

ALMANAC



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Holiday Fund: Upward Scholars pivots to ensure adult immigrants stay in college

by Linda Prieto

Since 2010, local nonprofit Upward Scholars has empowered more than 900 students through education, career development support, and a community that believes adult immigrant students from low-income households have the determination to achieve a better life for themselves and their families.

This year, due to COVID-19, more than 80% of Upward Scholars students are reporting a loss of employment, housing insecurity, and not enough money to pay for food. As a result, their education is no longer their top priority.

In a normal year, Upward Scholars provides students with laptops and textbooks and covers their community college transportation, parking, and an on-campus meal voucher. But 2020 is not a normal year, and the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the lives of Upward Scholars students prompted Upward Scholars to increase and diversify its support services so adult immigrant students from a low-income bracket can continue studying at local community colleges.

To help ensure that students can continue their community college classes, Upward Scholars has pivoted all of its in-person services to online programs. For example, prior to COVID, Upward Scholars tutors, all community volunteers, met with their students in person. Now, tutors meet with their students over web video. Upward Scholars has also created several new virtual programs during the pandemic, such as online learning workshops, one-on-one English conversation partners, virtual career development workshops, and virtual student-staff support groups in Spanish.

Providing selected students with laptops has been a longtime focus of Upward Scholars. Now, all students who need laptops receive one, along with hot spots to ensure internet connectivity.

"Technology and connectivity for all remain the number one priority in the area of the digital divide as we work to bridge educational welfare for families and individuals most impacted by economic constraints," said Prieto.

Donations to The Almanac's Holiday Fund benefit Upward Scholars and nine other nonprofits serving the local community. To donate, go to siliconvalleycf.org/almanac-holiday-fund.

Since the onset of COVID-19 in mid-March, Upward Scholars has provided needy students with over 350 grocery gift cards, nearly 150 biweekly grocery gift boxes (provided by Vegan Outreach), and four drive-thru meal programs serving 750 student meals (provided by AnewVista). But as the pandemic has dragged on, student surveys revealed that they were still struggling. Thus, Upward Scholars recently launched its first-ever Safety Net Fund for students needing emergency aid.

Upward Scholars student and single mom Cristina wrote on her application, "I don't have medical insurance, and I'm very concerned and overwhelmed by the whole situation. Since my kids are home, I've been spending more on food because they are eating three times more. I live on a budget, and this month, it seems like I already exceeded the limit of my budget. Thanks for taking the time of providing care for us."

Another Upward Scholars student, Moises, said, "My family and I are so concerned because at work they cut hours. The rents are too expensive, and with the current situation at work, it is more difficult to survive in this emergency. I don't like to do this, but due to the situation and the concern I have for the well-being of my family, I am forced to ask for help. With all my heart, thank you very much!"

"The stories our students share are heartbreaking," said Prieto. "Our hope is that emergency funds will give students like Cristina and Moises the impetus to stay in school. In short, we're doing all that we can do to ensure that we don't let the pandemic stand in the way of our students' future success."

Linda Prieto, Ph.D, is the executive director of Upward Scholars.

Comments

Posted by **Linda Prieto**
 a resident of another community
 on Jan 5, 2021 at 4:42 pm
Linda Prieto is a registered user.

It is so rewarding to see the evolution of Upward Scholars over the years. The past few years have been ones of rapid growth and development for the team, allowing the organization to provide more and deeper services and support to our students than ever before. This past year, however, while filled with many challenges and unknowns, has been instrumental in revealing our team's ability to stretch and pivot quickly and effectively. Our commitment to keeping our students in college and on track to meet their academic and career goals has never been more important. The Almanac community's generosity helps us continue this mission into the new year and for that we are so thankful. :)

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