

PROJECT PLAYBOOK

Listening with Empathy: Leveraging Student Voice in Innovation

UNIVERSITY
INNOVATION
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Formed in 2014, the UIA is a national multi-campus laboratory for student success innovation. UIA institutions collaborate to dramatically accelerate the implementation and scale of proven innovations to significantly increase the number and diversity of college graduates in the United States. Through 2023, UIA campuses collectively produced an additional 143,500 graduates compared to pre-UIA baseline rates. Notably, 60% of these graduates were students of color and 49% were low-income students. Moreover, UIA member institutions have increased their annual degree awards by 29%, annual degrees awarded to students of color by 89%, and annual degrees awarded to low-income students by 41%.

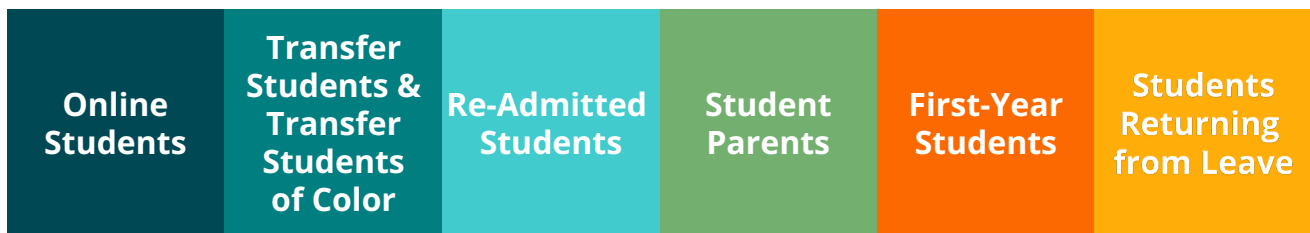
INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the University Innovation Alliance (UIA) launched the Listening Lab for Higher Education Transformation. Building on nearly a decade of experience identifying opportunities to serve students and close gaps in student outcomes, UIA campuses realized they needed better ways to listen to their local experts—their students. Multiple UIA campuses had begun exploring focus group methods as a way of learning from students beyond quantitative methods and the questions leaders knew to ask. The desire to find better ways of listening to students gained particular urgency as UIA campuses launched their student-centered redesign work, which foregrounded identity-conscious approaches to student success.

With empathy at its core, Listening Lab sought to design, implement, and scale an adaptable and systematic approach to elevating the student voice. We developed methods for creating generative conversations and deriving trustworthy findings, with attention to translating those findings into policy and program solutions supporting student success.

Seven UIA member campuses participated in the full implementation of Listening Lab focus groups with their students: Arizona State University, Georgia State University, Michigan State University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, Purdue University, University of California, Riverside, and University of Utah. Across these seven universities, we conducted 143 focus groups and ultimately listened to 448 students. Participating campuses selected a range of student identities and experiences to center in their focus groups, choosing student populations that leaders knew they needed to listen to in order to advance their student success efforts.

OUR CAMPUSES LISTENED TO



...AND WE LEARNED.

ABOUT THIS PLAYBOOK

This playbook provides a guide for other institutions seeking to listen better to their students. Although we focus on effective practices and recommendations for using focus groups to elevate student voices, many of the principles and approaches described in the playbook can be applied to a host of other efforts designed to improve student success.

Through the playbook, we aim to open conversations, offer insights, and provide inspiration for student success practitioners and higher education leaders who want to include students' perspectives as they pursue campus change and innovation. We describe our systematic and adaptable approach to focus groups as a key strategy for advancing student success on campus. Certainly, the act of conducting focus groups can function as its own intervention in support of students' sense of belonging and feelings of mattering to the institution. Our goal with focus groups, however, is much broader. By utilizing empathy-centered focus groups to deeply listen to students, campus leaders open themselves up to new connections to students, insights from students, and opportunities for campus transformation.



BENEFITS OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are a qualitative research method in which a small group of participants has a moderated conversation about a particular topic. As part of the Listening Lab initiative, campus student success professionals identified groups of students from whom they wanted to learn more about their experiences and needs. By using focus group methods, we maximized how many students we could listen to while also building a sense of community around shared experiences. Furthermore, students often said they appreciated that their university leaders cared enough about them to create these listening spaces.



"In 2022, Purdue University began our First-Year Success Project to see how we could better support the success of first-semester undergraduate students. The project initially looked at quantitative data (retention rates, graduation rates, GPA, and student demographics), which provided some insight into the phenomenon of success in the first year. However, we realized that we were 'missing' something about these phenomena, which is how we got involved in the Listening Lab project."

Historically, institutions have relied on surveys to garner information about students' basic needs, sense of belonging, and campus climate. But in addition to being hampered by low response rates and non-representative samples, **surveys can only answer the questions campus leaders already know to ask.** They miss potentially critical insights from students that could lead to improved policy and program decisions to improve student success.

Campuses can use focus group methods to gather valuable insights from their students to explore new or emerging topics, complement, illustrate, explain, or add nuance to existing data sources (e.g., quantitative campus data or national surveys), and inform their campus change efforts. Through intentional design choices as well as ongoing training and development for focus group leaders, these focus groups can also demonstrate the institution's care for students and create opportunities for students to feel more connected to their peers and institution, fostering community, a sense of mattering, and healing among student participants (Karunaratne, 2023). Students in the Listening Lab focus groups appreciated meeting others with similar backgrounds and shared that they felt less alone in their university experiences thanks to their participation in focus groups.

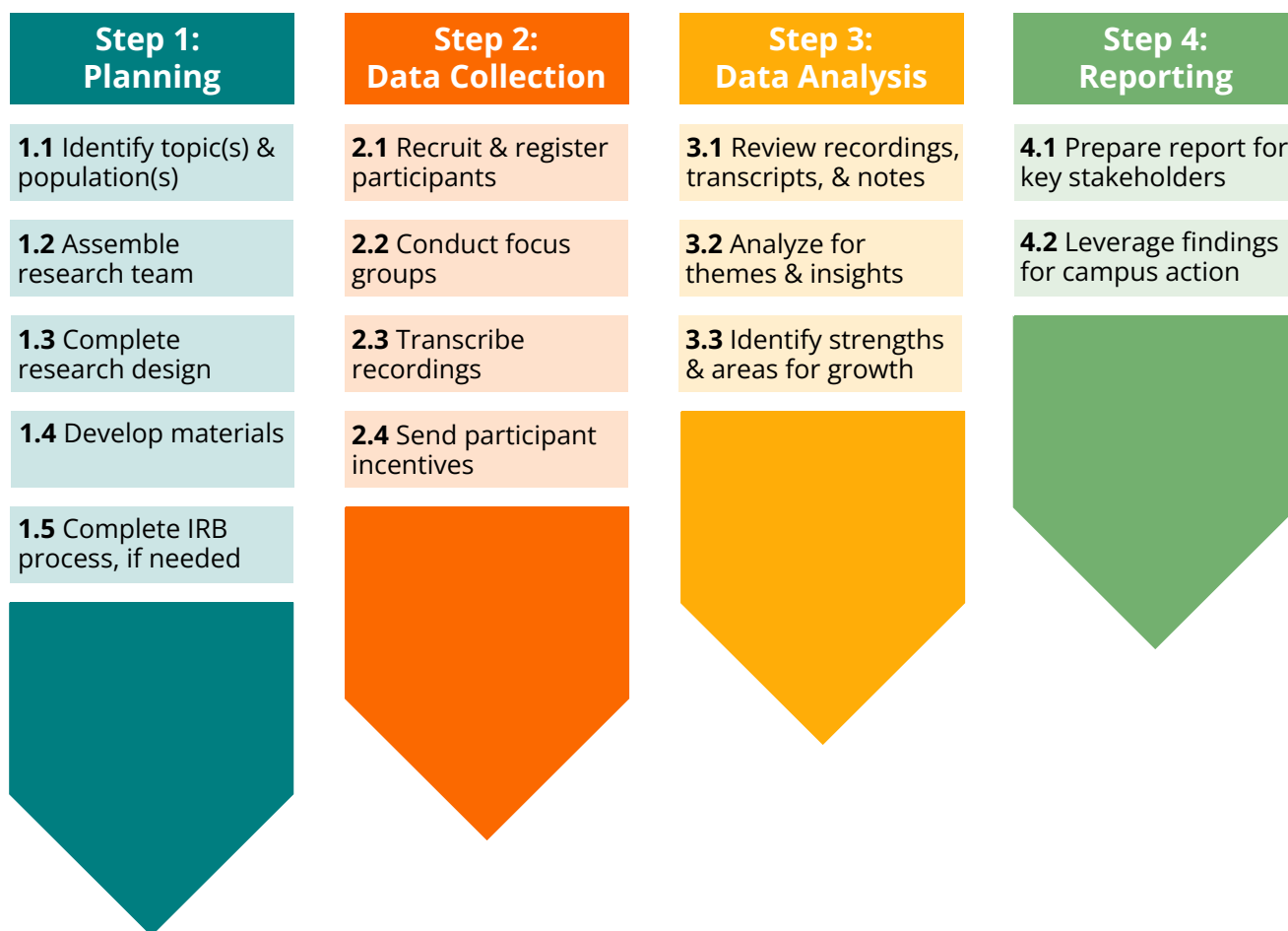
Through the Listening Lab initiative, the UIA advanced its mission of bringing about a fundamental transformation in higher education by designing and implementing focus groups as a tool for intentionally, systematically, and empathetically elevating the student voice in student success innovation work.

APPROACH TO LISTENING

To implement focus groups across UIA campuses, we used a common research design progression, infused with empathy and humanism as core values throughout all aspects of the project.

Empathy refers to a capacity to understand the perspectives, feelings, and experiences of another person. In our focus groups, empathy enabled moderators to respond to student participants in ways that demonstrated care, respected differences, shared in mutuality, and built trusting relationships. **Humanism** refers to a worldview that prioritizes the value and dignity of humans. This philosophical approach to meaning-making underscores the importance of personal narrative and agency. The Listening Lab model is built on the belief that educators should center students' voices in campus policy, practice, and support efforts.

In this section of the playbook, we offer a brief overview of each step of our process—planning, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. We expand upon lessons learned in the following sections. **For those seeking more step-by-step guidance, we have developed [The UIA Guide to Focus Groups](#).**



Step 1: Planning

The first step of the planning phase is to reflect on which students university leaders need to listen to the most and why. Participating UIA campuses chose their student populations for a variety of reasons, including advancing strategic imperatives and addressing persistent challenges. With the student population in mind, it is time to bring together your campus team. Listening Lab campus teams most often included upper-level leaders, student-facing professionals, research and assessment professionals, and staff who share identities and experiences with students.

Once a strong campus team is assembled, members can work together to write the focus group protocol, determine what (if any) approval is needed from the institutional review board (IRB), and create all recruitment materials (e.g., posters, emails, social media posts, intake forms).

Step 2: Data Collection

Participants are the most vital aspect of focus groups, and they can be recruited in myriad ways. We suggest making good use of the campus team from Step 1 to identify student recruitment opportunities that are specific to the desired student population. This could be through student organizations, email outreach, flyers, standing outside key campus locations, etc. Incentives such as a modest gift card or campus swag may also help to encourage students to spend time participating in a focus group. We suggest aiming for 4-6 participants per focus group, which allows each student to participate at depth within a 60-90 minute session.

With participants recruited and signed up for a session, it is time to conduct the focus group. We advocate for a co-moderator model, in which both moderators are trained to conduct empathy-centered focus groups. Additionally, we strongly encourage recording all focus groups (with participants' consent), so the recordings may be transcribed and more easily referenced.

Finally, distribute any promised incentives in a timely manner. Participants' time and insights are incredibly valuable and merit a token of appreciation.



"Through the Listening Lab, we learned from transfer students of color (TSOC). TSOC shared feedback to strengthen experiences through campus partnerships, cultural events, and empathy-centered advising. Many participants thanked moderators for holding space, prioritizing their opinions, and giving voice to their stories."

Step 3: Data Analysis

Once you have conducted your focus groups, it is time to dig into your transcripts, recordings, and notes to transform student insights into actionable qualitative data. This step is another opportunity to listen deeply and empathetically to students.

Your analysis plan should be responsive to the questions your campus team had from the outset. The most common approach is thematic analysis, or going into the text looking for patterns and themes, though there are other viable options. As you analyze, we encourage you to think about which policies and practices are working well, opportunities for change, surprises, and any new information that can be used to improve student experiences.

Step 4: Reporting

Students entrust us with their hopes, fears, struggles, and stories during the focus groups. To honor their valuable and vulnerable contributions, it is imperative that we use the insights gained from the focus groups to inform campus change efforts. Campus teams should share their work with relevant stakeholders, most often through reports and presentations. This step is an opportune moment to bring the focus group data into conversation with any additional data sources (e.g., campus data, national trends, local contexts) to paint a full and compelling picture of this student population's experiences and needs.



"Our focus groups provided robust insight into the GSU student experience, and findings were shared with GSU leadership. In response, GSU has made intentional changes to improve holistic support for undergraduate students. Enrollment revamped communications with new students to provide clarity. Student Engagement began offering more diverse food choices at campus events to foster cultural inclusivity. The First Year Experience team developed a module to familiarize students with public transportation to promote campus-city connectivity. The insights gathered from these focus groups have been so valuable that GSU has continued to conduct focus groups after the conclusion of the Listening Lab grant."

Lessons Learned

In addition to surfacing insights unique to each campus, the Listening Lab process yielded several lessons applicable to any university implementing focus groups.

- Each campus has unique IRB considerations. If your project requires an IRB, we suggest building 4-6 weeks into your timeline from submission to approval.
- Project management requires consistent documentation to streamline communication, establish task leads, and bridge any changes in personnel. We recommend establishing a centralized location to store and regularly update project notes, focus group materials, IRB documents, and other important records.
- Universities continue to adapt to shifting state and federal policies around DEI initiatives. Educators must work within the bounds of the law to advocate for practices that ensure we can hear from the students whose voices we too often miss.
- Several factors influence participant recruitment efficacy. Offer focus groups in different modalities and at multiple times throughout the day/week to account for various schedules, and consider how the academic calendar or campus-wide events may impact availability. Connect with campus partners who work closely with your target population to discuss recruitment pathways, such as listservs, club meeting times, and student referrals. Consider the role of incentives to spark interest, such as providing gift cards, food, and/or raffles.

For more insight, see [The UIA Guide to Focus Groups](#).



PROJECT INSIGHTS

The Listening Lab for Higher Education Transformation seeks to answer the questions: How do we, as educators and leaders, center student voices in our campus practices and policies? **How do we listen better?**



MODERATOR TRAINING

75+ attendees
17 campuses
30+ practice
sessions

as of March 2024



LISTENING LAB

143 focus groups
448 students
7 campuses

as of April 2024



Part 1: What Did We Learn About Listening?

Leading with empathy

As we seek to empower universities with strategies to center students' voices in campus practice, policy, and transformation, our listening efforts foreground empathy and accountability as guiding values. This requires prioritizing relationships, attending to context, and continuing to reflect on the process and our work. Importantly, we believe campus accountability starts with intentional, empathetic listening—and focus groups are a valuable tool for practitioners seeking to translate commitments into action.



"UCR is aware that transfer students have a unique collegiate experience. Our goal in joining the Listening Lab initiative was to better understand the current transfer student experience and enhance the campus climate for transfer students. UCR wants transfer students to have a seamless transition and complete their degrees."

Moderators who listen with curiosity

Moderators are essential to the focus group process. An effective moderator listens carefully and with curiosity, establishes an environment in which students feel comfortable sharing their perspectives, and keeps the conversation focused while also allowing it to develop organically.

The Listening Lab conducted a two-part training series utilizing a flipped classroom model to help moderators develop the skills and strategies necessary to lead focus groups. In part 1, participants reviewed videos and supporting materials about focus group methods, our approach, and moderation techniques. In part 2, participants gathered with Listening Lab facilitators for a synchronous virtual session in which we engaged in practice moderation scenarios and further discussions about focus group moderation. Ultimately, we engaged in thinking about what it means to listen deeply through proactive and responsive strategies, such as:

- Rhetorical approaches to demonstrate care (e.g., summarizing, re-framing, affirming, and prompting strategies)
- Fostering group cohesion, community norms, and compassionate intervention
- Language as a sense-making tool (e.g., word choice, mirror techniques, rapport-building)
- Multi-method elicitation techniques (e.g., visual, written, art-based, spoken)
- Leaning into silence
- Active listening and non-verbal cues
- Appropriate self-disclosure

As higher education professionals, many of our moderators currently or previously occupied high-touchpoint student-facing roles on their campuses. Our training provided an opportunity for participants to consider their experiences as advisors, mentors, and teachers. In many ways, these roles primed participants with transferable skills to serve as moderators. However, participants also grappled with some of the distinct differences between advising (and other helping-related) roles and serving as a focus group moderator. As advisors, listening to respond, offering advice, and resource referrals are a routine part of the job. As moderators, participants practiced strategies related to question-asking versus advice-giving or referral behaviors. Training participants attested to how this distinction equipped them to be curious moderators who listen to understand, and thus more robustly center student voices in the focus group space.

Practitioners who listen with curiosity

Listening with curiosity has applications beyond the focus group space, too. Educators in student-facing roles as well as senior administrators can listen with curiosity to improve their interactions with students.

For example, transfer students of color from Michigan State described how well-meaning advising practices can inadvertently silence students. When advisors know “too much,” their assumptions about what is best for students can shut down creative approaches to alternative curricular pathways, whereas alternative pathways are often necessary for the students’ holistic success. Additionally, transfer students of color noted that some resource referral behaviors can shut down help-seeking. When advisors offer resource referrals, the assumption is that the student has not yet sought out this resource and that the resource is a good match for the student’s expressed needs. However, when a student has already sought out this resource and had a negative experience, the student may feel defeated when this resource is presented as a solution. Listening with curiosity can serve as a mechanism to mitigate assumptions and build rapport with students. Question-asking prior to advice-giving might sound like, “Have you ever visited the Tutoring Center? What was that like?”



“As one of our focus populations, the University of Utah selected undergraduate students who are also parents. While we currently have good support systems and structure in place to serve our student-parents, we also recognize the need for improved and/or enhanced services. We used the Listening Lab focus groups to help assess barriers and to hear directly from student-parents. Their input will inform our efforts to support and promote student-parent success and overall well-being.”

Data analysis as accountability

As campus teams engaged in data analysis and report-writing based on their listening experiences in the focus groups, they were prompted to continually consider the following questions:

- As researchers and educators, what responsibilities do we have to our student participants and their stories?
- How can we continue to prioritize empathetic listening when working with our focus group transcripts as we conduct data analysis?
- What does advocacy look like when communicating focus group findings?
- Looking ahead, how do we identify thought partners and leaders who will help champion student success efforts?

Following focus groups and data collection, the UIA Listening Lab team hosted an interactive data analysis program. Data Dash served as a space for campus research teams to analyze their focus group data, emphasizing the value of accountability.

The pragmatic goal was to provide campus research teams with time to work through data analysis and report writing. Campus teams engaged with their student data and identified findings. Next, campus teams considered institutional transformation and opportunities for practices, processes, and policies. This also served as an opportunity to uplift the thought leaders, colleagues, and offices already engaged in campus transformation efforts. Importantly, Data Dash provided space for coalition-focused work to consider how we might strengthen and institutionalize empathetic listening practices on our campuses.

Ultimately, coalition-based and values-centric efforts are critical to translating research-oriented work into campus action that supports student success.



"N.C. A&T's University Student Success Office (USSO) and the Office of Strategic Planning and Institutional Effectiveness (OSPIE) are collaborating to improve the student success metrics in persistence and graduation for the readmission student population. Since conducting the focus groups within the Listening Lab, we have revamped our website to ensure that readmitted students have easier access to completing their readmission applications and are actively planning to collaborate with various campus partners to offer a readmission advising team and readmission orientation for the next term."

Part 2: What Did We Learn From Listening?

“I just like the whole aspect of this focus group—**getting to get the stuff off my chest** that I didn't think I could. And also being here with people who kind of had the same experience as me, **it just makes me feel not alone** in the whole process... Now that I know that there are people, not just in this meeting, but just in general that have experienced the same thing, **it helps.**”

—Solange, Focus Group Participant

As educators consider calls for increased transparency around university policies and practices, the growing role of technology in delivering education, and the future of student success, our listening revealed many opportunities to strengthen holistic support in the postsecondary context. Focus group participants described how campus change efforts may attend to their unique needs in and out of the classroom. Below, we outline participants' critical insights for campus action, drawn from the seven UIA institutions that took part in the Listening Lab. While the learnings you glean from your focus groups will vary based on your unique campus contexts, we hope these reflections offer actionable considerations for your institution, and for the future of higher education at-large.

Communication & transparency

Students frequently shared their perceptions of institutional habits and responsibilities in their focus groups. They cited the need for increased transparency related to costs, courses, and housing. For instance, students often described the financial stress of unexpected tuition increases and hidden educational costs—especially for students who were financially independent, low-income, and/or caretakers. Relatedly, students described the ambiguous nature of course offerings and the veiled process of securing housing. Both of these instances placed an increased administrative burden on students to clarify processes, seek guidance, and plan multiple “just-in-case” backup plans in an effort to meet their basic needs and continue toward a timely graduation.

Across student populations and universities, we heard calls for institutions to proactively, consistently, and transparently communicate with students. These focus group findings serve as an added reminder that higher education must adapt to a future that is reliant on transparent communication with stakeholders, especially in light of rising tuition, wavering state support, and increased public scrutiny. As educational leaders grapple with the state of higher education in the policy realm, they are also called to consider how to foster trusting relationships in their institutional context.

Technology

Across participating UIA campuses, students' experiences spoke to the uses and possibilities of technology. Technological advancements play a significant role in expanding access to postsecondary education and persistence toward degree attainment. Transfer students and online learners, for instance, remarked that remote curricular experiences were a beacon of opportunity. In many cases, students described their persistence and eventual degree-attainment as dependent on online course offerings.

In their focus groups, students also described the growing pains of online education. Rapid expansion of virtual learning sometimes resulted in inconsistent curricular environments, such as confusing expectations related to communication, protocols, or learning software. These student experiences suggested that pedagogical support for online education, consistent user-interface expectations, and centralized staffing for online learning may help balance rapid expansion with clearly articulated guidelines, which can evolve alongside technology.

Finally, as enrollment in online education programs continues to increase among first-year, continuing, and returning students, focus group participants underscored their desire for peer connectedness. While many educators and students can likely attest to the sometimes "awkward" or "clunky" feel of hybrid courses or events, online students' experiences speak to the necessity of continued innovation to foster connections and belonging, and offer equitable opportunities across modalities.



Centralized resources

Across all focus groups, moderators asked student participants, “What would you like to tell your instructors, administrators, or others about your experience and how they could make it better?” In response, students often cited the need for centralized, concise, and context-specific resources. While many campuses provided a comprehensive resource overview at student orientation and offices frequently highlighted their specific resources, students described navigational challenges. Students' narratives regularly touched on the siloed nature of on-campus resources. Though they did not use this language, they struggled to make sense of which resources were best suited to their unique needs. Many student populations (e.g., transfer students, transfer students of color, online students, student caregivers, returning students) described the need for a more population-specific resource list that outlines frequent referrals, touchpoints, or partnerships. Critically, campuses can better address basic need gaps by creating a widely accessible resource list for on-campus and off-campus programs that outlines eligibility, processes, hours, and contact information.

Relatedly, students who went through a transfer or re-entry admissions process outlined the need for clear, common timelines. While many timeline resources were easily accessible for first-year admissions and enrollment, students navigating different re-/matriculation processes were met with ambiguous requirements, timelines, communication, and contact information. For instance, several transfer students described being unsure how long it would take to process their transcript, how they would know when it was received, and whom to contact. As a result, steps in their admissions process and enrollment were often unknowingly delayed.



“In the past decade at ASU, online degree-seeking undergraduates’ growth has consistently outpaced campus immersion enrollments. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need to consider remote mechanisms to support students holistically. Still, university structures and broader postsecondary legacies center residential experiences. Listening Lab themes aligned with ASU’s strategic direction and these focus groups served as an opportunity to listen afresh to online undergraduate students. Students expressed gratitude for the flexibility of online education while longing for deeper connections to peers, faculty, and campus resources. Participants’ thoughtful engagement inspired continued listening and co-design opportunities.”



Listening

Our experiences with student participants underscored the importance of empathy-centered listening. Through our focus groups, we witnessed how thoughtful students were in forming, articulating, and responding to perceptions of campus. Students provided pragmatic, constructive feedback, paired with recognition and celebration of the good work being done on campus. In fact, students regularly described the people and places they felt the most appreciative of—*often attributed to the fact that they felt seen and heard in these spaces*. Students routinely expressed gratitude for the focus group space and the affirmation, hope, and connection it facilitated. Some students saw the focus group's mere existence as a signal that the university cares.

“ I think even doing this research and **hosting focus groups is a step in the right direction**, so I think it's nice to know that there's just effort there and that **our opinions do matter**.”

—Malia, Focus Group Participant

KEY TAKEAWAYS

“ I just wanted to say **thank you for providing this opportunity to have our voice heard** because there aren't many opportunities like [this].”

—Jess, Focus Group Participant

- 1. Students want to share their experiences when they believe they will be heard.** Unprompted, a number of students across campuses and focus populations expressed how much they appreciated the institution's interest in their experiences and feedback. Additionally, students shared how gathering with others who had similar backgrounds or experiences helped them feel less alone.
- 2. Campuses are hungry for insights from qualitative research.** Multiple participating campuses are embedding focus groups and other qualitative methods into their innovation, improvement, and assessment work.
- 3. Focus groups dovetail nicely with existing campus assessment and research efforts.** We strongly believe that focus groups are an excellent way both to inform quantitative inquiry design (e.g., host a few focus groups to help determine areas of interest for an upcoming survey) and to dive deeper into existing data (e.g., hold focus groups with LGBTQ+ students after a campus climate survey finds inequities).
- 4. Staff have many transferable skills to lend to empathy-centered focus groups.** Higher education professionals, perhaps especially those from student affairs and student success, utilize many transferable skills, such as listening, empathy, and problem solving, in their work. Focus group moderators use these skills, but with slight differences in goals and contexts. With a bit of training, staff can be ready to effectively moderate and analyze focus groups.
- 5. AI tools show promise for making qualitative research more feasible and efficient.** Numerous services now exist for AI-generated transcription and summaries. Such tools do not replace thoughtful and systematic analysis, but they can expedite the process of preparing transcripts and identifying general themes. These technologies are rapidly evolving, so be sure to select any AI tool with attention to data security.
- 6. Targeted, well-designed focus group initiatives with ongoing analysis can save time and may require fewer participants than expected.** Several campuses reported that listening deeply to 25-30 students (approximately 4-7 focus groups) about a particular topic provided substantive and actionable insights. For these campuses, additional groups offered little new information, but required significant staff time to conduct and analyze the focus groups.

SUMMARY & NEXT STEPS

Through the Listening Lab for Higher Education Transformation, the UIA created an adaptable, systematic, and empathy-centered approach to elevating the student voice through focus groups. Students and campus leaders found this approach to be valuable and effective. Students appreciated the opportunity to be heard, to connect with others who had similar experiences, and to feel like the university cared about them. Campus leaders—from those who conducted the focus groups to those reviewing the findings and acting on recommendations—appreciated this mechanism for listening carefully and for hearing from key student groups about their experiences, needs, and recommendations.

Ultimately, this initiative demonstrated that the seemingly simple act of listening with empathy and curiosity is an exceptionally powerful tool for building relationships and informing campus change efforts with student voices. Participating UIA campuses are finding ways to institutionalize empathy-centered focus groups. For example, multiple campuses are investing in staff training and time to support continued qualitative student success inquiry.

As you consider how to intentionally leverage empathy-centered focus groups at your institution, we encourage you to consider:

- **Listening to empathize and understand, rather than to respond.** Empathetic listening is a skill that can be practiced in many contexts, including and beyond focus groups. It is a powerful tool you can use immediately to foster connection and to get to the root of challenges. It may require a few extra minutes in an interaction, but we would wager it will be time well spent.
- **Staffing capacity and institutional commitment.** Focus groups require significant time and energy from the campus team—from setting the research agenda to holding the focus groups to analyzing data and making recommendations. Responsible staff should be given adequate training, working hours, and support in which to orchestrate this process.
- **Data should drive change.** What we learn from our students should change us and we should then use it to change the institution. Students entrust us with their goals, stories, and feedback. They offer these insights to us from a place of hope—maybe, just maybe, we will hear them and do something to improve their university experience. It is our obligation to honor their time and vulnerability with a commitment to act on what we hear during focus groups.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Listening & Focus Groups

- The UIA Guide to Focus Groups, a step-by-step guide for designing and implementing a focus group initiative with templates, timelines, and practical examples
- The UIA offers focus group moderator training in a six-week online course. Contact thelab@theuia.org for more information.

UIA Strategies & Initiatives

- Completion Grants Playbook
- Proactive Advising Playbook
- College to Career Playbook

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

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