

Narrative Change Goals



Urban Alliance connects students to equitable, inclusive careers through paid high school internships, mentorship, and professional development. It works with schools and employers to address systemic barriers to economic mobility for young adults of color and to bridge the gaps between education and workforce development for all young people.

Through the Pathways Narrative Project, Urban Alliance sought to increase the number of young

people participating in its High School Internship Program, with a focus on young men of color. Urban Alliance hypothesized that high school interns were not seen as valuable to employers, and set a goal of shifting the narrative so that employers saw value in high school students, especially for building a diverse early-talent pipeline.

Mapping the Narrative Landscape



First, Urban Alliance conducted a media audit to determine how internships are portrayed in the news. They found that student voices and experiences are missing in news coverage of internships, even with respect to photos or other imagery. Interns are

assumed to be college students. When internships are positively framed, the focus is on benefits to young people (not employers); in some cases, deficit framing describes internships as preventing youth violence.

Understanding Audience Mindset



Next, Urban Alliance conducted in-depth interviews with employers who were currently partnering with Urban Alliance. They learned that employers view internships primarily as charitable and secondarily as strategic to their business. Employers recognize developmental differences between students in high

school and college, while also valuing previous work experience. Importantly, employers raised concerns about the time it takes to supervise a high school intern and, thus, value non-profit partners that train and prepare interns.



Testing Persuasive Insights



Urban Alliance conducted in-depth interviews with HR professionals at companies in the DC Metro region who are not hosting high school interns, to determine what might help employers overcome perceived barriers to high school interns. The materials included a sample outreach pitch deck, a video featuring high school interns and employer partners, and a hypothetical op-ed from an employer making the business case for hiring high school interns.

For example, they tested a message emphasizing the benefits of high school interns for young people *and* employers:

Internships with high school students benefit both employers and young people. Employers meet their needs to develop a diverse talent pool. Young people gain valuable real-world work experience that helps them explore and pursue careers in their future.

HR professionals reacted positively to this “dual benefits” messaging:

I mean, the bottom line is, as altruistic as people want to be and businesses want to be, it's still a business. And I think that knowing that you're going in and protecting your business and developing it through this program is something that's hugely important...And so I'm good with really both of those particular statements because I think it touches both the heartstring portion, you know, what you want to do for others, and then really being able to do the business part.

—HR professional, Washington, DC

Insights from Message Testing:

- HR professionals are motivated by supporting people's development, and open to doing so with high school students
- HR professionals' support for high school internships is inhibited by their beliefs about high school-age students' maturity, motivation to work, and skills
- HR professionals' concerns can be managed by showing how nonprofit partner fill in skills gaps and sharing employers' stories about their perspective changing
- HR professionals are motivated by impact data on the benefits of high school internships to young people and employers' bottom line and talent strategy
- HR professionals value stories of transformation and impact, not just program testimonials
- HR professionals value hearing from both young people and employers as validators of high school internship programs

Putting Messages into Action



Urban Alliance incorporated research insights into outreach collateral and also did A/B testing for the subject lines of their April and May newsletters. Field testing of updated materials provided the opportunity to hear first-hand from employers who are responsible for hiring high school students. This has given Urban Alliance new insight into the importance of collecting partner quotes from current employer partners who can speak directly to the multiple benefits of high school internships: to young people, employers, and the greater good of society.

For example:

Our people set us apart. It is important to invest in young people as essential stakeholders in our continued success. Their success wherever they go after [company name] is our success. We all have had someone invest in us for us to be where we are today. To stop investing in young people is to jeopardize the future of our entire society.

—Employer partner, Washington, DC



What's Next for Urban Alliance



Through the Pathways Narrative Project, Urban Alliance learned about the importance of talking about the benefits of high school internships for both students and employers — and ensuring that potential employer partners hear directly from students and other employers. Urban Alliance hopes to continue the practice of field-testing messages and incorporating insights into their core processes, such as onboarding new employer partners.



I'm really focused on engaging more with [employer] partners, using the insights and findings we've gathered...so we can have the best of both worlds: our students and our student voices, and our job partners, both elevating the narrative of what we're trying to do.

—Maria Ibañez

National Communications Director, Urban Alliance

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.