National College Access Network

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NCAN Benchmarking Spotlight:

Act Six

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<p style="text-align:center">"New Faces in Leadership"</p>

Overview

In 2002, the Northwest Leadership Foundation in Tacoma, WA approached Whitworth University about partnering to educate a group of talented youth from the city's low-income neighborhoods who could become a force for social change on campus and, upon graduating from college, in their communities. Whitworth agreed to offer 11 students full, four-year scholarships, and the following fall, these students arrived on campus as the first cadre of Act Six Scholars. Thirteen years later, over 750 Act Six Scholars from nine cities and five states (Seattle, Tacoma, Spokane, and Yakima Valley, WA; Portland, OR; Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN; Chicago, IL; and Indianapolis, IN) had enrolled in 13 private, nonprofit colleges and universities with scholarships totaling over $58 million. Eighty percent graduated from college within six years, and nearly two-thirds of the graduates returned to their communities as advocates for change.

As a leadership and scholarship program, Act Six's mission is to connect community ministries with faith- and social justice-based colleges to prepare emerging urban leaders to engage in change on the campuses they attend and in their home communities. The program is modeled after the Posse Foundation, a national nonprofit that sends cohorts of youth leaders to highly selective colleges and universities with full tuition scholarships. Act Six differs from Posse in that it was conceived as a partnership between urban, community-based nonprofits and nearby, predominantly white, religiously affiliated institutions. While focusing on college persistence and degree attainment, the program views college completion not as the end goal but as a powerful strategy for developing the abilities of underrepresented students to serve as community leaders.

> **Profile of Scholars**
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> - **80% Low-income**
> - **74% First-generation**
> - **60% Female**
> - **40% Male**
> - **12% Asian/Pacific American**
> - **22% Black**
> - **38% Hispanic**
> - **14% White**

Act Six is based on a belief in the need for leadership to reconcile schisms and inequity among people. The program's name refers to the sixth chapter of the New Testament's Book of Acts, which discusses inequity in the distribution of food and the empowerment of leaders from the affected group to work toward a solution.

Program Model

Five key elements constitute Act Six's foundation:
1) the value of urban students assuming campus leadership roles;
2) cohorts of peers who face similar challenges helping each other through college;
3) students' cultural backgrounds as assets in pursuit of a college degree;
4) training that equips students with college navigational skills and the ability to be intercultural leaders; and
5) students having a sense of purpose as a strategy to enable them to persist to degree completion.

Act Six interweaves these elements throughout its program, using the tiered model described below.

Recruitment and Selection

The goal of the Act Six recruitment process is to develop a diverse pool of talented youth from low-income backgrounds with the ability to assume leadership roles on college campuses and in their communities. The process involves extensive outreach to high schools and community organizations serving large numbers of low-income and students of color. Staff focus on identifying high-potential students who want to use their education to make a difference in their communities. Staff in most Act Six cities make 30-100 recruitment visits annually.

Act Six Scholars are selected and matched with partner colleges through a three-phase, highly competitive procedure that starts in the fall of 12th grade and takes four months to complete. In Phase 1, students complete an online application asking for demographic, educational, and extracurricular information, including to which of the program's partner colleges they want to apply. The personal essay is considered the most important part of the application in this phase. Students must answer four questions describing:

- something they would like to change about their community;
- how their ethnic/cultural background defines them and how they expect to grow as part of a multiracial cadre;
- an aspect of their life they want others to consider; and
- the role their faith tradition (if any) has played in their life.

The Act Six application also serves as the application for admission to the partner colleges in which students express interest.

Along with the program application, students complete the FAFSA and submit their SAR, a copy of their high school transcript, their SAT or ACT scores, a report from their high school guidance counselor, and recommendations from a teacher and a community member. The Act Six staff review the completed applications and eliminate students who fall outside of the program's boundaries or do not meet the minimum academic standards of the partner colleges. The applications of students not selected to advance to the next phase are forwarded to the colleges in which they indicated interest for consideration in the general applicant pool.

In Phase 2, students participate in a half-day event where they meet college representatives to learn more about the institution considering them for a scholarship. Meanwhile, staff observe how they interact with peers. Local selection committees consisting of community representatives and a college admissions officer then read the applications for each college and select twice as many students as there are scholarships to move to Phase 3. All of the Phase 3 students receive offers of admission from the college for which they are in the running for an Act Six scholarship.

Students in Phase 3 spend two to three days on their first-choice campus, during which time they and college staff assess whether the institution makes for a good academic and social match. At the end of this phase, colleges designate five to eight students as Act Six Scholars. Together, the Scholars form a cadre whose members are expected to support each other once they get to campus. Most Scholars are in the top third of their high school graduating class.

Scholarships

Act Six Scholars receive full-tuition scholarships for four years from the college they attend. Students who need additional support receive grants and work-study awards to cover the cost of room and board, books, travel, and personal expenses. While colleges promise to meet students' full financial need with grants and work-study but without loans, some Scholars take out loans to assist with their family's contribution or to cover additional expenses such as study abroad programs. To renew their scholarship from year to year, students must participate actively in Act Six programming and meet Satisfactory Academic Progress requirements.

Training Curriculum

Once selected, Act Six Scholars participate with their cadre in an 18-month training program, the goals of which are to develop the knowledge and skills needed for college success and to foster a deep sense of purpose and commitment to campus and community leadership. The training has two parts – one focusing on the six months preceding college matriculation and another on the first year of college. It begins in March of students' senior year of high school and ends as they get ready to return for their second year of college.

The pre-college training is designed to help Scholars form supportive relationships among the members of their cadre, learn how to handle college-level coursework, and develop their intercultural and community leadership skills. It consists of 20 sessions – including weekly after-school meetings, weekend retreats, workshops for families, campus visits, and a multi-day wilderness experience – covering the following topics:

- **Act Six's mission, vision, and values:** What it means to be an Act Six Scholar
- **Practical skills:** Time and money management; critical reading, writing and discussion skills; strategies for dealing with the challenges of college
- **Culture, race, privilege, and identity:** Understanding and communicating with people of different cultural backgrounds and the connection of race and privilege to individual identity
- **Community leadership:** Frameworks for leadership and service, leadership styles, personal leadership strengths, and tools for leadership
- **Dynamics of change:** The elements involved in personal and organizational change; how to be effective agents of change on campus and in home communities
- **Team-building:** Developing trust and community within each cadre

Scholars are required to attend all sessions. The end goal of the pre-college training is for students to begin college ready for campus life with a strong peer support group and a clear sense of purpose for their education.

The purpose of the first-college-year curriculum is to enable students to adjust successfully to the academic and social demands of college and serve in a campus leadership role. Training runs from September to May and covers the topics below.

- **Establishing oneself on campus:** Understanding the course catalog and important policies and dates
- **Navigating academic challenges:** Identifying challenges to academic success and developing plans for addressing them
- **Navigating personal challenges and seeing new possibilities:** Reflecting on how to deal with personal challenges
- **Living a dual life:** Effectively bridging the differences between students' campus and home communities
- **Maintaining good mental health:** Learning approaches for managing stress and staying emotionally strong
- **Culture, identity, and conflict:** Examining how individuals' values and behaviors may have changed since beginning college, how cultural differences can cause miscommunications and conflict, and the distinction between culturally based and personality-based behaviors
- **Race and privilege:** Understanding how unequal distribution of power among different racial/ethnic groups can lead to unjust systems of race and oppression
- **Individual and collective leadership:** Reflecting on the leadership roles students have assumed during their first year of college and establishing future leadership goals

Campus Support

In addition to the first-year training program, Scholars receive support from Act Six advisors and campus staff designated as Act Six coordinators. Act Six advisors touch base with students weekly via email, text, or phone and visit them once a month on campus to help with whatever issues students may be concerned about. Advisors also communicate regularly with the campus coordinators about how students are doing. At the end of each semester, advisors meet with Scholars to assess their progress toward fulfilling degree requirements and develop plans for the coming semester. In addition, several colleges have enlisted faculty and staff to serve as mentors for the Scholars. Mentors offer social support, help students understand how campus policies and procedures work, and connect them with campus services such as tutoring.

Act Six advisors and campus coordinators actively encourage Scholars to take on leadership roles on campus and in the local community, with some campuses identifying Scholars to participate in campus-based leadership development programs. Over the years, Scholars have held many campus leadership positions; they've founded new clubs, served as club presidents, and been elected student body president.

Staffing

Act Six is staffed somewhat differently in each city where the program operates. Typically, a senior staff member of the local community organization sponsoring Act Six oversees the program, along with bearing other responsibilities. The size of the staff working directly with students depends on the number of partner colleges and student cadres involved in the program. Tacoma and Minneapolis-St. Paul, which are the largest programs, have two full-time staff members, as well as several AmeriCorps volunteers and interns. Along with managing the program, the full-time staff members function as student advisors. In both cities, the staff work closely as a team, sharing decision-making and administrative responsibilities.

Tracking Student Progress

The Act Six cities track student data on a cloud-based software platform created and administered by Degrees of Change (DoC), a nonprofit organized in 2012 to support the network of Act Six sites and the development of new programs. In addition to tracking, the software provides tools for communicating with groups of students, monitoring real-time performance, and generating program reports.

During the program's first phase, sites track data related to their recruitment efforts (e.g., number of high schools and community organizations visited, number of applications completed, and student demographic data). These data enable staff to understand the effectiveness of their outreach activities in achieving a diverse mix of students.

> **The Act Six organizational culture emphasizes reflection, cultural competency, collaboration, and service. Both staff and students frequently engage in activities where they think hard about what they are learning and doing, a process the Act Six leadership believes helps individuals achieve personal, professional, and organizational goals.**

At the college level, data collection focuses on student progress, type and length of interactions with Act Six staff, and satisfaction with the college experience and Act Six services. All Scholars sign FERPA waivers so that staff can receive students' academic records directly from the institutions they attend. DoC staff input the student transcript data and conduct the student satisfaction surveys, while local staff members input data on the services they provide to each student. DoC analyzes the data and generates reports for the sites on a regular basis. Sites use their data to identify and address individual student problems and uncover areas where the program at large needs to improve.

Organizational Culture

The Act Six organizational culture emphasizes reflection, cultural competency, collaboration, and service. Both staff and students frequently engage in activities where

they think hard about what they are learning and doing, a process the Act Six leadership believes helps individuals achieve personal, professional, and organizational goals. Reflection is a key organizing principle of staff meetings, which focus on thoughtful conversations about the work rather than simply sharing information. Cultural competency is interwoven throughout the training curriculum. Collaboration is evident in the ways in which staff members work together. While individuals have defined responsibilities, most decision-making and problem-solving activities involve staff members working together as a team. A commitment to service to others is also a fundamental value of Act Six and so underlies everything that happens throughout the organization.

Finances

The annual cost per Scholar, not including the scholarship funds or support services provided by partner colleges and universities, is approximately $1,800. Funding sources vary from city to city. As an example, in Tacoma, 25 percent of funding comes from fees paid by partner colleges, 50 percent from local foundations, 10 percent from corporations, and 15 percent from individuals.

Policies and Practices Contributing to Students' Success

Data-driven Theory of Change

A key factor contributing to the successful outcomes of Act Six Scholars is the organization's theory of change (Attachment A). The theory is based on research about why students from low-income communities complete college degrees at low rates, the assets such students bring to their college experience, and the roles they can play in transforming campuses into more culturally inclusive institutions. The theory of change spells out the short- and intermediate-term outcomes that Act Six needs to achieve to attain its goals of students earning bachelor's degrees, campuses becoming inclusive of diverse students, and urban communities gaining more well-educated leaders. Tied to each outcome is an action designed to help students reach the outcome and an indicator for measuring the progress of students toward achieving the goals.

> **Act Six continually assesses its progress using data compiled from students' transcripts and self-reports, staff-student interaction records, and twice-yearly student satisfaction surveys.**

Act Six continually assesses its progress using data compiled from students' transcripts and self-reports, staff-student interaction records, and twice-yearly student satisfaction surveys. Degrees of Change automates many otherwise time-consuming tasks for program staff across cloud-based applications. These include emailing or texting surveys to students (and sending reminders to non-respondents), updating databases and dashboards with student data, and telling staff which students require intervention. The compiled data provide staff members with a real-time dashboard they can use to guide program development and decision-making. Advisors

review students' data with them during end-of-semester meetings that involve frank conversations about how students are doing and the problems they need to address, and the development of a plan for improving students' performance.

During the semester, advisors receive email prompts regarding those students who are in trouble so they can quickly follow up and develop interventions to address problems. Examples of concerns that generate automatic email prompts include when students are dissatisfied with their Act Six experience, or have a GPA below 3.0. The staff also review the number of interactions students have with Act Six each month to identify individuals who may not be doing well, and intervene from there.

Using a research-based theory of change, data, and innovative technology, Act Six has produced high levels of persistence and graduation when compared to both national and local data. Overall, 80 percent of Act Six scholars earn a bachelor's degree within six years, compared to 60 percent of all undergraduates[i] and 51 percent of Pell Grant recipients nationwide.[ii] Act Six Scholars outperform all students at the colleges where they are enrolled by 15 percentage points on average. Moreover, when matched with demographically similar students who also received full-need scholarships, Act Six participants were nearly 60 percent less likely to leave school and six times more likely to graduate within four years from the first college they attend.[iii] Finally, with respect to Act Six's mission to develop community leaders, preliminary data from its first alumni survey show:

- 67 percent of graduates have returned to their home communities;
- 62 percent are employed in the nonprofit or public sectors;
- 50 percent are employed in the fields of education or community and social services; and
- 30 percent have served in a leadership role outside of their employment since graduation.

Training Curriculum

Act Six's training curriculum (Attachment B) contributes significantly to students earning a college degree and exercising effective leadership on campus and in urban communities. In addition to discussing strategies for surviving the first year of college, the curriculum engages students in exploring how issues of race, privilege, and power are likely to impact their college experience. Students also deepen their understanding of the program's vision of social transformation and develop the skills they will need to become leaders for change. Finally, training instills in students a strong sense of purpose for their college education, for which Scholars feel accountable and which is a key factor in the program's high degree completion rates.

The training topics students and staff report making the biggest difference in their success are those addressing culture and diversity and the challenges of attending a predominantly white college as a person of color. Discussions of race, gender, and culture give students the language and understanding to be able to identify their feelings and experiences as underrepresented students on largely white, affluent campuses. By portraying racism and gender discrimination as systems, students come to see themselves as navigating a challenging system rather than as victims of oppression.

The training also prepares Scholars to assume leadership roles. They learn how to organize and conduct meetings, manage time, resolve conflicts, and go about changing campus policies and practices that are insensitive to diverse cultures. One example is the experience of a Native American student who wanted to wear an eagle feather to graduation, but who was told she could not because the college had a policy of no decorations on graduation regalia. She spoke with the college's president about the importance of students being able to represent their culture as they walked across the stage and got the policy modified to allow for cultural expression. Scholars have organized and secured dedicated spaces, multicultural centers, and clubs that provide safe places for students of color to discuss issues they would not have an opportunity to comfortably share otherwise.

> **Discussions of race, gender, and culture give students the language and understanding to be able to identify their feelings and experiences as underrepresented students on predominantly white, more affluent campuses.**

Cadres

Another feature of Act Six that contributes significantly to students' college success is the cadre model. A cadre consists of seven to 10 students who receive Act Six scholarships from the same college, enroll in the same year, and commit to supporting one another other throughout their college experience. Such a support group can be pivotal for students of color at predominantly white institutions. Cadre members begin building relationships during the pre-college training program so that when they arrive on campus, they have peers they trust and with whom they can discuss experiences and concerns, learn from each other, and share resources. Cadre members also are a critical source of interpersonal social and emotional support.

Strong Partnerships

Strong community and college partnerships are fundamental to the success of Act Six. Community-based organizations working on the renewal of urban neighborhoods serve as sponsors of Act Six. Known as "affiliates," sponsors assume responsibility for all aspects of program operations: securing scholarship commitments from colleges and universities; hiring, paying, and overseeing the staff; and fundraising. Sponsors' interest in Act Six typically derives from the alignment between their social justice mission and need for young leaders to achieve community renewal goals, and Act Six's leadership development focus.

Act Six college partners provide tuition scholarships and commit to meeting the full financial need of the students selected to attend their institution. In addition to financial aid, partners provide support for Scholars once they are on campus and give Act Six access to the records of students via a FERPA waiver on file. Admissions officers serve as liaisons to Act Six during the pre-college phases, before student life staff members take over once Scholars enroll. Some campuses have committees of faculty and staff

who work with Act Six on recruiting and supporting students. Campuses also have assigned a professional academic advisor to work with Scholars and created faculty/staff mentoring programs for Scholars. College partners benefit from Act Six in various ways: The program's recruitment process helps institutions meet their multicultural enrollment goals, and colleges also have increased their applicant pools after receiving information about all Act Six applicants – including those who ultimately aren't selected – who listed them as a first-choice college. One institution reported receiving 300 applications that yielded more than 50 enrollees through their Act Six partnership.

Replication

Degrees of Change (DoC), the organization that oversees the Act Six Network and supports existing programs, offers a comprehensive portfolio of tools, consulting services, and other resources to help other communities replicate the Act Six model. Communities may replicate the entire model or specific program components, such as the training curriculum and the FoYoSt (Follow Your Students) cloud-based software application. The pre-college training curriculum has been replicated by several TRIO, Upward Bound, and Talent Search programs. Organizations using FoYoSt include College Track, 10,000 Degrees, the Tacoma (WA) Public Schools, the Washington Student Achievement Council, and Oregon GEAR UP.

The FoYoSt College Enrollment Visualizer developed by DoC speeds up and enhances the analysis of National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data. While the NSC is the most reliable data source for college enrollment and graduation data nationwide, its output can be cumbersome to analyze, often requiring weeks to process. By contrast, the College Enrollment Visualizer requires just minutes to convert endless rows of NSC data into intuitive, easy-to-read visual displays. FoYoSt's Student View displays individual students' current enrollment and degree status and allows organizations to follow their students' journeys through college quarter-by-quarter and year-by-year. Summary View automatically calculates persistence and completion outcomes with a year-by-year aggregate display of enrollment and degree status. Persistence and college graduation rates can be filtered by demographic variables to explore the performance of different subgroups of students.

The DoC replication process works as follows:
- Contact DoC to arrange a conversation about your interest and objectives, the context in which you work, and the assistance DoC can provide.
- Consider a proposal from the DoC staff describing the ways in which their services and tools could help you.
- Convene a group of community and higher education leaders to learn about the Act Six and DoC models, discuss what is necessary to replicate them, and assess the group's interest in doing so.
- Collaborate with community and college partners to develop a program tailored to the needs and interests of key stakeholders.

The most challenging aspects of replicating Act Six's model in its entirety are identifying and securing the commitment of a community affiliate to sponsor the program and

recruiting a group of colleges to provide scholarships and support for Act Six Scholars. The missions of affiliate organizations and colleges must align with the mission of Act Six to develop indigenous leaders to serve urban communities. The affiliate organization must have sufficient staff capacity to lead the planning, implementation, and fundraising activities involved in replicating the model. The affiliate also needs to have strong collaborative relationships with other community organizations whose involvement and support are integral to the Act Six recruitment and selection process. Partner colleges must commit to providing full four-year tuition scholarships for seven to 10 new Scholars each year and paying an annual fee of $25,000, which is shared by the affiliate and DoC. Colleges also need to have strong institutional buy-in from both senior leaders and frontline staff to provide the support Scholars will need to work on building a more diverse campus culture and to successfully complete a degree in four years.

Conclusion

With its goal of developing emerging urban community leaders, Act Six occupies a unique place among college access and success programs nationally. Act Six also has experienced remarkable success in achieving this goal. Eighty percent of its participants have earned degrees within six years of beginning college, and 65 percent have returned to their home communities, where they often work for nonprofit organizations and fill volunteer leadership positions.

Act Six's success is attributable in large measure to the organization's fidelity to its defining elements: cohorts as a core structure, the importance of cultural integrity, intensive leadership training, and fostering a strong sense of purpose. Act Six embeds these elements throughout its programming, from the recruitment phase to the support provided to students during their time on campus. The staff rigorously evaluate the impact of the interventions related to each of these elements on students' performance academically and in leadership roles. The commitment of partner colleges to the Scholars they enroll and the urban communities from which they come is also critical to Act Six successfully achieving its goals.

The program's emphasis on using research and data to inform practice is another distinguishing feature contributing to its high college completion rates. Act Six's theory of change is grounded in an extensive review of research literature on strategies that promote high levels of college persistence. The investment in the development of cutting-edge resources such of FoYoSt, which makes it much easier and more efficient to analyze and learn from NSC data, is another example of the way in which Act Six uses data to monitor the progress of students toward a degree and improve program interventions as needed to achieve better outcomes.

The high college completion rates of Act Six Scholars suggest the value of other college access and success organizations incorporating similar key elements into their programming. In particular, giving students a clear sense of purpose for their college education, helping them develop their cultural competency, and equipping them with the skills to function as effective leaders are likely to result in increased persistence and degree completion rates.

Acknowledgments

List of Attachments

- Attachment A: Act Six Theory of Change
- Attachment B: Act Six Curriculum Guide

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[i] Institute of Education Sciences. 2015. *Digest of Education Statistics, Table 326.10.* Washington, DC: National Center of Education Statistics.

[ii] Nichols, Andrew. 2015. *The Pell Partnership: Ensuring a Shared Responsibility for Low-Income Student Success.* Washington, DC: Education Trust.

[iii] Herron, Timothy. 2012. *Promoting College Completion Through Leadership Among Undergraduate Urban College Students: A Theory of Change and Evaluation of College Retention Outcomes for the Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative.* Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, Seattle, WA.