

# Listening with Empathy: Leveraging Student Voice in Innovation

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, the University Innovation Alliance (UIA) launched the Listening Lab for Higher Education Transformation 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. This playbook offers a step-by-step guide for implementing empathy-centered focus groups that provide deep insights into the student experience, ensuring that students are not only heard but also influence real campus change.

### Proven Impact Across Seven Campuses

From 2022-2024, UIA campuses conducted 143 focus groups with 448 students. These efforts resulted in actionable changes across campuses, such as improved communication strategies, revised student support services, and enhanced inclusivity in advising. These outcomes demonstrate the effectiveness of this model in catalyzing transformation within diverse university environments.

The playbook explores multiple benefits and recommendations for leveraging student voice in innovation efforts, including:

#### Elevate Student Voices for Actionable Insights

Traditional methods like surveys often miss critical student perspectives. At its core, the UIA's focus group model emphasizes the importance of empathy and intentional listening. Through the systematic use of focus groups, institutions can capture authentic, qualitative insights that reflect the real needs and challenges of students, driving better-informed policy and program decisions.

#### Focus Groups as a Tool for Student Engagement

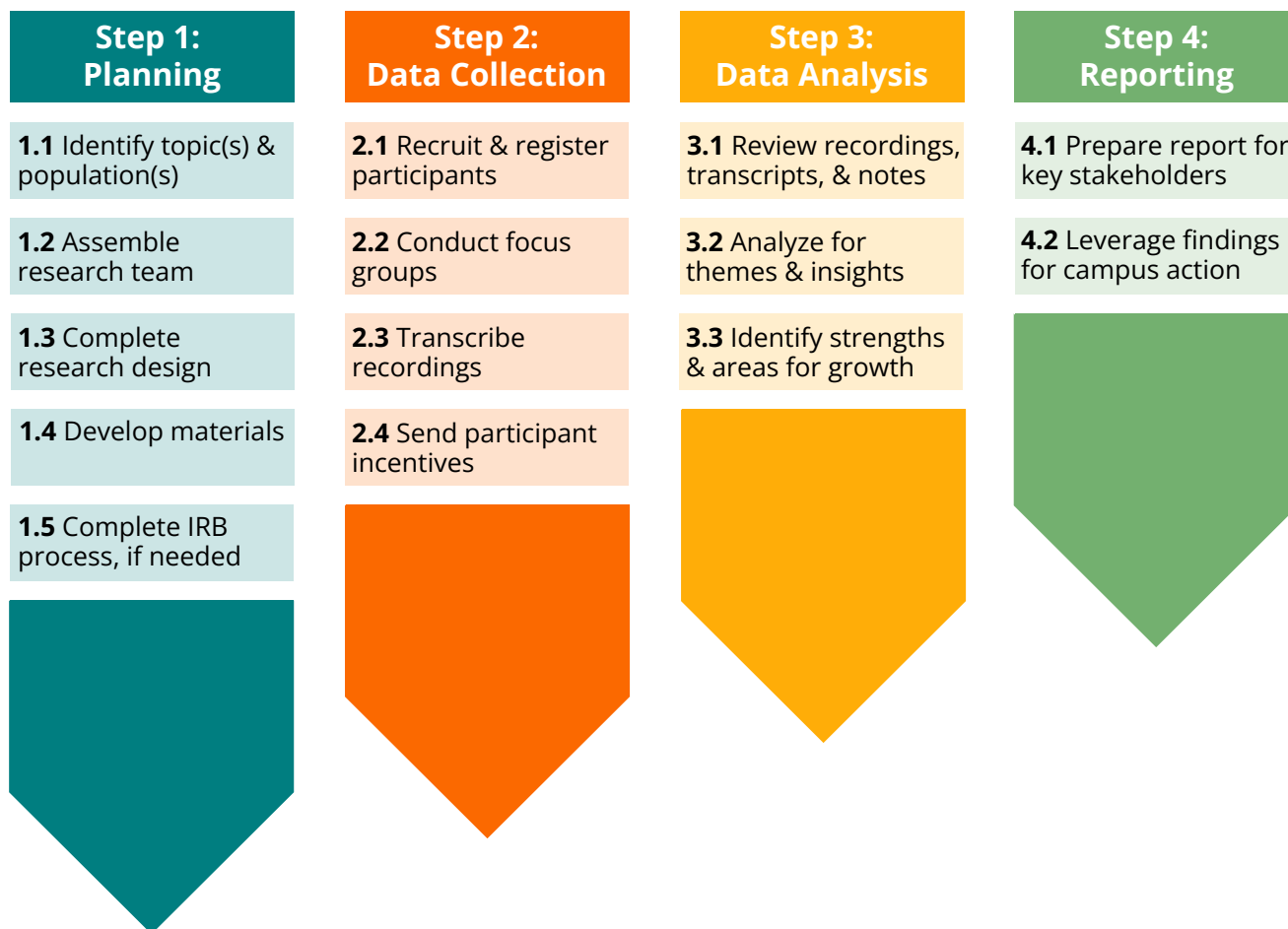
Focus groups can serve as an intervention to enhance student engagement and belonging. Focus groups not only surface students' thoughts and concerns but also foster a sense of community, healing, and connection among participants.

“ 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

## Our Approach

We used empathy-centered focus groups to listen to students and to translate our learning into innovation and change efforts. Following a common research design progression, we infused empathy and humanism throughout our approach.



## How This Playbook Can Help You

- **Transform Campus Practices:** Use focus groups to make real changes in campus policies, support services, and communication.
- **Enhance Student Engagement:** Create a more inclusive, student-centered environment by fostering meaningful connections with students.
- **Build a Culture of Empathy:** Shift from a reactive to a proactive listening culture, ensuring that students feel valued and heard.

The playbook offers a high-level framework and access to step-by-step guidance, sample templates, and actionable strategies that can be tailored to your institution's needs, regardless of size or structure. Empathy-centered focus groups can be a powerful tool for transforming how institutions engage with students. Institutions can unlock deeper student insights, foster trust, and create a more responsive, supportive environment for student success.