

THRIVE ASHEVILLE

Ideas to Action Leadership Forum
Sustainable Tourism

REPORT ON PROGRAM PERFORMANCE

Summer 2022

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

At Thrive Asheville, we believe that we can only address our most pressing challenges if we build authentic relationships among community members from diverse backgrounds, and we engage in purposeful planning together. Without a means to connect people and policies, gaps will grow and the challenges we face will worsen. That is why Thrive Asheville piloted a new approach to community problem-solving, the Ideas to Action Leadership Forum, in the fall of 2021, to:

- Build the relationships necessary to tackle tough issues,
- Learn about the challenges that are shaping our community, and,
- Come to agreement on how we might address issues to create a more equitable, resilient community.

We chose sustainable tourism as the focus of our inaugural forum because we believe that how we evolve as a premier visitor destination will have profound effects on our economy, quality of life for residents, and our natural resources. Too often the conversation around tourism is oversimplified, and focused on the most divisive aspects of visitation, rather than the artists, restaurants, attractions, and other local businesses that we value, and who thrives within the tourism economy. Learning about sustainable tourism - and then engaging in action planning - illustrates how Thrive works across issues that shape our community.

We have documented the Forum on our website (www.thriveavl.org). There, you can find:

- A list of 30+ community leaders who generously donated their time and expertise over eight months to assisting in community learning and problem-solving.
- Presentations from experts.
- An executive summary and full evaluation, conducted and written by Garrett Raczek, to assess the success of the Forum in meeting the goals described above.

At the last session, cohort members proposed actions to increase sustainability in the tourism sector, which were then voted on. The vast majority of participants approved these actions. This year, Thrive staff will support the efforts of three working groups to learn more about how to adopt the sustainable tourism best-practices we learned about, and implement them in Asheville:

- Explore the formation of a destination stewardship council to integrate tourism planning with the long-term goals for our community.
- Conduct a natural and cultural asset inventory to guide preservation and investment.
- Expand BIPOC-owned businesses that are engaged in the tourism sector.

We hope that you will participate in this work of learning and doing. Acting locally is one of the best ways that each of us can shape the future.

Kate Pett

Executive Director, Thrive Asheville

BACKGROUND

Communities across the nation are seeking new, collaborative methods for addressing the problems that they are collectively facing. In September 2021, Thrive Asheville convened a group of 34 community leaders to participate in the inaugural [Ideas to Action Leadership Forum](#), an approach to finding common ground on divisive issues. This first effort to enhance shared learning across lines of difference focused on sustainable tourism, with these specific goals: build relationships across lines of difference; learn about tourism in Asheville; learn about innovative approaches to sustainable tourism here and elsewhere; develop a common ground action agenda based on what was learned. This cohort of participants included community leaders who represented local government, advocates for arts, culture, and the environment, and local hotels, restaurateurs, and other businesses that engage directly in the tourism economy.

The sixth and final Ideas to Action (I2A) session took place in May 2022. At the time, 30 cohort members were actively engaged in the group's collective work. In an effort to understand the impact of this work, Thrive Asheville hired a consultant to: design a survey; administer the survey to cohort members; and conduct one-on-one interviews with a subset of the group. [The survey](#) was completed by 26 of the 30 cohort members (87% response rate). When it came to race/ethnicity, gender, and age, the participants broke down as follows:

- **Race/Ethnicity:** approximately 23% of respondents identified as Black, African American, or Latino/a/x. The remaining 77% of respondents identified as white.
- **Gender:** 69% of respondents identified as female while 31% identified as male.
- **Age:** 19% of respondents were between the ages 30 and 39; 23% were between 40 and 49; 46% were between 50 and 59; and 12% were between 60 and 69.

The following sections in this report detail results from the [Ideas to Action](#) survey and one-on-one interviews. All participant responses have been de-identified, meaning that no results can be attributed to particular individuals. The final section of this report reviews key takeaways, recommends program improvements, and provides suggestions for further areas of study.

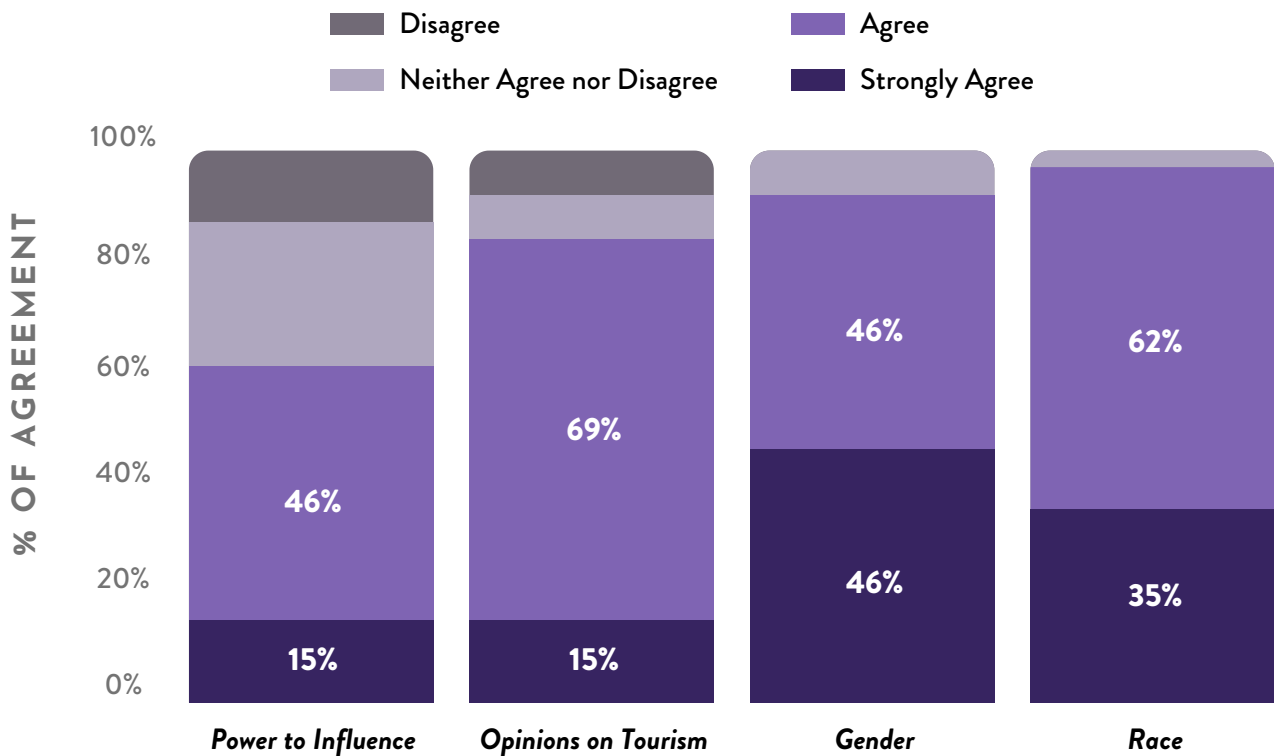
SURVEY RESULTS

DIVERSITY OF IDEAS TO ACTION PARTICIPANTS

Survey participants were asked about the degree to which they believed that the *Ideas to Action* cohort was diverse with respect to: race, gender, opinions on sustainable tourism, and power to influence community decisions on tourism. Survey respondents were most likely to agree that participants were diverse with respect to race and gender with 97% and 92% expressing agreement, respectively. Moreover, 84% of participants agreed that the cohort was diverse with respect to opinions on tourism. The lowest level of agreement was seen with “Power to Influence”, with 61% of respondents agreeing that the cohort was diverse in this area.

The graph below details the complete breakdown of responses from participants. There is general agreement that cohort participants were diverse in the four surveyed areas.

FIGURE 1. PARTICIPANT PERCEPTION OF IDEAS TO ACTION DIVERSITY*



*Question stem: To what extent do you agree that *Ideas to Action* (I2A) participants were diverse with respect to...

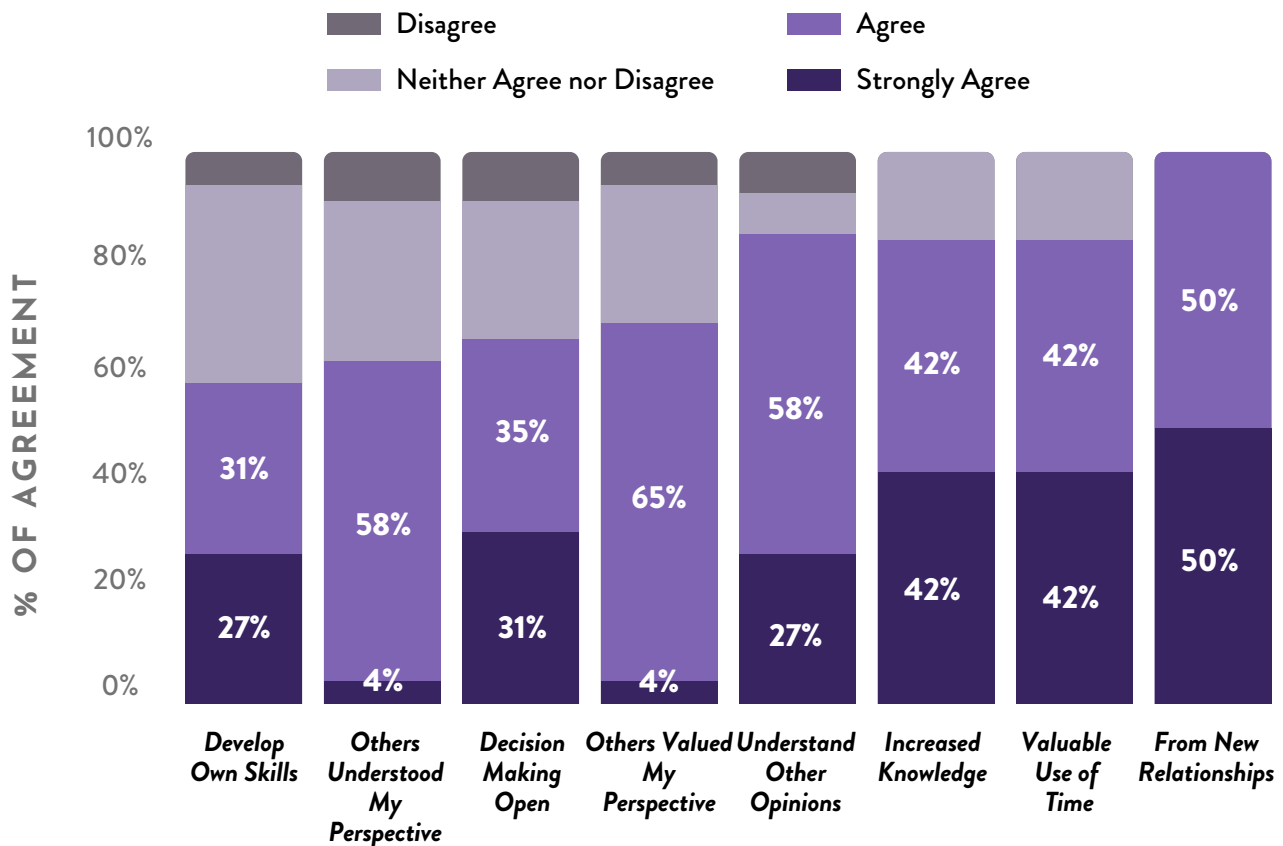
IDEAS TO ACTION IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS

Survey respondents were asked about the degree to which they believed that *Ideas to Action* sessions were beneficial to the participants who attended. The overwhelming majority of respondents (84%) agreed that I2A sessions were a valuable use of their time. In particular, they believed that the opportunity to form new relationships was particularly beneficial, with 100% agreeing that I2A sessions helped them connect with other community members. Participants also highlighted that their time in the program contributed to increased knowledge and understanding of other’s opinions on “sustainable tourism”.

Participants were less likely to agree that I2A sessions helped them develop their own skills for engaging with different opinions, with 58% of respondents expressing agreement.

The graph below details the complete breakdown of responses from participants.

FIGURE 2. PARTICIPANT PERCEPTION OF BENEFITS TO ENGAGING IN IDEAS TO ACTION SESSIONS*

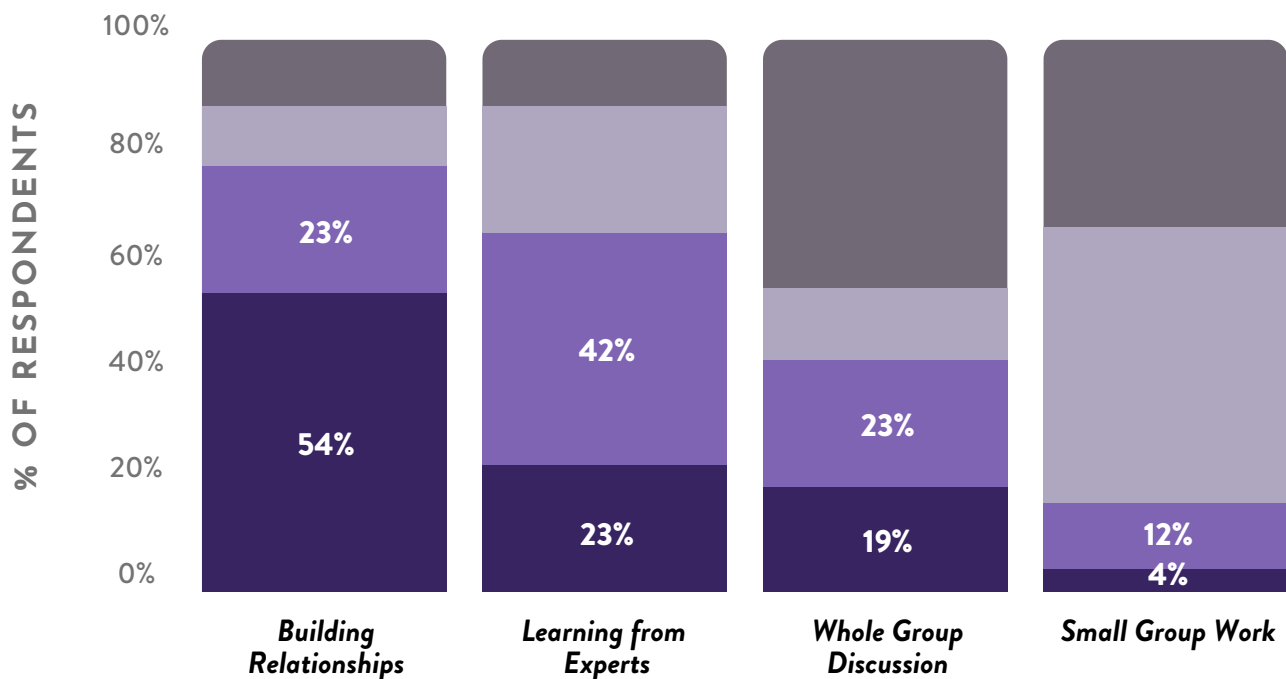


*Question stem: To what extent do you agree with the following statements...
 ([survey link](#) to full questions)

Survey participants were also asked to rank four program components in order from most to least valuable. Building relationships with community members was consistently ranked higher than other components, with 54% of respondents ranking it first and 77% ranking it in the top two. Working in small groups to identify solutions was ranked in the top two by only 16% of respondents, making it the least valuable programmatic component in the eyes of survey respondents.

The graph below details the complete breakdown of responses from participants.

FIGURE 3. PARTICIPANT RANKINGS OF IDEAS TO ACTION PROGRAM COMPONENTS



*Question stem: Which components of the Ideas to Action process were most valuable?

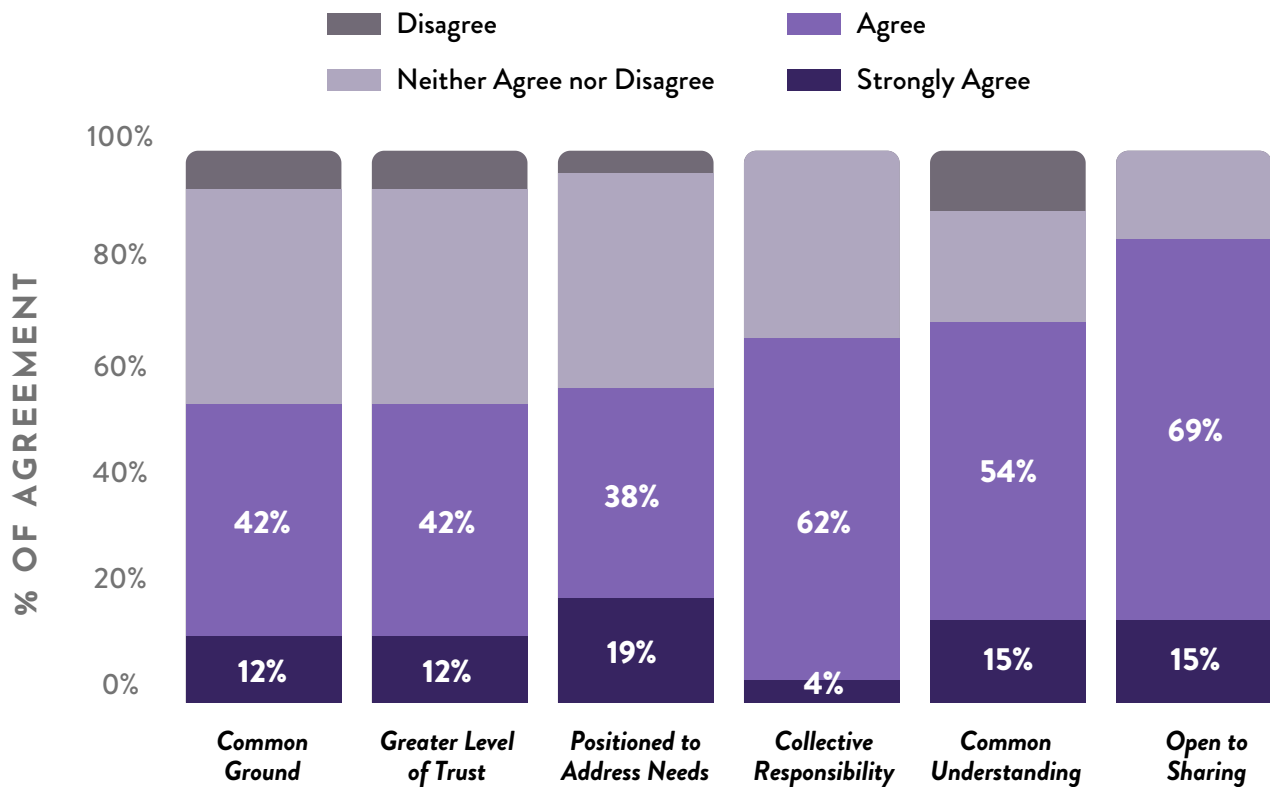
IDEAS TO ACTION COHORT-WIDE IMPACT

Survey participants were asked about the degree to which they believed that *Ideas to Action* sessions positioned the entire cohort to address tourism-based needs. At least 50% of respondents agreed that conditions among community stakeholders improved in each of the six assessed areas. The strongest agreement was seen in the area of “openness to sharing information or resources with one another”, where 84% of respondents agreed that participants are increasingly open to sharing after engaging in the I2A sessions.

The lowest level of agreement was seen in the areas of “Common Ground” and “Greater Level of Trust”, where 54% of respondents expressed agreement with conditions improving among I2A participants. Respondents often answered *Neither Agree nor Disagree* when asked if participants were able to find common ground on next steps and if there now existed a greater level of trust among participants.

The graph below details the complete breakdown of responses from participants.

FIGURE 4. PARTICIPANT PERCEPTION OF COHORT-WIDE BENEFITS*



Question stem: To what extent do you agree with the following statements... ([survey link](#) to full questions). “Common Ground” refers to the degree to which participants were able to find agreement on next steps, while “Common Understanding” refers to a shared understanding of tourism-based needs.

DEEP DIVE ANALYSIS

A deeper, statistical analysis was conducted to identify noteworthy trends among responses. Due to the small sample size (26 respondents), there are limits to the statistical tests that can be conducted as well as the conclusions that can be drawn from the data. For instance, in order to identify trends, participants identifying as BIPOC or female were combined into one group while those identifying as white and male were combined into another group. Larger data sets in the future would allow for more nuanced insights, without aggregating demographic groups. Given that this dataset is relatively small, qualitative findings from interviews must also be highlighted to identify trends. Nevertheless, these data still reveal some interesting insights that could be explored further.

Survey participants were asked about their level of support for the action agenda items that emerged from the I2A work, which included: supporting BIPOC-owned tourism business incubation, conducting a natural and cultural asset inventory, and exploring the formation of a destination stewardship council. Overall, 88% of respondents expressed varied levels of support for these action items, while the remaining 12% had “mixed feelings”. A series of statistical tests were conducted to detect potential patterns in the data. These tests revealed the following:

- There was a statistically significant, moderate, and positive correlation between respondents’ “Support for the Action Agenda” and feeling that their perspective on tourism was “understood” and “valued” (correlation = .59 and .5, respectively). This indicates that those who felt like their perspective was understood and valued were more likely to also support the action agenda.
- There was a statistically significant difference in action agenda support between BIPOC/female respondents and white/male respondents, with BIPOC/female respondents (on average) showing greater levels of support.
- There was also a statistically significant, moderate, and positive correlation between respondents’ “Support for the Action Agenda” and their self-reported level of participation/engagement in I2A sessions (correlation = .63). This means that respondents who believed that they were more actively engaged in sessions were more likely to also support the action agenda. A second test was conducted to determine any patterns within levels of engagement. A t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between BIPOC/female respondents and white/male respondents, with BIPOC/female respondents (on average) reporting greater levels of active engagement with the I2A sessions.

Survey respondents were also asked to report their likelihood of recommending I2A participation to a colleague who was invited in the future (on a scale of 0 to 10). This type of question, often called a “net promoter score” is widely used by businesses and organizations to determine the degree to which participants, clients, or customers are supportive of their experience. Those who give a rating of 9 or 10 (i.e. “extremely likely” to recommend Thrive to a colleague) are considered to be Promoters and are most likely to recommend an organization to others. Those giving a rating of 7 or 8 are known as Passives, as they are less likely to be strong promoters, and therefore advocates of an organization. Lastly, those giving a rating of 0 to 6 are Detractors. These individuals may be less likely to recommend an organization and more likely to spread unfavorable opinions about a given organization. A “net promoter score” is then calculated by subtracting the percentage of Detractors from the percentage of Promoters.

With respect to I2A survey respondents, 50% were Promoters while 15% fell into the category of Detractors, resulting in a net promoter score (NPS) of 35. Generally, a net promoter score above 20 is considered “good” while a NPS score above 50 is viewed as “excellent”.*

FIGURE 5. IDEAS TO ACTION NET PROMOTER SCORE



**For more information on net promoter scores, including the calculation and interpretation, please reference [this source](#).*





1-ON-1 INTERVIEWS

In an effort to gain further insight into I2A participant experience, one-on-one interviews were scheduled with a subset of the cohort. Twenty-one of the twenty-six survey respondents indicated that they would be willing to have a follow-up conversation to help inform the work ahead. Out of this group, five respondents were identified for a follow-up interview. These respondents were selected to represent a diverse sample, using the following identifiers: sector, gender, race, ethnicity, and perceived power.

All five interviews were conducted during the month of June 2022. Each interview lasted fifteen minutes and explored themes such as: benefits of participation in I2A, trust building, and advancing cohort goals.

When asked about the “highlight of [their] participation” in the Ideas to Action cohort, participants often referenced the ability to engage with peers in the community and collectively work to address an important issue. Participants were also appreciative of the opportunity to hear a diverse array of perspectives on tourism. Excerpts from some participant answers can be found below:



- *“[I] met a whole community that has a different impression of our industry...I learned a lot.”*
- *“[My highlight was] coming up with the action teams that are going to keep moving the work forward. I felt like I was playing a role with those.”*
- *“Getting together in groups and chatting with other leaders was very fulfilling, [and also] being able to understand their backgrounds and what’s meaningful to them.”*

Interview participants were asked to describe how their experience in the I2A cohort impacted them professionally. Once again, participants referenced the deeper connections and expanded networks they were able to make. Excerpts from some participant answers can be found below:



- *“[The I2A Leadership Forum] introduced me to people I haven’t come into contact with. I learned about other sectors... we often work in silos... the TDA is somewhat inaccessible to people who are not in that industry. [I2A] helped to level the playing field”.*
- *“[My participation] has forced or encouraged me to think differently, or more. It helps me to do my job better.”*

To ensure that progress is achieved on the issue of sustainable tourism, trust building must occur among community members. Interview participants were specifically asked to name ways in which trust could have been better built during the I2A Leadership Forum. Many participants raised issues such as time and divergent opinions. Excerpts from some participant answers can be found below:



- *“We didn’t meet that often to have consistent trust building. That held us back a little bit. Not having too many opportunities to break down silos. I felt like we came so far...but there were still some trust issues still.”*
- *“We want to have tough conversations but only doing it in an hour and a half is almost impossible. Tough conversation must happen in the beginning, then focus on actions... we were in such a race to find three actionable items that we missed opportunities.”*
- *“The meetings seemed long. Having a 5-hour meeting is a privilege and might inadvertently box out some very needed voices who do not have that privilege.”*
- *“Thrive did a good job at making different stakeholder groups heard. At the last meeting, it was clear that some folks still didn’t feel heard.”*
- *“When you get a large group together and talk about ideas, every time someone says something, others are looking for a reason that it doesn’t work. As soon as argument starts, it’s difficult to regain trust. For example, every time I mention something and people shoot my idea down...I lose my trust in the process and being willing to share my opinion.”*
- *“Some of the conversations felt like people came into it loaded and waited for an opportunity to voice what they already thought instead of giving the conversation a fresh chance.”*

At the final I2A session, cohort participants approved three action items:

- Supporting BIPOC-owned tourism sector business incubation (100% approval).
- Conducting a natural and cultural asset inventory (88% approval).
- Exploring the formation of a destination stewardship council (74% approval).

Interview participants were asked to name potential obstacles for the work ahead and offer ideas for how Thrive Asheville could help to advance this work. Throughout the interviews, participants often referenced obstacles such as: resource limitations (i.e. time and financial) for furthering the work; prioritization of action items; and securing buy-in from stakeholders in the tourism industry. Excerpts from some participant answers can be found below:



- *“[Thrive can] be a convener of the folks working on those action items [by] continuing to bring us together...We all have very full schedules...informal meetings could help.”*
- *“[We] need to be careful and need a neutral, balanced group of people and have enough folks who understand tourism.”*
- *“We need Thrive to not give up on this work. I hope Thrive can hang on. Everyone gets so burnt out on committees and not making progress. I hope Thrive can stick with it.”*
- *“We should look at other cities who have done this before and tweak their processes to fit Asheville. There’s definitely going to be some pushback. As long as we focus on a specific idea and not broaden it, we can accomplish more. To really succeed, we need to see that we have accomplished something...I don’t think anyone is comfortable being the advocate or president of a committee. That has to be Thrive right now.”*

SUMMARY

While this analysis does not represent the totality of feedback from I2A cohort members, insights from the I2A Participant Survey and one-on-one interviews can be used to inform future efforts to organize and empower community members seeking to collectively address an issue. This discussion intends to: review some of the high-level takeaways from the analysis; recommend areas for program improvement; and explore opportunities for further research.

TAKEAWAYS FROM ANALYSIS

- Cohort members widely approved of the three action items that emerged from the collective I2A work, with BIPOC/female participants reporting stronger approval and more active engagement in the I2A process than white/male participants.
- An overwhelming majority of members from this past I2A Leadership Forum believed that their participation was a valuable use of time.
- When asked about the valuable parts of their experience, cohort members consistently referenced the opportunity to connect and develop relationships with community members who represented different sectors within the community.
- Cohort members also believed that shared learning experiences were valuable aspects of their participation.
- Cohort members were less likely to believe that their peers understood their perspective on tourism (though a majority still expressed some level of agreement).
- By the end of all six I2A sessions, a majority of survey participants believed that progress was made among cohort members in six assessed areas, with an overwhelming majority believing that there was a greater openness to sharing information or resources with one another after the sessions.
- Cohort members were less likely to believe that conditions had improved in the areas of finding common ground and establishing a greater level of trust among the cohort (though a slim majority still expressed some level of agreement).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

- Continue to develop relationships: given that participants deeply valued connecting with peers in the different sectors, more opportunities should be provided to further strengthen relationships. Given time constraints, participants should be offered optional and informal opportunities to connect. This may look like intentionally pairing participants from different backgrounds or holding space and inviting those who wish to engage in informal networking.
- Align participant expectations: regular check-ins should be conducted to ensure that participant expectations align with any progression of the work. Survey data and participant interviews revealed a tension between allocating time to discussing the diverse opinions on sustainable tourism and moving forward with action planning. If the same time constraints are faced in the future, participants should be offered another source to share their perspective (e.g. discussion board that is active between sessions).
- Establish & regularly revisit cohort norms: while norms for engaging in the I2A sessions were established, these norms should be regularly revisited as a group to ensure that trust does not deteriorate throughout the process. Thrive should build upon its post-session survey by explicitly asking participants to reflect upon their adherence, as well as the group's adherence, to established norms. The following session should begin with the group reflecting on any insights gained from post-session surveys.
- Explicitly name tensions among participants: tension that may exist between participants should be named early in the process. This could look like participants sharing their beliefs on tourism and professional/personal identities (e.g. positional power). Using this information, facilitators can directly name tensions that may exist within the room, with participants brainstorming ways in which the group can collectively move forward, even in the face of these tensions.
- Compensate (some) participants: in an effort to expand participant diversity and remove barriers to engaging in sessions, stipends should be provided for those participants who would face financial hardship from participating in this work. Thrive should expand on past attempts to offer a stipend by setting up a confidential application process that would determine who is eligible for the stipend.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- A wide, diverse group of community stakeholders participated in the I2A Leadership Forum on sustainable tourism. More time could be spent exploring the reasons why some invitees were unable to participate in this cohort. In addition, it may be worthwhile to assess the degree to which those most impacted by tourism were adequately represented within this I2A cohort.
- [The I2A Leadership Forum](#) on sustainable tourism connected members of the community and, as seen from this analysis, strengthened networks. It may be worthwhile to explore network gaps that still exist within the local tourism sector. This would allow Thrive to facilitate further relationship building and, ultimately, build a stronger group of committed stakeholders seeking to implement action items.

CONCLUSION

Based on this analysis, Thrive Asheville and the I2A cohort made progress during this inaugural iteration of the [Ideas to Action Leadership Forum](#). As a result of their participation, participants built relationships and learned more about their own opinions, and opposing perspectives, on sustainable tourism. A strong majority of participants supported three actions that were explored during the Forum, and specific members of the group agreed to continue to work together to further the implementation of these actions.

Additionally, this analysis shows that more work must be done to build trust and understanding among participants with opposing views. Participants had differing perspectives on how time constrained the dialogue - some noting that the time commitment may have limited the diversity of participants, and others believing that the time allotted was not sufficient to achieve the goal of authentic trust-building. In future iterations of the [Ideas to Action Leadership Forum](#), program designers should consider whether pursuing all of the original programmatic goals are realistic given the time pressures that leaders face.

Given the importance of addressing large community challenges through collaborative efforts, Thrive Asheville can use this feedback to empower participants as they collectively seek to build a community where all members can thrive.



A decorative black metal post with a spherical top stands on a cobblestone sidewalk. The background is a blurred street scene with trees and buildings.

APPENDIX

Statistical data analysis, T-tests and Correlation tests, available upon request.

APPENDIX A. BIPOC TOURISM BUSINESS PROGRAM

PROPOSAL STATEMENT:

A collaborative program should be developed and piloted to highlight, nurture, and support the growth of Black, Indigenous, and people of color-owned businesses in the tourism industry. This includes a curriculum specific to identifying and capitalizing on business opportunities in Asheville's tourism sector.

CORE OUTCOMES:

- The BIPOC business community will have greater access to actionable information, capital, and influential people (including mentors) in the tourism sector. As a result, there will be job creation, and BIPOC businesses will have increased revenue and the connections they need to thrive.
- Moreover, there will be more BIPOC-owned businesses in the Tourism sector, operating at a scale that is capable of building generational wealth. This will lead to more diverse offerings in the tourism ecosystem.

YEAR 1 GOALS:

- A POC-led Advisory Committee has been formed; has been trained in how to build equitable programming; and has a clear charter and resources to oversee the program.
- Additionally, 10 to 12 BIPOC entrepreneurs have access to: industry-insider knowledge, accessible low-or-no-cost capital, connections, mentorship, and community support to grow their businesses and benefit from Asheville's tourism sector.

APPENDIX B. NATURAL & CULTURAL ASSET INVENTORY

PROPOSAL STATEMENT:

Conduct a natural and cultural asset inventory to protect and invest in the places that make our community special and support a thriving visitor economy. Identify opportunities for the inventory to create economic development for BIPOC residents based on cultural assets that have been overlooked.

- **Phase I** - Identify the best tools to conduct inventory; identify technical assistance as necessary; define assets and create a preliminary list. Gather other available data to understand what exists with regard to the use/value residents hold for natural and cultural resources in our community.
- **Phase II** - Collect and analyze data with Explore Asheville to determine demands by residents and visitors on local places based on use.
- **Phase III** - Collect local input. Identify places that are highly valued by the community and our visitors.

An inventory would include the following assets: arts, cultural features (social institutions, festivals, historical places, traditions, restaurants), and natural and recreational resources that intersect with our tourism economy.

CORE OUTCOMES:

- An Asset Stewardship Plan will be created with goals that respond to gaps in investment and maintenance of our prioritized assets.
- Equity gaps will be identified - creating more inclusive recognition of BIPOC cultural assets, and identifying inequitable access to natural resources - which can be used to repair harm and be restorative.

YEAR 1 GOALS:

- An inventory has been completed - with the support of community leadership, including city/county government, and the widespread participation of community members - and we have begun a process for a plan to protect and invest in our assets.
- We have shared the inventory with the community.

APPENDIX C. EXPLORE FORMATION OF DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL (DSC)

PROPOSAL STATEMENT:

- **Phase I** - Convene an exploratory team from the I2A to design what a DSC could look like, i.e., governance structures, rules, and authority. Determine what support would be necessary for this group to be successful. Define the authority this group could take when making decisions. Define and differentiate the role of a DSC that would fit local needs.
- **Phase II** - If Phase I surfaces a DSC model or other recommendations that would effectively meet local capacity and needs regarding destination stewardships structures, convene leaders from city and county staff, business leaders, and the community for a presentation of a proposed DSC structure.

CORE OUTCOMES:

- There will be a coordinated approach to sustainable tourism that will monitor economic, socio-cultural, and environmental opportunities, impacts, and benefits.
- There will be increased goodwill for the tourism sector through ongoing community input and increased well-being.

YEAR 1 GOALS:

- Conduct research on the design of governance structures for the Destination Stewardship Council.
- Present findings on proposed Destination Stewardship Council.