

Narrative Change Goals



CityWorks DC's mission is to improve the early career outcomes of DC youth and young adults of color by creating innovative programs and by mobilizing employers, educators, and city leaders to create a local, diverse talent pipeline. CityWorks DC's initial narrative change goal focused on shifting the mindset of grasstops leaders from a focus on college being the only postsecondary pathways to success to a mindset that incorporates the value of multiple pathways to

family sustaining careers. In other words, mobilize DC grasstops leaders to advance policies and programs focused on successful early career outcomes (e.g., wages, education, career trajectory, etc.) rather than solely college completion. As a result of their audience research, they revised their change goal to focus on narrative alignment among grasstops leaders in DC about what a local, equitable, employer-driven talent pipeline looks like.

Mapping the Narrative Landscape



First, CityWorks DC conducted a media audit to determine how the topics of career pathways and talent pipelines were being covered in the news. While CityWorks DC found some evidence of messages and stories that outline the need for

multiple pathways, within the education media space "college for all" is the dominant narrative, reflecting a bias for a four-year college degree as the key pathway to a flourishing life.

Understanding Audience Mindset



Next, CityWorks DC conducted discussion groups and in-depth interviews with grasstops education reformers and policymakers in DC. Key takeaways included:

- Grasstops leaders were not aligned around what an equitable, local, employer-driven talent pipeline is
- Grasstops leaders perceived the need to persuade employers about advantages of hiring local because they were not confident that employers saw the strategic value for their business of hiring local
- There was discomfort with framing postsecondary pathways as a forced binary between college and everything else. Grasstops leaders who are Black or grew up in low-income households believe strongly in the value of a college degree, not only for economic reasons but also personal and social reasons. Messages promoting postsecondary pathways other than a 4-year college degree may trigger implicit racial bias.

For example, a Black grasstops leader in DC shared concerns about just such a narrative shift:

You can't...tell a community of people that have been not only disenfranchised, but college access has been kept away from them so much so that we've had to create colleges just for our own communities, and [say] that now it's okay not to go [to college]....It could be troubling, it could be traumatic and it could be not well received. And so the language and the narrative has to be thoughtful.

Realizing that grasstops leaders lacked alignment on the desired outcome of a local, equitable, employer-driven talent pipeline led CityWorks DC to take a step back and shift their change goal to: "Build a common understanding of a 'local, equitable, employer-driven talent pipeline' among grasstops leaders so that we can elevate it as a priority, identify and align on strategies to achieve it, and proceed in implementation in a coordinated way."



Testing Persuasive Messages



With their new focus, CityWorksDC developed a narrative framework that makes the case for an employer-driven, equitable, local talent pipeline. To pressure test their new narrative framework, they conducted in-depth interviews with grasstops education leaders and policymakers in DC. They also sought audience reactions to the Hire Local DC's new "[Employers' Call to Action](#)" aimed at persuading local employers to engage in a range of work-based learning initiatives. From these interviews, CityWorksDC learned that:

- Education and government partners see employers as essential to building a local talent pipeline, and employers feel they can't do it without education and government partners

- The phrase "employer-driven, equitable, local talent pipeline" itself is abstract jargon that audiences may misinterpret; therefore, it is better to show — not tell — audiences how employers are taking the lead in collaborating with education and government agencies to build the pipeline through specific programs, partnerships, and systems changes
- Grasstops advocates and policymakers in DC especially value hearing from both students and employers (including both Black *and* white employers), about their desire to have a local talent pipeline, and associated steps/actions needed to establish one in DC



CONNECTION

We want young people in our city to pursue their interests, reach their full potential, and achieve their goals.

It's good business for our city to invest in young people being prepared for good jobs in our city, which will strengthen our local economy.



PROBLEM

Employers in DC need to find talent. At the same time, we have local residents who grew up in DC who are looking for good jobs but aren't getting hired.

This is particularly important for Black and Hispanic young people in DC who, historically, have not had access to good jobs in DC.



SOLUTION

Educators and workforce government agencies are creating innovative partnerships with employers to train, recruit, hire and retain hometown talent, especially DC's Black and Hispanic youth, into good jobs. We now have an opportunity to take these solutions to scale.



VISION

If we are successful, all young people growing up in DC, including Black and Hispanic young people, will be prepared for and hired into good jobs that will enable them to live and prosper in DC, and our local businesses will thrive.

CityWorks DC's new narrative resonated with grasstops leaders in DC. For example, a white grasstops leader reacted:

I really like the high level framing, the specific example of a young person, the specific action steps a company can take, how it's aligned to government. I think it also expresses the business case for hiring local in a compelling way.



Putting Messages into Action



While CityWorksDC did not do a structured field test of messaging, it incorporated research insights into communications materials such as blog posts, emails, and social media content. Additionally, CityWorks DC successfully equipped grasstops leaders and employers with talking points based on their tested messaging about developing a local talent pipeline in DC for a construction-focused panel hosted by CityWorks DC and the Federal City Council in June 2023. In reaction, numerous business leaders expressed excitement about

implementing work-based learning in their companies and were encouraged by the collective effort to organize employers that CityWorks DC is building with the Federal City Council. For example, Neil Stablow, Executive Vice President of Donohoe Construction noted:

...this is unlike anything that I've seen in the past where there's been a long-term, well-coordinated effort." Post-event feedback from attendees shared with CityWorks DC leaders indicated a notable shift in mindset, willingness, and understanding of hiring locally.

What's Next for CityWorks DC



Through the Pathways Narrative Project, CityWorks DC deepened their understanding of the value of narrative alignment among grasstops leaders in order to pursue their organizational change goals. CityWorksDC will continue to pressure-test narratives among a larger group of grasstops leaders, especially employers, and share insights and findings about audience mindsets and messaging and narrative as they emerge.



We came in with assumptions about our audience, some of which were correct and some that were not. So one of my take-aways is to peel back layers and layers of understanding and pressure-test assumptions every step of the way, so we can really engage in effecting mindset and narrative change.

—Erin Bibo

Vice President of Strategic Initiatives, CityWorks DC

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.