

This college-prep STEM program has a 100% high school graduation success rate

By [Alex Chan](#)

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Adan Arambulo, 16, left, from Valley High and Adriana Castrejon, 15, from Godinez work on writing code during an assignment at the Achievement Institute of Scientific Studies, a college to career readiness STEM program at the University of Redlands, South Coast Metro Campus. (Scott Smeltzer | Daily Pilot)

Over 20 years ago when Paul Riordan was teaching U.S. history at Santa Ana High School, he had a bright student who suddenly stopped showing up to class.

"He was always two chapters ahead of me," Riordan said of teaching the student. "Then he was gone for a couple of weeks and that bothered me."

When Riordan found the apartment where the student lived, the manager of the complex informed Riordan that the student had moved. His father had died and he now was working to support the family.

Some time later, Riordan went to a car wash in Santa Ana and suddenly heard an employee holler "El jefe!" — "the boss," which Riordan's students often referred to him as. The young man working there was his missing student.

Riordan eventually found part-time work for him to do instead so he could continue school. He learned years later that his former student graduated from Berkeley Law to become an attorney.

The longtime Santa Ana teacher went on to found the Achievement Institute of Scientific Studies, a college-to-career STEM program, where 100% of its participants have graduated, most of them from high schools in Santa Ana, according to Riordan.

Since its establishment in 1997, the program has had more than 150 students attend college.

Angela Casillas, a current student in the program who attends Godinez High School in Santa Ana, said she was drawn to apply to the institute after seeing the kinds of colleges its alumni have gotten into, including Stanford, Duke and Yale.

"If those kids can get into schools like Georgetown, Columbia and all the UCs, I thought to myself that I'd be able to do something like that, too," Casillas said. "I'm learning how to network and meet people. I'm still a little shy, but this helps."

The Achievement Institute of Scientific Studies offers its students seven weeks of classes for two summers in a row, starting at the end of their sophomore year. During this time, they also meet with members of the higher education and business communities.

The first summer focuses on STEM — science, technology, engineering and math — and career awareness with activities such as field trips and workshops with professionals in those fields.



High school students participate in the Achievement Institute of Scientific Studies, a college to career readiness STEM program, at the University of Redlands, South Coast Metro Campus on July 19. (Scott Smeltzer / Daily Pilot)

During the second summer, students concentrate on their educational plan, in which they research universities and scholarships they can apply for that following fall. This involves writing their college essays, developing a resume and doing a mock college interview.

Achievement Institute alumna Lisette Martínez is a grammar instructor helping this summer's students with their resumes, college essays, research papers and SAT and ACT writing.

"I didn't know much about applying to college," Martínez said of her experience as a student in the program. "But they taught me so much about public speaking, interview skills, and even how to do a basic handshake."

More than 100 students showed interest in attending this summer's program, according to the Achievement Institute's executive director Debbie Wells. Only 27 were admitted.

"I figured I'll join [the Achievement Institute] so they can help me and in the future I'll be able to help myself," Godinez High School student Isaias Cruz said. "I'm the oldest one out of my siblings and cousins, and I'll be the first one on this journey of going to college."

Isaias said his father's work as a handyman sparked his interest in construction, building and civil engineering.

Each day of class, the students come dressed in their blue Achievement Institute jackets which have "Academic Scholar" embroidered on the chest. Riordan has the same jacket, but with "El Jefe" sewn onto his.

This is the first year the Achievement Institute has held classes at the University of Redlands' South Coast Metro location in Santa Ana, a regional campus of the university that regularly offers education and business-related courses to working adults.

The location's campus director Linda Purtill, also an Achievement Institute board member, suggested that the high school students use the South Coast Metro space this summer.

"We're very blessed that different universities have been interested in helping," Wells said, noting that the program has held classes from place to place over the years. "But one of the goals is to have a facility of their own."

The program also needs more instructors and partnerships with the business community for student internships and sponsorships, according to Wells.

"We want the business community to know that these are kids they can start interacting with in high school who can eventually work for them in the future," Wells said. "When people say they want to see STEM interest among minority students, I say 'They're right here.' "

For more information on the Achievement Institute of Scientific Studies, visit aisfoundation.com.

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