

GIA INSIGHTS:

A Collaborative, Regional Response to COVID-19: Preserving the Educational Future of Students in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the weeks following California's stay at home orders in March 2020, Growing Inland Achievement and the Inland Empire educational network quickly mobilized and formed a Postsecondary Taskforce to help students in the region navigate their college transitions amid the global pandemic. The Taskforce provided critical insights and guidance which allowed GIA staff and Board of Directors to quickly address student needs, including: disbursement of emergency funding support to 14 regional educational institutions and student-support organizations and the development of a website hub for college-going information, advising support, technology, and basic needs resources.



THE CONTEXT

The Inland Empire region of Southern California is home to 4.5 million residents, of whom 2.9M are under the age of twenty-five.[1] The region has a 51% Latinx population and an overall median household income of \$62,000; the poverty rate is 14% (with Latinx comprising the largest ethnic group living below the poverty line), and 1.84M people belong to families who are working poor.[2] Additionally, and perhaps most startlingly, only 24.5% of adults in the two-county area have an associate degree or higher, compared to 38% to 48% of adults in adjacent Los Angeles and Orange Counties, and only 21% have a bachelor's degree or higher as compared to 31% and 39% of Los Angeles and Orange County residents respectively.[3]

The level of education of a region's residents will, more often than not, determine its economic viability as well as its resiliency during economic downturns. This reality is what led to the creation of Growing Inland Achievement and, five years into GIA's work, motivated GIA's Postsecondary Task Force to work to preserve the educational future of students in the region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the Great Recession that began in 2008, residents of the Inland Empire faced economic setbacks that surpassed those experienced anywhere else in the United States. This impact is attributed to the relatively low number of adults

[1] US Census ACS 2018

[2] US Census, 2017 5-year estimates; Brookings, 2019

[3] US Census 2014-2018



holding a degree of any kind and the number of underemployed residents. The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines underemployment as individuals counting part-time who want to work full time. Underemployed individuals lack a family-sustaining wage and benefits, making it almost impossible for families to save for their future or pursue any additional training or education that could increase their chances of full-time work. Because of the lower education levels and larger numbers of unemployed, it took far longer for individuals and the region to rebound from the recession. Many new initiatives arose across the region in response.

Growing Inland Achievement (GIA) was formed in 2015 after California State University, San Bernardino and University of California, Riverside partnered with the Inland Empire Economic Partnership and OneFuture Coachella Valley to apply for the California Governor's Innovation Award in Higher Education. Applying as a collaborative partnership, this group was awarded \$5M to establish a collective impact collaborative to increase bachelor's degree attainment of residents of the Inland Empire. With this primary objective clearly at the forefront of GIA's work, several secondary objectives were also defined: increase A-G course completion in high schools, reduce remediation, increase the number of AAs and certificates, and improve career readiness to better align to workforce needs. Today the GIA collaborative has grown into an inter-segmental and inter-agency network that includes leaders from education, industry, and community organizations from Riverside and San Bernardino Counties with a shared focus and intense commitment to empowering the



region's residents through increased educational attainment and economic prosperity.

GIA's work follows the collective impact model first defined in 2010 by two researchers from Stanford University who coined the phrase collective impact to describe the increased potential effectiveness when organizations and individuals band together to attain a common goal. Many regions across the United States adopted this premise following the Great Recession, including greater Nashville, Tennessee, where the work of collective impact came to be known as Alignment Nashville due to the alignment of resources required to increase a region's economic viability. Working for a common, greater purpose, alignment teams focus on specific aspects of the work that needs to be done to ground the vision in action.

Calling the smaller groups of GIA partners Action Network Teams (ANTs), three specific action teams began focusing on smaller aspects of the vision: College and Career Readiness, Equity, and Transfer, which eventually became Advising & Transfer. Each group meets monthly during the academic year to discuss strategies and tactics related to GIA's overarching vision. Each ANT has many members who attend consistently, solving problems collaboratively and sustaining trust. In March of 2020, following a discussion in the College and Career Readiness ANT, the Postsecondary Taskforce was born.

On March 13, 2020, California's Governor Gavin Newsom closed schools in response to a public health emergency known as COVID-19. This unprecedented



action, the first of its kind in 100 years, became known as Safer at Home and prioritized citizens' physical health and safety over social gatherings, including attending schools and colleges. As a result, a number of K-12 students were isolated from the teachers, counselors, and other mentors who had been guiding their learning and educational planning. Members of the GIA Action Network Teams expressed concerns about this reality in official ANT meetings and less formal conversations among friends. The group decided to meet weekly due to a shared commitment to students' futures in the region.



THE LOCAL RESPONSE TO A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

As a result of the closure of schools, teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents were all in the same storm facing the potential loss of students' dreams. In a remarkable, aligned effort, members of the GIA ANTs came together to create the Postsecondary Taskforce to address the situation. There had to be a way to keep the high school class of 2020 on track, heading toward achieving their dreams. Considering the short timeline from the end of March to the end of May, when most high school students would be finishing the school year, the task force had to act quickly.

In the Taskforce's initial meetings, the group discussed potential solutions based on the members' knowledge of the student populations they serve across the region. Except for GIA staff who participate in ANT meetings and the Taskforce, everyone working together to resolve the challenge volunteered their time and brought perspective from the other organizations they served. While previously, the inevitable siloed nature of a diverse, geographically large region had limited the outcomes of the ANTs, the emergency situation brought about immediate productivity and increased effectiveness. The concentrated, focused timeline--about ten weeks to accomplish a monumental task--and the increasingly alarming news about the growing numbers of people testing positive for COVID and the related likelihood that schools would be closed for the rest of the year added intensity to the Taskforce's interactions. All things that had previously been limited by bureaucracy became possible.



Some of the barriers exacerbated by social distancing and the other mandates related to California's Safer at Home policy enhanced GIA's Postsecondary Taskforce work. The group was forced to use computer-based meeting tools, and, as a result, many more members attended meetings because they could do so without driving across the region to gather. Furthermore, Taskforce members were looking for something proactive and beneficial to do, given the tragic news related to the pandemic. The urgency around the pandemic and communication limitations left many students isolated due to limited access to technology and little to no contact with school staff.

The weeks of closures and Safer at Home continued, and the toll on the economy became pressing. Unemployment statistics from across the region and around the United States magnified the dramatic need to do something, anything, to mitigate the devastation. Looking out the window at the Inland Empire, the needs in the communities served by GIA became visible and a visceral need to respond emerged. The Taskforce realized that to preserve the educational dreams of the Class of 2020, it would need to help meet additional, most basic needs: food, shelter, and access to technology.

In early April, Taskforce members expanded their outreach to seek input from community organizations with expertise in feeding the hungry and providing access to technology while also seeking insight from students. As sensitive as the topic of economic challenges can be, the relationships that a number of the Taskforce members have built with the communities they serve brought out a more candid and harsher reality than many had anticipated. Students and their



families were struggling to make ends meet at epic proportions beyond what had been predicted. In 2019, approximately 20% of those working in the Inland Empire were employed in food service, sales, or hospitality--industries drastically impacted by the closures.[4] Limited access to laptops, internet service, and distance learning was challenging students in the region in ways that had not been witnessed so dramatically before.

Realizing the significance of the region's needs, GIA's Board decided to allocate a portion of funding for GIA Innovation Awards to provide emergency funding for special projects to meet the immediate needs in the region. The application timeline and the award announcements were expedited to see that the resources were distributed most efficiently. A total of 14 regional educational institutions and regional nonprofit organizations were selected to receive awards, including the BLU Educational Foundation, One Future Coachella Valley, Ontario-Montclair Promise Scholars, several local K-12 school districts, and community colleges, among others. Listening to the voices of the region's citizens, especially students in high school and college, Taskforce members were attuned to the unique nature of the challenges presented by the COVID pandemic. Many of the mentors and other staff members working for the partnering agencies live in the region and attend school there. Their feedback shaped the Taskforce's direction and influenced its decisions. The Taskforce took the opportunity presented by the pandemic to finish developing a website to provide one location for information related to educational opportunities,

[4] Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019



technology support, and resources for meeting basic needs: Istudents.org. GIA staff quickly developed the website and previewed its content and appearance with local residents and regional leaders to ensure that the information would meet the needs of the region's population and span the gap between the realization that access to further education would likely improve one's quality of life and the ability to access accurate information about how to attain it.

Simple yet powerful examples of the need for information fueled the Taskforce's work. During one of the meetings, a local community college staff member shared that their team was struggling to find students to receive full tuition, books, and other financial support because they did not have a means of contacting applicants and other residents of their service area. Taskforce members realized that the phone numbers used by many of the potential students had been disconnected and were not in service--a consequence of the significant loss of jobs in the region. This potential loss of resources and access to higher education and an economic leg up was mitigated by the relationships and knowledge of Taskforce members. College staff were able to connect with representatives in the K-12 school districts, all of whom were working with the Taskforce to contact the students. This example indicates the power of collective impact, making a difference in the lives of individuals and the resulting positive significance.



NEXT STEPS: MOVING FORWARD

Growing Inland Achievement's Action Network Teams--and the Postsecondary Taskforce that met from March through June of 2020, helped preserve educational advantages for the Class of 2020, and connected students who might not have known where to turn to trustworthy information and other resources. The group shares a common goal: increasing the rates of industry-recognized certificates, associates degrees, and bachelor's degrees earned by students in the region. Quite simply, the mutual commitment to helping others have access to the educational experiences and basic needs that many ANT and Taskforce members have is what motivates them to continue to volunteer.

As the GIA Action Network Teams continue to meet, their optimism for the future successes of the Inland Empire and its residents fuels their work. Collaborating outside of their organizations, the Postsecondary Taskforce chose to focus on working to increase the region's viability and the likelihood of better economic outcomes when they could have easily waited for the challenging days of the pandemic to pass. Instead, with increased workloads due to remote work and ever-draining challenges of isolation and rapidly changing conditions, Taskforce members stayed engaged with the project week after week. Their commitment, fluid, and accountable communication, and dedication to a resilient future for those they serve led to remarkable results.

As the 2020-2021 school year continues, the impact of COVID-19 on college and university enrollment across the region will doubtlessly indicate that many



challenges lie ahead. The Taskforce's work ensured that IEstudents.org came about in the most timely crisis situation; the one-stop resource for impartial information on educational opportunities will be available for the foreseeable future. The challenges of urgency presented by the pandemic also changed the infrastructure of GIA's Action Network Teams and brought about a new framework for future interactions. These accomplishments will be sources of strength as the Inland Empire moves ahead. Years of inquiry work and a foundation for collective impact made the Postsecondary Taskforce's accomplishments possible and sustainable for the long haul.

