

Private Sector Leaders Address
Youth Challenges by Changing
the Way *They* do Business



All youth ready for
college, work & life.

“We are only graduating about 50 percent of L.A. youth. In a flat world [economy], those kids get abandoned... That is why we are trying to build a community movement that is so overwhelming that the institutional tendency to not change is compensated by this overwhelming tide toward better supports for young people.”

- David Rattray, UNITE-LA/L.A. Chamber

The United Way & UNITE-LA/L.A. Chamber Partnership



A young person speaks at the Cash for College press conference, one of UNITE-LA/L.A. Chamber's initiatives to increase public and private sector support for youth.

Case Study #4 in the Ready by 21™ Change Makers in Action Series
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HELP WANTED:

More than 78,000 Los Angeles residents between the ages of 18 and 24 are not employed and not in school.

Source: Hire LA's Youth 2006.

L.A. County is one of the country's largest and most diverse urban centers. A population nearing 10 million ranks the region as larger than 42 states, making a tall order of the overarching goal outlined by the LA Ready by 21 learning team of "launching a countywide movement for quality youth supports that meet the holistic needs of youth throughout L.A.'s communities."

Key leadership from UNITE-LA, an affiliate of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce that is focused on building partnerships between education and business to support young people's transition from school to career, and the United Way of Greater Los Angeles comprise the LA Ready by 21 learning team. Under the leadership of these two dynamic organizations, regional stakeholders have sharpened the vision for what they want youth to be able to do, what it means for young people to be prepared for school and work, and how they have improved their alignment around this tighter vision for youth.

Assessing Critical Gaps

Several studies showing the wide-spread school failure and a lack of workforce readiness and success among L.A. teens provided the strategic entry point for identifying a shared agenda.

David Rattray of UNITE-LA/L.A. Chamber summarized the challenge in this way: "We are only graduating about 50 percent of L.A. youth. In a flat world economy, those

kids get abandoned. We are at a crisis level situation with regard to the educational and workforce preparation of many L.A. youth."

"From South L.A. you can see the skyline and the corporate towers of Bunker Hill reflecting back at you in the distance. On a clear winter day, you can even see the silhouettes of snowcapped mountains. But too many young people here go through life believing they'll never reach the towers or the mountains."

*- Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa,
State of the City Address, April 2006*

In L.A., as in many urban areas, the challenge of preparing young people for productive, rewarding workforce experiences looms large. For many youth, the link between education, workforce development and youth development is weak.

Continuing his previous thoughts, Rattray who plays the dual roles of CEO of UNITE-LA and Vice President of Education and Workforce Development

Preparing a Young Workforce Only 4 in 10 Engaged



A range of regional reports, from a United Way report on the state of the city to a *Los Angeles Times* series on the failures in the educational system, characterize the magnitude of education-workforce preparation problem. In addition to the widely acknowledged educational pipeline problem, other data suggest an emerging workforce dilemma:

- In 2002, 37 percent of Los Angeles city residents between the ages of 16 and 19 were not employed and not in school;
- A report from the California Edge Campaign warns that as the Baby Boomer generation retires, larger percentages of the state's employers may be unable to find workers with the skills they need to remain competitive;
- Regional studies point to the increasing value of education as a key labor force issue—wages in California have increased only for college-educated workers, while wages for those with the lowest levels of education have actually declined when adjusted for inflation.

Sources: United Way of Greater Los Angeles. (2003). *A Tale of Two Cities: Bridging the Gap Between Promise and Peril*. Los Angeles: United Way of Greater Los Angeles & California's EDGE Campaign. (2006). *California's Edge: Keeping California Competitive, Creating Opportunity*. Los Angeles: California's EDGE Campaign.

at the L.A. Chamber stated, “People are beginning to understand that we are at a turning point—we will either be a great international city or we will decline because we can’t support kids to function in a competitive economy. That is why we are trying to build a community movement that is so overwhelming that the institutional tendency to not change is compensated for by this overwhelming tide toward better supports for young people.”

Aligning Organizational Agendas

In a city larger than the majority of states, acting on an emergent political will and meeting the objective of “launching a countywide movement for quality youth supports” begs the question of where to begin. Instead of building yet another coalition, UNITE-LA/L.A. Chamber and the United Way decided to first look internally. Job one toward movement building was to increase one another’s organizational capacities for advancing a comprehensive youth agenda.

To do that, the two organizations worked to cross-pollinate their leadership teams, starting by mapping their shared board members, then adding additional members from each one’s leadership team to the other organization’s board or advisory structures. UNITE-LA/L.A. Chamber’s senior leadership has been assisting the United Way as it develops and rolls out a new strategic plan. As a first step, Elise Buik, president of the United Way, joined the board of UNITE-LA. The internal alignment between organizations has allowed each to share work and move jointly on their complementary agendas.

“Our strategy has been to create alignment between education, workforce and economic development... bringing our leadership teams together has created an alignment that will be strong as we plan for the future.”

- Elise Buik, President, United Way of Greater LA

Linking Separate Efforts to Building a Community Movement

With the encouragement of national partner the Forum for Youth Investment, Masen Davis, director of development at the United Way, and Rattray acted on their jointly shared notion that the myriad of well-intentioned efforts focused on youth lacked the power on their own to add up to positive change for the most vulnerable young people.

Reflecting on the challenge of linking efforts to address the problem together, Davis explained, “We were putting forth various efforts separately. We found that a lot of efforts were not linking together. People are busy, and in a city of

this size, parallel efforts often don’t get linked as they should. But with this new set of coordinated efforts between us, we meet in the middle. None of the efforts would have had the full power, on their own, to affect larger scale change had we not brought our resources together.”

So, armed with solid data, an aggressive vision of what it takes for young people to be ready for school and work and reasoned strategies for merging workforce and educational agendas, these leaders leveraged their existing relationships to:

- Align the existing work of the two lead organizations, and create new shared work;
- Take their shared agendas into existing public campaigns to lend increased momentum and support to those efforts and expand their relevance for youth;
- Challenge the private sector to fill in gaps in youth opportunities (e.g., summer jobs, college access and awareness) and supports for the preparation of young people.

Building Cross-Sector Momentum

The partnership has launched or expanded several initiatives that rely on public and private support:

- **L.A. County Public Benefits Education Campaign:** Promotion of a public education initiative managed by the Commission for Children, Youth and Families to provide support to help families in poverty, including education about public benefits, financial aid and tax credits.
- **The EDGE Campaign:** Support for and infusion of a youth angle into an existing statewide campaign to develop a highly trained regional workforce and promote workforce development in California.
- **Hire LA:** Launch of summer jobs for youth campaign to provide 5,000 new jobs online for Los Angeles young people.
- **Work Ready Certificate:** Creation and coordination of a portable work credential program providing participating youth with a certification that demonstrates skills essential to entry-level employment.

These initiatives have been successful because of the team’s increased effectiveness at engaging private and government leadership and facilitating partnerships between the private sector and government to make sure young people are ready. When United Way and UNITE-LA/L.A. Chamber challenged the private sector around the issues of summer jobs and college access, making appeals

Challenge

- *Finding an effective strategy for launching a countywide movement for quality youth supports that meet the holistic needs of youth throughout L.A.'s communities.*

Solutions

- *Create intentional overlaps and shared consciousness about priorities and key opportunities among the leadership teams of the lead organizations.*
- *Use the synergy between organizations to leverage more together on behalf of children and youth than either organization could on their own.*

Results

- *Increased stakeholder alignment around a tightened vision for youth.*
- *Delivering on specific commitments related to workforce development and education.*

that reached beyond supplying “more funding to programs,” the sector responded.

With the direct support of the business community, a UNITE-LA/L.A. Chamber college and career expo drew more than 12,000 young people and parents and met the 5,000 jobs goal – a big uptake in the number of available jobs from 2005.

And public officials elevated these issues to public awareness by putting them on the front burner of the political agenda. The recently elected mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, has placed education and youth jobs at the forefront of the issues he is championing, connecting these issues to concerns about the future of the L.A. workforce. Other civic leaders have followed suit.

“There is increased political will to figure out what needs to change.”

- Masen Davis, United Way of Greater LA

Coordinated Investments Set the Stage for Strategic Big Picture Change

Both organizations agree that their original investment in making leader-to-leader connections between their organizations is paying off. “Our strategy has been to create greater alignment between education, workforce and economic development. The strategy [of bringing our leadership teams together] has created an alignment that will be strong as we plan for the future,” Buik commented.

Ratray and Davis point to three major benefits from this internal alignment:

- **Increased Power.** They form a more powerful base from which to engage the mayor and other top city and county stakeholders and to keep youth issues front and center.
- **Expanded Opportunities.** Overlapping leadership teams increase the natural opportunities to advocate together on common issues.
- **Increased Efficiency.** Alignment helps both organizations to be complementary rather than redundant.

For example, as the United Way dips a toe into school reform, both organizations agreed that leveraging the United Way’s existing relationships and expertise in the middle school after-school arena was an effective complement to UNITE-LA/L.A. Chamber’s ongoing work in high school reform.

As both organizations look to the future, their recent investments in partnership and alignment have netted additional individual benefits. In particular, the United Way has emerged from these efforts with a new vision for youth in L.A. County—a vision for which Davis directly credits Ready by 21 ideas. This vision is: *All young people should graduate from high school prepared for college and the workforce.*

Through the two-pronged approach of advancing joint public efforts and deep internal alignment of their respective leadership teams, the lead organizations have demonstrated a deep capacity for leveraging their own top leadership to broaden and elevate a shared agenda, and for capitalizing on the interests of both public and private leaders as they advance issues affecting children and youth.

Behind the Scenes Partnership with the Forum

“..both organizations are working differently and together in a way that they were not before Ready by 21.”

– Masen Davis

Outside Catalyst. Both organizations credit the Forum with being the outside catalyst for their move to work more strategically together. Masen Davis talked about the value of the Forum’s encouragement and “polite pushing.”

Powerful Concepts. Both organizations would also say that while the underlying ideas provided a supportive backdrop to a variety of efforts, “A lot of the Ready by 21 concepts were useful in galvanizing our partners, and, for some, it really reinforced a systemic way of looking at issues,” reports Ratray.

Branding Flexibility. Ready by 21™ as a brand and the Ready by 21™ language were not prominently featured as the L.A. partnership rolled out their coordinated activities. David Ratray explained, “We have so many existing efforts to deal with in LA that it was difficult to bring forward Ready by 21 as a brand itself.”

Want to Learn More?

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