



Key Distinguishers for Integrated Work-based Learning: Establishing Criteria for Braiding Learning from Work with Academics

Introduction

It is tempting to call for a return to normal after the devastating impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the underlying conditions that the pandemic unmasked and accelerated—including massive disparities in access, opportunity, and outcomes across nearly every socio-economic measure—demand that we strive for more. The pandemic has served as a wake up call for policymakers and practitioners to create a new normal, one in which all New Yorkers benefit equitably from a thriving and inclusive economy. To do this, we must reinvent how our institutions support, train, and empower the city’s young people to contribute to and compete in the 21st-century labor market which is global, driven by advances in technology, and constantly evolving.

Prior to the pandemic, too many NYC residents and entire communities were being left behind, with many of the public systems that are meant to ensure opportunity for all instead perpetuating growing levels of inequality.¹ Advancements in technology and artificial intelligence were already eroding local middle-skills jobs, and the pandemic has accelerated the pace of erosion.² Additionally, the change in norms required by the pandemic was a proof of concept for significantly expanding remote work for a wide variety of jobs for many firms and industries which will have a significant, if yet unknown, impact on the local labor market.³

How we approach and what we prioritize in the city’s recovery from the pandemic is an opportunity to transform our economy so that prosperity is more widely shared. If we continue to leave behind the predominantly Black and brown communities of New York, such as the South Bronx and many other parts of the city, any signs of progress will be an illusion, and we will be ill-equipped to deal with the crises of the future. Our failure to achieve equitable prosperity stifles the potential of millions of residents; weakens the local economy due to a lack of job-ready talent; and strains public systems under the weight of widespread poverty and hardship.

The most important step in creating a thriving, inclusive economy—in which all New Yorkers have an opportunity to succeed and contribute to the city’s growth—is to reinvent our system of youth talent development. Our public education and workforce programs are not adequately empowering young people for success in the labor market, remain far too siloed, and promote growing inequities based on multiple measures. Fortunately, we know what it takes to address the problem. We must create a youth talent development system where education and employment go hand-in-hand and where learning from and about work is integral to every

¹ *A Primer: School Funding and Equity: Lessons learned from the first year of school-level budget transparency data in 76 New York school districts.* The Education Trust-New York. March 2019. Available [here](#).

² Steve Lohr. *The Pandemic Has Accelerated Demand for a More Skilled Workforce.* The New York Times. July 13, 2020. Available [here](#).

³ Erik Brynjolfsson et al. *COVID-19 and Remote Work: An Early Look at US Data.* Available [here](#).



student's academic experience, beginning early in high school and throughout their academic career.

The Power of Braiding Work with Academics

In January 2020, HERE to HERE released, [*A New Approach to Educational Equity: How Work-Based Learning Can Address Today's Opportunity Gaps*](#), a report that details how work-based learning can combat the effects of segregated schools and other inequities in our public education system. The report highlights research from several sources showing that students who engage in work and work-based learning experiences beginning in high school are more likely to thrive professionally. Employers also know from extensive research that their companies are more productive, profitable, and make better decisions if they hire, retain, and promote managers with diverse lived experiences.⁴ Additionally, given the significantly greater awareness and public commitments in response to George Floyd's murder and subsequent calls for racial justice, more employers are prepared to partner to create work-based learning opportunities for students from underserved and marginalized communities.

The time to do this work is now. In order to create a new youth talent development strategy—with work-based learning at its center—a critical next step is to define and codify the core principles and essential features of high-quality work-based learning. Though there are examples of work-based learning in action, along with toolkits and best practices, the field has yet to coalesce around a set of criteria that can serve as a guide for how to engage in the work effectively. To this end, HERE to HERE has worked with practitioners to create an initial iteration of the **Key Distinguishers for Integrated Work-based Learning** based on best practice, research, and an effort to break down the silos of work, workforce development, and education.⁵

The Key Distinguishers framework focuses on four interrelated areas of integrated work-based learning: *high schools, postsecondary programs, employers, and paid work experiences*. The first three speak to the institutional settings in which integrated work-based learning should—but too often does not—take place, and the last addresses the work experience itself. Additionally, as a guide, we are developing a rubric which shows if the institution or experience is beginning, approaching, meeting, or exceeding the Key Distinguisher. HERE to HERE is also beginning to build out case study examples to show the Key Distinguishers in action.

Key Distinguishers can guide practice and policy

The Key Distinguishers serve as a practitioner developed holistic framework to ensure employers, educators, and other key stakeholders create, support, and expand integrated

⁴ Vivian Hunt et al. *Delivering Through Diversity*. January 2018. McKinsey & Company. Available [here](#).

⁵ HERE to HERE would like to thank the institutions and organizations whose partnership, research, and work we drew on to create an initial iteration of the Key Distinguishers. They include Big Picture Learning, DreamYard, Jobs for the Future, CUNY, New York University, CareerWise New York, and the Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship. Our work would not be possible without their invaluable contributions to the field of work-based learning.



work-based learning opportunities for young people, and that over time the quality of these opportunities improve to better serve young people, employers, and the economy. Six core principles drove the development of the Key Distinguisher framework:

1. Student-focused and based on youth development principles
2. Designed by and for employers, educators, and students
3. Centered around integrating learning from work into traditional academic pathways
4. Embedded into institutional design
5. Iterative and evolving as practice improves
6. Embraces the goals of Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The Key Distinguishers are meant to be used “on the ground” by practitioners, employers, and other stakeholders who are implementing work-based learning. In determining what a school, CBO, or private company wants their work-based learning program to look like, the Key Distinguishers provide an assessment tool and roadmap from which to build. Similarly, for philanthropic organizations, city agencies, and others involved in decisions around funding, partnerships, and contracts, the Key Distinguishers can be utilized as a way to ensure that those receiving resources plan to implement their work-based learning in a way that is aligned with what the field regards to be essential practices.

The summer of 2020 provides a case study in how the Key Distinguishers can be an impactful tool to strengthen work-based learning. With the Covid-19 pandemic causing a major shift in how work-based learning experiences could be offered, HERE to HERE developed a set of Key Distinguishers for remote internships. A request-for-proposals for funding from the Bronx Community Relief Effort stipulated that applicants address how they would meet the Key Distinguishers in their virtual programs. This “test run” of the Key Distinguishers proved a success; the applicants found the Key Distinguishers helpful in crafting their programs and proposals, and funding decisions were made using objective criteria based on practitioner-informed best practices. The virtual experiences were meaningful for the young people, and many of the expected challenges of quickly pivoting to remote programming were mitigated thanks largely to the guidance provided by the Key Distinguishers. In the fall, HERE to HERE released, [*What’s Next? The Promise of Remote Internships in the Future of Work-based Learning*](#), highlighting lessons learned from the summer and implications for the future of work-based learning.

The Key Distinguishers can play an important role in other ways across the youth talent development landscape. The entire field—stakeholders ranging from educators to employers to policy makers—can benefit from adopting a shared language, standards of practice, and understanding of what constitutes—and what it takes to implement—robust integrated work-based learning. Shared language and criteria can facilitate more efficient and productive partnerships, a necessity for braiding learning from work with academics. And a collective understanding of what it takes to implement high-quality work-based learning can help inform



and guide policy, uncover and tackle barriers, build the case for advocacy, and increase resources, at both an institutional and systemic level.

Key Distinguishers can help build a thriving, more inclusive economy

The gaps in our public education, workforce development, and hiring systems result in the potential of all stakeholders going unfulfilled. The staff of educational institutions and workforce development programs want the young people they are working with to succeed, often going above and beyond the duties of their role. However, there are a range of obstacles that stand in their way, among them the lack of proper guidance for how to effectively braid work and learning. Without an agreed-upon set of criteria for what high-quality work-based learning looks like, each school or organization is left to experiment with their own ideas for what may work, often without a structured way to determine whether or not what they are doing is the best approach.

Similarly, employers want to engage in training the young people that will make up their future talent pool, but are unsure of where to begin, who to partner with, and how they can best complement the work being done in classrooms. Many employers are eager to diversify their workforces so that they can both incorporate a wide range of perspectives and live up to statements they have made in support of Black Lives Matter and economic, racial, and social justice. However, even the best intentions and most active engagement on the part of employers will mean relatively little if there is not clarity across the field on the role employers can and should be playing, how partnerships can be maintained, and how employers can engage in the work in a way that promotes the best possible experience and outcome for all involved.

Most importantly, our current system shortchanges the talent and potential of the city's young people. We know that there are institutions across the city that take pride in their internship programs, and that these opportunities can be transformative, particularly for young people of color who are more likely to lack access. These opportunities, however, are simply too few and far between to reach most students. We cannot continue to relegate young people to a lottery or require them to be exceptional to engage in high-quality work-based learning and to secure a family-sustaining career. The stakes for our city's young people—and by extension, our city as a whole—are too high.

The Key Distinguishers aim to match our potential—as students, educators, youth-serving organizations, and employers—to the outcomes required for a thriving, inclusive economy. By providing stakeholders with a framework for how to create, improve, and expand integrated work-based learning, we can ensure that our aspirations are paired with a plan for how to do the work.

As the next step in the development of the Key Distinguishers, HERE to HERE is convening a task force of students; practitioners from high schools, post-secondary institutions, employers,



community-based organizations, workforce providers, funders, and public agencies; and leading experts in youth and workforce development, education, human resources, talent development, change management, and economic development to pressure test and refine our initial iteration. We will work with these partners to develop a request for proposal to support both exemplary and promising examples of integrated work-based learning in action. Additionally, we will begin to identify a shared research, policy, and advocacy agenda for the Key Distinguishers for Integrated Work-Based Learning and raise the additional resources needed to make best practice common practice and constantly improve the quality of work-based learning implementation. The goal of the task force is to release the Key Distinguishers 1.0 as a pragmatic and go-to tool for use by practitioners as well as other stakeholders eager to advance this work.⁶

The time to act is now

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely disrupted all aspects of life in New York City, including our educational system and the labor market. The pandemic has also exposed the massive inequities that have long existed in New York City, along lines of geography, income level, and race and ethnicity. Even during the best of economic times, young people of color living in New York's low income communities such as the South Bronx are going to face substantially longer odds of launching into a family-sustaining career compared to a more well-to-do peer elsewhere in the city. That reality has left entire similarly-situated communities perpetually in the grips of poverty and particularly vulnerable to crises such as the pandemic. This is not a normal we should seek to return to.

A new system of youth talent development that braids learning from work into academics will require— among other things—stakeholders who are aligned on a vision for what the system looks like when functioning properly. What infrastructure do high schools need to have in place? How should postsecondary institutions and employers engage with one another? What do all internships and other paid work experiences need to provide to participants? The Key Distinguishers begin to answer these questions—and to coalesce stakeholders around a shared vision and shared understanding of best practice—so that the braiding of learning from work into academic pathways will no longer be a promising exception, but the norm. The future and well-being of our city depends on it.

⁶The Key Distinguishers—and the goals of the Task Force—are modeled after the [Enterprise Green Communities Criteria](#), which provides and helps developers reach standards for environmentally sustainable affordable housing development. HERE to HERE is thankful to Dana Bourland, a chief architect of the Green Communities Initiative, and whose book, [Gray to Green Communities: A Call to Action on the and Housing and Climate Crises](#), provides an inspiring analogue for how the Key Distinguishers can be used to advance high-quality work-based learning.