



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: L.A. Area Chamber of Commerce

A Conversation with LA Chamber Director of Education and Workforce Development, Paola Santana

Paola Santana leads the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce's college access and success portfolio; including implementation of student programming, higher education policy advocacy and systems change initiatives. David Kietzman, managing partner, [Momentum Solutions](#), sat down with Paola to talk about UNITE LA and its connection to SoCal College Access Network.

If you can describe UNITE LA in three words, what would they be?

Education, innovation and collaboration.

Tell us what core strengths UNITE LA has shared with SoCal CAN members?

Under UNITE LA, the L.A. Chamber of Commerce is managing the Cash for College campaign, which supports the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). While other SoCal CAN members provide more comprehensive college access programs, we provide a very specific piece of the college-going puzzle, which is support for FAFSA completion.

Can you share an example of how UNITE LA has worked directly with SoCal CAN members?

Our role with FAFSA is to build regional capacity by partnering with various organizations that would like to host FAFSA workshops. Through our (SoCal CAN) membership, we are able to connect with other members that are interested in learning more about FAFSA or hosting a workshop. When a member organization is interested, we provide training for their staff on how they can help assist clients complete the application, help facilitate execution of the workshops and provide experts who can answer questions, especially for those who have unusual circumstances.

Has UNITE LA collaborated on any projects with SoCal CAN directly?

Yes. Last year, SoCal CAN hosted training for its members on how to read financial aid letters. The training was sponsored by uAspire (formerly known as ACCESS), which helps students find an affordable way to and through a postsecondary education. Members found value in the training and so Alison (the executive director of SoCal CAN) wanted to offer it again. We were invited by Lumina Foundation to apply for a grant to financially support the training, so Alison and I collaborated on submitting a joint proposal. In general, the membership network is great about sharing opportunities for grants that may not fit with their organization, but would benefit another. We are all constantly in communication about opportunities.

Tell us about the advocacy work that UNITE LA is doing in conjunction with SoCal CAN?

We've had the opportunity to work with SoCal CAN on several policy initiatives, including supporting SoCal CAN's bill on degree audits a couple of years ago. Through our affiliation with the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, we find that we can bring a different voice to efforts advocating on behalf of students and their postsecondary success. We've also been able to collaborate on the Coalition to Keep College Affordable, visiting Washington D.C. with a group of students to talk with lawmakers about the importance of investments in the Pell Grant program and FAFSA simplification.

The work UNITE LA is doing to help students become financially prepared for college is so important. Is there a way for SoCal CAN and its members to help with your efforts?

There absolutely is an opportunity for SoCal CAN and its membership to work with institutions to improve the financial aid process and awareness for students. The SoCal CAN membership can be tremendously influential in these conversations simply by sharing links to additional information via social media, hosting workshops, and sending reminders about application deadlines. Our goal is to keep FAFSA and other financial aid opportunities "top of mind" for our students and any support to help raise the level of awareness is greatly appreciated.

Together we **CAN.**