

Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement

Rio Grande Valley, Texas

Organizational Background

The Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement, or VIDA, is a nonprofit organization founded in September 1995 by Valley Interfaith,¹ a grassroots organizing group, working in partnership with community and business leaders in the Rio Grande Valley at the southern most tip of Texas. VIDA's mission is "to formulate new institutional relationships in the Rio Grande Valley that simultaneously address employers' needs for skilled workers" and help low-income, unemployed and underemployed residents in the Valley get the skills necessary to secure a high-skilled, high-wage job. VIDA works with employers, education institutions and community-based nonprofit organizations to provide services in six locations, and its work spans four counties. Today, its board of directors consists of five leaders from Valley Interfaith and five local business leaders.

Distinguishing features

- Substantial financing from local sales tax, bridge receipts and general revenue
- Regional collaboration and impacts
- Outcomes measured through Return On Investment

Industries

- Allied Health
- Manufacturing

The Valley has a diverse economic and employment base, with the mainstay agricultural and livestock sector interspersed with urbanized centers that have developed, along with the manufacturing and assembly industries. Much of the manufacturing industry appeared in the region beginning in the 1960s in the form of *maquiladoras* – typically low-wage assembly plants. In more recent years, many of these plants, including those that produced for Haggard Clothing Co., Fruit of the Loom, and Levi-Strauss & Co., have downsized or relocated out of the Valley. This has created a large surplus of displaced workers with skills that are no longer in demand or relevant for more highly skilled manufacturing and health care jobs that have come to the region in the ensuing years, leaving employers challenged to locate sufficient numbers of qualified workers.

Today, the geographic area served by VIDA is characterized by an unusual combination of very rapid job creation, quickly dropping unemployment rates as the demand for qualified workers outpaces the supply, and per capita income levels that are among the lowest in the nation. To a great extent, this contradiction is due to the regional skills gap – a large number of low-income adults in the Rio Grande Valley lack the kinds of skills that are required by high-wage occupations in the advanced manufacturing and health care industries. At the same time, the region's rapidly expanding hotel and restaurant industry offers jobs that do not provide workers with family-supporting wages or benefits.

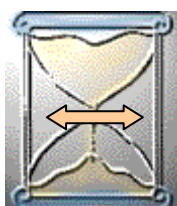
VIDA is modeled after Project QUEST in San Antonio, but adaptations were made to accommodate these unique and diverse circumstances, and to partner with the Valley's large number and variety of businesses, particularly in the health care and manufacturing industries. VIDA's vision is rooted in a market-driven philosophy that aims to provide workforce services that contribute sustained economic growth for the local area, and promote access to quality,

¹ Valley Interfaith is an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation. Members of Valley Interfaith are drawn from 45 churches and public school groups. Since its creation in 1982, this group has organized successfully to bring basic services such as electricity, roads and health care to impoverished residents of the Rio Grande Valley.

living-wage jobs. VIDA targets those industry sectors that provide jobs with benefits, livable wages (defined for the region as at least \$8.50 per hour), and opportunities for wage and career advancement. Despite an expanding numbers of jobs, the hotel and restaurant industry has not been a target industry for VIDA because generally work in the sector is low quality.

Strategy and Services

VIDA provides services to low-income individuals based on a one-stop model that offers easy access, maximum flexibility, and coordination of a range of services tailored to individuals' needs. Income-eligible applicants (defined by federal poverty guidelines as un- or underemployed adults earning less than \$7.50 per hour with family responsibilities), who are ready for community college classes, may receive VIDA's supports designed to help them succeed in post-secondary training.



VIDA's Executive Director, Dominique Halaby, explains that VIDA directs its limited resources toward effecting 'deep results' among individuals ready to pursue post-secondary occupational education. Halaby views the context in which VIDA operates to address the mismatch between business and workers as an hour-glass. The middle of the hour-glass controls the flow of sand, and in order to change the flow, he argues, work needs to occur in the middle to broaden opportunities. That is, VIDA serves individuals who are poised to advance into high-skill, high-demand positions, but encounter a range of obstacles that block passage to advancement. As these obstacles are broken down, space is opened for lower-skilled workers to advance. While VIDA has chosen to focus its direct training services on individuals who are college-ready, it intentionally relies on and works to influence its network of educational and human service organizations to serve individuals who are not college-ready, and to enable them to get to that level. In this way, the organization extends the impact of its work beyond the number of individuals provided with direct services.

VIDA partners with a variety of educational institutions (see below) to link clients with job training. All interested applicants attend an orientation session and meet with a counselor to determine their need and eligibility for one of three training options: basic skills, post-secondary training, or customized training based with selected employers. Counselors guide applicants and use assessment tools to help individuals develop a training and career plan for a high-demand occupation. As a final acceptance procedure, applicants must interview with VIDA management on an admissions committee.

VIDA refers applicants who are not ready for college-level academic work to the basic skills training adult education programs, which are provided through the Region 1 Education Service Center.

VIDA provides students with tuition assistance; support services, including financial assistance with child care, transportation and other emergency issues; counseling/case management; career planning; job placement; and follow-up services. At the time of enrollment, VIDA counselors conduct a financial planning process with participants to develop a plan for how they and their families will manage financial obligations while enrolled in a college program. During this process, participants and counselors identify financial gaps and work to fill them. In this way, VIDA helps address the issues that might otherwise force participants to drop-out of programs

when they hit financial hardships along the way. Through leveraged funds (described below under “Financing”) and any individual-based assistance the client is eligible to receive, VIDA packages supportive services averaging \$2,500 per individual.

VIDA students must meet once weekly with their case manager, often in peer-meetings, as a supplement to their courses. VIDA requires peer interactions such as these weekly meetings, to help clients learn from others in similar work-life-study situations and to reinforce VIDA’s community-based approach. VIDA also impels clients to volunteer in community and business projects. The visibility of VIDA students in the community and businesses raises awareness about VIDA’s training opportunities for low-income individuals, and educates businesses about the benefits of investing in the training of Valley residents.

Critical Partners

VIDA pursues its economic development objectives and goals to increase post-secondary training for low-income individuals through key partnerships with employers, educational institutions and community-based nonprofit organizations. As one example of its partnerships with community-based organizations, VIDA holds quarterly orientations about its programs and services, in conjunction with more than a dozen area churches, which operate as outreach centers for residents interested in job training programs.

One of VIDA’s central goals is to transform educational systems to better meet the needs of historically underserved and impoverished students. To achieve this goal, VIDA works with partners in the education and training system to broker new relationships and strategies designed to better support the education and advancement of workers and success of Valley businesses.

VIDA’s partnership with South Texas College (STC) exemplifies this goal. Since the late 1990’s, the two have partnered to find ways to institutionalize VIDA’s approach, thereby extending its benefits to a large number of STC students. As a result of this collaboration, STC has begun to implement an intensive advising and support services system to increase retention and completion among at-risk students, and, in support of this, VIDA is providing case management training to the college’s admissions, financial aid and academic counselors. In addition, with VIDA as an essential partner, the college is applying instructional innovation to support low-level learners and increase the rate of students completing remedial or gatekeeper courses and moving into credit-bearing academic courses. The college also is working now to identify and tackle subtle, systemic barriers to post-secondary success, such as incongruities in financial aid and admissions deadlines.

One of the most comprehensive examples of VIDA’s work in building partnerships to address the needs of low-income workers can be seen in its efforts related to the Rio Grande Valley Allied Health Training Alliance. The Alliance is a region-wide collaboration among 10 hospitals, five educational institutions, four counties, two workforce development boards, and VIDA. The Alliance resulted from the local community’s efforts to encourage health care employers to take advantage of the local labor surplus, and to avoid the growing number of high-skill, high-wage jobs taken by professionals hired from outside the area. The Alliance is trying to expand available training for current health care professionals who need relatively little additional training to advance or move within the Valley’s health care industry, e.g., from general medical positions to specialty positions. Additionally, an important part of VIDA’s involvement in the Alliance is

trying to improve opportunities for new entrants to the health care field, such as improving access to post-secondary training opportunities for low-income individuals. As they begin their studies through the Rio Grande Valley Allied Health Training Alliance, VIDA students are placed in a health-related job at one of the participating hospitals, making at least \$7 an hour for a maximum of 10-20 hours per week. VIDA is the administrative, organizational and oversight hub of the Alliance, and at the same time provides social supports to Valley residents who are studying allied health in connection with VIDA's programs.

One of the key objectives of the Alliance is to address the region's nursing faculty shortage by increasing opportunities for post-licensure training, certifications and advanced degrees in a way that aims to equip and entice practicing nurses to become nurse educators. Toward this objective, VIDA has focused on constructing a career ladder of course offerings among Alliance members, to provide training and upward mobility to individuals already practicing in the medical field, who need very little additional training or certification to obtain a degree. The Alliance also is tackling the need for post-licensure specialty training. The hope is that these expanded training avenues will encourage and enable more nurses to go into education. The Alliance is also looking into student-teacher ratio requirements that may restrict access to training, and ways to reduce the number of nurses who fail.

VIDA's work hinges on leveraging the unique core competencies of a range of institutions with which it partners. For example, much of the Alliance's work is accomplished by sub-committees, with staff from each of the partner organizations contributing its own particular expertise and resources. VIDA does not have nursing expertise, so hospitals dedicate time to develop clinical content, colleges take responsibility for post-licensure issues, and the university staff and resources are leveraged for meeting space, meeting management, note-taking and follow-up. Another advantage to this partnership structure is that previously competitive entities have realized benefits from collaborating. For example, when two of the participating colleges found themselves applying for the same grant funding, they chose to collaborate in a strategic way, thereby increasing the chances of acquiring at least one grant between them.

Relationship with Business

Even though it operates for the benefit of low-income individuals, VIDA believes that its success is accomplished by focusing on regional business, economic development and return on investment, rather than marketing the human service aspect of its work. For example, to encourage employer investment, VIDA gathered data from area hospitals to illustrate to them how much they spent to recruit and hire out-of-area, compared with what the same money could accomplish if applied locally to training. This provided a business-oriented argument for business investment in the Alliance. All 14 Valley-area hospitals have opted to participate in the Alliance.

Businesses acknowledge VIDA's success and are instrumental in changing the Valley's training system. In Harlingen, for example, a major health care employer was an important champion in getting city officials to commit funding to job training and workforce intermediary activities. VIDA also acts as a broker between the student-worker, businesses and the college. For example, VIDA follows up to make sure that the skills learned are needed by the business, and are being used by students in their jobs. If VIDA hears that skills are not being used, they go to the college and rectify the mismatch between skills taught and needed. As a trusted broker and negotiator,

VIDA helps Alliance members to be more open with sensitive, often proprietary information that is necessary for change. The development of a Centralized Clinical Scheduling System is an example of how VIDA has been able to facilitate increased collaboration among business partners. The system is a centralized management information system that will enable matches between Valley health care employers who can announce clinical opportunities, and colleges that need placements for students in training programs. It is designed to increase both the efficiency of placement and the numbers of individuals who can enroll in and complete training. In the Valley, this system is being launched first with hospitals, with smaller medical offices/facilities added later. Plans to adopt this system developed by VIDA are underway in the City of San Antonio and the State of Colorado.

Outcomes

VIDA reports impressive outcomes resulting from its approach to supporting low-income students in post-secondary training. Since it began operating, VIDA has helped more than 3,800 Valley residents complete a job training program and enter employment. In 2006, the median wage for graduates placed in jobs was \$19.50 per hour. VIDA clients have a post-secondary graduation rate of more than 90 percent and an employment rate exceeding 95 percent. By comparison, area colleges had a graduation rate of 43 percent when VIDA launched its strategy. Over the past 10 years, colleges that have partnered with VIDA have seen their post-secondary completion rates overall increase somewhat, as the VIDA model has had broad impact on education in the region. (At one local college with a close partnership with VIDA, rates rose from 52 percent in 1996 to 66 percent in 2006).

One-hundred and thirty-four students completed VIDA's training in nursing and allied health programs, including 45 registered nurses, 85 vocational nurses, 3 radiologic technicians and 1 surgical technician. Average hourly wages were \$16.61, compared to an average of \$7.07 before the training. In addition to educating critically-needed health care workers, this initiative, funded with state workforce and matching local funds, also helped fulfill needs for bilingual staff and culturally sensitive care.

To demonstrate its impact on economic growth, VIDA conducted return on investment (ROI) analysis of earnings, tax revenue and public welfare receipt for clients who received training through investments made by the city of McAllen. Since 1998, the McAllen City Commission and the Development Corporation of McAllen invested in the McAllen Self-Sufficiency Project for basic skills and job training administered through VIDA, the Region 1 Education Service Center offering adult education, and STC. VIDA's ROI analysis shows that investments of \$2.4 million by the city resulted in more than \$5 million in benefits, such as increased sales tax, property tax and other fees related to the workers, for a return of 211 percent on the city's investment.² In a similar approach to documenting return on investment, VIDA's 2004 Annual Report states that its 3,000 graduates account for more than \$80 million in annual income in the local economy.

² Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, *There's No Place Like Home: A look at local support for workforce intermediaries*, February 2006.

VIDA is looking into the feasibility of adapting its model for use throughout Texas. El Paso, Austin and San Antonio are involved in replication studies to determine if the Alliance’s “Growing Our Own” strategic plan and model can be useful in other local areas.

Financing

Since 1995, VIDA has received over \$22.3 million in funding from federal, state and local agencies, as well as corporate and private foundations; and has helped to leverage an additional \$20 million to support training provided by its partners in the Rio Grande Valley. As fiscal agent for the Alliance, VIDA was a recent recipient of a \$4 million grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor under the President’s High Growth Job Training Initiative. Participating hospitals also have committed to investing \$1.6 million in cash and \$2.8 million in in-kind contributions to the project.

Notably, VIDA receives funding from local municipalities, primarily through local tax revenues, obtained largely from the community organizing and advocacy efforts of Valley Interfaith. Utilizing Texas’ statewide Economic Development Sales Tax program, a group of nine Rio Grande Valley cities are providing VIDA with funding from sales tax revenues set aside for local job development and training. In the city of McAllen, where Valley Interfaith and VIDA collaborated to advocate for this kind of fiscal support, \$1 million of sales tax revenues is diverted to a job development and training fund annually. Of these McAllen sales tax revenues, \$666,000 goes directly toward supporting VIDA, covering about 25 percent of its budget. The majority of the remaining funds support adult education and GED programs delivered by the Region 1 Educational Service Center (\$125,000), and the development of sector-oriented education programs at South Texas College (\$209,000). VIDA also receives a combined \$632,500 in funding from the cities of Harlingen, Brownsville, Mission, Weslaco, San Juan, Hidalgo, Port Isabel and Mercedes, and may soon be funded by a regional consortium of county and city agencies in: Starr County, where the county would provide funds from bridge receipts; the City of Roma which would provide funds from general revenue; and Rio Grande City which would use funds from a sales tax.

VIDA’s success and aggressive fund-raising has attracted significant funding. Nonetheless, much of the brokering and development activities conducted by VIDA staff, and the partnering with colleges and businesses, are unfunded.

To Learn More

More information about VIDA is available at: www.vidacareers.org. VIDA is part of a network of initiatives affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Another IAF affiliated organization, Capital IDEA, also has been profiled by WSI. [Click here](#) to access the profile of Capital IDEA.