Students Rising Above

Students Rising Above (SRA) is an award-winning nonprofit organization that ensures that 90% of the students they work with through their Rising Stars program — predominantly low-income, first-generation college students — go on to four-year colleges and universities.

A "full-service shop," SRA provides personal guidance and mentoring, internships and career guidance, and financial support for college applications, working with students through graduation and into the workforce. Since 1998, SRA has helped nearly 600 students graduate from a four-year college.

Though their legacy program is focused in the San Francisco Bay Area, in 2014 SRA created the SRA College2Careers Hub to share its experience and expertise with thousands of students across the country to help them successfully navigate the critical pathway from high school through college and into the workforce. Their EdTech initiatives have expanded into partnerships, assisting other organizations in expanding their programming in the post-secondary space with a virtual advising model.

In 2018, SRA launched Students Online Achieving Results (SOAR), a hybrid of SRA's online services and virtual advising. Small cohorts of 2- and 4-year college students around the country participate in virtual hangouts once a month to discuss important topics like time management, financial aid renewal and budgeting, and the importance of career exploration and development. Students benefit from the advice of professional advisors as well as peer mentors — college seniors who have wisdom to share with their younger counterparts.

In their overall work, Students Rising Above maintains the following goals:

1. To help students realize their potential as advocates and leaders in their own higher education endeavors.
2. To nurture students toward taking on leadership roles at their college campuses.
3. To support students as they enter the workforce in their continued efforts to practice their agency and exercise their advocacy.

Role and Background in uCANRise

Students Rising Above served a valuable role in the uCANRise community of practice: they were the only fully direct-service organization at the table, and as such, the collaborative saw them as the community of practice members closest to the students who were the center of all of our collaboration and development. As an organization and as individuals, SRA has deep expertise in working with students, and the collaborative relied heavily on their understanding of what works best for today's low-income and first-generation students in developing the Promising Practices. In their proposal for the experimental year, SRA was

excited about earmarking a number of Promising Practices to test and report on.

However, their ability to engage with the Promising Practices was hampered by a lack of continuity in staffing their work with uCANRise. In their first year in uCANRise, the SRA team included several long-time staff members and a newly hired executive director (ED). While having a new ED was a challenge early on, other team changes created further difficulty with continuity throughout the first year and into the second year. Staff members moved forward and managed to meet their milestones and outcomes despite these challenges.

SRA's alignment with uCANRises's Theory of Change made them an organic, successful partner in the collaborative. By the end of the planning year, they were already implementing less formalized theories and practices that they helped to shape. In response to their work with uCANRise, SRA reported that they had begun the process of formalizing some of the drafted 20 Promising Practices by introducing their Student Ambassador Program, an opportunity for SRA students to take on leadership roles within SRA and represent the organization to the outside world. Through the SRA Student Ambassador Program, students participate in panel discussions, help facilitate workshops for their peers, and represent SRA to outside organizations in the media and with corporate partners. SRA

acknowledges that students, in general, have been doing this work for decades — but their Ambassador Program is an explicit first step toward codifying their emphasis on student voice and leadership.

As the collaborative moved into the second experimental year of uCANRise, SRA was also in the process of activating their Alumni Leadership Board, a group of 12 passionate and diverse young professionals eager to share their knowledge and experience with their younger counterparts. To formalize some of the Promising Practices within SRA, their intent was to share the 20 Promising Practices with the alumni board for feedback and reflection about their own college and career experiences as advocates to hear their suggestions for moving forward.

Approach and Findings

As uCANRise moved into the experimentation year, SRA proposed to work with a number of Promising Practices, determining that they would spend the next 12 months focusing on Promising Practices 4-5 (advising and counseling activities), 6-7 (relationship building activities), and 13-15 (dialoguing and reflecting). However, after revisiting their plans with their larger body of advisors, they determined to move forward with a more effective set of Promising Practices instead, as outlined below.

SRA uCANRise community of practice members realized that the Promising Practices could be interpreted more broadly than they had originally imagined, particularly within the context of organizational mission, delivery models, and resources. When attempting to work with staff who had not been part of the process of developing the Promising Practices, they found that the Practices had limitations. They grappled with the fact that some descriptions are suggestions rather than activity instructions that they could easily transfer to their existing model for student engagement.

For example, Promising Practice #16: Let Students Take the Lead calls for teaching students event planning and organizing skills. To truly let students take the lead, SRA's team expanded the breadth of this practice in various ways, such as by inviting students to approach them with proposals and plans of action for their chosen areas of advocacy. Giving students a supportive environment for initiating this process encourages learning by empowerment, a fundamental requirement that is part of the uCANRise Theory of Change.

They also realized that there were more general and broad core values and within those, several applicable other Practices that played into how to implement that value. For example, Promising Practice #5, how to be an empowering organization, was more of a core value that they could apply directly with individual students and then share with others to emphasize using Promising Practices #9, dedicate virtual space to student organizing; #16, let students take the lead; and #17, teach students how to communicate for successful advocacy.

Below are SRA's Promising Practices findings.

Promising Practice #5: Be an empowering organization.

In line with the overall uCANRise Theory of Change and Practice #5, SRA's approach to advising students is focused on an empowerment framework, a method proven to help students become self-supporting, inspiring, change agents who are network builders and role models capable of bridging cultures. Because SRA is centered on empowering students, Practice #5 resonated with staff and leadership — SRA advisors work very closely with individual students, so their ongoing professional development about the uCANRise Theory of Change and objectives was a critical component of success. SRA advisors needed to be intimately familiar with the Practices in order to leverage and evaluate the content and continue to strengthen their students' advocacy skills.

However, the practice of being an empowering organization does not require an organization to

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work on site on a campus. While some student access and success direct-service organizations are located on college campuses, many do not have permanent campus space. These organizations work with students in temporary, short-term space on high school and college campuses, on campuses during academic breaks, off campus in organizational learning centers, and virtually by website or even text apps. SRA's team has a mix of ways of connecting with students, but advisors do not necessarily forge long-term one-on-one relationships with students. For SRA to fully engage the practice, they would need to think through how the implied foundation of this practice — building well-established, trusting relationships between students and advisors through frequent in-person and virtual connections — looks in SRA's delivery model. Intrinsic to SRA's daily work is pointing students to specific campus resources that support and build advocacy knowledge and skills and encourages campus involvement. While SRA knew that their model was rooted in empowerment, they wondered how they could articulate empowerment within their work, particularly in terms of quantifying and collecting stories that might be useful to other student access and success direct-service organizations.

As a result, staff held several workshops during which advisors reflected on and shared how they empower students to advocate for causes important to them. Through these dialogues, the advising team identified a core direction. Because

students already carry so much responsibility, having the support of student access and success direct-service organizations to elevate their voices would not only further student causes, but would also encourage other students to take action. Sharing their work with a larger audience would be significantly empowering to students.

SRA is well known for the potent way that they lift students up and amplify their voices and accomplishments. Their social media presence is well respected for showing the amazing ways that their students are breaking career boundaries and adding their competence and passion to the workforce. While their strong social media presence certainly does not hurt in keeping them on the radar of funders and donors, SRA recognizes that when students see other students stepping into leadership roles, they are motivated to do the same. The organization has seen the way that this kind of social media inspiration has inspired their low-income and first-generation students to leave their comfort zones and leverage their resilience for academic and career excellence. The same mechanism could contribute to supporting students in realizing their potential as amazing advocates for the causes they care most about. SRA believes sharing student advocacy stories empowers other young people to speak up for what they believe in.

For instance, during the experimentation year, SRA student Jocelyn Gama was featured on a local news station to highlight her advocacy work, serving as inspiration to students like her to become leaders. Jocelyn came to SRA motivated to advocate for topics she felt passionate about. Inspired by Senator Kamala Harris, Jocelyn's dream has been to pursue a career in politics. Very quickly, Jocelyn learned that the world of politics and law is very big. Wanting to ensure that she did not get overwhelmed or lose sight of her dream, SRA identified her as a perfect candidate for their partnership with the Running Start program. Running Start focuses on supporting high school and college-age women to hone their political skills and learn about the legislative process through firsthand experiences in Washington, D.C. Participating students emerge from their programs

with a deeper understanding of the need for more women to run for office and increased confidence in their own abilities to lead, whether on campus or in elected office.

SRA partners with Running Start to sponsor two SRA students every year who are passionate about political movements and interested in participating in Running Start programming. With other students like her, Jocelyn was able to explore what it meant to have a voice and advocate for issues she felt most passionate about. She continues to have ongoing conversations with her advisors and other SRA staff about what her career will entail, including what she will bring back to her community — both intended outcomes in the uCANRise Theory of Change.

Promising Practice #16: Let students take the lead.

In the SRA program model, students turn to SRA to help them in the social change space they are trying to impact. SRA advisors take a problem-solving approach built on teaching students how to identify options and challenges and to evaluate the best course of action, thus supporting the development of students' critical thinking skills. Rather than providing answers or giving their own opinions, advisors encourage students to reflect on prior situations to determine what worked and what didn't and to use this information to inform their present decision. Advisors use a solutions-based approach that helps students take the lead. Such an approach also empowers students to realize the impact of their individual efforts. Practice #16, therefore, can work across the many areas in which SRA provides leadership space to students.

Early in the experimentation year, SRA anticipated that they would be teaching students leadership skills through formal workshops or via instruction on SRA's virtual Hub, as a way of testing this practice. Advisors quickly discovered, however, that many students have significant knowledge and resources on their campuses that address their leadership challenges. Rather than provide direct instruction, it made more sense to mentor students in how to discover campus resources for building their own leadership competencies. Students'

passions could be dampened or the advisor-student relationship strained by too much overt instruction on the part of the advisor. Advisors soon discovered it was critical to be the learners in their relationships with students, who were eager to share how they were exploring and what they were learning.

Overall, SRA found that working with students individually was much more powerful than teaching them as a group as each student advocacy project is unique and students were often at different stages of their projects at any given time. When there were natural matches in students working on similar efforts, SRA made peer-to-peer connections for students to work together to get the best results. But overall, much of the experimentation toward this Promising Practice was conducted in one-on-one interactions with students.

A student example of SRA's adoption of this practice is Alondra, a junior at Yale University who worked as a Fellow at the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), in Washington, D.C. as part of the FirstGEN Fellows program. CLINIC, the largest charitable legal immigration network in the nation, provides substantive legal and program management training and resources, as well as advocacy support at state, local and national levels. FirstGEN is a 10-week summer program for undergraduate students who are the first in their immediate families to attend an institution of higher education and who are passionate about pursuing careers in social justice.

First, SRA contributed to Alondra's success by providing her with a stipend to buy appropriate clothing for her fellowship. Afterward, inspired by her experience with CLINIC, Alondra founded a new club at Yale, the Estados Unidos Asylum Project, to recruit volunteers for asylum assistance on the U.S. border. She submitted a proposal to SRA requesting seed funding. SRA was able to contribute financially to her successful trajectory. In line with the uCANRise Theory of Change, Alondra's club partners with off-campus immigration organizations in Yale's New Haven, Connecticut community to carry out and rally support and community engagement on immigration matters relevant to the city's population. Twenty-six community and campus members attended the initial club meeting, and through the club, members have received training on asylum and immigration law, the border crisis, and a healthcare campaign. Alondra is a strong example of how a single student's advocacy work, with support from a college access and success direct-service organization, can be traced through each area of the uCANRise Theory of Change, moving us all closer to the realization of our ultimate outcome for students.

For SRA, the year of experimentation underscored what the uCANRise collaborative had chosen as the ultimate outcome for students: that an outcome of students taking the lead in creating socially and economically just communities for all is intrinsically related to the belief that empowering students

through education will result in broader and deeper social justice both on and off campus. While offering future workshops — delivered through shared leadership with students facilitating or co-facilitating — that respond to students' requests to build their skills for participating in advocacy is not out of the question, SRA, like most direct-service organizations, is interested in the financial costs of those delivery models and recommends budgeting be included in the next iteration of the uCANRise Promising Practices to encourage resourcing and planning efforts for other organizations like them.

Promising Practice #18: Let them learn while they earn.

Sixty percent of SRA college students held an internship during 2019, excluding high school seniors and graduating college seniors. This is a result of SRA establishing long-term, high-quality relationships with many employers, and showing the importance of fair pay for student labor. SRA leverages these relationships not only to procure strong internship placements for their students, but to shape equity for all college students.

SRA's network is one of the many strengths. SRA partners with hundreds of corporations and organizations in the Bay Area and beyond to offer students internship opportunities in a wide range of industries. Most internship opportunities SRA shares with students are paid, though, as has become increasingly controversial nationwide, many are not. Most unpaid opportunities, as it turns out, are with nonprofits focused on community-based work and advocacy. Students speak passionately about internship positions in advocacy organizations they would love to work with, but they are discouraged by the lack of financial support.

Because low-income and first-generation students do not have the same financial safety net and family financial contributions as middle- and upper-income students do (many low-income and first-generation students must financially support themselves and in some cases, their families), unpaid internships mean they are likely to select out of these opportunities, which may impact their choices about future careers.

SRA students, however, can request a stipend to support their pursuits for unpaid internships in areas they are passionate about. SRA makes significant contributions to the extent possible, in order to protect a potential advocacy pathway from college to community advocacy for interested students. For example, through SRA, Mina secured an internship with the Bay Area Legal Incubator (BALI). BALI is a social-mission community of independent attorneys that provides an introductory incubator program to help recent law school graduates and other new attorneys accelerate the launch of single-attorney practices serving low- and middle-income communities in California. The internship was unpaid, but SRA was able to provide Mina a stipend to offset her expenses during the internship period. Through the internship, she grew her knowledge and passion for social justice reform and is now thinking about pursuing a legal degree or related doctoral degree, both of which would allow her to give back to her community and future students, which is in direct alignment with the uCANRise Theory of Change.

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This approach to supporting students, along with reflecting back to the nonprofit sector, should be a Promising Practice in and of itself in future iterations. While organizations like SRA can offset a portion of unpaid student work, these direct-service organizations are nonprofits themselves, often with lean budgets. SRA has made it a strategy to engage with employers to persuade them to ensure that low-income students have the same opportunities as their more financially secure counterparts to gain real-world experiences through paid internships. Providing a stipend or supplementing low-pay internships to make opportunities in advocacy

work possible can quickly become financially unsustainable for direct-service organizations, especially when competing internships in other fields pay in the range of $4,000 per semester. College access and direct-service organizations need to make sure they are moving the needle on the long-term goal of ensuring that all internships in all fields are reasonably paid by employers.

Organizations across all sectors must invest in students at reasonable internship payment levels. SRA continues to have conversations with employers, including nonprofit employers, about the importance of paying interns. Without doing so, they will fail to attract a population they seek to infuse diverse perspectives and contributions into their sector focus.

Promising Practice #20: Invite your students to teach you.

During the summer of 2019, SRA's Career Development team hosted a Summer Leadership Program. The Summer Leadership Program cultivated students' leadership skills by helping them develop their passion project with the intent to positively impact their communities. Providing students a platform to discover issues they were passionate about allowed SRA staff to learn from students how to improve the organization's programming, internships, and other resources tailored to their needs. While students developed amazing projects, it was difficult to maintain the momentum built during the program as they transitioned back to school with no structured method for checking in and gathering updates. To bring projects closer to fruition, continued follow-up and guidance were needed for some students. SRA did not initially plan for this and is currently looking at ways to support students next summer.

SRA identified a key learning here — the need to check back with students to learn more about their project progress and identify areas where they may need additional support to make their projects a reality. However, preliminary student success stories were captured that will serve as learning case studies. For instance, Ivan, an SRA student who was chosen for the Peer Leader role, was instrumental in building the program with SRA's Manager of Talent Development. Ivan applied the valuable experience he gained while developing his own club at UC Santa Barbara. It was an opportunity for Ivan to further develop his leadership skills while also helping participants grow. Students identified several issue areas they felt passionate about, including increasing access to mental health services, focusing on middle and high school students in low-income communities, and empowering teen moms with tools and resources to pursue academic and career goals. The SRA team witnessed how, when students are motivated by a cause, they develop amazing ideas.

Takeaways and Next Steps

Unintentionally, due to staffing changes, SRA played a key role in testing the Promising Practices by seeing them with "fresh eyes," since staff engaging in the experimentation year largely were not part of the team that contributed to the Promising Practices, nor did they develop the proposal for their experiments. SRA was able to turn this challenge into an opportunity, and we now have a sense of how those not involved in creating the Promising Practices will experience trying to put them into play.

Based on SRA's engagement and findings in uCANRise, recommended next steps emerged for future iterations of the collaborative's work.

- Future iterations of Promising Practices should be clarified and expanded to ensure that direct-service organizations can more easily blend them into their current work models. This effort should include revising and sorting as necessary to differentiate practices from values.

- A train-the-trainers curriculum unit for each revised Promising Practice would be useful

for direct-service college access and success organizations that want to disseminate a cluster of practices for advisor use but don't have the capacity to create their own curriculum.

- Supporting organizations in understanding broader organizational strategies, planning processes, and impacts is key. Next-generation versions of uCANRise work should also include strategic planning, budgeting, and evaluation tools so that organizations can ensure that resources and work plans are aligned and outcomes are analyzed.

- An additional Promising Practice area should be developed that supports direct-service organizations in planning for and providing stipends to students interested in unpaid internships related to advocacy and nonprofits.

- A key systems-change activity for uCANrise will be gathering and disseminating knowledge and practices to support college access and success organizations in persuading employers, including nonprofits and other advocacy organizations, to do away with unpaid internships and instead offer reasonable payment to student workers. One way to do this is to demonstrate to organizations that the return on investment from stipended internships is greater than following unpaid internship guidelines, which are depicted as 80% learning opportunity and 20% labor. Students are eager to roll up their sleeves and embrace real-world learning through actual work.

- Data-gathering and reflection tools tailored to specific Promising Practices would be useful to capture and relay stories about organizational learning. For example, though SRA hosted a summer learning institute and set as a goal to learn from their students, they lacked a structured approach to capturing and reflecting on their learnings to share with others.