

The Pathways Narrative Project: Narrative as Inquiry

Introduction

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.

Project Design

The design of the Pathways Narrative Project was intentionally experimental, enabling each organization to choose learning objectives that aligned with their strategies and goals. In this way the project model built in necessary flexibility to ensure that every organization could situate narrative change in their own context.

ORS Impact, the learning and evaluation partner for the Pathways Narrative Project, noted that for most if not all of the organizations, the work was as much about learning about narrative change as it was about doing narrative change work:

It's worth noting that capacity strengthening in this case was focused on specific, early-stage aspects of narrative change work: namely, supporting organizations to understand how narrative might be a useful lever for achieving their broader organizational change goals, identifying beneficial narratives that could help to advance those goals, identifying and understanding audiences and their priorities, and applying these insights to the development of content (such as language, stories, messages, and messengers).¹

More specifically, the Pathways Narrative Project helped to build the capacity of organizations to advance narratives — defined as patterns or systems of stories — and shift audience mindsets among employers, policymakers, community and education leaders, and other key stakeholders to ensure that all young people obtain credentials of value and gain the professional skills, agency, and relationships to thrive in the workplace.

Each organization developed narrative change goals, mapped their narrative landscape, conducted research to understand the mindsets of key audiences, and developed and tested persuasive messaging with their target audience. Organizations applied what they learned through the narrative inquiry process in multiple ways:

- Informing messaging and strategic communications with key audiences in the pathways ecosystem
- Providing organizations with new and valuable proximity to their target audience and key stakeholders
- Inspiring reflection on and better alignment of organizational strategies and goals

This case study highlights what organizations learned from audience research across the cohort and provides examples of implementation opportunities for different organizations that reflect the thematic categories listed above. What seems important to memorialize here, from the organizations' collective and individual learning and action around narrative change, is how narrative change tools can help prompt reflection and strategic shifts in individual organizations and build knowledge in ways that could benefit the field itself.

¹ ORS Impact. (2023, September 28). *Strengthening Organizational Capacity for Narrative Change: Insights from the Pathways Narrative Project*. Pathways Narrative Project.



Narrative inquiry to inform messaging and communications

All of the organizations that participated in the Pathways Narrative Project operate within the broader field of education and career pathways development — a field focused on creating more opportunities for young people to explore education and career pathways while obtaining skills and experience of value to both themselves and their future employers. And every organization, during the project duration, went through the same process of narrative inquiry: establishing their hypotheses about what narratives needed to shift or be re-framed; analyzing the narrative landscape; mapping the mindsets of their target

audiences; and developing and testing persuasive messaging. While the design of the project was not intended to develop a shared narrative strategy across the field, collective insights about the tools of narrative change (e.g., messaging, messengers, and stories) were developed that may prove useful for a range of organizations working in the education and career pathways space.

Below we share some collective insights from the project cohort:

The Pathways field does not yet have alignment on terminology or key concepts

During message testing, different terms and concepts resonated with different audiences, across different locations and in different roles in education and work systems. This finding has been consistent throughout each phase of this project. Organizations working in the pathways field, designing pathways programs, and advocating for pathways-related solutions are not aligned on key terms or narratives related to education and career pathways for young people.

For example, in-depth interviews conducted by Education Partnership of the Permian Basin, Young Invincibles, Urban Alliance, and CityWorks DC with employers, policymakers, and students across different locations resulted in no conclusive preference for a term to describe pathways programs, such as apprenticeships or internships, that combine learning and working. Audiences' preferences were split among "career-connected learning," "work-based learning," and "real-world experience."

Across audiences and places, persuasive messages convey the dual benefits of pathways programs for both young people and businesses

Despite the lack of alignment around key terminology, across the cohort, organizations found that the most persuasive messages about pathways programs convey the benefits both for young people and businesses. The key is for these messages to show — not tell — audiences how young people and businesses, alike, can benefit from pathways programs such as internships, apprenticeships, and other work-based or career-connected learning opportunities. These messages and examples connect with audiences in ways that match their core values and beliefs about what young people need to succeed and thrive, specifically opportunities and career choices. At the same time, these messages and examples illustrate how pathways programs provide businesses with the trained, skilled talent pipeline that they need in order

to prosper. CareerWise Colorado, an organization that creates modern youth apprenticeship programs integrated with school systems, tested a "dual benefits" message in a hypothetical case study they shared with tech employers in Colorado and found that employers responded positively to this messaging structure.

Here's the benefit for the students and you should care about the student. But like here's the benefit for the company too. Cause if I was going to pitch this to my leadership, that is what they would want to know, right? Like, that's super nice but what's the benefit for me?

—Tech employer, Colorado



Urban Alliance, which is focused on offering paid high school internships, mentoring, and professional development for young people in DC, also successfully tested the following “dual benefits” message with prospective employer partners in the DC metro area.

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.

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, DC

As a result of their research, Urban Alliance updated their outreach materials for prospective employer partners using this approach, and has also started collecting more testimonials from current employer partners that reflect their perspectives on the benefits of Urban Alliance's high school internship program.

Employers are perceived as powerful actors in the pathways ecosystem

Employers play multiple roles in the education to workforce continuum. Employers open the door to high school students seeking exposure to the careers and industries that they are excited about; provide real-world work and education opportunities for high school graduates and apprentices; and ultimately may decide to hire the high-quality and well-trained young talent that many organizations aim to produce. The organizations in the Pathways Narrative Project that chose to do audience research with employers learned that their target audience represented a range of diverse perspectives and that employers neither saw themselves or identified as “employers.” Instead, most people who make up the “employer” audience in the pathways space identify with their occupational role (e.g., Human Resources manager, company executive, software engineer, etc.) or sector (e.g., real estate, technology company).

In short, being an “employer” is a role within the pathways ecosystem, but may not be an identity around which to create messaging. This insight enabled partners to refine their target audiences and to become more specific about the conditions and types of professionals that were most available to working with young people, and also to tailor messaging to the specific roles and industries that

are most important for achieving their organizational goals. New York University School of Professional Services (NYU SPS), which joined the Pathways Narrative Project after inheriting another organization's postsecondary portfolio, learned that messaging can also be successful when it describes the opportunities presented by external factors, such as a changing workforce and the need to remain competitive with one's industry peers. For example, when NYU SPS surveyed industry professionals in real estate, they found that leading with a message about a changing sector activated employers' interest in training the next generation of professionals.

Nonprofit organizations in the career pathways field often refer to “employers” as a target audience. However, those who we'd call “employers” don't necessarily see themselves as “employers” unless they are specifically in HR or positions to hire people.

—Stephanie Ramirez, Senior Project Manager, Innovation and Strategic Initiatives, New York University School of Professional Studies.

Audiences perceive the “college for all” narrative as being about access to college

At the outset of the Pathways project, several organizations identified the “college for all” narrative as a dominant narrative that makes it difficult for them to achieve their organizational goals related to

expanding post-secondary options for young people that do not involve college.” However, audiences — even those who are invested and believe in the value of a range of post-secondary options — may disagree.



Individuals interviewed often embraced the “college for all” narrative because they associated it with opening up access to higher education for communities of color, especially Black students who had historically been excluded from attending college by racist policies. The “college for all” narrative is perceived as an important historic win for some audiences, so messages that directly counter or contradict this notion threaten to rollback progress that has been made.

There are not a lot of conversations about whether or not a white young person or students should or shouldn't go to college. I never have conversations about the white students going to college. I only have conversations about Black and brown children

and whether or not they should go to college and what they should be doing after graduation. We don't ever have targeted discussions about non-communities of color and what's gonna happen with them after graduation.

—Policymaker, DC

These collective insights from the Pathways Narrative Project, which were unearthed through the application of narrative change tools, can help advance the work of pathways organizations that are seeking greater alignment with or engagement of their target audiences — whether they be employers, policymakers, education leaders, or young people themselves.

Narrative inquiry to increase proximity to target audiences

Some of the organizations involved in the Pathways Narrative Project were familiar with audience research, such as polling or message testing, prior to their participation in the project. However, the Pathways Narrative Project introduced all of the organizations to a different type of audience research — one that involved multiple layers of understanding the narrative landscape, the mindsets of their target audiences, and how to integrate concepts and ideas that were often working in opposition to one another in the pathways space (such as, “there should be more postsecondary opportunities besides, or in addition

to, college for young people” versus “Everyone should get the opportunity to access a college education.”)

While the Pathways Narrative Project illustrated the capacity constraints of many organizations to engage in this level of narrative work, all of the organizations came away with valuable insights for their work moving forward. Some organizations gathered insights about young people, while others gathered insights about the partners and stakeholders in their networks in ways that opened up opportunities to create greater cohesion around messaging.

Audience insights deepen understanding about young people's lived experience

Some organizations conducted research with young people and gained greater proximity to the people their work intends to benefit. Why was this important? Because these organizations served in intermediary roles — as connective tissue between education and employment systems, with a shared goal of creating more opportunities for young people to explore and succeed in their chosen career pathways. More often than not, these organizations interacted with other adults supporting young people, not with young people themselves. However, they still took advantage of the learning opportunity presented by the Pathways Narrative Project to conduct research with young people and gain valuable insights about what young people actually believe, feel, and think about their future education and career options.

EmployIndy and Ascend Indiana are two Indiana-based organizations that joined forces during the Pathways Narrative Project. 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 identified a shared goal of increasing the number of students served by high school apprenticeships.

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. After conducting focus groups, the Indiana organizations developed a deeper appreciation for how much young people wanted to learn about different education and career options, yet lacked awareness of these options. Additionally, activities like job fairs were perceived as insufficient to raise their awareness. Moreover, even words like “apprenticeships” were considered to be dated by young people.

Overall, EmployIndy and Ascend Indiana, through their audience research, learned that when raising awareness about modern youth apprenticeship options and other postsecondary options, it was important to both understand and reflect young people’s desire for agency and the rich diversity of young people’s interests and lived experiences. Moreover, in gaining a more multi-dimensional appreciation of young people as their target audiences, both EmployIndy and Ascend Indiana realized that career pathways opportunities also had to be multi-dimensional — and that it was important to avoid creating a binary construct between college as one potential pathway and other postsecondary opportunities as another, in order to avoid unintentionally reinforcing existing beliefs about beliefs about which students belong in which pathway.

“ [The project] has influenced our programs, how we talk about our programs, our structures, the social media posts we put out, we are now much more aware of how all of these little pieces contribute to the narrative. And when we’re giving presentations or information sessions for students, we are now much more aware of how every word that comes out of their mouth matters. We are listening much more to the feedback from students currently enrolled in a program or a service--how they’re talking about what the program is doing for them, their lives, and whether they’ve changed any preconceived notions about things like work-based learning or career pathways. We’re definitely much more sensitive to listening for these things from students after going through this project. We are listening for their lived experiences, the things that influence them.

—Addison McKown, Manager, Strategic Communications, EmployIndy

Audience insights influence collaborations with partners

The Education Partnership of the Permian Basin (EPPB) is an intermediary organization dedicated to improving the education and life outcomes of young people who live in the Permian Basin, a geographical region encompassing both western Texas and southeastern New Mexico. The region is known as the highest oil-producing field in the United States. EPPB works with education, business, and other civic leaders to ensure that students in the Permian Basin have the best chances to succeed from cradle to career. For the Pathways Narrative Project, EPPB conducted audience research with high school students to understand their mindset about post-secondary opportunities in the Permian Basin. EPPB’s goal is to ensure every graduating high school student in the Permian Basin is prepared with a postsecondary plan for college, career, trade, or military.

EPPB’s research with high school students showed, among other things, that students value education and career paths that offer opportunity and exploration, and that high school students hold different beliefs than adults about the value of a postsecondary education. Using the insights from the research, EPPB developed and tested stories about young people that both highlighted young people’s agency in choosing careers

“ I was struggling with narrative as a concept, because we sit at the cross-section of systems, at the grasstops level. So, it’s not like we interact directly with kids, we interact with teachers. But when we learned about the different ways to engage with narrative [through the project], we said, oh, okay: that one about trying to align narratives within systems — that is the space in which we operate. Now that we understand that, we are trying to apply that in a very concrete way as we build out an energy pathway. It is informing how we’re trying to recruit kids, or how the districts would be recruiting kids. And it’s informing our rural collaborative work, where we’re bringing together four rural districts for them to focus on some pathways.

—Adrian Vega,
Education Partnership of the Permian Basin



for themselves and showed young people exploring a wide range of career and education possibilities. The stories were tested with high school students, who felt the messages in the stories were both positive and inspiring, and helped overcome their perceptions about the stigma of living in the Permian Basin. EPPB is already training education leaders in their network — the audience they have the most direct influence over — about the importance of gaining this type of proximity to young people's beliefs and lived experiences, and the power of student storytelling to support young people's agency in exploring and making choices about their postsecondary plan.

For the Colorado Education Initiative (CEI), an organization that works with education leaders to implement relevant and meaningful learning for young people while they are still in high school, the Pathways Narrative Project provided an opportunity to create more cohesion around the idea that career-connected learning was valuable for all high school students, college-bound or not. Along the way, CEI learned that parents and students were largely absent from the narrative about career-connected learning — they also learned that many of the education leaders they work with believed that the education system was antiquated. Overall, CEI was able to gain traction with their target audience of school

superintendents and district leaders on the idea that career-connected learning was relevant for all students.

What mattered for the organizations highlighted above was not just the power of the insights themselves; it was also how much they were able to leverage these insights to shape their communications and their collaboration with their partners and other stakeholders.

|| [The project] deepened my perspective on narrative and I guess in some ways validated it, because we learned that there is research and a whole community and movement behind this topic and we've been able to be a part of this. I think it's probably applied some rigor and strategies and tactics and techniques against what was more of an idea of where we think we need to change. Now, we've built some capacity against the how.

—Samantha Olson,
VP of Strategy, Colorado Education Initiative

Narrative inquiry inspires reflection on and alignment of strategies and goals

For some organizations, the work of the Pathways Narrative Project went beyond achieving greater cohesion around messaging or increased understanding of how to engage audiences and resulted in shifts that impacted organizational strategies and goals. One example was CityWorks DC, an organization with the mission to improve the early career outcomes of Washington, 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. At the start of the Pathways Narrative Project, CityWorks DC focused on 'grasstops' leaders in education and employment as their target audience, and hypothesized that it was necessary to shift this audience from a mindset of college being the best post-secondary pathway to a mindset that is more welcoming of multiple pathways.

What CityWorks DC learned, through interviews with these target audience members, is that 'grasstops' leaders in DC were not aligned around what an equitable, local, employer-driven talent pipeline would look like. Moreover, they learned that their target audience members felt some discomfort with framing postsecondary options as a forced binary between

college and everything else, and that 'grasstops' leaders who are Black or who grew up in low-income households believe strongly in the value of a college degree for reasons that go beyond economic ones.

As a result of their research, CityWorks DC came to understand that grasstops leaders in DC — their target audience — did not have an aligned or effective way of communicating about their shared outcome, a local, diverse, talent pipeline. Therefore, as CityWorks DC shared in its final reflections:

We stepped back. We shifted our change goal from building the pipeline to building 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. Realizing that we needed to align on the foundation was helpful because, without that, we would have continued to progress on narrative change with a very shaky base. We're now much better poised to align strongly at our core and go from there.



The example of CityWorks DC illustrates how narrative-based work can help shine a light on other, critical areas of social change that need strategic alignment — alignment within an organization around its core strategies and goals; alignment between an organization and its partners and allies; and finally, alignment at a systemic level. Alignment at a systems-level is especially critical for the pathways field, which works at the intersection of multiple systems including K-12 education, postsecondary education, career technical education, workforce development, and employment. Almost all of the organizations involved in the Pathways Narrative Project operate at these intersections. And most came to understand that narrative work offered insights into how to achieve greater alignment with different stakeholders and partners, while holding the success of young people in their lives and their careers at the center.

Finally, Young Invincibles (YI), an organization dedicated to elevating the voices of young people on issues that matter to them, not only understood how narrative change work can strengthen organizational strategies and goals, it committed to continuing this learning and work into the future. The insights that YI gathered from audience research with Texas policymakers and advocates were instrumental to helping young people to re-frame and drive messaging and narratives around community college financing, ultimately resulting in passage of historic legislation in Texas and increased state investments in making community college more affordable. Through multiple forms of commentary and legislative testimony, young people were able to share their experiences about the benefits and impacts of community college in ways that directly influenced the passage of the legislation. As YI reported in their final reflections:

We witnessed a preliminary win with the inclusion of affordability within the final commission recommendations, which partner organizations were strongly convinced would not be included... This monumental community college finance legislation will support Texans seeking affordable pathways to educational and economic opportunity. Our narrative change work was instrumental in passing this legislation. For nearly two years, we worked at every step to inform and advocate for the policy proposals included in the new law. I'm not sure if we succeeded in achieving a new narrative, but we created a strong desire for student voices to be a part of this and decision-makers were consistently "impressed" that young people were showing up to the table.

While the community college legislation was an exciting result from the Pathways Narrative Project, YI also demonstrated an understanding of how narrative change tools could strengthen other parts of the organization's work. YI stated that:

YI is planning to make narrative change strategy a key part of all major campaigns both in Texas and across the organization beginning in 2024. At our spring staff retreat, staff was briefed on dominant narratives and story-based change strategies during a session called "YI's long term agenda." Our goal is to continue to use YI staff town halls and other professional development opportunities for staff to train and inform our teams of the success of the HB 8 campaign and the key components of narrative strategy.

And, in learning about the various ways to engage in and measure narrative work through the Pathways Narrative Project, YI has established a new strategic goal as an organization: that "Young people are equipped to lead efforts to develop and drive narrative change in ways that reflect their priorities and experiences," and that success will be measured by the "number of young advocates who complete our program and show an increased knowledge of narrative change strategy." In other words, for Young Invincibles, narrative work not only influenced the organization's strategic goals; it became a key strategy for the organization itself.



Conclusion

The intensive work of the Pathways Narrative Project highlights how learning about and practicing strategies for narrative change can help organizations rethink how they engage with their target audiences and how closely aligned their strategies are with the perspectives and experiences of the young people these organizations are seeking to serve as well as the education and workforce system partners they need to engage. All of the organizations involved in the Pathways Narrative Project were able to use narrative as a lens through which other parts of their work could be clarified, strengthened, and/or adapted to their strategic aims. In addition, while organizations were able to apply this learning to their own respective areas of work, learning across the cohort helped them also understand the possibilities of strategic alignment across multiple parts of the education and career pathways space — even with respect to their own target audiences and partners. For funders especially, understanding which organizations are best positioned to engage in narrative work and align with others in the same space, around shared narrative goals, could be a powerful way to support narrative change strategies moving forward.

The pathways field is inherently intersectional — born out of a shared aim to bridge the gap between high school, postsecondary education, and work. As such, many of the organizations in this space need to work with multiple stakeholders, such as funders, advocates, policymakers, and program providers, to ensure that young people can navigate the transitions between education and work systems and explore these pathways. This cross-systems, intersectional work requires a deep understanding of what motivates and engages stakeholders and audiences. Narrative work, as a process of inquiry, can help foster that deep understanding, so that organizations and funders can understand who is doing what within the pathways ecosystem and deploy narrative as a way to achieve greater alignment and ultimately, greater strategic impact.