

**Application Point of Contact: Lynn McIlvain**

**Fiscal Agent: Degrees of Change**

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Applicants must submit the [Letter of Interest Submission Form](#) and upload to the form a Letter of Interest as a PDF attachment **no later than February 16, 2024 by 11:59PM Pacific Time**. To ensure formatting aligns with the below guidelines, we encourage applicants to make use of this Letter of Interest template.

A Letter of Interest must adhere to the following guidelines:

- No more than five pages in total length, excluding the cover page
- Cover page identifies:
  - o Partnership name (If applicable)
  - o Application point of contact
  - o Name of the organization that will act as fiscal agent
- All bolded questions are numbered and answered serially (see pgs. 6-8 in the Request for Letters of Interest)
- Responses are single spaced in Times New Roman 11-point font

**Note:** All LOIs submitted to WSAC will be publicly available on the WSAC website in advance of the recommendations made to Council (est. May 2024).

**1. Why are the partner organizations that are or will be included in this work the ones that came together to address educational attainment through place-based work in your region?**

Degrees of Change and our partners are all deeply dedicated to Washington State and to our local communities. Degrees of Change was founded by Dr. Tim Herron, who launched our college success programming in 2002. We have always known that the solutions to our community’s challenges lie within our community itself. After years of close and intentional conversations with our community members, we launched our career success programming in 2019.

Our partners are all committed to the same mission: empower our communities to become the most vibrant, equitable communities that they can be. Degrees of Change partners are committed to our strategies; they understand that to truly empower young people within our communities, these young people must be educated and prepared for leadership roles upon graduation. Community empowerment only begins with educational attainment—it does not stop there.

Many of our partners have been doing this work in our communities for a long time. For example, one of our close higher education partners, Pacific Lutheran University, has undertaken projects like Teach253 (with Tacoma Public Schools, another close partner), The Education Intern Program, the Automatic Admission Partnership, and has hosted scholars in Degrees of Change’s Act Six program for the last 15 years. All our place-based partnerships with two- and four-year colleges and universities, employers in the public and private sector, and community-based organizations all share built, trusted relationships with our communities. These partners’ livelihoods, like that of Degrees of Change, are intimately dependent on the success of the communities in which they live and operate.

We also partner with other local community-based organizations, such as Washington State Opportunity Scholars, to ensure that our programming efforts are not duplicated. Washington State Opportunity Scholars partners with Degrees of Change to refer their own students to apply for our programming which they themselves may not provide, such as Seed Internships.

**2. How is or will the partnership be structured?**

*We do not expect a statement of each organization’s role, but instead details about how your partnership collaborates, its intended or practiced approach to decision-making, and whether the partnership **anticipates recruiting new members** during the granting period.*

Degrees of Change develops and supports community partnerships among colleges, employers, and community-based organizations to meet educational attainment goals for the young leaders in our community. We create a bridge for our young people across different systems: from high school to and through college and from college to career. Partnerships are diverse and consist of pre-higher education partners (who also employ our future teachers), such as Tacoma Public Schools and Franklin Pierce School District; higher education institutions, such as Pacific Lutheran University, Saint Martin’s University, Heritage University, and Northwest University; and post-higher education partners, such as employer partners like MultiCare, Tacoma Public Utilities, MacDonald-Miller, Symetra, and more.

Other community organizations, such as Washington State Opportunity Scholars and the Yakima Valley Community Foundation, also partner on program recruitment efforts to avoid duplicating services.

To ensure our partnerships are solid and collaborative, we establish at least three levels of buy-in. For example, when partnering with higher education institutions, we secure commitment from and collaboration with the college president or other senior leadership, admissions, and student life. For post-higher education employer partners, we identify partnership champions in senior leadership, HR, and department supervisors. Degrees of Change has dedicated points of contact for each of our partners,

typically determined by the program arm with which that partner works most closely. Through partner surveys and regular meetings, Degrees of Change maintains touchpoints with our partners weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly depending on partner preference and programming intensity.

**3. How have or will the partner organizations learn from each other and the communities served, and how does or will the partnership incorporate this learning into ongoing work?**

The research and data teams within our partnerships collaborate to implement data collection and sharing agreements. Data sharing agreements allow for continuous improvement throughout programming by leveraging current data to evaluate program outcomes and address successes and friction points with timeliness. Importantly, these agreements allow us to receive financial aid, enrollment, and graduation data from higher education partners (supplemented with National Student Clearinghouse college enrollment and graduation data).

Program participant feedback is a particular priority for Degrees of Change and our partners. Together, we collect pre- and post-training surveys, quicker “pulse check” surveys during programming, and alumni surveys from program alumni. These surveys track and measure outcomes (changes in attitudes and behaviors; college persistence and graduation; employment outcomes) as well as collect feedback which shape programming improvements. If any issues are identified in surveys, staff are alerted and follow up to address these concerns efficiently. Time spent with our partners is essential to true and open collaboration and the deep learning that comes with that collaboration.

For example, Degrees of Change meets monthly with our higher education partners to discuss how best to adapt our programming to serve students in the changing landscape of higher education. Over this past year, we have invested in an ongoing dialogue with all our local college partners to leverage our learnings and redesign our college success programming to serve more students over time, deepen the supports students receive on campus, while also addressing the recruitment and financial challenges our college partners face post-COVID.

**4. Who are the focal population(s) in your partnership’s work, and what assets do learners and families in these populations bring to their educational journeys?**

*For example, assets may include the languages spoken at home or in community spaces, the social connections that bind the community and/or region, or cultural practices and norms observed within the region’s communities. In answering this question, please identify how your partnership has directly engaged the focal population(s) to build an understanding of these assets.*

Programming is designed for diverse leaders between 18-24 years old. These young leaders may be diverse in several different ways: racially or ethnically marginalized, economically disadvantaged, and first-generation to college. Our direct service programs identify and prepare leaders (86% students of color; 84% low-income and/or first-generation; 62% women) to create communities and systems where everyone is treated equitably and recognized for their talents regardless of their gender, income status, sexual identity, disability status, religion, or race.

Our program participants have intimate knowledge about the systemic challenges that our communities face through their own lived experiences. They are resilient and deeply committed to their communities. They have learned firsthand the essential role of community support in the lives of its citizens. Our cohorts also become extremely committed to one another; they are driven to push and encourage their cohort members such that they all succeed. This team mindset is the foundation of the cohort method’s success.

As much as our learners are community-minded team players, they are also independent and capable leaders. They are empowered and educated by their life experiences and those of their loved ones to advocate and make change in areas where it is most necessary to do so. They have unique strengths, and it is built into our programming to help our learners discover and leverage these strengths. During leadership development training hours, participants take the StrengthsFinder assessment (by Gallup). The assessment screens for competencies in such strengths as “Activator,” “Connectedness,” “Command,” “Deliberative,” “Learner,” and many more.

Our curriculum also facilitates a broader exploration of each of our young leaders’ intersectional identities, including cultural values, norms, and biases; race/ethnicity, gender, language, immigration status, and societal privilege; and how to leverage their strengths to lead across difference in a multicultural world.

**5. What is the geographic region where the focal population(s) that would be served by this investment live?**

Our wide community partnership will serve students and promote educational attainment outcomes across Washington State. Between all our programming, we have presences in Tacoma-Seattle, Spokane, and Yakima.

**6. What are some of the systemic barriers that learners and families in your focal population(s) encounter?**

*Please identify how your partnership has directly engaged the focal population(s) to build an understanding of these barriers.*

Over the last 20 years, Degrees of Change has worked with our communities to understand why barriers persist between our learners and educational attainment. Our founder was a high school math teacher who learned firsthand how low-income and first-generation students, especially students of color, face real and systemic challenges. Per Stephens, et. al.’s, *Closing the social-class achievement gap: A difference-education intervention improves first-generation students' academic performance and all students' college transition* (2014), first generation and racially marginalized students face unique barriers to educational attainment including lack of college readiness, familial support, financial stability, low academic self-esteem, and difficult on-campus adjustments.

The six-year bachelor's degree attainment rate for low-income students is 44%, compared to 64% for students who are not low-income. First generation students are 62% less likely to graduate college than those whose parents attained bachelor’s degrees (Stephens et. al. 2014). We are proud to share that our participants’ average graduation rate is 81%.

According to the Washington Student Achievement Council, nearly 70% of all projected job openings will require postsecondary education. Degrees of Change and our partners know that educational attainment is essential to ensure that our participants are both as financially stable and as well prepared as necessary to lead and serve our communities—and by extension, our society at large.

**7. What work do you propose undertaking during the granting period?**

Our partnership will accomplish the following deliverables in fiscal year 2024-25:

80% of graduating class of program participants will earn their bachelor’s degree

80% of participants report their career experience made them more confident in completing college

230 participants will secure professional and/or internship opportunities

40% program growth will occur with 250 participants recruited during annual recruitment

450 program participants will be served with cohort-based leadership development programming

180 leadership development training hours will be provided for program participants

## **8. How will this proposed work contribute to increasing educational attainment for the focal population(s) in your region?**

Our model of cohort-based leadership development has displayed proven college and career outcomes with demographically similar students for more than 20 years. This model offers our target population a built-in social support system, in which students from the same community build strong bonds before attending the same college or participating in internships together. The cohort model has been evaluated internally and externally by doctoral-level researchers and has been statistically shown to significantly increase the rate of college completion compared to that of students in traditional learning models, per Oldham's *The impact of a cohort-based learning model on student success within vocational technical certificates at a community college* (2017). This is because our cohort model builds the social (familial) support and self-esteem as well as eases the adjustment to on-campus living, mitigating identified challenges to disadvantaged learners' educational attainment.

Furthermore, our partnerships close the financial barrier between disadvantaged learners and educational attainment by providing financial aid. In-college career experiences provide employment wages that contribute to student financial stability but, more importantly, connect students to career experiences. Many other students who share demographics with our program participants do not complete college, citing an absent sense of purpose, per Bay-Meyer et al.'s *Why Do Students Leave College? Student Voice Research Report* (2020). However, our participants complete career experiences with a fresh understanding of why educational attainment is important and how they will leverage their degree post-graduation.

Degrees of Change runs our own robust data and evaluation efforts which provide quantifiable direct evidence of the efficacy and impact of our programming.

81% graduate within six years, nearly double the national average for low-income students (cumulative through spring 2023),

83% report that our career programming raised their confidence in completing college (summer 2023),

and 36% enrolled in post-graduate education within one year of graduation, compared to 25% nationwide (cumulative through our last alumni survey in 2019).

Furthermore, leveraging Washington State's College Bound Scholarship and State Need Grant and our college partners' generous scholarship packages alleviate financial barriers that directly impact first-generation students' success in college and post-graduation. According to Fry's *First-Generation College Graduates Lag Behind Their Peers on Key Economic Outcomes* (2021), published by the Pew Research Center, first generation students were 10% more likely to incur higher college debt compared to non-first-generation students and were 8% more likely to owe \$25,000 or more. Our college success program participants graduate college with full need met, with a maximum of \$3,000 in work study funds per year.

This is how our programming's impact radiates out into our communities. Nationwide, only 20% of students whose parents did not attend college will earn their college degree. However, students with even one parent possessing a bachelor's degree graduated college at a rate of 60%. (This increases to 82% when both parents possess a bachelor's degree.) With most high-demand, high-paying jobs in our state requiring some form of post-secondary degree or credential, our program alumni break intergenerational barriers and, by so doing, truly transform our communities into more equitable ones.

Each partnership plays a vital role in our programming. Higher education institutions finance generous scholarships for our learners, promote our programming at their events, provide thought partnership and program design consultation, and more. Employer partners host interns, employ graduates, and many sponsor our programming directly. Other community-based organizations serve as our affiliate partners outside of Tacoma-Seattle, providing direct program services, thought partnership, and program design support. School districts recruit and refer participants to our programs, host interns or employ graduates, and consult on program delivery.