

Southern California College Access Network (SoCal CAN)



Founded in 2005, Southern California College Access Network (SoCal CAN) is an alliance of 85 college access and success programs working together to increase the rate at which low-income students access and complete college.

Network members provide direct services to more than 150,000 students in the region, with the goal of ensuring they are prepared academically, financially, and socially for success in college and beyond.

SoCal CAN also provides direct-service college success programming. To combat Los Angeles's low college persistence rates for low-income, first generation students, over 15 SoCal CAN members developed Level Up, a program that guides students through their first year of college, when dropping out is most prevalent. Each year, approximately 400 Los Angeles area college students at more than 45 campuses across the country are actively engaged in the Level Up program, which is largely driven by the interests and needs expressed by participating students. Through Level Up, students connect with other students on and off their campuses and access resources that support them in achieving their higher-education goals. Part of that support is being provided with the scaffolding to build self-advocacy skills that will serve them not only

while they are at college, but also once they have graduated.

With nearly a decade of experience doing policy advocacy work at the local, state, and institutional levels, SoCal CAN has identified two major approaches that consistently yield positive results for their advocacy work. The first positive practice is to develop constructive relationships with the very entity they are seeking to change. They have found that when they lead with their shared interest in seeing students succeed and offer their support to make that happen, institutions are more likely to engage with them. They have expertise in spotlighting concerns in a way that invites joint problem-solving rather than spurring an adversarial relationship. The second approach that they have found works extremely well for them is passing the mic to their students. Students are able to bring the issues to life through personal stories and pique the interest of administrators and policy makers in a profound way.

Role and Background in uCANRise

SoCal CAN, a much-respected organization in the college access and success field, played an important role in the the uCANRise collaborative for several reasons, including their expertise in creating opportunities for organizations to learn

together, collaborate with one another, and jointly advocate for system-level and state-level policies and practices that advance student success. Additionally, SoCal CAN was in the process of developing Changemakers, focused on student-led advocacy, when they joined the collaborative, and

their expertise was highly valued by other learning community members. Finally, SoCal CAN had deep experience with the California State University (CSU) system, and they were able to provide much-needed perspective in the collaborative's attempts to strategize what it would take to impact that system in terms of gains in educational equity.

SoCal CAN dedicated three members to engaging in the uCANRise collaborative, including their executive director, and did not have the challenges other organizations did with staff turnover in the first year. Their steady engagement resulted in their perspectives being strongly represented in products of the collaborative, including the theory of change and Promising Practices. Additionally, because they were poised to launch Changemakers during the second experimentation year of uCANRise, their contributions were both authentic and practical.

Additionally, in August 2018, SoCal CAN received a two-year grant from the College Futures Foundation to build capacity for civic engagement work with students and members, and to seed a

student and member advocacy fellowship. In the second year in uCANRise, SoCal CAN's focus was on drawing in part on the uCANRise Theory of Change and Promising Practices to develop and launch the fellowship program. In 2019, SoCal CAN launched SoCal CAN Changemakers, a fellowship program designed to foster student-led advocacy in higher education, nurturing student advocates and preparing them to make differences on their college campuses and in their communities. SoCal CAN Changemakers is a direct response to the current climate in our country and on college campuses, which has created a spike in students who are passionate about advocating for change. By tapping into student momentum, SoCal CAN hopes to improve Southern California's colleges and universities by equipping students to execute advocacy campaigns. Students in the Changemaker cohort participate in training and structured, supported learning experiences, and develop advocacy skills, build issues knowledge, and determine best courses of action to pursue institutional change for educational equity.

Approach and Findings

As the SoCal CAN team started the process of selecting Promising Practices for work in the second year of uCANRise, they selected three target audiences for the work with three adjacent goals.

TARGET AUDIENCE	GOAL
SoCal CAN College Students	To empower low-income, first-generation college students to play a central role in advocating for policies and practices that advance student success.
SoCal CAN Member Organizations	To inspire the field of college access and success programs to support student-led advocacy efforts.
Los Angeles Region Colleges and Universities Serving the Largest Number of Low-Income, First-Generation College Students ¹	To strengthen the connection between post-secondary institutions, students and college access programs to jointly determine the best courses of action to support student success.

¹Pending student interest, ten Los Angeles area higher ed institutions serving the largest number of low-income, first-generation students in the region were selected: CSU Dominguez Hills, CSU Fullerton, CSU Long Beach, CSU Los Angeles, CSU Northridge, East Los Angeles College, El Camino College, Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles Trade Tech, and Santa Monica College.

After cross-referencing these audiences and goals with SoCal CAN's strengths and unique position in the field, staff came to the conclusion that SoCal CAN is well positioned to integrate nearly half of the uCANRise Promising Practices into their existing and/or emerging work. They then proposed four main activities for the experimentation year and the uCANRise Theory of Change and Promising Practices that would be tested within each, as follows.

ACTIVITY #1: Develop enabling environments at SoCal CAN for student-led advocacy work to flourish.

SoCal CAN noted that their first activity would be less about testing Promising Practices and more about adopting the theory of change to sit within the DNA of SoCal CAN. SoCal CAN takes pride in the close relationships their network forges with low-income students and families in the Los Angeles region. Their work is informed by student experiences; however, it is not entirely student-facing. Yet, they believe the network is poised to adopt "student-centered" as a core value and to take concrete steps to creating an environment that allows student-led advocacy work, in particular, to flourish.

During the uCANRise transition period from the first to the second year of the collaborative, in mid-January 2019, the SoCal CAN board outlined a set of actions the network would take to become more student-centered in all aspects of their organization – from governance to staffing. Implementation was set to begin in March 2019, and there was an emphasis on documenting approaches and outcomes. SoCal CAN's hope was that by modeling the organizational transformation they proposed to the field and experimenting with practices that encouraged and enabled student engagement in policy change, they would inspire other organizations to do the same.

The network started this work in Spring 2019 by creating five paid internship opportunities for college students. The student interns were thoughtfully integrated into the SoCal CAN team and assigned to a specific area of work. They were encouraged to share their perspectives on how

to improve it and empowered to work with staff to make these changes happen. This infusion of student perspective has proven to be invaluable and SoCal CAN is now working to make the paid internship opportunities for students available year-round.

Another way SoCal CAN has encouraged greater inclusion of student perspectives was through the involvement of students in the networks 2020-2021 strategic planning process. A student focus group was held in January 2020 to weigh in on the future direction of SoCal CAN.

Finally, SoCal CAN is now in the process of designating two positions on its board to be held by students. Positions are being drafted and recruitment will take place in Spring 2020.

ACTIVITY #2: Enrich the Level Up program with empowering activities that foster allyship and encourage students to advocate for themselves, their peers, their campuses, and their communities.

- Promising Practice #1: Become a student advocacy organization "clearinghouse."
- Promising Practice #2: Serve as a student-centered educational equity news center.
- Promising Practice #6: Partner with campus advocacy organizations.
- Promising Practice #14: Build authentic connections for movements through allyship.
- Promising Practice #10: Help new college students develop their personal missions.
- Promising Practice #8: Mobilize students through technology.

By continuing to draw on the uCANRise Theory of Change and several Promising Practices, SoCal CAN set out to enrich their existing Level Up components – trainings, curriculum, text messaging, and social media – with information and activities that support students in gaining critical understanding of their sociopolitical environment and provide them with options for gaining skills to become problem solvers.

In Spring 2019, the Level Up Program Manager, with the support of two student interns, developed a plan to integrate the six practices listed above into academic year 2019-2020 Level Up programming. The first course of action was to research student advocacy organizations at each Level Up campus. A list was generated for each campus and shared with the Level Up campus cohorts at the Summer Training. This exercise also allowed Level Up staff and interns to begin forging relationships with campus advocacy groups.

Level Up used its text messaging and social media channels to share important information on current issues impacting students – student hunger, student homelessness, campus climates, mental health issues, etc.

During the Summer Training, Level Up staff had the opportunity to incorporate several more of the Promising Practices into the program. Workshops were offered on how to create a personal mission statement, how to be an effective ally to other students and student movements, and how to connect with important educational equity issues being addressed by student advocacy organizations on campus.

Additionally, Level Up used its text messaging and social media channels to share important information on current issues impacting students – student hunger, student homelessness, campus climates, mental health issues, etc. In the months to come, the Changemakers will be implementing their campus-based advocacy action plans. Level Up is hoping to use its texting and social media platforms to mobilize Level Up students to engage in the Changemakers advocacy efforts as appropriate. In early May, Level Up will be administering its annual survey to glean participant feedback. SoCal CAN hopes to include several new questions in the survey that will help determine the impact of these newly incorporated “empowering activities” on students’ experiences.

ACTIVITY #3: Launch SoCal CAN’s student advocacy Changemakers Fellowship to create empowering outcomes.

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

With support from the College Futures Foundation and guidance from the uCANRise Theory of Change, SoCal CAN launched their Changemakers Student Advocacy Fellowship in March 2019. The intention of the fellowship was to uplift student voices, nurture student advocates, and prepare students to make a difference on their college campuses. All fellows received a generous stipend for their participation in the program, which was disbursed at three intervals: the first at the beginning of the fellowship, the second in the middle, and the final payment at the end. Further, the program was meant to realize SoCal CAN’s vision of bringing students, community-based organizations, and higher-education institutions together to improve college access and success for low-income, first-generation students in the greater Los Angeles region. Student advocates – or Changemakers – would:

1. Develop skills and knowledge needed to lead advocacy efforts and be a part of campuses’ decision-making processes.
2. Access salient information about higher-education institutions and a variety of issues facing students today.
3. Build essential skills in persuasion, communications, relationship-building, and leadership.
4. Have the opportunity to meet with and cultivate relationships with important stakeholders, and develop real solutions to real student problems.

The main challenge SoCal CAN anticipated with operationalizing the uCANRise learnings through Changemakers in the experimental year was the fluid and often unpredictable nature of advocacy work. Though confident that their members and students could gain knowledge, skills, and expertise through their involvement with the fellowship, for instance, what was harder to predict was the impact of campus-specific advocacy efforts on institutions.

To that end, SoCal CAN planned to engage an evaluation consultant with experience measuring the impact of advocacy efforts to ensure that they are effectively monitoring the change (no matter how large or small) that is occurring as a result of the fellows' efforts.

The initial 30 fellows chosen to participate in Changemakers represent 16 Southern California colleges and universities and include University of California (UC) students, CSU students, and community college students. Originally, SoCal CAN planned to target 10 schools, as indicated in the footnote on Page 2. However, after consulting with member organizations who preferred a more open candidate pool, it was discovered that representation from a broader swath of schools was necessary to yield a higher number of diverse applicants. Once applications were submitted, the admissions team carefully curated the first cohort to meet that goal. Almost all of them – 90% – were first-generation college students, more than two-thirds were commuter students, and over half worked as well as attended school. Almost two-thirds were part of college access or success programs in high school or college.

While SoCal CAN originally included a lengthy number of topics in the curriculum, it ultimately made more sense to support students in “learning by doing.”

The incoming Changemakers were clustered into nine small cohorts, with some groups representing a single campus and others clustered by UC, CSU, or community college enrollment. Each group received support from SoCal CAN's three advisors: one lead advisor who supervised the entire program and supported all cohorts, and two student interns who have advocacy, community organizing, and legislative experience. The team split the cohorts and each person served as a point person for their designated group. With advisor support, each cohort chose a single advocacy issue to focus on, and then created and shared an advocacy action

plan that included three campaign activities: 1) meeting with a campus official to discuss the chosen issue, 2) launching a public awareness campaign about the issue, and 3) working with the local or campus press to secure media coverage for the issue. The cohorts continued to make progress on the action plans, focusing on one activity per month. Some cohorts were required to evaluate and be accountable for their progress by completing surveys reporting on the outcomes of their meetings. Others documented their activities via pictures and materials they created. While the fellowship is 12 months long, students were challenged to complete one activity per month. When asked, students suggested starting activities sooner in the year so they would have more time to complete them given their many competing priorities.

To develop skills and knowledge needed to lead advocacy efforts and be a part of campuses' decision-making processes, Changemakers participated in three interactive convenings that included curriculum and other programming that supported essential skill building in persuasion, communications, relationship-building, and leadership and provided them with opportunities to meet with and cultivate relationships with mentors and allies and develop strategies for addressing real student problems. While SoCal CAN originally included a lengthy number of topics in the curriculum, it ultimately made more sense to support students in “learning by doing.” During convenings, students received guidance on a set of foundational topics they then took to their campuses where they could increase their learning as they implemented Changemaker concepts with their campus peers.

Between sessions, Changemakers engaged in peer teaching and learning by submitting monthly assignments that allowed them to build and share knowledge about higher-ed issues including educational equity, racism, and community organizing, as well as to stay connected to one another more generally. Cohorts also hosted visits from SoCal CAN Changemaker advisors who supported students to transition from building knowledge and skills to thinking about the issues

most important to them. Students were also encouraged to learn what other students cared about and how to make decisions about what issues to advocate for.

During the course of implementing the fellowship, several challenges surfaced, including geographical challenges associated with the convenings, engagement and communication between convenings, and staffing the program. Initially SoCal CAN focused on Southern California as a region concentrated enough to build critical mass with student participation. In addition to Los Angeles County, students from UC San Diego, UCI, UCR, and CSUSB participate in the program. SoCal CAN had not planned to reach out to the UC system; however, students and other stakeholders suggested that UC students would benefit from the fellowship as there are issues in their higher-education systems they want to address.

The size of Southern California presented obstacles to, first, finding locations for the convenings where students did not have to travel far; second, providing reliable transportation for students to attend the convenings; and, third, SoCal CAN advisors traveling to campuses to meet with students. Further, maintaining engagement and communication with students between convenings has proved difficult. While students report that they are using the skills they have acquired in Changemakers to advocate for causes they are passionate about on campus, maintaining communication and engagement with students between convenings given their busy school schedules and outside-of-school responsibilities is difficult. A more in-depth strategy is needed to maintain momentum and energy between convenings. Finally, in retrospect, by creating such a high number of cohorts, nine, from the total group of 30 participants, and providing the opportunity for each cohort to select its own issue and develop a unique advocacy plan, SoCal CAN realizes the big lift the fellowship created for the one consultant and two interns who managed the program. During peak times, the consultant worked 30 hours per week and the interns worked 15 hours each week. During slower periods, the consultant worked 15 hours per week and interns worked 10 per week.

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Despite these challenges, student response to their participation in the fellowship was highly favorable and SoCal CAN is looking forward to future iterations of the program. And, for SoCal CAN as an organization, managing a student advocacy fellowship has created an additional level of visibility. For example, Executive Director Alison De Lucca and a Changemaker Fellow, Hazel Ramos from UCLA, were invited to testify at a forum hosted by the search committee of the next University of California President. They talked about the qualities SoCal CAN seeks in the next UC President and issues most important to the students and communities SoCal CAN serves. Their testimony was acknowledged by others, including attending partner members who were live streaming the event and praised Alison and Hazel for making salient points, and Hazel in particular, for her incisiveness when she presented. UC Regents came up to both after the event to spend more time with them and to get to know Hazel better. The experience reinforced how strong communication skills make strong student advocates.

Additionally, the experience of implementing Changemakers has led SoCal CAN to the goal of developing a student-centered policy agenda with strong input from student Changemakers that will focus the network for the duration of the next two years.

ACTIVITY #4: Share SoCal CAN's work and the uCANRise toolkit with SoCal CAN members and other college access and success professionals.

SoCal CAN's network includes college access organizations, youth development groups, charter management organizations, higher education outreach and support programs, businesses, and data/research/advocacy groups. To disseminate learnings and opportunities surfaced from their participation in the uCANRise community of practice, SoCal CAN focused one of their 2019 quarterly membership meetings on student advocacy. They invited Dr. Veronica Terriquez from the University of California to share her research on the impact youth organizing and civic engagement have on college persistence, college completion and career choice. They showcased the uCANRise resource guide and encouraged members to consider Promising Practices included in the guide. Organizations were invited to incorporate one or more of the practices to begin building their capacities for supporting students in student-led advocacy efforts. Nearly 20 member organizations

have reported the integration of at least one recommended practice into their work.

SoCal CAN also shared the uCANRise toolkit with other coalitions working on higher education policy issues in California and beyond. At the state level, Californians for College Affordability, College for All Coalition, Los Angeles HUB, California Undocumented Higher Education Coalition and the Civic Engagement for College Success Network have all received an electronic copy of the report. At the national level, SoCal CAN, uAspire, and Students Rising Above presented the uCANRise toolkit at the National College Access Network Conference in September 2019. More than 100 college access professionals learned about the work and received either a hard copy or a requested digital version of the report. Finally, through SoCal CAN's connection to The Morris and Meyer Kaplan Foundation, SoCal CAN has been invited to present the uCANRise toolkit and their experience with Changemakers to a network of college access organizations and postsecondary funders in Chicago in summer 2020.

Takeaways and Next Steps

SoCal CAN successfully met all three of its proposed activities for the experimental year of uCANRise. Despite the initial challenges in its pilot year, the Changemakers program has, and continues to have, a positive impact on SoCal CAN and the students it serves. Based on SoCal CAN's engagement and findings, the following recommended next steps emerged for future iterations of the collaborative's work.

- Changemakers fellows provided valuable feedback during the course of the Changemakers pilot about pacing of activities, and SoCal CAN knew they had to be adaptive in their model to authentically incorporate student guidance. Future work for uCANRise should include student-engagement activities to capture key

lessons about our models and pacing from student perspectives and the dissemination of these learnings back to organizations working with the uCANRise Theory of Change and Promising Practices.

- Future iterations of uCANRise can serve organizations wishing to launch student-led advocacy programs mapped to the uCANRise Theory of Change by developing and sharing sample work plans to show how goals such as the ones articulated by SoCal CAN for Changemakers can be achieved with a variety of resources, including various staffing configurations, as well as multi-year plans for rolling out program components (and sequencing resource load and program-lift intensity).

- Future versions of uCANRise can support direct-service organizations interested in operationalizing the uCANRise Theory of Change and Promising Practices by providing options for virtual and hybrid delivery of advocacy training, from the simple Slack channel to the more complex Mobilize site, or even by leveraging no-cost features of social media sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn.
- SoCal CAN realized that the attributes they were building into Changemakers – including the generous amount of the initial stipend for participants – will be contingent upon funding each time they initiate a new cohort, and that such funding may not be in place during the early recruitment period. They were thoughtful, therefore, about what information was included in program descriptions and on their website. Because they were not able to ensure full funding prior to launch, they also found themselves in the position of potentially overloading staff members because they did not have the assurance they needed that they could build out program staff.

A future for uCANRise should be to continue to document the strain and impact that current funding models have on direct-service organizations who are attempting to build programming in support of the uCANRise Theory of Change, with the objective of increasing funders willingness to fund such work earlier and more fully so that programs are then set up for success and can achieve the theory of change outcomes.