



# TURNING THE MIRROR: DATA ADULT LEARNERS OF COLOR WANT TO SEE

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## ABOUT SOVA

Sova focuses on improving the quality and accelerating the pace of complex problem solving in the areas of higher education and workforce development. Animated by a core commitment to advancing socioeconomic mobility for more Americans, Sova pursues its mission through distinctive approaches with strategic planning, will-building, implementation support, and program design and improvement.

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**NEWLEONARD**



This report was edited by Ashley Greenman.



## Turning the Mirror: Data Adult Learners of Color Want to See

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## Introduction

Providing students with accurate and actionable information, conveyed in accessible ways, is critical for empowering learner agency. Often, the creators of postsecondary data tools do not consider the elements that are important to students or present data in ways that are helpful to students. To complicate matters, a well-established and growing body of research suggests postsecondary providers and the agencies that support them must recognize that the priorities and needs of adult learners are often different from those of students enrolling in college and workforce training programs directly after high school (Bahr et al., 2021; Kasworm, 2016; Person et al., 2020, 2021; Robertson, 2020). As public confidence in higher education declines and the share of adults with some credits and no credentials grows, higher education leaders and decision makers must upskill in communicating data and information that matter to these learners (Causey et al., 2022; Silliman & Schleifer, 2018).

To help ensure that current and future data tools feel relevant and useful to adult students of color, Lumina Foundation asked Sova to conduct a qualitative research project centering the voice and perspectives of these learners. Between March and June 2022, Sova conducted 23 focus groups in multiple regions of the country with adults between the ages of 25 and 55 who identify as Black, Latino/a/x, and Native American. Groups were held in California, Michigan, and Washington state, with roughly even numbers conducted virtually and in person. While none of the focus group participants had completed a credential, most had been enrolled in a program one or more times, and just over half were enrolled in a postsecondary or workforce training program at the time of the conversations.

Sova and its project partners focused on gleaning insights about the data and information that matter to racially minoritized adults as they make decisions about whether to pursue a postsecondary credential. We emerged from the project with the conviction that institutions, and those that produce postsecondary data tools, must increase their attention to data that signal institutional readiness for adults who identify as Black, Latino/a/x, and Native American. Rather than focusing exclusively on disaggregated student outcomes data, institutions should also prioritize sharing data and information that demonstrate support of Black, Latino/a/x, and Native American student success.



The research summarized in this report can inform data tool development; help system and institutional leaders communicate their value more effectively to adult learners of color; and strengthen policymakers' understanding of the elements of institutional readiness for these learners. As the title of the report suggests, the findings of this report encourage postsecondary providers to turn the mirror on themselves when considering how to make data relevant to today's learners.

## The How Matters

### Conducting Culturally Competent Research with Adult Learners of Color

Cultural competence is necessary for high-quality learner voice work with adults of color, particularly when research touches on sensitive topics. For a variety of reasons, education is a complex topic for the adults we sought to learn from in our focus groups. Further, adults from racially minoritized communities bring a visceral awareness of the ways white researchers have historically approached communities of color in extractive or exploitative ways. Therefore, Sova designed the focus groups to be culturally relevant and culturally responsible. In addition to grounding protocol development in relevant literature (LaFrance & Nichols, 2009; Wilson, 2008) and ensuring focus group moderation was provided by researchers of color from backgrounds similar to those of the respondents, Sova partnered with Black-owned and Native American-owned small businesses to provide recording, video, and transcription for the focus groups. In addition to providing technical support for the focus groups, these partners also led the production of the audio elements associated with the project.



**Domonique Meeks**

### Ambassador Stories

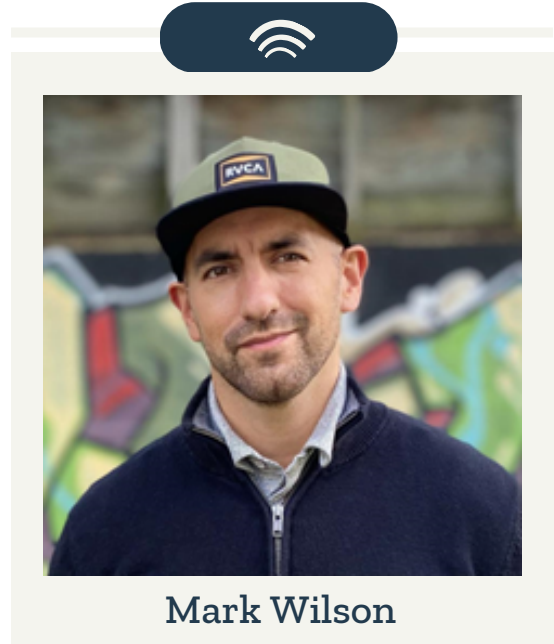
Ambassador Stories uses media to highlight the people, places, and spaces that bring soul to our beloved communities. Through multiple aspects of media production and consulting, the Ambassador Stories team delivers stories with the highest levels of authenticity and quality. Ambassador Stories is driven by a dedication to social change. Domonique Meeks is the co-founder of Ambassador Stories. His work revolves around asset-based storytelling, digital access, and democratizing media. Meeks has hosted and produced multiple podcast and documentary series. These pieces center around the experiences, genius, and innovation of Seattle's melanated communities.

## New Leonard Media

New Leonard Media (NLM) is a Native American family-owned multimedia recording studio that offers podcast and vocal production in a creative and comfortable setting for all. NLM supports non-profits and leaders of social change. NLM is committed to supporting the artists, musicians, poets, podcasters, and organizations creating positive impacts in our society. NLM's purpose is to allow a more profound voice to those who need it. NLM is a core partner to Sova in learner voice work.

Mark Wilson, founder of NLM, is an enrolled member of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa

and Chippewa Indians. Wilson serves many roles in his community in northwest Michigan, including on the City Commission and Planning Commission for Traverse City. For nearly a decade, Wilson served on the tribal council for the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, including in the role of vice tribal chairman.



**Mark Wilson**

## Areas of Inquiry

The following areas of inquiry grounded the research protocol used in the focus groups and guided the analysis.

- 1 How are the data currently used in postsecondary data tools perceived and understood by Black, Latino/a/x, and Native American adults who have not completed a credential but who express interest in furthering their education through college or a workforce training program?
- 2 What, if any, quantitative data points matter most to these learners?
- 3 What more can be learned to deepen existing knowledge about the messages and practices that most resonate with adult learners as they make the decision to pursue a credential?

# The Complexity of Identity

## Intersectionality, Liminality, and Ethnopolitics

Researchers and advocates working to understand the indicators of institutional readiness to serve today's adult learners must keep in mind the complexity of learner identity.

Each of the three target population groups included in this qualitative study is enormously diverse. For example, there are nearly 700 federally recognized Native American tribes in the United States with tremendous racial, ethnic, and religious diversity within these tribes. Likewise, students who identify as Latino/a/x are not a monolithic group and have tremendous diversity in country and region of origin. Many who identify as Latino/a/x may also identify as Black or Indigenous, and many who identify as Indigenous or Black also identify as Latino/a/x. While looking to conduct primarily homogeneous groups, we observed the conversations frequently turned to ethnopolitics and the feelings of belonging or not belonging in multiple communities.

While intersectionality, liminality, and ethnopolitics are common across all the population groups we focused on for this study, we recognize that the unique experiences of particular groups shape their view of educational institutions. For example, between the 1860s and 1970s, hundreds of thousands of Native American children were taken from their homes and families and placed in boarding schools operated by the federal government and churches as part of the effort to "civilize" Indigenous communities through erasure of their culture and language. In Michigan, where we conducted the focus groups with Indigenous adults from [Anishinaabe tribes](#), the horrors of these native [boarding schools](#) span generations with the last of these schools closing in the 1980s. The intergenerational trauma associated with this brutal history necessarily shapes how these adults view white-dominated educational institutions.

**To effectively attract, retain, and graduate more adults, colleges and workforce training providers must understand the common experiences of historically marginalized communities they seek to serve and the unique experiences of adults who identify with various racial and ethnic subgroups within these broader communities.**



## Findings in Brief

- 1 How are the data currently used in postsecondary data tools perceived and understood by Black, Latino/a/x, and Native American adults who have not completed a credential but who express interest in furthering their education through college or a workforce training program?

Across groups, very few of the most commonly used data terms resonated with participants. Some terms were viewed as confusing while others were viewed as irrelevant. Data such as graduation rates and average earnings for graduates were of greater interest than other data points, but respondents said those data points would mean more if they spoke to the outcomes of working adults, students of color, first-generation college-goers, and students trying to complete a credential while raising children or caring for other family members. Of the ten data elements tested with participants, none were viewed by participants as very helpful information to have when making decisions about whether to enroll in a program. Five data elements were viewed as somewhat (but not very) relevant, and five were viewed as irrelevant.

### Five data elements viewed as irrelevant:

- Retention rate
- Persistence rate
- Loan default rate
- Average loan debt
- Percent of students who take out loans

In general, participants were much less interested in data about student outcomes and much more interested in how a college would support them in completing their degree and advancing their careers.

- 2 What, if any, quantitative data points matter most to these learners?

As they engage in the complex cost-benefit analysis, adult learners are less interested in data that tells them what is happening to other students in general and more interested in data that tells them what the college or program is doing to help students like them succeed. When asked what types of data would be most relevant and useful to them, participants focused on data and information that is personally relevant to them as busy adults from racially minoritized backgrounds, including:

- Demographic data about students (percentage of students who work, are adults, or have children);
- Demographic data about college employees (number of first-generation college graduates on staff and the racial diversity of faculty, staff, and administrators);
- Outcomes and ROI data (regional career outcomes for graduates by program, community engagement, and presence of alumni in community networks);



- Data about relevant supports (average time for transfer credit evaluation, average percentage of transfer credits applied toward a credential, advisor-to-student ratios, percentage of students receiving career counseling, percentage of students with mentors, and the list of resources available for working parents); and
- Data about co-curricular, professional network-building opportunities for adults (employer partnerships by program, networking opportunities, and culturally-affirming, community-based affinity groups available to students).

3 What more can be learned to deepen existing knowledge about the messages and practices that most resonate with adult learners as they make the decision to pursue a credential?

### **Acknowledge Deep Mistrust**

Institutional leaders, policymakers, and those who build data tools need to keep in mind that deep-rooted, well-founded mistrust of educational institutions shapes how adult learners of color view the data and information provided to them by colleges. Knowing that mistrust runs high and deep, institutions need to do more to communicate how they are working to create a climate of belonging and success for these learners.

### **Mitigate Anxiety and Fear**

In addition to pervasive mistrust, adult learners and students of color from low-income backgrounds in the groups described experiencing high levels of anxiety and imposter syndrome as they considered furthering their education. Understanding the anxieties and fears of these learners is essential to building data tools that speak to their priorities and needs.

### **Promote Belonging and Safety**

When we asked questions about the information and data that matter most when deciding whether to enroll in a program, participants described wanting to know that they will be safe and feel like they belong. Institutions must consider how they will measure and report progress toward creating a climate of safety and belonging. Those creating data tools should listen to students reflect on safety and belonging on campus to inform data collection and analysis.

### **Bring Data to Life**

How data are presented is as important as what data are presented. The participants in our focus groups described the importance of attending to how data and information are presented and conveyed through the following means:

- Peer mentors,
- Faculty and advisors from the same background who take the time to connect, or
- Easily accessible resources on student-facing websites.

Storytelling and personalized narratives that help students see themselves as being capable of achieving their goals often matter more than cold, impersonal quantitative information.

## Findings in Detail

- 1 How are the data currently used in postsecondary data tools perceived and understood by Black, Latino/a/x, and Native American adults who have not completed a credential but who express interest in furthering their education through college or a workforce training program?

Across groups, very few of the data terms resonated with participants. Some terms were viewed as confusing while others were viewed as irrelevant. Data such as graduation rates and average earnings for graduates were of greater interest than other data points, but respondents said those data points would mean more if they were more tailored to speak to the outcomes of working adults, first-generation college-goers, and students trying to complete a credential while raising children or caring for other family members. In other words, the data would mean more if they saw themselves and their experiences reflected in it.

Of the ten data elements tested with participants, none were viewed by participants as very helpful information to have when making decisions about whether to enroll in a program. Five data elements were viewed as somewhat (but not very) relevant, and five were viewed as irrelevant.



**“Those numbers are just for people for the student body, you know what I mean? Those were not the numbers that applied to me. Maybe if there's a breakout for like first-generation students of color or something.”**

– Rio Hondo, Black adult learner

**“That would've been helpful to see: How many people without mobility were able to still achieve their educational goals.”**

– Rio Hondo, Latino/a/x focus group

**“I would like to see how many parents actually were able to complete their course of study while raising a child full time.”**

– Michigan, Native American focus group

Viewed as Somewhat (But Not Very) Relevant	Viewed as Irrelevant
Average earnings of graduates	Retention rate
Job placement for graduates	Persistence rate
Percent of students who receive scholarships	Percent of students who take out loans
Percent of students who get internships	Average loan debt
Graduation rates	Loan default rate



**"I want to know who's making it out of there that has real life experience. I'm 32. I work full time. My husband works full time. I got three kids. Can I do this? Is it possible? It's a motivator, I guess, to see who's making it through there."**

– Michigan, Native American focus group

In general, participants were much less interested in data about student outcomes and much more interested in how a college would support them in completing their degree.



What, if any, quantitative data points matter most to these learners?

Research suggests that adult learners from racially minoritized backgrounds have a more complicated cost-benefit calculation to make than students attending college directly after high school. For most

focus group participants, college is something that they squeeze into their already busy lives. For example, some participants were parents concerned about balancing their own schoolwork with their children's well-being. Some were employees trying to figure out if they could maintain a full-time job while pursuing a degree, or if they had enough savings to take time off from work. Participants weighed the time spent completing a degree against the income they would lose while enrolled, the time they would spend away from their family, and the time they would no longer have for other responsibilities.

When asked what types of data would be most relevant and useful to them, participants suggested a range of ideas that underscore their desire for information that speaks directly to their needs and priorities.



**"I wasted a lot of years taking classes when I really didn't know what I wanted to do. So I wanted to make sure that I had an advisor who was knowledgeable about the field that I was going to school for and who had experience in the field that I was going to school for. Show me the data. Show me if this career is gonna put my family on the right track to be successful."**

– Seattle, Black focus group



As students engage in the complex cost-benefit analysis, adult learners are less interested in data that tells them what is happening to other students in general and more interested in data that tells them what the college or program is doing to help students like them be successful. In addition, transfer credits came up in nearly every conversation, with many participants asking for information about how transcripts are evaluated and transfer credits applied. Likewise, participants were curious about advisor-to-student ratios and other indicators of support. Beyond data about outcomes for learners like them, they also mainly wanted to know about all the ways colleges are working to lower barriers and create a sense of belonging for adults working to squeeze the pursuit of a credential into an already-busy life.

For these learners, the most relevant data would speak to how an institution helps returning adults navigate the financial aid process and the full cost of attending a program, and how they streamline complex processes and provide flexible supports to help these learners stay on track.



**“It would be helpful to see a simple flow chart to help you navigate, so you're not just swinging in the dark. Something just to help us kind of navigate the campus life as far as, who do we go to for admissions? Who do we go to for our records?”**

– Mixed Location, Latinx adult learner

**“I think I wish I would've known what resources the school had available to students, specifically around advising and opportunities that they have. My school has a lot of tutoring options and stuff like that that are super beneficial. You can rent laptops if you don't have access to the internet at home. So those resources, but specifically resources around like course planning. I wish I would've known about way sooner, that would've been really beneficial.”**

– Mixed Location, Black adult learner



**“It would be nice to see the amount of students that do get jobs straight out of college and in what fields here, because I understand that some careers will find jobs easier than others. So what would that mean for my specific career? How many people do actually graduate and how many people do find jobs in my specific career? And am I wasting my time here with this major?”**

– Mixed Location, Latinx adult learner

**“Alumni told me that you can apply to 200 jobs, but a lot of those applications are just gonna go into the void. It's mainly about who you know. If the school can get you into an internship or some sort of work-based learning, you can meet the right people and you can network with them. I think that's why that was so important to me.”**

– Everett, Latinx focus group





In addition to information that would aid in the cost-benefit analysis or provide reassurances about the feasibility of a program for a busy adult, the participants in these groups also said they needed more tailored information that speaks to the return on their investment. For the most part, the participants in the focus groups were interested only in programs close to their homes, families, and jobs; therefore, they were more interested in information about local labor market outcomes. For busy adults, local labor market outcomes by program and access to local/regional professional and cultural networks matter more than general career outcomes data.

The following data elements were identified by participants as most valuable:

- Time to degree for working adults and students who are parents/caregivers.
- Average percent of transfer credits accepted and applied to a program.
- Number of programs and courses offered in a flexible format, including online classes or evening and weekend classes.
- Number and types of academic supports available to students, such as tech support, weekend and evening computer lab access, and tutoring.
- Racial diversity of students, faculty, and staff.
- Availability and cost of programs that would help mitigate transportation, childcare, technology, and other indirect expenses.
- Types of financial aid, scholarships, and work-based learning opportunities that are available to students of color and working adults.
- Availability of career counseling to help align course of study with career aspirations, and to help provide students access to local and regional professional networks.
- Employer partnerships and local labor market outcomes for graduates by program.
- Mentorship and availability of culturally relevant networks and networking opportunities.



3

What more can be learned to deepen existing knowledge about the messages and practices that most resonate with adult learners as they make the decision to pursue a credential?

### Acknowledge Deep Mistrust

Institutional leaders, policymakers, and those who build data tools need to keep in mind that deep-rooted, well-founded mistrust of educational institutions shapes how adult learners of color view the data and information provided to them by colleges. Knowing that mistrust runs high and deep, institutions need to do more to communicate about how they are working to create a climate of belonging and success for these learners.



**"A lot of our parents, grandparents, and family members went through boarding schools where cultural identities were stripped down and almost taken away completely. And our identity was not what it once was. Now we live in a time where we have access to these things, we can choose to live this life and learn these things without having somebody standing over us telling us we can't."**

– Michigan, Native American focus group

**"I feel like I'm walking through a door that has been locked to me into a room that was never meant for me. It feels like I'm definitely learning how to play by rules in a place where I don't necessarily feel or see people like me or have a learning style that matches something that I'm able to easily deal with."**

– Everett, Black focus group

**"I think if every single university could offer free counseling to students because we are always struggling emotionally during our time as a student. It is not meant to be easy. It's not meant for us, especially people of color to be there. And that's why our retention rates are lower than any other peer, because it's meant to crush us down. So if that information could be available. How many students use that support? How many counselors do they have available? Right on the front page, I would definitely appreciate that."**

– Tacoma, Latinx focus group



## Mitigate Anxiety and Fear

In addition to pervasive mistrust, adult learners and students of color from low-income backgrounds in the groups described experiencing high levels of anxiety and imposter syndrome. Understanding the role that anxiety and fear play for these learners is essential to building data tools that speak to their priorities and needs.



**“I was scared. I thought I’m gonna be the dumbest one in the class because I’m the oldest one. I haven’t been to any kind of formal math training since like high school. I didn’t wanna hold the class back. That was my fear. So I studied for two months before I started that subject because I didn’t wanna be that dumb person.”**

– Rio Hondo, Black focus group

**“I’ve been told I’m a good writer. Sometimes I feel like I’m an imposter. I actually tested into Advanced English, but I didn’t follow through because once I got into that class, it just felt like I was an imposter, like I didn’t belong here even when I tested into it.”**

– Michigan, Native American focus group

**“It’s really scary because I’ve never been good at school. I am in classes that are typically dominated by white men. And I’m sitting here as this little brown lady who was older than like 90 percent of the class.”**

– Michigan, Native American focus group

## Promote Belonging and Safety

In many of the conversations, when we asked questions about what matters to them when considering whether to pursue further education, participants described wanting to know that they will be safe and feel like they belong. While the importance of belonging is well established, it is less clear how institutions might measure and share how they are faring when it comes to creating a climate of safety and belonging.





**"I wanna know that when I come on your property, that your other students or faculty aren't gonna see the color of my skin or the way my hair is. I wanna know that we will not be taken into some room and interrogated. I wanna know that I can sit at a table and study. I'm not saying it's all of the system because sometimes it's also my people. I just wanna know that I'm safe."**

– Mixed Location, Black adult learner

**"How many professors of color do you have for your course? How many Latinx professors do you have? People are from different ethnic groups, they're trying to see themselves represented. If the information is not available, maybe they will look at another option where they feel more welcome and safe."**

– Tacoma, Latinx focus group

**"I would like to know the diversity of the campus itself, as well as the LGBTQ rates for myself being gay. It's nice to know those rates because then you can know what you're walking into. You have other people there, you have allies and it's not like you're just going to be in the middle of nowhere by yourself."**

– Michigan, Native American focus group

### **Bring Data to Life**

How data are presented is as important as what data are presented. Whether through peer mentors, faculty and advisors from the same background who take the time to connect 1:1, or easily accessible resources on student-facing websites, the participants in our focus groups described the importance of attending to how data and information are presented and conveyed.



**"For me there's very little life experience within my immediate circle that comes with higher education. So I think that's where a lot of the intimidation comes from is that the people that we seek our information from don't have a lot of resources to provide us. They don't have a lot of answers. So I think we really depend on the school and those types of resources, that whatever we could find that's available to us that allows us to see that process is not so murky."**

– Michigan, Native American focus group

**"I met a few people who went to my college and they told me their experiences. It was really important for me to hear the stories about accessibility and how to access services. How easy it would be to get a job at the college. How good the professors would be. How supportive the environment is. That's what's important to me in a college."**

– Mixed Location, Latinx adult learner







**"It's hard for us Indigenous folks to trust anybody, really. To have someone reach out and be very honest and forthright, I trusted that immediately. Then when I got to the school, the counselors there were really helpful, the guidance people, so [my college] gets it."**

– Michigan, Native American focus group



## Recommendations and Reminders for Leaders

Providing relevant, useful data and information to learners is a critical piece of the completion puzzle. Ensuring that such tools are indeed useful requires listening to the learners themselves. Understanding the experiences and expectations of adult learners of color from different backgrounds can help policymakers, data tool builders, and institutional leaders communicate in ways that increase these learners' confidence in institutions and bolster their sense of belonging and purpose. As widespread doubts about the value of higher education continue to grow and the cost-benefit analysis for adults leads many to question the feasibility of pursuing a credential, higher education leaders and advocates must meet these learners where they are and provide them with the data and information that matters most to them. In addition to sharing data and information that speak directly to institutional readiness for adult learners of color, leaders should also attend with great care to the way data and information are presented to learners who approach postsecondary education with mistrust and skepticism. Customized presentation, storytelling, and peer networks are promising avenues for ensuring that the data and information that matter to these learners is accessible. User-experience (UX) research with data tools and further listening to these learners should be prioritized alongside the improvement of data tools themselves.



### **To be relevant to adult learners, higher education leaders must:**

- Understand the experience and expectations of adult learners of color.
- Provide data that matters to them.
- Present data in meaningful ways that promote trust.
- Customize data presentation and elevate storytelling of peer networks.



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# Appendix

## Methodology

Cultural competence is necessary for high-quality research on learner voice with racially minoritized adults. Rather than working with traditional research units or focus group facilities, Sova partnered with respected and known members of the communities where focus group participants live to co-create a tailored outreach strategy. As part of Sova's commitment to trust building and transparency, researchers of color from backgrounds similar to that of focus group participants conducted the focus groups. For the in-person groups, local caterers were hired to provide culturally relevant meals for participants before the conversations began. Participants received a \$100 stipend for their time and a childcare supplement as needed. Sova partnered with Black-owned and Native American-owned small businesses to provide recording, video, and transcription for all the groups. These partners, Ambassador Stories and New Leonard Media, produced small audio elements from the focus group conversations and recorded additional interviews with several individuals from across the groups. To round out the approach, Sova partnered with Public Agenda to build a coding scheme and provide independent, third-party analysis of the focus group data.

Using a snowball recruiting method, Sova conducted 23 focus groups in-person and virtually between March and June 2022. Participants were 25 and older and were considering attending, had previously attended, or were already enrolled in a higher education institution seeking a two-year or four-year degree or workforce training certification. Groups were recruited based on location and race or ethnicity. Some groups were homogeneous, and some were heterogeneous by race or ethnicity and location. While the focus groups were designed to provide dedicated space to at least 36 individuals from each of three populations, the complexity of racial and ethnic identities is such that many of the groups were composed of individuals who identified as multiracial.



Public Agenda received 23 transcripts of focus groups from Sova. Through an iterative collaboration with Sova, Public Agenda developed a codebook that included variables of interest based on project objectives. Two members of the Public Agenda research team coded each transcript using the Dedoose platform. Within Dedoose, Public Agenda analyzed the coded transcripts thematically. Although the sample is not large enough to make any inferences about location or race/ethnicity, researchers and Public Agenda and Sova agree that the Native American groups, composed of significant numbers of rurally located respondents, pointed in the direction of themes that deserve a deep-dive in future research. In these groups, themes around mistrust, anxiety, and community responsibility were stronger than in the other groups. While no definitive claims can be made about the differences between the groups, the research teams at both Sova and Public Agenda suggest further exploration of these themes through further listening sessions, in-depth interviews, and surveys aimed at better understanding the experiences of Native American learners and other rurally located learners from racially minoritized backgrounds.

## Partner Institutions

Bakersfield College  
Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School  
El Camino College  
Everett Community College  
Hartnell College  
Rio Hondo College  
Seattle Central College  
Tacoma Community College



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