



# POWERFUL LEARNING

## The Impact of CHIRLA's Wise Up! on Members' Educational and Civic Pathways

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Support for this report was provided by:  
**THE CHARLES STEWART MOTT FOUNDATION, AND ATLANTIC PHILANTHROPIES**

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## Introduction

Since 2001, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA)'s Wise Up! program has organized high school students in Los Angeles to address immigrant rights issues affecting their communities. Wise Up's youth organizing has produced tangible gains. Wise Up! members build empowered relationships with community leaders and public officials as they have successfully advocated for changes in policies and practices at the local, state, and federal levels. Members also acquire critical thinking and civic skills as they attend workshops, take part in regular meetings, attend workshops, and participate in campaigns.

This report describes how Wise Up! contributes to the postsecondary educational attainment and civic engagement of members after they leave high school. Specifically, it compares the experiences of young adults who were members of Wise Up! while in high school with a group of young adults from similar demographic backgrounds who never participated in youth organizing. The central finding of this report is that Wise Up! alumni are far more likely than comparable peers across California to enroll in four-year colleges and universities and engage in various civic activities in early adulthood.

This report proceeds in four sections. Section one provides a brief overview of the study of Wise Up! alumni. Section two offers a demographic profile of the Wise Up! alumni who participated in the study and highlights the similarities and differences between this group and other California young adults. Section three compares the educational outcomes of Wise Up! alumni with those of young adults from comparable backgrounds. Finally, section four compares civic engagement outcomes between Wise Up! alumni and other young adults.

## I. The California Young Adult Survey and the Study of Youth Organizing Groups

This study of Wise Up! alumni was conducted by researchers from USC and UCLA interested in understanding how participation in youth organizing during high school shapes the experience of young adults after they leave high school. Wise Up! was one of eight well-established California youth organizing groups included in the study. Researchers conducted 410 telephone surveys and 75 in-depth interviews in 2011-12 from young alumni (ages 18-26) of these eight groups. All former youth organizing participants for whom contact information was available were invited to participate in the study.

The study of alumni from youth organizing groups was conducted alongside a broader research project, the California Young Adult Study (CYAS), that explores the educational and civic pathways of a representative sample of young adults (ages 18-26) across California.<sup>1</sup> Through the CYAS, researchers conducted 2,200 phone surveys and 150 in-depth interviews in 2011-12. The CYAS sample includes large numbers of young adults who have similar backgrounds to Wise Up! alumni but *did not* participate in youth organizing while in high school. By comparing the educational and civic pathways of these two groups, we are able to identify outcomes associated with participation in Wise Up! In the statistical analysis presented in this report, we compare Wise Up! alumni to young people who come from similar backgrounds in terms of age, gender, family socioeconomic background, and self-reported high school GPA.<sup>2</sup> We also share findings from in-depth interviews that were conducted in person with individuals who responded to the survey.

| Race/Ethnicity              | Latino | African American | Asian American | White | Other |
|-----------------------------|--------|------------------|----------------|-------|-------|
| Wise Up! Survey Respondents | 96%    | 0%               | 2%             | 0%    | 2%    |
| Youth in California         | 44%    | 6%               | 11%            | 35%   | 4%    |

| Demographic Background      | Female | Male | From Immigrant Family | Low-Income Family | Parents have a College Degree |
|-----------------------------|--------|------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Wise Up! Survey Respondents | 58%    | 42%  | 100%                  | 96%               | 12%                           |
| Youth in California         | 48%    | 52%  | 54%                   | 38%               | 35%                           |

Source: CYAS Surveys

## II. Wise Up! Alumni And Young Adults in California

Wise Up! primarily involves immigrant and undocumented youth from the Los Angeles area. The 57 Wise Up! alumni who participated in this study generally reflect the demographic make-up of immigrant communities in California. As can be expected, Wise Up! alumni are more likely to come from Latino (96%) and immigrant (100%) backgrounds than the general young adult population of California. However, Wise Up! alumni come from significantly more disadvantaged backgrounds than the general population. As shown in the table, almost all Wise Up! alumni (96%) come from low-income families, as compared with only 38% of the general California young adult population. In addition, Wise Up! study participants are only *half as likely* to have college-educated parents than the general youth population (12% vs. 23%). Wise Up! survey participants are also disproportionately women.

## III. Educational Outcomes for Wise Up! Alumni

Educational attainment has become an increasingly important factor in determining life chances. Over the last four decades, the wage gap has grown between those completing a college degree and those who do not.<sup>3</sup> The shift from a manufacturing-based to a service and information-based economy has meant that a growing proportion of jobs,—particularly higher paying jobs—require at least some higher education.

Latino immigrant youth, including the undocumented, encounter significant barriers to finishing high school and enrolling in postsecondary education. However, Wise Up!’s programs contribute to the postsecondary school enrollment of its members. Indeed, Wise Up! alumni

enroll in college at much higher rates than comparable youth. While, overall, alumni are about as likely to enroll in community colleges as similar youth, they are 4.6 times more likely to attend a four-year university.

Wise Up! alumni referenced various activities that contributed to their academic success and post-secondary enrollment outcomes, including the following: mentorship of Wise Up! and other CHIRLA staff, SAT and scholarship workshops; opportunities to meet undocumented college students; exposure to college organizations serving other A.B. 540 (undocumented) students; workshops on A.B. 540, financial aid applications, Dream Act legislation; and safe community settings to discuss strategies for navigating the educational pipeline for undocumented students.

*“Organizers would give us a lot of information on scholarships available to A.B. 540 students and connect us to other organizations at different colleges that had support groups for A.B. 540 students. They would tell us about different types of colleges, and encourage us to apply, to give it a shot. Wise Up! was really about inspiring us to go to college, even if we didn’t have papers.”*

(Male, 24 years old)

Additionally, participation in Wise Up’s civic efforts further motivates degree attainment, as campaigns expose members to college-educated community stakeholders, and provide them an understanding of how obtaining a higher education degree can further enable them to help their community. Campaigns provide undocumented members the hope that they will one day have access to a

pathway to citizenship and well paying jobs that require a college degree.

#### IV. Civic Outcomes for Wise Up! Alumni

Like other youth organizing groups, Wise Up! aims to promote the civic development of its members. This goal emerges out of the recognition that powerful and healthy communities require active and informed participation. As earlier research has established, youth organizing provides an essential context for young people to acquire the knowledge and skills to become engaged by learning about elections and the policy process, developing skills for deliberation, and forging critical analyses that explain their social reality.<sup>4</sup>

As part of CHIRLA's larger effort to support immigrant incorporation, WiseUp! has advocated for policy changes and programs that increase college access for immigrant youth. For example, in 2001, CHIRLA's youth members helped fight for the passage of California legislation that allows undocumented college students to pay in-state tuition (Assembly Bill 540). They shared their testimonies in front of state legislators and helped generate support for the bill within their schools and communities. Similarly, Wise Up! members also were part of advocacy efforts leading to the 2011 passage of laws allowing undocumented youth access to certain forms of private and institutional financial aid (Assembly Bills 130 and 131, also known as the California Dream Act). Over the past decade, Wise Up! members and alumni have worked to raise awareness about the federal DREAM Act which, if signed into law, would allow an eventual path to citizenship for undocumented young adults who pursue higher education or the military.

This type of civic engagement at such a young age has implications for later-in-life community involvement. Indeed, Wise Up! members are notably more likely than the general population of California's youth to participate in civic activities after they leave high school. When compared to randomly selected youth from similar backgrounds:

Wise Up! alumni are 3.5 times more likely to have volunteered within the last year.

Wise Up! alumni are 6.7 times more likely to have worked on an issue that affects their community.

Wise Up! alumni are 3.9 times more likely to have expressed their view on a social and political issue online.

Wise Up! alumni are 12.7 times more likely to have attended a protest, action, or rally.

CHIRLA's Wise Up! high school program fosters high levels of civic engagement among its members. Alumni members demonstrate a deeper understanding of how to inject their viewpoints in government decision-making processes than youth who did not participate in high school organizing. They are also exercising high levels of leadership in their communities. CHIRLA alumni continue to be leaders on their college campuses or in the Undocumented Student Movement (DREAM Act or "Dreamer" movement) on a national level. Many continue to maintain strong ties to CHIRLA through general membership meetings or through CHIRLA's California's Dream Network, which coordinates state-wide campaigns of undocumented college students, documented allies, and community-based organizations.

*"Since our college A.B.540 support group works with CHIRLA, our activities are a lot about politics. We ... educate people about different campaigns, we hand out fliers, and we get people to make calls to support our campaign. Our group also tries to get out the vote to pass or to stop a bill, or in some cases we get people to stop the deportation of a DREAMER."*

— (Male, 23 years old)

*"After high school, I participated in a A.B.540 organization at my college. Now I'm coordinating another autonomous youth led organization, and am running for an elected position on national coordinating committee that deals with immigrant rights."*

— (Female, 22 years old)

*"Before I joined Wise Up!, I used to be more afraid of the police because I thought that they could separate me from my family. But now I know the rights that we have."*

— (Female, 18 years old)

The benefits of participating in CHIRLA's youth organizing program reverberate far beyond the members themselves. Importantly, alumni members encourage their family members to become involved in addressing

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community concerns. Unlike youth from the general population, Wise Up! alumni report helping their parents, siblings, or other family members overcome educational and informational barriers to civic participation. Alumni orient their families to political processes in the United States and make sure that they know their rights regarding civic and political participation. Additionally, many alumni mobilize their families to participate in the immigration rights movement and other local community issues. The results of this research suggest that Wise Up! impacts the civic engagement of families by promoting the educational achievement and community leadership of high school students.

*“My mom and uncles are always asking about the DREAM Act or just legislation that can help us legalize our status. So I explain to them what is happening with immigration reforms.”*

— (Female, 21 years old)

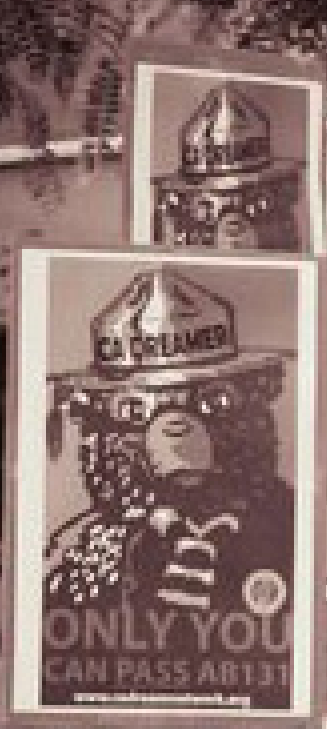
*“My mom went to a lot of the marches with me. I should say that she was not totally informed back then, but she went. We would go to the marches, and she eventually ended up being a part of a lot of things. And I feel like now, when she goes to work in the hotel, she gets a lot more involved in the union. It’s cool. For the first time, maybe two or three weeks ago, she invited me to a political event organized by the union, and that was crazy!”*

— (Male, 24 years old)

## Notes

1. For more information on the California Young Adult Survey, see <http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/projects/california-young-adult-survey>.
2. We use logistic regression analysis to compare youth organizing alumni to the general populations. Our methodology cannot account for the experiences of youth organizing alumni whose contact information was unavailable at the time of the study or who declined to participate in the survey. Our analysis also does not account for factors that motivate or enable some youth to participate in youth organizing and not others. As such, this study does not conclusively measure the size of the impact of youth organizing on the postsecondary educational and civic trajectories of alumni.
3. Carnevale, A., Smith, N., Strohl, J. (2010). *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018*. Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
4. See generally: Rogers, J., Mediratta, K., and Shah, S. (2012). Building Power, Learning Democracy: Youth Organizing as a Site of Civic Development. *Review of Research in Education* 36:43-66. Shah, S. (2011). *Building Transformative Youth Leadership: Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing*. New York: Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, OPS 11.

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