college’s campus closure and transition to virtual learning only. She does not have internet in her home and new internet installation is not an essential service during the stay-at-home order. Therefore, in order to receive and complete her assignments, she has to drive nearly 20 miles from Spanish Fort to Mobile to get access to internet at her sister’s home—causing both a health risk and an additional financial burden due to the cost of gas. Flooding on rainy days prevents her gaining internet access and therefore negatively impacts her grades.

In Alabama Workforce Region 7, the [Mobile Area Education Foundation](#) facilitates a postsecondary attainment agenda known as [75,000 degrees by 2030](#) (75,000 Degrees Talent Hub*). This region, like all regions in Alabama, already faces challenges to getting more citizens to and *through* a postsecondary pathway. Now that higher education institutions have closed their doors and transitioned all learning to virtual classrooms, challenges that already existed are amplified.

Many students rely on campus computer labs to access and complete their assignments because they can’t afford or access internet at home. When nearly 82,000 students enrolled in an Alabama 2- and 4-year institution receive Pell funding, access to technology is an expense many can’t afford. Even if a student can afford to purchase a computer, what good is it if he/she doesn’t have access to internet/Wi-Fi?

Internet/Wi-Fi access is a bifurcated equity challenge encompassing geography and affordability. Let’s start with rural communities. As stated in a [USA Today](#) article, in nine of 67 Alabama counties, less than 30% of the population has access to broadband. Choctaw County only has an internet access rate of 22.8%. Cleburne County has a low access rate of 12.9%. For other Alabamians, access to internet is not based on geography, but affordability. An additional \$40-50/month for internet creates a hardship for many families in Alabama, which is the sixth poorest state in the U.S. With access to broadband being at such disparaging low rates, transitioning to only virtual learning further widens the gap of equitable access to earning a credential or degree.

Every day we are bombarded with data on the economic impact COVID-19 is having on our state, nation, and world. We have to remember people are attached to these numbers.

This brings me back to my initial question; will we be able to fulfill our state’s postsecondary attainment goal so that we can grow our workforce to 500,000 highly skilled employees? We must. It is more pertinent than ever. In order for our state to recover from the negative economic impacts of this pandemic, we must invest in Alabama’s best asset...human capital.

As our local, state, and federal leaders navigate through this pandemic, I challenge them to put the word equity in action. While distributing stimulus checks may address the short-term needs of some of our community members, we must also find ways to better the process of getting to and *through* postsecondary pathways for all Alabamians. Equitable access to quality education is not only an economic imperative, but a moral imperative and it is the only way we will ensure 500,000 highly skilled employees in our workforce by 2025.

*Originally appeared on AL.com’s website - www.al.com