



A Suggested Timeline

15 percent for opening

- **Welcome**—the moderator introduces the forum.
- **Ground rules**—participants review desired outcomes of the forum.
- **Starter video**—the starter video sets the tone for the deliberation.
- **Icebreakers**—connect the issue to people’s lives and concerns.

65 percent for deliberation

- Participants examine all the approaches.

20 percent for ending the forum

- **End the discussion**—reflect on what has been accomplished.
 - **Questionnaire**—participants complete questionnaire.
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Issue Forum Process (National Issues Forums Institute)

Edited by: Johanna Reed Adams, Ph.D., State Community Leadership Development Extension Specialist

Organizing a Forum

Define the purpose

Be clear about why you are holding the forum and what you plan to do with the results.

Here are some things to think about:

- Will there be just one forum or a series of forums?
- What can people expect from participating in the forum?
- Who should be involved in organizing the forum?
- Who can help reach people who do not normally participate in public meetings?
- Who will be able to help implement the ideas that emerge from the forum? And how can we get them involved?

Recruit others to help

A great way to spread the workload is to identify and recruit planning partners who care about the issue. Ideally, these concerned stakeholders would represent diverse groups of people. They can provide resources, recruit forum participants, and communicate with interested stakeholders. They may focus on just one issue and disband after the forum or they may help organize action teams to work on this issue. Here are some ideas:

- Librarians, parent associations, teachers, and school administrators are valuable sources of information about education in general and about local schools in particular.
- Service clubs, churches, and faith-based organizations are groups that cut across every facet of community life; partnering with them improves the odds of having broad and diverse participation.
- It is important to get views from people who did not fare well in school and whose voices or perspectives are not often heard in public forums. Nontraditional education programs, such as workforce training programs, English-as-a-second-language programs, GED workshops, and community colleges, may be good places to start.
- The media are the best sources of public advertising. Some public television stations and newspapers cover forums. Some newspapers have published issues-in-brief or issue maps, which can be found at the end of issue books. Citizens can also write letters to the editor.
- Chambers of Commerce and members of the business community have led the way in calling for improvements in education. These groups can be counted on to be part of the conversation and they can help in other ways.

Select a location

It is very important to consider when and where to hold the forum. A university classroom, for example, may not be the most comfortable place for people with a limited education to meet and talk about the achievement gap. However, public schools and libraries are ideal meeting places, which are easily accessible and open to the public. Options like child care or refreshments may make it easier for busy parents to take part. Include these in your planning if at all possible.

Issue books

Make sure that forum participants get copies of the issue book or the issue-in-brief in advance of the event.

The role of the participant

The participant is the most important part of any forum. The forum process works best when each participant not only shares his or her ideas but also listens carefully to the ideas of other participants.

Their job as participants includes:

- listening to all possible solutions to an issue,
- weighing the possible costs and consequences of each, and
- working as a group to make a decision that reflects their combined values and ideas.

The role of the moderator

It is essential to the success of a forum that the moderator:

- Provides an overview of the process of deliberation—the rationale for the kind of work the participants are preparing to do.
- Asks questions that probe deeply into what's at stake in the issue and in each approach.
- Encourages participants to direct their responses and questions to one another.
- Remains neutral throughout the discussion, while encouraging participants to explore all facets of their own and others' opinions.
- Keeps track of the time so participants can move through the deliberation of each approach and into an ending period of reflection.
- Reports on the results of the forum.

The role of the recorder

The recorder keeps a visible record of the forum participants' comments, usually by writing on flip chart pages visible to everyone. The recorder's role is to:

- Remind forum participants of their key concerns, the areas of greatest disagreement, and the benefits and trade-offs their discussion highlighted.
- Produce a written record of the group's work, which might be useful for future meetings of the group or additional forums.
- Help inform other members of the community about the outcomes of the deliberation
- Capture the tension, trade-offs, and common ground for action.
- Express main ideas in clearly written, brief phrases.

Moderating a Forum

The moderator welcomes participants, suggests guidelines for the deliberation, introduces the issue, invites participants to share their concerns about the achievement gap, guides the deliberation through three approaches, and helps the group identify common ground for action and unresolved issues. To learn more about moderator training visit the **National Issues Forums Institute Web site, www.nifi.org.**

A Suggested Format

Welcome

- Introduce yourself and the recorder, or ask whether someone in the group would be willing to take notes.
- Thank participants for attending the discussion and acknowledge the organizers of the forum.
- Ask the group to agree on ground rules for the deliberation.
- If participants have not received the issue book in advance, distribute copies. Explain that the starter video will give them an overview of the issue even if they have not read the issue book.
- Let participants know that the deliberation will focus on the three approaches outline in the issue book, giving each approach equal consideration.

Suggested Ground Rules

- Everyone gets to participate.
- No one should dominate the conversation
- All views will be considered with respect.
- Everyone should listen as well as speak.

Personal stake

In the first few minutes, connect the issue to people's lives and concerns by inviting a few participants to talk about their personal experiences with the issue. Be sure to set a time limit, as these opening discussions can often consume your entire time!

Tips for Moderating a Forum

- Remain neutral
- Make sure all major approaches are considered.
- Keep the discussion moving and focused.
- Reserve ample time for reflection at the end.

Show the video

As you watch the video, think about the stories that people told during the icebreaker and how they relate to the framework. This is a good way to develop your listening skills and may help you guide the discussion.

Deliberate the approaches

- Guide the discussion and help the participants see how their ideas connect or contrast, giving equal consideration to all three approaches.
- Ask questions to help people talk more deeply about the issue, to really think about why they feel a certain way and why others may have a different perspective. When the underlying motives behind people's perspectives are revealed, they often find common ground or at least have a deeper understanding of different perspectives.

Consistent with what deliberation is, moderators ask basic types of questions in a forum:

1. What is Valuable to Us?

This question gets at why making public choices is so difficult; the approaches turn on things that people care about very deeply, such as being secure or being treated fairly. This question can take many forms:

- What things are most valuable to people who support this option?
- What is appealing about this approach?
- What makes this approach a good idea—or a bad idea?

2. What Are the Costs or Consequences Associated with the Various Approaches?

This question can take as long as it prompts people to think about the likely effects of various approaches on what is valuable to them. Examples include:

- What would result from doing what this approach proposes?
- What could be some of the consequences of doing what you are suggesting?
- Can you give an example of what you think would happen?
- Does anyone have a different estimate of costs or consequences?

3. What Are the Tensions or Conflicts in This Issue That We Have to Work Through?

As a forum progresses, moderators will ask questions that draw out conflicts or tensions that people have to work through. They might ask:

- What do you see as the cause of tension between the approaches?
- Where are the conflicts that come from what we've said about this issue?
- Why is this issue so difficult to decide?

Deliberate the approaches

- Guide the discussion and help the participants see how their ideas connect or contrast, giving equal consideration to all three approaches.
- Ask questions to help people talk more deeply about the issue, to really think about why they feel a certain way and why others may have a different perspective. When the underlying motives behind people's perspectives are revealed, they often find common ground or at least have a deeper understanding of different perspectives.

Here are some general **follow-up questions** you can use to guide the conversation and help participants think about the issue more deeply:

- If we followed this course of action, what would be the effects on your life?
- For those who hold that position, what do they care deeply about? What is most valuable to them?
- How would someone make a case against what you just said?
- What are some negative aspects of the approach you favor?
- What would be the consequences of this approach?
- What perspective have we not considered? What "voice" have we not heard?

Ending the discussion

Encourage the group to reflect on the forum and to answer questions such as:

Individual Reflections

What surprised you about this deliberation?

How has your thinking about the achievement gap changed as a result of this conversation?

What did you learn about the effects of the achievement gap in your community?

Group Reflections

What were some common concerns that we heard expressed in our discussion?

Do we have a good understanding of the problem and how it affects our community?

What are some actions we would support to address this issue?

What outcomes are unacceptable, or results do we want to avoid?

Next-Step Reflections

What do we still need to talk about?

How can we use what we have learned today?

What can you do to make a difference, and are you ready to make a commitment?

Thank the participants and the organizers. Ask them to complete the questionnaire at the back of their books. Filled out after the forum, questionnaires serve multiple purposes. They help participants face conflicts within themselves. They give participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had. And they give participants an opportunity to add to what was said or heard in the forum.

Announce any upcoming forums or proposed next steps, if appropriate.

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