**UnidosUS** (formerly the National Council of La Raza)—the largest national Latino civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States—works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans. Through its network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations, UnidosUS reaches millions of Latinos each year in 41 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. UnidosUS is driven by the mission to build a stronger America by creating opportunities for Latinos. To achieve its mission, UnidosUS conducts applied research, policy analysis, robust programming and advocacy, providing a Latino perspective in five key areas—assets/investments, civil rights/immigration, education, employment and economic status, and health.

Through a portfolio of twelve, youth leadership development programs, UnidosUS promotes equitable access to quality education for Latinos. The UnidosUS, K-16 programs, also known as Líderes, fill a programmatic gap by providing evidence-based programs with a tailored and culturally competent approach to student supports, services, and curricula.

The *Líderes* programs focus on four priority areas: Leadership development, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), College & Career-Readiness and Post-Secondary Success. These programmatic areas address pressing needs in our students’ academic skill sets and target academic fields and industries with an underrepresentation of Latinos.

Established in 2009, the CASA program is geared at middle school, Latino students who are typically, first-generation, low-income and English learners. It focuses on the development of soft skills known to strengthen a student's ability to succeed in college. Soft skills are character traits, attitudes, and behaviors that help individuals adapt, overcome obstacles, develop productive relationships and thrive in the school and workplace.

The higher education and business sectors have raised concerns about the lack of soft skills possessed by college students and employees. For instance, professors have noted that students with a solid academic track record can be outperformed by students with lower academic grades but stronger set of soft skills. This observation is corroborated by a survey by the Workforce Solutions Group that finds that more than 60% of employers say applicants lack "communication and interpersonal skills." An expanding body of literature is connecting service-learning as an important course or educational strategy to address some of the competencies required by students to enhance their technical knowledge, professional practice and citizenship behavior.

Although research supports the value of service-learning for youth development, little research has been conducted on the impact of service-learning with underrepresented youth—in particular, Latinos. The UnidosUS CASA model is primarily informed by the perspectives and needs of the communities in which the schools are situated.
The CASA service-learning program is also guided by a set of principles that include:

- Engaging youth in the service-learning planning process to emphasize their voice
- Reflecting and honoring the values of Latino communities and the traditions in those communities through culturally competent service-learning programs
- Addressing community problems through the development of solutions to the issues challenging Latinos
- Approaching the service element of service-learning through direct ties in the community that will expand students’ global awareness, soft skills and knowledge base
- Reinforcing high standards and rigorous learning

The ultimate goal of the CASA model is to anchor academic learning in a culturally and linguistically responsive context to address a genuine need in the Latino community. CASA invites students to develop their leadership potential and to play the dual role of student and teacher by learning and teaching the community at large about pressing issues in the Latino community while being an active, positive, and resourceful part of the solution.

CASA has served over 7,000 middle school students since its inception. Each year the CASA Youth Summit also brings together instructors and students participating in the program to present on their service-learning project. This past year the CASA Youth Summit brought together nearly 50 students and 20 teachers from across seven states to UnidosUS’ headquarters in Washington, DC.

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