



EVERYBODY READY FOR COLLEGE

A Choicework Discussion Starter

A Note on Public Agenda's Choicework Discussion Starters

Public Agenda Choicework Discussion Starters support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations and classrooms, by journalists and researchers, and by individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

Each discussion starter is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The different perspectives are drawn both from what the public thinks about an issue, based on surveys and focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

Customizing to Fit Your Situation

Note that the Choicework Discussion Starters are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways — they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional related ideas.

Additionally, users of these guides have the option of providing various kinds of nonpartisan information along with them as context for a conversation.

Public Agenda's Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda often uses these guides as discussion starters for Community Conversations as part of a larger program of community dialogue and action. Such conversations are frequently a solid first step toward new partnerships and initiatives.

Public Agenda's approach to Community Conversations involves several principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants, "beyond the usual suspects"
- Small, diverse dialogue groups with trained moderators and recorders
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (Choicework)
- Strategic follow-up to connect dialogue to action

If you would like to learn more about Public Agenda's approach to public engagement, or to see a full list of our Choicework Discussion Starters (including print and video versions), please visit our website www.publicagenda.org and click on "Public Engagement."

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Everybody Ready for College

Introduction

What's the most important thing we need to do to make sure our students are ready for college and able to succeed when they get there?

Even with a high school diploma, too many students these days arrive at college lacking the right kind of preparation, knowledge and attitude to succeed. The issue of college readiness is becoming more and more important because:

- Education beyond the high school level is now critical for securing most kinds of employment, especially jobs that pay more than minimum wage;
- Elected officials as well as business and education leaders around the country are calling for more people to have college degrees;
- In order to take full advantage of higher education, students need to arrive well prepared and ready for success;
- Many students admit, and college faculty agree, that students need to be (and could have been) better prepared for the realities of college.

How can our community work together to ensure that students arrive ready for success in college? To help get the conversation started we've created this Choicework Discussion Starter, which describes three different approaches we could take to help ensure the success of students entering college. Each approach proposes a different way to improve college readiness and help students achieve their goals. Which do you think is likely to have the greatest impact on college readiness, and why?

Approach 1:

Do a Better Job of “Aligning” the K-12 and College Teaching and Learning Experiences

A big reason students are not arriving at college with the level of preparedness they need is due to a lack of communication and coordination between the K-12 system and local higher education institutions. It’s important for K-12 schools and teachers to prepare students for the first year of college, just as teachers of first-year college students need to have a better feel for the needs and experiences of recent high school graduates. Both high schools and colleges need to work together to help students make the academic and social transition. In particular, they need to work together to make sure curriculum, expectations and teaching methods are better aligned and coordinated.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Better align standards and curriculum so that students graduate high school ready to do college-level work, and adjust high school teaching methods to resemble college more and more as students progress through high school.
- Create ways for high school teachers, college teachers and administrators to meet regularly to ensure their teaching goals and methods stay coordinated over time.
- Pursue state-level policy advocacy to support the alignment process.

Those who like this approach say things like:

“By aligning the curriculum and teaching methods, students would have a smoother transition and not lose time getting up to speed once they are already in college.”

Those who don’t like this approach say things like:

“There are too many school districts and teachers to even begin to think curricula could be aligned. And besides, the K-12 system is already too overburdened with state mandates about testing to take on something else.”

Approach 2:

Make Sure Students Understand and Can Manage the Transition to College

Being ready to succeed depends largely on the motivation and desire of the individual. Students need to understand what college entails, both inside and outside of the classroom, and they need to want to succeed. While we can't force every student to want to go to college, we can do a better job of helping them understand what college is really about and why it's important.

Our educators need to make sure that all students have a much better understanding, much earlier, of what they will encounter in college — both in terms of the academic skills they will need to have mastered and what kind of expectations their professors and the college will have in terms of study habits, class attendance, time management, and tuition payments.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Beginning in high school (or even earlier) and continuing in college, provide more programs and resources for students to get the information and support they need to stay organized and manage their college experience. For example, a high school course on life and study skills should be mandatory for all.
- Every high school student should visit college at least once, even before their senior year. We need to work to make their experience on the campus more meaningful, for example, by having high school students meet with current college students and professors in small groups to talk about what college is like.
- Require first-year college orientation seminars/classes and set up one-stop shopping for information and resources, both online and face-to-face.

Those who like this approach often say things like:

“Like it or not, young people really need help with life skills today. We need to get away from just handing them a high school diploma and wishing them good luck.”

Those who don't like this approach say things like:

“Students mature at different speeds and always have. The bigger problem is that they aren't learning what they need to learn in high school before they are allowed to graduate and move on.”

Approach 3:

Make Sure Kids Care about Going to College in the First Place

Too many kids and their parents in our community still believe that getting a high school education is good enough. The entire community needs to work together to make sure students understand that in today's economy, a high school diploma doesn't take you very far. If students and parents truly absorb the value of a college education and the opportunities it will provide, it will greatly help everything else fall into place. Too often this is left to chance, or for kids to figure out for themselves when it's often too late, and they are too far behind. Teachers, parents and community leaders have to make it clear to all kids that they can, and should, go to college, but that they must put some effort into being as ready as possible.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Redouble current outreach and education efforts with parents so they understand the value of college. We should emphasize the idea that college is for everyone, so that parents can transmit this value to their kids.
- Remind various members of our community to take advantage of every opportunity they have to reinforce this message; for example, in church, in after-school programs, in public-interest ads, etc.
- Encourage college readiness efforts and programming on the part of local philanthropies and service-providing agencies.

Those who like this approach often say things like:

“Expectations are the key. We must create a community that expects its children to go to college and succeed there, and we must communicate that expectation to our children starting at an early age.”

Those who don't like this approach say things like:

“Changing communities is a long-term project. We need to do something now to help our kids be better prepared for college in the short term.”

Using this guide in a community conversation, discussion group or classroom setting

After discussing the choices on the previous pages, you may wish to consider and talk through the following questions.

Summarizing a Choicework Conversation

These questions are a good way to summarize a Choicework conversation, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement? What are the issues we may need to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

Bridging from Dialogue to Action

These questions can help you move from dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today?

Note: If this question generates a long list of potential actions, they can be prioritized by asking each person to list his or her top three ideas.

2. Is there anything that you, as individuals, might do, or do differently, as a result of today's conversation?
3. What would you like to see happen to follow up on today's conversation? What should the immediate follow-up steps be?

Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan opinion research organization with an expanding program of citizen education and public engagement activities. Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich.

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Public Agenda

6 East 39th Street
New York, NY 10016
t (212) 686.6610 f (212) 889.3461

1100 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 1090
Washington, DC 20005
t (202) 292.1020 f (202) 775.8835

www.PublicAgenda.org