

# ORGANIZER'S GUIDE



## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Working Together for Community  
College Student Success



## **Community Conversations Organizer's Guide: Overview**

### Community Conversations: A Core Public Engagement Strategy

This Organizer's Guide was created by Public Agenda, a national partner of Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count. Achieving the Dream is a national initiative to help more community college students succeed, particularly students of color and low-income students.

Achieving the Dream's mission is to improve results for the nation's community college students. Reaching out to and engaging critical stakeholders within the college campus and in the surrounding community is one important dimension of this work. When done well, public engagement builds understanding, support and new partnerships that can help students meet their goals with greater success.

This Organizer's Guide offers principles, practical guidelines and carefully crafted materials that can help colleges successfully include community dialogue into the mix of their engagement activities. These principles, guidelines and materials are drawn from a number of sources. First, they reflect Public Agenda's 30 years of experience as a public opinion and civic engagement organization. Second, they are a product of the collective wisdom of Achieving the Dream's national partners, including many of the nation's pre-eminent experts on community colleges and social change. Finally, they have benefited from—and will continue to do so in subsequent editions—the many pioneering community colleges that are doing the real work of Achieving the Dream.

We would especially like to thank the community colleges who took part in the pilot engagement project with Public Agenda in 2005-2006, and whose valuable insights and contributions to the development of these materials are greatly appreciated. Thank you very much to the Alamo Community College District in San Antonio, TX; Housatonic Community College in Bridgeport, CT; Jefferson Community College in Steubenville, Ohio; Norwalk Community College, in Norwalk, CT; Tallahassee Community College in Tallahassee, FL, and Valencia Community College in Orlando, FL.

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## SECTION 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO ORGANIZING COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

This section begins by explaining how community conversations can be integrated into your college's Achieving the Dream efforts. It provides an overview of Public Agenda's community conversation model, which has been adapted for the Achieving the Dream initiative. Finally, it describes the outcomes of several past applications of community conversations in a variety of settings.

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### Engaging the Community through Dialogue

Dialogue can be a powerful tool to aid colleges in their community and stakeholder engagement efforts on behalf of their Achieving the Dream work. Of course, it is not the only strategy colleges can employ in this regard, but it is an important approach that can powerfully complement and lead to other engagement strategies and activities, including the following:

- Broad-based advisory committees and task forces.
- College-community partnerships with businesses, libraries, K–12 systems and many other community-based organizations and institutions.
- Policies and practices that promote transparency.
- Focus groups and surveys (which are related to, but not identical with, these dialogue practices).
- Effective, user-friendly communications.
- Community-friendly practices (“customer service” orientation).
- Service learning and other ways in which students and community intersect.
- Creative strategies to bring the community onto the campus and the college population into the community (field trips; art events, cultural festivals and the like; community service programs and events; volunteer programs).

This Organizer's Guide will help community college leaders engage their communities in a powerful way through dynamic, productive community conversations about helping students succeed.

These dialogues can raise awareness about community college activities and issues, open up new lines of communication between the college and community and spawn new ideas, initiatives and partnerships that will help more students succeed.

## Public Agenda's Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda's approach to community dialogue involves several key principles and guidelines that can be applied flexibly to different settings.

Each of these areas is described briefly in the pages that follow and is discussed in detail in various sections of this guide.

### *Local, Nonpartisan Sponsors/Organizers*

Community colleges will be most successful recruiting diverse participants and creating powerful follow-up to community conversations if they enlist the help of other community-based organizations and institutions. A community coalition, in other words, is generally the most effective sponsoring and organizing entity for community conversations.

### *Diverse Participants: Beyond the Usual Suspects*

True community conversations should include a cross section of the community, not just the professional community and a few well-known concerned citizens. Our aim here is to include average citizens as well as experts and professionals and to ensure that all groups and stakeholders are represented and heard from.

### *Dialogue in Small, Diverse Groups with Trained Moderators and Recorders*

A genuine exchange of views can best occur in small diverse groups, with well-trained nonpartisan moderators to facilitate the dialogue and recorders who document the proceedings for effective follow-up.

### *The Power of Choicework*

Public Agenda has developed a Discussion Guide for use by community colleges called "Success Is What Counts: A Community Conversation to Help All Community College Students Achieve." The Discussion Guide is organized around giving people alternative ways of thinking about an issue, or what Public Agenda refers to as "Choicework," an exceptionally effective way of providing citizens with a structure for engaging in an issue with which they may have little experience.

### *Forum Follow-Up*

It is important that these community dialogues be part of a process, one that feeds success for community college students. If they are only single meetings that come and go, with no discernible connection to the life of the college, its students and the community, then they will have been of little value. Thus, a major focus of this guide and of any training that Public Agenda might provide is follow-up and the relationship between community dialogues and action aimed at helping more students succeed.

### *Picturing a Community Conversation*

Each community conversation should be a significant community event. Typically, each will have somewhere between 60 and 120 participants. The session begins with a meal, followed by welcoming remarks by the conversation's sponsors; organizers then divide participants into groups of about 12 to 14 people.

Each group should be as diverse and representative of the community as possible. The small group discussion is designed to take about two hours; the entire forum will take about four hours.

The basic structure of an evening community conversation is as follows:

- ▷ 5:45 – 6:30 Registration, Dinner
- ▷ 6:30 – 6:50 Introduction (large group)  
Welcome, purpose, overview. Brief presentation of key Achieving the Dream data points and instructions for breaking into small groups.
- ▷ 7:00 – 8:50 Small group discussion  
Groups of 12-14, each with a trained moderator, recorder and prepared discussion starter materials
  - 7:00 Overview, introductions, ground rules
  - 7:10 Presentation/discussion of Choicework materials
  - 7:50 Interim Summary on Common Ground, Disagreements, Questions and Concerns
  - 8:00 How can the college and community work together to make headway on tonight's topic
  - 8:30 Prioritize Action Ideas
  - 8:40 Next Steps
  - 8:50 Finish, participants fill out survey
- ▷ 9:00 – 9:20 Closing (large group)  
Recorders share highlights from each group  
Group discusses plans to follow up on the conversation

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## Outcomes of Past Community Conversation Initiatives

Outcomes of community conversations are as varied as the communities and the issues themselves. **In every case, real change is the result of strategic follow-up to community conversations that builds effectively on the momentum and goodwill generated by the dialogues.**

The outcomes for your local college and community will depend on your advance planning for follow-up, the ideas and insights that emerge from the conversations and the ways in which the college, the partner organizations and individual participants take advantage of the process. Following are a few examples of outcomes from past community conversations:

## Community-Level Outcomes

### *The Heritage School, East Harlem, New York City*

This public high school with a focus on the arts held a community conversation about how to boost parental involvement. As a result, parents continued to meet around three themes—communication, supporting students academically and involving the community—to tackle the issue. Other outcomes included hiring a translator for newsletters and events to include the many Spanish-speaking parents in the school; creating art and computer classes for parents who said they wanted to better understand how to help their children; expanding the school-business connection with internships. Additional community forums on a variety of topics were subsequently held.

### *San Jose, California*

Community conversations began in San Jose as a way to help revise the district's strategic plan but became institutionalized as an annual form of community outreach and involvement. Results of initial focus groups and community forums resulted in steeper graduation requirements, annual school report cards and annual "climate reports." A second wave of six neighborhood-based forums attracted an average of 150 participants each. The district has become committed to the process, creating a Department of Public Engagement.

### *Bridgeport, Connecticut*

After an initial community discussion, a coalition of organizers, led by the local education fund, has continued the dialogue at more than 20 schools in the district. Working with district- and school-level officials, the coalition has sponsored school-based discussions on a variety of topics, including parent involvement, school safety and race in education. The coalition eventually plans to reach every school in the urban district in the coming years.

### *Hattiesburg, Mississippi*

As a result of its first community conversation, which was the first education event encompassing all five of the region's districts, several local clergy formed a group to focus on education issues. One of the members now also serves on the board of the local education fund that sponsored the meeting. The education fund applied successfully for a grant to increase parental involvement in math and science education, citing the community conversation experience in the application, and the lead moderator at the forum is chairing the project. School board members from the five districts involved in the original forum have created a meeting structure for the first time. The community has also held subsequent community discussions about the role of race in education.

## Statewide Outcomes

### *Property Tax Reform in New Jersey*

A New Jersey citizens' group called the Coalition for the Public Good organized a major statewide "Citizens' Tax Assembly," a two-day event based on the community conversation model. The Citizens' Tax Assembly brought together almost 100 diverse "delegates" from every county in the state to engage one another in a dialogue on possible approaches to tax reform.

The Coalition for the Public Good produced a report on the assembly and took their recommendations directly to the New Jersey Legislature in a set of special hearings. Later, an additional statewide follow-up assembly was held in which the same delegates reassembled to continue refining their recommendations and to tackle the issues in more detail, and several regional forums have been conducted as well. Currently, the coalition is working to influence the findings of a new task force recently created by the state legislature to consider holding a property tax constitutional convention.

### *Essential Education in Nebraska*

The Nebraska State Board of Education was looking for a way to allow a cross section of residents to weigh in on new recommendations they had developed called "Equitable Opportunities for an Essential Education for All Students—Recommendations for Nebraska Public School Districts." Selected districts across the state facilitated Choicework-type forums with more than 370 parents, students, educators (teachers, principals and superintendents) and members of the general public, overall representing roughly 25 districts.

The state board learned that Nebraskans have an expansive vision of the educational opportunities that should be available to all students and that their views were generally consistent with the board's recommendations. Consequently, the board was able to adopt the new recommendations, confident that they had received real feedback from the people who would be most affected by the new regulations and that the process reflected true consultation with the public.



## SECTION 2: CREATING THE SPONSORING COALITION AND PLANNING TEAM

Section 2 explains the first step in organizing a community conversation initiative—the creation of a Sponsoring Coalition and a Planning Team.

### Part 1: Creating the Sponsoring Coalition

Although your community college is taking a leadership role in this effort, **community conversations work best if they are presented and run by a Sponsoring Coalition of local institutions and organizations.**

Doing so gives the initiative broader reach into the community and communicates that the conversation will be open to multiple interests and viewpoints. It brings a greater variety of skill sets to the proceedings. And wider sponsorship opens up possibilities for long-term partnerships and follow-up.

#### Sponsoring Coalition

##### *What Does the Sponsoring Coalition Do?*

- Publicly sponsors the series of community dialogues.
- Members should balance one another to present a nonpartisan sponsoring umbrella.
- Members should balance one another with respect to skills, knowledge, networks and the like.
- Often includes some active and some passive members—the latter can exist as an advisory council.
- Main responsibilities: Contribute staff and resources to the Planning Team.

#### Who Should Join the Coalition?

The Sponsoring Coalition comprises the community college and several community partners who collectively lend their names and general support to the endeavor. Sponsors host the conversation process and bring to the effort a variety of resources, including contacts, credibility and special skills. **Finally, the Sponsoring Coalition creates and lends people to the Planning Team, which actually makes the conversations happen.**

As a community college, you might consider approaching the following potential partners:

- Local employers (especially those who hire community college graduates) or the Chamber of Commerce.
- The local K–12 public school district and/or local four-year colleges.
- A local chapter of the Urban League, the YMCA, religious institutions, a social service organization and the like.
- Local government officials.
- Respected active citizens.



#### TIP

Use a variety of methods to recruit sponsors, and keep in mind that a personal invitation is often the best.



#### TIP

Think as well about informal “leaders” who may not have a title or an official position but are respected and trusted in their community.



**TIP**

The more diverse and representative the Sponsoring Coalition is, the better the participation at your conversation is likely to be.

**It takes some extra planning up front to bring a good mix of community interests on board, but it is worth the time to make this a true community effort.** It's a good idea to consider some "unlikely" partners: people and organizations of different experiences, backgrounds and maybe political leanings. Co-sponsors do not have to agree on politics or education policy, as long as they agree that community dialogue is an important way to help tackle community challenges. It's critical to think about who will be able to implement the action ideas that emerge from the conversation and to involve them from the beginning.

### Explaining the Initiative to Potential Sponsors

When approaching potential co-sponsors, it's best to be ready with a brief and straightforward "pitch" that explains the purpose of the community conversation and why you are hoping they will want to get involved. Your "talking points" might include the following:

- You are organizing a community conversation about helping community college students succeed.
- It is based on a model of public engagement developed by the organization Public Agenda, which has been used in hundreds of communities. The model is carefully designed to be:
  - ✓ **inclusive**, going beyond the "usual suspects" to include a true cross section of stakeholders and community members.
  - ✓ **productive**, with trained moderators and recorders working with small groups of diverse participants, using carefully prepared discussion materials.
- The conversation is an integral part of the work you are doing through Achieving the Dream to close achievement gaps on your campus. You intend to use the results to refine policy, build support for the college and its students and forge new community relationships and partnerships.
- Explain the community conversation initiative in a way that will make sense to the people you are talking to—in other words, that will relate to their personal background or their organization's mission or goals. Help them see how their involvement in the process can enable them to further the work they are already doing, as well as contribute to the college, its students and the community overall.
- When talking to local employers or the Chamber of Commerce, for example, you can explain how a successful process will lead ultimately to better-prepared potential employees—and that a community that sees its local businesses getting involved in the community's potential as a whole is more likely to support those businesses in the future.

It's important that members of the Sponsoring Coalition understand this isn't a typical public relations event. Make sure they are comfortable with the idea that this is an open dialogue and not about selling predecided solutions.

## ? Frequently Asked Questions about the Sponsoring Coalition

### 1. *What does the Sponsoring Coalition actually do?*

The Sponsoring Coalition is responsible for helping put together the Planning Team; in addition, members lend their names (and the name of their organization) to the event, support the Planning Team (for instance, with publicity and media relations), participate in the conversation and share responsibility for follow up activities.

### 2. *How many member organizations should the Sponsoring Coalition have?*

Usually between three and six active member organizations serve the purposes of (a) creating a nonpartisan umbrella for the initiative, and (b) sharing the labor to keep things manageable. Many more than this can bog down the process, but additional sponsors can be added in the form of a less active “advisory committee.”

## Part 2: Creating the Planning Team

Perhaps the most important task of the Sponsoring Coalition is the creation of the Planning Team, which is responsible for the actual work of organizing the community conversation. Generally, the Planning Team comprises members of the Sponsoring Coalition organizations and individuals recruited to the effort for their specific skills and backgrounds. It should be a diverse group of individuals who are interested in the project and willing to commit the time necessary over the next few months to make it happen. The Planning Team should include people with access to and credibility with various important segments of the local population, including those who are typically uninvolved in or excluded from local decision making.

**Important:** Colleges are sometimes tempted to take on the lion’s share of work themselves, particularly those with a public relations or community relations department. It is very important to create a true team of people from within and outside of the college who will take responsibility for various aspects of the work involved. Both your conversation and your long term possibilities for follow-up work will benefit.

### Planning Team

#### *What Does the Planning Team Do?*

- Usually about 12 members drawn from Sponsoring Coalition and, in many cases, additional members who have been recruited because of their interest, expertise, stature, contacts or resources.
- Makes major strategic decisions, including topic selection and addition of local themes/questions, forum location, media policy and so forth.
- Spearheads communications efforts (in coordination with workgroups) such as developing talking points, promotional materials and media guidelines.
- Creates workgroups to manage the various components, drawing from its ranks and recruiting additional people as needed to get the job done.



#### TIP

It is usually helpful to create an e-mail listserve that includes all the members of the Planning Team, in order to facilitate quick and easy communication. For example, meeting times and locations can be announced via listserve, and planners can post updates, questions and concerns for a group response in between meetings. Each workgroup may want to have its own listserve as well.



**TIP**  
 You may find a rich resource in your alumni, many of whom live nearby and understand firsthand the challenges and experiences of being a community college student. They could be valuable members of your Planning Team as well as participants in the conversation itself.

*Who from the College Should Be on the Planning Team?*

You may have a “community relations officer” of some kind, and it will likely make sense to include that person. Beyond this, whom might you recruit to the initiative? What about students, not just as participants but as members of the Planning Team? What about faculty—full-time and adjuncts? Might any of your trustees enjoy this kind of project? Are there active citizens who have worked with you in the past on community initiatives who might be strong Planning Team members?

It is a helpful practice to designate someone as the primary liaison and coordinator for the Planning Team. And it usually makes sense to divide the responsibilities among five main workgroups (see “Community Conversations Organizers Chart,” next page) so that no one person or organization bears the entire burden. Each workgroup should also have someone play the role of liaison.

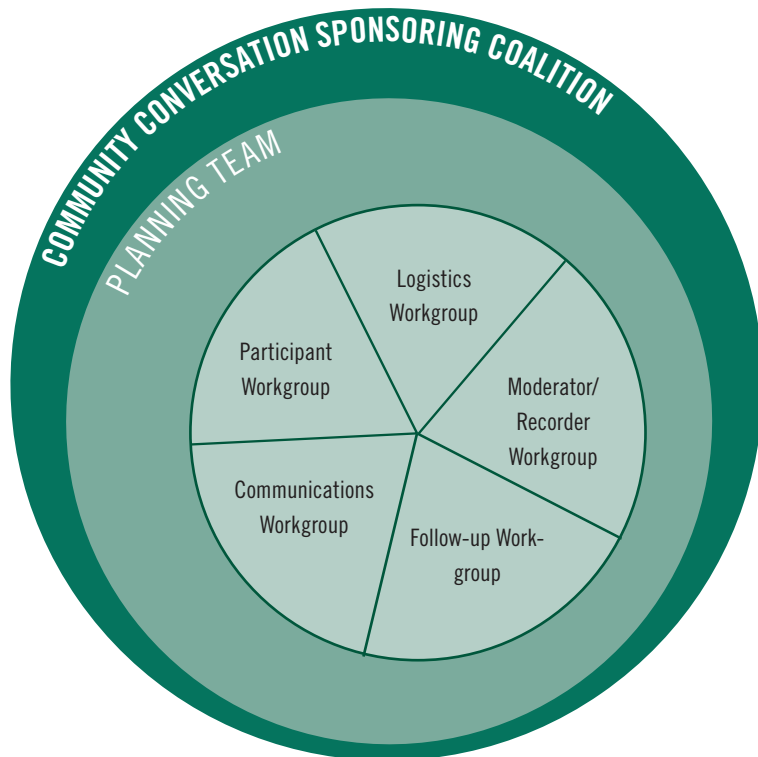
*Recommended Meeting Schedule*

All members of the Planning Team should try to meet regularly—probably once a week—to make sure planning stays on track and to give the workgroups an opportunity to share their progress with the whole group as well as voice questions and concerns. It’s up to the individual workgroups to decide how often they need to meet to keep up momentum.

## Community Conversations

### Organizer's Chart

The following chart summarizes the relationship and responsibilities of the various organizers and workgroups.



#### Logistics Workgroup

- ▷ Handles all pre-event and day-of-event logistics for the community discussion(s), including location, food, equipment, registration (working with Participants workgroup) and so forth.

#### Participants Workgroup

- ▷ Should be composed of diverse members with knowledge of, and standing in, the various sectors of the community you wish to recruit.
- ▷ Develops and implements recruitment plan.

#### Moderator/Recorder Workgroup

- ▷ Recruits and plans training for moderators and recorders.
- ▷ Plans and manages moderating needs for all opening and closing plenary sessions, which should be tightly coordinated with the Logistics workgroup.

#### Communications Workgroup

- ▷ Creates basic communications tools and products.
- ▷ Manages media relations.

### Follow-up Workgroup

- ▷ Ideally, will have community action, community college system and research backgrounds/capabilities.
- ▷ Responsible for preparing action opportunities for participants prior to initial forum (for instance, making people aware of organizations and events relevant to the forum's theme), organizing follow-up task forces that forum participants can join and so forth.
- ▷ Also responsible for creating a postforum summary report and postforum communications with participants.
- ▷ It is strongly recommended that Follow-up workgroup participants be protected from most of the previous organizational "heavy lifting" (yet still be familiar with the nuts and bolts of the proceedings). This will ensure that the members are fresh and ready to go forward with the follow-up as soon as the event is over.

## SECTION 3: STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

This section discusses a number of strategic decisions that the Planning Team needs to grapple with:

- Choosing and customizing the topic.
- Defining “community” for the purposes of this conversation.
- Are you planning a single community conversation or a series?
- Will your community conversation be monolingual or multilingual?
- What can you do to make it possible for everyone who wants to attend to be able to attend?
- Will you invite observers, and if so, whom?
- Will you involve the media, and if so, how?
- Are there critical strategic considerations unique to your situation?

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### Choosing and Customizing Your Topic

A critical task for community conversation organizers is to select and frame the topic for discussion. Included in this tool kit is a discussion framework that Public Agenda has developed and carefully tested called “Success Is What Counts: A Community Conversation to Help All Community College Students Achieve.” It employs a Choicework approach, inviting people to consider several ways to address a particular community concern or need, which is a great way to get the conversation going.

Because this topic has been carefully pretested and is available in video as well as in print format, you may want to start with this discussion module before developing your own. However, it’s up to you to decide whether this topic will work for you.

The major components of small group discussions include the following:

- Overview, introductions, ground rules, watch video.
- Part 1: Choicework dialogue on “Success Is What Counts.” (See appendix 1 to review the print version of the “Success Is What Counts” Choicework discussion framework.)
- Interim summary: common ground, disagreements, questions and concerns.
- Part 2: (as an example) “How can the college and community work together to help all community college students succeed?”—or whatever part 2 question you want to develop.
- Next steps.

### Customizing Your Discussion Guide

The “Success Is What Counts” discussion framework is meant only to get the conversation going, and there is plenty of room to customize the discussion to cover issues that are important to your college and community.

The material can be customized by developing specific “probes” (questions that moderators keep in mind and ask during the small group discussion) that can explore how a larger theme of the discussion relates to a given college’s specific situation and concerns.

An even more powerful way to customize the materials is to design a subsection of the dialogue that addresses the specific concerns of a given college. This is usually done as a “part 2” following initial discussion of the framework.

Examples of part 2 discussion topics for Achieving the Dream colleges:

- “How can the college and the community do a better job of working together to help more students succeed?”
- “How can the college and the K–12 community work together to make sure more students are prepared for college-level work?”
- How can we more fully engage our busy students in their education and help them develop a true love of learning?”
- “Our Town Community College is about to implement a new initiative to help more community college students succeed. We’d like to tell you about it, get your feedback and see if there are ways you’d like to participate.”

In this way, the conversation will combine materials that have been tested in focus groups (that is, the Choicework) with enough customization to make sure each college can adapt the proceedings to best fit its situation and goals. We believe that balancing both these elements (pretested materials and customization) offers the best recipe for successful conversations.

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### Defining “Community” for the Purposes of This Conversation

An important early step in your planning concerns the size and composition of the community you wish to engage.

One question here has to do with the scope of the community you are engaging. Will the conversation be based in a neighborhood around a single college or campus, within a single town, or around a region with several campuses?

Small- and medium-size communities can have successful communitywide forums, although local organizers who begin communitywide often want to follow up with more local, neighborhood-based conversations. In large urban centers, it may make more sense to plan a series of neighborhood-based forums, in order to narrow the scope to a level that average residents can relate to. There is no one way to think about this. Rather, it is something that you should decide for yourselves based on your goals and your knowledge of the local culture.

Another question concerns how you conceive of the community members and stakeholders you wish to include. The Participants workgroup section is concerned primarily with helping you think about whom to invite and how to do so effectively. Please turn to that section for further thoughts and guidelines on this crucial subject.

## Are You Planning a Single Community Conversation or a Series?

A related consideration is whether you want to plan a single conversation and then pause to assess how best to follow-up or, alternatively, arrange a series of conversations from the start.

If you are interested in the series idea, there are a few options to consider. One is to apportion several full-scale conversations over a predetermined period of time. Another is to organize one full-scale conversation and then hold several smaller, “satellite” conversations; this will provide some scale to your effort, allow you to reach specific sectors of the community and keep your workload manageable. (For more information and detail on the question of multiple forums, see section 9 of this guide.)

## Will Your Community Conversation Be Monolingual or Multilingual?

In many cities and towns across the country, non-native English speakers or those with limited to no English are a large and vital part of the community. It is very important to the success and overall credibility of your initiative that you make provisions for involving those community members. This is especially important for Achieving the Dream community conversations if your data analysis has shown that there is an achievement gap between ESL (English as a second language) and other students and you are targeting their achievement as part of your initiative.

While multilingual forums present some challenges, they are not insurmountable.

### Structuring the Conversation to Include Non-English Speakers

To begin with, you will have to decide whether to organize discussion groups by language—in which case you will need to provide a bilingual moderator and recorder (who have participated in the moderator/recorder training)—or have non-English speakers mixed in with the others but provide translators for each small group.

Mixing non-English-speaking and English-speaking participants in the same group offers the greatest diversity. On the other hand, having same-language groups eases the flow of conversation for English and non-English speakers alike. In our experience, local organizers have most often chosen to provide simultaneous translation during the opening and closing plenary sessions and to create one or two non-English-language breakout groups so that non-English speakers can experience a free-flowing dialogue. Whichever approach you choose, make sure

- you have enough translators and bilingual moderators.
- participant materials are translated.
- interpreters are available during the opening and closing plenary sessions, either at the front of the room or at the table with the non-English-speaking residents.

## What Can You Do to Make It Possible for Everyone Who Wants to Attend to Be Able to Attend?

Of course, you'll want the conversation to be held in a well-known, accessible location that people will feel comfortable visiting during whatever time of day the meeting takes place. What else can you do to make it possible for virtually everyone to attend? Can you, for instance, provide some assistance for participants with transportation and/or with child care?

Of course, there are limits to how far organizers can go to make things accessible. Time and money can be factors. Depending on the facility, there may not be appropriate space for child care. But these are questions you will want to think about.



### TIP

If you do include observers, inform your moderators so they'll be ready. Assign observers to specific discussion groups so no one room is overloaded—no more than three or four observers per room is a good rule of thumb. Make sure chairs are set up for observers outside the circle of participants. It is also important to brief observers about what's expected of them—that they are invited as distinguished guests and are asked to observe and not participate (explain why) during the small group discussion.

## Will You Invite Observers, and If So, Whom?

Observers might be education or community leaders such as K–12 superintendents, college presidents and other senior members of the college's administration; town council members; mayors; and others who will attend the discussion groups to listen and observe the proceedings but not participate actively.

This is not to say that such people should necessarily be observers rather than regular participants; rather, it is an option that might be preferable for you or for them. In some instances, a controversial public figure could become a distraction if the group focuses more on that person than on the issue under discussion, and it may be best for that person not to be present. In other cases, public figures have felt comfortable staying in the background and just listening. Authorities and leaders rarely get to hear from a broad cross section of the community in great depth. In still other cases, local leaders have participated effectively in the discussions and everyone seemed perfectly comfortable with it.

You might consider asking one of the observers to speak briefly at the closing plenary session, sharing his or her perceptions of the session. And you should definitely plan to meet with observers after the event and include them in your plans for follow-up.

## Will You Involve the Media, and If So, How?

Occasionally, a local media outlet has acted as a co-sponsor of a community conversation and is therefore part of things from the beginning. But more typically, organizers need to decide if they want to involve the media and how. Also, you must be prepared to respond to the media if they become interested in your project.

In general, media coverage of community conversations has been very positive, so unless there are specific reasons to assume the media will be hostile, you do not need to be overly anxious about bad press.

The most important issue related to the media is how to protect the quality of the conversations. Participants who see the press in attendance may feel less comfortable expressing themselves or advocating a position. One way to handle this is with a simple ground rule that reporters usually agree to abide by:

*Reporters may report what they hear, but they may not attribute quotes to individuals unless they speak to that person following the meeting and the person agrees to be quoted.*

If the media are present under these conditions, the moderator should inform the group at the outset. The same ground rules that you lay out for reporters can also be applied to “bloggers,” should you have any who wish to attend and blog the discussion, either during or after the event.

### TIP

Be ready for press inquiries that might come your way. Consider preparing a brief, clear statement or series of talking points about the purpose of the forums, the sponsors and organizers, when and where they’ll occur and so forth. This fact sheet can then be distributed to all those on the Planning Team likely to encounter the press and adapted to different venues (such as flyers, announcements and the like).

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. How do we get media coverage for our community conversation?

- Alert the media about the conversation through a press release or media advisory.
- If you decide, you can also invite reporters to cover the conversation itself.
- Ask a member or members of the Sponsoring Coalition to write an opinion piece for the local newspaper calling attention to the issue and the upcoming conversation.

### 2. What if a news article isn’t accurate or gives the wrong impression?

- Make every effort to provide reporters with the most accurate, up-to-date information possible, and try not to have too many people in contact with reporters. In fact, you might think about designating a “spokesperson,” someone who will be the main point of contact with the media.
- Nevertheless, mistakes do happen. If one does, be sure to call the reporter or editor and ask to have the misinformation corrected. Even if the paper doesn’t publish a correction, it will hopefully not repeat the mistake in any future stories.

### TIP

Occasionally, a reporter or member of the media may show up unannounced to the community conversation. Make sure you prepare the moderators for this possibility and let them know that if this happens, they should explain the ground rules to the reporter and secure an agreement to abide by them; also make sure there are no objections within the small discussion group itself.

## Are There Critical Strategic Considerations Unique to Your Situation?

The strategic questions and considerations we've discussed so far are almost always important themes for Planning Team discussion, regardless of the college or community. But your institution or community may be subject to unique dynamics that you should be aware of and prepare for.

For example:

- Are there hot button issues on campus or in the community that are liable to emerge? If so, how can you prepare for them?
- Is it election season, and if so, is that a factor to take into account?
- Are there racial or other social tensions in the community or on campus that should be thought through?
- What is the perception of the college in the community? Are there any particularly challenging community leaders or groups that will need special attention?
- Are there any special opportunities that the community conversation could help you take advantage of? For instance, perhaps a new community foundation has formed or a new school board has been elected. Including such stakeholders as co-sponsors could be a good way to build new relationships.

## SECTION 4: PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Section 4 provides an overview and timelines for many of the practical, nitty-gritty tasks that must be accomplished, from drawing up a budget to recruiting and training moderators. While many of these will be handled by one of the workgroups, it's a good idea for everyone on the Planning Team to understand the entire process.

### Budget and Funding

The following list may help you create a budget for the forum(s). Many communities have received in-kind donations from community organizations or local businesses for some of these items, such as space, food or printing expenses. You should designate one or two individuals from the Planning Team to develop an overall budget as well as budgets for each workgroup.

<b>COMMUNITY CONVERSATION BUDGET CHART</b>		
Item	Estimated Cost	Notes
<i>Mailing/Printing Costs</i> postage, stationery, invitations, copying, etc.		
<i>Food</i> For meetings and conversation		
<i>Conversation Materials</i> Copies of the Participant Guide and additional materials, copies of the Moderator/Recorder Guide, etc.		
<i>Space</i> If needed		
<i>Other:</i>		
TOTAL ESTIMATED BUDGET: \$_____		

## List of Planning Tasks

This list should help you get started—add to it as needed. Tasks are presented in roughly the order in which they should be addressed. Detailed information on these tasks and other practical considerations are included in the sections in this guide relating to the five workgroups.

- Choose a date(s) for the community conversation(s).
- Choose/customize topic.
- Decide on the scope of the community (neighborhood, town, regional, etc.).
- Select the conversation site(s) and make arrangements for food and equipment.
- Recruit people to serve as moderators and recorders.
- Develop a list of potential participants and observers.
- About four to six weeks before the conversation, invite participants and observers. Ask them to respond at least two weeks before the date of the event.
- As the date nears, follow up written or e-mailed invitations with telephone calls to all participants, especially those who may be difficult to involve, ensuring participation of a diverse cross section of stakeholders.
- Assign confirmed participants to small discussion groups so each group represents the diversity of the total.
- Determine if media coverage is desired, and if so, develop a communications and media outreach plan.
- If possible, provide copies of the Participant Guide to confirmed attendees before the conversation(s), but plan to have them available at the forum.
- Conduct moderator training two to five days before the forum.
- Follow up on the community conversation in a variety of ways.
- Other:

## Planning Team Timeline

You should start planning and working on your community conversation at least two months in advance, preferably three. This sample timeline is meant as a rough guide to help you schedule your planning activities.

### *Ten weeks before the forum*

- Solidify sponsors, get Planning Team in place
- Define community, choose forum topic
- Decide on media and observer policy
- Create workgroups for the various planning responsibilities (logistics, participants, moderators/recorders, communications, follow-up)
- Workgroups begin their tasks

### *Eight weeks before the forum*

- Planning Team meets as needed to coordinate and monitor progress of subcommittees

### *Six weeks before the forum*

- Mail invitations to participants and observers (roughly four to six weeks before forum)
- Recruit moderators/recorders
- Confirm logistics: location, food, equipment

### *Three to four weeks before the forum*

- Additional participant recruiting to assure a diverse participant group, as needed
- Planning Team meets as needed
- Begin initial contact with media (optional)

### *Ten days to one week before the forum*

- Moderator/recorder training session held
- Follow-up/reminder phone calls to participants
- Additional participant recruiting to fill in weak spots, as needed
- Continue follow-up with media (optional)
- Finalize equipment, food, logistical needs
- Plenary and closing session plans in place (who will welcome, handle questions about follow-up and so on)

### *Day of forum*

- Hold community conversation
- Debrief next day with moderators and organizers

### *One to two weeks after the forum, Follow-up workgroup meets*

- Creates summary report, compiles questionnaire results, creates recommendations memo and presents to Planning Team for approval
- Mails letter to participants, shares report with appropriate parties, media and the like
- Reviews additional next steps as determined by Planning Team, such as discussion of plans for next forum (if appropriate)



## SECTION 5: LOGISTICS WORKGROUP

Sections 5-9 are devoted to the workgroups that the Planning Team should form to make sure there are people responsible for the various tasks that need attention. This section deals with the Logistics workgroup, which handles the “nuts and bolts” tasks of organizing the community conversation, such as

- selecting a location for the community conversation.
- coordinating the meal and meal-related needs.
- ensuring that all necessary equipment is arranged and in place on the day of the event.
- day-of-event coordination, including
  - o registration of participants.
  - o making sure all equipment is in place for plenary and small group meetings.
  - o providing general support and troubleshooting to other workgroups.

### Selecting a Location for the Conversation(s)

The conversation can probably be held at the college itself unless there’s a good reason to hold it somewhere else. You’re looking for a location that is welcoming, not particularly controversial and relatively easy to find and travel to. Additionally, the location must be able to handle the space needs of a broad-based community conversation, with

- a dining area for up to 100 to 125 participants.
- a large room (can be the same as the dining area or different) for the opening and closing plenary sessions.
- breakout group rooms that are easily and quickly accessible and can accommodate about 12 to 18 persons each. Such rooms must be able to have seating arranged in a circle or semicircle.
- enough restrooms in the building for all attendees.
- appropriate space and personnel if child care is to be provided.

### Providing Meals

Offering a meal before the conversation begins is a great way to set a relaxed and friendly tone and carries symbolic weight as people who may be on different sides of an issue or from different parts of town break bread together. You may be able to find local merchants or civic groups willing to donate food or utensils or volunteers who will offer to serve or clean up.

We have also seen some colleges use students and faculty from the culinary arts department to prepare and serve the meal. This is a great way to involve students in the process and to show off their skills to the community.



#### TIP

At a community conversation held at a school in East Harlem, New York, the school’s Latin jazz band played several songs during dinner.

## Equipment Checklist for Community Conversation

Very little special equipment is needed for a typical community conversation. The following checklist, however, will help you plan for what you do need.

### *Registration*

- Long rectangular table and chairs for staff
- Registration or check-in sheets to track who has arrived
- Blank sheets for walk-ins to jot down contact information
- Name tags for participants, name tags for staff, pens, markers and so on
- Other

### *Dining area*

- Tables for serving food
- Tables and chairs for eating
- Plates, forks, knives, napkins, garbage cans and so forth
- Other

### *Central discussion room (may also be used for one of the small group discussions)*

- Podium and microphone
- Flip chart, markers, masking tape (or self-stick flip chart)
- Optional: Seating, if more than one speaker
- Optional: PowerPoint set up, if a brief presentation is to be made at opening and/or closing plenary sessions
- Other

### *Breakout rooms*

- Printed participant materials
- TV monitor and VCR if using video discussion starter
- Flip chart, markers, masking tape (or self-stick flip chart)
- Movable chairs set up in a circle, semicircle or horseshoe
- Other



#### **TIP**

Make sure someone is present to troubleshoot any audiovisual equipment you will be using.

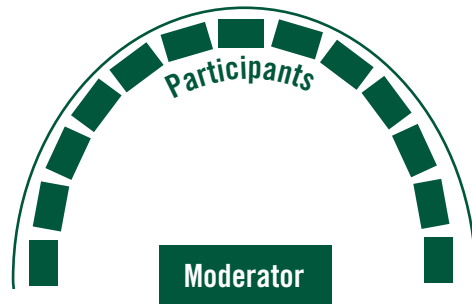
## Day-of-Event Coordination

### *Main Room and Breakout Rooms*

The first and most basic responsibility is to check that the plenary room setup is adequate, with enough seats for the expected crowd to see and hear everything and microphones and audiovisual equipment as needed.

Although the Moderator/Recorder workgroup should be checking to make sure everything is in place in the breakout rooms, you may want to coordinate with its members to make sure everyone knows who is bringing what to the event. Make sure all audio/video equipment is working and that each room has a flip chart and pens.

The rooms should ideally be set up in a horseshoe or semi-circle shape. (Each location is different of course, but you should try to get as close to this as you can.)



### *Registration*

A registration table should be set up where participants enter the building. At the table, they should receive a Participant Guide and name tag indicating their small group assignment. Make sure there are friendly and enthusiastic people at the registration table able to answer basic questions about the community conversation. And someone should inform participants where the meal is taking place.

A task that the Logistics workgroup and the Participants workgroup can share is assigning preregistered participants among the breakout groups.

Occasionally, people complain that they are not in the same group as their friend or spouse. Explain to them that the purpose of the conversation is to listen to and learn from people they might not normally interact with and that the conversations are usually richer when this is the case. But if they insist, it's fine to accommodate them.

Members of the Logistics workgroup can help on the day of the event by troubleshooting as needed.



### TIP

**A note on walk-ins:** It's always possible that you'll have some people who are not preregistered (and thus assigned to a specific group) but wish to participate. Assuming you are not approaching your location's maximum capacity, the best way to handle walk-ins is to distribute them randomly among the small discussion groups.



## SECTION 6: PARTICIPANTS WORKGROUP

Part 1 of section 6 will help you think about whom to invite and how best to go about inviting them. You will also find some suggestions on how to include and welcome community members who don't speak English.

Part 2 explains the material you will need to provide participants at the event. A sample Participant Guide and Participant Survey are included.

### Part 1: Whom to Invite and How to Gain Participation

#### Whom to Invite

We recommend an invitational, or mostly invitational, community discussion. Why? In our experience, extending a personal invitation is the best way to ensure the most representative and diverse group possible. An invitation that is extended by someone who is a friend, a respected local leader or another trustworthy source is far more likely to engender a positive response than a general announcement viewed on a bulletin board or in a newspaper. The diversity generated from well-thought-out and targeted invitations is also helpful in preventing “single issue” advocates or the most strident voices from dominating the proceedings.

Achieving the Dream conversation participants should include a wide cross section of the community's general public along with students, faculty, administrators, community leaders and any and all “voices” and stakeholders who would want to be represented and/or have important roles to play in the success of the college and its students. This is a good place to make use of your alumni—get them involved!

*We recommend you consider recruiting the following:*

- The general public, aiming for a demographic spread that roughly reflects the overall community.
- Parents/guardians and spouses of community college students.
- Current community college students and alumni.
- Four-year college students (recent high school graduates, transfer students and the like).
- Community college faculty and administrators.
- K–12 educators/school administrators/guidance counselors.
- Four-year college administrators, guidance counselors and/or faculty, if there are any nearby.
- Local employers, especially those who might be in a position to hire young people from the community.
- Community leaders, such as
  - o local government officials.
  - o community-based organizational leaders, particularly those in workforce development programs and who serve low-income communities and/or populations of color.



#### TIP

Sending out personalized invitations and making phone calls help you target your prospective participants, and open the group to more than just the “usual suspects”—that is, those people who show up at every public meeting on your issue.



#### TIP

Ask your Sponsoring Coalition to provide you with names and contact information for people they would like to invite. Send those people letters inviting them on behalf of the organization who suggested them.

- o religious leaders.
- o civic leaders, such as the League of Women Voters.
- o others: \_\_\_\_\_.
- Local employers, especially those who might be in a position to hire young people from the community.
- High school students (11th and 12th graders only, as younger students have a more difficult time participating in a group of adults).
- Others: \_\_\_\_\_.



**TIP**

Extra-special effort should be made to include members of the communities of the students you are focused on through your Achieving the Dream work.

Guidelines for Successful Recruiting

- Make special efforts to reach out to people who tend to be **uninvolved** and who represent the **diversity** (ethnically, economically, politically) of the community.
- **Over-recruit** those participants least likely to come. For example, you should probably not over-recruit full-time faculty, but you might want to over-recruit adjunct faculty and non-English-speaking members of the community.
- Consider involving **students** through appropriate classes. For instance, a political science or education professor might offer class credit if his or her students get involved in the community conversation as organizers or participants.
- Even though this section is organized around groups that should be represented, each person should be **invited as an individual**, bringing his or her own points of view, rather than purely as a representative of a group.
- Invitations should come from **personal contact by credible sources** within subcommunities. A respected senior citizen is often an effective person to invite other senior citizens to attend, and a student will often be the best person to invite other students.
- In addition to personal outreach, it is a good idea to send **written invitations**. This helps people feel they are being included in something special.
- Communicate that the meeting is **different**—more interesting, engaging and welcoming than most public forums or meetings.
- Also communicate that the meeting **matters**, which may mean talking about why it is so important to improve results for local community college students and that the sponsors and organizers are going to use the results to improve policies and support new initiatives to help community college students succeed.
- Setting up a web site about the conversation is a good idea. Many colleges found this as an easy way for participants to RSVP for the event.
- **Track progress** as you go, and make adjustments to hit your recruitment targets.
- Send a **confirmation letter or e-mail** to participants to confirm their attendance. The letter should reinforce the time and place of the conversation and should also include clear directions to the location as well as instructions regarding child care provision (if applicable).

## Recruiting Non-English Speakers

One of the first questions organizers should ask when they begin to recruit participants is whether there are non-English-speaking populations within the community that ought to be represented, and if so, how best to include them in the discussions. (See section 3 for more detail on multilingual conversations.) Invitations and the Participant Guide, for instance, should often be translated into your community's dominant second language, whether it's Spanish, Chinese, Creole or something else. (This tool kit does contain some materials in Spanish.)

Moreover, it makes sense to have as a member of your sponsoring and/or organizing committees someone with ties to the non-English-dominant community you are interested in, someone who can inform the planning process and help with grassroots outreach to recruit people to the upcoming conversation(s). Such personal outreach is important to successful recruitment in general, but it is critical here. The more welcome you make people feel, beginning with the invitation, the more likely they are to attend. This means, for example, phone calls to potential Latino participants by a Spanish speaker.



### TIP

When potential participants hear about the community conversation frequently and in myriad contexts, they will be more likely to participate. Generating a “buzz” through the media will help with this and can be even more powerful when it's supported by word of mouth, flyers and advertisements.

Sample Participant Recruitment Grid

<b>Organizer:</b> _____					
<b>Responsible for categories:</b> _____					
Category	Target #	# Invited	# Accepted	# Still Needed	Notes
Alumni					
Students					
Latino community members					
Etc.					

**? Frequently Asked Questions**

*1. What happens if we are not getting enough representation from some important groups that should be at the forum?*

Track progress, increase invitees and try new strategies. Ask those who have agreed to attend to bring a friend from that community. Think about why you are having trouble attracting those individuals—what is keeping them from attending? Then try to address those obstacles directly. Think about targeted media (radio/press) ads.

*2. We've posted advertisements in the newspaper and sent out letters. How else can we reach people?*

Try to get people where they socialize—for example, at neighborhood clubs, shops, churches, sports leagues, hair salons and community centers. Perhaps someone from your workgroup can distribute flyers at these locations and remain there to answer questions about the process.

## Part 2: Participant Materials

### The Participant Guide

Appendix 1 contains the text of the “Success Is What Counts” Participant Guide, which we also provide you as a separate Participant Guide. To customize your Participant Guide, you can simply place a cover page and introduction over the guide that is provided; alternatively, you may prefer to create something more elaborate.

The cover can be as simple or elaborate as you wish and as resources allow; in the past, groups have added their logo, the title, time and place of the event, a list of sponsors and so on. You may want to add (here or in accompanying materials) a brief introduction about the college, a note about the Achieving the Dream initiative, a few well-chosen data points about your students and a statement about your commitment to acting on the results of the conversation.

### The Participant Survey

In addition, all participants should complete a Participant Survey before they leave. These are completed at the end of the closing plenary sessions. Data from the surveys allow you to assess the event and plan for future community discussions. See Appendix 2 for a sample Participant Survey.

### Foreign Language Materials

If you have decided to hold a bilingual forum, you will need to coordinate the production and distribution of a translated Participant Guide. Public Agenda has copies available in Spanish of the print and video versions of the “Success Is What Counts” discussion materials as well as the Participant Survey and Moderator/Recorder Guide.

### Other Materials

Other materials you might consider including in a packet for participants are an agenda to the event and the names of sponsors, organizers and moderators. However, we suggest keeping these packets relatively clutter-free or some people may feel overwhelmed.



## SECTION 7: MODERATOR/RECORDER WORKGROUP

Part 1 of this section will help you understand how to select, train and support the moderators and recorders for each of the breakout groups.

Part 2 discusses the role of the “host,” or master of ceremonies, who will lead the opening and closing plenary sessions at the event itself.

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### Part 1: Managing Moderators and Recorders for the Breakout Groups

#### Recruiting Moderators

**We can’t stress enough how important it is to focus on recruiting good Moderators (and Recorders). Moderators play a key role in the community conversations and have a very large impact on the experience.** We have occasionally encountered people with a great deal of facilitating experience who do poorly in this type of setting and those with no experience who do very well. Thus, while the following guidelines can help you to select moderator trainees, the most important qualifications—“people skills,” the ability to think on one’s feet and a real interest in supporting an open, inclusive dialogue—should be kept in mind regardless of a candidate’s background on paper or other “political” considerations.

Depending on how many moderators you will need for your event (1 each per small group of 12 to 14 people), you should recruit a few extra people who are willing to attend the training and the event as alternates. It’s always possible that you will have an influx of walk-ins and will need to form an extra discussion group, or someone may have a last minute family conflict or emergency and won’t be available to moderate on the day of the conversation. Also, as you may plan to hold more than one conversation, you will want to have enough trained local moderators who can serve in those future conversations. Finally, some people prefer to co-moderate or co-record, so you can double these functions in a couple of instances if you wish.

You will need moderators with the following skills, knowledge and background:

- Group facilitation skills/experience, especially in working with diverse groups and with the general public (as opposed to working only with professionals).
- Ability to create an environment in which it is safe and comfortable for people to express their views.
- Ability to help participants articulate the reasoning, experiences and values supporting their positions.
- Ability to play devil’s advocate and challenge people (in a friendly, civil way, of course) to consider alternate viewpoints.
- Comfort with and ability to manage group conflict.
- Ability to take a nonpartisan moderating stance.
- Nonpartisan credibility. Some people may be able to moderate in a nonpartisan manner but, because of past associations, will not be viewed in that light by members of the group.

- Some general familiarity with community college and education reform debates, although expertise is not required. This attribute is less important than the others.
- Some diversity. Ideally, the moderator team overall will roughly reflect the demographics of the community, so it is often a plus to have some diversity of race, ethnicity, gender and the like among the moderators.

Moderators have been drawn from the following backgrounds:

- Businesspeople, including trainers and consultants.
- Social workers and others in community service.
- Qualitative researchers.
- Therapists and counselors.
- Mediators and people trained in conflict resolution.
- Educators, including those in higher education (although faculty and administrators from the community college should not moderate unless they are comfortable with criticism and can stay nonpartisan and open to all views).
- Clergy, including pastoral counselors.

### Recruiting Recorders

The recorders also play a crucial role and should be carefully selected and trained. Recorders must be able to quickly summarize the main points in the discussion and write them legibly enough for all to see. Like the moderators, they must also be nonpartisan, trusted to record all ideas, not just those they agree with.

Ideally, recorders will attend the moderator/recorder training session. **If recorders are not able to attend, they should be fully briefed and should meet with their moderators prior to the community conversation to clarify roles and tasks, create a sense of teamwork and avoid last minute confusion.**

If a recorder is unable to attend the moderator/recorder training, it is important that he or she be supplied with a guide and be fully briefed on the following:

- The purpose of the community conversation.
- The structure of the meeting and the recorder's role.
- Exactly what recorders are expected to do at each phase of the session.

## Organizing the Moderator/Recorder Training

It is important that anyone who serves as a moderator or recorder for the community conversation attend the training session. This is critical for moderators. If a recorder is unable to attend, that person can be carefully briefed later on.<sup>1</sup> Let them know why they are being asked to serve as a Moderator or Recorder and what the community conversation is all about.

The training should take place three to seven days prior to the conversation. This will allow enough time for the training to “sink in” and for moderators/recorders to familiarize themselves with the procedures and guide, but not so much time that the information is no longer fresh.

The training is usually scheduled from 8:00 to 2:00 or 9:00 to 3:00, with a short lunch break. We strongly advise you to schedule trainings during the day, rather than after work or on Friday afternoons. There is a lot of material to practice and absorb, and it is very hard for trainees to focus after a full day of work. You’ll likely get some push back when you tell people the training takes about five hours, but stand firm! In the end, this much time is needed to make sure they are confident and well prepared. You’ll need a room that can accommodate a trainer, the moderators/recorders to be trained and any observers who might wish to attend. The room should be set up to resemble a breakout room at the actual community conversation. Chairs should be arranged in a circle, semicircle or horseshoe. If you have more than 20 or so people attending, you may need two rooms.

You will also need the following:

- Two flip charts with paper and pens.
- VCR setup with TV.
- Moderator/Recorder Guide and any additional handouts you wish to provide.
- Lunch and refreshments.



### TIP

Before the training, be sure to supply moderators and recorders with the Moderator/Recorder Guide as well as any background material on the session that you think will be useful. For example, a succinct background on the college, Achieving the Dream and a few key data points on student achievement will probably be helpful. But resist the temptation to “data dump”; that will only distract them from the task at hand—learning to facilitate the breakout dialogue groups.

1. Public Agenda typically provides this training as part of an overall package of technical assistance.

## Coordinating the Moderators and Recorders at the Conversation

In addition to recruiting and setting up the moderator training, the Moderator/Recorder workgroup should ensure that all moderating/recording essentials are in place at the event, including the following:

- ✓ Extra copies of the Moderator/Recorder Guide.
- ✓ Adequately sized breakout rooms, with enough seats properly configured (in circle, semicircle or horseshoe shape, not classroom style).
- ✓ Extra discussion starter materials, including copies of the Participant Guide, any handouts or posters that might be employed as conversation aids and, when appropriate, videotapes or other audiovisual materials.
- ✓ VCR/TV setups if using video discussion starters.
- ✓ Flip charts, markers, masking tape (self-sticking flip charts are ideal).
- ✓ Other: \_\_\_\_\_.

*See Appendix 3 for a basic version of the Moderator/Recorder Guide for the “Success Is What Counts” discussion framework. Public Agenda can also provide you with a Spanish-language version of the guide.*

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## Part 2: Managing the Opening and Closing Plenary Sessions and the Role of the Community Conversation “Host”

The community conversation opens and closes with plenary (whole group) sessions that sandwich the breakout dialogue groups. Each plenary session is about a half hour in length.

The opening plenary session is devoted to welcoming participants, giving them an overview of the proceedings, providing them with basic information and background and offering some words of encouragement. You might consider asking a current or former student to make a few remarks to set the tone.

The closing plenary session is for brief, efficient reports from each breakout group, information on follow-up activities, thanking participants and making sure participant surveys are filled out.

While numerous people may be involved in making remarks at the opening and closing plenary sessions, it’s a good idea to have a master of ceremonies, or “host,” as the main facilitator. The host is often a lead member of one of the sponsoring organizations, a lead member of the Planning Team or a prominent member of the community who is good at this kind of thing. Try to choose someone charismatic and energizing.

A detailed Host Guide providing guidelines to managing the opening and closing plenary sessions may be found in Appendix 4.

## SECTION 8: COMMUNICATIONS WORKGROUP

This section will focus on the external relations tasks the Communications Workgroup will need to accomplish.

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### Communications & External Relations

Your Planning Team as a whole will have decided how much focus you want to place on media relations and other kinds of communications. At the very least, you'll need to develop some basic pieces that you can use in a number of ways.<sup>2</sup>

There are three fundamental communications tools you will find useful:

- A set of talking points to help you explain the initiative.
- A flyer that explains the purpose of the community conversations and gives basic information, such as when and where it will take place.
- A “pitch letter” to explain the event to potential partners and allies.

You can build on these to create more materials as needed.

The talking points should convey factual information about the conversation as well as the intent behind it. These should be distributed to everyone on the planning and sponsoring teams, to help them talk about the event.

A basic flyer should provide a succinct, visually appealing presentation of the event that you can use to generate interest and “buzz” as well as recruit participants.

Finally, a pitch letter should contain everything in your talking points, but in a more personal manner. Depending on its recipient, the letter should be tailored to focus on why you think whoever is receiving the letter should be interested in participating, donating food, observing the conversation and so forth.

You can also consider creative ideas to get messages across, such as the use of T-shirts, bumper stickers, coffee mugs and ads on local restaurant menus.

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2. KSA-Plus has developed various communications materials for the Achieving the Dream initiative that may be helpful to you as you develop materials for community engagement.

### Online Communications

You may want to consider if there are ways to use a community Web site, perhaps that of the community college, to create an interactive means of communication about the conversation and its aftermath.

### The Media

Media relations were covered as one of the strategic considerations discussed under section 3, and members of this workgroup should review that discussion. It will be your job to implement any decisions by the Planning Team as to media relations.

## SECTION 9: FOLLOW UP WORKGROUP

In our experience, almost everyone who attends well-organized, well-run community conversations comes away feeling that the experience was exciting, refreshing and extremely valuable. The vast majority feel that there was not enough time and that more people ought to be involved in the dialogue, and everyone wants to see the conversations lead to real results in their community.

These are major strategic questions that the Planning Team overall needs to address. The job of the Follow-up workgroup is to make sure that ideas on follow-up are considered from the beginning and to implement the follow-up plan as it develops. As noted earlier, we recommend that at least some members of this workgroup be “protected” from the nuts-and-bolts tasks of putting on the first community conversation, so that they can save their energy to ensure effective and robust follow-up.

Section 9 offers guidelines for follow-up, organized around two main areas:

- Linking community dialogue to meaningful action by the college and the community.
- Expanding and institutionalizing the dialogue process.

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### Linking Community Dialogue to Meaningful Action by the College and the Community

Some practitioners of dialogue believe that it should not be used as a problem-solving exercise—that doing so exacerbates power dynamics and the immediate stakes of the conversation, jeopardizing an honest, insightful, self-reflective exchange of values and ideas. Other, more action-oriented and pragmatic types believe words alone are meaningless and tend to view a detailed action plan as the sign of a successful meeting.

Public Agenda has staked out a middle ground on this question. We suggest that community dialogue is best used to promote mutual understanding and communication about a shared problem and to identify general ideas and directions for solutions. Thus, the dialogue builds a solid foundation for action, but detailed action planning is best handled in a follow-up stage.

**In practice, this means that community sponsors and organizers should think early on about how to create the conditions for effective follow-up to their forums.** At the very least, they are advised to:

- Provide a summary report to all participants.
- Report results to decision makers and, when possible, convey decision maker response(s) back to participants.
- Disseminate the results in other ways, such as online and through media channels.
- Suggest ways that participants who are so inspired can stay involved, such as joining organizations dedicated to some aspect of the topic at hand and helping with future community conversations.
- Pick at least one issue or problem raised during the conversation to address concretely and specifically in your follow-up. This could be something you are already working on or something new. Let participants know you will be addressing the issue/concern and invite them to help, if appropriate.

Beyond these basic steps, organizers can consider the following:

- **Creating action task forces** to plan and promote specific policies or new initiatives based on important directions for action that emerged from the community conversation.
  - o For instance, the idea of creating a closer partnership among the college, the K–12 system and a community-based organization may have emerged as a hot idea in the conversation. A task force could be formed to create an action plan with representatives from each of those institutions plus volunteers from the community conversation. Or perhaps the idea emerged of creating a community foundation to support special initiatives to provide support for low-income community college students. A task force or study group could be formed devoted to researching and promoting such an initiative.
- **Continuing and expanding** the dialogue that was begun in the community conversation on the Internet or through a newsletter.
- **Providing needed information:** One category of outcome produced by this community conversation process is to identify questions people have, areas where they want more information. For instance, they may have questions about college policy or practice, how the college is funded, what student achievement data says or how other colleges have solved certain problems. There are often items here that are easy to respond to, and the college and organizers should do so after a community conversation—it is an important sign of good faith on the part of the organizers and shows participants that someone is addressing their questions.
- **Convening a leadership session** to react to some of the results of the deliberations. For instance, a college leadership team and/or trustees board could meet following community conversations and issue a response, and/or a meeting of community leaders could do the same.

- **Conducting a focus group** to better understand some of the areas of disagreement that were identified at the meeting and how you might help people work through them. This can lead to new ideas for future forums and other kinds of community action.
- **Taking advantage** of the fact that many people simply want to help in any way they can after a community conversation and may be open to volunteering or raising money for the college and its students. It is important to capitalize on this energy and motivation as quickly as possible—after all, most of us lead busy lives, and good intentions are easily “overtaken” by the events of daily life.
- And so on. There is, of course, no single right way to do this. The question is, what would be a good approach for your college, community partners and community?

### Expanding and Institutionalizing the Dialogue Process

Whether you planned a single community conversation or a series (see section 3, “Strategic Considerations”), as you reach the end point of a phase of dialogue work, you’ll want to think about how and when to use dialogue in the future. Following are some of the questions you’ll want to think about.

#### What Should the Second Series Be About?

You might hold a second round to delve further into a specific issue identified by participants as important. This was the case in a New York City K–12 forum where the original topic was standards: Subsequent discussions were held on parental and community involvement.

Even if you have convened small workgroups designed to get more specific about areas of common ground and action ideas, people still often want to

- work through important areas of disagreement that were identified. These issues may not have been resolved in the original series. (Note that sometimes important disagreements among participants need to be worked out. At other times there may be a disagreement between the participants and some college policy.)
- reconsider some facet of the conversation once a crucial piece of missing information is obtained that people said they needed.

Remember, it makes sense to hold a forum only on a topic about which people feel a sense of urgency and where there are important community issues to work out. What did you learn about this from your first series of community conversations?

Remember as well that Public Agenda has discussion frameworks prepared on various education issues that could be useful to you in your follow-up work. If you choose a topic other than ones we have materials prepared for, you’ll have to develop a way to frame the conver-

sation and get the discussion started. This is something you might try to do yourselves, or you might want to see if you can get some outside help. For example, Public Agenda offers a one-day workshop on framing issues for public discussion.

Keep in mind:

**Choose a topic** that is of strong interest to both the community and the college.

One way to get at this is to make a list of discussion topics that relate to issues on the college's agenda. Then make a list of the topics that relate to the concerns of average parents, students and community members. The overlap between the two lists is a good place to look for first conversation topics—if you choose a topic that is of strong interest to both the college and the community, more people will be motivated to engage in the process.

**Choose an issue** where public input and involvement can make a real difference.

For instance, if a new statewide policy will be affecting community college funding the day after your forum, it may not make sense to use that topic, as the discussion could immediately become outdated. On the other hand, if the college is in the process of developing new plans for creating a more diverse faculty, then public input and involvement can have very direct payoffs.

Remember that it's possible to customize the topic somewhat to take local issues into account.

Specific probes and questions can be built into the moderator and participant materials to help people engage in themes that may not be in the video.

### *Who Should Attend?*

Do you want to delve deeper with the original participants, expand to new participants or try to combine new people and veterans? It can be tricky to hold a second forum on the same topic with both veterans and new participants. It's not impossible—you can, for example, keep the veterans in their own discussion groups—but it does add a layer of complexity.

### *Where Should It Be Held?*

This question is especially important for regional meetings, but it can be worth a little thought with respect to any site. Were the space and location adequate? Would changing the location make it easier to recruit certain participants and/or be important for symbolic reasons? For example, in Cobb County, Georgia, which is a large school district, the steering committee decided to rotate the locations, both to encourage participation from different parts of the county and as a gesture to indicate that the sessions were open to everyone.

*Who Is Going to Organize It?*

Is the original steering committee intact? Is everyone on board for round two? Would a partially or wholly new steering committee make sense at this point? Are there individuals from groups that were underrepresented at the session who might be invited to participate? At the very least, you should think about how the more enthusiastic participants from the last forum might play a role in helping with the next one.

*Who Is Going to Moderate It?*

Do you have the moderators you'll need for a second series? Might your moderators benefit from a brief "tune-up training" as they prepare for a new topic? Do you need to, or want to, train new people or draw on moderators from outside your community?

*What Were the Weaknesses Last Time, and How Can You Address Them?*

No one needs to tell you that public engagement is challenging and every session will have had its strengths and weaknesses. How would you assess yours? What can you do to be more successful next time? What new strategies might be employed?

*Do You Want to Experiment with the Formula?*

Related to the last topic of improving on the formula is revising it to better suit your needs and those of your community. For example, aiming for about 100 participants from across your community is not essential. You may decide that it makes more sense to hold a series of three smaller, neighborhood-based forums over a six-month period.

This is not a suggestion to depart from the fundamental principles that we have found to be essential, such as

- striving for a broad, diverse group of participants "beyond the usual suspects."
- working in small, moderated groups.
- providing some structure to the conversation, so people have a place to start and the most experienced and expert among them don't end up taking over. Discussion materials generally work best if they involve choices and are presented in a clear, nonpartisan, jargon-free manner.
- maintaining a nonpartisan, inclusive and open sponsorship and atmosphere.

Should you decide to change the formula, please feel free to bounce your ideas off of us. We may have tried something and failed already, and you might as well hear about that sooner rather than later. That said, we have every reason to believe that you can improvise on the approach in ways that work well for your situation, and we look forward to learning from any experiments you conduct.

Good luck!