

Using Student Focus Groups to Strengthen Program Design

Kelly Bay-Meyer, Ph.D.
Director of Research & Evaluation
Degrees of Change

Project Finish Line
Learning Community on Measuring Program Effectiveness
Puget Sound ESD
October 10, 2016



Outline

12:30-12:35 - Context for Case Study

- Degrees of Change
- Act Six
- College Spark Washington
- Ready to Rise

12:35-1:00 - Focus Group Case Study

1. Set-up
2. Facilitation
3. Data collection
4. Data analysis
5. Reporting
6. Program Design

1:00-1:15 - Q&A



Context

- Degrees of Change
 - Created in 2012 as a vehicle to leverage and scale the demonstrated success of the Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative
 - Central office for Act Six (and Ready to Rise)
 - curriculum, staff training, administrative support, technical assistance, data collection, research, evaluation, technological & programmatic innovations, expanded partnerships, etc.

Context

- Act Six
 - Leadership training & full scholarships program
 - Students who want to use their college education to lead & serve in their home communities
 - Since 2002, 755 scholars (86% students of color; 74% first-gen; 79% low-inc; 90% first-gen or low-inc)
 - Partnership between local organizations & faith-based colleges
 - Tacoma-Seattle, Portland, Spokane, Yakima Valley, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Chicago & Indianapolis
 - 80% six-year bachelor's degree graduation rate

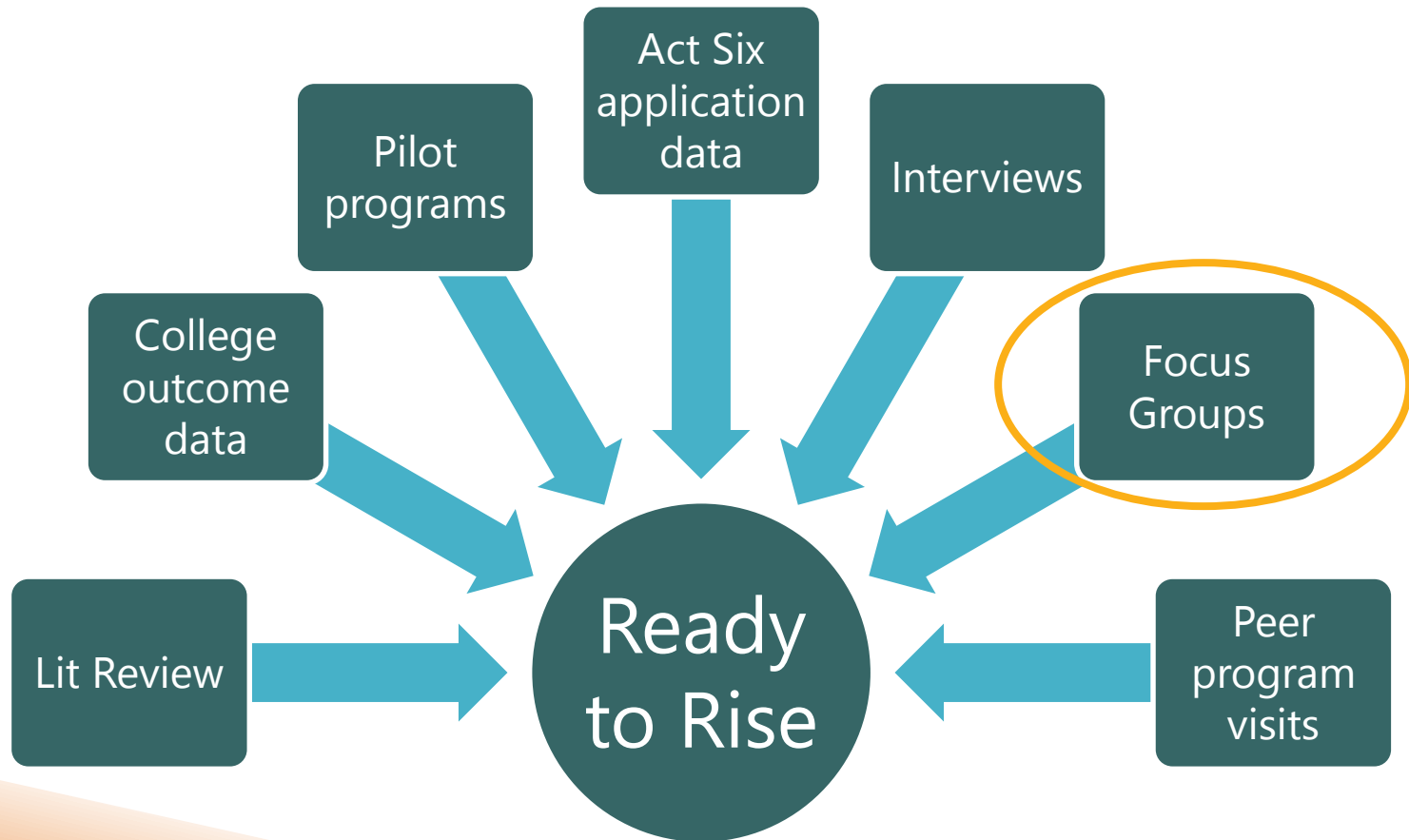
Context

- College Spark Washington
 - College Spark Washington approached Degrees of Change to develop a new program to scale the success of Act Six to public two-year and four-year colleges in Washington State
 - \$3.4 million grant over five years to serve 1,000 students
 - New program called Ready to Rise

Context

- Ready to Rise
 - Leadership development & college support program
 - Students graduating from high schools in Tacoma, Vancouver or Yakima Valley
 - Desire to use their college degrees to lead and serve their home communities
 - Primarily first-generation, low-income &/or students of color
 - Attending one of seven partner colleges:
 - Public two-year:*
 - Clark College
 - Tacoma Community College
 - Yakima Valley College
 - Public four-year*
 - Central Washington University
 - University of Washington-Tacoma
 - Washington State University-Vancouver
 - Western Washington University

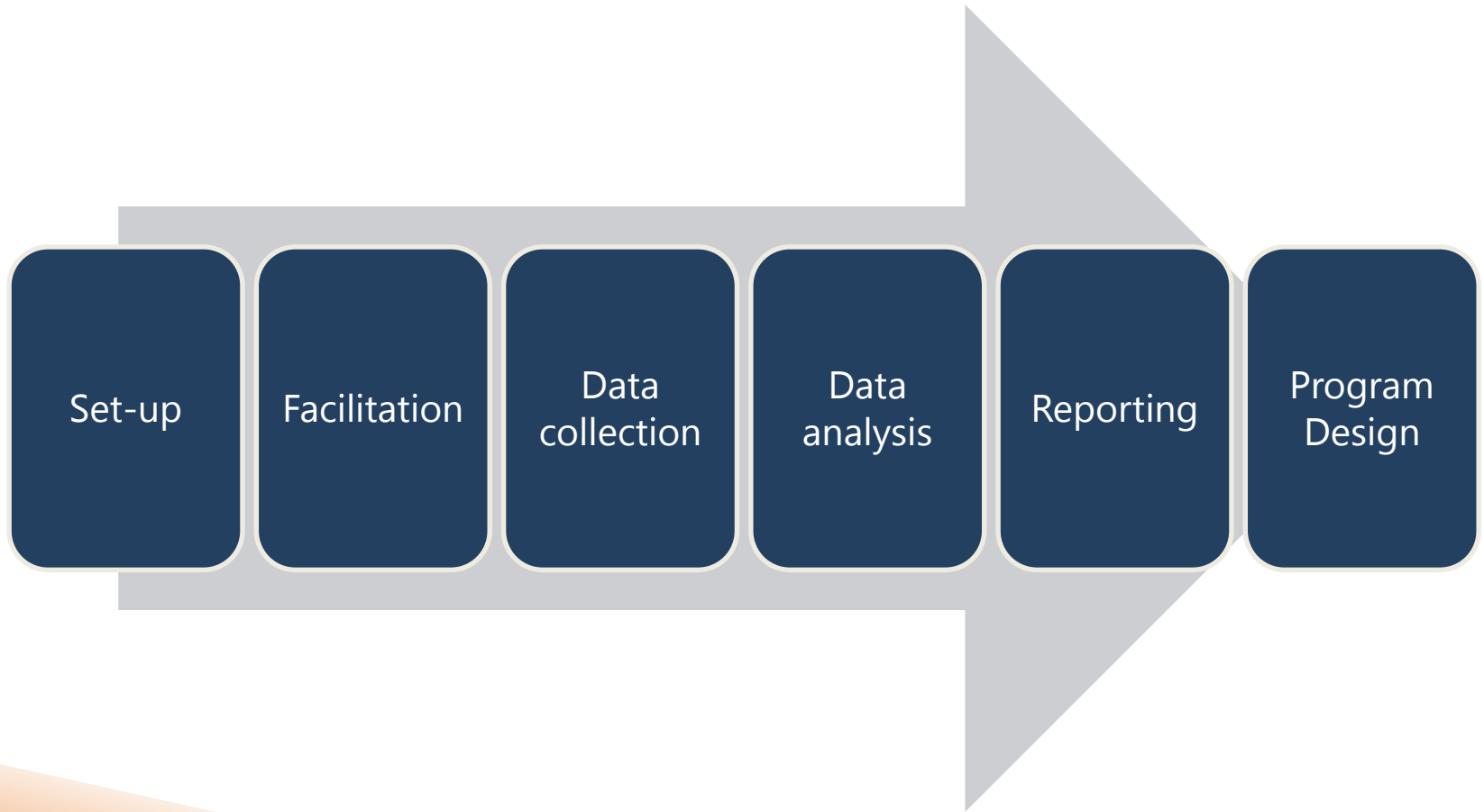
Focus Group Case Study



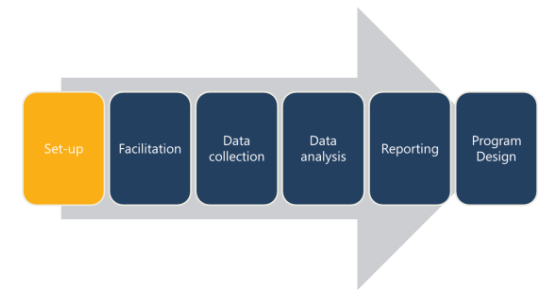
Focus Group Case Study

- Specifically *student* focus groups
- Goal was to learn from the successes and challenges experienced by community cohort programs to inform design of Ready to Rise.
 - Act Six scholars = scholarship recipients
 - Act Six Academy scholars = non-scholarship recipients
 - City Builders scholars = non-scholarship recipients, community cohort program administered by college

Focus Group Case Study



Set-up



1. Gather contextual information
2. Determine appropriate method
3. Draft protocol

Setting Up Focus Groups

3. Draft protocols

- Space to list program, location, date, time, duration
- Sign-in sheet for participants with relevant demographics
- Include time allotted for each section
- Begin with thanking participants, introducing self & topic, explaining why participants were selected
- Provide guidelines: no right or wrong answers, listening respectfully, turn off cell phones, talk to each other
- Explain how findings will be used & how participant privacy will be protected (may need to sign consent form for IRB purposes)



Setting Up Focus Groups

3. Draft protocols (cont'd)

- Ask participants to introduce themselves with most relevant descriptors and/or ice breaker questions to build comfort
- Allow time for participants to ask questions before starting
- Question content
 - General to specific
 - Based on goals of focus group
 - Allow for “probing” and unanticipated information



Portland Focus Group Protocol

Kelly Bay-Meyer, Director of Research and Evaluation

9/28/2016

Participating Programs & Representatives:

1. Act Six Academy Scholars

INTRODUCTIONS, PURPOSE & METHODS (10 min.):

Introductions:

- Name, Hometown, College, Year, Major, Act Six Academy participation

Purpose:

- Learn from the successes and challenges experienced by Act Six, Act Six Academy, and community cohort programs in order to inform future expansion efforts with Through College Together.

Methods:

- Appreciative Inquiry as a way of reframing questions to be solutions-focused. Instead of asking "What problems are you having?" we ask, "What's working well around here?" and "How can we do more of it?" (Preskill, 2007)¹.
- Responses will be coded by theme across interviews and focus groups, summarized in a draft report, shared back with participants for review, revised if needed, and then finalized as an internal report.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (1 hr. 20 min.):

15 min.

1. What were your best experiences with the Act Six Academy program?

15 min.

2. What do you value most about the Act Six Academy program? Why did you participate?

15 min.

3. What would you like the Act Six Academy program to look like 5 to 10 years from now?

20 min.

4. If you had three wishes that you could grant on behalf of the Act Six Academy program in order to build upon your successes and to grow toward your 5- to 10-year vision, what would they be?

15 min.

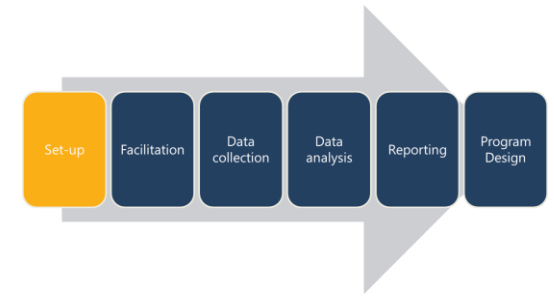
5. If you were giving advice to an organization that wanted to expand the Act Six Academy program to another college/region in the state, what would you say?

¹ Preskill, H. (2007). Using Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation Practice. Presented at the American Evaluation Association Summer Evaluation Institute, Atlanta, Georgia. Retrieved from, http://betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/Preskill_Using%20Appreciative.pdf.

Focus Group Protocol Example

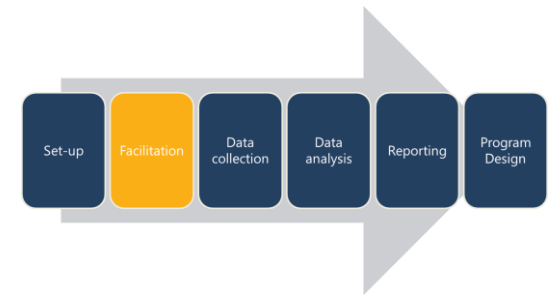


Set-up



4. Review protocol with stakeholders
5. Ensure that trusted & well-informed contact invites students
6. Print copies of protocol for participants
7. Consider incentives
 - Provide beverages (and food, if possible)
 - Swag?
 - Opportunity to share opinions & improve program for future students?

Facilitation



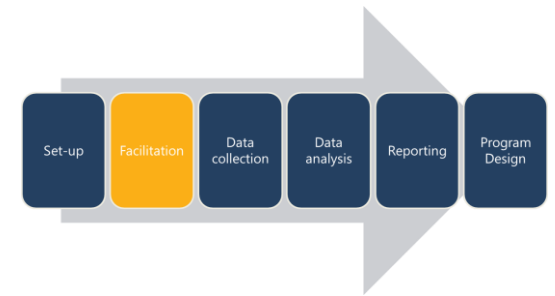
- Comfortable setting
- Circle seating
 - Draw seating diagram & write down names
- Consider costs and benefits of audio recording
- Useful to have two moderators:
 1. guide conversation
 2. written notes, logistics, time keeper

Facilitation



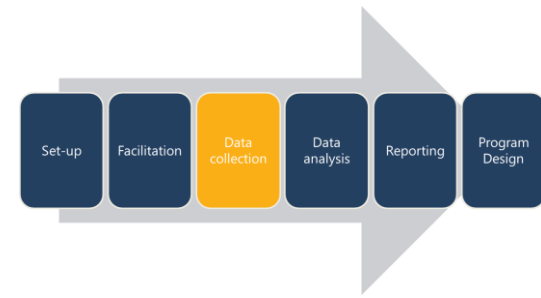
- Follow-up questions/probes
 - Open-ended questions as opposed to dichotomous yes/no
 - General to specific
 - Volunteers vs. round robin
 - Probes: Explain further? Examples? Am I understanding correctly?
- Controlled reactions to participants
 - Eye contact, head nodding
 - Avoid value judgments—“So I’m hearing that...” or “Thank you for sharing that...” as opposed to “That’s good”

Facilitation



- Subtle group control
 - Experts, dominant talkers, shy participants, ramblers...
- Wrapping up
 - Summarize
 - Review purpose and ask if anything was missed
 - Next steps/what to expect?
 - Thanks and dismissal

Data Collection



- Sign-in sheet
 - Other relevant information?
 - Gender? Race/ethnicity? Grade-level? Number of years in program?
- Audio recording
 - Comfort of participants?
 - Resources to transcribe?
- Written notes
 - Clarity and consistency
 - Quotes
 - Key points and themes
 - Note-taker's own ideas, hunches or thoughts (delineate)
 - Body language, non-verbal activity

Data Analysis



- During focus group
 - Probe to clarify inconsistent or vague comments
 - Offer a summary & seek confirmation
- Immediately after focus group
 - Debrief with other moderator
 - Note themes, hunches, interpretations, ideas
 - Label and file field notes, tapes & other materials

Data Analysis



- Within hours
 - Make back-up copy of audio files & written notes
- Within days
 - Transcribe word for word from audio file
 - Identify speaker whenever possible
 - Write up report of question-by-question responses with amplifying quotes
 - Look for emerging themes by question & overall

Reporting



1. Write Executive Summary last
2. Include focus group protocol in appendix
3. Describe purpose, questions, participants (in general—not by name), location, date, duration
4. Sequence results question by question or by theme
5. Narrative & bullets
6. A few quotes to illustrate themes
7. Verify report with other moderator (and focus group participants)
8. Revise and finalize

Portland and Yakima Interview and Focus Group Summary

"Together Through College" Design Planning Process

Kelly Bay-Meyer, Director of Research & Evaluation, Degrees of Change

January 15, 2016

In order to inform the design of the "Together Through College" program, Degrees of Change conducted interviews and focus groups with students, coaches and directors of the Act Six and community cohorts programs in Portland and Yakima on January 6th-7th, 2016. Interview and focus group questions emphasized program successes and challenges, recommended program changes, and suggestions regarding how best to recruit for and implement the new "Together Through College" program. Among Degrees of Change staff, Nalani Linder, Managing Director of the Community Cohorts, facilitated all interviews and focus groups; Kelly Bay-Meyer, Director of Research and Evaluation, transcribed responses; and Tim Herron, President, offered additional insights and posed follow-up questions, as needed.

In total, three interviews and five focus groups representing 19 individuals were conducted. In Portland, Degrees of Change interviewed Adam Ristick, Assistant Director of the Act Six Scholarship for the Portland Leadership Foundation and Ben Sand, CEO of the Portland Leadership Foundation. Additionally, three separate focus groups were conducted in Portland with two Act Six scholars; five Act Six Academy scholars; and two City Builders scholars, respectively. In Yakima, one focus group was conducted with five staff representing four different college access programs (College Success Foundation, Upward Bound-WSU, Upward Bound-YVCC and Upward Bound Science), and one focus group was conducted with five Act Six Academy scholars. This report also includes findings from a prior interview with Delinda Higgins, Act Six Director for the Yakima Leadership Foundation.

A summary of the findings from these interviews and focus groups are provided below across four separate content areas: 1) program successes; 2) program challenges; 3) recommended program changes; and 4) "Together Through College" suggestions. Within each content area, generalizable themes are described first, followed by themes disaggregated by region and respondent group (where applicable).

Program Successes

Overall

- Although there is agreement that high school students initially apply to Act Six for the scholarship, both staff and students take pride that Act Six is more than just a scholarship – it is an incredible leadership development opportunity, a chance to be part of something greater than yourself and to give back.

Report Example

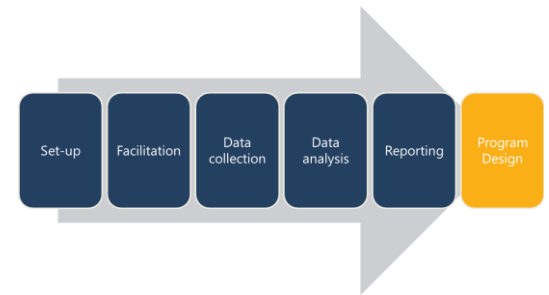


Program Design



- Program goals
 - Return home to lead and serve
 - College retention and graduation
 - Retain emphasis on leadership development & cadre-building

Program Design



- Student recruitment & selection criteria
 - Not necessarily demonstrated leadership—but students who love their community & want to serve
 - Ability to attend any one of partner colleges
 - Need to clarify roles and responsibilities of students and staff
 - More flexibility with academic preparation but need minimum GPA or coursework due to programmatic constraints
 - Incentivize initial participation with summer stipend
 - Non-financial incentives more important later:
 - Don't go to college alone
 - Develop as a leader
 - Increase your career readiness
 - Emphasize assets—not deficits—frame as a leadership development—not as a college retention program



Program Design



- Student supports
 - When?
 - Throughout college—not just pre-college and first year
 - Scaled back time commitment without college scholarship
 - What?
 - College success strategies
 - Leadership development
 - Career preparation
 - How?
 - Full-time site directors
 - Near-peer ambassadors
 - Vocational specialist
 - Personalized text messaging & badging app



Resources

- Krueger, R.A. (2002). Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews. St. Paul: University of Minnesota. Retrieved from, <http://www.eiu.edu/~ihec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf>.
- Grudens-Schuck, N., Allen, B.L., Larson, K. (2004). Focus Group Fundamentals. Iowa State University. Retrieved from, <http://comm.eval.org/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=3d675ceb-cf85-4ffb-9781-aaaa58fd789a&forceDialog=0>.
- Berkowitz, B. (2016). Conducting Focus Groups. The Community Tool Box, Chapter 3, Section 6. Work Group for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas. Retrieved from, <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-focus-groups/main>.



Questions?



Thank you!

