

Building Narrative Power: Insights from the Pathways Narrative Project

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.

Phases of Research

To build organizations' capacity to engage in narrative change, the work centered on five stages of research:

- Identifying narrative change goals (Phase 1: Change)
- Mapping the narrative landscape to better understand existing dominant narratives (Phase 2: Landscape)
- Understanding the mindsets of target audiences (Phase 3: Mindset)
- Using mindset insights to develop and test sample messaging (Phase 4: Persuasion)
- Implementing and measuring the impact of narrative interventions using tested messaging (Phase 5: Action)

Narrative as Enabler

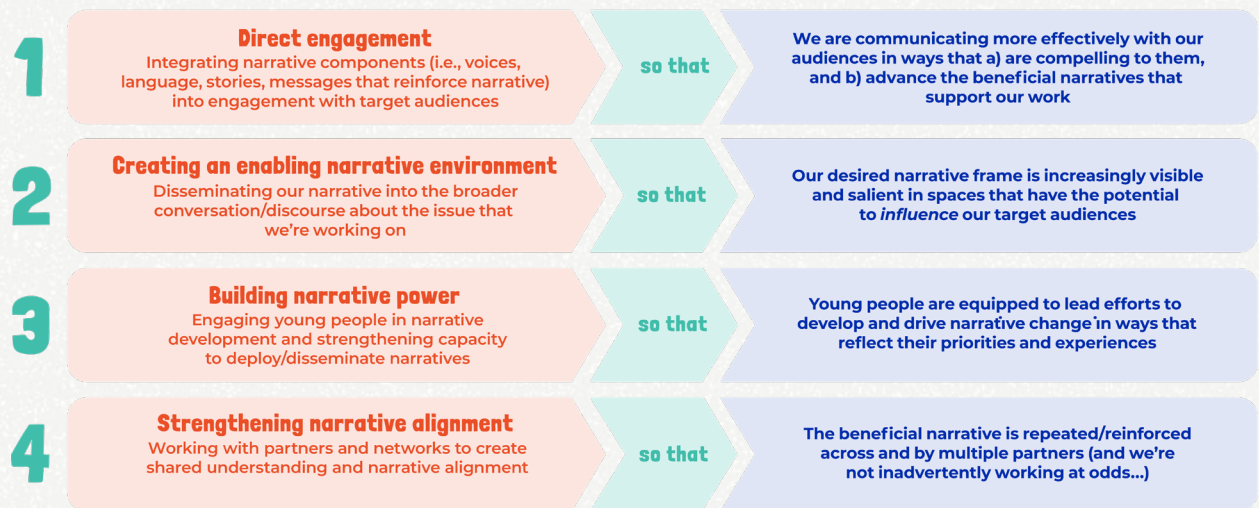
This flexibility was illustrated through a framework created by ORS Impact, a strategy and measurement firm that served as the measurement, learning and evaluation partner for the project. ORS Impact examined what each of the nine organizations learned about narrative and their own capacities to engage in various dimensions of narrative work and then

More specifically, the Pathways Narrative Project helped to build the capacity of organizations to advance narratives — defined as patterns or systems of stories — that both center the voices of young people 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.

The design of the Pathways Narrative Project was intentionally experimental; the funders involved, all with grantmaking investments to expand the range of education and career options for young people, were primarily interested in learning how organizations could build their capacity to leverage narrative change strategies in service of their organizational goals. The design of the project thus allowed for flexibility in how the nine organizations wanted to engage with narrative change research and strategies.

developed a framework to use narrative as an enabler for systems and policy change. This framework helped each organization to identify their unique narrative strategies based on how they are positioned in the broader narrative ecosystem, their capacities, and what outcomes would be enabled as a result.

Framework: Narrative as Enabler



This case study is focused on what was learned about **Building Narrative Power**. Through this project, almost all of the organizations learned important lessons about the ongoing dearth of youth voices in dominant narratives about young people's education and career pathways — and in most cases, the organizations felt compelled to prioritize centering youth voices in their work to engage their target audiences. This type of work is what the first bucket calls **Direct Engagement**. However, strategies that build narrative power directly engage young people themselves in narrative development and build the capacity of young people to deploy/disseminate narratives. This enables

young people to create messaging — namely by telling their own stories — and drive narrative change in ways that reflect their priorities and lived experiences. In the Pathways Narrative Project, one organization, Young Invincibles, pursued this type of narrative change. The insights from Young Invincibles' experience in building narrative power, as well as the insights from the experiences of other organizations around helping their target audience achieve greater proximity to young people's experiences and voices, have important lessons for funders and the social sector at large about how to fully leverage narrative power to effect systemic change.

Approaches to centering young people in narrative change

Narrative change is an effort to counter, modify, or replace existing narratives that perpetuate inequities and uphold an unjust status quo, through the creation and deployment of new or different narratives.¹ There are multiple ways to engage in changing narratives that are either not helpful or harmful to young people seeking more options and support to explore education and career options. The two distinct approaches utilized in the Pathways Narrative Project were:

- 1) Centering youth voices and stories in work meant to support them
- 2) Deploying narrative as a tool to build power — in this case, power for young people

In other words, it is the difference between shining a spotlight on young people and their stories versus young people acting as the showrunners for their own stories. While it may be valuable to draw a distinction between these approaches, they can also be deployed simultaneously.

¹ Source: ORS Impact (2021). *Measuring Narrative Change: Understanding Progress and Navigating Complexity*.



Understanding the importance of youth voice

Almost all of the organizations in the Pathways Narrative Project came away with a deepened appreciation for how underrepresented young people's perspectives and voices are in the pathways space, even in narratives that are meant to be about them and for them. It is one thing to call out the importance of centering the perspectives of the people identified as direct beneficiaries of an organization's work; it is another thing to do the work of understanding why it's important and how one might gather those perspectives, and this is what most of the organizations involved in the Pathways Narrative Project ended up doing with respect to young people.

For all of the organizations, the first step in engaging in narrative change work was to map the narrative landscape impacting and influencing their change goal. In this phase each group conducted research to identify and develop an evidence base showing how their hypothesized dominant narrative showed up and was operationalized in the media or messaging environment. Each organization conducted a preliminary review of existing research and then conducted a media audit (e.g., a review and analysis of news media, social media, and/or trade publications) and/or a messaging audit (e.g., a review

of organizational websites, newsletters, and other targeted messaging).

During the narrative landscape phase, most organizations discovered that young people were almost always positioned as passive participants with respect to issues directly shaping their future — high school education, career exploration and learning opportunities, college and other postsecondary options — and that young people's voices and lived experiences were largely absent from the narrative landscape. When student voices did appear in the narrative landscape, they resulted in young people being presented through the lens of an adult expert — often portraying young people as lacking agency, or being in need of interventions, with some groups of young people requiring more interventions and support than others. As one example, Young Invincibles conducted a messaging audit of websites and public materials for over 15 entities (colleges, policy advocates, and government entities) within the community college/workforce landscape in Texas and found that most websites talked about students but did not feature specific students' voices or include images of actual students engaged in the advocacy efforts.

The persuasive power of youth voices

Over the next two phases of the Pathways Narrative Project, organizations conducted research to understand the mindsets of their target audiences and what messaging would persuade them to shift their mindsets. They learned how compelling young people's voices are among both youth and adult audiences. Education Partnership of the Permian Basin (EPPB), an intermediary organization in Texas dedicated to improving the education and life outcomes of young people who live in the Permian Basin, found that high school students who are thinking about what their career might be, but may not yet know how to get there, were eager to hear a variety of stories from peers and young adults that center young people's decision-making agency, emphasizing how they chose among many options. EPPB also found it helpful to share journey stories of people who grew up in the Permian Basin and navigated the decision-making process in pursuit of various post-secondary education and career pathways, including returning to the Permian Basin to work and live. Finally, when EPPB shared student story examples with education leaders in the Permian Basin, it increased leaders' awareness of the power of student stories to connect with and persuade students to

consider postsecondary education and career options in the Permian Basin.

Urban Alliance, which is dedicated to creating inclusive, equitable pathways through mentoring, professional development, and internships for young people, found through their research that stories featuring young people, especially in videos, disrupted employers' implicit biases or beliefs about young people not being motivated or capable of contributing to a company's bottom line.

I think the student's ability to articulate what it was for them, like, you know, how the experience was so was saving grace, how it built them, how it made them feel, how they're able to now articulate and feel like they got a seat at the table. They got room at the table. They may not have the same degree as John Doe, but I still got the same experience as John Doe because an organization took a chance on me and built me, built me with those soft skills and provided me with an opportunity to be successful.

—HR professional, Washington, DC



Employers valued hearing from young people alongside testimonials from other employers about the practical value and viability of work-based learning programs for a business of their same size or in their sector. Videos featuring both young people and employers underscored the powerful influence that young people's perspectives and stories can have on articulating the value proposition of pathways programs for both businesses and young people.

Centering young people's stories and experiences is an essential ingredient to shifting dominant narratives about young people, especially by — helping adults such as advocates, funders, and policymakers gain greater proximity to young people's experiences, which in turn helps them understand which programs and policies are best suited to open up more education and career options for young people.

Kids are so underrated, it's unbelievable. You can put them in front of a crowd and they'll blow your mind. They can talk and they can express themselves incredibly well. And I'd rather hear from them than from [anyone]. I just wanna hear from the kid. Cause that's what's gonna inspire people is if you hear from this kid and you hear, 'look, I got this one opportunity and now I'm doing this and that, and now I wanna, I thought I was gonna be this, and now I'm gonna be that. And I have this idea of what I'm gonna be in life.' I think it's really powerful. We're listening to everybody but the kids, which doesn't make any sense to me. You know, it's like, I just think it's, it's fascinating to me that we wanna listen to all the educators and directors and the government, but how about the kids?

—Latinx grasstops leader, DC

Young people as builders of narrative power

While many organizations in the Pathways Narrative Project engage young people in sharing their stories, most do so in order to build the supply and uptake of programs and services for young people and in service of myriad goals, such as encouraging policymakers and other funders to allocate more resources for these programs and services, which in turn can help increase the supply of various policies, programs, and solutions in the pathways field.

However, only one organization worked on the demand side of the pathways equation, which is to engage young people, as the main consumers of pathways-related programs and consumers, as decision-makers and developers of narrative strategy. For young people, this is where the potential of their narrative power

lies — because inviting them to shape and share their narratives means they are not only the subjects of the stories, but also designers of the strategy about where and to whom their stories should be shared, in order to influence policies and other decisions that affect them. Practically speaking, young people speaking to their own experiences or stories can help: 1) attract more young people to programs designed to support them; and 2) enable policymakers, funders, and others to experience greater proximity to the issues that matter to young people and their lived experiences, which can then in turn inform decisions about funding more resources and programs to help support young people's education and career pathways.

Using audience research to inform narrative power

Among the Pathways Narrative Project organizations, Young Invincibles in Texas took up narrative change strategies that were intentionally designed to build power among young people. Founded in 2009 by a group of students, Young Invincibles was created out of a shared recognition that young people's voices were not being heard in the debate over healthcare reform. In its current form, Young Invincibles is committed to expanding economic opportunity for young adults ages 18 to 34 and making sure that their perspectives

are heard wherever decisions that affect their collective future are being made.

For the Pathways Narrative Project, the team at Young Invincibles set a goal to influence 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. Fundamentally, Young Invincibles



chose a narrative change goal to build the power of young people — in this case, community college students — to shape higher education policymaking in Texas. This narrative change goal is consistent with their organizational goal to amplify the voices of young adults in the political process and expand economic opportunity.

The Pathways Narrative Project enabled Young Invincibles to observe and analyze the narratives dominating the media landscape and also to better understand the narratives that are operationalized among Texas legislators – underpinning and influencing their decision making about community college financing and whose voices matter in that process. Young Invincibles used these findings to sharpen and amplify messages related to community college financing so that student voices and perspectives informed the debate. Moreover, to build the power of young people, Young Invincibles ensured that community college students were directly engaged in the strategy of how their perspectives and stories would be told. Young Invincibles trained students in narrative change, and it was community college students — those who would be most impacted by the Texas Legislature's decisions — who testified in front of legislators on community college financing and spoke to news reporters covering the legislation.

If Young Invincibles is already well-versed in the deployment of narrative as a way to build power for young people, what, then, did the Pathways Narrative Project add to their arsenal of narrative tools? For Young Invincibles, the added value came from the various components of narrative change work that had to do with understanding audience mindset. While Young Invincibles has proximity to young people, the Pathways Narrative Project's approach to Heartwired audience research helped them achieve a deeper understanding of their audiences' mindsets, namely the beliefs, values and lived experiences of Texas state legislators as related to community college. And most importantly, the mission of Young Invincibles meant that this knowledge could be shared with young people, so they were better-equipped on how and where to speak to their experiences and perspectives.

To gain this understanding, 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. They learned, among other things, that policymakers value

community colleges primarily for their role in filling workforce gaps in Texas; that messages emphasizing solutions that meet the needs of employers are more persuasive than those that focus on students; and that policymakers and advocates value hearing from students about their experiences with community college, but not all believe that student voices influence legislators' decisions about higher education policy.

But I would say that they [state legislators] do pay a lot more...they tend to pay a lot more attention to the business community. Employers within their district in particular are a big audience for them.

Policymaker/Advocate, TX

I'm just gonna be blunt about it. Because of the way that the processes work in the Texas legislature, it's, how should I say this? The real decisions aren't made on camera. And so because of that, I would be shocked if, at the actual decision making table, if a student was actually physically or even virtually represented at that table. That's not to say that it's not an important thing to kind of pursue. I would just say it's impractical.

Policymaker/Advocate, TX

Learning about policymakers' perceived limitations on the influence of student voice was an important reality check for Young Invincibles in terms of their narrative power building goal.

Undeterred, Young Invincibles developed a narrative framework that they hoped would convince Texas legislators to listen to students' voices on reforming the state funding formula for Texas community colleges to better meet students' needs. Community college students serving on Young Invincibles' Student Advisory Council developed their personal stories, using the narrative framework as a guide, in a variety of formats: legislative testimony, op-ed, tweets, and video. These messages were tested through a set of in-depth interviews with former Texas legislators, legislative staff, and policy advocates. Young Invincibles learned that, for student voices to persuade legislators on the financial priorities in the bill, students needed to frame their stories around working hard to achieve their goals and aspirations and provide detailed data about the financial barriers they face. Young Invincibles refined their narrative framework and then got to work on their legislative advocacy campaign.



Young people driving narrative change

Following the audience research, Young Invincibles' student advocates launched an all-out campaign featuring student voices in support of HB 8, legislation aimed at reforming the funding model for community college in Texas. Young Invincibles trained 12 student leaders and engaged 1,000+ community college students to share their stories and aspirations for affordable community college, all aligned with the narrative framework developed through this project. Students provided testimony 22 times, and news stories about the legislation featured students and coverage focused on student needs, not only workforce gaps. In their stories, members of the Student Advisory Council emphasized the value of hard work and the need to support their families; they referenced key data points about the benefits of making community college more affordable for students; and they conveyed benefits of state investments in community colleges to employers and local economies.

For example, Student Advisory Council member, Daisy Donjuan, published an op-ed in the Dallas Morning News in support of HB 8:

While much cheaper than a four-year degree, many of us still rely on the state's primary need-based financial aid program for two-year students to afford the full cost of attending community colleges. But as I learned the hard way, it's not a fail-safe. Only a fraction of eligible students have access to this particular grant program... I'm set to transfer to Austin College next year to continue on my path to becoming an attorney — a path made possible because of the opportunities community colleges provided me. I want to be an example to my community, to show them that if I can do it, they can too. But in order for that to happen, our community colleges need support. As our state legislators meet and decide the fate of HB 8 and SB 2539, I hope they will remember my story and invest in making more Texans' futures like mine.

Another Student Advisory Council member, Victoria Hoover, implemented the narrative framework through her legislative testimony in support of HB 8:

Tyler Junior College is where I found the self-respect, commitment, and community that helped make me the person I am today...Our community colleges are like the hard-working Texans they serve. They hold down multiple jobs to get things done, shore up the communities they are a part of, and wear many hats without complaint despite so often being under-appreciated and under-compensated for their efforts...That's what makes HB 8 so necessary — it ensures state funding for community colleges grows with outcomes that help students compete and succeed in today's changing economy. This new formula would also account for and reward the success of those who might need additional support — economically and academically disadvantaged students and adult learners like me...HB 8 also addresses the unique needs of smaller community colleges by providing a base level of funding to ensure rural Texans have the education and training opportunities to help grow their regional economies. Imagine if high school graduates could earn the credentials and develop the skills to support their families without having to relocate to a big city. I urge you to support HB 8 to build a more prosperous, successful state for all Texans.



Community college students were successful in persuading the Texas Community College Finance Commission to recommend policy solutions that increase the affordability of community college. Ultimately, legislation passed, to the tune of \$684 million, resulting in 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 students enrolled in dual-credit programs. Legislators cited young people as key influencers in the policy change. Following passage of the bill, a Texas legislator said:

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.

Young Invincibles' experience in building narrative power yielded lessons that they are eager to apply to other areas of work. "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." said Kasey Corpus, Policy and Advocacy Manager at Young Invincibles.

Funding narrative power: Investing in "supply" and "demand" strategies

Each organization's strategic context informs and influences how they perceive the opportunity for narrative change. While some organizations are concentrated on increasing the existence of high-quality pathways (supply), others are focused on giving young people more of a seat at the table, so they can advocate for the system changes, programs and services that will meet their needs (demand). Unlike Young Invincibles, most of the organizations in the Pathways Narrative Project focus on increasing the supply of high-quality multiple pathways such as career-connected learning programs, apprenticeships, internships, and other work-based learning programs and policies. These supply-side organizations were able to develop successful narrative-change strategies, especially those focused on adult stakeholders; yet the imbalance between supply-side and demand-side organizations led to fewer narrative-change insights focused on youth and their families.

For example, CareerWise Colorado, an organization that works to create modern youth apprenticeship programs, identified technology employers as their priority audience, and aimed to introduce a narrative that connects the value of youth apprenticeships to business priorities that extend beyond social impact (e.g., profits, growth strategy, employee retention). This narrative shift works to advance their goal of creating more apprenticeships for Colorado young people in the tech sector. Urban Alliance 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. In this project they focused on shifting the narrative about the value that high school student interns can bring to employers in multiple sectors, in order to increase the number of employers creating opportunities for high school interns to gain valuable work experience.

Funders are gradually recognizing that narrative change is an important lever for enabling systems change, because there is almost always a lack of alignment between dominant narratives that help shape decisions made at the system level and the desired narratives held by groups of people affected by those decisions.

For funders of narrative change work, finding the right balance of supply and demand organizations to support is a critical consideration – because an imbalance between supply- and demand-oriented organizations may end up unintentionally reinforcing an imbalance in power dynamics that already exists.

For instance, the over-representation of supply-oriented organizations in the Pathways Narrative Project meant that most of the organizations, logically, ended up selecting and researching target audiences that are within their direct sphere of influence such as employers or education system leaders. While these organizations learned about the power of centering



young people's stories and perspectives, they were not positioned to support young people to build narrative power for themselves. As a result, the Pathways Narrative Project generated less new knowledge about opportunities to shift narratives with the groups who are arguably the most important stakeholders in the K-12 education space — the students themselves.

Even the organizations that did identify young people and/or families as audiences critical to achieving their narrative change goals faced limited opportunities to engage them. Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) initially named parents and families as their key target audience for shifting the narrative from “learning only happens in school” to a narrative of “career-connected learning is a critical part of a high school education.” The organization recognizes that full adoption of the existing career-connected learning opportunities in their state will require both greater access to high-quality pathways and also greater uptake of existing high-quality pathways. However, CEI's core relationships are not with parents and students, but rather with superintendents, principals, and those that coordinate and implement CCL programs across the state. CEI's locus of influence was within a different audience than they initially proposed targeting, and they shifted their target audience to those that they felt they could access and influence with narrative messaging.

This observation about supply-oriented versus demand-oriented organizations offers future funders of narrative change strategies an important consideration about the mix of organizations that make up a narrative ecosystem. Most organizations in the Pathways Narrative Project explored narrative change strategies that involved directly engaging with their target audiences to increase supply of pathways programs and solutions or strategies to align stakeholders around new, desired narratives. Relatively few organizations were positioned to deploy narrative change that would build greater demand among students and families for pathways programs or to build narrative power. Funders in the pathways field seeking to accelerate systems change may consider investing in a wider array of organizations that can utilize narrative power-building strategies, as a way to build power and change systems in ways that truly benefit and center young people. While it is clear that the participating organizations in the Pathways Narrative Project gleaned many valuable insights about narrative change strategies that have the potential to sharpen the focus of their work and deepen their engagement with their partners and target audiences, there is still much more that needs to be done to not only center young people's voices and stories, but also to enable them to shape new narratives and drive narrative change.

Conclusion

Young people and their futures, particularly with respect to how well the education system prepares them for future success, have been a central topic of concern and debate for decades — at every turn of the road, fresh ideas are urgently needed. Simply understanding what narrative is, and how dominant narratives shape the hearts and minds of audiences positioned to make decisions that influence young people's futures, represents power on one level.

Acting on that understanding — so that young people are able to impact decisions about their own futures — represents power of a transformative nature. The lessons and experiences of the organizations in the Pathways Narrative Project can be an important first step for other stakeholders, such as funders and policymakers, to support narrative change that will accelerate systems change with the people most impacted positioned to lead.

About the Pathways Narrative Project

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pathwaysnarrative.org