

IMPACT STUDY: BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, APPROACH

Cooperative for Education (COED) has been supporting education in Guatemala since 1997, with its Rise Youth Development program serving nearly 2,400 students since 2007. The program provides scholarships to students in the central highlands, along with personalized academic support and mentoring, psychological support and workshops on “soft skills”, with remarkable results to show for the effort. Students entering the program had a pre-pandemic high school graduation rate of 80% alongside a parental graduation rate of 20%. In light of the pandemic’s impact on schools and the economy, COED began wondering whether the program was sufficient to break the cycle of poverty and considered what more might be needed, possibly including founding a school.

To better understand the needs of students and their families, COED partnered with ADGN Education in early 2024 to conduct an impact study. ADGN Education is a mission-driven consulting firm using tools from human-centered design to improve education outcomes for marginalized students. The study aimed to assess how well the Rise program helps students achieve long-term, multigenerational change and to identify what accelerates or derails their progress. The study focused on three key areas:

1. **Desired Outcomes:** What do students and families hope to achieve through education and the Rise scholarship?
2. **Current Reality:** To what extent are students on track to achieve those outcomes?
3. **Critical Factors:** What factors contribute to or hinder success?

The goal was to gather actionable insights to inform COED’s future strategy. Through human-centered design tools, literature reviews, and consultations with other NGOs, COED sought to define a clear theory of action and determine the best interventions to maximize impact for students and families. In all, ADGN/COED interviewed program staff and more than 200 students, graduates and family members, received survey responses from more than 500 current students and graduates, and analyzed program graduation and dropout data from over 15 years looking for correlation between any known factor and program completion. In addition, and with the purpose of incorporating an understanding of the broader context, COED conducted a literature review focused on identifying predictive variables for adolescent success and failure, and interviewed executive leaders from 16 entities (NGOs and foundations) serving marginalized young people in Guatemala.

ADGN and COED invite our colleagues driven by related missions across sectors and entry points to learn from our methods and findings, and to share feedback, ideas, and innovations that push our thinking and practice to enhance our ability to ever more effectively serve our students. To continue to engage with us, we share our contact information on page 3.

FINDINGS BRIEF

ADGN offers that any program has three core components: a (1) **user** aiming for an (2) **outcome** arrived at through a (3) **journey**. The most effective programs are clear about who their users are and what outcomes they desire, then rigorously test and adjust supports and interventions to help that user achieve that outcome. Throughout, user voice and experience anchors the design of the program. The findings from this study are arranged to help COED design supports for their users. Effective supports help users mitigate the biggest and/or most common obstacles and help more students access the factors most associated with success.

1. USER

The impact study found that COED selects highly motivated students, who are:

- From rural and semi-rural communities in Guatemala's central highlands with a range of community assets and challenges (e.g. low to high levels of outmigration, relative proximity or distance to quality schools and employment).
- From families whose parents generally have limited formal education (fewer than 20% finished high school) and low incomes (fewer than 2% of parents earn Guatemalan minimum wage or higher), and who commit to prioritizing their child's studies.
- Mostly female (74%) a focus population which research shows has great potential for social change AND who simultaneously run into patriarchal expectations and discrimination in their journey.

This selection profile is unique and should be kept in mind before generalizing findings. COED intends to continue to design its Rise program to support these students.

2. OUTCOMES

The impact study found notable alignment across the outcomes that students most desired:

- COED's students and graduates universally want to graduate from high school (usually becoming the most educated person in their family upon doing so).
- COED scholars believe that education is a path to earning an income that allows them to contribute to their family and break the cycle of poverty - a desire that *all* users consulted for this study mentioned.
- Just over 90% of COED scholars want to continue their studies at the university level and many note that they want to start a business, own a home and/or contribute to their community.

These findings don't negate that education has many other benefits. These findings do underscore that the opportunity cost of education that COED's users are willing to pay is understood by users to have a specific return on their investment - specifically, higher earning potential and, with more income, the ability to support their families and break out of poverty. COED is taking this insight as a "north star" for program design: a highly effective program will maximize the number of students who achieve two outcomes: (a) graduate from high school and (b) earn an income that allows them to contribute to their family and break the cycle of poverty.

Our graduate survey data shows a positive correlation between income and university studies. Based on focus group data and less formal observational data gathered by staff, we believe that it is earnings that enable young graduates to support their families and have margin in their budgets for university tuition, which in turn can lead to improved salaries.

3. JOURNEY

What we learned about the user journey when it goes well is captured in the bullet point synopsis that follows. More details are available in the reference materials. Synopsis - COED scholars are most successful at graduating high school and obtaining a living wage when:

- There are no family economic events that force the students to re-prioritize
- Students obtain hard skills that are in demand in the job market.
 - School quality and school leadership make a big difference.
 - *Carrera* matters.
- Students obtain soft skills that help them secure and be successful in a job.
 - School quality and school leadership make a big difference.
 - COED workshops make a big difference.
- Students have technology skills.
- Students do not fall behind in school.

- They are academically prepared.
- They consistently attend school.
- Student social engagement is healthy.
 - They have good friends (and avoid bad influence).
 - They delay the start of a family (marriage, pregnancy).
- Students feel supported by their family.
- Students effectively navigate social-emotional and psychological challenges.
- Students maintain optimism and resilience.
- Students successfully transition to *básico* (middle school) and again to *diversificado* (high school).
- Students and/or recent graduates have the resources to pursue a decent-paying job (time, cost of clothes/transport, etc).
- Students and/or recent graduates find formal employment opportunities with decent pay AND margin after expenses (commuting, living expenses).
- Students and/or recent graduates secure decent-paying employment through differentiating skills and experiences (hard and soft skills obtained + prior work experience and/or university studies).

We learned a tremendous amount about the user journey through our study. So much of what we share above, however, is already well known and can be summed up in the following way: there are a lot of factors that contribute to success or failure - it's complex, challenging, and can be downright overwhelming!

For COED, clear prioritization is the breakthrough element of this study, and we are prioritizing two factors - or impact points - above all others.

The first factor is ensuring economic conditions that enable an adolescent to remain in school. Asking former students who both graduated and did not from high school what was most challenging along the way, we heard again and again that the call to serve their family's most immediate economic needs was what was most likely to (or actually did) lead them away from school. Often, the presenting issue was attendance or academic but, digging deeper (why weren't you able to attend? why did you fall behind academically?), the root cause often turned out to be tending to the family. This has significant investment implications for COED - namely, marginal dollars intended to increase high school graduation may very well be best invested by mitigating economic family pressure (for example: increasing scholarship amount, having an emergency fund for families who suffer an unforeseen economic event like loss of a parent income).

The second factor is improving workforce orientation and access. While all students wanted to earn a living wage and saw education followed by formal employment as the path to doing so, very few could describe what *carreras* were in demand (a *carrera* in Guatemala is like a college major, but for high schoolers - an academic concentration intended to convey a specific set of competencies). Very few students could describe how or where to look for a job or what an employer would seek. Many did not know someone formally employed. This has significant investment implications for COED - namely, marginal dollars intended to increase formal employment may very well be best invested by providing more programming focused on workforce orientation and access (for example: early and ongoing career counseling, job boards, and internship placement). A major insight of us is that making marginal improvements to what students learn is unlikely to advance them towards the outcomes they most desire if their chances of securing a decent job are not improved by that learning.

Finally, we note that COED is making adjustments to other program supports and interventions to respond to the expanded findings (available in the reference materials that follow - these two factors, however, will receive the most and first investment.

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REFERENCE MATERIALS

EXPANDED FINDINGS: STUDENT AND GRADUATE JOURNEY

STUDENT JOURNEY

During their time as students, COED scholars (*becados*):

- Generally believe that they are getting a good education across multiple measures.
 - Students and families select schools/institutions for *básico* and *diversificado* without widespread evidence of considering the quality of the education program –
 - It is unclear if this is because students and families:
 - Do not know how to differentiate quality, and/or
 - Do not have good local options (and can't afford the commute for a better less local option – time, risk and/or cost), and/or
 - Choose the least expensive option in order to be able to put some of the COED stipend towards other basic family expenses.
 - (In spite of student optimism about educational quality, COED staff generally have concerns about the quality of education in a good number of the schools - *nivel básico y diversificado* - that *becados* attend.)
- Tend to choose *carreras* to study without awareness or consideration of market demand or transferrable skills.
- Do not demonstrate much familiarity with the formal economy – what jobs exist and/or how to navigate obtaining a job after graduating.
- Report low average exposure to computers, and technology training.
- Benefit from the soft skill workshops that COED offers, but often mention a desire for more soft skills training.
- Go on to graduate high school at a pre-pandemic rate of 80%, an all-time program rate of 70% and a current program rate closer to 55% (likely due to the effects of the pandemic). Graduating or dropping out most often depend on any one or combination of the following factors:
 - Foremost, avoiding or facing events that pressure them to divert their time and energy away from studies (family sickness, death, loss of job) and into the maintenance of their families.
 - Not having or being able to quickly close academic gaps (sometimes pre-existing and other times precipitated by absences/distractions brought on by addressing family needs).
 - Family support for studies.
 - Navigating emotional, social, and psychological challenges – which may also be precipitated or compounded by the pressures and challenges already noted.
 - Personal resolve/character/mindset.

Possibly (some compelling evidence but not triangulated across multiple impact study components)

- *Possibly* pregnancy/parenting.
 - The literature review and staff interviews suggest that teen pregnancy is a common reason for adolescent girls not to finish their studies. However, our survey did not include ex-alumnos (*desertados/retirados*) and our focus groups requiring travel and having a relatively small sample of ex-alumnos may have translated to sampling bias (i.e. not being accessible to young parents).
- *Possibly* the adjustment period to a new level of schooling.
 - Based on dropout patterns alone (not multiple components of the study), the following junctures are hypothesized to be particularly important for retention:
 - First six months of *básico*
 - Time between finishing *básico* and completing the first year of *diversificado*.
- *Possibly* immigration. (Bullets below based only on staff interviews, though the literature review and common knowledge indicate Guatemala has high levels of outmigration).
 - Students may drop out of school to immigrate out of Guatemala.*

- Staff believe some students may drop out of school because receiving remittances breeds academic apathy.*
**Users did not describe either of these phenomena and only one becado surveyed for this study self-identified as having immigrated out of Guatemala.*
- Operate with a high level of optimism about their post-secondary employment prospects.

GRADUATE JOURNEY

Once graduates, COED's former *becados*:

Trabajo/empleo

- Navigate an extremely difficult labor market.
 - Guatemala as a country was producing fewer than 1,000 private sector jobs annually before the pandemic.
 - 61% of graduates cite lack of jobs in their communities as a barrier to employment
 - 76% of formal private sector jobs are concentrated in urban areas (51% in Dept of Guatemala).
 - 83% of private formal sector jobs are held by people in the top two income quintiles.
- Experience pressure to immediately invest their efforts in income-generating activities – average wages in Guatemala have declined and the price of goods has climbed significantly with global inflation. Upon graduation, they no longer have scholarship money income and are often in rural communities where obtaining a formal job would require time and money to actively pursue one.
- Are mostly working (71%+), largely in the informal economy, despite wanting formal jobs.
 - Roughly one third of graduates hold formal jobs.
 - About a quarter of graduates who graduated at least 2.5 years ago earn Guatemalan minimum wage (Q3385/mes).
 - 98% of graduates without a formal job want one.
 - Formally employed graduates earn significantly more on average than other graduates.
- Often demonstrate (through a mix of self-assessment, interview responses, staff assessment, and based on lit review) the following gaps in knowledge and readiness to obtain formal employment:
 - Required experience (internship, prior work, apprenticeship, etc.)
 - Differentiating university studies that might give them a leg up
 - Job search skills
 - Demand for their particular field of study
 - Soft skills
 - Technology skills

Entrepreneurship

- Start businesses in about 10% of cases.
 - 30%+ of these small business owners make the Guatemalan minimum wage of Q3385/mes or more (and may have another job in addition to a small business).

University studies

- Do not study in large numbers at the university level despite wanting to.
 - Over 90% of graduates want or wanted to study at the university level.
 - Among them, 24% are studying or have studied at the university level.
- Cite a range of significant barriers to studying at the university level, including:
 - Covering costs (e.g. tuition, transportation, room and board).
 - Academic readiness (e.g. passing entrance exams).
 - The opportunity cost of studying when pressure to bring in an income is current.
- Show a positive correlation between income and university studies.
 - It is hypothesized that in most cases securing a baseline level of income enables university studies and, over time, university studies unlock access to greater income.

FURTHER FRAMING, CELEBRATIONS, GRATITUDE

As described in the previous section, COED partnered with ADGN to design a study to (a) verify the aim of equipping Rise scholars with *the tools to completely break out of poverty, creating deep, multigenerational change*, and (b) provide insight into what accelerates and what derails them on their path to this desired outcome. We did not pursue the question, “What good has come about as a result of COED’s efforts?” From ADGN’s perspective, however, it is important to acknowledge that we learned a lot about this in the process.

- Current and past recipients of the scholarship are deeply grateful and often share that the opportunity to study has been life-altering and would have been impossible or very challenging without COED’s support. The majority of COED graduates become the most educated in their family, often setting an example for their families and communities about what is possible in terms of educational attainment.
 - Even students who drop out of the scholarship program after *básico* often become the most educated in their families.
- COED students defy the statistics for rural Guatemala in terms of educational attainment and post-secondary success, and demonstrate that it is access to opportunity rather than talent that holds back educational attainment and so much of the economic and social mobility for which education is a foundational condition.
- The research is clear that education has benefits beyond the ability to earn more money, and it’s likely (but beyond the scope of this study) that many of COED’s scholars and their communities experience one or more of these benefits for every year that COED makes possible a scholar’s education:
 - Improved health literacy and outcomes
 - Delayed start of a family (early marriage, teen pregnancy)
 - Empowerment and gender equality (both by demonstrating the potential of women and giving women skills and knowledge that make them more likely to have a seat in decision making processes at home and in their communities)
 - Enhanced civic participation
 - Reduced crime rates (students in school are less likely to engage in criminal activities and learn prosocial behaviors)
 - Improved parenting skills (more educated parents are more likely to raise healthier and better educated children)
 - Better agricultural practices
 - Stronger environmental awareness
 - Greater self-esteem and psychological well-being.

COED Impact Study Brief: Learning from Student and Recent Grad Experience

Prepared for Seattle International Foundation Donor Roundtable



- COED connects many people from around the world to Guatemala every year, including through its Rise program – facilitating greater understanding of, attention to, and resource flow for Guatemala.
- COED has collected significant information over the course of more than 15 years and made important investments in data infrastructure, which all now has the potential to be leveraged by COED as well as others to drive ever better support to students, families, and communities.

ADGN also wishes to acknowledge, uplift, and thank COED’s leadership team, Rise facilitators, and Rise coordinators for their efforts in this study. ADGN Education staff have worked with many entities focused on improving education and COED’s team stands out for all of the following reasons:

- **Operational excellence**, as evidenced in scale and efficiency across broad geographic coverage, and in coordinating all on-site and survey related activities that were part of this impact study.
- **Exemplary culture of adult learning**, as demonstrated through embracing workshops on human-centered design, and seeking more information about program outcomes and efficacy.
- **Stakeholder orientation**, as evidenced through significant overlap between initial staff interviews about perception of user journey and final findings report, and through staff wanting to hear users and senior leadership wanting to hear from staff and users.
- **Dedication to mission**, as demonstrated through simultaneous steadfast focus on goals and flexibility regarding path – evidenced in adding and evolving programs over the organization’s history and being willing to do so again to better serve users.