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Shaping Our Future

How Should Higher Education Help Us Create the Society We Want?

Throughout American history, colleges and universities have been a key to our economic development and social progress. Now the United States is facing serious challenges on both these fronts. How can higher education best help us handle these challenges and create the society we want?

OPTION ONE

Focus on Staying Competitive in the Global Economy

We must recapture our worldwide lead in science and technology in a tough global marketplace. Countries like China are transforming their systems to educate more high-tech professionals, and we should too. It's our best chance to keep our economy growing.

OPTION TWO

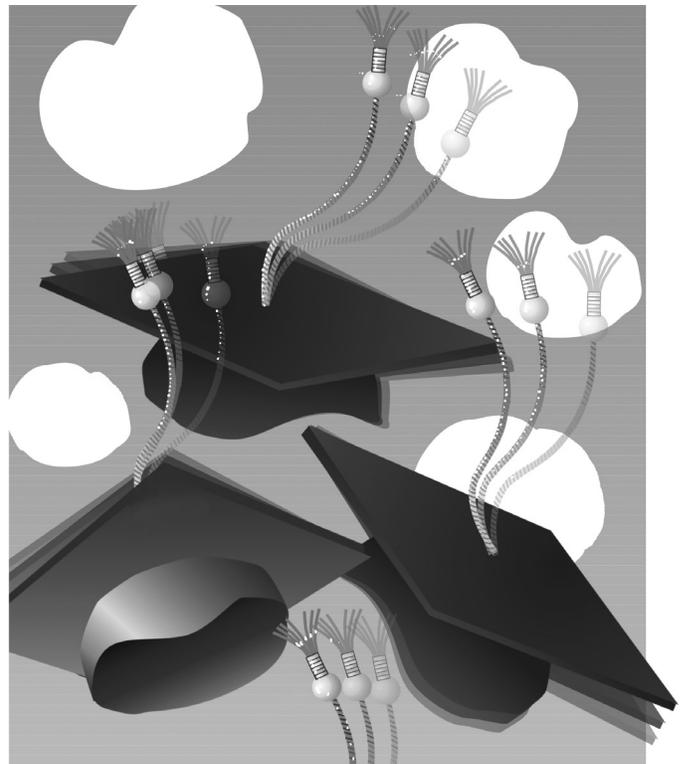
Work Together and Repair an Ailing Society

Most of the nation's problems reflect an underlying crisis of division and mistrust. Higher education can do more to strengthen values like responsibility, integrity, and respect for others. Students also need real-life experience in collaboration and problem solving.

OPTION THREE

Ensure that Everyone Gets a Fair Chance

We call this the land of opportunity, but it isn't so for many Americans. Because a college education unlocks the door to advancement, higher education and government should do much more to ensure that all Americans have an equal shot at getting a degree—without accumulating huge debts.



>> National Issues Forums and Study Guides

Why are we here? What are we going to do?

We are here to move toward a public decision on a difficult issue through CHOICE WORK.

How do we do that?

We do that by engaging in a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- understand the PROS and CONS of each option—its benefits, drawbacks, and trade-offs.
- know the STRATEGIC FACTS and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
- get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations—the things they consider to be the most valuable in everyday life.
- weigh carefully the views of others and appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- WORK THROUGH the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.

>> Forums or Study Circles—or Both?

Many NIF groups choose to organize single forums around issues of concern in their communities. Most single forums last two to two-and-a-half hours.

Other groups, however, plan for multiple sessions or study circles to allow participants greater opportunity to examine issues in depth. Some groups set aside time for two meetings while others might devote a separate session to each option. And still others plan ahead for a session after the forum for participants to come back together and consider next steps.

In some communities, people begin their examination of an issue in a large-group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse is also helpful—starting in small groups and culminating in a larger community forum.

National Issues Forums is about encouraging public deliberation. The needs of your community will drive the schedule in which deliberation can best occur.

>> Stages of a Forum

Welcome

The convenor or moderator introduces the NIF program.

Ground rules

Participants and the moderator review desired outcomes and agree on ground rules.

Getting started

One good way to start is for participants to take a few minutes to talk about their personal experiences with the issue and tell their stories. Sometimes the convenor or moderator begins by showing a starter video that reviews the problems underlying the issue.

Deliberation

Participants examine all the options. An approximately equal amount of time should be spent on each choice.

Ending the forum

Participants reflect on what has been achieved.

Questionnaire

Participants complete the questionnaire.

>> If This Is Your First Experience as a Moderator

You don't have to be an expert on the issue.

Read the issue guide thoroughly. Consider questions that get to the heart of the issue and think through the essence of each option. This is a critical part of preparation.

Stay focused on what the forum is about—deliberation.

Ask questions that probe the underlying motivations of each option, the trade-offs it might require, and the willingness of the participants to recognize them. (Sample questions begin on Page 5.) Listen to others.

Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

Sometimes it's hard to move on to another option when there is so much more that could be said. But in order to make progress, participants need time to weigh all the major options fairly.

Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.

In many ways, this is the most important work the group will do. The moderator will provide reminders that time is passing, but it is up to all the participants to help preserve the time to reflect on what they have said and what they might want to do about it.

>> Beginning a Forum

Before the deliberation begins, it is important for participants to review guidelines for their discussion. They should agree that:

- everyone is encouraged to participate,
- no one or two individuals should dominate,
- the discussion should focus on the options,
- all the major options should be considered fairly,
- they will maintain an open and respectful atmosphere for the discussion, and
- they will listen to each other.

>> Ending a Forum

Before ending a forum, take a few minutes to reflect, both individually and as a group, on what has been achieved. Consider the following kinds of questions:

I. Individual reflections

How has your thinking about the issue changed?

How has your thinking about other peoples' views changed?

How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?

II. Group reflections

What didn't we work through?

Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?

Which trade-offs are we willing to make to move in a shared direction?

Which are we unwilling to make?

III. Next-step reflections

What do we still need to talk about?

How can we use what we learned in this forum about ourselves?

Do we want to meet again?

Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

As you examine this issue together you will undoubtedly think of questions that are at the heart of what makes the issue compelling. In some forums, certain questions might arise that could derail the deliberation by veering into partisan political debate. It will be important to remember that, as a group, you are dealing with broader underlying concerns that are not defined by party affiliation and that your work here is to dig down to the basic values that define us as human beings and as Americans rather than as liberals and conservatives. It is helpful to consider, ahead of time, broad questions that need to be addressed in each option. Here are some examples:

O P T I O N O N E

- What role should higher education play in helping our country stay ahead of its competitors in the global marketplace? Should these roles be different in private and public institutions?
- What, if anything, are the public primary and secondary schools in your community doing to interest students in pursuing college studies in math, science, or technology? What could they do better?
- Much scientific and technical research is financed by large industries. What effect do you think this funding has on college and university curricula in the sciences? What educational or other advantages might this funding have for students in these fields?
- Should we make it easier for foreign students who get advanced science and technology degrees in this country to stay here?

O P T I O N T W O

- Many people are concerned about the apparently declining ability or willingness of Americans to collaborate and compromise. Are there evidences of this breakdown in your community?
- How important do you think it is for colleges to provide students with opportunities to learn about other cultures? How can schools best do this?
- Do you think colleges and universities should incorporate the teaching of ethical principles into their courses? Are these matters best left to families?
- What kinds of service-related activities or public work are best suited to teach students the skills they need to become good citizens? Should these learning experiences be required for a degree?

Questions continued on Page 6.

Questions, continued.

O P T I O N T H R E E

- Online courses make sense for many students because it enables them to save money and time. Educationally speaking, do online classes have advantages over classroom learning? What are the downsides?
- What would happen if we awarded more scholarships and other financial aid based on need and fewer on the basis of academic merit?
- Is a college degree for everyone? Should every youngster be encouraged to take college preparatory courses in high school?
- Some college students are less well prepared than others, for instance by some high schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Should a college make special efforts to help such students earn their degrees? Whose responsibility is it?

>>Questionnaires

Questionnaires play an important role in your local forum—and in the national NIF network. Filled out after the forum, they serve multiple purposes. They give participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had and give them a chance to add to what was said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside the forum. As one means of capturing what happened in the forum, they provide information that can be used to communicate participants' views to others—to officeholders, to the media, and to other citizens.

A national report on the outcomes of the forums on a given issue is produced each year, based on extensive interviews with moderators and the questionnaires that forums generate. Some communities use questionnaires as part of the reports they generate on the outcomes of local forums.

Please return completed questionnaires to your moderator or to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

>>The Role of the Moderator

- to provide an overview of the deliberation process
- to ask probing questions about what's at stake in each issue and each option
- to encourage participants to direct their questions and responses to one another
- to remain neutral

Another important job for the moderator is to fill out the Moderator Response sheet at the end of this guide and return it with the questionnaires to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

>>For More Information

To order issue guides or starter tapes, call 1-800-600-4060, FAX (937) 435-7367, or mail to NIF Publications, 1800 N. Stonelake Drive, Box A, Bloomington, IN 47402. Other issue guides and tapes may also be ordered from this source.

For more information or to make comments, visit the National Issues Forums Institute website at www.nifi.org or call NIFI at 1-800-433-7834.

To post the dates and locations of your forums, e-mail: forums@nifi.org.

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Moderator Response

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it with the questionnaires from the forum to: National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

Moderator's Name _____

Phone _____ E-mail address _____

Date and location (state) where forum was held _____

Briefly describe the audience of your forum, including city and state, diversity, and age and number of participants.

What elements of this issue seemed most difficult for the participants? _____

What common concerns were most apparent? _____

What things did participants appear to hold most valuable as they wrestled with trade-offs? Describe.

Which trade-offs were participants most comfortable with? Describe. _____

Which trade-offs did the participants struggle with most? Describe. _____

Did the group identify shared directions for action? _____

Return with questionnaires to:
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100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777