

Narrative Change Goals



The Pathways Narrative Project initially partnered with HERE to HERE, an organization with the goal of helping 10,000 low-income students of color be better equipped to earn family-sustaining incomes, achieve college and career success, and contribute to the city's thriving, inclusive economy. In August 2022, HERE to HERE transferred part of its work to the New York University School of Professional Studies (NYU SPS), which is expanding HERE to HERE's work to build new pipelines that connect underrepresented high school graduates to postsecondary opportunities.

At the start of the project, HERE to HERE sought to use the Pathways Narrative Project to research and

better understand how narrative could motivate or influence NYU and City University of New York faculty to incorporate work experience into degree programs. When the Pathways Narrative Project transferred to NYU SPS, the team, having learned from earlier phases how deeply embedded real-world work experience is to the NYU SPS learning experience, elected to refine the change goal and the audience. Instead, they would explore how to leverage narrative to inspire and motivate industry professionals to contribute their expertise to provide applied learning opportunities for the school's students.

Mapping the Narrative Landscape



HERE to HERE began the work by conducting a survey of NYU SPS and CUNY professors and a media audit to determine how education leaders and publications viewed and talked about pathways that integrated academic coursework with work experience. Two college student interns supported the analysis and interpretation of results across the audit and the survey. Among other key findings, they learned that conversations in the media about work-based learning were predominantly

led by community colleges, not private institutions. They also learned that work-based learning was most commonly framed as a benefit to high-school students while experiential learning was framed as a service for employers, with programs created in response to employers identifying a skills gap for recent graduates. Finally, they observed that the news media and professors reinforced a belief that meaningful work could only follow school, with very few included outlets describing a "learn and earn" model.

Understanding Audience Mindset



Shortly before transitioning to NYU SPS, the project team conducted in-depth interviews with 10 full-time and adjunct faculty from NYU SPS. Among the faculty members they spoke with, most understood the value of work-based learning but described it as either "applied learning" or "experiential learning." And faculty members, regardless of whether they are adjuncts or full-time, described having dual identities or playing two roles. They saw themselves as educators and also as experts in their respective industries, and it was this combination of experiences that enabled them to see and understand the value of work-based learning for both students and employers. The majority also believed students needed "an exposure to a diversity of subjects and ideas, critical thinking skills" and "practical skills and knowledge to land a good paying job" and that it was their role to provide those.

After completing the analysis of the interviews, the project team agreed to change the project goals and target audience to better match the new institutional context of the project. This meant shifting the change goal to one that better aligned with NYU SPS's goals of building connections between industry and higher education institutions in service of school and industry partnerships. The target audience shifted to industry professionals in three high-opportunity sectors: HR, hospitality, and real estate. In this reconfigured research project, NYU SPS hoped to enable professionals to feel as if they have a role to play in preparing students for their future careers and professional lives.

I usually say I'm an educator and a lawyer, right? The educator part is a big part of my identity and it is something I'm passionate about. But I do think that practice-based educators often, depending on what the field is, can often do pretty well in terms of communicating how the world works.

—Faculty, NYUSPS



Testing Persuasive Messages



After shifting their work to focus on industry professionals, NYU SPS created an industry survey to determine how much of what they learned about adjunct professors applied to professionals outside of a university setting. Over 120 respondents from hospitality, real estate, and HR completed the survey. Among other findings, the survey revealed that professionals in these sectors preferred the phrase “real world learning” to “applied learning” or “work-place learning” but had a fairly limited understanding of what “real world learning” entailed or their role as partners to higher education. Additionally, an overwhelming majority of respondents believed that practical skills and work experience should be incorporated into undergraduate degree programs, and those who were inclined to participate in “real world learning” indicated that their top motivations are “professional duty,” an “adult took a chance on them,” or “diversifying industry.”

Real estate professionals represented the larger sector of respondents, so NYU SPS focused its in-depth interviews within this group. The learning objective for these interviews was to expand the audience’s perception of what “real world learning” looks like and enable audiences to recognize their own role in partnering with higher education. NYU SPS tested a fictitious op-ed from an industry leader as well as a definition of “real world learning” that primed audiences to understand the importance of the partnership between industry and higher education in order to meet the needs of students and employers.

From these interviews, NYU SPS learned that:

- College-educated industry professionals can be persuaded of the value of real world learning and partnerships between higher ed and industry leaders.
- Even people who didn’t think hiring was an issue or who didn’t initially think industry plays a role in preparing the next generation of professionals found the concept of “real world learning” very appealing.
- Relating to their personal experiences navigating educational and career journeys and calling out the gaps and struggles that the typical educational journey has in preparing people for their careers seems to make them more receptive to a new way of thinking about college in the career preparation journey. Highlighting personal industry leader/partner stories and stats/impact numbers are key to making a compelling case.
- Most skills identified for their roles and/or entering real estate are not technical (e.g., passion, interest, drive, hunger for the deal, etc.) and nearly all said they gained skills on the job, not in the classroom.

Most respondents agreed with the statement and stayed consistent. Those that didn’t or agreed less jumped up 2+ points by the end of the interview.

How much do you agree with this statement (scale of 1-9, 1=don’t agree and 9 is strongly agree?)

The real estate industry is changing quickly. In order to be prepared for the changes that lie ahead, our sector must play an active role in training the next generation of real estate professionals. We must do our part to equip students, who are currently studying to join our industry, with the experiences, skills and knowledge they will need to be successful.



Baseline	Baseline II
8	10
5	7
9	9
1	10
9	9
9	9
7	7



What's Next for NYU SPS



Through the Pathways Narrative Project, NYU SPS has learned that language matters; when trying to reach and influence target audiences, an understanding of what language resonates with those audiences is important, as is taking the time to build on existing relationships and networks to help establish a new narrative. NYU SPS will incorporate these insights into the re-branding of NYU SPS so that over the long term, the school is viewed as a go-to place for learning that integrates in-classroom learning with real-world experience.



I always saw narrative as a really critical piece of the pie in any organization, especially nonprofit organizations, because without narrative how do you move your mission forward? It's a very strategic tool--it's the way that people can see the relevance of the work and its impact on them or on other people.

—Stephanie Ramirez

Senior Project Manager, Innovation and Strategic Initiatives,
NYU School of Professional Studies

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.