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Community foundations and nonprofits have mobilized to increase participation in the 2010 U.S. Census.
With a depleted state budget and drastic cuts in county funding affecting education, health care and social services, it is critical that we have an accurate census count to ensure that our region receives the federal funds it needs and maintains its political representation in the House of Representatives.

By pooling funds from the community foundation, other funders, local government and individuals, we have helped nonprofit organizations reach out to hard-to-count communities. As trusted voices, they can stress what is at stake in a way government workers cannot. For every person not counted, our region will lose more than $11,500 in federal funding in the next decade.

You can read more about the importance of the census in this issue’s feature story. But the census isn’t the only place where numbers matter. In our What If? column, education expert Glenn E. Singleton offers a frank assessment of the mathematics achievement gap for minorities. If we don’t figure out how to make these students count, their future prospects suffer, and so does our collective prosperity. In our Q&A, Prosper CEO Chris Larsen shows how he’s trying to make consumers count in a marketplace dominated by large institutions. Big Ideas features stories about asset building, which empowers individuals through financial education and matched savings, and the Silicon Valley Index, a statistical measure of the health of our region.

In all these cases, numbers are important. But even more important is that each number represents a person or a cause that is crucial to the future of Silicon Valley.
Efforts to deal with poverty often focus on income, especially in an era of increasing need for safety-net services. But another line of thinking focuses instead on asset building and aims to do more than help families pay the rent and put food on the table.

Matched savings programs, including individual development accounts (IDAs), teach people about savings while helping them build assets toward a goal: higher education or starting a small business, for example. In turn, once participants reach certain benchmarks, they receive matching funds from philanthropic donors and government programs.

"Assets are really the key to enabling a family to stay out of poverty, pass something on to the next generation and have a forward-looking outlook on life," says Eric Weaver, founder and CEO of Opportunity Fund, a San José-based nonprofit financial institution that manages IDAs.

Opportunity Fund administers IDAs for the American Dream Match Fund, a program launched in 2009 and developed by the Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED). The program aims to enroll 100 San Mateo and Santa Clara county residents. The goal, says CFED Chair and founder Bob Friedman, is to prove the concept works locally, and then find more partners to spread the idea regionally and nationally and advocate for government policies that are friendly to matching programs.

The fund’s concept is straightforward. Participants set a goal to save for education or start a business. Once they save $2,000, donors from anywhere match that with a contribution of $2,000, and Opportunity Fund contributes an additional $2,000, thereby tripling the savings.

The program isn’t just about the money, though. Through a $175,000 grant from Silicon Valley Community Foundation, CFED also makes free financial education available to participants.
A Region at Risk

Analysis points to potential problems

Silicon Valley’s place as the global epicenter of innovation is no longer guaranteed, according to the 2010 Silicon Valley Index (available at siliconvalleycf.org). Produced by Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network and Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the index measures the economic strength and overall health of the region. This year’s Special Analysis, which received national and international media attention, focuses on Silicon Valley’s innovation habitat and the risks it faces.

Silicon Valley has thrived on a steady flow of foreign talent, but those workers now have more choices as regions such as China and India emerge. In a region where 60 percent of the science and engineering workforce is born outside the U.S., nearly three times the national average, maintaining that talent is critical, particularly as the U.S. continues to produce fewer of these highly specialized workers to fill potential gaps.

In addition, Silicon Valley is not attracting a significant share of the federal funding available for biotechnology, clean tech and energy. The region was built on massive federal investments in defense, space and the Internet, but its ability to attract money has slipped as up-and-comers such as Huntsville, Ala., compete successfully for those dollars.

“On the heels of the worst economic year since the Great Depression, our region has entered a new era of uncertainty in which our ability to attract top talent, fund innovation and preserve a decent quality of life is no longer guaranteed,” warns Emmett D. Carson, Ph.D., CEO and president of the community foundation.

But there are positive signs. The Special Analysis mentions Silicon Valley’s ability to shift with the times, an ability it will need to emerge from the recession as one of the world’s most dynamic economies.

“We cannot afford to be complacent, despite Silicon Valley’s reputation for reinventing itself,” Carson says. “We’ve got to have a call to action to bring together our political, business and educational leadership, and in a comprehensive way.” —Chris Blose

participants. The goal, at first, is to teach basics such as creating a budget and monitoring credit reports, but participants also learn about choosing and using credit cards properly, avoiding scams and predatory lending, and even saving toward large investments.

The American Dream Match Fund grew in part out of the American Dream Demonstration research and testing performed by CFED in the 1990s. In the results, people living at half the poverty line actually saved at twice to three times the rate of participants at twice the poverty line. Staffers asked the poorest participants why this was, Friedman says. “They said, in one way or another, that this is the price of stability and the price of hope. This is the way we get ahead.”

The results also highlighted the benefits of the educational component. “We found that for each hour of basic financial education or asset-specific education, average monthly savings actually went up,” Friedman says.

Pairing an individual development account with education changes the attitudes and behavior of participants, says Pat Krackov, program officer for the community foundation. Once people start to build savings and learn more advanced concepts, their perception of what is possible expands. “They can put their assets and financial tools to work in a way that creates value for themselves and their families over the long term.”

The community foundation also supported the development of savetogether.org, an online peer-to-peer platform that connects donors with individuals who want to save. It offers donors the chance to have a direct influence on a family and to receive regular updates that highlight that influence in financial and anecdotal terms.

Weaver says the appeal for donors is that IDAs such as the American Dream Match Fund go well beyond simple charity. “I have one donor who says, ‘I like this because it’s a hand up, not a handout,’” Weaver says. “It’s appealing to people because it rewards families who are working hard to make a positive change in their lives.” —Chris Blose
Julio García moves with purpose around the brochure-and poster-strewn conference room in East Palo Alto’s Ravenswood Family Health Center. The piles of material are Spanish-language collateral for the 2010 U.S. Census, and García is role-playing various census-gathering interactions with members of his Nuestra Casa Hispanic leadership group.

García has assigned each member to a hard-to-count census tract. These are “neighborhoods at risk” generally containing between 4,000 and 8,000 people and, in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, largely made up of immigrants. These tracts also typically contain large percentages of farm workers, people of color, female heads of households, students and renters who tend to move around frequently.

In Spanish, García alternately plays a census volunteer and a wary potential participant. The latter exemplifies the thousands of people living in hard-to-count tracts who have plausible reasons for staying away from one of America’s quintessential sociopolitical events, one in which an accurate count determines everything from funding for schools and hospitals to representation in Congress. García and his fellow volunteers hope to use the trust and goodwill they hold in their community to counter those reasons and encourage people to be counted.
A volunteer from the Vietnamese Complete Count Committee marches in the Vietnamese Spring Parade and Festival in downtown San José.
This early-evening meeting in East Palo Alto was one of many such training sessions taking place across Silicon Valley, California and the country during winter 2010. Once spring arrived, the volunteers began serving as the front line in a campaign, bankrolled by concerned foundations—including Silicon Valley Community Foundation—and equally concerned city and county governments, to assure that the country, its counties, states, cities and rural areas were primed for census day and the period that came after.

On April 1, 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau officially undertook its 23rd constitutionally mandated measure of the nation, counting citizens and noncitizens alike. Mailings, follow-up calls and visits for nonresponders will run through July, at which point the bureau will stop gathering and begin tabulating data. In December, as has happened every 10th year since 1790, the bureau will present an official report to the president. The stakes could not be higher in terms of potential services and infrastructure lost for all Californians. PricewaterhouseCoopers determined that in the 2000 census, more than 500,000 Californians went uncounted, resulting in the state losing more than $1.5 billion in federal funds.

During the 10 years until the 2020 census, more than $3 trillion in federal money will be apportioned based on this year’s count. Every person not counted represents federal funds that will not be available for schools, clinics, hospitals, infrastructure, rail and road transportation, as well as for critical social services already slashed in budget-busted California. In the worst-case scenario, California stands to lose one or more seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Given California’s budget crisis, and given that the census helps determine so much policy and funding, the census matters—no matter who you are.

Before and After Census Day
Dealing with the millions who ignore, discard or fail to receive their census forms is what compels the door-to-door march of volunteers and brings Nuestra Casa and other nonprofits to the cause. The various scenarios that Julio García uses over the course of the training session portray potential census responders who are afraid to answer the count because of what García calls a “historical distrust of the government and its authorities.” Other scenarios deal with non-English-speaking workers, in the country legitimately or not, who have questions about what possible benefit the American census could have for them.

Picking out volunteer Maria Dominguez, García asks her to read from a script. Her character in this case balks at answering some or all of the 10 census questions because, as she protests, “If I give away personal information, it will be found out by the immigration authorities.” To counter this line of
resistance, García instructs the group to explain that the Census Bureau differs from the other government agencies they may have encountered. He instructs them to assure neighbors, friends and relatives that the Census Bureau is not allowed by law to give away individuals’ personal information under penalty of prison and a $250,000 fine. For those from nations where such legal distinctions are not taken seriously, confusion and fear are not hard to understand.

García presents Maria’s sister and fellow volunteer Reyna Dominguez with another common objection: “We are just transient workers. Why should we care about responding to your census?” Reyna’s retort is that regardless of current immigration status, it’s important for the community to get its fair share of government funding and political representation instead of being undercounted, underfunded and underrepresented. García shares another possible inducement to participate: You might one day bring your family to the U.S., where you can send your children to a new census-mandated school or seek medical attention in a health clinic or hospital built because of a full and fair count.

These arguments mean as much for a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who emigrated from India as they do for a divorced mother working two low-wage jobs to support her children.

Recognizing that importance, in mid-2009, representatives of Silicon Valley foundations and nonprofits began to focus on the upcoming census more prominently than ever before. They knew a shadow loomed over any attempt to address an undercount of minorities and others in hard-to-count tracts. The sheer numbers involved present a significant obstacle. In San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, an estimated 80–110 hard-to-count tracts contain as many as 280,000 men, women and children who, if not counted, would equate to a yearly funding loss of more than $30 million.

In October 2009, the Census Bureau allocated $300 million for a national media blitz, but California’s state budget for a targeted campaign had been drastically slashed. What in 2000 had been a $24 million “get out the census” campaign budget was a mere $2.1 million in 2010. Counties were making similarly dramatic cuts, with San Mateo investing only $90,000 for the 2010 census compared with $425,000 in 2000 and Santa Clara County reducing its funding by $265,000 from 2000 levels.

By late October 2009, concern became widespread enough throughout California’s nonprofit world that an organization called Grantmakers Concerned With Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR) sponsored a meeting for foundations and nonprofits to strategize. The goal, according to Ted Wang, a Berkeley-based GCIR consultant, was to find the best use of limited resources, as well as provide coordination for mobilization efforts. Ultimately, funds from 18 foundations went to various outreach programs to ensure an accurate count. Major givers included Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the California Community Foundation, and the Irvine and Haas foundations. Grants, apportioned in terms of a foundation’s geographical reach, restored census-related outreach programs, at least in part.

In January 2010, the community foundation created a collaborative funding pool that has allocated $650,000 to the census effort. Both Santa Clara County and the City of San José contributed the money they had set aside for outreach to the community foundation’s fund. At the time, CEO and President Emmett D. Carson attested to the urgency of the situation and noted, “For every person not counted, our region will lose more than $11,500 in federal funding in the next decade.”

The strategy of the community foundation, mirroring its focus on San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, concentrated on local outreach organizations, 38 of which received grants of up to $10,000. These organizations included Asian Americans for Community Involvement, the California Alliance of African American Educators, Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County, the Child Care Coordinating Council of San Mateo County, International Children’s Assistance Network, North Peninsula Neighborhood...
populations, other groups reach out to other communities that have historically suffered from a low count and reduced clout.

For example, Malissa Netane, Pacific Islander community facilitator for San Mateo’s Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center (PCRC), complains that the 2000 census ended up with a count of 500 Tongans and Samoans in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties combined. The result came as a shock to community leaders who took as gospel that Silicon Valley had one of the largest populations of Pacific Islanders outside the home archipelagos. “It’s ridiculous. They didn’t even count 20 percent of the Bay Area’s Pacific Islanders,” Netane says. “That’s an 80 percent undercount.” The PCRC is using its census grant to reach out to the churches, schools and social groups around which much of Pacific Islander life revolves. “We can build on existing collaborations at the same time we explain how the census benefits people and their communities without affecting their legal status,” Netane says of the strategy.

In similar fashion, Quyen Vuong, director of the International Children’s Assistance Network, another grantee, refers to the disheartening and disenfranchising 2000 census, when San José’s burgeoning Vietnamese community was reported to be 10 percent of the city’s population. Community leaders insist the number was far closer to 20 percent, so 10 years later, Vuong worries this time about the 2010 Vietnamese language census form. The form uses terms that could be construed as having totalitarian overtones. Clued in by Vuong, the Census Bureau in Washington is changing its Vietnamese media campaign to reflect a more sensitive reading.

Mistranslation aside, Vuong stands powerfully behind the census movement and currently works with a grant to develop outreach aimed at Santa Clara’s Buddhist communities. There is a particular emphasis on monks and priests, who are among the most trusted members of the local Asian community and are therefore essential in vouching for the census.

To highlight the importance of being counted, the community foundation partnered with the Census Bureau to place billboards and posters in hard-to-count tracts.

**Trusted Voices**

With money tight, time and creativity are increasingly of the essence. Community foundations are taking more of a leadership role than ever before because of their ability to raise money and mobilize volunteers.

Manuel Santamaría, grantmaking director for the community foundation, worries that traditional communication efforts too often miss the mark. “The Census Bureau’s media-based shotgun approach simply won’t work if it isn’t localized,” Santamaría says, particularly for the historically undercounted populations. For a truly effective count, Santamaría calls for waging a “ground war” in which groups like Nuestra Casa serve as the army of volunteers. “These groups have existing outreach infrastructures that enable the staff to be quickly deployed without spending weeks strategizing what to do,” he notes.

The programs that received grants have one thing in common: Each is known and respected in its home community. The idea, says Margot Grant, San Mateo County’s census coordinator, is to reach out to organizations that can quickly retool and communicate the “be counted” message through community ties. These organizations can reach people who are highly skeptical and often downright afraid of government workers. People are less likely to slam the door on a neighbor than on a stranger.

Volunteers are paid $500 stipends and are trained to identify and win over people in hard-to-count tracts. And as Nuestra Casa reaches out to Hispanic communities, other groups reach out to other communities that have historically suffered from a low count and reduced clout.

So high are the stakes in San José that grantee Somos Mayfair, a social services organization working in one of the city’s poorest Hispanic neighborhoods, has taken drastic measures in the past. Tired of being underrepresented in such local issues as schools, transit, bus stops and low-income housing placement, Somos Mayfair’s Executive Director Jaime Alvarado decided to undertake his own census after dissatisfaction with the 2000 count. Experience told him the official numbers were way off in terms of factors...
like average neighborhood salaries. The 2000 census reported that Mayfair was solidly middle-class, but Somos’ own subsequent data found that 88 percent of the neighborhood population earned $30,000 or less a year. According to Alvarado, this result taught a valuable lesson about how important correct data is for good decision-making.

For the 2010 census, Somos Mayfair geared up its own door-to-door effort, which relies solely on Spanish speakers. “You have a radically different dialogue when Spanish speakers speak to Spanish speakers,” Alvarado says. “People are more willing to buy into the position we are advocating.”

One Size Does Not Fit All
Legal action in the region may have provided an additional catalyst for the success of the 2010 census. In summer 2009, Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), a venerable San Francisco-based civil rights group, filed a federal court challenge to the upcoming count. The suit was a repeat performance of sorts; in 1970, CAA filed a suit that helped open the U.S. election process and census to non-English-speaking citizens. Yet, in the decades since, the help given non-English speakers to participate in the census has depended largely on the ideology of the administration in power.

CAA persuaded San Francisco’s city attorney and board of supervisors to support its suit against the Census Bureau. It was a good fit; in 2008, San Francisco successfully challenged an earlier census estimate and forced the bureau to recognize nearly 35,000 additional San Franciscans, with a commensurate rise in available federal funding. The 2009 CAA suit asked for an increase in the number of languages available for census collateral and outreach materials.

In October 2009, the atmosphere changed radically. Robert Groves, the new census director, flew to San Francisco to apologize and offer improvements in the way the 2010 census would be conducted. “We’ve come to realize,” Groves said at a San Francisco City Hall press conference that included city officials and CAA’s Vincent Pan, “that a census run out of Washington on a one-size-fits-all model doesn’t work very well.”

Instead, Groves offered new approaches, including a basic census form printed in six languages, plus phone and outreach assistance in 59 other tongues. Groves also announced a $300 million media program to get the word out on ethnic television, radio and print media.

So far, Silicon Valley’s census participation rate has been well above the state average. Find the latest figures at 2010census.gov.

“Because we have lost so much money in undercounting,” Pan says of the value of these changes, “it will pay for itself immediately.”

Will 2010 be the most above-board, fair and successful U.S. census? If San Mateo and Santa Clara counties are any indication, a number of factors can still turn sour. The dearth of official funding has forced the region’s foundations and nonprofits to dig deep. And census questions, particularly the one requesting a subject’s telephone number, could still drive people away.

What would census success mean? Perhaps the philanthropic investments of several million dollars will bring an additional 100,000 people onto the rolls, netting the region upwards of $1 billion of desperately needed federal funding during the coming decade. And if all goes according to plan, the region, like the nation, may see a profound increase in the effective power, funding and clout of hard-to-count communities. If so, success in no small part will be due to the engagement of foundation-funded community and faith-based organizations, who recognized that everybody counts. One
In a credit market dominated by Wall Street and banks that have grown more powerful in the aftermath of the credit crisis, middle-class Americans have few real financial options. Today’s complex financial landscape can take advantage of consumers. Those hit hardest by the current recession—especially people living near or below the poverty line—too often turn to payday lending and its staggering interest rates when they have no other choice.
Chris Larsen, co-founder and CEO of Prosper Marketplace Inc., is banking on technology, education and determined political activism to create more just alternatives to the traditional credit market. Through his business and philanthropic endeavors, he has long fought for consumer interests. Larsen previously was co-founder, chairman and CEO of E-Loan, an online lender he sold in 2005. He sits on Silicon Valley Community Foundation’s anti-payday lending advisory committee and is a fund advisor. His current business, Prosper, launched in 2006 as a prominent and forward-thinking example of peer-to-peer lending.

Larsen sat down with community foundation CEO and President Emmett D. Carson and ONE contributor Cody Kraatz at Prosper’s headquarters in San Francisco to discuss his company, predatory payday lending, consumer protections and his approach to philanthropy.

How did you get involved in consumer protection and lending issues?

It goes back to my first company, E-Loan. That company sprung out of my first bad experience buying a house, and how I was taken advantage of. I started looking into the industry, how anti-consumer it was, and the lack of protection. And I also looked into the political influence that the financial industry has, which I think we’ve all seen play out in the worst possible way recently.

My respect for working people and poor people definitely comes from my dad. I could see his bitterness while he was struggling. He was a union guy his whole life, and he got angry at the elites. That was back in the ‘60s, when the working class in America was pretty darn good. It’s worse for them now, and things are actually going backwards, I’m afraid.

What recent conditions have allowed predatory payday lending to become worse?

There are two main factors. One is temporary and cyclical, which is that banks, the traditional providers of credit, have moved away from anything that’s not prime. That will work its way out after about two years, but the second factor is a much worse permanent problem: A ton of American credit was based on false pretenses. Credit was underpriced for a good decade. So that means credit got more expensive and less available, and there are just no alternatives.

I think Wall Street puts up barriers to alternatives. It’s incredibly hard for new entrants to compete against that machine, and that machine ended up being broken.

The banks have regrouped. They’re powerful, they’re making a ton of money and they have successfully blocked any big changes. The popular rage will die out, and the biggest players will get stronger. In the meantime, that means that the only game in town for many people is payday lending, so that field is growing.
Tell us about Prosper. Is your vision to create alternatives to existing systems?
The idea is to create a third way of banking, if you will. We talked a little about the Wall Street way of banking, where about half of all credit comes from and which has obviously been so shaken up. Then you have the regular banks and depositories, which take in money, pay 1 percent and lend it out to your neighbors at 20 percent.
Our idea is really a direct flow of banking, right from people who have money to people who want to borrow money. Unlike just putting their money passively in a bank, lenders decide where it goes. They have more control, so it’s participatory. We become the infrastructure that allows people to connect.

With a longer-term view, we think this idea could really help counter payday lending, as well, if people can help out fellow community members and make a good return. This is not a charity. This is a marketplace, but with much more competition at the most granular level, rather than leaving it to the oligopoly of banks and Wall Street companies that have a protected, artificial sort of competition because they’ve taken the average person out of the market.

For those average people, what will the new normal be as the economy improves?
I think the very poorest are going to do a little better. It’s the middle that’s completely squeezed, and then the rich have a much bigger market. The average working-class person in America is going to start looking like the average working-class person in China in terms of income level, which is good for China, but bad for America.

I think people should be waking up to the idea that this could go very badly. Has the Internet actually empowered counterarguments and shined a light on what’s really going on? Yeah, kind of, but it’s also dissipated a lot of the anger with the kind of nonsense that’s been going on that otherwise would have shown up on the streets. Have you seen any protests about the whole financial meltdown? It’s shocking, actually.

Who ought to ring the alarm now: business leaders, educators, politicians, foundations?
It’s a small group that can even say anything anymore. Many business leaders are at risk if they say what they really think. So any organization that doesn’t have the same conflicts—which would speak to the community foundations, the nonprofits—they shouldn’t underestimate their ability to speak and act freely.

What can people do individually?
Americans need to dig deeper into how things really work in Washington and on Wall Street. It’s incredibly complicated, and that complexity works in the favor of the established elites, which is how they killed financial reform. It’s not enough to say, “It’s corruption.” It’s worse than that. It’s much more insidious.
I’ve been thinking more and more that we need some kind of public-interest lobbying groups to counteract what’s going on. The voice that’s being heard is the voice of the moneyed interests, the elites and the entrenched powers. But here’s where I’m optimistic: When you actually start fighting, you can do so much. If you put pressure on the powers that be, they will retreat.

Have your long-term goals in philanthropy shifted over time?
I think things will probably change a little bit. I have a 3-year-old and another one on the way, so I think that makes you change the way you think about the world. Everything becomes a lot more concrete, rather than abstract. I’m a lot more focused on what’s going to happen domestically because I think our country is at such a turning point right now.

How do you decide what to support?
I got involved with philanthropy at San Francisco State University. I went there as an undergrad, and I went to the development people after I was fortunate enough to have some luck and asked them, “Where’s your need?” They all pointed at teachers’ college education. I like that it’s really practical. You can apply money locally, where it’s going to have the biggest long-term impact.
This spring, Silicon Valley Community Foundation and Entrepreneurs Foundation published the 2010 Corporate Citizenship Study, which provides a regional look at how and why companies participate in philanthropic, citizenship and community involvement initiatives. The study, available at siliconvalleycf.org, reveals that companies take their cues about the direction and support of corporate citizenship programs from their employees. Seventy-one percent of employees at the responding companies contribute to their community programs in addition to performing their other responsibilities. Employee engagement continues to be a universal way for companies to meet external community goals and achieve internal human resources goals.

In Silicon Valley, the average annual corporate contribution per company in 2007 was $80,000. Today that figure has increased to $100,000, despite a significant economic downturn. This is due largely to growth of in-kind donations. Most companies anticipate that cash contributions will remain flat over the next two years, with only 30 percent planning to add additional resources to their corporate giving budgets. Health and human services and education remain the primary focus areas for corporate giving in Silicon Valley. However, sustainability and environmental issues are gaining increasing attention from both employees and company leaders.

Fifty-six percent of companies currently have a corporate foundation or corporate donor advised fund. Of those companies, more than half donate more than $1 million per year.

Could you survive in Silicon Valley on $16,640 a year? That's what a minimum-wage earner makes in a year — at a time when rents are going up, foreclosures are at record highs, and jobs and homes are being lost at alarming rates.

To aid those most in danger of falling through the cracks, the community foundation’s Economic Security Fund focuses on three critical areas:

• Financial education and asset-building programs (see page 4 for more information)
• Promoting policy advocacy to curb predatory payday lending
• Counseling for homeowners and renters endangered by the foreclosure crisis

Learn more about how you can contribute to the fund and help families build financial security at siliconvalleycf.org.

For decades, an achievement gap has separated students of color from their white and Asian peers. At three forums this spring, education experts explored the causes behind the achievement gap. “Closing the achievement gap is the most critical challenge of this generation,” says Muhammed Chaudhry, CEO of Silicon Valley Education Foundation, which presented the forums with the community foundation.

At host sites Hewlett-Packard and Google — companies in industries whose jobs are out of reach for unprepared students, particularly in math and science — participants listened to speakers address issues such as institutional racism and student placement and discussed what steps must be taken to close the gap. The forums will lead to a series of policy recommendations that business, education and government leaders can support and school boards can adopt.

Read more about the community foundation’s work in education in the Fall 2009 issue of ONE: Innovation Through Philanthropy at siliconvalleycf.org.
In 2006, Educational Testing Services (ETS) reported that the United States faced a “perfect storm” composed of three devastating factors: an emerging, unstable global economy, rapid demographic shifts and the PreK–16 achievement gap. ETS summarized that the country must meet the academic needs of black and brown students or risk damaging its future economic viability.

For a decade, educators have attempted to determine why the achievement gap persists between students of color and their white counterparts. Blame has been placed on poverty, lack of family involvement, community pathology and children's attitudes toward school. Meanwhile, there has been no real investigation into the impact of race on student achievement. At Pacific Educational Group, we promote courageous conversations about race not to position race and racism as the only factors contributing to achievement disparities, but rather to prompt a brand of leadership for racial equity that we believe is the missing factor in our exhaustive attempts to reform schools.

In examining data that summarizes standardized assessments, we first notice that racial disparities exist across the board. Black and brown boys are most likely to drop out, be expelled and placed in special education. This same group is least likely to graduate on time, to enroll in advanced placement/international baccalaureate coursework and to attend college. The data also indicate that lower-income white students consistently outperform higher-income black and brown students, and that English-speaking Latinos score lower on average than Latinos who are English-language learners. We conclude that poverty, language and environment are not the sole causes for the racial gap and that racial biases are in fact embedded in our system.

Positing that systemic racism is the most devastating factor contributing to the lowered achievement of black and brown students often causes educators to react as if they are being labeled as racist. However, our pressing concern is with the educational system, which categorically refuses to consider the implications of race in instruction, assessment, policy, programs and disciplinary practices. Furthermore, a lack of consciousness about the cultures of students and families of color can lead educators to unintentionally lower their expectations of their students of color.

I would suggest that educators' beliefs about student capability determine resulting disparities. Connected to one unconscious, uninformed belief about the abilities of students of color is a multitude of destructive behaviors in boardrooms, offices and classrooms that diminish educational opportunities for those populations.

Courageous conversations about race alone will not eliminate racial disparities. But helping educators develop an understanding about race is an essential starting point.
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