

Narrative Change Goals



EmployIndy's mission is to guide the local workforce ecosystem and make strategic investments in partners focused on underserved and underrepresented residents. Ascend Indiana's mission is for Indiana to be a place of economic opportunity for all. For the Pathways Narrative Project, these two organizations worked together on the goal of serving over 5,000 students through modern youth apprenticeship by Fall of 2030. In addition, Ascend focused on creating a "community of practice" to break down barriers to creating more youth apprenticeship experiences in Indiana by 2025.

Ascend and EmployIndy conducted research with young people to learn whether it was possible to

expand or attach new meaning to the dominant narrative that a college degree was the only path to prepare for the workforce and get a good job. Ascend and EmployIndy wanted to expand young people's understanding of job preparation — to show them how vital apprenticeships and workplace learning programs, starting in high school, are for students to succeed in their jobs and careers, even for those students who plan to go to college. They also wanted to expand young people's understanding of the variety of pathways open to them that could potentially involve college, career, or a mix of both.

Mapping the Narrative Landscape



First, Ascend and EmployIndy conducted a media audit of mainstream news outlets that prominently featured stories about employment and workforce topics, in order to understand how students and their parents understand choices during and after high school. The media audit highlighted a prominent narrative that the only way to get a "good job" in

this economy is with a traditional college education. Further, apprenticeships are viewed as being only for trade occupations, which are often stigmatized as low-skill and low-wage. This stigma pitted college against apprenticeships, framing it as a binary choice for students. At the same time, many people are not convinced that college is worth the price.

Understanding Audience Mindset



Next, to better understand the beliefs of current high school students, Ascend and EmployIndy conducted in-depth interviews with high school students who were Black, Hispanic, or white from low-income households. They also reviewed findings from previous focus groups, interviews, and surveys with students, parents, educators, employers, and community-based organizations from Central Indiana.

Some key takeaways from the interviews:

- There is a lack of clarity around what is needed to succeed in work
- While students may learn about potential jobs and careers from job fairs, they lack direct work experience to understand whether a job is a match for their interests, skills, and aspirations
- Many students feel that adults in their lives are not meeting their needs around navigating education and career counselors
- Students are most motivated by the potential to earn good pay, help others, and expand on their interests when deciding what career to pursue



Testing and Activating Persuasive Insights



In focus groups with high school students from Indianapolis, Ascend and EmployIndy tested new and existing messages and videos featuring Indiana high school students. The test content included messages that spotlighted programs that offer high school students paid opportunities to gain real-world professional experience.

They also tested an existing video showcasing the Indiana Modern Apprenticeship Program, to which the high school research participants had positive reactions. Here's what young people liked about Indiana's Modern Apprenticeship Program:

It gave me inspiration because there were people in our age group, like they were somebody that already went through it and I like they already got experience in it. It's like they were doing it like now.

—Black Female High School Student, Indianapolis

Gaining experience is one of the biggest things and factors in getting the better and better jobs that you want. [If you] didn't know if you wanted to go to college but wanted good jobs, you need experience. You can't just go into a good job and be like, well I can learn how to do this. [Employers] gonna want you already coming in there knowing to love something. They can't

just teach you every little bitty thing. But yeah, experience, it just looks good for you. Like you already know how to do something. I can leave him by himself. He knows how to do this already.

—Black Male High School Student, Indianapolis

In addition, Ascend and EmployIndy learned that the dominant narrative they sought to shift—that college is the only path to a good job—is reinforced by a lack of awareness among students of the other postsecondary options that exist. In addition, there is a flawed mental template associated with the word “apprenticeship”—the word is associated with bygone eras (like a blacksmith from 200 years ago), or as something only relevant to the trades.

Finally, the research highlighted what high school students want from their educational experiences: a variety of options to explore different careers without being confined to a single path too soon; programs, resources, and guidance to set them up with a clear path to a quality, successful life, whatever that means for them; and real-world experience so they can launch a successful career.

What's Next for EmployIndy and Ascend



The Pathways Narrative Project has given EmployIndy and Ascend a better understanding of the challenges students are facing—students lack awareness of postsecondary options other than, or in addition to, college. As a result, both organizations are working on creating better framing around the pathways programs they offer so students can have options that both resonate with them and help them achieve their vision of success.

Both organizations are planning to update their messaging and collateral about their pathways-related programs and services. In addition, the organizations found that learning about narrative strategies could translate to other parts of the organization's work as well. They are looking at how narrative strategies can be deployed to clarify their strategic priorities and better connect with parent/caregiver and employer audiences.



It can feel easier to operate in the day-to-day rather than think about these big-picture questions like, How do we change the narrative? But when we're figuring out what are the larger policy plays, what are the larger systemic and societal we need to address these systemic issues to better support our day-to-day programs, we then realize that most of it has to do with narrative. Thinking about narrative helps us take a broader view instead of just saying, okay, here's our action plan and then we've changed the system, you know?

—Kristen Barry

Vice President of Research and Strategy, EmployIndy

About the Pathways Narrative Project

The Pathways Narrative Project is a two-year collaborative initiative, led by Wonder: Strategies for Good and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation and others, that convened nine organizations working in five places (Colorado, Indiana, New York,

Texas, and Washington, DC) to improve education and career pathways for young people. Together the cohort explored how to leverage the power of narrative to advance programs and systems change in the pathways space.