Impactful and Collaborative Practices to Effectively Communicate Career Pathway Initiatives

Interest in and growth of career pathways initiatives, including through Career Technical Education (CTE), continues to expand. As a result, so does the importance of effective communication about these initiatives — to raise awareness and compel action in communities, achieve alignment with existing systems and initiatives, and build buy-in and relationships with partners, funders and policymakers.

Successful pathways expansion requires robust and sustainable cross-sector partnerships to both drive innovation and ensure education and workforce alignment. These partnerships create opportunities as well as challenges, at times creating intersecting or even competing interests on needs and desired impact of the career pathway landscape. Navigating and achieving consensus amidst these complexities is central to leveraging communications as a driver to build buy-in, inspire action, and ultimately achieve meaningful learner impacts and transform systems.

This resource provides strategies with accompanying recommendations and guiding structures to create impactful and collaborative structures that communicate progress and impact for cross-sector career pathway endeavors of all sizes, including large-scale, cross-sector initiatives.

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1 Develop cross-organizational structures that center collaboration *and* decision-making authority.

Effective communication of any initiative requires creating intentional and well-understood organizing structures about who is involved in making decisions about communications activities; who has decision-making authority to move communications activities forward; and who is responsible for executing communications activities. To do so, consider these recommendations:

STRUCTURES

Designate a communications lead

Select an individual responsible for leading the communications strategy and structures across initiative partners. This individual should ideally have easy access to top-level information about initiative work in order to communicate connections across activities.

Consider an executive communications team

If the communications lead needs additional capacity or if the number of communications representatives includes more than a dozen partners, consider an executive team. This group of two to four individuals would assist in managing the committee and making final decisions if a voting structure for the committee is not possible.

Designate partner communications representatives

Each initiative partner should have an individual who provides input on communications so all interests and connected work are understood and considered. These representatives should have a strong understanding of initiative activities and how they connect to other work the organization they represent is conducting.

Develop a tiered communications committee

Ideally, the communications lead and representatives form the top level of a communications committee. It is recommended that a committee also include additional individuals that:

- Execute communications activities but may not need to be involved in decision making

- Provide a valuable perspective on a specific activity or project. These individuals can be organized through subcommittees or working groups for specific projects.

Develop routines to maintain structures
Structures are only as effective as the routines connected to them. These routines should include but are not limited to meeting frequency, voting procedures and margins; reporting timelines and documents; communication during and outside of meetings, etc.

Pair routines with accountability measures
Often unintentionally, routines can be interrupted due to competing priorities or capacity. Measures such as monthly routine checklists, identifying accountability partners for structure leadership, and alternative meeting hosts to avoid cancellations can get routines back on track.

Create a decision-making tree
Structures must encourage ideation while also providing a clear path towards final decisions. The communications lead should have the authority to convene communications representatives, achieve consensus among representatives, then efficiently advance recommendations. Often this may include additional approval processes with project leadership aligned to communications deliverables being produced (i.e. internal update, fact sheet, press release, etc.) , as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Sample Communications Structure

External Approval Structures

COMMUNICATIONS LEAD
Decision-making: Approve content for routine communications
Additional Approval: Initiative team approve project plan and messaging; site lead approve assets for new communication initiatives or routines

Intiative Team

Site Lead

COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE
Communications Lead + Organizational Representatives
Decision-making: Majority Vote; Lead as tiebreaker

COMMUNICATIONS SUBCOMMITTEES
Subcommittee Chairs = Communications Representatives selected by Committee
Decision-making: Members make recommendations; recommendations reviewed and approved by Chair for consideration by Communications Committee and Initiative Team, as appropriate

Subcommittee   Subcommittee   Subcommittee   Subcommittee

2 Cultivate a communications strategy connected to shared commitments and existing priorities.

An effective initiative communications strategy consists of goals, activities, and metrics that help achieve existing project vision, goals and priorities. Doing so provides a guiding light for decision-making, particularly in large-scale initiatives where the quantity of partners and positionality may lead to competing and complicating interests.

Keep in mind that communication goals are different from activities; a goal should be the outcome the initiative desires to achieve from the communications, while an activity is the tangible written, visual, or verbal outreach to achieve the goal. This should be further broken down into metrics, or markers to measure success, and impact, or quantitative targets for connected metrics and goals.

To create a connective communications strategy both within communication structures and across initiative partners, consider these recommendations:

CONNECTIONS

Achieve shared commitment towards communications goals
Initiatives don't occur in silos—initiative partners will continue conducting and communicating about their own work while they communicate about an initiative. Potential activities should compel each partner to consider these questions:
- Where is there overlap between the initiative's goals and my organization's goals? How is the initiative advancing organizational priorities?
- What initiative goal or project is my organization most interested in communicating?
- Are there potential conflicts between my organization's goals or projects and those of the initiative? How can communications be designed to mitigate conflict and demonstrate shared commitment to desired outcomes?

Achieve shared commitment towards communications goals
A communications strategy should connect to the priorities of the larger community and its policymakers in addition to the interest of the core partners.

Prioritize audiences
Initiatives communicate with a variety of audiences, including internal partners, policymakers, potential funders, educators, and learners. However, initiatives often lack capacity to communicate with all audiences at once. Communications goals should guide prioritization of audience communications. Begin by considering which audience(s) are most important to gaining approval or establishing a project.

Use structures to set strategy boundaries
When cultivating shared commitment and language, rely on communications structures to set boundaries of when communications ideation, decision making, and execution begins and ends. These structures are also useful to message shared commitments.

Create a communications schedule
Once the priority of audiences is determined, the next step is to create a sequence of communications to identify inflection points where a) audience communications overlap and b) communications can align with important existing events or deadlines.

As shown in Figure 2, It may be helpful to separate activities into the stages of Inform, Persuade, Maintain/Sustain and Celebrate across the life of the initiative or activity. This creates a communications sequence for informing, compeling, and sustaining action while also identifying timeline overlaps for audiences.

Figure 2 : Connecting Communication Goals and Stages Across Audiences

Project Goal: Build seamless transitions to support postsecondary success for graduauting seniors.				
Communications Goal: Increase percentage of learners and families who answer 'Knowledgeable or 'Somewhat Knowledgeable' about dual enrollment and early college programs on annual survey by 20% by March 31, 2025.				
Audiences	Q1 2024	Q2 2024	Q3 2024	Q4 2024
Learners and Families		Inform	Persuade	Persuade
Postsecondary Leaders	Inform, Persuade	Maintain	Maintain	Celebrate
Secondary Leaders	Inform, Persuade	Maintain	Maintain	Celebrate
Educators and Career Advising Professionals	Inform	Persuade	Maintain	Maintain

3 Establish early storytelling coversations and routines.

Storytelling involves communicating to achieve a desired action in a way that centers the human experience, or in the words of screenwriter Robert McKee, "uniting an idea with an emotion" to demonstrate change and impact. These stories should align with and be responsive to the values, priorities and culture of the intended audience and goals of the initiative.

Discussions about storytelling often occur at the end of a project when there are clear outcomes to communicate. On the contrary, these discussions should occur at the beginning as the stories an initiative wants to tell can often significantly impact communications goals and activities. For example, if the initiative aims to increase learner access to high-quality career pathways, collecting learner perspectives early can tell a clearer story about need and subsequent impact, or inspire a communications activity that otherwise might not have been considered.

Routines for storytelling are one example of the larger practice of knowledge management, a disciplined, multi-faceted approach to identifying, capturing, evaluating and sharing information to capture individual and collective experiences.

To center storytelling throughout initiative communications, consider these recommendations:

PRACTICES

Develop audience personas
Personas are hypothetical individuals aligned to target audiences with connected identities and journeys to success. These personas can be created using existing knowledge, but ideally should also include research such as focus groups, audience interviews and surveys.

Developing personas helps communicators consider if proposed messages and stories would resonate with an individual whose experience is simillar to the person. It can also inform goalsetting by illuminating desired outcomes for these audiences.

Confirm the storytelling reflects your community
Opportunity gaps are often discussed for quantitative data, but qualitative data including audience narratives should also be evaluated. Consider:

- What stories are currently being told in your community about the impact of career pathways? What aspects of the experience are missing that your initiative addresses?

- Which populations and lived experiences are currently highlighted in storytelling in your community? Which populations are missing?

Connect storytelling routines and knowledge management

Like internal communication structures and practices, storytelling should embed routines to make this aspect of communications expected rather than an afterthought.

These routines are part of a larger knowledge management strategy. Examples of storytelling routines include training staff on collecting stories, establishing routine audience interviews, developing documents to collect stories and track impact targets, and identifying storytelling opportunities for each communication activity.

Identify storytelling targets and data points

Ensuring you have clearly defined individuals or groups whose experiences you hope to lift up through storytelling allows communications teams to clearly identify the types of qualitative and quantitative data needed to communicate the initiative's impact.

For example, increasing Black learner enrollment in an engineering career pathway could include storytelling data points such as ten interviews with current and prospective learners about their perceptions of and experience in these programs along the way, or collecting photos to show diverse representation in engineering programs and careers.

4 Create messages that connect *and* challenge.

Developing key messages about an initiative's intended purpose and impact should not only connect with an audience's values, priorities, and initiatives, but should also challenge the audience to see themselves achieving a higher level of participation, impact, and/or success through the initiative's work.

To create impactful and manageable messages for key audiences, consider these recommendations:

Understand your audiences
Before creating messages, conduct <u>audience mapping</u> within communications structures and, when possible, directly with audiences to understand values, priorities, perceptions of career pathways, preferred language and terminology, etc. This audience mapping can be used to develop the aforementioned personas to apply to future work.

Test messages
Whenever possible, receive input on messages from audiences prior to, during and after key communications activities to ensure they are making the intended impact.

This testing can be conducted through focus groups, surveys, A/B message testing on communication platforms, <u>including audience members</u> in the message development process, and more.

Create core and tailored messages
Figure 3 shows key messaging components that allow for central, core messages and tailoring that meets the needs of each target audience.

Create "connect" AND "challenge" statements
When explaining an initiative, be clear how the initiative connects and builds on existing work while also meeting an unmet need.
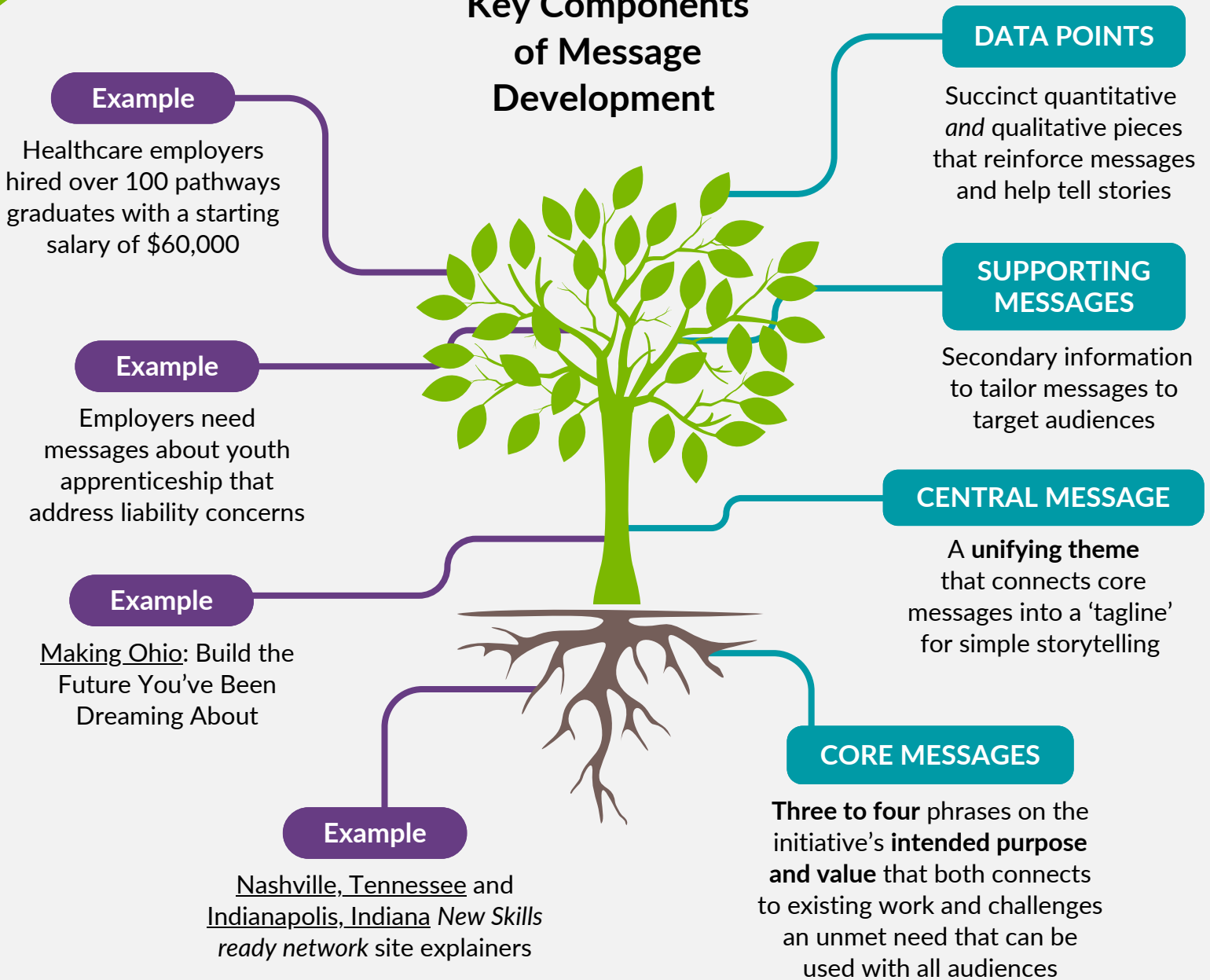
> **Example**
>
> *Existing Work*: Through the IPlan initiative, our state is committed to a Day One life and career development plan that travels with learners through postsecondary education.
>
> *Unmet Need*: The *New Skills ready network* initiative expands IPlan templates and curriculum beyond high school to Grades 5 to 8.

Conduct early communications about sustainability
Clearly communicating current conditions connected to the initiative, how the work will make progress, and what work is still to be done starts sustainability narratives early. It also helps partners make connections with the initiative, current, and future work, and sets expectations that results from career pathways initiatives are <u>often not immediate</u>.

Figure 3:

Key Components of Message Development

DATA POINTS

Succinct quantitative *and* qualitative pieces that reinforce messages and help tell stories

Example

Healthcare employers hired over 100 pathways graduates with a starting salary of $60,000

SUPPORTING MESSAGES

Secondary information to tailor messages to target audiences

Example

Employers need messages about youth apprenticeship that address liability concerns

CENTRAL MESSAGE

A **unifying theme** that connects core messages into a 'tagline' for simple storytelling

Example

Making Ohio: Build the Future You've Been Dreaming About

CORE MESSAGES

Three to four phrases on the initiative's **intended purpose and value** that both connects to existing work and challenges an unmet need that can be used with all audiences

Example

Nashville, Tennessee and Indianapolis, Indiana *New Skills ready network* site explainers