

Securing Access and Retention in Higher Education for Vulnerable Youth in Paraguay

Education is more than just a right, it is a gateway to opportunity, dignity, and a future free from poverty. However, this gateway is firmly shut for thousands of vulnerable youth in Paraguay. 64% of young people ages 18 to 29 are not attending any formal educational institution. This situation is even worse when considering young people living in rural areas, where poverty and systemic challenges are fundamental barriers blocking their dreams of a higher education. Brimming with untapped potential, these young people find themselves cornered by circumstances beyond their control.

Even for those with the undeniable courage to overcome these barriers and secure scholarships or financial aid, the journey is far from over. Financial struggles, isolation from their support networks, and the absence of institutional guidance create overwhelming obstacles. These issues often lead students to reconsider their higher education, letting go of the dreams they once thought were within their reach. Without support, their aspirations become increasingly difficult to sustain, making it harder for them to reach their full potential.

In August 2023, the Realizing Equitable Access, Retention, and Completion in Higher Education (REACH) initiative was launched to change this narrative. This bold and visionary program, implemented by Fundación Paraguaya with funding from USAID and managed by FHI 360, offered a lifeline to youth on the edge of hopelessness. REACH sought to open the doors to education and to ensure that vulnerable youth had the tools, resources, and unwavering support needed to thrive and graduate with dignity. It represents a crucial step toward expanding opportunities and ensuring that more young people can pursue their education.

The REACH initiative has already illuminated paths of possibility.

The initiative was designed to support Paraguay's most vulnerable youth in accessing and completing higher education. Many of the scholarship recipients live in remote areas, some traveling over 200 kilometers to the capital to pursue their studies. To maximize their employment prospects, students were carefully selected for technical careers with high labor demand, such as industrial electricity, industrial maintenance, mechatronics, robotics, gastronomy, hospitality and tourism management, forestry management, and agroecology. These fields were identified through rigorous labor market research to ensure that graduates have real opportunities to secure quality jobs.

To better understand and address students' unique challenges, the program utilized an adaptation of the Poverty Stoplight methodology, an approach replicated worldwide to tackle multidimensional poverty. Developed through participatory research, this adaptation allowed students to identify and prioritize their

biggest barriers to success, ensuring that solutions emerged from their lived experiences rather than top-down interventions. The resulting data enabled precise resource allocation ensuring that students received targeted support based on their specific vulnerabilities.

Many of these students were young mothers and thanks to the REACH program, for the first time, they had access to on-site childcare facilities, making it possible for them to continue their education while caring for their children. Indigenous students, historically underrepresented in higher education, now have access to tailored mentorship and guidance. Additionally, collaboration with private companies has provided students with internships and mentorships, bridging the gap between academia and industry and giving them hands-on experience to enhance their employability.

REACH has already transformed the lives of 285 students, many of whom are first-generation college students, setting a powerful precedent for their families and communities. Earning degrees not only increases their income potential, it also inspires others around them to pursue education, creating a ripple effect of opportunity. Beyond individual success, the initiative is fostering systemic change by building a network among higher education institutions, equipping them with the tools and knowledge needed to continue supporting students in vulnerable situations long after the program ends.

Beyond statistics, the REACH initiative has profoundly changed lives. Luz Mara Pereira, an 18-year-old student from Itá, is one such example. Despite battling childhood leukemia and experiencing severe bullying, Luz remained determined to pursue higher education. Financial hardship made this journey even more challenging, forcing her to carefully budget her expenses and often walk long distances to save money. Thanks to the REACH scholarship, she now receives support for bus fares and school supplies, easing the financial burden on her family and allowing her to focus on her studies. With this support, she can continue pursuing a degree in Business Management while working toward her dream of securing a stable future for herself and her loved ones.

Juan Vera, a 28-year-old father of two, had to abandon his studies at a young age to provide for his children. Left as the sole caretaker of his daughters, he worked tirelessly in various jobs to make ends meet. Although he dreamed of a career in Mechatronics and Industrial Automation, financial limitations prevented him from enrolling in formal education. When Juan was on the verge of dropping out due to a lack of resources, the REACH scholarship gave him the lifeline he needed. Today, he balances work, fatherhood, and his education, grateful for the second chance to build a better future for himself and his family.

The current funding crisis.

Unfortunately, the change in U.S. leadership has abruptly stalled the program's progress. Due to the suspension of funding from the U.S. government, the initiative is now paralyzed. For at least the next 90

days, the absence of financial support threatens to undo the significant strides made in empowering vulnerable youth. Without urgent action to secure interim funding, 285 students face the devastating prospect of losing the resources and opportunities that have sustained their education and their hope.

The uncertainty extends beyond this temporary halt. If the government decides that the project no longer aligns with its vision, the program's future could remain indefinitely stalled. This would leave students without the mentorship, financial aid, and institutional support that has been fundamental to their success. The impact of such a decision would be catastrophic, both for the participants and for the broader efforts to create systemic change in Paraguay's education landscape.

A Call to Action.

In this critical moment, Fundación Paraguaya calls upon new partners, donors, and advocates to step forward with urgency and determination. The immediate need is to secure funding to sustain the program for the 90 days of uncertainty. Without this lifeline, the progress achieved by 285 determined students risks unraveling entirely, leaving them without the support systems that have become fundamental for their educational journey. These are more than just numbers, they are real lives that will possibly be irreparably altered, they are people who face unimaginable circumstances who now see their dreams fading away.

By investing in the REACH initiative, you are not simply funding a program; you are investing in hope, resilience, and the promise of a brighter future for Paraguay. You are standing with 285 young individuals who refuse to let poverty dictate their destinies and are paving the way for systemic change that will impact many generations to come. The stakes are high, and the need is urgent. By working together, we can make sure that these dreams thrive rather than die, igniting a wave of opportunity and empowerment across the nation.