

WORKFORCE NARRATIVE PROJECT

Workforce Narrative Meeting Summary

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Location: The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Date: May 17, 2007, 9:30 AM – 4:00 PM

Participants

Brandon Roberts
Bob Giloth
Cheryl King (*Author*)
Mark Greenberg
Doug Henton (*Author*)
Guy Molyneux
Andrea Payne
Paul Harrington
Sallie Glickman
Anthony Carnevale (*Author*)
Julie Strawn
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Andy Van Kleunen
Beth Shulman
Manuel Pastor (*Author*)
Harry J. Holzer (*Author*)
Margy Waller

By Phone:

Katherine Magnuson (*Author*)
Paul Osterman (*Author*)

Opening Statements and Background, Brandon Roberts & Bob Giloth

Brandon Roberts opened the meeting with an overview of initiative, and the need to develop a new underlying rationale for investing in workforce training and development. This initiative is a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF). The project started with a group of seven national experts writing short papers, each presenting a different narrative around investing in workforce development. This meeting is the culmination of this process, and is intended to provide the authors, along with other experts including academics, practitioners, communication specialists, and policy thinkers, the chance to discuss the merits of each rationale. Ultimately, this meeting will help AECF decide whether to proceed with the project, and what direction it could take.

Bob Giloth gave an overview of AECF's interest in this project, and their ultimate goals for the meeting. He explained that AECF is focused on kids, but from a broad perspective that recognizes that importance of supports for parents. Therefore, while the new narrative being discussed is focused on workforce issues, it is also intended to be linked to other issues that impact family success. The group raised a few issues to keep in mind throughout the discussion:

- 1) As with welfare, many people have negative connotations of workforce development. Part of the story is making a positive case for these types of programs.
- 2) There is a tension between treating this as a universal employment and training issue, or a targeted low-income issue. This is something to be conscious of in crafting a persuasive narrative.

Components of a Narrative, Beth Shulman

To set up the discussion, Beth Shulman gave an overview of framing and the components of a narrative. She identified four key steps in crafting a persuasive narrative:

- 1) **Value Statement:** In order to draw the reader in, a narrative needs to start off with a message that tells them why they should care about the issue. This should be an aspirational statement that lays out the core values of your argument. It should be something that people can relate to, and a story in which they can see themselves. This will be the central “why” of your argument.
- 2) **Problem Statement:** What is going wrong? What is causing us to fall short of what our values dictate, and what does the problem look like?
- 3) **Solution:** How can the problem be solved? It is easy to dwell on the problem, but this does not move your argument forward unless you can present a way to improve the situation. The solution needs to be clear and concrete.
- 4) **Action Agenda:** What can people do to move the solution forward?

Minimum Wage Campaign: Beth described her experience in crafting a narrative around the minimum wage. She used polling and focus groups to test how well different messages resonated, and found that people connected with the idea that if you work hard, you should be able to support your family. The campaign moved forward with this message, always presenting this idea first, and then following by explaining that many jobs are not providing this type of security in exchange for hard work. The campaign cited some data when needed, but the values narrative was at the center.

Discipline: Identifying a values narrative that people can relate to is important, but it will not be enough if people in the field do not themselves believe in the narrative. The advocates and practitioners working on the issue must be convinced that the values presented are truly the reason for acting, and they must feel some passion about it in order to be convincing. Those working on the issue must be very disciplined in their framing, and both personal belief and passion can help with this consistency.

Experience with Workforce Narratives, Sally Glickman & Andy Van Kleunen

A Tale of Two Cities: Sallie Glickman described her experience with creating the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board’s *A Tale of Two Cities*. This brief attempted to create a new narrative around local workforce issues, but setting forth both values and context. The goals were to move the local conversation away from taxes, and to make workforce issues feel more accessible and relevant to all city residents. The final product was an easy to read story that presented the WIB’s vision for the city. It was written so that people could see themselves both in the story and the solution.

Framing: The brief begins with framing messages. The first things the reader sees are the headline and a caption, both with the same clear message. Sallie explained that they have been largely effective in conveying the story because the message is something she believes and is passionate about.

Broad Focus on Education: Rather than focusing specifically on employment and training, the brief focuses heavily on education. The rationale behind this is, first, that the two are converging in a knowledge economy, and second, that education can be a broad conversation starter, with other topics such as job training and technical skills emerging as they move forward. It also taps into the idea that Philadelphia does not need to recruit new workers to meet the needs of the knowledge economy, but to activate the people who are already there. Some concerns with the education focus included the risk of people focusing on kids rather than working adults, and the exclusion of other important issues such as the role of the business community.

Skills 2 Compete: Andy Van Kleunen discussed the Workforce Alliance’s new vision for workforce development, which centers on a “skills guarantee.” The idea is to recapture the U.S. role as a world leader by reinvigorating the nation’s education guarantee—moving people past high school with the promise of at least two years of post-secondary education. The concept intends to broadly encompass all forms of education, so that people from many fields can buy in and promote the idea. The message is also clear and simple enough for politicians to articulate.

The overall goal is not to promote one specific type of program, but to get people thinking and talking about the system as a whole. The initiative is also intended to broaden the employment and training discussion to those already in the workforce—“the forgotten middle.” This group is largely left off the public radar, with only 4-year college students getting much attention.

Broad Vision of Opportunity: The initiative plays into the idea of tapping into the middle class. Currently, people think of 4-year college as the route to opportunity; this needs to be countered so that all post-secondary education is seen as a viable upward path. An important goal of this initiative, and any workforce narrative, should be to create a broad agenda that sees education as a continuum, rather than a choice between K-12 and adult programs. The concept of a 2-year guarantee is universal, and can therefore be very inclusive. It sets a goal not only for helping high school students move on to college, but also for helping adults increase their skills.

Risks and Benefits of Focusing on ‘College’: It is important to be strategic in word choice and framing. There is a general sense of “BA elitism” in America—the idea that if you haven’t finished a 4-year program, you have not done the work needed to earn a good standard of living. Using the word college could unintentionally play into this feeling, and fail to increase support for 2-year and technical programs. Even if an initiative is working for something more, if it focuses on the idea of college, this is where money will be invested. On the other hand, the word college is what many people feel comfortable with, and it conveys a positive vision of what people want for their own children. The word post-secondary is not universally understood. If people feel an initiative is about expanding options, they may fear it is about creating a dual-tracked system that funnels some students into less desirable options.

Review of Papers

The authors reviewed their narratives, and the larger group discussed each perspective.

Investing to Benefit Adult Workers, Cheryl King

This narrative is based on the idea that adults without a high school diploma or post-secondary experience are struggling in the job market. Cheryl King composed this paper based on her experience in Kentucky. Her organization did research and found that many local adults knew there were programs out there to help them, but did not see how participation would improve their lives. Those who were coming into the programs knew they needed a degree or GED to access certain jobs, but did not necessarily understand the amount of work it would require for them to achieve this. They came in because they wanted to get a job, not because they wanted to increase their education or skills.

Bringing Families on Board with Your Message: In response to the disconnect between education and achievement among the general population, they conducted a media campaign across the state of Kentucky to try to shift how adults thought of education. The campaign sold the idea of achieving a better life for both yourself and your children. It was based on the idea that policymakers will not be able to create effective programs if the target audience does not know or care about what is being offered. The Kentucky campaign was not about specific programs, but about creating a new statewide outlook on the entire system. The message to the legislature was that they needed to provide the resources to help connect people to post-secondary programs.

Investing to Benefit Business, Harry Holzer

Harry Holzer's paper focused on a workforce narrative from the business perspective. Businesses have a stake in workforce development because they need skilled, productive workers, and their costs go up when they cannot find them. Economics says that if workforce development is truly in their interest, they will invest in it. Unfortunately, this is undercut by the fact that businesses lack perfect information about potential job candidates, even if they are trained, and the fact that they lack resources to invest in programs upfront. Furthermore, the degree to which businesses feel the pressure to upgrade workers' skills varies by industry, region, and the state of the economy.

Targeting Struggling Industries: Since there is such variation, it makes sense to target a narrative to businesses and industries that are struggling. Those that are feeling pressure are most likely get on board with investing in workforce development.

Countering Negative Public-Sector Stereotypes: Many businesses are hesitant to participate in public sector programs because they feel it will be inefficient, and not business-friendly. Any narrative targeted towards business needs to counter these perceptions through concrete evidence of positive business outcomes, and specific examples of other business who have benefited.

Business Program Preferences: In general, businesses prefer to deal with educational institutions. This is partially because it allows them to offload responsibility from themselves to another system. It also provides an external screening and sorting mechanism, which business leaders are familiar with and feel they can trust. For example, business may be more receptive to partnerships with community colleges than targeted employment and training programs, or service offered through WIBs. WIBs are

seen as service centers for the low-skilled, while community colleges are seen as a more flexible, business-friendly system. Businesses need to feel like they are gaining something, not simply helping the poor.

Washington State Opportunity Grant Example: In Washington state, business showed strong support and even testified for the new opportunity grant program. Advocates did thorough research on labor supply and demand, and were able to paint a story of a mid-level worker shortage. With this evidence, they were able to argue that the state needed to guarantee a new minimum of at least two years of post-secondary education. The grants were then crafted around business partnerships in demand industries. The program was sold as something universal.

Investing to Benefit Children of Low-Skill Adults, Katherine Magnuson

Katherine Magnuson focused on how workforce development can benefit children. This can be a strong starting point, since it is viable on both moral grounds and on the basis of equal opportunity. This narrative counters the notion that we have to invest in either kids OR adults, and instead, shows how investing in one is essential to the success of the other. What happens in a child's early life and in their family life during school impacts their ability to succeed in the labor market. This narrative diffuses the conflict between youth and adults.

Empirical Support: This narrative has a strong moral component, but can also be supported on empirical grounds. There is evidence that shows that parental education benefits children. Studies have shown this to be true whether the parent completes school before the child is born, or enrolls in school later in the child's life. These benefits range from reduced delinquency to higher earnings later in life.

Moral Grounds: Americans believe that everyone should at least have the opportunity to succeed. Since children are seen as innocent, people are often more willing to create programs that benefit them. While this idea is generally assumed to be true, there is some evidence that it does not hold true universally. Framing research has found that when messages focus on the needs of children, people often assume it is because of something the parents did wrong. Even if they feel sympathy, they do not always feel it is the government's place to fix it. They may still feel it is the parent's job to help their child. They may also feel that poor kids are not getting ahead because they simply aren't smart enough. This issue may undercut the strength of child-based messages. There is some evidence to counter these ideas, which must be integrated into the narrative.

Lack of Understanding around Workforce Development: Pre-K initiatives have been very successful, largely because people immediately understand what pre-K means. It conjures a concrete image in people's minds, which workforce development does not. In order for people to support workforce programs, they need to first understand what exactly we're talking about. Finding good phrasing and imagery will be important a key component of a successful narrative.

Tone: How an argument is presented can be just as important as what it says. It is often easy to talk about negative consequences rather than positive opportunities. The

narrative will be received better if it focuses on affirmatives; the improvements we can achieve if we invest in the workforce.

Challenge of Investing in Adults with Focus on Kids: If the narrative focuses on kids, we run the risk that the public conversation will stay on kids, and never move on to policy changes for adults. The strength of this narrative is that people are much more willing to discuss policies that benefit children, but it could also be a weakness if it diverts attention from the ultimate workforce goal. It could also cause people to think of workforce development as a social program, which could invoke other negative connotations linked to poverty and welfare. These weaknesses may make it more appropriate as a supplemental rather than dominant narrative.

Investing to Benefit Distressed Communities & Disadvantaged Adults, Manuel Pastor

This narrative focuses on inequality in a spatial form, arguing that the concentration of poverty exacerbates poverty. It is based on the evidence that regions with more inequality have slower economic growth, more social tension, and less investment. This perspective could help engage the community development field, which has largely lost its way and could be reinvigorated with a focus on workforce issues.

Immigrant Integration: This narrative can help increase immigrant integration into local communities. It is based on the notion that America is the kind of place where we don't want to leave people behind. It plays into the idea of mutual obligations—one neighbor may benefit from receiving help today, and in turn, the other neighbor will benefit from receiving help tomorrow. In essence, it is a narrative around coming together as one nation. These ideals are based on family and community, and are the ideals that bring many new Americans to this country. Therefore, it can not only help integrate immigrant groups, but can also help mobilize them by presenting a message they connect with.

New Allies: The narrative can bring a variety of new allies into the fold. First, it can help re-frame the work of community developers. Second, it can activate immigrant groups. Finally, it may also have the power to engage business. Since it shows that inequality slows the economy, it gives business a concrete incentive to address poverty. Businesses may also be more willing to invest financially at the community level. Whereas national investment is too diffuse, and local chambers are too specific, a businesses operational region may be the right target.

Investing to Benefit/Address Labor Volatility, Paul Osterman

The current workforce development system is too isolated, and often stigmatized as it is seen as a program for the poor. The new narrative needs to appeal to a much broader constituency. This perspective works from the idea that the labor market is a much more dangerous place than it used to be, for every worker at every level. The solution is to create some kind of universal insurance that deals with this increased risk. This system needs to be public, since most would not be able to afford private insurance, and private companies would exclude some workers. This narrative would deemphasize redistribution, and focus on security for all workers.

Solutions Follow the Framing: This narrative has a lot of power because it taps into a new reality that many people have a sense of insecurity. Even if they are not personally impacted, they do feel that things are insecure for others. While this may be a popular frame, it may not lead to the desired results. The narrative does not lead directly to the need to invest in training and workforce development, but rather to policies that reduce the risk of job loss, such as wage insurance. Politicians in particular prefer not to discuss re-training in the context of job insecurity. They do not want to tell people what programs will be available after they lose their job; they want to tell people that their jobs are secure under their leadership. Furthermore, low-income workers are not guaranteed to benefit, since policy solutions could easily focus on the need of higher-skilled workers.

Benefits of Expanding the Narrative: Insecurity is just one piece of the overall changing economy. This narrative could therefore be broadened to reflect how the workforce is changing overall, with the central arguments that our policies are outdated and failing to meet the needs of the 21st century economy. This could help ensure that a broader range of solutions fall into the frame. Focusing too narrowly could make displaced workers the centerpiece, at the expense of more broad employment and training goals.

Investing to Benefit Regional Economies, Doug Henton

Every region is experiencing different changes as a result of globalization and technology, due to different industry mixes, different labor pools, and different economies. More and more, therefore, businesses are starting to come together on the regional level to deal with economic changes. Industry is already partnering with intermediaries and community colleges in order to stay competitive. This argument focuses on economic security, and whether businesses will win or lose as a result of their local economy. The national story is too broad to encompass the diversity of experiences facing different regions.

Funding Issues: There are advantages and disadvantages to funding at the regional level. On the one hand, regions are orphans. They have no official leadership entity, which makes it hard to compete with city, county, and state priorities. On the other hand, regions can come together in a way that groups can't on the national level. There is the potential to create new structures that blend public, private, and foundation resources. In order to accommodate regional initiatives, federal funding streams need to become more flexible. Currently, businesses turn to community colleges because they are less restricted by rules than many government programs. Programs could have a greater impact with fewer rules, and instead, more guidance around design principles.

Regions as Testing Grounds: Regions could make a good start point in finding a new direction for workforce development. There is a lot of potential for testing and experimentation at this level. Lessons learned in one region can be applied and built on in other areas, and potentially on the national level.

Investing to Benefit/Address Globalization, Anthony Carnevale

Many themes from this paper came out in earlier discussions. Specifically, trade adjustment may be an area with significant workforce development potential. To include Bob Giloth in the next steps discussion, the group had to move on without a conversation specific to globalization.

Next Steps

The group discussed their overall conclusions, and gave suggestions on where AECF might go from here.

Testing of Possible Messages

A concrete next step might be to draft some messages based on the narratives, and start testing them to gauge people's reactions. This is the first step in determining what will resonate and move the public conversation forward. The initiative needs to determine where it wants to go, and use testing to determine if different messages move people in that direction.

Local Experimentation

Many participants felt that local experimentation should begin now. This is something that can be promoted before further national discussion begins, and it would allow multiple pathways to be pursued at once. Eventually, any national messages that are created should be tested in a variety of different local economies. An approach that works in one area is not guaranteed to work in every area. Particularly, regions with strong economies are likely to receive different messages than regions with struggling economies.

Marshalling Evidence of What Works

However compelling a narrative is, it needs to be tied to solutions in order to give direction to policymakers. In order to have good solutions, we need to know what works. Many workforce development programs have not been rigorously evaluated, but nonetheless have a wealth of administrative data available. Using this administrative data to determine what works could help determine next steps. Evidence of what works can also be compelling to the general public. Working adults have rational reasons to doubt that a long-term, mid-life educational program will pay off, and this initiative should help provide evidence of positive outcomes.

Collecting Positive Stories

Many people are skeptical about the existing public systems. In order to counter this feeling and bolster the narrative, we need to find positive stories. We need examples of successful workforce development initiatives that can be integrated into new arguments, from the perspective of both workers and employers.

Connecting Framing Researchers with Policy Researchers

It would be useful to facilitate more conversation between the people doing framing research and the people doing academic/policy research. Despite good intentions, researchers often do not know what works according to the framing research. This could help bring everyone onto the same page. Understanding frames is extremely important, because they are not easy to change. Rather, researchers and advocates need to know how to develop messages that work within the existing dominant frames.

Creating a Public Message

The message that works for policy may not be the message that works for the general public. It is important to craft something that resonates with adults, and helps them see the value of further education and training. A public message can also help activate organizers and activists.