Innovative Strategies to Close Postsecondary Attainment Gaps

Advocating for Change During Times of Crisis

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In the past few years, communities across the nation have weathered the effects of multiple crises.

Natural disasters, such as wildfires in northern California, tornadoes and floods in the Midwest, or hurricanes along the southern coast have devastated districts and counties, repeatedly testing the resiliency of communities' emergency-response strategies.

The year 2020 brought two additional crises of extraordinary magnitude. Communities from coast to coast were upended first by the COVID-19 pandemic and then by anti-racism protests, fueled by centuries of discrimination and sparked by George Floyd's murder as well as other instances of police violence and systemic racism. Responding to these dual crises of a global pandemic and endemic, structural racism requires dual foci: both short- and long-term action and thinking at both the individual and society levels. Further, the fact that health and health care disparities plus wealth and employment gaps, among other inequities rooted in systemic racism, have caused the COVID-19 crisis to disproportionately impact Black and other communities of color demands a comprehensive and wide-ranging approach.

Successful community leaders understand how to prioritize immediate and direct action to help community members in real-time, while also continuing to address the structural and systemic barriers that consistently lead to disproportionate devastation for Black communities, communities of color, and other populations that have been historically and systematically discriminated against. Talent Hubs, a network of communities designated by Lumina Foundation, in partnership with the Kresge Foundation, for their ability to align and organize behind the common goal of increasing postsecondary attainment, are home to such leaders. Throughout crisis recovery in these communities, diverse groups of community stakeholders, civic leaders, and educators have collaborated across sectors to ensure no member of their communities is left behind. These cross-sector partnerships are built on the understanding that community healing and prosperity is not about "fixing" individuals; instead they focus on systemic reform in a way that intentionally addresses education, employment, and health disparities related to race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status.

Throughout the uncertainty of 2020, Talent Hubs have acted swiftly on behalf of their most disenfranchised populations to identify and remove barriers to education and provide services to keep their students from falling behind. In this time of national crisis, regional collaboratives can harness the power of their collective voice to advocate on behalf of their citizens for necessary change, call attention to policies and practices with inequitable consequences, and use data to illustrate how pandemics magnify disparities in their community that disproportionately impact the people they serve.

This guidebook highlights inspiring examples of Talent Hubs' responses from around the country and takes a deep dive into the partnership strategy that one Talent Hub in southwest Alabama deployed to capture and amplify the voices of students in their region who have been most marginalized by the effects of the current pandemic. Following the **interview** portion of the guidebook, we provide an **Op-ed Storytelling Tool** to help other communities harness the power of collective voice to advocate for change in their regions.

MOBILE COUNTY, ALABAMA

- **Chandra Scott** – Director, Strategic Outcomes, Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF)

Mobile County, located in southwest Alabama, adjacent to Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, encompasses eleven municipalities and is home to over 413,000 residents.[1] In Mobile County, 59 percent of residents are white, 36 percent are Black, and the remaining 7 percent are a range of all other ethnicities.[2] Only 31 percent of residents have earned a degree or credential and 22.3 percent have earned some college credit but no degree.[3] Approximately 21 percent of residents live in poverty and the median household income is $46,166.[4] Mobile County's unemployment rate jumped from 3.8 percent in March 2020 to 15.1 percent in April 2020 at the outset of the COVID-19 crisis.[5] Roughly 83 percent of Mobile County residents have a computer at home and 72 percent have broadband internet subscriptions, compared to the national averages of 88.8 percent and 80.4 percent, respectively.[6] This crisis has magnified the pre-existing digital divide and has had a disproportionate impact on the access and success of students from populations typically underrepresented in higher education.

The Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF), a nonprofit whose staff members have been advocates and activists for public education in the Mobile area for over two decades, is the lead Talent Hub partner for its region. MAEF employs a broad-based citizen engagement approach to improve public education outcomes and career readiness in the community. The foundation leverages strategic partnerships with civic leaders, industry, and public K-12 and postsecondary systems to advance its mission. MAEF's 75,000 Degrees (75K°) initiative aims to increase postsecondary attainment by doubling the number of Mobile County residents with degrees by 2030. Bishop State Community College, Coastal Alabama Community College, and the University of South Alabama are partners in 75K°, which is led by Chandra Scott, MAEF's Director of

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"UNDERREPRESENTED"

The term "underrepresented," like "under-served," is commonly used but also commonly misunderstood. The fact many students historically have not been served by our higher education system and presently are not represented in that system is an intentional result, not an unfortunate coincidence.

In the recent words of IHEP President Michelle Asha Cooper:

"For too long, our higher education system has operated on policies, practices, and assumptions that inherently privilege white, wealthy, and well-connected students over their peers. The insidious policies that disadvantage Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other students of color, as well as low- and moderate-income students do more than limit their potential. They limit the potential of our higher education system to be a true arbiter of social mobility and justice. But the way we've been isn't the only way we can be. Our higher education system can rise to this moment and fulfill its mission for all students, by reframing, rethinking, and even rebuilding."

Strategic Outcomes, who has worked for educational equity for over eighteen years.

MAEF's blueprint expands beyond Mobile County to impact the entire Piney Wood region in southwest Alabama, also known as Region 7. Their partners collaborate with the entire nine-county region, cascading aligned county-level efforts into a regional vision.

The COVID-19 crisis forced higher education Talent Hub partners in Mobile County, along with institutions across the country, to move their instruction and work online during spring 2020, with an uncertain date of return to

1   Mobile County. (n.d.). *About Mobile County*. Retrieved from https://www.mobilecountyal.gov/government/about-mobile-county/

2   United States Census Bureau. (2019). *QuickFacts: Mobile County, Alabama*. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/mobilecountyalabama

3   Mobile Area Education Foundation. (n.d.). *75K degrees*. Retrieved from http://www.maef.net/our-work/initiatives/75k-degrees/

4   United States Census Bureau. (2019). *QuickFacts: Mobile County, Alabama*. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/mobilecountyalabama

5   Alabama Department of Labor. (2020). *Alabama, U.S., & county area: Civilian labor force data*. Retrieved from http://www2.labor.alabama.gov/LAUS/cntyclf.pdf

6   United States Census Bureau. (2019). *QuickFacts: United States*. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219

campus-based operations. As colleges and universities acted quickly to protect the health and wellbeing of their students, staff, and faculty, postsecondary professionals were charged with transforming the higher education system into a fully virtual environment almost overnight. Postsecondary institutions in Mobile County responded by transitioning student services like tutoring, advising, and basic needs assistance to open Zoom rooms or by appoint-ment using Zoom and similar platforms. Colleges and universities addressed students' increased financial strain by creating COVID-19-specific student emergency funds and keeping campus food pantries open with new "social distancing" guidelines. These institutions also attempted to tackle the heightened digital divide by providing wi-fi in campus parking lots, and local internet providers offered temporarily free or low-cost subscriptions.

The following sections provide an in-depth look at how the Mobile Talent Hub lifted up the voices of those students who were most impacted by these disruptions to their postsecondary plans in order to ensure they—and others like them—are not left behind. For those interested in harnessing the power of collective voice to advocate for change in their regions, IHEP's **Op-ed Storytelling Tool** demonstrates how to use stories to craft a powerful op-ed.

Coastal Alabama Community College students, Calvin Dulaney, Brennan Howard, and Cameron Morris, taking a stroll on the porch of the Fairhope Campus' Administration Building before March 2020. "We miss seeing our students in person and look forward to the days when we can return our classes to campus," shared college staff. "In the meantime, we are doing all we can to keep our students safe and minimize the spread of COVID-19." Photo courtesy of Coastal Alabama Community College.

Talent Hubs, by design, understand that to increase educational attainment, they must work to fix systems and intentionally address barriers that lead to equity gaps related to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Due to the cross-sector nature of their work, Talent Hubs can act in meaningful ways when they leverage their collective voice to advocate on behalf of the people they serve. Even more powerfully, Talent Hubs can use their position to amplify the voices of impacted communities who would not otherwise be heard. Actions like these are necessary to ensure equitable access to and success in postsecondary education that will lead to meaningful employment and stronger communities.

In the following interview, IHEP spoke with Chandra Scott about how MAEF conducts collective action work and amplifies the collective voice.

Goals

IHEP: How did you identify the problem that the Mobile Talent Hub is collectively working to solve, even before the COVID-19 crisis?

In Mobile County, we were grappling with a disconnect between our high school, postsecondary, and workforce sectors. After years of intense focus, our high school graduation rates were going up, but we continued to hear from partners in our workforce sector that high school graduates were not workforce ready. This feedback led to our initial focus on postsecondary education as the link between secondary education and employment.

The first time we reviewed our postsecondary attainment data was heartbreaking. We all had this sense of shock. For years, we've unwittingly perpetuated the perception that our higher ed systems were great. You would see new buildings going up, campus expansions, and sports teams coming in, signaling growth. With growth, it's easy to assume that student outcomes must be great, but the data said something totally different. At the time, one institution's graduation rate was under 14 percent. Once we started to disaggregate the data and focus on Black, or any people of color, it was startling how low postsecondary attainment rates were.

We coupled the attainment data with our projected workforce needs and an evaluation of our community. That's when we realized that only around 75,000 out of the 413,000 people in Mobile held a postsecondary degree and the majority of them would either be aging out of the workforce or were employed in the education sector. We realized this didn't leave enough people with postsecondary degrees to fill positions requiring such credentials in other industries.

> *Our thought was, "You're telling us that in a community with so many resources, our people really have not been the valued asset? It's really been buildings and industry?" We decided that to shift the conversation to postsecondary education, we would need to focus on human capital as an asset.*

We began to be strategic and to hold our education leaders accountable. We needed them to be more open, transparent, and engaged about how their institutions would help meet our goal of 75,000 additional degrees. That was probably the greatest benefit of this work—it geared us up to be more open with each other and to eliminate the invisible walls that kept us from entering each other's space to collaborate.

IHEP: How did you identify the student populations on which MAEF would ultimately focus?

We felt a need to put emphasis on students who are African American, both male and female, and students who are Pell-eligible, which is usually synonymous with a low-income student or family. Those two populations are part of our equity lens because our data showed that they have high remediation rates, while also rating lowest in completion. We realized that surely something is going on if African American and Pell-eligible students are the ones who are usually enrolled in the remedial courses.

We all know research has shown that when students are put on a remedial track, they're less likely to complete because they're already behind their cohort. If students have to repeat the remedial course, then they might give up, or be forced to give up, because their financial aid will likely run out. We realized we needed to better understand the multi-layered barriers and challenges those two populations faced.

IHEP: How did MAEF's previous work guide its response to the COVID-19 crisis in your community?

Over the years, we've had a front-row seat to watch how K-12 and higher ed dealt with students who are called different terms, like "opportunity youth," "high-risk," or "at-risk," but all share the common denominator of being left behind, even as their challenges differ by the individual. Many of us would likely have a hard time trying to balance the myriad challenges these students face while juggling what academia requires with all of their other responsibilities. Hearing student stories in Mobile kept my eyes open to the unseen challenges that exist in our society and our communities. As a society, we see a student going to college and think they must be fine. We assume that their world is good, because if it wasn't, they wouldn't be there. In reality, that is so far from the truth. Hearing actual stories of students' struggles kept me from thinking that because enrollment is going up, all of these students are doing great and everyone is on the same level playing field, when that's not the case.

IHEP: How did the COVID-19 crisis magnify the disparities in your community that impact the students you serve?

Three years ago, MAEF opened the Accel Day and Evening Academy, which was the state's first charter school. We work with a lot of underserved kids, particularly with regard to technology access, so we provide Chromebooks for all of them because we know the resource barriers they face. When COVID hit, I witnessed what our

organization had to do to assist our charter school students, such as assessing how many students needed to check out a Chromebook to take home and how many students we had to help access broadband because they lacked any service in their home. So many processes had to be put in place to support those high school students—and that was only at one charter school.

Because of this, I suspected it would be no different in higher ed. When I spoke with advisors at our partner postsecondary institutions, they talked about how their phone literally would not stop ringing because their students were concerned with online learning, saying, "I've never had an online course," or, 'I only had one online course, but I usually did it on campus in your lab." Now, listen to that. "I take an online class at your institution, but I come to your institution to do the online class." The craziness in that statement alone contains so many layers of challenges that student faces. Most likely that student took the online course because it gave them flexibility and time to do the course, but they didn't have the resources to take an online course in the way we imagine they would, in the comfort of their homes.

Listening to these anecdotes pushed me to want to understand better: how are all students being impacted by the COVID pandemic? I think it gave us an opportunity to show the people in positions of power, who can truly influence systemic change around access to technology and non-traditional learning loads, how we can do better for our students.

IHEP: How else does technology impact students in Mobile and MAEF's goals?

Lack of technology or internet is usually labeled as a rural issue. One student with whom I spoke doesn't live in rural Alabama; she lives in a suburban area and yet she does not have internet. I want people to understand that we can't box issues to belong to one population of people, just because that's usually the group that we've been told, or sold, to believe the issue impacts. That's a strategy we use to ignore a problem. We're taught that only a small group of people are affected, which causes us to think that it's not that big of a problem.

In Alabama, we had to realize that this problem is bigger than just our rural areas. The shift to distance learning broadened the gap and it made me concerned about

WORKFORCE SPOTLIGHT

How are regional Chambers of Commerce advocating for the needs of local businesses and their communities during the COVID-19 crisis?

In Oklahoma, the **Tulsa Regional Chamber** launched its COVID-19 Business Impact Survey in mid-March, surveying regional businesses on pandemic-induced challenges and how the Chamber could be of most value. Overwhelmingly, respondents communicated the need for advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels for financial support and assistance. In Michigan, the **Detroit Regional Chamber** conducted a Return-to-Work Survey in early June to garner feedback from regional business leaders regarding how to safely physically reopen businesses and establish work-from-home protocols. The survey results will be used to create resources to assist local businesses in reopening and inform policymakers of the ongoing regional needs.

What actions are Talent Hub partners taking to ensure businesses survive the pandemic and displaced workers find employment during the COVID-19 crisis?

Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership quickly adapted by moving their Professional Development Summer Series for Interns online. The Series' purpose is to support employers in providing high-quality, real-world learning experiences for their interns. Team Northeast Ohio Business Development Organization (NEO) (part of the **Cleveland Hub**), and the University of South Florida (**Tampa Bay Hub**), swiftly transitioned their career fairs online. Team NEO sponsored the OH-Zone Virtual Career Fair with over twenty manufacturing employers from northeast Ohio and the University of South Florida held a Virtual Career Fair in partnership with CareerEco and eleven other Florida public universities that featured over one-hundred employers.

reaching our regional goal of 75,000 degrees. Our state has a goal of 500,000 highly skilled and trained workers. Both of those goals are now in jeopardy. If a pandemic

pushes postsecondary instruction online, and a quarter of the state doesn't have technology or internet, how will we hit our educational and workforce targets?

When I talk about the issue around the technology in the household, yes, most households have some type of smart device or computer. However, usually more than one person lives in that household. How do you map out whose work is prioritized in a home with one computer, that's likely not the most up-to-date? Someone in the house is going to get short-changed. That's why we had to look at this more comprehensively; beyond whether each household has a computer, how many people in that household now have to shift to online learning or work when a situation like COVID-19 happens? I wanted an opportunity to explore what others were dealing with and shine a light on the lack of understanding of how this crisis is impacting people throughout our state.

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

How have backbone community partners acted swiftly to identify and remove barriers to education and services during this time of crisis?

Childcare emerged as a significant need in many communities. When work cannot be completed at home, access to quality childcare is essential for parents and caregivers who are providing life-critical services or who are at risk for health reasons or extreme financial hardship. The **Columbus** and **Tulsa Hubs** provided a pathway for families, including first responders, to access safe emergency childcare. The United Way of Central New Mexico (**Albuquerque Hub**), the Boston Foundation (**Boston Hub**), the United Way of Southern Nevada (**Las Vegas Hub**), the Southwest Florida Community Foundation (**Southwest Florida Hub**), and the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay (**Tampa Bay Hub**) established emergency relief funds to be distributed to nonprofits serving local community members most impacted by COVID-19. The United Way of Southern Nevada and the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay also leveraged their websites to bring attention to the resource and volunteer needs of community-based organizations in their regions.

How have Talent Hub partners reacted to societal inequities magnified by COVID-19?

Realizing that many students in their community did not have the internet access and technology needed to be successful in school, the **Nashville** Area Chamber of Commerce responded by swiftly establishing a community consortium to address the regional digital divide. **Northeast Indiana** Talent Hub partner Ivy Tech Fort Wayne collaborated with the local YWCA to create a regional quarantine center where homeless community members could receive needed medical care. **Tampa Bay** Talent Hub partner, United Way Suncoast, along with Feeding Tampa Bay, continued food distribution to neighborhoods most impacted by the pandemic.

Partnerships

IHEP: How have you worked to build partnerships within your community?

> *Here's the reality: it takes years to build trust with others—not only with people but systems of people.*

MAEF has existed in Mobile since 1992 and over the years, MAEF has earned the respect of doing community engagement from day one. We've always hosted what we call "Yes, we can" community conversations. Funny note—Barack Obama's campaign actually called us and wanted to buy the website name yeswecan.org when he was running for president. This practice has always been the heart and the core of the organization—to hear from the people, and not to just assume what they were experiencing, what was happening, why things weren't happening. When you make assumptions, you can kill a thing before the thing can even become a thing.

MAEF built a reputation over the years of working within communities. I'm not using "community" as a broad definition; I'm talking about going to recreation centers and venues in the middle of people's neighborhoods that people walk to from their homes. We ask structured questions, we listen to the people, and then we write down responses and give them the document to review. It's important for them to validate what we hear and say, "Yep, this is what we said we desire, we want, and we demand." We always take those documents, which we call "Community Agreements," and share them with leaders in our city and our region. Much of our work is centered around the lack of education resources or the desired education outcome for those neighborhoods. We do what we call "co-owned strategic planning" with superintendents, using those documents.

This process has earned us respect. People know that we literally and authentically go get the voice of the people, document it, and give it back—and that we hold leaders accountable. Our role has always been to help bring communities and leadership together. It's not hard for us to bring people together in our community because of those years of doing the hard stuff.

IHEP: What aspect of community partnerships is most challenging?

It is important to step back and orchestrate, to bring in people who you know cannot only bring credibility, but expertise. You have to be willing to put your pride to the side. This is not about you. If you can't put your pride to the side, then you will never truly do collective-impact work.

> *Collective impact is very uncomfortable; it is not a feel-good process. You have to give up your ownership for the greater good.*

As humans, that is never a great feeling, because you feel like in some form or way you've been diminished and won't get the credit for your intellectual property. But guess what? You will know at the end of the day that your contribution helped students, and your state, or your region, or your city. If it only helped one student, that's one student you can point out and say, "I did that. I helped to do that," even though that student will never know you.

EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

How have Talent Hub higher education partners provided emergency, real-time supports to students during COVID-19?

In California (**Shasta Hub**), leaders have repurposed school buses as mobile hot spot centers and parked them in areas that would otherwise be disconnected. These hot spot centers enable students to access and complete their coursework on predictable schedules. Institutions like the College of Southern Nevada (**Las Vegas Hub**) and University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (**RGV Hub**) offered emergency relief funds to students who were enrolled in the spring 2020 semester. South Texas College (**RGV Hub**) partnered with schools to open computer labs to virtually assist students with enrollment processes.

How have Talent Hub partners who advocate for equitable college access altered their work during COVID-19?

College Now Greater Cleveland (**Cleveland Hub**) and the Detroit Regional Chamber along with the Detroit College Access Network (**Detroit Hub**), continued to proactively reach out to students regarding college access, transitioning their advising appointments to virtual platforms. Both organizations have also converted community workshops on topics like financial aid and college enrollment into webinars. St. Louis Graduates (**St. Louis Hub**) implemented Brown Bag Virtual Lunches for high school counselors and access advisors to connect, learn, and share resources. Lunch topics included virtual advising, social-emotional student support, and assisting students with financial aid appeals.

IHEP: How has being designated as a Talent Hub impacted your work?

If you look on Lumina's Talent Hub map, there aren't many Talent Hubs in my area of the world, meaning the South. The fact that Lumina gave lower Alabama a chance means a lot, particularly to anybody who knows the history of our state. MAEF has silently made major changes in school

districts and to policy in our region for many years, but becoming a Talent Hub elevated our organizational credibility. I honestly do believe the designation is what has helped our state coalesce around postsecondary attainment. Our state leaders were able to see that if our small corner of the state has achieved such a successful outcome in two years, then perhaps other areas should be learning from us and replicating in other areas of the state. I strongly believe if it was just MAEF doing the work, the state would not be paying attention to it. But, because we're attached to a national organization that backed this agenda, we have been able to elevate the work happening at our institutions.

Implementation

IHEP: How was MAEF able to amplify the community's voice to maximize impact so swiftly in this time of crisis?

MAEF doesn't carry out the work, but we can advocate, share, communicate, and lift up the work. Our role is to connect with the right people who can carry out the work, such as the higher ed leaders at our partner institutions, Bishop State Community College, Coastal Alabama Community College, and the University of South Alabama. MAEF cannot credential students, but we can partner with institutional leaders who understand why they may need to think out-of-the-box and change their processes to meet the current needs and demands in our region.

For organizations involved in collective-action work, if you haven't done the hard work of bringing your community together prior to whatever crisis you're dealing with, partner with someone who has. That's the key ingredient. You have to have the credibility of an organization that people already trust, so they know that if they say something, your organization is going to respect it, and get it to the right people to carry their voice.

IHEP: What led you to have direct conversations with students affected by the pandemic?

One thing that bothered me from the experience with our charter school was how uneasy parents and students felt about the process of borrowing technology. They worried that if something happened to the technology while in their possession, like their three-year-old accidentally stepping on the computer, they wouldn't be able to afford to replace or fix it. Often they would reject the option of borrowing technology rather than risk being in that position. How do we create systems that don't put people in positions that make them feel like they are accepting a handout that they still can't afford to take?

This gave me the idea to reach out and conduct one-on-one interviews with college students. I reached out to the advisors at Bishop State Community College, Coastal Alabama Community College, and the University of South Alabama, and asked for names of students that might be willing to talk with me. I didn't tell the advisors why I wanted to speak with students, because I didn't want to bias who they chose. I just told them that I wanted to talk to some students to see how they're doing during the pandemic. One of the Bishop State students I interviewed shared her story that resonated all the way across both challenges: technology and internet access. I knew she was only one of thousands more who shared the same story, and so I wrote an op-ed to elevate her story.

IHEP: Why did you choose an op-ed to communicate this message?

I love telling stories; that's just how I communicate. I've shifted over time to be more strategic, to use stories to make an impact.

> *Writing an op-ed allows you to expand your voice—and the voices of others—and helps you to humanize the impact of policy decisions.*

I alone don't have the reach, or the type of control, or the influence to make changes at the federal level. But with an op-ed, I can reach those who do have that power, and humanizing an experience can help them make decisions that really lead to better outcomes; at least that's my hope.

Impact

IHEP: You've mentioned listening to community members' needs and amplifying their voices. How did your op-ed fit that strategy?

That's the core of who I am. I'm a listener. In this way, the work of MAEF fits perfectly with my way of processing things. By listening, you realize that collective impact is not about you. It is about bringing different people into a space and amplifying their voice, no matter who they are.

Even that disruptive person, whom you cannot stand to see show up to a meeting—their voice is just as important, because they have a reason for pushing their agenda. If you listen hard enough, you will learn what is at the root of their disruption. If you can understand how to do that, it most likely will help you understand others that have been shunned from those spaces and how to involve them as partners in the work. No matter who they are, you have to listen to them.

For instance, the student I interviewed, whom I refer-enced in the op-ed, over and over she kept repeating her disbelief that anybody wanted to listen to her. She kept asking, "Why me? Why did you pick me?" And, I kept telling her, "Why not you?" I had to remind her not to discredit her own voice and story.

IHEP: Why was it important to leverage MAEF's relationships to connect directly with students to amplify their voices in this moment?

> *The key to this work is to make everyone understand that their voice matters. No matter what tags or labels someone has given to you, earned or unearned, your voice still matters.*

And it can possibly change policy and practice at a higher level if your voice is finally presented to the people who make decisions. Because, we have to be

After Chandra Scott's op-ed ran in in May, Lateshia C. finished her spring 2020 term with a "big bang," receiving three As and one B and earning her place on the Dean's List. Lateshia, pictured here on her way to church, praises God for bringing her "through many storms." Photo courtesy of Lateshia C.

honest, most of the people who make real decisions are not connected to the collective voice. They are connected to the individual and collective voice, which is usually connected to a bottom line, or to some type of fabricated goal that is not connected to the voice. If we don't continue to help the voice get connected to the work, we always will leave behind the very people we say we want to close gaps for. For me, the only way to make that a reality is to bring those voices into the space where those spreadsheets and analyses are being reviewed and layer those voices on top. Make the numbers real to the person who's making the decision.

Bishop State Commencement Ceremony. Photo courtesy of Bishop State Community College.

Looking Ahead

IHEP: Have you learned any lessons that you would like to share with other groups interested in using their collective voice to advocate for equity in their communities?

The first thing that pops in my head is that I went into this kicking and screaming. When Dakota asked me to join the Lumina Policy Corps, I told him, "No. That's not what I do. MAEF is a non-profit. We cannot lobby to federal staff in any way."[7] That was my lack of understanding of the difference between lobbying and advocating. As a non-profit, we can advocate for our students' needs by putting a voice to the issues.

I would tell other Talent Hubs to talk with the students in their community. When I was working in high schools, I would literally go to high school events, sit next to a student, and just spark a conversation because I wanted to understand what things were like from their perspective. I encourage everyone to do that so when you do have the opportunity to approach federal, state, or local leaders, you aren't just walking in with a fancy info-graphic of data and charts that tell the outcome. Instead, you can say, "Take this data point right here, which is

really a student named Charles, from whichever institution. He had to go through x, y, and z, and now he's this number of credits away from completion, or this is what his persistence or re-enrollment looks like." The story humanizes the data.

IHEP: What would you suggest another Talent Hub member do to get started?

As non-profit leaders in this work, we should gather as many human stories as possible. If that has not been your work, make it your work now. I know a lot of us that follow the data but never connect the data point to the real person it represents. Remember the key reason we're doing this is for the students and their outcomes. How can that be your focus if you have not talked to a student?

My biggest piece of advice is that as you're crunching numbers, gathering data, and building systems, don't forget to take a moment to connect with a person, or persons, that you are doing the work for. You have to know where they are, and who they are, to be better purveyors of the data that can ultimately benefit them.

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7   As a private foundation, Lumina does not support or oppose any legislation. Lumina provides educational information, nonpartisan research and analysis to advance Goal 2025 – 60% of working-age Americans holding high-quality credentials beyond high school by 2025.
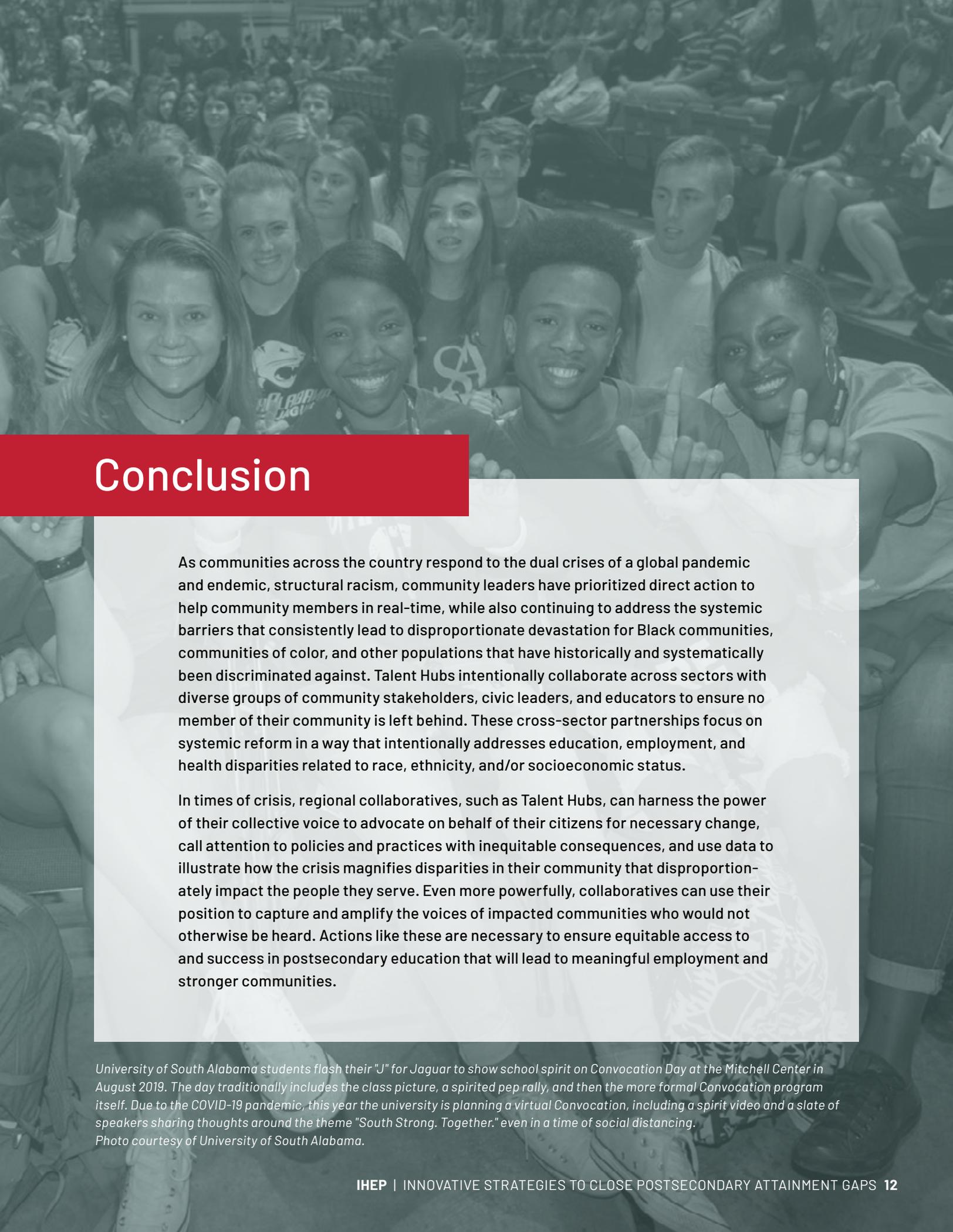
Conclusion

As communities across the country respond to the dual crises of a global pandemic and endemic, structural racism, community leaders have prioritized direct action to help community members in real-time, while also continuing to address the systemic barriers that consistently lead to disproportionate devastation for Black communities, communities of color, and other populations that have historically and systematically been discriminated against. Talent Hubs intentionally collaborate across sectors with diverse groups of community stakeholders, civic leaders, and educators to ensure no member of their community is left behind. These cross-sector partnerships focus on systemic reform in a way that intentionally addresses education, employment, and health disparities related to race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status.

In times of crisis, regional collaboratives, such as Talent Hubs, can harness the power of their collective voice to advocate on behalf of their citizens for necessary change, call attention to policies and practices with inequitable consequences, and use data to illustrate how the crisis magnifies disparities in their community that disproportionately impact the people they serve. Even more powerfully, collaboratives can use their position to capture and amplify the voices of impacted communities who would not otherwise be heard. Actions like these are necessary to ensure equitable access to and success in postsecondary education that will lead to meaningful employment and stronger communities.

University of South Alabama students flash their "J" for Jaguar to show school spirit on Convocation Day at the Mitchell Center in August 2019. The day traditionally includes the class picture, a spirited pep rally, and then the more formal Convocation program itself. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year the university is planning a virtual Convocation, including a spirit video and a slate of speakers sharing thoughts around the theme "South Strong. Together." even in a time of social distancing.
Photo courtesy of University of South Alabama.

Op-Ed Storytelling Tool

Meaning "opposite the editorial page," op-eds express the opinions of an author not associated with the publishing news outlet. These opinion pieces can be effectively deployed to elevate a community's shared voice, bring awareness to an issue and identify recommendations for policymakers.

They enable individuals to argue persuasively to sway public opinion and, ultimately, even public policy. Op-eds are brief, typically 750 words or less, and usually cover one major point that relates to a current event, like a public health crisis.

This tool provides readers with a guide to writing effective op-eds using an example written by Chandra Scott, Director of Strategic Outcomes at Mobile Area Education Foundation, Lead Partner for Lumina's Mobile Talent Hub. This op-ed was crafted during COVID-19 to bring attention to how the pandemic exacerbated the digital divide in Alabama and negatively impacted college access and persistence for students from populations underrepresented in higher education. It was published on May 13, 2020 on AL.com.

PLANNING

1. Determine the Best Author

Is it better to hear from the college president, an employer, a faculty member, a parent, or a student? The best author depends upon whom you are trying to reach and why.

2. Own Your Voice

Many people may doubt they have the expertise required to write an op-ed. Lived experience can equate to the most powerful expertise, and equitable representation in the voices we amplify is vital. Use a personal tone and share your own experiences.

3. Identify the Problem, Cause, and Solution

Clearly identify the problem you want to address, its cause and possible solutions, as these factors will inform how you present the problem. You do not need to articulate a complete solution to the problem, but you do need to know who can take action to make change.

4. Know Your Audience and the "So What"

Who is your primary audience and what do they value? Why should they care about the problem you have identified? The answers to these questions will determine how you frame the issue.

5. Identify Target Media Outlets

Identify ideal media outlets for your op-ed. Does your target audience read these publications? If not, which other outlets would enable you to reach them? Familiarize yourself with submission requirements and follow them closely. If online submission is required, submit your piece prior to emailing staff directly for follow-up.

6. Identify Target Release Date

Etiquette requires you pitch to only one media outlet at a time. Build sufficient time into your timeline to pitch, not get accepted, and then pitch to additional outlets before your target release date. Ideally your op-ed relates to something timely, such as recent news, a policy change, or a new study. Consider this connection when selecting your target release date to ensure it is well-timed for the most impact.

Establish Your Credibility

Ensure something in your op-ed lets your audience know you have experience or expertise in your topic. It may be as simple as your title, or you may need to signal the audience with phrases like "In my 17 years as an administrator" or "As a student who stopped-out".

Grab Attention

Even before COVID-19, but especially now, many topics are competing for your audience's attention. Your opening needs a "hook" to intrigue your audience to keep reading. Hooks include surprising facts, examples, brief stories, and strong claims.

Make Your Point

Authors can get swept up in a story and not realize they haven't made a clear argument. Use short sentences and paragraphs and avoid jargon for clarity.

Consider a Counterargument (or Not)

Sometimes it's a good idea to acknowledge a counterargument. In other cases, you could be simply giving visibility to your critics. Consider whether you are preemptively addressing your readers' questions or creating doubt. If the answer is the latter, skip the counterargument.

OPINION

Lack of broadband access is a hidden barrier to our pandemic recovery

POSTED MAY 13, 2020

By Chandra Scott | Director, Strategic Outcomes Mobile Area Education Foundation

Alabama has a goal of growing its workforce to 500,000 highly skilled employees over the next five years. With an unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic, is this goal still possible?

One alarming outcome of the pandemic is the transition from traditional learning to virtual learning in both K-12 and postsecondary institutions. Lateshia C. is a 27-year-old, single mother of two who attends community college with the hopes of becoming a nurse. With an unforeseen novel COVID-19 pandemic [sic], Lateshia's path to attaining a degree has become challenged with the college's campus closure and transition to virtual learning only. She does not have internet in her home and new internet installation is not an essential service during the stay-at-home order. Therefore, in order to receive and complete her assignments, she has to drive nearly 20 miles from Spanish Fort to Mobile to get access to internet at her sister's home—causing both a health risk and an additional financial burden due to the cost of gas. Flooding on rainy days prevents her gaining internet access and therefore negatively impacts her grades.

In Alabama Workforce Region 7, the Mobile Area Education Foundation facilitates a postsecondary attainment agenda known as 75,000 degrees by 2030 (75,000 Degrees Talent Hub*). This region, like all regions in Alabama, already faces challenges to getting more citizens *to* and *through* a postsecondary pathway. Now that higher education institutions have closed their doors and transitioned all learning to virtual classrooms, challenges that already existed are amplified.

Many students rely on campus computer labs to access and complete their assignments because they can't afford or access internet at home. When nearly 82,000 students enrolled in an Alabama 2- and 4-year institution receive Pell funding, access to technology is an expense many can't afford. Even if a student can afford to purchase a computer, what good is it if he/she doesn't have access to internet/Wi-Fi?

Support Your Point

Use evidence and examples to support your point and provide context to frame quantitative evidence like data.

Conclusion

Your conclusion should relate back to your introduction and offer some form of solution. You need to identify who can do what to make change and ideally provide a specific call to action.

Internet/Wi-Fi access is a bifurcated equity challenge encompassing geography and affordability. Let's start with rural communities. As stated in a USAtoday.com article, in nine of 67 Alabama counties, less than 30% of the population has access to broadband. Choctaw County only has an internet access rate of 22.8%. Cleburne County has a low access rate of 12.9%. For other Alabamians, access to internet is not based on geography, but affordability. An additional $40-50/month for internet creates a hardship for many families in Alabama, which is the sixth poorest state in the U.S. With access to broadband being at such disparaging low rates, transitioning to only virtual learning further widens the gap of equitable access to earning a credential or degree.

Every day we are bombarded with data on the economic impact COVID-19 is having on our state, nation, and world. We have to remember people are attached to these numbers. This brings me back to my initial question; will we be able to fulfill our state's postsec-ondary attainment goal so that we can grow our workforce to 500,000 highly skilled employees? We must. It is more pertinent than ever. In order for our state to recover from the negative economic impacts of this pandemic, we must invest in Alabama's best asset...human capital.

As our local, state, and federal leaders navigate through this pandemic, I challenge them to put the word equity in action. While distributing stimulus checks may address the short-term needs of some of our community members, we must also find ways to better the process of getting *to* and *through* postsecondary pathways for all Alabamians. Equitable access to quality education is not only an economic impera-tive, but a moral imperative and it is the only way we will ensure 500,000 highly skilled employees in our workforce by 2025.

Originally appeared on AL.com's website – www.al.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Talent Hubs are communities that have shown the ability and commitment to significantly increase college-level learning among residents of all backgrounds. Talent Hubs are officially designated as such by Lumina Foundation, with support from the Kresge Foundation.

Areas that have earned a designation as a Talent Hub truly work as a community, meaning businesses, education leaders, and civic organizations work as a unit to attract, cultivate, and retain skilled and knowledgeable workers. Aligned and organized around this shared goal, they create multiple ways for individuals to earn college degrees, certificates, and other quality credentials beyond a high school diploma.

Each Talent Hub has a backbone organization, a nonprofit entity that organizes and coordinates the work of the various local stakeholders. The hubs span the country, from New York City to Shasta County, California, from St. Louis to the Rio Grande Valley, and from Boston to Albuquerque.

The Talent Hubs serve various populations. Some focus on African American residents, some on Latinxs, others on Native Americans. Some Talent Hubs are targeting traditional college students, while others are zeroing in on older students who left school before finishing degrees. All share a commitment to eliminating disparities in educational outcomes among students of color.

As part of IHEP's role in the Talent Hubs effort, IHEP documents the implementation of innovative policies and practices within the Talent Hubs and develops tools to create and/or assess postsecondary policy with an emphasis on equity.

For more about the Talent Hubs effort, visit: www.luminafoundation.org/talent-hubs

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Our goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.

Lumina takes a range of approaches to effect change in federal and state policy. We support the conditions to create and sustain the political will for change. We also provide policy leaders with nonpartisan research and advice, point them toward potential policy options, and support advocacy efforts.