

IMPACT

Backbones Leaders Program

REPORT

COMMUNITY REPORT
MARCH 2024

BACKBONES 

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Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Coast Salish and Duwamish people as the original stewards and storytellers of the land where our work started, Seattle. Past, present, and future, we recognize the brilliance and resilience of the Duwamish tribe.

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The Leaders Program

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Introduction

Since its inception in 2020, the Backbones Leaders Program has been focused on empowering individuals with spinal cord injuries and disabilities (SCI/D), equipping them with a skill set that will position them to become leaders and contribute to building a strong community. This unique initiative brings together ten remarkable individuals each year, all showing an unwavering dedication to leadership, self-improvement, advocacy, and community service. Chosen from nationwide through a selection process that includes an online application and a virtual interview, participants embark on a transformative year-long journey. Monthly virtual gatherings provide a platform for learning from guest speakers, enriching educational activities, and delving into discussions on vital topics like public speaking, advocacy, identity, and more. Beyond these interactions, the program fosters growth through peer learning and mentoring opportunities with Backbones' dedicated staff, complemented by a professional development grant to further each participant's journey.

This report highlights the profound impact and progress of the Backbones Leaders Program over the years, guided by a comprehensive evaluation conducted by Storytellers for Change. Focusing on several pivotal areas, the evaluation sheds light on how the program has influenced its participants, pinpointing its strengths and areas for improvement. Furthermore, this report celebrates the Backbones Leaders Program's achievements and charts a course for its ongoing journey.

The findings in this report are the product of a mixed-method study, which included a survey, interviews with participants and staff, and a document review process. The following research questions guided this evaluation:

- How has the Backbones Leaders Program impacted the personal and professional lives of the participants?
- What are the perceived strengths and areas for improvement in the program identified by participants and staff?
- What are the visions and suggestions of participants and staff for future program development?

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to extend our deepest gratitude to all the evaluation participants who generously gave their time and shared their candid insights, experiences, and aspirations. Your voices are at the heart of this research and have provided invaluable information that will guide Backbone's work and development. Every story and suggestion is essential to this process, illuminating the multifaceted impact of the Leaders Program and its promise to amplify its impact.

Additionally, our sincere appreciation goes out to the dedicated Backbones staff and board of directors, whose commitment to the Leaders Program participants and its mission is unparalleled. Their ongoing support and collaboration throughout this evaluation process have been instrumental. We particularly want to recognize the advice, guidance, and feedback provided by Reveca Torres and Monica Quimby. Their contributions were essential to the success of this project.

Last but not least, our heartfelt thanks to the research team at Storytellers for Change. Your meticulous efforts, expertise, and dedication in bringing this evaluation to fruition have been pivotal. Together, all these contributions form a collaborative tapestry, each thread significant in weaving the story of the Backbones Leaders Program and its journey.

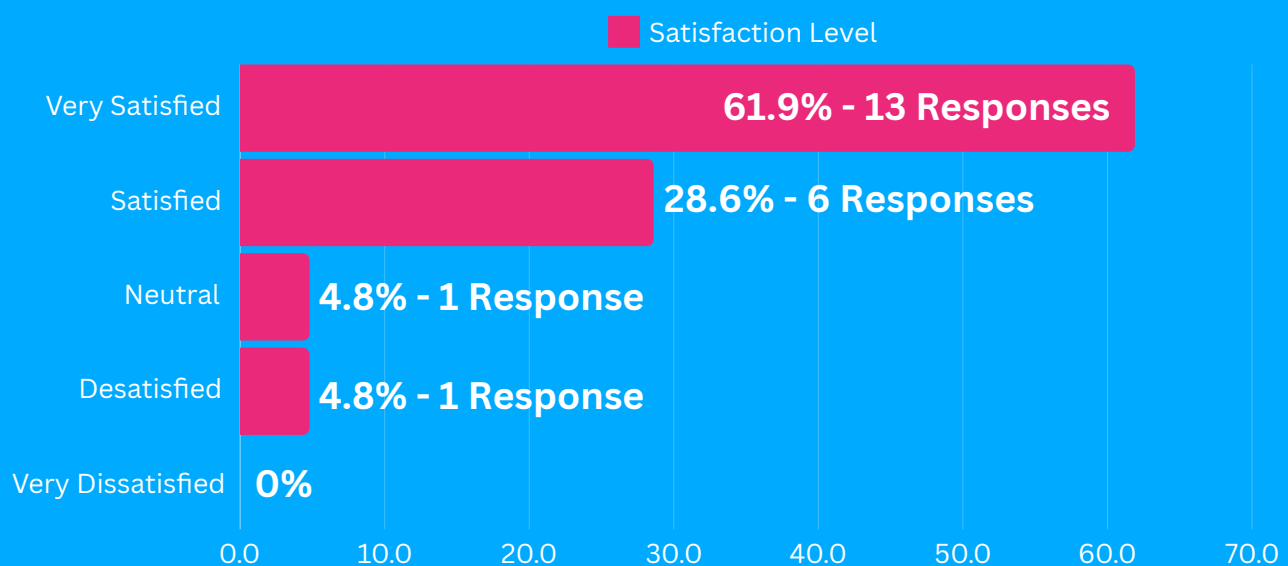
FINDINGS

The report findings are divided into five sections: program satisfaction, program impact, areas of improvement, areas of strength, and future development. These findings offer a snapshot of critical insights and characteristics of the Leaders Program. At the same time, it's crucial to recognize that data constantly evolves, and what's captured at a specific moment may not fully represent the entire spectrum of participant experiences and perspectives. While these findings provide valuable insights, they should be used as a starting point rather than a definitive conclusion about the impact of the Leaders Program. Continuous engagement and ongoing evaluation are necessary to maintain an accurate and holistic understanding of the program's impact.

Program Satisfaction

The Leaders Program has been overwhelmingly praised for contributing to its participants' skill development, personal growth, and sense of motivation. In addition, the program excels at community building and fostering inclusion. A notable 90% of respondents expressed high satisfaction levels, indicating they were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their experience (See Figure 1). This high satisfaction rate underscores the program's effectiveness in meeting its objectives and positively impacting participants.

Figure 1: Participant Satisfaction



N = 21

Participants particularly valued the program for facilitating the acquisition of new skills and leadership qualities. Many acknowledged the program's effectiveness in enhancing their leadership capabilities, with one participant noting, "I learned a variety of skills to be a better leader. Some I didn't know I needed." This emphasis on skill development and leadership growth is a testament to the program's comprehensive approach to personal and professional development.

The program's impact on personal growth was also a recurring theme in the feedback. Participants appreciated the opportunity to engage in self-reflection and personal development, with one stating, "The program has helped me to grow as a person and challenge myself more." This aspect of the program underscores its role in fostering an environment that encourages participants to push their boundaries and grow.

Networking and community building were identified as significant benefits, with many participants valuing the opportunity to expand their networks and connect with peers. A participant's feedback encapsulated this: "[I] made more connections to expand my network of peers, and this helped me feel like I'm part of something bigger." Such opportunities enhance participants' professional networks and contribute to a sense of community and shared purpose. Motivation and inspiration derived from guest speakers and learning about others' contributions were highlighted as pivotal aspects of the program. Overall, participants felt inspired to pursue their goals and explore new opportunities. One participant shared, "[In the program] I always felt unbelievably motivated to continue on my trajectory and maybe try new things that I learned from others." The program's emphasis on exposing participants to diverse perspectives and inclusivity, particularly around advocacy and disability, was praised. Participants appreciated the introduction to different perspectives, enhancing their understanding and empathy towards various social issues, identities, and lived experiences.

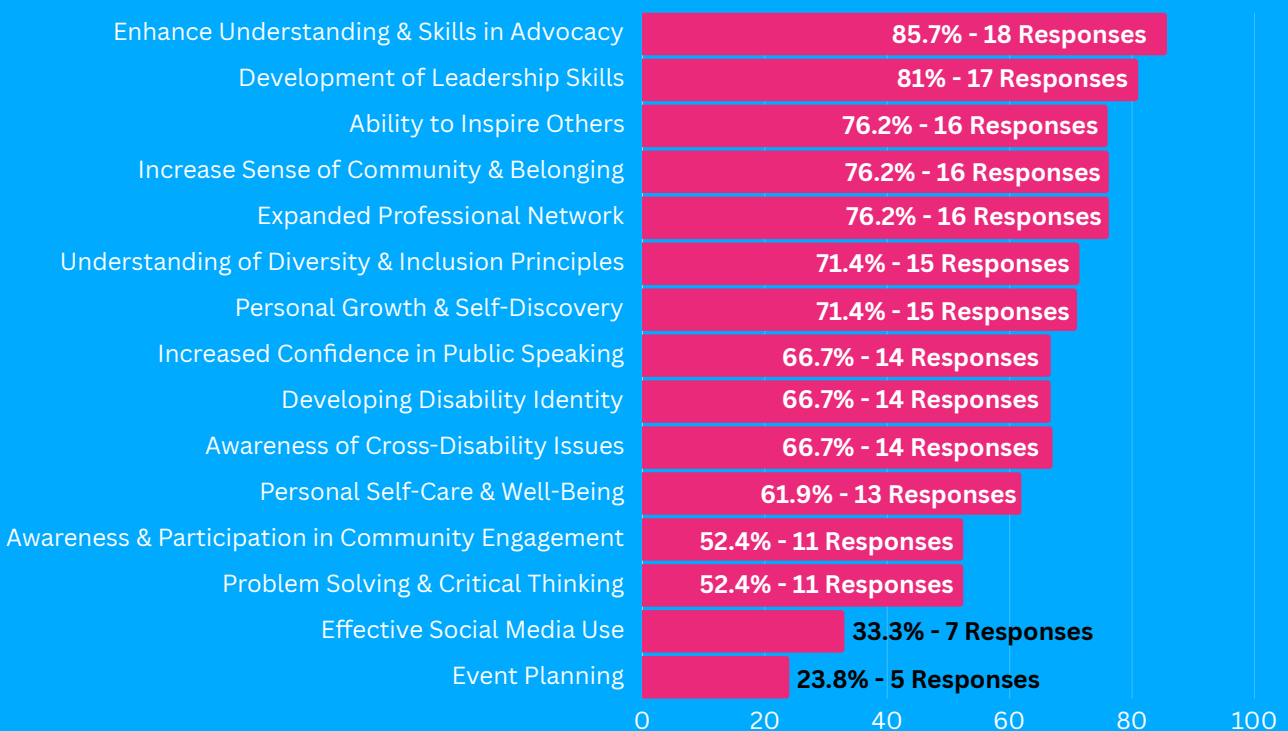
Despite these strengths, the program has areas that require attention and improvement. A minority of respondents expressed a need for more interactive opportunities, practical applications of the skills learned, and networking or discussion times. Finally, although the program has significantly influenced numerous participants, continuous evaluation mechanisms throughout each cohort are urgently needed. This form of evaluation will guarantee that feedback is gathered as closely as possible to the experience of involvement in the program.

Program Impact

The Backbones Leaders Program has played a pivotal role in shaping the lives of its participants, as evidenced by the evaluation data. Skill development emerged as a core strength of the program, with advocacy and leadership identified as the areas of highest positive impact by 85% and 81% of respondents, respectively. These findings underscore the program's effectiveness in equipping participants with essential skills for leading change and advocating for disability rights. Participants' ability to inspire others, feel a sense of community, engage in networking, embrace diversity and inclusion, and experience personal growth and self-discovery were also highly rated, each by 70% or more of survey respondents.

Despite these successes, the program shows room for improvement in specific areas. Effective social media use and event planning were identified as the areas with the lowest positive impact, cited by only 33% and 23% of respondents, respectively. Additionally, areas such as public speaking, developing a disability identity, awareness of cross-disability issues, self-care, community engagement, and critical thinking were identified by less than 70% of participants as areas of impact. If these are areas of importance for the program, these findings suggest room for improvement.

Figure 2: Areas of Positive impact as reported by survey participants



Participants shared powerful testimonials about their experiences (See Figure 3), further illuminating the program's profound impact. One participant expressed how the program energized them and inspired them to mobilize and explore opportunities for leadership roles within various organizations. This reflects the program's success in inspiring participants to engage in their communities. The sense of community and mutual care within the program was another highlight, with participants appreciating the networking opportunities and monthly discussions. During an interview, one participant described these interactions as “eye-opening” and “world-expanding,” emphasizing the value of connecting with peers facing similar or different challenges and ambitions.

Overall, the Backbones Leaders Program has significantly impacted its participants, notably in skill development, personal growth, and community engagement. While it excels in many areas, the feedback points to opportunities to enhance the curriculum by introducing more project-based learning, strengthening opportunities for networking and collaboration, and leveraging participants' expertise. Addressing these areas could further strengthen the program's impact and support participants in their journey toward leadership and advocacy.

Figure 3: Participants' Testimonies

“The Leaders Program energized me. It was amazing to learn about different people, stories, and successes, whether small or big. It inspired me to mobilize myself to approach different organizations and see where my skill sets may help them, whether it's, again, being just a member of the organization or more of a strategic leadership role on the board.”

“The genuine care everyone has for each other in this program is inspiring. The networking required by the program was great. [Having these] monthly discussions was so eye-opening. It was world-expanding for me to have conversations with other people with disabilities who are doing things that aren't necessarily in my wheelhouse.”

“The vision board was the hardest assignment for me, like to take that time to focus on myself and try to decide what do I want. Like, how do I represent that? And how do I show who I am in a document that anybody could look at and see it? And I've never been a person who does the vision board thing, I am a graphic designer, but I don't necessarily feel that I'm an artist at that. But it was really valuable. And it was also beautiful to see how every person interpreted that assignment completely differently.”

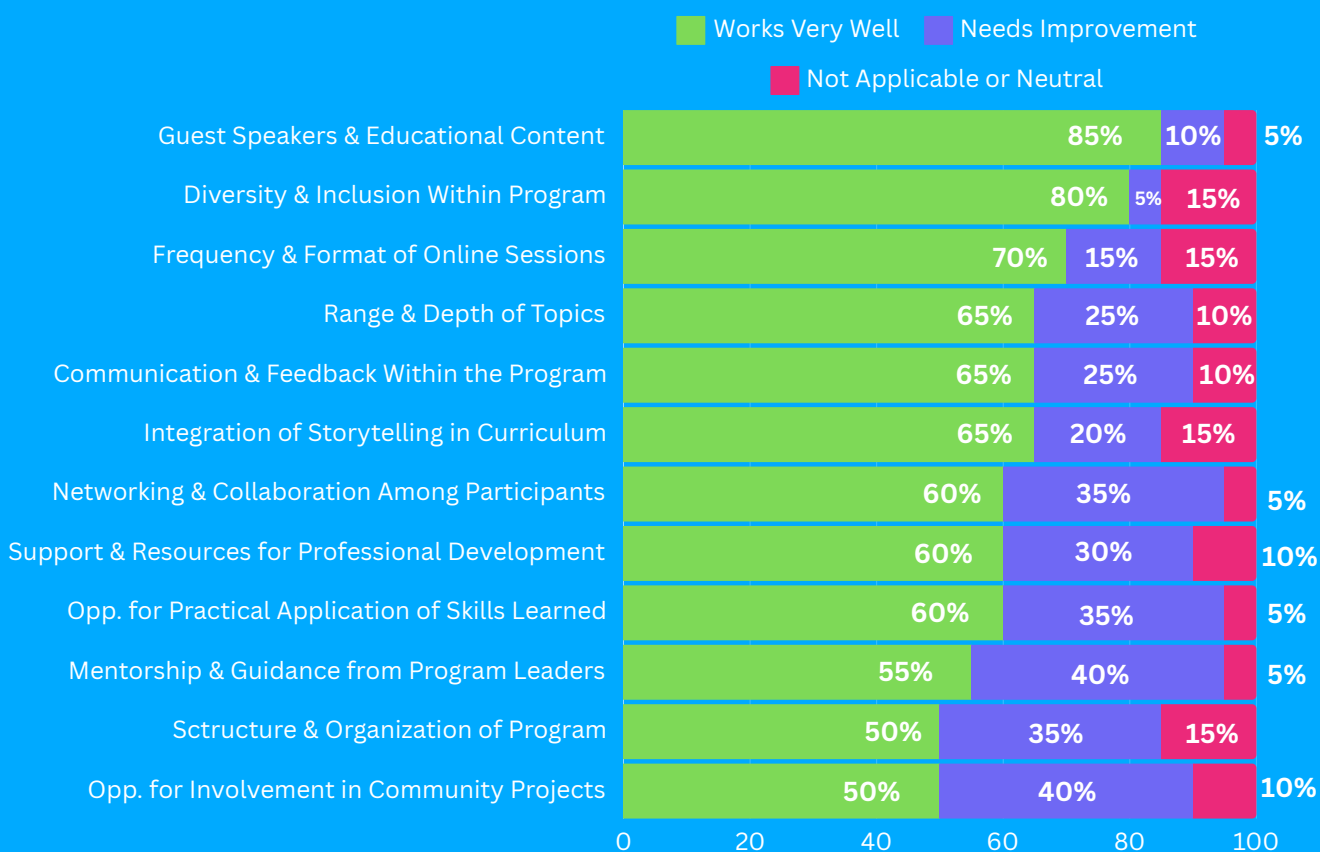
Areas of Improvement

The survey and interviews conducted to evaluate the Backbones Leaders Program have provided valuable insights into areas where the program excels and where room for improvement is needed (See Figure 4). This section of the report focuses on the latter, highlighting feedback from participants on how the program could enhance its offerings and better meet its participants' needs.

Networking and Collaboration Among Participants

A significant area for improvement identified was the need for enhanced networking and social interaction opportunities. Participants desired more structured and informal occasions to interact during the program's monthly meetings and outside these scheduled times. The suggestion to facilitate connections with alumni underscores the demand for a more integrated community that extends beyond current cohorts. This feedback points to the potential benefits of a more cohesive network encouraging ongoing engagement and support among all participants.

Figure 4: Areas of Program Strength & improvement



N = 21

Access to Materials and Resources

Feedback also indicated that the program could improve how participants access materials and resources. The current system appears to be less user-friendly than desired, and participants suggested adopting platforms like Google Drive for easier access to developmental documents and links. Streamlining access to these resources could significantly enhance the learning experience and ensure that participants have the materials they need when they need them.

Practical Application and Mentorship

The need for more opportunities to apply skills learned in practice and for stronger mentorship was also highlighted. Participants seek more hands-on projects and effective mentorship platforms offering guidance and brainstorming opportunities. This includes creating pathways for participants to volunteer their talents with organizations that value them, enhancing their real-world experience and professional development.

Collaboration and Professional Development

Participants suggested introducing a unified project to foster collaboration between meetings. Such an initiative would keep members connected and encourage active collaboration on meaningful projects, reinforcing the skills learned during the program. Moreover, the feedback calls for an enhanced professional development process, including more resources, direction, and opportunities for one-on-one mentorship. This suggests a need for a more tailored approach to professional growth within the program.

Leadership Opportunities

Finally, there was a call for more leadership opportunities within the program, potentially through mentorship or employment opportunities targeted at graduates. This indicates a desire for a more deliberate pathway from program participation to leadership roles, enabling participants to apply their skills within the community or in other projects.

While the Backbones Leaders Program has positively impacted its participants, there is a clear demand for improvements in networking, resource access, practical application, mentorship, and leadership opportunities. Addressing these areas could significantly enhance the program's effectiveness and foster a more engaging, supportive, and impactful experience for all participants.

Areas of Strength

The Backbones Leaders Program stands out for its comprehensive personal and professional development approach, emphasizing diversity, inclusion, and the power of storytelling. This report delves into the areas where the program excels, as identified through participant feedback and survey responses. These strengths notably contribute to the program's overall success and its positive impact on its participants.

Staff, Guest Speakers, and Educational Content

One of the program's most lauded aspects is the excellence of its staff, guest speakers, and the richness of the educational content provided. Participants have expressed their appreciation for the accessibility and support of the program leaders. One participant noted, "...they were available if you wanted to reach out... Reveca and Monica are great!" The impact of guest speakers and modules was also highlighted, with another participant reflecting, "The guest speakers and modules were so helpful... they really impacted me." These testimonials underscore the program's commitment to delivering high-quality support and learning materials, which are crucial for the participants' development.

Diversity and Inclusion

The program's emphasis on diversity and inclusion has fostered a deeper understanding and appreciation of various perspectives among participants. By exposing participants to diverse viewpoints, the program enriches the learning experience, encourages inclusivity, and fosters an environment for intersectional dialogues about disability, identity, and leadership. One participant shared, "I'm a person who didn't find much value in my disability... this program exposed me to other perspectives." Another added, "It was valuable... learning about different perspectives and experiences like what it's like to be in the LGBTQ community and have a disability." These reflections illustrate the program's success in creating an inclusive and empathetic environment for all participants.

Community Building and Networking

The program's focus on community building and networking has been instrumental in creating a supportive and connected environment. One-on-one connections and sharing personal experiences are particularly valued. Participants have felt genuine care and support, as one shared, "The genuine care everyone has for each other." The significance of networking within the

program was also praised, with another participant noting: "[The] networking that's required by the program is great and makes you feel connected beyond your current community." This sentiment highlights the value of relationship-building within the cohort, which cultivates a positive social environment and facilitates peer learning.

Voice, Agency, and Storytelling

Participants have experienced profound self-discovery, increased agency, and a newfound appreciation for storytelling through the program. It has empowered them to explore their journeys and share their stories confidently. One participant remarked, "The program helped me to feel less apologetic, and now I know I have something of value to offer." Another testified, "[The program] allowed me to know that I can tell my story and not feel bad about telling my story, or embarrassed about it, and [I learned] how to tell my story." These quotes highlight the program's effectiveness in empowering participants to articulate their experiences and advocate for themselves and others.

Skill-Building Activities & Professional Development Grant

The program's skill-building activities and resources, including access to professional development grants, have been pivotal in participant development. One participant said, "...[the program] also gave me access to more impact and training, and has helped me to be a leader and use my voice." Another participant also shared the impact of the professional development grant on them, saying, "They were able to offer me a [grant], and I'm getting professional coaching now because of the grant."

The Backbones Leaders Program excels at delivering a multifaceted development experience. It is characterized by its commitment to diversity and inclusion, quality educational content, effective community building, and the enhancement of participants' leadership skills. These strengths highlight the program's comprehensive approach to development and underscore its impact on participants, equipping them with the skills, confidence, and connections necessary to thrive as leaders and advocates.

Future Program Development

As part of the assessment, via the survey and interviews, the evaluation team also asked participants about their ideas for the program's future development. Their ideas and suggestions are aligned with themes already highlighted in this report, and they include increasing opportunities for collaboration and community-building, the expansion of the program, and a larger focus on storytelling and public speaking. In addition, it's worth highlighting that many participants also envision themselves getting more involved with Backbones, demonstrating a high commitment toward the organization and its future.

Community and Collaboration

Participants express a strong desire for broader networks and more collaborative opportunities, not just within their cohorts but also extending to alumni, other organizations, and projects. This feedback suggests a potential for the program to build bridges between past and present participants, facilitating a vibrant, interconnected community. The emphasis is on the value of shared experiences and collective growth, underscoring the importance of a supportive network for aspiring leaders.

Figure 5: Participants' Testimonies

“One very potential idea is, you know, helping Backbones as an organization to fundraise.”

“I want to get even more involved with Backbones... I think some of the things I have learned over the years from Backbones have been very valuable. I think I could share that knowledge with others. So, you know, I want to take my experience and give it to someone else.”

“I would like to continue to be involved with the program. I'm open to anything.”

“One of the things I would like to do is, if they ever were looking for someone to go back and talk, I would like the opportunity to be one of the presenters.”

“I'm ready to get involved in any way I can to support Backbones. Mentoring or meeting with others to work on projects like fundraising or something else.”

Outreach and Expansion

A few participants also articulated an aspiration to scale the program. While the scope of scale varied, from engaging more people locally to expanding internationally, these aspirations reflect the value participants hold for the program. One participant shared this sentiment: "Backbones is something that can be worldwide." Participants see the program's principles and lessons as applicable and impactful, suggesting they believe an expanded reach could empower a larger demographic of leaders and advocates across different cultural and geographic landscapes.

Visibility, Public Speaking, and Narrative

Enhancing the program's visibility through public speaking engagements and narrative projects is highlighted as a crucial strategy. Participants believe that by elevating the program's profile, they can advance its mission and draw more attention to the issues it addresses. This approach aligns with the participants' personal ambitions to engage more in public speaking, storytelling, and writing as channels for advocacy and professional development. One participant highlighted the personal impact of storytelling, stating, "Storytelling is a way to give your own authentic voice, [to offer a] perspective of your experiences."

Personal Development

In addition to highlighting aspirations for the future of Backbones, participants also articulated personal goals and priorities for their own futures, which can be summarized in the following categories:

- **Storytelling and Public Speaking:** A notable number of participants expressed a keen interest in advancing their storytelling and public speaking skills. They view these competencies as essential tools for advocacy, professional opportunities, and personal expression.
- **A Commitment to Well-Being:** All interview participants consistently prioritized well-being. Participants recognize the importance of balancing their commitments with personal health and self-care.
- **Continued Involvement in Advocacy and Leadership:** Although each in different ways and scales, participants articulated a commitment to remain actively involved in advocacy, leadership, and community projects. This underscores the program's lasting impact on its participants. In addition, participants from all four cohorts desire to contribute to the Backbones community through fundraising, mentorship, or sharing their learned knowledge and experiences with newer cohorts.

Methodology

The evaluation team employed a mixed-methods approach to gather comprehensive data. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through online surveys, while qualitative insights were derived from a survey and in-depth interviews with a sample of Leaders Program participants from the four cohorts. Combining these research methods ensured a robust and well-rounded assessment of the program.

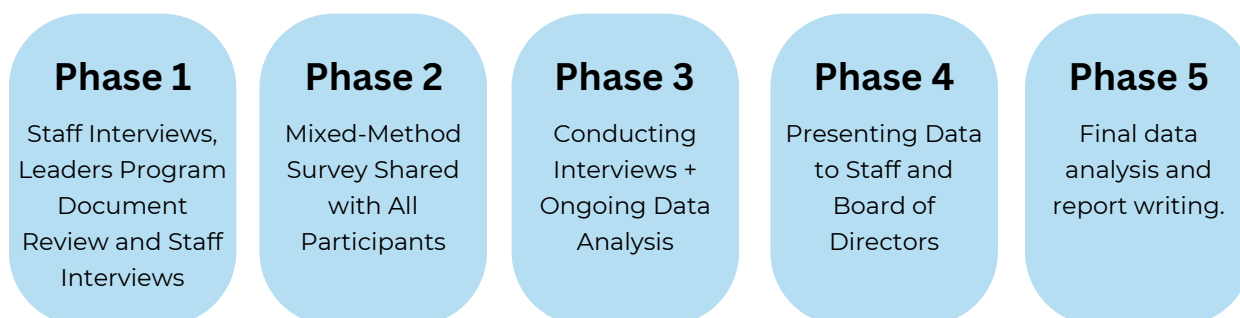
Sampling Strategy

This study relied on a carefully designed sampling strategy to ensure a comprehensive evaluation that considered the diverse experiences of participants from across the program's four cohorts. The evaluation team collaborated closely with Backbones staff to identify interview participants, and the survey was sent to all forty program participants.

Data Collection & Analysis

The research team conducted its data collection and analysis process in five phases (See Figure 6). The first phase included interviews with staff, developing a logic model for the program, and a landscape analysis to understand the field of organizations that are serving and engaging individuals with spinal cord injuries or diseases (SCI/D). The second phase consisted of a mixed-method survey distributed to all forty participants of the Leaders Program. The survey was designed in collaboration with Backbones staff. The inquiry focus of the mixed-method survey centered around four areas: program satisfaction, program impact, areas of improvement, and areas of strength.

Figure 6: Data Collection & Analysis Process

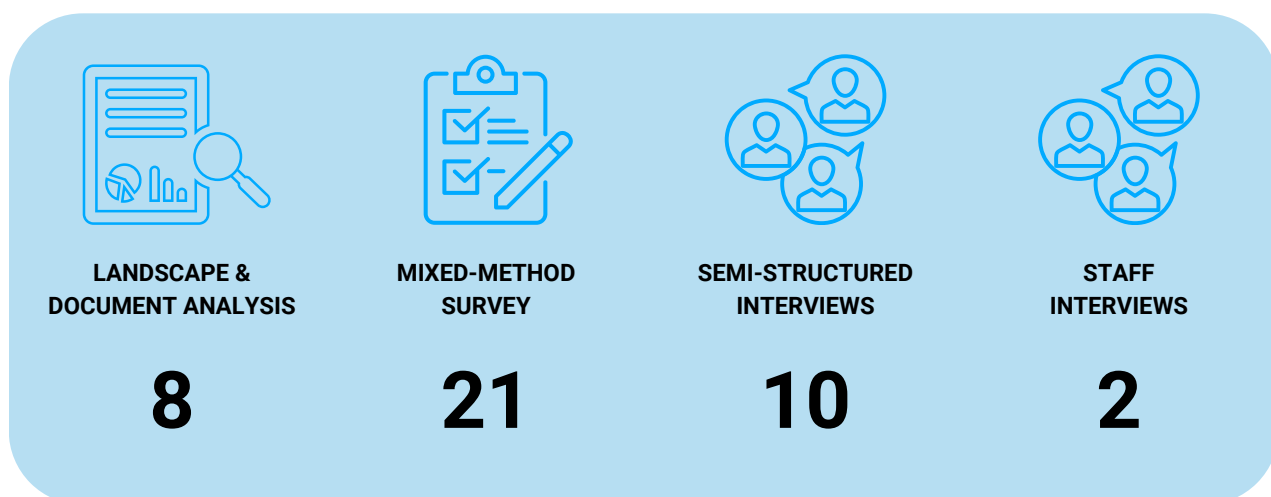


The survey was distributed via email through an invitation sent by Backbones' Executive Director. Survey responses were analyzed and coded as they were received. A total of 21 participants responded to the survey (See Figure 7).

As the survey was shared with participants, we also initiated the third evaluation phase, which involved conducting interviews to gather in-depth insights from program alumni. Participants were selected from the four different cohorts to ensure a representative sample, and a 50-dollar honorarium was offered for their participation. The organization's Executive Director also sent personalized invitations to program participants, asking them to participate in the interview. These interviews aimed to explore how participants understand the program's impact on them, recommendations for improvement, and ideas for future program development, among other themes. From February 8th to February 27, 2024, evaluators conducted 10 interviews. All interviews were conducted over Zoom, recorded with participants' permission, and transcribed for analysis.

The transcribed interview data were analyzed through an abductive coding approach—a flexible qualitative data analysis technique that allows researchers to develop new theories about their data based on existing theories and concepts. Evaluators developed an initial codebook based on the general themes related to the research questions and insights gathered from the baseline analysis and survey responses. After the interviews were completed, changes were made to the codebook, and transcripts were coded using the updated codebook. Evaluators engaged in two rounds of coding. After the first round of coding, the codebook was revised and finalized before

Figure 7: Methods & Outcomes



the second round of coding. This final codebook (See Appendix 2) was later used to code the final open-ended survey responses.

The fourth stage in our data collection and analysis process included presenting initial research findings to Backbones' Executive Director and the Board of Directors. The last data analysis phase included a final comprehensive review of all the data sets and the development of the evaluations' findings and recommendations.

VALIDITY & LIMITATIONS

The research team analyzed the survey and interview data in several rounds to increase the study's validity. Two researchers coded all data, and the evaluation team actively discussed and compared notes and emergent insights during the data analysis process. Furthermore, for the sake of transparency and research reflexivity, all team members wrote a brief research identity memo to discuss how their positionality relates to this study, and the project abided by strict adherence to standards and principles of research, such as protecting the privacy and integrity of the research participants, respecting their personal and contextual experiences, and actively seeking guidance from Backbones to protect the privacy of all participants. Lastly, we recognize that this study was limited by the context of our project timeline and the fact that researchers do not have spinal cord injuries. The evaluation team reflected carefully on their positionality to approach research and data with the utmost care, professionalism, and commitment to integrity.

2024

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