

# Closing the Gap: Identifying effective educational program strategies and best practices for Latino youth

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## Message from the League of United Latin American Citizens

By Brent Wilkes, LULAC National Executive Director

With a vast grassroots network of over 135,000 members and 1,000 Councils in 37 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, the League of United Latin American Citizens is the oldest and largest Latino civil rights organization in the country. Since our founding in 1929, LULAC dedicated itself to advancing educational opportunities for Latinos by fighting government-sponsored segregation in schools.



Our reach is furthered by working with corporate partners and community based organizations. Due to the high dropout rate amongst Latino youth, Ford Motor Company Fund and LULAC created the *Ford Driving Dreams Through Education* (FDD) program in 2010 to stimulate academic achievement, high school completion, and college enrollment. To date, 42 LULAC Councils in 39 cities across 16 states have impacted over 1,200 students through the implementation of successful programs tailored to each community's respective needs.

This paper is an examination of the *Ford Driving Dreams Through Education* programs. Furthermore, we hope that future Councils will take advantage of the insights in this paper to create successful programs of their own.



# **Part I: Combating High School Drop-Out through the *Ford Driving Dreams Through Education* (FDD) Program**

## **Section One – Background: Why the FDD Program?**

### **Purpose of this paper**

This report illustrates a strategy used by LULAC and the Ford Motor Company Fund to address the unacceptably high school drop-out rates among Latino students in the United States. Part I of this report describes the *Ford Driving Dreams Through Education* (FDD) program that local LULAC councils utilized to help Latino students graduate from high school and attend college. For the last five years, LULAC Councils have used this program successfully to overcome barriers hindering the educational success of Latino students.

Part II of this report highlights shared themes that stand out across the most successful FDD sites. Using previously submitted FDD qualitative and quantitative data from end-of-year comprehensive site reports, the final sections of this report provide readers with examples of best practices in action from FDD sites.

### **Unacceptably High Drop-Out Rate of Latino Students**

Graduation data from key states illustrate gaps in completion rates between key student groups. According to data from the Department of Education, in some states the gap is more than 20 points between the overall state graduation rate and the graduation rates of various subgroups, such as English Language Learners, Latinos, or students from low-income households -- including in states where LULAC National operates *Ford Driving Dreams Through Education* programs.

**Figure 1: Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) Gaps, by Subgroup and State 2012-2013**

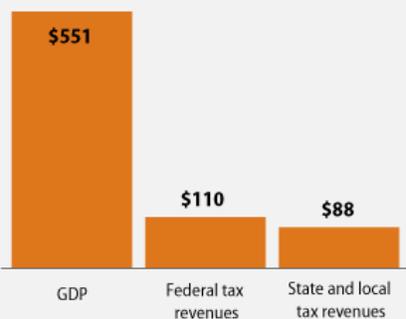
State	2013 Grad Rate	2013 Grad Rate for English Language Learners	2013 Grad Rate for Latinos	2013 Grad Rate for Students from Low-Income Households
Arizona	75.1	20	68.9	69.4
California	80.4	63.1	75.7	74.8
Colorado	76.9	58.5	65.4	63.7
Florida	75.6	57.5	74.9	67.0
Georgia	71.7	43.8	62.6	63.8
Illinois	83.2	63.7	76.3	73.0
Maryland	85	57	75.1	75.8
Missouri	85.7	69.0	81.0	78.0
New Mexico	70.3	65.4	68.0	64.7
New York	76.8	39.1	62.3	67.5
Ohio	82.2	67.0	69.0	69.6
Texas	88	71.3	85.1	85.2
Wisconsin	88	62	74.3	76.6

Source: U.S. Department of Education (2014). Provisional Data File: ST2012-13 Four-Year Regulatory Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates (ACGR).

As Figure 1 illustrates, the graduation gap between subgroups of students and the overall state cohort is significant across these key states. Disparities in academic retention translate into long-term challenges for both the Hispanic community and the nation as a whole. Lack of a high school diploma limits earning potential, decreases the chance of securing employment, and jeopardizes long-term economic security.<sup>i</sup>

**Economic and fiscal benefits of closing academic achievement gaps**

Average annual increase in GDP and tax revenues between 2014 and 2050 in billions of dollars



Data further show that closing the achievement gap would greatly help the American economy.<sup>ii</sup> According to a report from the Center for American Progress, putting an end to the achievement gap would grow the American economy 5.8 percent (\$2.3 trillion) by 2050. Cumulatively, American GDP would add \$20.4 trillion – or \$551 billion per year.<sup>iii</sup>

Source: Center for American Progress.

## Section Two – Success of the FDD Program

### Preventing Drop-Out by Confronting Gaps in Achievement, Opportunity, and Inspiration

Promoting high school graduation is a challenging objective, since the causes of drop-out before completion of one's high school career are multi-faceted and numerous. LULAC approached its participation in the FDD program with the view that community-based extra-curricular programs can make a real positive difference in the lives of Latino students if they address three critical areas, identified by the Latino STEM Alliance<sup>iv</sup>. In short detail, they are:

**THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP:** The most well documented of the gaps, Latino performance on key assessments and academic indicators continues to lag. According to data from the Pew Research Center, an important number of Latino students identified “poor English skills” as a major reason for why Latino students achieve at lower rates than their peers. Because of this, accessing tutoring, test prep, technology, school supplies, and culturally and linguistically competent support from education professionals is key in addressing this gap.<sup>v</sup>

**OPPORTUNITY GAP:** Underserved Latinos – and young Latinos in particular – experience a lack of academic, networking, recreational, and career opportunities. Further, data from Pew Research Center surveys also show that many Latino students fail to attend college because they “don't need any more education for the careers they want.” This ignorance about the lack of stable and highly paid employment options for Latino students can be traced back to a dearth of opportunities.<sup>vi</sup> In addition, accessing key resources like technology and education centers, financial resources for developmental trips, summer camps, and other structured programs are vital components to addressing the opportunity gap.

**INSPIRATION GAP:** Perhaps the most challenging and critical gap to tackle is the inspiration gap. According to data from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 39.5% of Latino students nationwide attend hyper-segregated schools (defined as schools that are more than 90% nonwhite). More worrying still is that this number increases to more than 60% of Latino students in Western states.<sup>vii</sup> The report goes on to explain the wide reaching effects of this phenomenon, including lack of exposure to college-educated adults. Providing opportunities for youth to access both experiences and also networking opportunities where they can meet mentors, role-

models, and life coaches in fields of their interest all play a major role in helping steer young Latinos into higher education opportunities and careers.<sup>viii</sup>

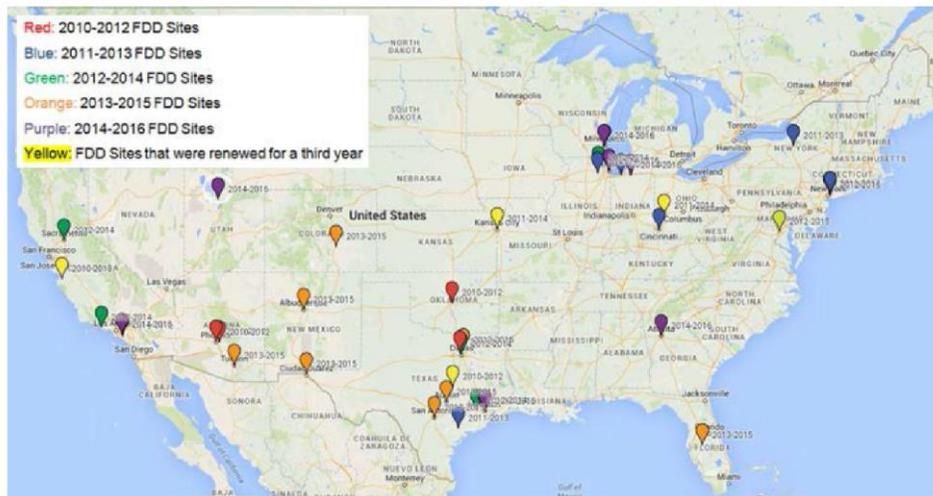
By addressing these three gaps at the community level through cooperation with its local councils, LULAC hoped to utilize the FDD program to reduce high school drop-out rates and improve other indicators of success among Latino students.

### **LULAC, the Ford Motor Company Fund, and *Ford Driving Dreams Through Education***

In order to be considered for a grant from the Ford Motor Company Fund, LULAC councils submitted proposals to an evaluation committee. At least 20 students needed to be involved in any potential program, and the applying LULAC council needed to partner with a local education group (including but not specifically limited to high schools). From the education group, two letters of recommendation needed to be submitted for consideration. LULAC councils could expect evaluations of their progress to follow, qualitatively tracking student perceptions of their progress, and quantitatively tracking participants' GPAs and enrollment status.

However, beyond these instructions, LULAC councils had wide latitude to craft programs that they felt would be beneficial to their target students, and they were encouraged to tailor their proposals to the specific set of circumstances that their communities faced. The evaluation committee selected a geographically diverse group of sites to receive grant monies, as shown below. This map shows the location of FDD sites through the past five years, and highlights those programs that have been renewed beyond their initial charter.

**Figure 3: Map of Ford Driving Dreams Sites**



Source: LULAC National

## Measurable Results through Lower Drop-Out Rates and Other Positive Indicators

The programs highlighted below showed significant improvement in both qualitative questionnaires submitted by participants and statistical indicators of overall enrollment, consistent class attendance, and increasing grade point averages. As students reported more ambitious aspirations and overall well-being, they remained in school at a higher level and performed more competitively, as reflected by their GPAs. From the data collected, LULAC National identified common strategies and best practices in confronting Latino students' unique challenges and keeping them in school.

Four of these strategies and best practices are presented in Part II of this report, illustrated by real-life examples of how individual LULAC councils responded to their challenges on the ground.

## Part II: Lessons Learned – Best Practices from Successful FDD Programs

Unsurprisingly, the most successful programs were led by dedicated LULAC members who put forth a great deal of consistent effort in service to their programs and the students they served.

More specifically, the leaders of successful programs noticeably (1) invested considerable initial effort into creating a vision. They could then commit effectively to their well-planned programs. They also (2) intelligently leveraged the resources found in their communities to extract the greatest return on investment and (3) commonly found personal and creative ways to keep their student participants engaged, for example, with extensive mentoring or an artistic focus. These methods of engagement were not complex, but they were uniformly consistent.

The success of the best programs ultimately led to their sustainability – they had the opportunity to continue independently without the expectation of additional funding.

### Section Three – LULAC Council #39000 (Dayton, OH) - The *Camino de Vida* Program (2011-2014)

Total Students: 20			
GRADE	ETHNICITY	SEX	GPA
7 <sup>th</sup> : 1 (5%)	Hispanic: 20 (100%)	F: 9 (45%)	Fall 2011: 2.784
8 <sup>th</sup> : 1 (5%)		M: 11 (55%)	Spring 2012: 2.788
9 <sup>th</sup> : 9 (47%)			
10 <sup>th</sup> : 2 (11%)			
11 <sup>th</sup> : 3 (16%)			
12 <sup>th</sup> : 3 (16%)			

LULAC Ohio created *Camino de Vida* (Life Path) to implement a mentorship program and a plan of one-on-one tutoring sessions, in cooperation with Wright State University, the University of Dayton’s Fitz Center for Leadership in Community, and the Dayton Public School District. Successfully drawing from the resources in its community, the council found a group of mentors who committed to one year of weekly meetings with students to develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. In addition, the program scheduled monthly meetings for families who wanted to become more involved in their children’s school.

The context of this program was challenging, since Dayton Public Schools had recently experienced a sharp increase in students identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). Many of these LEP students were from immigrant families and at risk of dropping out before receiving their high school diploma. However, through the personal connections created by one-on-one mentorships, the *Camino de Vida* program significantly helped these students improve their academic performance and language comprehension.

Mentors stayed highly engaged and active, leading a well-planned variety of projects, seminars, and field trips with students. In one instance, students took a field trip to Wright State University, where they met with professors and students in the medical program. They gained exposure to medical professions and the educational requirements necessary to gain entrance in the medical field. The students were highly encouraged by the trip to consider medicine as a future career path.

LULAC members and mentors leveraged their access to the community to engage students with personal and very relevant events, such as a motivational seminar featuring Mr. Roy Juarez, Jr., who recounted how he went from living on the streets to ultimately going to college and becoming a successful businessman. Mentors hosted seminars on varied popular topics of interest to the group, including the importance of volunteering, the debate on immigration, and career pathways.

The successes of the Dayton program were significant. In the Fall of 2011, students began with a cumulative GPA of 41.77, but ended that Spring with a total GPA of 44.61 – an increase of 2.84 points. In addition, Daniel Molina, an FDD program participant, graduated as Belmont High School’s first ever LEP Co-Valedictorian.

### **Section Four – LULAC Council #23047 (Queens, NYC) & STEM Program (2012-2015)**

Total Students: 50			
GRADE	ETHNICITY	SEX	GPA
9 <sup>th</sup> : 30 (60%)	Hispanic: 49 (98%)	F: 23 (46%)	Spring 2011: 78.99
10 <sup>th</sup> : 19 (38%)	Arabic: 1 (2%)	M: 27 (54%)	Fall 2011: 81.10
11 <sup>th</sup> : 0			Spring 2013: 81.10
12 <sup>th</sup> : 1 (2%)			Spring 2014: N/A

LULAC Council #23047 in Queens, New York also harnessed the power of mentorship and hands-on experiences through groups in its community. This council developed a unique vision to take advantage of its local resources – engaging its students with an experiential approach through which artists and designers mentored participating students. It also tied in existing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math education) initiatives, both supplementing course work with art and incorporating STEM subjects into its mentorships. Like the program in Dayton, the Queens Council used field trips, speakers, and projects to undergird its tutoring and mentorship activities. Its meetings were also consistent and frequent.

To combine Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics with design, LULAC Council #23047's after-school program led educational workshops focused on the use of technology and art. The Council partnered with Fluid New Media Labs, a locally-based non-profit organization promoting creative works. Students learned about STEM through activities that use digital media, which engaged students in high school activities. The program developed an extensive plan of leadership workshops, field trips to museums and area colleges, career exploration opportunities, and incentives for students. It also organized parental involvement workshops to help parents strategize for their children's college years.

This FDD initiative leveraged the creative resources in its community very effectively. The program provided a solidly planned base from which to reap the maximum return on investment, as measured in student engagement and achievement. During the 2012-2013 academic year, students enrolled in this program met more than 30 times, for a total of more than 80 hours.

The following year, the FDD program coordinator provided weekly tutoring and mentoring sessions on various topics to program participants, including linoleum carving, individual art projects, video production and editing, solar panel construction, and digital self-portraits.

Council #23047's program stood out because of the impressively consistent engagement of its participating mentors, ensuring that student participants stayed on track and continually participated in its unique enrichment programs.

### **Section Five – LULAC Council #9607 (Kansas City, MO) and the College Readiness Program (2011-2014)**

Total Students: 20			
GRADE	ETHNICITY	SEX	GPA
9 <sup>th</sup> : 3 (15%)	Hispanic: 20 (100%)	F: 10 (50%)	Spring 2011: 2.75
11 <sup>th</sup> : 3 (15%)		M: 10 (50%)	Fall 2011: 2.88
12 <sup>th</sup> : 14 (70%)			Spring 2012: N/A

In an effort to address the Latino inspiration gap in Kansas City Public Schools, LULAC Council #9607 took advantage of its access to the LULAC *National Education Services Centers, Inc.* (LNESEC) *Kansas City College Coach* Program. LNESEC college entrance specialists worked with students from East High School, Alta Vista High School and J.C.

Harmon High School to research college information and apply to scholarships for minority or underserved students, making a positive connection for program participants between high school and their future careers. Members from LULAC Council #9607 also made themselves available to students as mentors and motivational speakers.

In addition, *KC College Coach* worked toward a broader vision of community engagement, encouraging its students to become involved in their neighborhood to foster their sense of citizenship and enhance their college application. In cooperation with LNEESC, students took part in a variety of workshops, including:

- *How Educational Achievement Relates to Future Lifestyles,*
- *College Prep: SAT & ACT Prep Courses at LULAC’S Technology Center*
- *How to Fund your College Education*
- *Scholarships: Completing Applications*
- *Self-Portrait: “Who am I?” and “Who I will be?”*
- *Ethics & Modeling Behavior: Who Do You Idolize? Why?*
- *Mission, Vision, & Goals: Creating a Vision, Understanding the Importance of Priorities, Goals, and Resources, Team Building, Creating, Implementing, and Evaluating Different Plans,*
- *Cultural Awareness*
- *Changing YOUR Environment, and Working on Community Improvement.*

The Kansas City Council leveraged its outside partnership to give it maximum positive impact, expanding its program thanks to the LULAC National Educational Service Center’s expertise and resources. Though it primarily assisted students in pursuing higher education opportunities, the program kept its students active and involved through a number of mentorship components. In addition, the program’s extensive workshops and community service projects helped to enhance its existing partnerships within the community.

## **Section Six – LULAC Council #21006 Silver Spring (Silver Spring, MD)**

**(2012-2015)**

Total Students: 36			
GRADE	ETHNICITY	SEX	GPA
7 <sup>th</sup> : 2 (5.5%)	Hispanic: 26 (72%)	F: 18 (50%)	Fall 2012: 2.49
8 <sup>th</sup> : 3 (8%)	African American: 9 (25%)	M: 18 (50%)	Spring 2013: 2.86
9 <sup>th</sup> : 11 (30.5%)	Unknown: 1 (3%)		Spring 2014: 2.80
10 <sup>th</sup> :9 (25%)			
11 <sup>th</sup> :10 (28%)			
12 <sup>th</sup> : 1 (3%)			

A stellar example of partnership, vision, and planning can be found in Silver Spring, Maryland. Of all the programs LULAC examined, this was one of the most extensive. Teaming with local non-profit organization *GapBuster* to offer a comprehensive schedule of programs, mentorship, and exploratory field trips, LULAC Silver Spring also worked with the University of Maryland, the NASA Goddard Space Center, the Department of Agriculture, and various other local and national organizations.

Students in this program benefited greatly from all the resources available to them through *GapBuster, Inc.*, broadly involving themselves in their communities.

Participants engaged in community service by hosting car washes and bake sales as fund raisers, helping to run voter registration drives, operating *Bike Shops Community Breakdown Day* with local youth and assisting a Hispanic Heritage Festival, as well as feeding the homeless during the holidays.

They received academic training in the form of SAT classes, CPR training, GED classes, scholarship sessions, and tutoring sessions. Additionally they learned from numerous workshops, with topics ranging from entrepreneurship to voter registration, and they participated in *NASA STEM Day* at NASA Goddard Airspace.

Participants benefited from a very strong civic engagement program by meeting with members of Congress, attending the 84th and 85th Annual LULAC National Convention, the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington, and the *Civil War/Civil Rights Dialogue* with Julian Bond at the University of Maryland, as well as by participating in LULAC's *Advocacy Days* on Capitol Hill and LULAC's *Emerge Latino Conference* in Washington D.C.

LULAC Silver Spring FDD students also took advantage of a unique extracurricular academic opportunity, engaging in the *Ten80 Students Challenge*, where they learned to race remote control cars for national competition, studied aerodynamics and created their own business plan and marketing plans. After much preparation, the students attended the *40th Annual National Society of Black Engineers Convention* and competed for the national title of the Ten80 program.

Over the course of the two-year grant period, students enrolled in this program met more than 200 times for more than 450 hours each academic year. Consistency and

commitment distinguished this very successful FDD program. Other organizations recognized its success, and it has found funding to continue beyond the Ford Foundation’s initial grant.

## Section Seven – LULAC Council #4734 (Temple, TX) (2010-2013)

Total Students: 18			
GRADE	ETHNICITY	SEX	GPA
9 <sup>th</sup> : 8 (44%)	Hispanic: 18 (90%)	F: 13 (72%)	Fall 2010: 3.256
10 <sup>th</sup> : 9 (50%)	White: 2 (10%)	M: 5 (28%)	Spring 2011: 3.42
11 <sup>th</sup> 1 (6%)			Fall 2011: N/A
			Spring 2012: 3.329

This unique music-driven program found success with its vision of engagement through art. LULAC Temple members offered both music lessons and academic tutoring at Temple High School under the weekly leadership of a music student and a professional mariachi instructor. In addition, LULAC Youth Council members attending Temple College provided academic support and mentorship during participants’ work study hour or lunch period, and an experienced social worker tracked each student’s success to provide accountability and consistency.

The students received mariachi costumes to complement their musical training and to serve as an incentive for remaining involved. As interest grew, the program incorporated school counselors and support staff into its plan who met with participants on a weekly basis to keep track of their grades and progress with schoolwork. If participants’ overall course scores dropped below 80, then attendance at the school’s ACE tutoring program became mandatory until their grades improved. Students had the chance to spend time with their mentors from Temple College every Sunday afternoon after mariachi music lessons, offering participants a real-world view of their potential future achievements.

The LULAC Temple Council productively engaged students with both personal and artistic connections and adherence to its unique plan. As a sign of the program’s recognized success, the Temple Independent School District Superintendent, local LULAC Councils, the Temple College Academie Musique, and the TC Foundation launched meetings to plan for the incorporation of the council model into the school system and its expansion to include 8<sup>th</sup>-graders.

## Section Eight – Reflection and Lessons Learned

The five showcased LULAC local council programs arrived at their success in different ways and under different circumstances, but common threads united their experiences. They clearly benefited from committed leadership that began with extensive planning and followed up with consistent effort. They also took advantage of resources available in their communities, whether volunteer designers in Queens, New York, mariachi performers in Texas, the local chapter of LNEESC in Kansas City, institutions of higher learning in southwest Ohio, or an array of non-profit and federal organizations in the National Capital Area, capitalizing on the work of other actors trying to make a positive difference.

All highlighted programs also engaged their students in some form of a mentorship program, providing the personal connection often needed to help students realize their full potential. Martin Roll, a brand consultant and contributor to INSEAD business school's Global Intelligence program describes ideal mentors as those who can "lead their mentee with empathy, sensitivity and patience, while constantly adapting to changing times and circumstances." He encourages mentors to be a "complete role model" with "a broad understanding of the mentee's social, environmental, financial and individual circumstances."<sup>ix</sup> The human touch created by connecting generous community members with engaged students is partially responsible for the sustainable nature of the most successful programs.

In short, the key sparks that made these programs stand out were:

***Mentorship:*** A good mentor is a person that breaks the "career counselor" mold to address a mentee's personal needs as well. Some of the most successful FDD sites did this by pairing students up with dedicated volunteers, encouraging participation in a specific trade, and requiring that students also attend academic tutoring sessions.

***Partnerships:*** In many ways, the personal mentorship example mirrors the larger partnership model that we advocate for FDD sites. For many students, the burden of learning is concentrated on a few actors instead of the community at large. By rethinking the paradigm of one school, one classroom, one teacher, students are given the opportunity for a richer education. Many FDD sites did this by partnering with local non-profits, community groups, and universities to stretch their resources and expertise. Affiliation with a university or community college in particular can go a long way in closing the so-called "inspiration gap." By linking a FDD program with a "big brother" at

the university, students are given the opportunity to seriously consider going to college. By exposing them to their potential, they are encouraged to succeed in a way unmatched by mere grades or test scores.

**Uniqueness:** Another important way to reach students is through an FDD program effectively tailored to their needs. One classic example is an art program. On the whole, American parents demonstrate broad support for the arts in schools.<sup>x</sup> In addition, the benefits of strong music and arts programs cannot be underestimated -- especially in how they often enrich the dialogue in other classes. Unfortunately, education funding is usually inadequate to fully implement these popular and beneficial classes.<sup>xi</sup> But arts aren't the only "extra" program that faces challenges – even practical STEM and shop programs face funding hurdles in schools.<sup>xii</sup> When creating your program, keep these realities in mind. Ask yourself: does our school have strong "extra" programs? By stepping in to offer one, students are given a supplementary program unavailable in the classroom – furthering their educational and career goals.

**Management:** The most successful FDD sites were able to leverage the human capital around them: from top management and program coordinators to dedicated volunteers and community partners. By enticing these distinct groups to share responsibility for the program's success, the program has a better chance of success. Even simple mechanisms of shared responsibility, such as circulating an attendance sheet, led to stronger programmatic structure. Concurrently increasing student engagement was obvious from the qualitative reviews sent to LULAC headquarters by participants, and this accountability by local councils to their national stakeholders reinforced the consistent strength of locally-grown initiatives. Frequency of mentorship program meetings at a minimum of once a week, for example, compounded the robust energy of these initiatives, and LULAC observed that the consistency of effort put forth by the best programs was supported by literature on organizational efficacy.<sup>xiii</sup>

## Closing Thoughts

The most successful FDD sites embodied the values promoted by professional scholars of management. According to Professor Manfred FR Kets de Vries, also of INSEAD business school, these are: "Have a compelling vision, create a well-rounded executive team, foster group identification, and create mechanisms of organizational governance." The five programs selected in this paper all displayed evidence of creativity and vision, strong leadership and management, engaged community-based learning, and rapidly solidifying institutions.

These characteristics serve as some of the key ingredients for successful models that can be replicated and scaled across the country. It is LULAC's intention to publicize the best of local council experiences behind the *Ford Driving Dreams Through Education* program to help inform future decisions by local and national stakeholders as they start their own initiatives. LULAC's youngest and future members stand to benefit most from these successfully executed programs, and we are both encouraged and humbled by the successes of our best council initiatives. Finally, we must thank the Ford Motor Company Fund, whose commitment to LULAC's youngest stakeholders made the entire initiative possible. We are very grateful for their partnership and look forward to successful collaboration in the future.

## About the Authors

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## Endnotes

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