

Communicating About
Young People's
Education and Career Journeys

A
MESSAGING
GUIDE





Illustration by Ladasia Bryant, age 19

Introduction

At any given time, millions of young people in high school start to think more seriously about the question: **What's next for me?** There are various iterations of this question—e.g., “who do I want to be?” or, “how do I see my future?” but it all adds up to the fact that in adolescence, young people begin to think more concretely about their future goals and aspirations.

Young people's journeys towards their future lives are very diverse—and take place in vastly different contexts across the United States. School systems, employment markets, family dynamics, peer influence, cultural and ethnic identities—all of these and more can shape how a young person forms, explores, and navigates their pathways towards the future. And research has shown time and time again that some groups of young people—particularly Black and Latino young people, and young people from low-income or rural backgrounds—experience more systemic barriers to achieving economic mobility and success after high school and postsecondary experiences than other groups of young people.

This communications guide distills insights and findings gathered from three projects funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: **Striving to Thriving**, the **Social Capital Messaging Project**, and the **Pathways Narrative Project**. All three projects focused on understanding aspects of how young people form their occupational identities, make decisions about their futures, navigate through their journeys—and how people, including family members and other adults, can support their journeys. Many insights have already been shared through reports, tools, and other resources, available on the website equitablefutures.org. Throughout this guide, you'll find suggestions for additional tools and resources if you want to learn more.

This guide, specifically, is focused on **communications**—how to communicate with, and about, young people as they navigate the pathways that will help them to achieve their aspirations and goals for their futures. For example, let's say you are a brand-new communications manager at a nonprofit that supports young people through mentorship and placing them in paid internships. Not only do you care deeply about this work, you also want to find clear and meaningful ways to talk about this work—maybe to potential donors, or to community leaders, or with the young people you're seeking to support.

If any of this resonates with your day-to-day work life, this guide is for you. Because as we all know, while it's everyone's job to effectively communicate when it comes to social change work, even communications professionals need guidance and occasional reminders on how to do it in ways that help us truly connect with our audiences and partners, and ensure that we stay aligned and focused when it comes to the change we want to see in the world.



Striving to Thriving

Qualitative and quantitative research conducted in 2018-2019 with the goal of understanding how young people's lived experiences, beliefs, feelings, and values help to shape their future identities and goals related to their lives and their careers. Participants included nearly 4,000 Black and Hispanic youth from urban to rural households of all income levels, as well as white youth from households with lower incomes.



Social Capital Messaging Project

This project involved audience research and field-testing that resulted in a messaging guide designed to help adults who support young people in their career pathways build support for embedding social capital—i.e., strong and caring relationships to benefit young people—in their outreach and programs.



Pathways Narrative Project

The Pathways Narrative Project is a jointly-funded effort from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and other funders. The project focused on building the capacity of advocates and non-profit organizations to **leverage narrative change as a strategy for systems change that ensures Black and Latino young people and young people from low-income backgrounds are able to obtain credentials of value and develop the agency, professional skills, and social capital to thrive in the workplace.**

Insights from this project are available on <https://pathwaysnarrative.org>.

COMMUNICATIONS RECOMMENDATION #1:

Center young people's experiences and voices in your communications about them

Individual young people possess unique and rich visions about their future lives, even though they may be at different stages of thinking through how to get there. However, centering the voices and experiences of the people we are seeking to uplift through our work doesn't happen as often as it should. Organizations doing social change work need language and stories to inspire and connect with their audiences, such as key organizational partners or donors. But too often, they find themselves in a scramble to either collect or bank stories about their work, or, they tell people's stories without giving the main protagonists of their stories sufficient agency or voice.

What Striving to Thriving and the Pathways Narrative Project found: Young people themselves—their voices, their experiences, their aspirations—are largely missing from the narrative landscape. Many of the organizations working in this space don't feature young people prominently in their communications, even though their primary purpose is to give young people the resources and the opportunities they need to explore and navigate these pathways and achieve success in their future careers and lives.

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More specific communications insights related to this recommendation:



Striving to Thriving research found that young people **prioritize a good life over a good career**—so engaging and communicating with young people around specific career pathways may need to first acknowledge where they're at with respect to envisioning their future lives.



Another insight from Striving to Thriving: young people see themselves as their own best change agents. They possess agency, in other words, and when communicating about and with young people about their pathways, **it is important to respect and listen for young people's sense of agency so interventions and programs designed to support them don't inadvertently end up talking "down" to them or missing the mark entirely.**



Additionally: Focus on communicating how programs and solutions can enable and support young people to have agency and choice in making decisions about their futures.

Other tools, resources and further reading:



[Designing Pathways With Youth Toolkit](#) (to help organizations center youth voices in the work they do and build equitable pathways)



Video stories of young people talking about their career pathways, including **[a series designed for youth-serving professionals](#)** and **[a series designed for students](#)**.



A **[toolkit on storytelling](#)** that centers young people

COMMUNICATIONS RECOMMENDATION #2:

Use plain-spoken language instead of jargon

Efforts to support young people in their education and career journeys cut across many different fields: the K-12 education system, post-secondary options, workforce development, youth development programs, and federal, state, and local education policymakers. Many of these varied sectors use language that would be incomprehensible to someone outside the sector. Therefore, using plain-spoken language is essential for reaching audiences outside your immediate sphere of practice and influence.

This recommendation has been echoed in many communications guides and in many message research projects. With respect to the Social Capital Messaging Project, one of the main insights is that the term itself—social capital—doesn't work well for many people, especially the young people who program leaders and funders are hoping to help build social capital. Similarly, through the Pathways Narrative Project, nine organizations working to support young people's education and career pathways conducted individual research efforts to understand the mindsets of their target audiences, which ranged from employers to educators to young people themselves. One of the main insights across all of their efforts? There is a lack of shared understanding of common terms used in the Pathways field and **inconsistency with language creates barriers for audiences.**

Using plain-spoken language is essential for reaching audiences outside your immediate sphere of practice and influence.

More specific communications insights related to this recommendation:



Use **plainspoken alternatives to social capital**, such as “professional networks” and “career connections.”



Unpack broadly-termed words like “equity” by specifically **naming who the intended beneficiaries are of particular programs and what systemic barriers stand in the way.**



Across audience and geography, there is a lack of shared understanding of common terms related to education and career pathways and **inconsistency with language creates barriers for audiences.**

Other tools, resources and further reading:

- ▶ Jargon is especially problematic when words we attach a great deal of meaning to become vague through overuse or lack of definition. [A Communications Network conference session tackled this topic with respect to the word “equity.”](#)
- ▶ [A blog post from PR Newswire](#) with 3 tips on how to avoid jargon.

COMMUNICATIONS RECOMMENDATION #3:

Use asset framing, not deficit framing

Deficit-framing is when groups of people are described by the challenges they experience in their lives as if these are personal characteristics, not system-based or historic challenges shaped by many factors. Asset-framing, on the other hand, is when people are defined first by their aspirations and contributions before describing the systemic barriers they may face.

When talking about young people and their futures, it's the difference between saying, "Black and Latino young people are far less likely to apply to four-year colleges" versus saying, "Many Black and Latino young people aspire to college as part of their educational and career goals, but often face challenging barriers—such as the rising college costs—to exploring these goals." In the first formulation, the language talks about the problem as a personal attribute of Black and Latino young people; in the second, the language shifts the focus of the problem to the systemic barriers that young people face.

Using asset framing is important when talking about and with young people because it helps humanize them as individuals within their own unique contexts and avoids the trope of blaming young people for systemic problems and issues they had no part in creating. Asset framing focuses on the rich array of beliefs, values, and lived experiences that shape a young person's identity and help them find their way to the future life they want to have.

Adopting asset-based framing doesn't mean that the challenges faced by many young people in navigating their pathways should be ignored or not mentioned; many adults working to support young people know that system-wide barriers are formidable, such as the disparity in networking opportunities between young people born into generational privilege and those born into generations of poverty. But what you lead with is important in keeping both young people—and the people who support them—engaged about change, and about making things better in the future.

More specific communications insights related to this recommendation:



Asset-framing is especially important when young people are first introduced—as both messengers and as the main protagonist in stories about their lived experiences and perspectives. Then the barriers and challenges many young people face in charting their paths through education and career opportunities can be more thoroughly explained.



Explain the role that systemic barriers play in limiting some young people's access to professional networks. In this way, you can avoid inadvertently portraying these barriers as a deficit attributable to young people.



Implicit and explicit bias based on race, gender, and income shape how audiences understand the value of pathways programs and who these programs should benefit. These biases also likely play a role in deficit framing versus asset framing.

Other tools, resources and further reading:

▶ Check out the work of [Trabian Shorters](#), a leading social entrepreneur and coach on how to apply asset-framing in movement-building and communications.

COMMUNICATIONS RECOMMENDATION #4:

Align internal and external audiences around shared understanding and language

Many organizations overestimate the clarity and accessibility of the language they use externally when, in fact, research shows that this is not the case. There's a lot of research about how much repetition is needed to make a message "stick;" there's also research about how people intend to convey one meaning but their audiences extrapolate another. So, when developing messages for your communications, check for messaging alignment, both internally and externally. Internal alignment is about how you and your colleagues and key spokespeople and partners are talking about the work you're doing with young people. You and your colleagues don't have to sound like robotic echoes of each other, but you will want to aim for some level of consistency about how you describe the work, your values and beliefs underlying the work, and who you most want to connect with and support.

External alignment is about how your audiences receive and understand your messages. The **Pathways Narrative Project** is focused on helping a cohort of organizations build their capacity to communicate about what they do with respect to young people's education and career pathways. Through this project, these organizations are testing how they want to talk about pathways—and learning about the terms that their audiences use, like "work-based learning" and "career-connected learning." One of the core lessons emerging from this project is that people mean and hear different things with respect to the word "pathways." That's why it's important, when communicating, to check for internal and external alignment periodically, and adjust messaging based on what you learn.

More specific communications insights related to this recommendation:



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**. This finding shows that alignment may already exist within your audiences and partners—and therefore, the right messaging and engagement can help build on that alignment.



Utilize behavioral cues to summon audiences' memories about professional relationships and **help audiences to widen the lens in order to see how professional relationships come to be**. This insight is about audience connection—which is an important ingredient to audience engagement and alignment.



Internal and external audiences need to be aligned on who is benefiting from a proposed intervention. In the Pathways Narrative Project, one of the key insights from the research efforts of several different organizations found that persuasive messaging on career pathways programs needed to reflect specific benefits for different stakeholders: for students, career pathways programs offered more opportunity and choice for their futures lives, whereas businesses needed a robust talent pipeline to thrive and prosper.

Other tools, resources and further reading:

▶ **Wonder: Strategies for Good**, which worked on all three projects and put together this guide, uses an approach to make progress on tough social issues on which audiences are often not aligned—like marriage equality, affordable housing, etc. This approach, called Heartwired, helps you to understand how people's emotions, beliefs, values, identity, and lived experiences shape their mindsets on specific issues. [Learn more about Heartwired here.](#)

COMMUNICATIONS RECOMMENDATION #5:

Invest effort in understanding the dominant narratives influencing the issues you work on

For the purposes of this guide, narrative can be thought of as a **pattern** or system of stories, not just one story. The stories tell people how to think, feel, and relate to people, places, ideas, or events. For organizations working in the career pathways space, there are many narratives at play. Stakeholders hold a wide array of views about the value of education (high school and postsecondary), what constitutes a meaningful career trajectory, what it means to succeed and to “earn a living” and to feel professionally fulfilled. Understanding which narratives affect your work is critical to the change effort you are seeking to make happen.

Most social change efforts—for example, the increased emphasis on STEM education for students of color—had significant narrative shift components. In other words, while it was important to change policies and practices around these topics, it was also important to change the storylines and the patterns of stories around these topics so people could see, for example, that young Black females could absolutely succeed in STEM careers, like medicine, with the help of stories that featured people who looked like them.

All of the organizations participating in the Pathways Narrative Project had the opportunity to learn about the narratives influencing their work on creating more education and career pathway opportunities for young people. Most pathways programs provide opportunities for young people to either choose an accelerated route through postsecondary education or bypass it altogether to earn different sorts of credentials for their desired careers. However, many organizations found that the narrative on “college for all”—meaning, the promotion of a 4-year college degree as the best option leading to future success—was the dominant narrative. Furthermore, attempts to critique or shift the “college for all” dominant narrative had the potential for backfiring, as audience members expressed concerns about a potential return to practices that disenfranchised Black people, in particular, from attending higher education institutions.

More specific communications insights related to this recommendation:



Audiences have **different underlying assumptions about the purpose of school (as a public or private good) and who benefits from the education system**. Therefore, you need to check what those assumptions are, and your messaging strategy needs to help bridge those differences.



There is a **misalignment between what students and educators believe is important for students' success and how success is currently measured by education systems**. These types of alignment—between what people believe and actual practice—can hamper progress towards your change goals.

Other tools, resources and further reading:

▶ There are many organizations and storytellers working on narrative change—a communications approach to help understand what narratives and stories are dominating public discourse and audience reactions on specific issues, and seeking to shift the narratives by creating new patterns of stories on those issues in order to make progress. You should check out these organizations, like [Harmony Labs](#) or [The Opportunity Agenda](#), which offer tools and resources on narrative change, messaging and audience segmentation.



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Learning and Doing More

Learning about communications insights is the first step; thinking about how to apply them to your own work and context is the next step. If you are interested in applying these recommendations to your work, we suggest you start by auditing your own communications and messaging based on each of the recommendations included in this guide. Then make an action plan for improving your communications by centering young people's voices and agency, removing jargon, using asset-framing, and aligning your audiences around shared language and understanding.

You may also want to do a media or messaging audit to more deeply understand the dominant narratives about young people's education and career pathways that may be impacting your ability to make progress on advancing your

organization's programs or systems changes. Audience research can then help you to determine what messaging will help you to shift the narrative to make possible the programmatic and systemic changes that enable all young people to thrive.

You can also check out more tools and resources associated with Striving to Thriving and the Social Capital Messaging Project at <https://equitablefutures.org>. You can explore more insights and narrative change tools from the Pathways Narrative Project at <https://pathwaysnarrative.org>.