



What Works Cities Economic Mobility Initiative TULSA

Tulsa: NextUp helps young people take the next step

Ensuring young Tulsans have paths to stable and higher paying jobs is a critical component of both individual and City-wide success. Through the NextUp program, the City of Tulsa – and its partners – took on the important task of adapting a nationally renowned, evidence-based workforce development program to a new, younger audience. As part of the What Works Cities (WWC) Economic Mobility Initiative, the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) supported and evaluated this program. This memo summarizes our high-level findings and recommended next steps.

⚠ Issue Motivation

Tulsa is experiencing significant economic growth, low unemployment, and broad-based community revitalization. However, not all residents of Tulsa are benefitting from this growth. Young adults and people of color experience **higher rates of unemployment and poverty, and lower levels of educational attainment**, especially in the North Tulsa area. To help address these disparities, the City of Tulsa is investing in initiatives to support their residents in accessing jobs and training. In 2019, there were more than (defined as those not enrolled in school and not participating in the workforce) in the Tulsa metro area with limited service options to engage them in training. The seeks to address the existing gap in services for youth. NextUp is operated by Madison Strategies Group (MSG), often known locally as Tulsa Community WorkAdvance (TCW). MSG has operated the nationally-recognized, evidence-based TCW program in Tulsa for ten years. Launched in spring 2019, NextUp is an innovative program that builds on the success of TCW and provides disconnected youth ages 18 to 24 with comprehensive and wraparound services to increase their earning potential.

“NextUp coaches have
a way of making
you feel special
and deserving of a
second chance!”

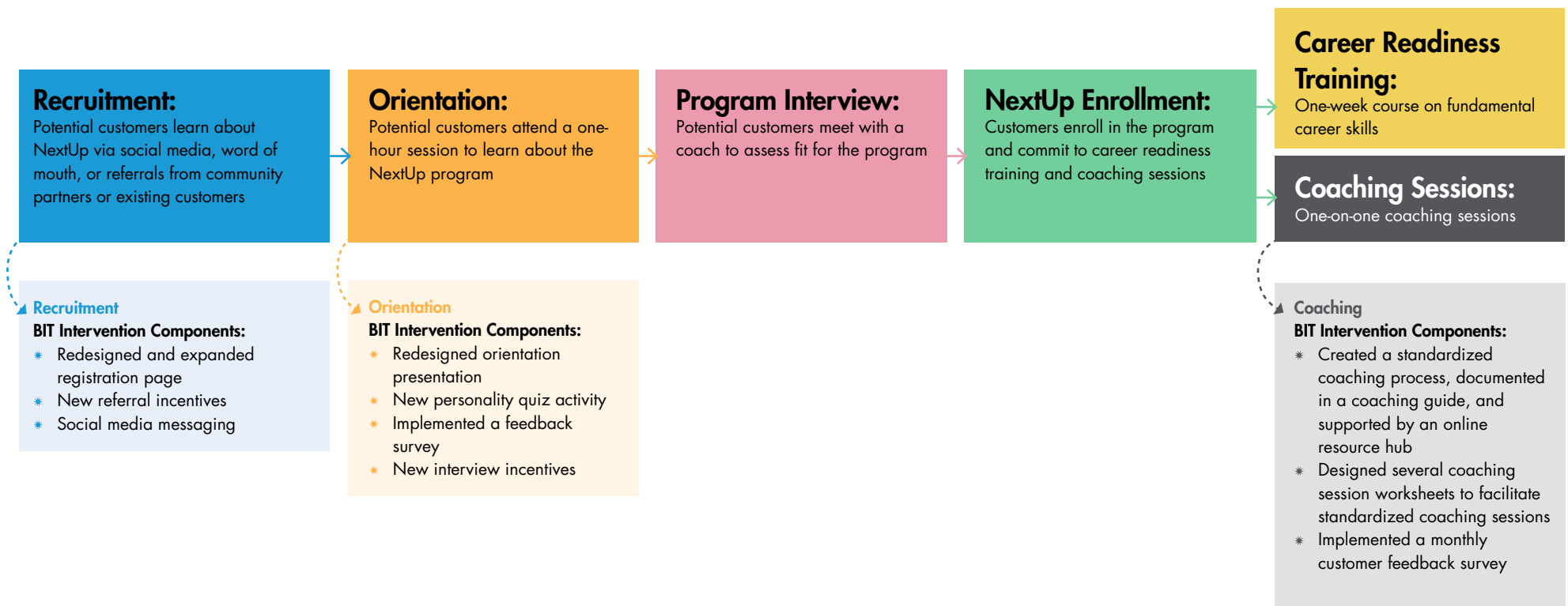
— Quote from NextUp customer

Our Approach

Through the WWC Economic Mobility Initiative, TCW and the City of Tulsa committed to refining and expanding the NextUp program to improve economic outcomes for disengaged youth. In their work with BIT, TCW sought to test new ideas to increase enrollment in the program and improve the quality of programming for participants, as well as gather actionable data about how youth experienced this new program.

Based on feedback from current NextUp customers and staff, BIT and TCW focused on increasing intake into the program (recruitment, orientation) and improving and standardizing program activities (coaching). In designing each component, the project team drew on programmatic expertise from TCW staff, behavioral science evidence, and feedback solicited from prototyping sessions with customers conducted in fall 2019. **See Figure 1** for additional details on program design.

Figure 1. Next Up Customer Journey & BIT Intervention Components



COVID-19 Modifications

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, several changes were made to the program:

- ★ Recruitment was paused between March and July 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions, and resumed in July 2020 when local restrictions were lifted.
- ★ Two intervention components that were initially scoped (an internship program for NextUp customers with the City of Tulsa and production of videos for use in online recruitment) were not implemented due to COVID-19 restrictions and a lack of staff capacity.

COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns and subsequent recovery also created a

unique set of circumstances that affected current and potential NextUppers' willingness to participate. For example, COVID-19 lay-offs may have meant that more young people had the availability and desire to return to their education in 2020, while higher starting wages and signing bonuses for low skill and no preparation jobs may have reduced interest in training in spring and summer 2021.

Evaluation Methodology

BIT conducted a formative evaluation of this intervention work. The evaluation consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data collected during the intervention period (October 2019 through May 2021). Indicators included: participation data from NextUp's program administration database, monthly surveys of current customers, social media engagement, and interviews with program staff. This formative evaluation aims to provide insights to inform decisions about whether to continue, adjust, or remove program components.

Throughout this evaluation, we focused on addressing three research questions:

- 1 What are the participation rates for each stage of the NextUp program?
- 2 What are customers' and staffs' perceptions of the refined and expanded NextUp program?
- 3 How did the new program components perform and what improvements could be made to the NextUp program?

Findings

Participation Rates

Figure 2 shows program participation numbers as well as conversation rates between stages. Our evaluation found **promising retention across NextUp's stages but there is still room for further improvement**. Of those who pass the program interview into the program, 63% continue on to attend coaching sessions and 68% complete career readiness training.

While retention overall is strong, there were disparities between Black and white participants' conversion between orientation and becoming Next-Uppers (only 41% of Black youth at orientation went on to become Next-Uppers, compared to 54% of non-Black attendees).

Perceptions of the Program

We found that NextUp has high recommendations ratings: 94% of responses in the monthly survey indicated a high likelihood of recommending NextUp to a friend.



New Program Components

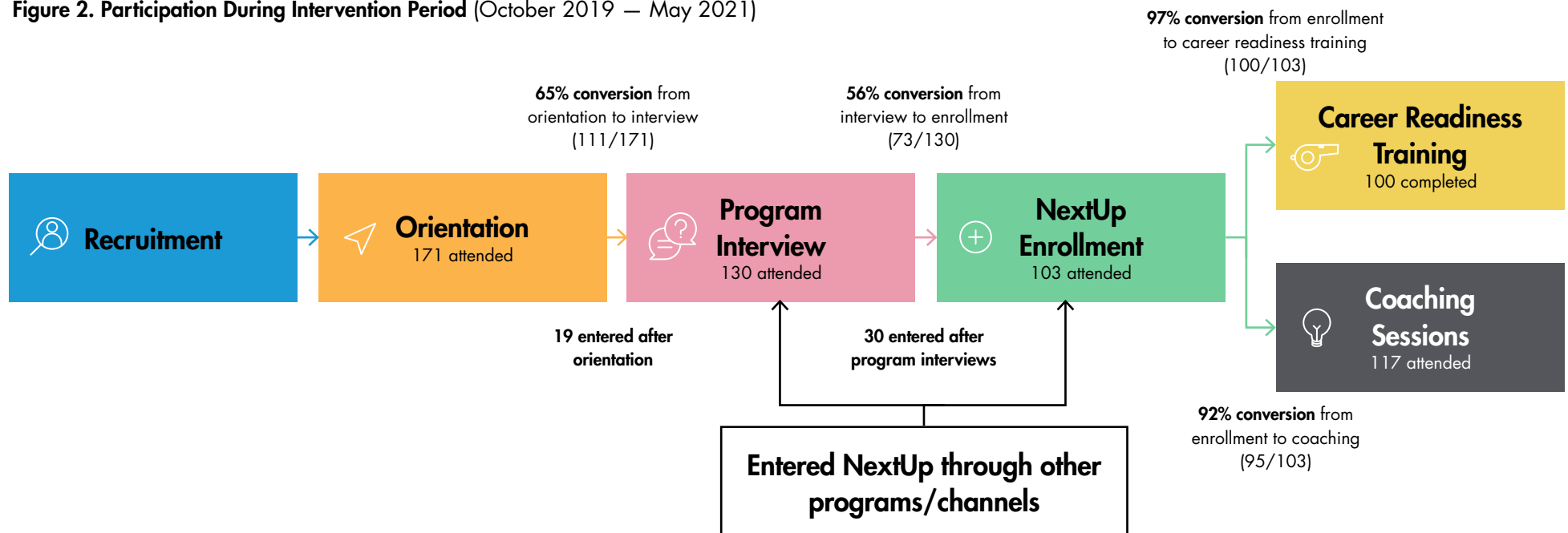
Of the new program components introduced through this project, we found varying levels of success.

Recruitment: The new referral and incentive programs, while perceived as slightly complicated, helped NextUp reach more of the target population. In particular, peer referrals accounted for 30% of orientation attendees. Many of those referrals carried on through later program elements: 55% who were referred completed career readiness training, compared to 41% who were not referred. Newly designed social media outreach didn't receive much engagement via the platforms (likes, clicks, shares) – but overall impressions were high. Following this pilot, TCW has engaged with a local advertising agency to support new efforts to expand their social media reach and outreach to this audience.

Orientation: All respondents to the orientation feedback survey reported that they would likely recommend NextUp to a friend based on the newly re-designed NextUp orientation experience (94 of 94). The new orientation activity (known as “16 Personalities”) provides some value for clients, but coaches reported that it does not always inform future coaching sessions. Some commented that they did not have the capacity to dive into their customers’ results from 16 Personalities, and that other activities were often a better fit for customers’ needs.

Coaching: Attendance at coaching sessions was strong. Customers attended an average of six coaching sessions and 89% of customers returned for at least a second session. We found that coaches regularly adapted and customized the newly developed session materials to meet student needs. New coaches noted the depth of the resources available to support coaching, but felt that it was difficult to absorb all of the information at once.

Figure 2. Participation During Intervention Period (October 2019 — May 2021)



Scaling Opportunities & Recommendations

NextUp has made significant progress over the past 18 months to recruit new customers and help them continue through their journey to better employment opportunities and greater economic mobility. We recommend NextUp scale what worked and conduct targeted follow-ups into more challenging areas, to better iterate and respond to the needs of young people.



Recruitment

Continue to incentivize peer referrals and explore ways to expand the referral program

Peer referrals were shown to be a powerful motivator to encourage individuals to attend orientation and persist through the program. Consider leveraging this influence by employing formal peer spokespeople or “ambassadors.” NextUppers that are particularly successful at recruiting in their networks could be given further incentives or compensation for referrals.



Recruitment

Analyze data on how customers enter the program through other programs and channels

This will allow staff to understand which channels (e.g., other TCW programs) are strong recruitment prospects, explore how outcomes for customers may vary from each source, and create more structured referral opportunities between programs.



Orientation

Solicit more detailed feedback from current NextUppers to better understand how they feel about the 16 Personalities activity

Currently the orientation feedback survey asks about general experiences and overall sentiment, but asking more targeted questions can help support new programming or tweaks to existing content. Based on the feedback, consider replacing the activity with another career activity or tying the 16 Personalities outputs more closely to future coaching activities.



Coaching

Make the Coaching Guide and worksheets “living documents” and consider regular refreshers for existing coaches

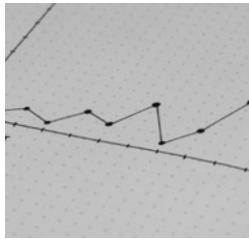
Encourage coaches to add their “best practices” to the living guide regularly. This could be accomplished by storing the documents in a Google Doc and using the “comments” feature. Additionally, consider creating structured opportunities for coaches to exchange learnings and update the coaching materials.



Overall

↻ **Utilize program data to better understand how the NextUp experience differs by demographic groups and prioritize addressing equity gaps**

By analyzing program data by race, age, and gender across the program lifecycle, NextUp can better support potential and current customers by targeting outreach during potential drop-off periods.



Overall

↻ **Prioritizing 3-5 key metrics to report weekly, focused on priority goals**

NextUp is a “data-rich” program that collects an impressive amount of data and regularly uses it to report on current performance. Using a targeted set of metrics drawn from the full range of options available to help monitor and improve the program operations can ensure all customers are benefiting from the program – without overwhelming staff.



Overall

↻ **Pursue funding for budget and staff needs to support the recommendations in this report**

Over the course of this Initiative, the TCW staff stretched to incorporate the new programming; however, for sustaining this work BIT recommends that TCW solicit funding dedicated to this work moving forward.

Other job training and placement programs may also be interested in scaling up NextUp’s approach, to better support youth in their own geographies. The additions made to adapt TCW’s core program – revamped recruitment, orientation, and a one-on-one coaching program – are likely accessible and replicable for the thousands of job training programs across the country.



About this Initiative

The [What Works Cities Economic Mobility Initiative](#) is a program that aims to help nine participating cities identify, pilot, and measure the success of local strategies designed to accelerate economic mobility for their residents. Through the expertise of the What Works Cities' network of [city leaders](#) and the support of Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Ballmer Group, this initiative puts data and evidence at the center of local government decision-making. The Initiative launched in April 2019, with an 18-month timeline, but was extended to 30 months as a result of COVID-19. In each city, a project was selected in collaboration with the city leaders that met the following five criteria: evidence base, mayoral priority, scalability, feasibility, and stewarding taxpayer resources.

Launched in 2015, [Data for Progress](#) helps local governments use data and evidence to tackle their most pressing challenges and improve residents' lives. Learn more at [dataforprogress.org](#).

City Partners

This project was supported by two key partners: Tulsa Community WorkAdvance (TCW) and the Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity.

