

Narrative Change Goals



Young Invincibles' mission is to amplify the voices of young adults in the political process and expand economic opportunity for our generation. For the Pathways Narrative Project, the team at Young Invincibles working in Texas set a goal of influencing policymakers on the Texas Commission on Community College Finance, and ultimately the Texas legislature, to develop an equitable funding model for community

colleges that recognizes the role that community colleges play in young people's lives. They hypothesized that policymakers and community college administrators believed they — not community college students — knew best how to invest the state's limited resources in the community college system. To advance their policy goals, Young Invincibles wanted to elevate the power of young people's voices.

Mapping the Narrative Landscape



First, Young Invincibles analyzed how higher education policy advocates framed the need for community college finance reform as well as how Texas-based media outlets framed the issue and who was positioned as experts proposing policy solutions.

They confirmed their initial hypothesis that student stories and perspectives were largely missing from the public narrative about community college funding models.

Understanding Audience Mindset



While Young Invincibles had deep experience and understanding of young people's perspectives on their futures in Texas, they had less familiarity with the policymaker audience who youth leaders were seeking to reach. Therefore, Young Invincibles conducted in-depth interviews with former Texas legislators, legislative staff, and policy advocates to understand their mindsets about community colleges and the power of young people's voices. Young Invincibles learned that:

- Policymakers value community colleges for their role in filling workforce gaps in Texas
- Messages emphasizing solutions that meet the needs of employers are more persuasive than those that focus on students
- Policymakers and advocates say they value hearing from students about their experiences with community college, but they do not necessarily believe that student voices will influence legislators' decisions about higher education policy



Testing Persuasive Insights



In order to learn which messages from community college students would be most influential, Young Invincibles developed and tested student stories in a variety of formats: legislative testimony, op-ed, tweets, and video. These messages would need to persuade legislators — including conservative ones — to increase state funding for community colleges, not only shift to an outcome-based funding model. Young Invincibles learned that students needed to share stories about working hard to achieve their goals and aspirations, with detailed data about the financial barriers they face.

Insights from Message Testing:

- There are two core values that resonate with policymakers and advocates: economic prosperity and students working hard for career and family
- Positive, asset-framed student stories and testimony were powerful and influential
- Show — don't tell — that student voices matter through storytelling
- Story-based messages with detailed data are more effective than stories without facts or broad appeals
- Messages and stories about community college finance will be more effective if they are perceived as unrelated to other “third rail” issues in Texas politics
- Conservative lawmakers in Texas value efficiency and low taxes
- Policymakers are especially interested in hearing from community college students in unique areas
- Avoid jargon when describing the kind of jobs that community colleges can help students access

Putting Messages into Action



In 2023, the Texas legislature took up a bill to reform the community college funding model, based on recommendations from the Commission on Community College Finance in 2022. Young Invincibles had already successfully engaged young people in shaping the commission's recommendations. Next, Young Invincibles put their messaging research about persuasive student stories into action. They trained 12 student leaders and engaged 1,000+ community college students to share their stories and aspirations for affordable community college. As a result, students testified for the legislation 22 times, and news stories about the legislation featured students and coverage focused on student needs, not only workforce gaps. The historic legislation passed, dedicating \$684 million to Texas community colleges and enhancing outcomes

for students. The impact is a 20% increase in state allocations to community colleges (from \$1.8 billion to \$2.2 billion over the next 2 years) and a significant expansion of financial aid and scholarships for low-income dual-credit students.

Following passage of the bill, Texas legislators reflected on the power of student voices:

We heard from a lot of community college students as we took testimony, especially in the public testimony portion of our hearings, and that was very impactful, very important. We can sit in a room in Austin, in the Capitol, and think we know what is needed out there. But to have people come in and share their life experiences, what is happening for them right now in the community college and the barriers they're facing, the opportunities that [are] provided them — that was very impactful as we crafted the final bill and pushed it through the legislative process, ultimately to the governor's signature.

—Policymaker, Texas



What's Next for Young Invincibles



Young Invincibles is well-positioned to take on narrative change as a means to amplify the voices of young people and give them more power to change policies that affect young people's lives. With the experience gained through the Pathways Narrative Project, Young Invincibles is interested in learning about the dominant narratives in all of the issue areas they work on, beyond college affordability, such as healthcare. In addition, they understand that achieving narrative change so that young people are centered in narratives about their futures requires learning about the mindsets of their target audiences, such as policymakers and advocates.



The project's process inspired us to realize that building narrative power is essential for effecting change. For this project, mobilizing young adults, providing them with information and resources, and helping them better understand their narrative power was crucial in creating actionable change.

—Kasey Corpus

Policy and Advocacy Manager, Young Invincibles

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.