Fostering Connections and Professional Networks

How to Talk about Social Capital: Messaging Insights and Recommendations

Version 2.0

March 2022

equitable futures
A PROJECT OF THE BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

Credit: Annabelle Armstrong – Temple

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Introduction

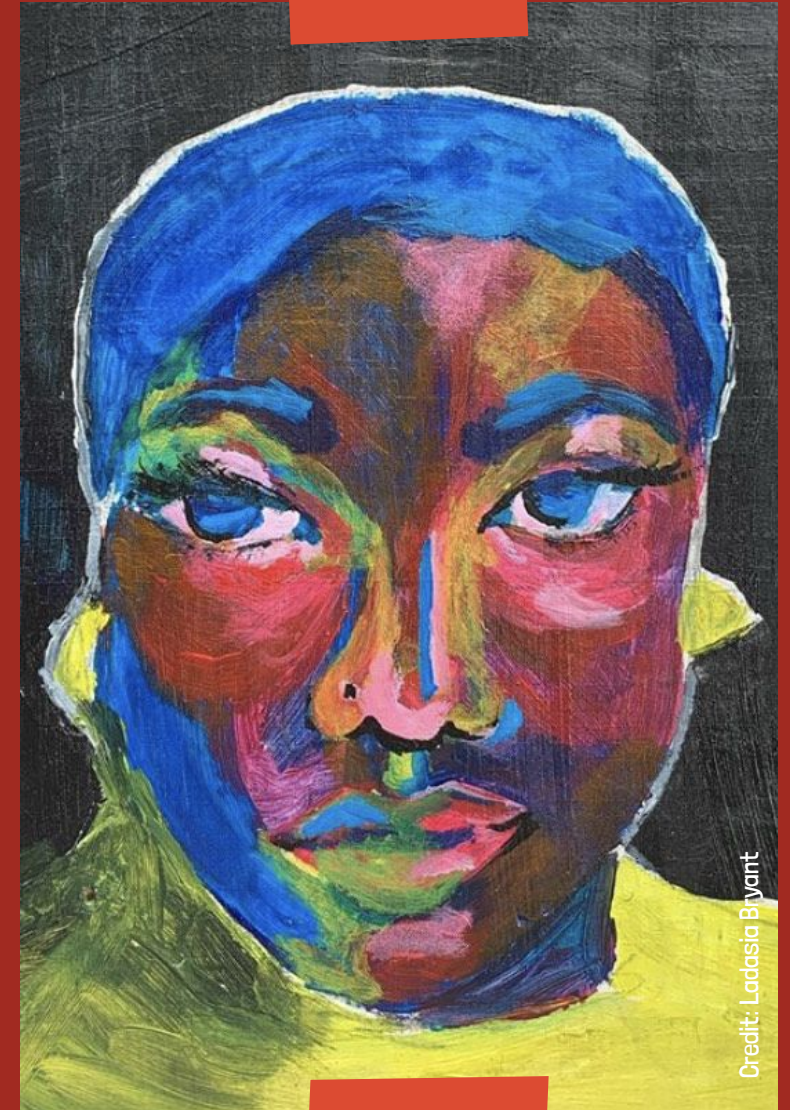# Introduction

This research-based messaging guide is part of a body of work supported by Equitable Futures, a program of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, focused on helping young people develop the agency, social capital, skills, credentials and early labor market outcomes needed to thrive in the workforce and life.

Who is this guide for?

- Advocates, program designers and program managers working across the K-12, post-secondary, career navigation and youth development sectors who want to strengthen their communications and persuade other youth-serving professionals about the value of social capital.

- Philanthropists and funders who seek to deepen their understanding of opportunities to strengthen support for programs and interventions that help young people develop and access social capital.
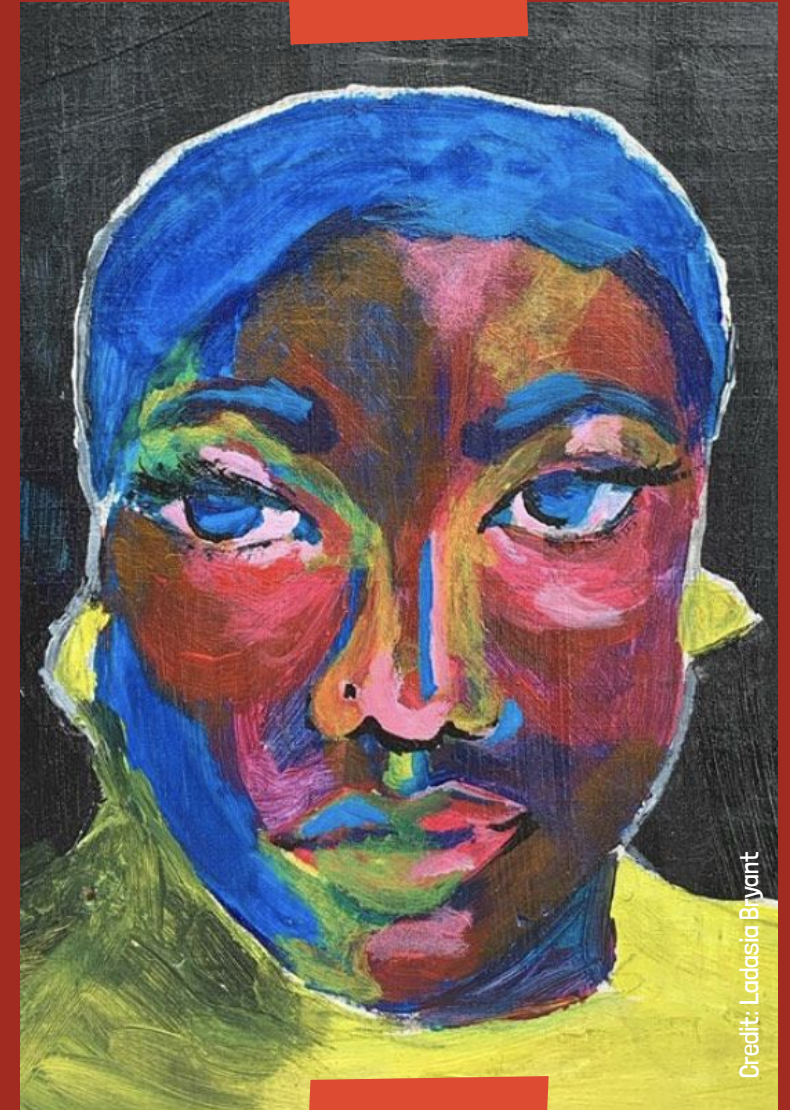
Credit: Ladasia Bryant

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Introduction

What is the purpose of this guide?

This guide will help you to communicate effectively about social capital. The strategies and messaging in this guide are designed to help you build support for embedding social capital into existing programs and interventions. The guide includes:

- **Insights from audience research** about the mindsets of youth-serving professionals working in the K-12, post-secondary, career navigation and youth development sectors; and

- **Messaging recommendations** tested during research and validated during field testing that proved effective at persuading youth-serving professionals to increase their support of social capital.

Credit: Ladasia Bryant

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Field Testing

What is field testing?

The messaging recommendations in an earlier edition of this guide were implemented and tested in 2021 by a diverse set of non-profit organizations working to elevate the importance of social capital in their respective fields. Their findings, which help to validate the messaging recommendations, are featured as "Lesssons from the Field" throughout this guide.

Field Testing Partners

ADVANCE>>CTE
State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work

HERE TO HERE

Climb Hire

MENTOR
THE NATIONAL MENTORING PARTNERSHIP

Credit: Ladasia Bryant

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Growing Support for Social Capital: A Theoretical Framework

Diffusion of innovations theory is a helpful framework to consider when thinking about how to strengthen and accelerate support for programs and interventions that embed social capital.

Ideas spread along a continuum with one audience segment influencing the next, beginning first with "innovators" and "early adopters" who help to spread the new idea and build support among the "early majority."

That's why we focused our audience research focused on early adopters. We wanted to discover the messages that can be used to reach the next segment of audiences — the early majority.

Additional research will help us to understand what messages can be used to reach the next audience segment.

2.5%	13.5%	34%	34%	16%
INNOVATORS	EARLY ADOPTERS	EARLY MAJORITY	LATE ADOPTERS	LAGGARDS
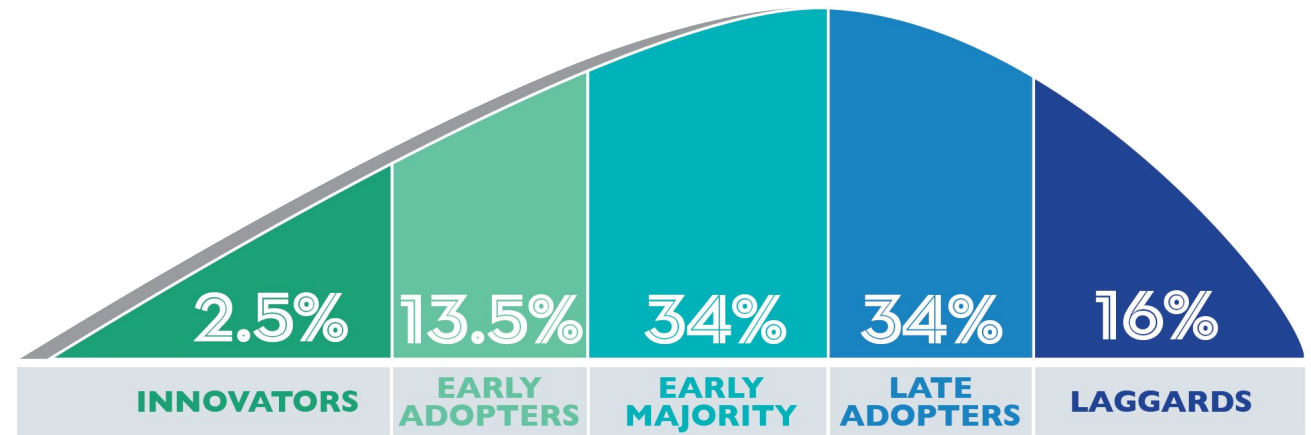
About this Guide

Voices of Stakeholders

In this guide, we lift up the voices of stakeholders who participated in this research project. Their participation was both anonymous and confidential.

However, throughout the guide, you will find references like this that note their occupation and their racial, ethnic, and gender identities:

– Post–secondary, Hispanic woman **– CTE, White woman**

– Nonprofit, Black man **– Career Navigation, API woman**

In this research, we have learned how affinity based on shared identity often shapes audiences' attitudes and behaviors. We hope these citations will offer an added level of nuance and richness to your learning.

Icons

Content that we tested in our audience research is denoted with this icon:
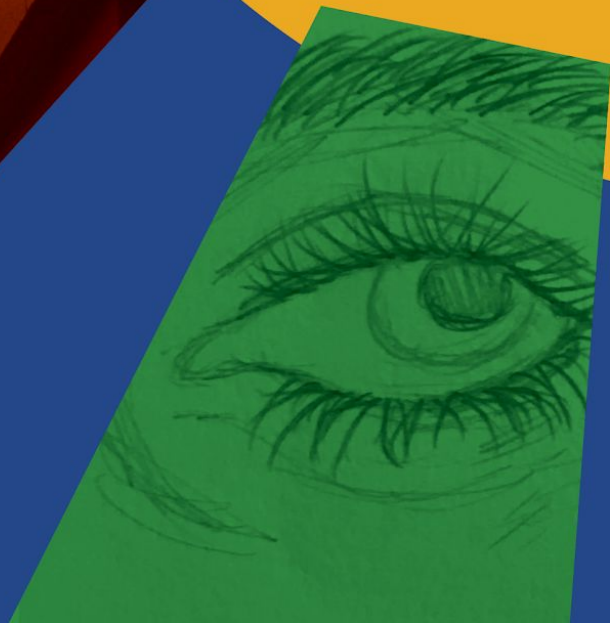
test content

Practical examples of how to put messaging recommendations into practice are denoted with this icon:

Messaging Recommendations

Findings and case studies of messaging recommendations that were field tested are denoted with this icon:

Lessons from the Field

Guide at a Glance

Audience Insights

1. Youth-serving professionals are familiar with *social capital* as an idea and may use the phrase, though some point to its shortcomings as a term.

2. Among youth-serving professionals working in career development fields, there is already support for programs and interventions that build social capital for young people, and the right messages and engagement can grow and deepen enthusiasm for the value of social capital.

3. Youth-serving professionals' openness to embedding social capital in programs in interventions is based on the belief that while college is key to economic mobility, education — alone — is not enough.

4. Youth-serving professionals' support for social capital can be amplified by reminding them of their own lived experiences, identities, and aspirations to help young people succeed.

5. However, youth-serving professionals have practical concerns about how programs and interventions that build social capital for young people can be implemented more widely.

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Messaging Recommendations

1. Use plainspoken alternatives to social capital such as *professional networks* and *career connections*.

2. Utilize behavioral cues to summon audiences' memories about professional relationships.

3. Help audiences to widen the lens in order to see how professional relationships come to be.

4. Connect discussions of social capital to audiences' pre-existing beliefs about what young people need to succeed and thrive.

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Messaging Recommendations

5. Tap into audience values of *hard work* and *personal responsibility* combined with *community support*.

6. Explain the role that systemic barriers play in limiting some young people's access to professional networks.

7. Show how social capital can be embedded in existing programs.

8. Spotlight diverse youth and adult messengers (race, gender, occupation, etc.) to add credibility and emotional power.

9. Connect with audiences emotionally by prioritizing story-based content.

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A Research–Based Approach to Messaging

Research Overview

Research Goal: To better understand how to communicate about social capital and the importance of professional relationships for young people with decision makers and influencers.

- **Objective 1: Establish a Baseline**
  Use multiple methods of research in order to establish a baseline among professional stakeholders who work with young people about the narrative on social capital and professional relationships, including in the COVID-19 landscape.

  - **Outcome:** A baseline measure of the narrative landscape on social capital that can be used to evaluate narrative shift in the future.

- **Objective 2: Test and Validate Messaging**
  Test message prototypes with professional stakeholders about the importance of relationships and social capital, validate messaging recommendations in the field, and publish messaging guidance.

  - **Outcome**: Message guidance for the field to communicate effectively about social capital.

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Audiences & Research Methods

Audiences	Methodologies				
	Media Audit of Industry/Trade Publications	Messaging Audit of Organizations	In-Depth Interviews	Online Focus Group	Field Testing
Youth-serving Nonprofits	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
K-12 School Districts	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Post-secondary Schools	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Career advising / navigation platforms	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Career & Technical Education (CTE) programs	✔		✔	✔	✔
Influencers (e.g. funders, education consultants)	✔		✔		
Young People					✔
Employers					✔

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Overview of Methodologies

Media Audit & Social Listening

- Wonder reviewed 112 articles across 20 publications reaching professional stakeholder audiences: public sector/education, nonprofit, private sector/business

Audit of Organizational Messaging

- Wonder reviewed websites and social media assets from 10 organizations in the field: K-12 districts, post-secondary institutions, nonprofits, transition advising organizations, and pathway intermediaries

In-Depth Interviews

- Wonder conducted ten 1-hour long in-depth interviews with youth-serving professionals and influencers designed to understand how people talk about social capital and to test message prototypes making the case for deeper investment in social capital programs and interventions

Credit: Brenda Rivera

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Credit: Brenda Rivera

Overview of Methodologies

Online Focus Group

- ***Overview:*** Goodwin Simon Strategic Research conducted an online focus group among 26 youth-serving professionals between October 5-15, 2020.

- ***Occupational Perspectives:*** Participants worked in K-12 districts, post-secondary institutions, youth-serving nonprofits, CTE programs, and career navigation platforms and all were focused on workforce and career development with young people.

- ***Demographic Representation:*** The participants came from 12 different states, including four or more from FL, GA, MD, and TX. Participants were 10 male, 16 female; 11 Black, 8 white, 4 Hispanic, and 3 Asian/Pacific Islander.

- ***Content Tested:***
  - Eight videos featuring a diverse set of youth and adults
  - Print Newsletter Story about a K-12 Career Connections program, including alumni profiles of two young people
  - Messages in support of social capital from a diverse set of professional stakeholders

Credit: Brenda Rivera
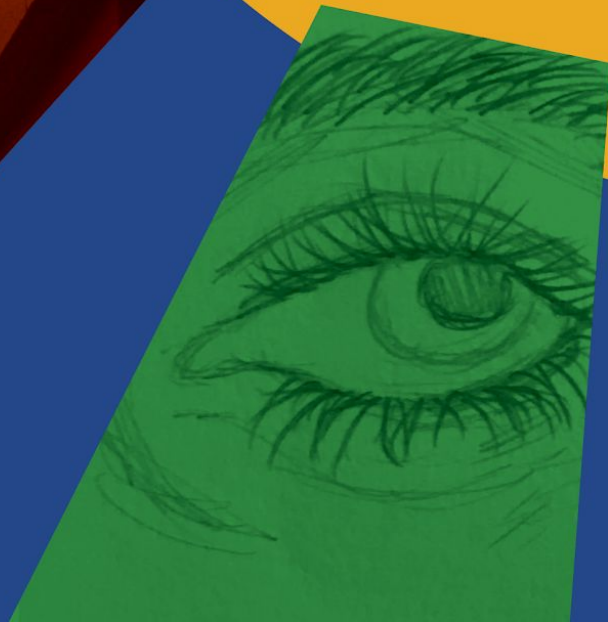
Overview of Methodologies

Field Testing

- ***Overview:*** Wonder partnered with four organizations to develop customized field tests using the messaging recommendations related to social capital. Impacts were measured using a range of methods including A/B testing for social media ads, email and texting campaigns; surveys; and in-depth interviews.

- ***Organizations:*** The field testing organizations represent a variety of national and local organizations engaged in work-based learning, career preparation and youth development.

  - Advance CTE
  - HERE to HERE
  - Climb Hire
  - MENTOR

- ***Messaging Approaches Tested:***
  - Plainspoken alternatives to *social capital*
  - Behavioral cues invoking memories about professional relationships
  - Messages aligned with audiences' values, beliefs and lived experiences
  - Diverse types of messengers
  - Programmatic/policy details showing how social capital can be embedded in programs
  - Story-based content about social capital

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Audience Insights

Audience Insights

1. Youth-serving professionals are familiar with *social capital* as an idea and may use the phrase, though some point to its shortcomings as a term.

- Youth-serving professionals who see the term "social capital" as a challenge express concern about using jargon or inaccessible language, especially if the term is used with young people.

- Some worry that it frames relationships as transactional — rather than sources of mutual benefit and respect.

- Because capital references a capitalist framework, some worry that it prioritizes people with resources over those without.

"I use the term [social capital] a lot. I love the idea and the concept of it...It is one of those jargony terms that is used in philanthropy, or is going to be used at, like, a university. It is erudite — I would be surprised if a lay person who doesn't work in the social sector or social science would be that familiar with 'social capital', the term; as a concept, sure, but the term."

— Influencer, Black man

"There is a problematic nature of the use of the term 'social capital.' It still frames it in a capitalist sense and it looks at it as sort of like an investment with a return on investment."

— Nonprofit, White woman

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Lessons from the Field

MENTOR
THE NATIONAL MENTORING PARTNERSHIP

How is the term "social capital" understood by youth-serving professionals in schools?

In their field-testing research, MENTOR asked 22 youth-serving professionals working in education — nonprofit leaders, classroom teachers, superintendents, and district-level administrators — whether "social capital" was understood in schools.

As we discovered in our earlier research, youth-serving professionals felt that the idea is important, but is jargon that is not immediately understood. They felt it can be easily explained to young people and youth-serving professionals who understand the importance of a network of relationships. One person noted that social capital has not been prioritized for youth of color, and even actively thwarted.

"I don't think students would know what 'social capital' is."
— Youth-Serving Professional, Education

"I would like the term 'social capital' [to] become more understood by youth, long before they graduate from high school."
— Youth-Serving Professional, Education

"I think we need to acknowledge that 'social capital' has not only not been prioritized, but in most cases actively thwarted for young people of color."
— Youth-Serving Professional, Education

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Audience Insights

2. Among youth-serving professionals working in career development fields, there is already support for programs and interventions that build social capital for young people, *and* the right messages and engagement can grow and deepen enthusiasm for the value of social capital.

- Youth-serving professionals who focus on career pathways believe that social capital is important for professional success, and therefore do not push back against the idea of investing resources into programs that build social capital for young people.

- The right messages can increase enthusiasm for intentional social capital programs, as evidenced by youth-serving professionals who say they will reach out to potential mentors and open up their own networks for the young people they serve.

"[I will] reach out personally to more businesses, professionals and experts to establish mentorships, internships, apprenticeships and build relationships and even try to mentor more youth myself."

– Nonprofit, Black man

"[I will] engage more CEOs to implement more options for students to engage with their company. Also, connect more with students who are first generation graduates and/or have faced childhood trauma to help them see there is an opportunity to succeed in any career they set their mind to."
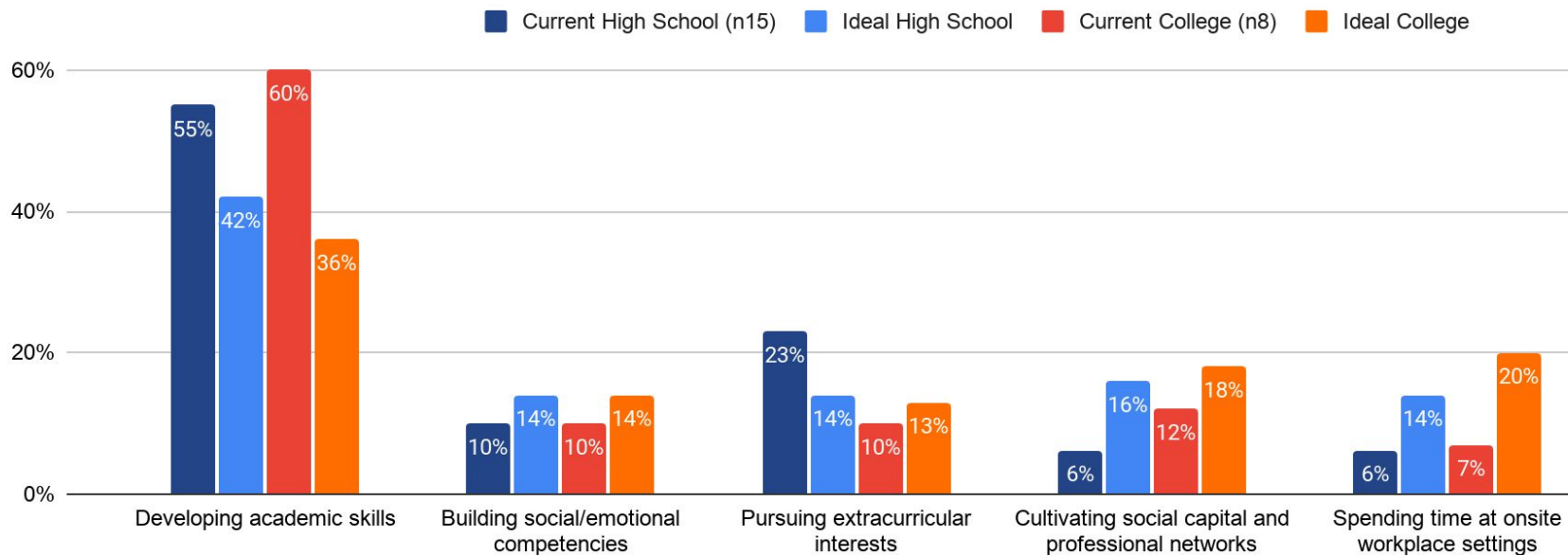
– CTE, White woman

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Audience Insights

2. Among youth-serving professionals working in career development fields, there is already support for programs and interventions that build social capital for young people, *and* the right messages and engagement can grow and deepen enthusiasm for the value of social capital.

- When asked to re-allocate the typical amount of time a high school or college student spends on various activities, focus group participants all increased time for social capital and onsite workplace settings, taking time away from academic skills and extracurriculars.

Time Allocation: Current vs. Ideal

Current High School (n15)   Ideal High School   Current College (n8)   Ideal College

Activity	Current High School (n15)	Ideal High School	Current College (n8)	Ideal College
Developing academic skills	55%	42%	60%	36%
Building social/emotional competencies	10%	14%	10%	14%
Pursuing extracurricular interests	23%	14%	10%	13%
Cultivating social capital and professional networks	6%	16%	12%	18%
Spending time at onsite workplace settings	6%	14%	7%	20%

"[This shift] will help them develop the real world experiences and skills to graduate and be successful in a diverse workplace. It will also give them access to better quality jobs with upward mobility, more relevant jobs."

– Post–secondary, Hispanic woman

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Audience Insights

3. Youth-serving professionals' openness to embedding social capital in programs in interventions is based on the belief that while college is key to economic mobility, education — alone — is not enough.

- Some youth-serving professionals believe education is a key, if not the key, to economic mobility; that belief fuels a narrative that prioritizes college and demotes other pathways.

- Most youth-serving professionals see the purpose of education as helping individuals acquire skills and academics, which fails to recognize the role of relationships and professional networks in opening up opportunities and pathways.

- Some recognize that education is not a silver bullet and success in career requires more than skills and academics.

> "Many minorities struggle to gain employment even with a degree. I have experienced it first hand as a Black male myself...It is generally difficult for anyone to make that jump from college to the workforce without connections and social capital. How do you know where to go or where to look?"
>
> **– Nonprofit, Black man**

> "I think most people think that [the purpose of college] is so that you can enter into the middle class...It is not academics alone are going to get you there and it is not like relationships alone are going to get you there, but it is the marriage between the two that are the winning combo."
>
> **– Nonprofit, API woman**

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Audience Insights

4. Youth-serving professionals' support for social capital can be amplified by reminding youth-serving professionals of their own lived experiences, identities, and aspirations to help young people succeed.

- When prompted by verbal cues or opportunities to reflect on one's own career path, youth-serving professionals readily recall how relationships helped them to make progress in their own lives.

- Youth-serving professionals relate positively to values-based messages about educational opportunity and the ability to impact young people's success — often by relating these values to their own identities and lived experiences.

"I believe the first line in her statement is the truest — 'Looking back many of us can think of one close professional relationship…' Without the relationships that I built through high school and college I would most definitely not be on the career path that I am today."

– Secondary, Black woman

"My mom is an immigrant from Mexico; my dad is a first generation college graduate. He was a teacher. I went to a public school in one of the poorest regions of the country and then went to Harvard for undergrad and really kind of lived very personally, understood what the educational inequities were in this country as a result of that and always have had a passion for bringing educational opportunity to more people."

– CTE, Hispanic woman

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Audience Insights

5. However, youth-serving professionals have practical concerns about how programs and interventions that build social capital for young people can be implemented more widely.

- One practical concern is the time and cost required to scale programs and interventions that build social capital, which youth-serving professionals perceive to be labor intensive given the need for partnerships with mentors, internship supervisors, and employers.

- Another practical concern is about what K-12 and post-secondary systems are currently accountable for. Youth-serving professionals believe that to invest more deeply in social capital, there would need to be a realignment in education systems from accountability being tied to test scores, graduation rates, or college attainment to the depth, breadth and diversity of professional networks.

"If we add these [social capital] measures at the state level, "what gets measured, gets done."

– CTE, White woman

"We don't think about success as getting a job. Success is instead measured by the number of kids who pass some state assessment then I feel like it is really hard to say we are going to allocate school time toward these things that don't immediately link us to data test assessment."

– K–12, White woman

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Lessons from the Field

ADVANCE CTE
State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work

What practical concerns do education policymakers have about embedding social capital in work-based learning policies and programming?
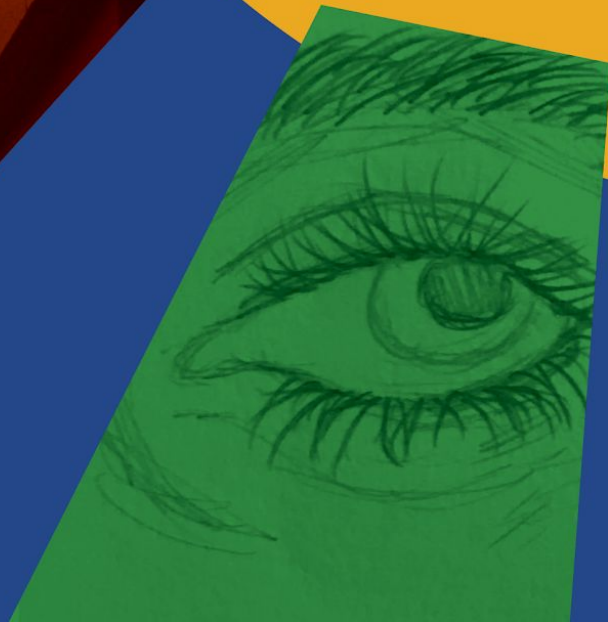
- Advance CTE held a set of workgroup sessions for state leaders in Career Technical Education that were designed to test if and how these practical concerns could be addressed. In a pre-survey, they found that state CTE leaders desire to more intentionally embed social capital into policies and programming, and believe that understanding how to measure social capital is important.

- However, many state CTE leaders lacked full confidence in being able to measure the impact of social capital, particularly the types of relationships formed in work-based learning opportunities and if those relationships led to career connections. Only 8% of respondents felt extremely or very confident about measuring impact. In the post-survey, that number increased to 33%.

[Pre-Survey Response]
"Social capital relies on interpersonal skills, and this is often difficult to formalize in curriculum. Leaders will need definitions, objectives and accountability measurements to understand the definition of "social capital."

– State leader, Career Technical Education

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Messaging Recommendations

Messaging Recommendations

1. Use plainspoken alternatives to social capital such as *professional networks* and *career connections.*

Alternatives to social capital to use instead:
- relationships
- professional relationships
- work relationships
- the value of relationships
- professional networks
- a web of supportive relationships
- connections
- career connections

test content*

Lessons from the Field*

MENTOR

MENTOR asked 22 youth-serving professionals working in education to rank plainspoken alternatives to the term "social capital." Here's how they ranked terms:

Most clear
A web of supportive relationships
Relationships
The value of relationships
Career connections
Connections
Least clear
Professional networks

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*Learn about these icons on

Lessons from the Field

ADVANCE >> CTE
State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work

Climb Hire

What are some examples of how nonprofit organizations have used the messaging recommendation about plainspoken alternatives to "social capital" with different audiences?

- Advance CTE found that using plainspoken alternatives such as **professional networks** and **work-based learning opportunities and internships**, helped state CTE leaders make a connection between social capital and current CTE policies and programming.

"Putting work-based learning into the context of social capital rather than simply career awareness really hit home for me."

— **State leader, Career Technical Education**

- Climb Hire used plainspoken alternatives such as **connections** alongside "skills" and "confidence" in their messages targeting young adults as seen in this example:

Climb Hire

Break into Tech

$0 upfront. **100%** virtual learning.
No college degree required.

Get the **skills**, **connections** and **confidence** to land a job in tech

JOIN TODAY

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Messaging Recommendations

2. Utilize behavioral cues to summon audiences' memories about professional relationships.

Youth-serving professionals are able to easily recall examples of professional relationships that helped them on their education and career journeys. You can use behavioral cues in your messages to elicit these memories.

For instance, your message might say, "Looking back, many of us can think of at least one close professional relationship who played an important role in helping us to make progress toward our life goals." This messaging element with cues like, "looking back" or "think" can help to summon memories among youth-serving professionals of the people who helped them along their own education and professional journeys.

"Virtually everyone who has achieved some 'success' in their professional life has spoken about how social capital played a role in their journey. No one ever makes it on their own. It takes support and good social relationships with people who have our best interests at heart."

– Post–secondary, API woman

Messaging Recommendations

2. Utilize behavioral cues to summon audiences' memories about professional relationships.

"Looking back, many of us can think of at least one close professional relationship — or even some acquaintances — who played an important role in helping us make progress toward our life goals."

Cheryl Martin, Community College Career Counselor*

test content

Messaging Recommendations

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Messaging Recommendations

3. Help audiences to widen the lens in order to see how professional relationships come to be.

While youth-serving professionals are easily able to think about meaningful professional relationships that helped them on their educational and professional journeys, they usually determine that those relationships were entirely the result of serendipity or their own hard work and hustle. The good news is that it is possible to help them widen the lens of how professional relationships come to be. To do so, your messaging should help them to form solid reasoning chains on how people form professional relationships. Your messages should balance the role that a program or institution played while allowing them to maintain a sense that their hard work and drive played a role in forming those professional relationships.

"The line *'take the chance out of chance encounters'* really resonated with me—it made me think about how we can remove *chance* from network building."

— Secondary, White woman reacting to test messages

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Messaging Recommendations

3. Help audiences to widen the lens in order to see how professional relationships come to be.

"Unfortunately, most career development or job training programs focus on teaching 'soft skills' without increasing young people's access to the actual relationships they need. By contrast, schools that intentionally design for relationship-building — in trainings, curricula and programs — help take the chance out of chance encounters. Giving all young people opportunities to nurture trusting and authentic relationships will help them succeed in school, career and life."

Lydia Sanchez, Workforce Development Director, Carlton School District*

Messaging Recommendations

test content

*We know that messengers matter as much as messages. During audience research, we used fictionalized accounts such as this one, to better understand how messages and messengers work together to persuade audiences.

Messaging Recommendations

4. Connect discussions of social capital to audiences' pre-existing beliefs about what young people need to succeed and thrive.

Humans bring a healthy dose of skepticism to new ideas — especially ideas that might alter how they do their jobs or what their organizations focus on. Evoking the familiar is an effective way to calm people's skepticism. To do this, anchor your messaging about social capital with beliefs that audiences already hold to be true about what young people need to succeed and thrive. For instance, youth-serving professionals believe in:

- the efficacy of mentoring (by adults and peers)
- hands-on work experience
- the importance of academics, skills and credentials

Overall, the approach that tests well highlights how social capital programming can be embedded into existing programs and interventions such as mentoring programs, work-based learning, or other academic skills-building or credentialing programs. For example, messages that test well make the case for how academics, skills, *and* relationships are a powerful and mutually reinforcing combination to help young people to succeed and thrive.

Anchoring social capital with audiences' beliefs about existing programs is a much easier persuasive lift than trying to convince stakeholders to invest in entirely new programs.

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Messaging Recommendations

4. Connect discussions of social capital to audiences' pre-existing beliefs about what young people need to succeed and thrive.

"Higher education needs to evolve to the changing needs of the workforce. It's not just about learning concepts and theories, **it's about hands-on experiences** and connections that will lead to well paying jobs post graduation."

– Post–secondary, Hispanic woman

"**Peer mentorship can be a great tool** for young adults who are struggling to find their place in the world after graduating high school. Students who graduate high school but choose not to go to high school can get caught in limbo and be looking for direction."

– Secondary, Black woman

"I liked **the hands on approach** of the Braven leadership coaches..they helped prepare those young people for success."

– NGO, Black man

"[What resonated:] **The importance they both feel of connecting with a mentor** or an individual who they have been able to learn about their field from."

– NGO, Black man

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Messaging Recommendations

4. Connect discussions of social capital to audiences' pre-existing beliefs about what young people need to succeed and thrive.
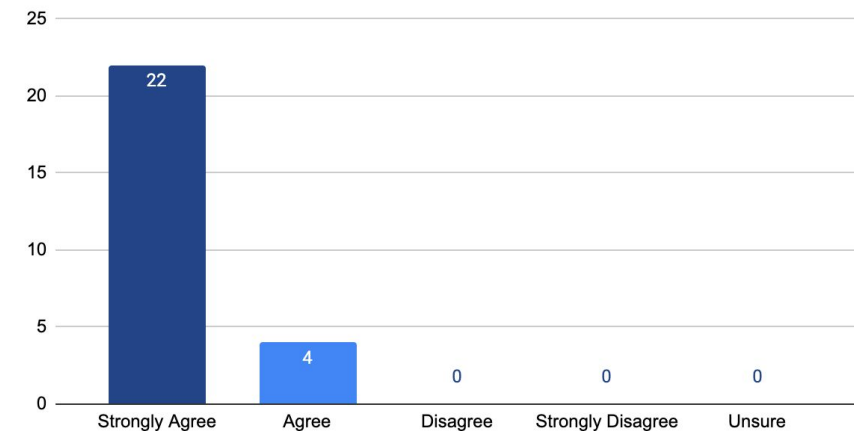
*"For many years, Washington Valley Public Schools has been focused on increasing high school graduation rates and preparing our students to be college and career ready...What we've come to realize is that **academics, skills development and relationships are all core** to helping young people achieve their educational and career goals."*

Enrique Ortiz, Superintendent of Washington Valley Public Schools*

test content

Do you generally agree or disagree with Superintendent Ortiz' statement?

Strongly Agree	22
Agree	4
Disagree	0
Strongly Disagree	0
Unsure	0

Messaging Recommendations

*We know that messengers matter as much as messages. During audience research, we used fictionalized accounts such as this one, to better understand how messages and messengers work together to persuade audiences.

Lessons from the Field — Climb Hire

When to introduce messages about "social capital" in communications with young people?

Climb Hire wanted to test if messages about connections and professional networks would motivate young people to join their program, where social capital is an important program component.

Using email A/B testing, Climb Hire found that a subject line emphasizing salary increases received more opens than one emphasizing professional networks. A subsequent test found that it was more valuable to emphasize the "skills and confidence" that young people receive by participating in their program than "professional networks."

A   **85% of jobs are filled through networks**. Let's build yours. ✗

Email opens: 23% (83)
Read rate: 41%

B   What would you do with a **2–3x salary increase**? ✓

Email opens: 27% (97)
Read rate: 41%

A   Hi, **my name is Emelene** and I'm an alumni of Climb Hire. I saw you submitted a form online and would love to tell you more about our program! Our learning community is designed to teach you the skills to land great jobs that pay **$55–65k.** Please reply "YES" to receive a call from a Climber to learn more about our program. ✓

B   Thank you for your interest in Climb Hire! Looking to build the **skills, connections**, and **confidence** to land a career in tech? Please reply "YES" to receive a call from an Alumni and learn more about our exciting program. ✗

Results:
Text Message A (top) **2.5%** response rate
Text Message B (bottom) 1% response rate

"Talking about social capital so early in our applicant journey was not what drove conversions and engagement...We found that our hook was emphasizing the outcomes of our program, especially salary increases. Talking about the importance of social capital and showcasing alumni stories may be more impactful for people who are *almost* set on joining our program but need that little extra push farther down in their applicant journey."

– Climb Hire, Field Testing Partner

Messaging Recommendations

5. Tap into audience values of *hard work* and *personal responsibility* combined with *community support*.

Value-based messaging helps to leverage people's emotion-based system of thinking and decision-making. *Hard work, personal responsibility* and *community support* are all deeply held values for our target audiences. Youth-serving professionals see themselves as hard workers (as do most people) and also believe that personal agency is a key factor that drives success. Many also chose their career paths in order to provide social support for young people. When used together as frameworks for our messaging, they help to strengthen support for efforts to embed social capital in their existing programs. The combination also helps to differentiate these values from a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps framework that ignores the importance of social support and expects young people to succeed on their own.

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Messaging Recommendations

5. Tap into audience values of *hard work* and *personal responsibility* combined with *community support*.

"I like the concept of personal responsibility. Young people do need the benefit of networking relationships, but also have a part to play in their own success. They have to work to achieve their goals in addition to learning the importance of relationship building."

– Post–secondary, Black woman

"It takes a village to help a young person get to the next level, which are usually your family and close friends, but you also need programs like Braven or mentors as part of that village."

– Nonprofit, Black man

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Messaging Recommendations

5. Tap into audience values of *hard work* and *personal responsibility* combined with *community support*.

"Hard work, perseverance, and personal responsibility are all important for getting ahead in life. Relationships are also important, though we sometimes take them for granted. With people on our side, we can strive for our big goals — even if we struggle along the way."

John Carter, Principal, Roosevelt High School*

Messaging Recommendations

test content

*We know that messengers matter as much as messages. During audience research, we used fictionalized accounts such as this one, to better understand how messages and messengers work together to persuade audiences.

Messaging Recommendations

6. Explain the role that systemic barriers play in limiting some young people's access to professional networks.

It is important to show that young people's success in life depends on both their agency as well as efforts that work to remove the various barriers — historical, structural and systemic — that stand between young people and their life goals. Doing so helps elevate the importance of embedding social capital in programs. Without these descriptions, some youth-serving professionals shift the entire burden on acquiring social capital, and success in school, to students themselves.

"The questions that came up [from my colleagues]: 'Why didn't they finish school?' 'Whose fault is it that they do not have the same resources?' 'I should not have to be impacted because they do not have what is required to go to the next level' was used several times."

– Secondary, Black woman describing conversations they have had with colleagues about social capital

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Messaging Recommendations

6. Explain the role that systemic barriers play in limiting some young people's access to professional networks.

"The rates at which Black students are earning degrees may be going up, but their participation in the workforce is not seeing that same trajectory. It's not just about the degrees. It's also about the connections that they are able to make to get into the workplace. There's structural racism in all of that. I believe that building the relationships and having those connections to employers does start to chip away at some of that structural racism because employers really begin to fully understand the talent pipeline of these beautiful Black and Brown students."

Veronica Herrero, Chief Strategy Officer, City Colleges of Chicago

test content

"It is validating hearing it from a woman of color — a race other than mine, but still a minority, to hear her confirm the structural racism that exists today and the challenges our students will face and have to overcome. If we understand the factors and challenges we can prepare for them, prepare our students to deal with them and make a plan with them to find mentors and build their connections and social capital networks."

– Nonprofit, Black man

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Messaging Recommendations

6. Explain the role that systemic barriers play in limiting some young people's access to professional networks.

"Some young people are born into families where they inherit a broad network of relationships through the adults in their families, neighborhoods and schools. These relationships open doors and foster a sense of belonging — helping young people to succeed in school and in their careers.

Unfortunately, systemic barriers that structure everything from what neighborhoods we live in or what schools we attend, limit access to these networks for some young people. For too many Black and Hispanic young people and young people from families experiencing poverty, these systemic barriers can make it more difficult to learn about different career opportunities or to connect with other people in various careers who share their background or lived experience."

Gerald Rawley, Union District Superintendent*

test content

"I think he speaks to the minority population in a way that's important. I think he definitely discusses a sense of privilege that many people don't address. I think programs like this must be funded in areas of low socioeconomic status to give others who don't have the expanded family network the same opportunity as others."

– Post-secondary, Black woman

*We know that messengers matter as much as messages. During audience research, we used fictionalized accounts such as this one, to better understand how messages and messengers work together to persuade audiences.

Messaging Recommendations

7. Show how social capital can be embedded in existing programs.

Address practical considerations: While youth-serving professionals show strong support for embedding social capital into existing programs and interventions, they also raise practical considerations and concerns about scaling programs. Those practical questions and concerns include:
- how to encourage buy-in from students to take social capital seriously
- how institutions can cover the costs for these programs
- how to be more flexible with schedules to incorporate social capital into existing programming

Share context for impact data and statistics: Statistics and data showing impact and success are important — but youth-serving professionals often question the validity of the data. Youth-serving professionals will bring a healthy dose of skepticism and will question whether proof points point to correlation rather than causation. Content that allows audiences a deeper exploration of programming approaches will help to strengthen credibility about the efficacy of the approaches and how they help youth-serving professionals to achieve key milestones and metrics.

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Messaging Recommendations

7. Show how social capital can be embedded in existing programs.

Provide opportunities to learn more: Provide opportunities to explore concrete details and examples that *show* (not tell) how social capital can be embedded in existing policies or program contexts. Experiences that invite engagement, discussion, and an opportunity to ask questions such as professional development sessions or site visits are ideal such opportunities. Additionally, written content that provides an in-depth exploration of programs will help to bolster credibility of efficacy. For example, online content could allow your audiences to "double-click" — the ability to get sample case studies that answer some of these more practical questions and concerns when they want to learn more.

Lessons from the Field

What are the most effective formats for providing opportunities for audiences to learn more?

In field testing, the organizations that provided more time for audiences to learn more were more successful in building support and deepening enthusiasm for social capital programs and interventions. Longer-form opportunities included MENTOR's two, 1-hour listening sessions and Advance CTE's 4-session workgroup over four months. By contrast, Climb Hire and HERE to HERE tested social capital messaging in short-form contexts such as email subject lines, text messages, and ads on social media platforms, LinkedIn and Facebook. Short-form messages about social capital (or plainspoken alternatives) generated less engagement and enthusiasm than longer-form engagement sessions.

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Messaging Recommendations

7. Show how social capital can be embedded in existing programs.

Youth serving-professionals want to understand what it looks like, in practice, to embed social capital into existing programs, interventions and curriculum.

"[I am thinking about] how we can build social capital into our curriculum."

– Post–secondary, Hispanic woman

"I don't think I got enough of a sense of the realities of what it takes to build something like this [K-12 career connections program] out, particularly when employer access is so scarce."

– Influencer, White man

"What is the best way to create and implement networking programming for middle-high school students? Once the programs have been established what is the best way to get students to participate and to remain active with the program?"

– K–12, Black woman

"How can we collectively build equitable and scalable structures or programs for students to gain social capital?"

– Career Navigation, API woman

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Messaging Recommendations

7. Show how social capital can be embedded in existing programs.

"When an employer thinks of themselves as a mentor and they really scaffold their employee's growth, that creates a genuine loyalty. Social capital and mentoring are not mutually exclusive. They definitely enhance one another. And when a caring adult can be a mentor that provides or advances a young person's social capital, it only creates a stronger bond."

Charline Alexandre-Joseph, Director of Workforce Development, MENTOR National

Messaging Recommendations

test content

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Lessons from the Field

ADVANCE ❯ CTE
State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work

What messaging approaches are most persuasive in helping policymakers commit to embedding social capital in existing programs and policies?

Advance CTE invited a sample of State Career Technical Education (CTE) Directors and/or their state team members to participate in a Shared Solutions Workgroup (Workgroup) about social capital. The Workgroup was similar to an online focus group where participants were presented with a variety of messages and then asked to share their reactions.

The impact of the intervention was measured through a pre- and post-survey, as well as in-depth interviews.

The messages and messengers that were tested in the Workgroup were designed to help Advance CTE understand:

- What messages about social capital most resonate with state CTE leaders;
- Which messenger did state CTE leaders become more receptive to; and
- If an increase of awareness and knowledge in social capital and its connection to CTE had an influence on state CTE leaders' desire to make policy or programming actions.

After participating in the Workgroup, **9 state CTE leaders reported understanding the connections between social capital and CTE extremely or very well,** compared to just 3 before the Workgroup.

Understanding Connections Between Social Capital and CTE
How well do you feel you understand the connections between social capital and CTE?

Legend: ■ Extremely well ■ Very well ■ Somewhat well ■ A little well ■ Not well at all ■ Unsure
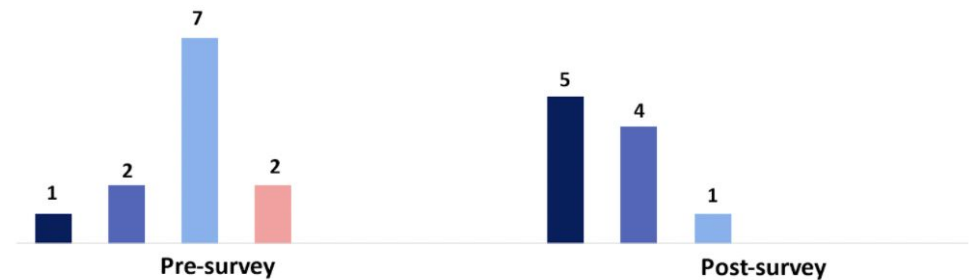
Pre-survey: 1, 2, 7, 2
Post-survey: 5, 4, 1

Lessons from the Field

ADVANCE > CTE
State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work

What messaging approaches are most persuasive in helping policymakers commit to embedding social capital in existing programs and policies?

The **most effective message** tested in Advance CTE's Workgroup was, "How to Measuring Social Capital."

- Eight of the ten respondents indicated that understanding how to measure social capital will be very effective or extremely effective in helping state CTE leaders design CTE policy and programming.

The **most important messenger** that state CTE leaders wanted to hear from was another peer state CTE leader.

- 60 percent of respondents in the post survey indicated that it was very important to hear from their peer state leader.
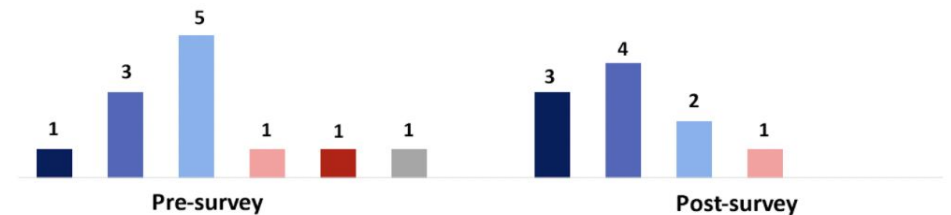
The Workgroup **increased the confidence of state CTE leaders to communicate with others** about the benefits of social capital.

After participating in the Workgroup, **state CTE leaders reported increased confidence in their ability to define and communicate the benefits of social capital to local CTE leaders.**

Ability to Define and Communicate the Benefits of Social Capital to Local CTE leaders

How confident are you in your ability to define and communicate the benefits of social capital to local CTE leaders?

■ Extremely confident ■ Very confident ■ Somewhat confident ■ A little confident ■ Not confident at all ■ Unsure

Pre-survey: 1, 3, 5, 1, 1, 1
Post-survey: 3, 4, 2, 1

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Lessons from the Field

ADVANCE ⟩⟩CTE
State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work

What messaging approaches are most persuasive in helping policymakers commit to embedding social capital in existing programs and policies?

Overall, the Workgroup approach was successful in helping to show state CTE leaders how to embed social capital in existing policies and programs and building enthusiasm to do so.

- Following the Workgroup field test, participants followed up on their own with facilitating three presentations and holding 19 extensive conversations on embedding social capital in CTE policy and programming across their state CTE teams.

- Workgroup participants expressed commitments to communicate more about social capital and find ways to embed social capital in existing programs including work-based learning, internships and employer partnerships.

> "We plan to make a concerted effort to embed it in career development, continuing with the messaging around what social capital is and the benefit. We will pull in stakeholders from business and industry. With work-based learning coordinators, we can be talking to adults about building mentorships that build social networks."
>
> **– State leader, Career Technical Education**

> "Start early with schools counselors and career specialists. They're building these relationships. Our communications and marketing campaigns need to make sure student stories about career success and peer relationships are being told in the secondary space."
>
> **– State leader, Career Technical Education**

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Messaging Recommendations

8. Spotlight diverse youth and adult messengers (race, gender, occupation, etc.) to add credibility and emotional power.

We have learned from this and other research that messengers matter as much — if not more — than the message. In this research, we saw how certain messengers bolstered credibility and strengthened the emotional power of content. Diverse messengers — in terms of age, race, gender, occupation — were all important.

Youth Messengers
Young people, as messengers:

- Remind youth-serving professionals why they chose a career working to support young people; and
- Strengthen the emotional power of messages and content.

In fact, youth messengers are so important in making the moral case for this work, audiences want them to be fully integrated into content — rather than feeling like that youth are tacked on at the end of a story. In featuring young people, take time to spotlight the multi-dimensional nature of their personalities and their lives. That includes spotlighting young people in their neighborhoods and communities — together with their parents and family. Authentically portraying young people means showing their agency, hopes, dreams and ambition (rather than one-dimensional characters or stereotypes of broken young people in need of help). Finally, young people's relationships with supportive adults should be positioned as partnerships — rather than a blank canvass being acted upon by adults.

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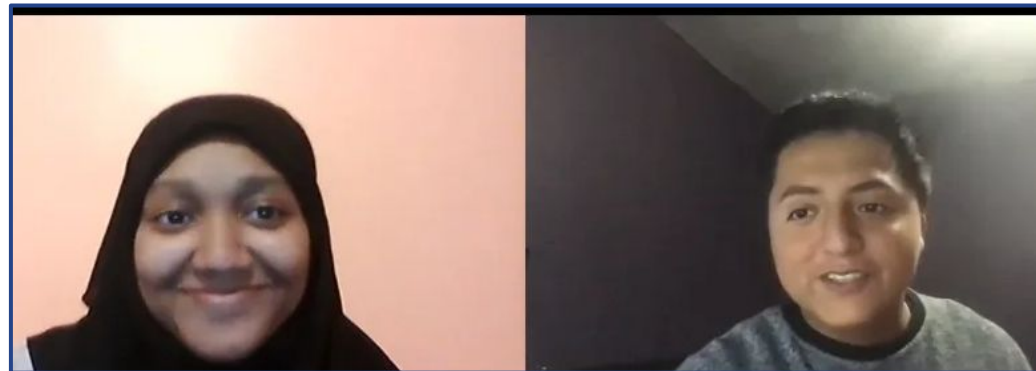
Messaging Recommendations

8. Spotlight diverse youth and adult messengers (race, gender, occupation, etc.) to add credibility and emotional power.

Adult Messengers
For adult messengers, there's an opportunity to build affinity with other youth-serving professionals by using messengers that reflect the diverse racial, ethnic, gender and occupational demographics of your target audiences. When tackling socially sensitive subjects like structural racism, it's helpful to use a mix of messengers — including messengers of color together with white messengers. Many people of color in our research appreciated hearing from a messenger who shared their racial or ethnic background — as well as those of different racial or ethnic backgrounds speaking out against structural racism. In a few cases, a white messenger speaking out against structural racism lacked credibility or came across as patronizing. Pairing up messengers of color with white messengers will help bolster the credibility of both messengers.

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Messaging Recommendations

8. Spotlight diverse youth and adult messengers (race, gender, occupation, etc.) to add credibility and emotional power.

test content

Messaging Recommendations

8. Spotlight diverse youth and adult messengers (race, gender, occupation, etc.) to add credibility and emotional power.

"[What resonated most about a video featuring a Latina working in the community college system was]...her experience as a first generation college student and daughter of immigrants. That was my experience as well. I had no one in my family to turn to because no one else had been through those experiences. The importance of relationships outside my family and personal life were so important."

– Post–secondary, API woman

"It was refreshing to see a video with multiple speakers — helped show the impact of networking in action."

– Career Navigation, White woman

"First of all, hearing from students is always in my mind one of the most compelling mediums. Second of all, they were very candid about what is effective and ineffective and shared some great insights."

– Career Navigation, White man

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Messaging Recommendations

8. Spotlight diverse youth and adult messengers (race, gender, occupation, etc.) to add credibility and emotional power.

Examples of occupational roles among adult messengers:

- Superintendent, K-12 school district
- Workforce development director, K-12 school district
- Career connections program director, K-12 school district
- Principal, High school
- Career counselor, Community college
- Chief strategy or academic officer, College or university system
- Executive director, Career pathways nonprofit
- Leadership coach, Career pathways nonprofit organization
- Program director, Youth-serving nonprofit organization
- Company executive, Career pathways program partner

test content

Messaging Recommendations

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Lessons from the Field

HERE TO HERE

Whose voices and experiences should be centered in messaging?

When HERE to HERE tested messages on LinkedIn, they found that the student-centered message, accompanied by an image of a male mentor, resulted in more click throughs to the website than the employer-centered message with the same image.

"Not only do I have a mentor, but I also have a friend. And that relationship and building that bond can open up many doors."

"These young people bring fresh perspectives, and we cultivate a pipeline of entry-level hires from our local community. It's a win-win."

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Messaging Recommendations

9. Connect with audiences emotionally by prioritizing story-based content.

Because social capital is about relationships — stories are the perfect medium to communicate about the power of social capital because stories are inherently about relationships. Stories were among the richest and most successful pieces of content that we tested. Story-based video content is especially persuasive with youth-serving professionals because it is more successful at eliciting positive emotional responses. Stories allow you to accomplish many of the previous messaging recommendations.

- Stories help to remind youth-serving professionals of the important role that professional relationships played in their own educational and career journeys.

- Story-based content helps to widen the lens for audiences — to see that professional relationships are not accidental nor based entirely on one's hard work — but the result of intentional programs and institutions.

- Stories allow you to embed values (e.g. hard work, community support) and beliefs about what works (e.g. mentoring).

- Because stories tend to be stickier than other types of content (i.e. they are more successful at facilitating recall), they are especially well suited at helping to answer people's practical questions and respond to their concerns.

- Stories give you the opportunity to feature diverse messengers.

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Messaging Recommendations

9. Connect with audiences emotionally by prioritizing story-based content.

"I feel very proud to see this video. It actually made me smile and made me feel that what I'm doing is very important. I also know that the students who look like me definitely gravitate towards me much more than others."

— Post–secondary, Black woman

"I definitely feel inspired to do more now that I have a new perspective. Some of the stories I heard have given me more to think about as I go about my daily work."

— Post–secondary, Black woman

"This video gave me feelings of hope and optimism. It was so powerful to hear how students saw themselves and others and how it inspired them to keep going."

— K–12, White woman

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Messaging Recommendations

9. Connect with audiences emotionally by prioritizing story-based content.

Video Excerpts
Crystal Cárdenas: *My dad...walked up to me and he's like, "Look at my hands, look how dry my hands are." I wondered, "Why are you showing me your hands, Dad?" He looked up at me and he said, "I work with my hands so that you can work with your mind."*

Crystal's mom [in Spanish]: *I want the best for my children. I want them to have a career so they can have bright futures. For me that is the American Dream.*

Susan Suarez-Madson: *Braven is a career accelerator. It's basically making sure that when you get out of college, that you are able to land a really great first job. I was a leadership coach*

Crystal: *My focus was more on academics, but once I started going through the program, I realized there's other things that I also need to dedicate my focus to. There were also a lot of first-generation students like myself.*
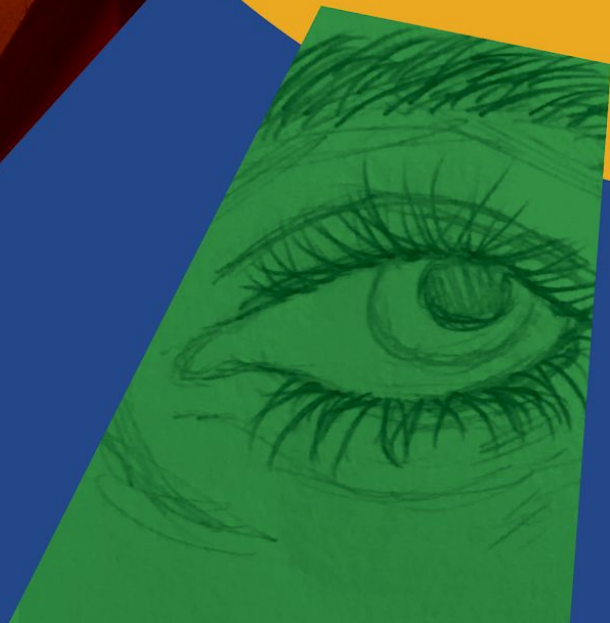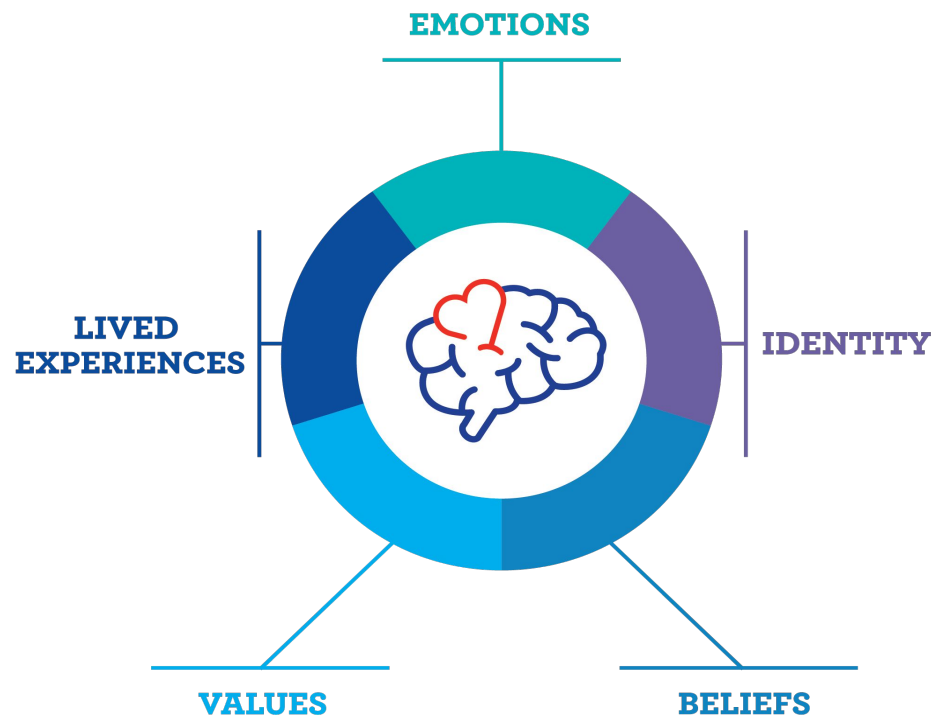
test content

Crystal Cárdenas, 2016 Braven Fellow
Video available online: https://vimeo.com/282841119

Heartwired Messages

Core Concept: Humans Are Heartwired

EMOTIONS

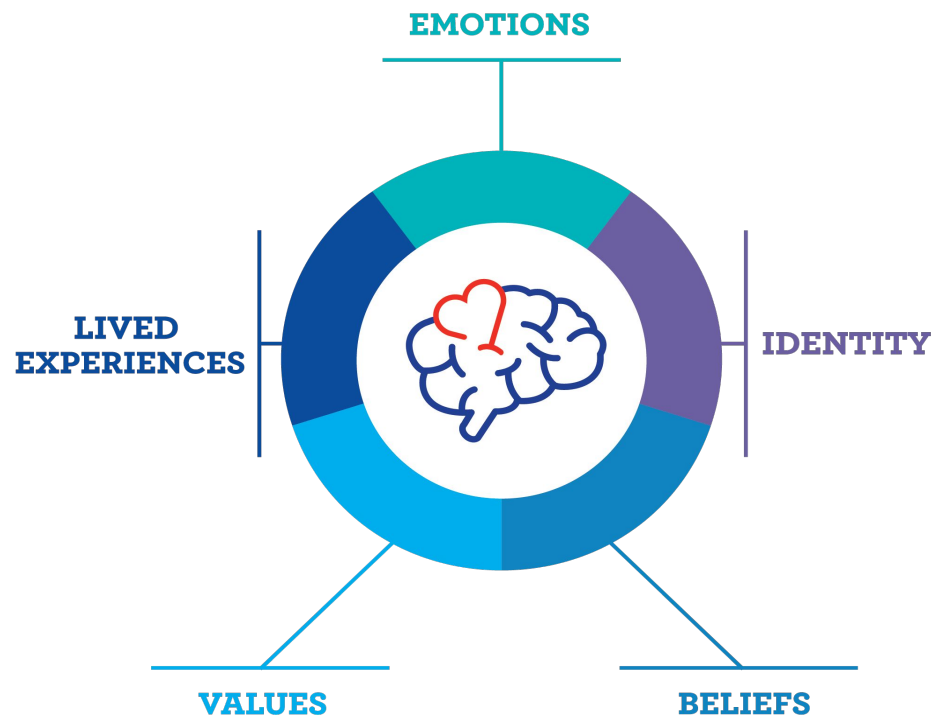IDENTITY

LIVED EXPERIENCES

VALUES

BELIEFS

Human decision-making is influenced by how people are heartwired — the mind circuits and connections that tie together people's emotions, identity, values, beliefs and lived experiences.

Wonder and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research developed the Heartwired approach to audience research to investigate the way that the five Heartwired Factors — emotions, identity, lived experiences, values and beliefs — combine, and often collide, to shape people's attitudes and behavior.

In this messaging research, youth-serving professionals were able to readily recall their lived experiences of personal and professional relationships playing an important role in their education and career journeys. These memories and lived experiences were especially powerful in positively influencing their support for embedding social capital in existing programs and interventions.

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Core Concept: Humans Are Heartwired

EMOTIONS

LIVED
EXPERIENCES

IDENTITY

VALUES

BELIEFS

Emotions: Feelings in response to stimuli
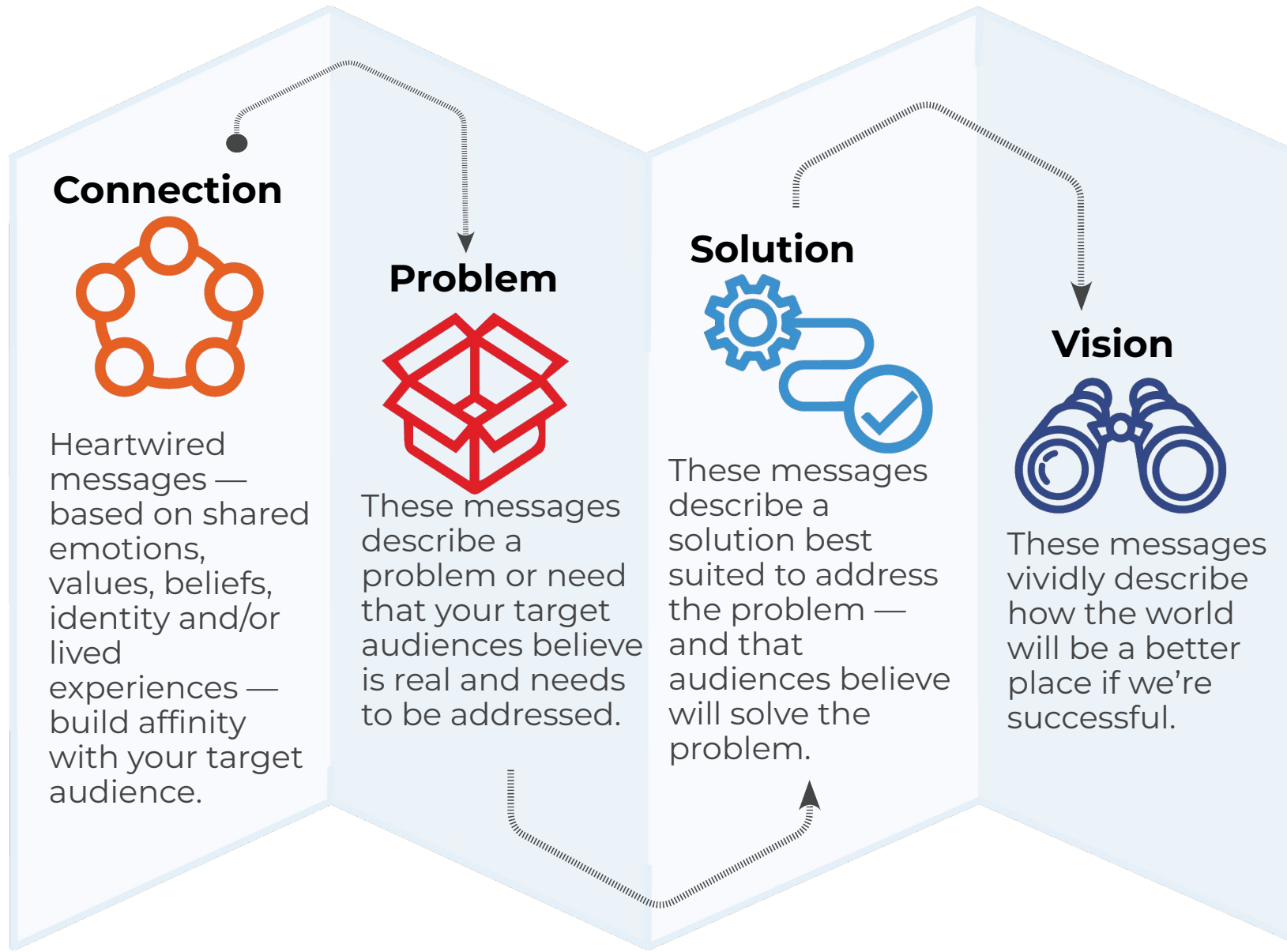
Identity: How one sees oneself

Lived Experiences: Meaning made from events/relationships

Values: Ideals about good and bad, right and wrong

Beliefs: Ideas held to be true

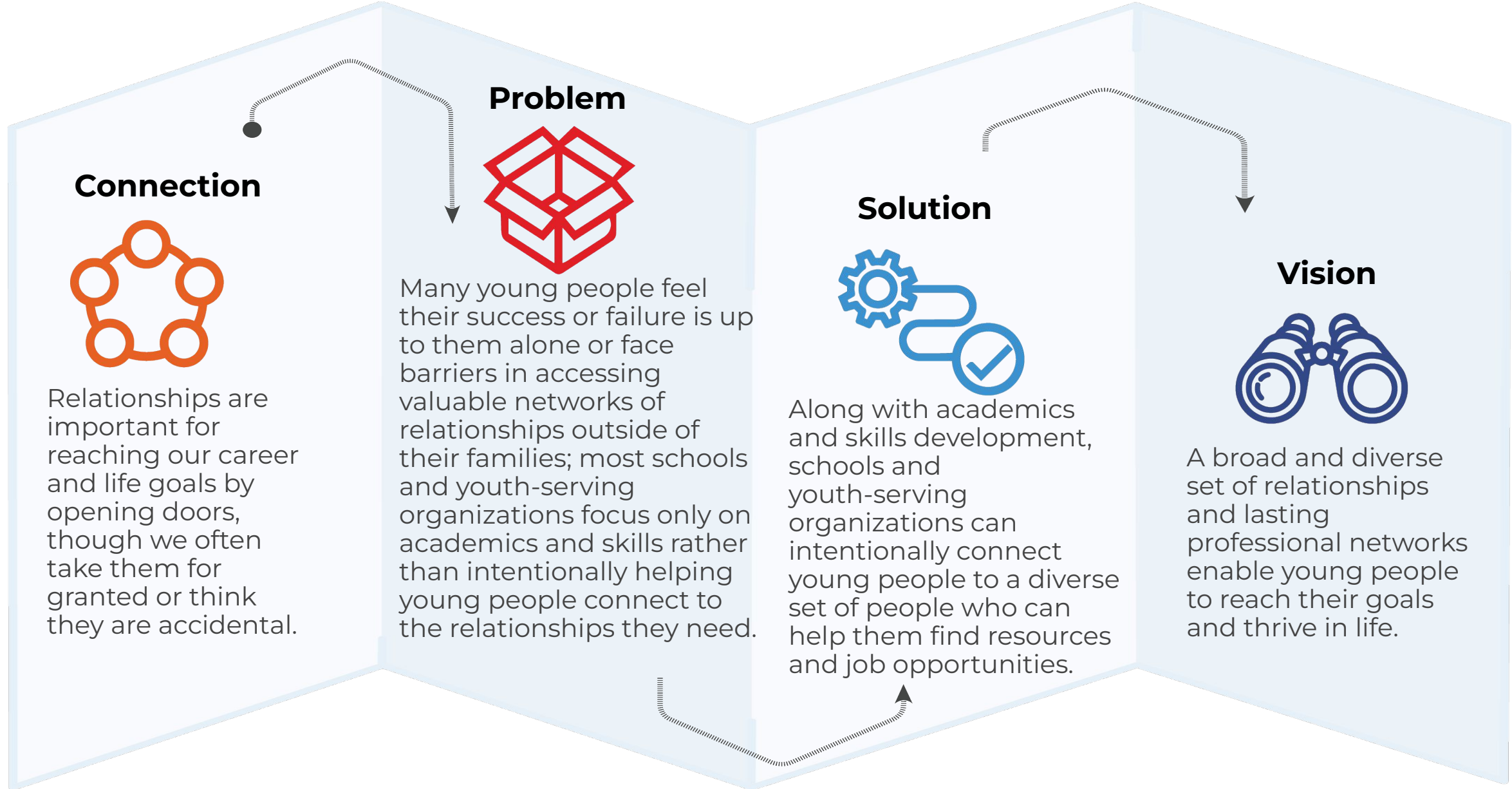**To learn more about Heartwired, visit heartwiredforchange.com**

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Core Concept: Heartwired Messages

Connection

Heartwired messages — based on shared emotions, values, beliefs, identity and/or lived experiences — build affinity with your target audience.

Problem

These messages describe a problem or need that your target audiences believe is real and needs to be addressed.

Solution

These messages describe a solution best suited to address the problem — and that audiences believe will solve the problem.

Vision

These messages vividly describe how the world will be a better place if we're successful.

Heartwired audience research helps us to understand how people feel and relate to issues. We can then leverage that understanding to develop sequenced messages that align with how they are heartwired.

We tested this messaging formula in our research. It was an effective approach to help youth-serving professionals to understand the value of embedding social capital in programs and interventions.

Heartwired Messages on Relationships

Connection

Relationships are important for reaching our career and life goals by opening doors, though we often take them for granted or think they are accidental.

Problem

Many young people feel their success or failure is up to them alone or face barriers in accessing valuable networks of relationships outside of their families; most schools and youth-serving organizations focus only on academics and skills rather than intentionally helping young people connect to the relationships they need.

Solution

Along with academics and skills development, schools and youth-serving organizations can intentionally connect young people to a diverse set of people who can help them find resources and job opportunities.

Vision

A broad and diverse set of relationships and lasting professional networks enable young people to reach their goals and thrive in life.

Heartwired Messages

Messaging Recommendations

Cheryl Martin,
Community College
Career Counselor*

*We know that messengers matter as much as messages. During audience research, we used fictionalized accounts such as this one, to better understand how messages and messengers work together to persuade audiences.

"Looking back, many of us can think of at least one close professional relationship — or even some acquaintances — who played an important role in helping us make progress toward our life goals.

> This behavioral cue encourages audiences to remember the role of professional relationships in their own career paths.

Many young people have supportive families, yet believe that their success or failure is completely up to them alone. A web of supportive relationships with peers, older peers and adults — including those with a similar lived experience or shared identity — nourish young people's talents.

> This taps into an existing belief that audiences hold about the importance of familial support, and acknowledges that it is often not enough.

Schools, employers and career advising services need to intentionally build and broker these relationships that connect young people to resources and job opportunities.

> The focus here is on how existing programs and institutions can be intentional about helping youth build social capital.

When young people see themselves — not all alone — but as part of a community rich with connections, they can access the resources that open up pathways to their life goals. Every young person needs someone who will take a bet on them. We should commit to ensuring that every young person has a set of relationships outside of their family who can help them navigate their education and career pathways."

> This ends with an aspirational statement marking the shift from feeling alone, as an individual, to the feeling of belonging to a larger community.

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Heartwired Messages

Messaging Recommendations

Gerald Rawley, Union District Superintendent*

*We know that messengers matter as much as messages. During audience research, we used fictionalized accounts such as this one, to better understand how messages and messengers work together to persuade audiences.

"Some young people are born into families where they inherit a broad network of relationships through the adults in their families, neighborhoods and schools. These relationships open doors and foster a sense of belonging — helping young people to succeed in school and in their careers.

Unfortunately, systemic barriers that structure everything from what neighborhoods we live in or what schools we attend, limit access to these networks for some young people. For too many Black and Hispanic young people and young people from families experiencing poverty, these systemic barriers can make it more difficult to learn about different career opportunities or to connect with other people in various careers who share their background or lived experience.

Schools can help young people who are Black and Hispanic and those from families with lower incomes expand the set of relationships they need to navigate education and career opportunities.

Access to these professional networks and relationships helps to open doors and foster a sense of belonging — putting young people on a path to achieve their life goals."

The statement is anchored in a shared belief about what young people need to thrive: supportive relationships and a sense of belonging.

This message frames the problem in terms of the systemic barriers that many young people face in accessing social capital.

The focus here is on how access to social capital can and should be embedded in existing institutions serving youth.

This ends by connecting professional networks and relationships for young people with the deep, human desire to belong.

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Potential Uses of Heartwired Messages

- Speeches and presentations
- Funder pitches
- Grant proposals
- Newsletter articles
- Blog posts
- Website content

Messaging Recommendations

Heartwired Messaging example in a funder pitch presentation (1 of 2)

Messaging Recommendations

We may think relationships are accidental — or come to us by virtue of luck. But when you stop and think about people who helped you along your path in life, you can probably think of people beyond your family and friends who you met through school or an internship or an organization you joined. Perhaps those people introduced you to others in their networks.

Some young people inherit beneficial networks of close relationships and acquaintances from their families, schools and organizations. The problem is that other young people who face systemic barriers that structure everything from what neighborhoods we live in or what schools we attend do not have access to these networks. That's true for the young people we work with: Black and Latino young people from families living on low incomes, whose parents are often working multiple jobs.

We know young people need to develop the skills to apply to schools, navigate the job search process, build professional networks, and gain experience working in a professional setting — all of which are more difficult to do without the support of a professional network that can offer support, connections, and advice. In fact, most career development or job training programs focus on teaching young people "soft skills" without increasing their access to the actual relationships they need.

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Heartwired Messaging example in a funder pitch presentation (2 of 2)

Messaging Recommendations

However, it is possible to create programs that help all young people develop and nurture meaningful relationships and professional networks.

We know because we have piloted an approach with our school district in one high school, and 95% of the 20 students in our first cohort have expanded their professional networks through a work-based learning program AND cultivated supportive peer relationships that will outlast the program.

We are looking to scale this approach throughout the district because we know that schools and youth-serving organizations like ours that intentionally design for relationship-building — in trainings, curricula and programs — help take the chance out of chance encounters.

We would like to present details to you about how to invest in this new district partnership, so together we can ensure all young people in our city have opportunities to nurture trusting and authentic relationships that help young people succeed in school, career and life.
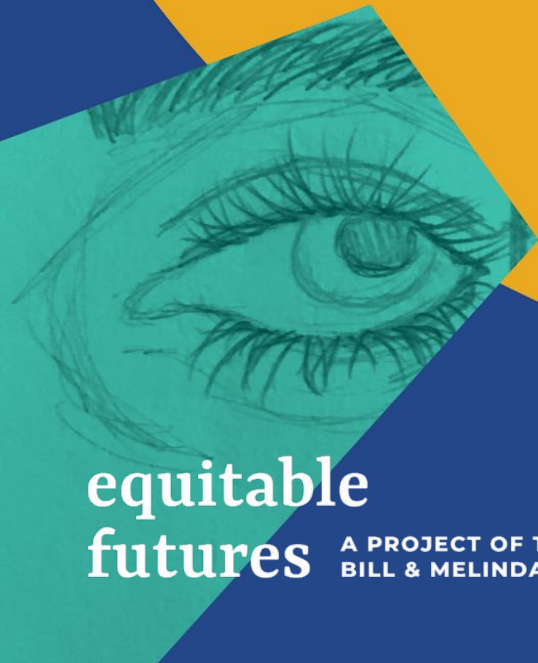
Now we'd like to walk you through details about how the program would work at scale…

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Fostering Connections and Professional Networks

How to Talk about Social Capital: Messaging Insights and Recommendations

Version 2.0

March 2022

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