

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: Families in Schools

A Conversation with Families In Schools Executive Director, Oscar Cruz

From the personal experience of being a first-generation student, CEO Oscar Cruz holds the Families in Schools' (FIS) mission close to heart. Cruz took time to chat with David Kietzman, managing partner at [Momentum Solutions](#), about FIS and how the SoCal Can network benefits his nonprofit organization.

Tell us about Families in Schools (FIS)?

Families in Schools just celebrated its 15th anniversary. Our focus is to improve partnerships between schools and families, so that students can reach academic achievement. We're constantly trying to find ways to better communicate to low-income families, who are often immigrants learning about our school system, on how to create a college-going culture at home.

Why did you choose to become a SoCal CAN member?

Because a large portion of our portfolio focuses on college awareness and preparation, it's critical for FIS be part of a network that helps us stay on top of the latest information on college access, including best practices and policy issues. SoCal CAN offers us a networking opportunity to do just that. For the last seven years, we've been able to leverage expertise from the network, identify partners and stay up to date through organizations that are involved with college awareness and preparation.

How has FIS used its membership to work with SoCal CAN's network?

Most recently, we've been collaborating with SoCal CAN around a program that focuses on transition to college. A lot of members in the network are working with students accepted into colleges across the country. We see an opportunity to build stronger partnerships with families and help them understand what it means when their child is accepted into college. The transition for first-time college goers impacts the whole family. The college student will need lots of family support, so our goal is to create tools to help the family members provide that support. To create the transition to college program, we are relying on SoCal CAN's network and their array of expertise to build curriculum targeting 11th and 12th graders.

How will FIS collaborate with other members to create the Transition to College curriculum?

When we refer to curriculum we're really talking about a toolkit that members can use to work with students going to college and their families. We're still defining what the toolkit will look like. We are relying heavily on the members to help us test the toolkit and be part of the process. Each member participant will receive training on how to implement the toolkit, and then put it into action by

presenting it to the clients or students they are helping. We would receive feedback from each member, which we will then incorporate into the final product before it is published for all members to use. Tapping into the network makes it easier for us to create the curriculum by accessing content and feedback directly from the leaders who are working with the thousands of students they've helped get to college. This collaboration brings so much value to the end product.

How does FIS' membership impact your clients?

FIS is focused on getting families engaged and helping them make the best college decisions with their children. We want to make sure families have the most accurate information on the college application and acceptance process to financial aid and more. To deliver this, we need to stay up to date on all policy and procedures. One of the values our membership brings is access to a network of experts. Through our connection to members who are leaders and advocates in their field, we don't have to spend extra resources developing that knowledge, and that allows us to spend more time helping our clients.

What's the benefit of attending membership meetings?

Membership meetings offer an opportunity hear from other partners and members about their challenges or needs, and in turn, we try to support them with lessons learned from the field, best practices that have worked for another member, or simply sharing what we've seen or heard on the ground. All of us have the common goal of advocating for college access, and SoCal CAN always provides an opportunity for us to network and share materials. There's richness to the networking, collaboration and overall camaraderie — and we're grateful for that.

What would you say to other colleagues considering a SoCal CAN membership?

First, I would say that SoCal CAN is going to help their organization. Members can leverage what has been done to make their work more effective. Second, I would say that SoCal CAN's leadership is great at bringing together groups of members — a collective — focused on making a bigger impact on policy and practices and now is a great time to be part of that strategy.

Finally, I would add that the membership brings together an array of organizations that tackle college access issues from various vantage points. From our perspective, we're focused on the parent engagement component. Others are looking at it as mentors, student support, direct service provider, advocates and so on. I think there's enough diversity that as a whole we bring different components that make the network stronger. I think that's the richness of the network—the range of expertise and skills.

Finally, what would you like SoCal CAN stakeholders to know about FIS?

I would want them to know that if there's a focus on career and college, to consider FIS as a partner in conducting engagement in the families they are serving. Engaging college-bound families starts as a value proposition and we can help tap into the community and families to make a bigger impact on the students they serve.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I would like to mention the (SoCal CAN) network's leadership. They are strategic thinkers and are always two steps ahead of fulfilling members' needs. There's a richness and value to network leadership that should be acknowledged.

Together we **CAN.**