

Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative Evaluation Summary

Program

The Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative, an initiative of the Northwest Leadership Foundation (NLF), aims to equip emerging urban leaders to engage the college campus and their communities at home through a four-part strategy: recruit and select diverse, multicultural cadres of promising urban leaders; provide training during their senior year in high school to prepare them for academic success and develop them as leaders; send the cadre together to college with four-year full tuition scholarships at partner colleges; and provide support and ongoing leadership development opportunities.

Evaluation purpose and methods

Wilder Research conducted an evaluation of Act Six to determine which program components were working well, identify components essential to success, assess program outcomes, and analyze the program's return-on-investment.

Our evaluation focused on the partnership between NLF in Tacoma and Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington, the first and longest-running site of the program. It used a variety of data provided by NLF and Whitworth University, including data on the campus climate and student enrollment, demographics, and academic performance. We conducted focus groups, interviews, and surveys of students, stakeholder groups, and key informants on campus and in the community. In addition, we compared Act Six recipients with a peer group of Whitworth students not in the program. We also compared Act Six students with students in the Palmer Scholars program, a traditional scholarship program. Palmer Scholars are demographically similar to Act Six students, grew up in the Tacoma area, and attended many of the same high schools as Act Six students. Therefore, positive differences in comparisons between Act Six and Palmer Scholars may indicate that unique features of Act Six have an impact beyond that of traditional scholarship programs.

Findings

Recruitment

Act Six has attracted students with the backgrounds and qualities necessary to achieve program goals.

Benefits to students

Act Six students are succeeding academically and graduating from college. As of spring 2008, 47 of the 51 Act Six students were currently enrolled or had graduated, an overall success rate of 92 percent. When compared to the Palmer Scholars, the percentage of Act Six students who graduated in four years (82%) was significantly higher than Palmer Scholars (36%). When asked if they received the support they needed to succeed at their campus, the percentage that agreed or strongly agreed was significantly higher among Act Six students (95%) than among Palmer Scholars (76%).

Act Six students participated in more leadership, vocational development, and co-curricular activities than their Whitworth peers. They were significantly more likely to have participated in an internship (55%) compared to Whitworth peers (25%) and Palmer Scholars (32%). Participation in the other development opportunities, including retreats, workshops, conferences, or job fairs, was similar among Act Six students and Palmer Scholars, but significantly higher than that of their Whitworth peers. Almost one out of four Act Six students (23%) reported having been involved in student government.

Most Act Six students rated their college experience positively, although not as highly as their Whitworth peers.

Impact on campus

Most of the Act Six students and Whitworth faculty believed the campus had benefited from Act Six, while Whitworth peers were more evenly split between those who thought the campus had benefited and those who did not know. The most commonly noted benefit was an increased awareness of diversity issues. This may be leading to a greater understanding, openness, and acceptance of diversity on campus and an improved campus climate. Even in discussing tensions that surfaced on campus in spring 2007 regarding diversity issues, faculty generally described that period of turmoil as necessary on the path to greater diversity and cultural awareness on campus and, in that sense, ultimately beneficial to the college.

Reports of faculty, peers, and Act Six students themselves all indicate that Act Six students have provided substantial leadership on campus in a variety of capacities. Focus group

Continued

comments by Whitworth faculty and peers describe Act Six students as providing leadership through student groups, effectively articulating new or less familiar viewpoints in class discussions, and having an impact through one-on-one conversations.

However, at this point the proportion of underserved students (i.e., students of color, low-income students) has not seen much increase overall at Whitworth. Students of color account for about 12 percent of the incoming students both before and after bringing Act Six to campus.

Impact on communities

All Act Six students said they were committed to making a difference in their community. Many Act Six students reported feeling pressure to return home to Tacoma after graduation (although not required), and many felt conflicted about whether they wanted to do so. Nevertheless, the majority of Act Six students reported planning to return to their home community following graduation (60%), higher than their Whitworth peers (31%) and the Palmer Scholars (46%). Most emphasized their commitment to serving communities in need regardless of where they end up living. All 11 graduates were employed as of summer 2008, 7 in the education or nonprofit sector.

Program components essential to success

The Act Six program has seven core components: two-way partnerships with colleges, full scholarships for recipients, a comprehensive recruitment and selection process, a preparation and leadership training program, a cadre support system, on-campus support and mentoring, and ongoing leadership and vocational development. The evaluation found all seven components to be valuable to the program's success, but the specific ways in which components are implemented may be discretionary.

Recommendations for building on success

More supports for students' success

Suggestions to strengthen students' success include increasing faculty involvement in pre-college training, enhancing preparation of Act Six students for campus life by allowing more unstructured time during campus visits,

and offering more guidance for living in a community not reflective of one's own background. Findings also suggest that Act Six students need opportunities to debrief on their leadership experiences, have realistic expectations set for changes they can accomplish, and to receive guidance from seasoned mentors or program staff. As more Act Six students graduate from college, an Act Six Alumni network could be established as a source of support.

Strengthen efforts to improve campus climate

Awareness of diversity issues has increased; however, knowledge of the program is still low, especially among students. Students and faculty expressed interest in learning more about the program, and staff should continue to work with the college to promote understanding of the program as well as broader understanding of cultural diversity. Perhaps Act Six students across cadres could provide an informative program for the campus, or special training events could be offered for faculty. Other suggestions are to find ways to continue campus dialogue on diversity, and to promote relationships between Act Six students and peers.

Return-on-investment (ROI) analysis

At this early stage, findings are preliminary, first-approximation results. But, based on the very short record of the program at Whitworth, and little information about the subsequent careers of Act Six students, we estimate the Act Six program returns between \$1.82 and \$2.41 of value for each dollar of program cost. This value represents the expected added future wages and tax payments by Act Six scholars and the value added to the educational experiences of their fellow students through the scholars' impact on campus life. As more data accumulates, ROI analysis will be more accurate, and can be improved further by instituting a regular program of surveying former participants with regard to employment and volunteer activities, and making some accounting changes to better partition Act Six costs.

For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Act Six Scholarship and Leadership Initiative: Program evaluation report*. For more information about this report, contact Jennifer Lee Schultz at Wilder Research, 651-280-2677.

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