

# SUCCESS IS WHAT COUNTS

A guide from  
Public Agenda

With support from  
The Kresge Foundation

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## A Community College Guide to Community Engagement & Strategic Partnerships



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**Success is What Counts:  
A Community College Guide  
to Community Engagement &  
Strategic Partnerships**

A resource from Public Agenda

Generously funded by  
The Kresge Foundation

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[http://www.publicagenda.org/  
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# SUCCESS IS WHAT COUNTS

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# THE PURPOSE & VALUE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Most often, large-scale institutional change work is viewed as an expert-driven process. Get the best information, bring trained minds to bear, make the best decision with internal and external expertise, and only then reach out to wider audiences to persuade them to sign on. Those outside the circle of internal decision makers tend to be viewed as audiences to be educated or persuaded, or sometimes as problems to be managed. Rarely are they seen as vital resources for achieving student success goals.

Authentic community engagement, by contrast, involves substantive give and take with those outside the college who have an interest in the decisions that are made, or who potentially have a role to play in strengthening the college's work. Such engagement efforts begin with a commitment to building new or improved forms of partnership across various silos and boundaries with those in the community and region who may not be deeply familiar with the work of the college and the needs of its students. While broad-based community engagement is not appropriate for every initiative, it is essential for the long-term success of ambitious change efforts like those sought by Achieving the Dream (ATD) colleges.

ATD has identified broad engagement as one of its core principles, and community engagement and communication as one of the essential capacities that colleges must purposefully develop in order to fulfill their missions. This guide is designed to enhance the ability of colleges to strengthen community engagement efforts. Such efforts are critical for forging meaningful partnerships with key external stakeholders such as K-12 schools, universities, employers and community-based organizations. This guide is also designed to help strengthen efforts to engage internal stakeholders across the institution by connecting their work to that of potential community

partners who can provide vital supports to students. For colleges to become true anchor institutions in their communities, and for community partnerships to meaningfully support student success efforts, colleges must become more skillful in their engagement efforts.

Carefully planned and executed community engagement efforts can...

- foster a sense of shared responsibility for the student success agenda among key actors in the broader community
- help unearth critical internal and external obstacles to student success and generate solutions that can be collaboratively pursued
- strengthen and forge new creative partnerships on behalf of better outcomes for all students and specific populations
- serve as a powerful form of professional development for faculty and staff
- generate qualitative data to improve outcomes and inform interventions and strategies



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# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is best viewed as a primer, a starting point for community engagement efforts. As the college team charged with community engagement efforts begins to plan, this guide will help ensure the work begins on strong footing. In the following pages, we will outline general principles of effective engagement, and provide tools and resources to support effective broad-based community engagement practices.

We recommend that a cross-functional team within the college be charged with spearheading community engagement efforts and that this team be empowered to plan, organize and conduct a range of engagement activities that are carefully aligned with the overarching goals and near-term student success priorities of the college. As the group pursues its community engagement strategy, expanding involvement to include key community partners, allies or friendly critics will help strengthen and protect the work.

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# KEY PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## Understand Your Audiences

Chances are, the community partners you seek to engage do not know all that much about the work of the college or the challenges and constraints that colleges face as they seek to significantly improve outcomes for students. Understanding your target audiences' experiences with and perceptions of your college will help you determine what types of data, information and stories will be most useful to them.

## Go Beyond the Usual Suspects—Be Creative

While it's fine to consult with the regulars—those with whom you already have strong connections in the community—engagement efforts are more useful, and tend to be considerably more interesting and fun, if you can bring fresh faces, energy and ideas to the table.

## Listen More, Talk Less

Community engagement is not well-served by a great deal of speechmaking or pontificating. Work hard to set the stage for honest dialogue, and keep in mind that you are more likely to gain the respect and trust of potential partners if you start by listening and make active listening an ongoing priority.

## Set a Constructive, Problem-solving Tone

While making the case for your work involves creating a sense of urgency, avoid easy polarization and stridency when engaging community partners. It is important to move beyond "sounding the alarm" to create discussions that have forward momentum. The best community engagement efforts foster a sense of possibility for potential partners.

## Start Where People Are

Be attuned to what potential community partners care and worry about. Whether it's K-12 schools, community-based organizations or regional economic development agencies, all potential partners are operating with a set of interests and constraints that shape their work and their view of the college. Engage community partners using their interests, concerns and language—and avoid jargon completely.

## Offer Choices for Deliberation

Letting people wrestle with alternatives, and pointing out the pros and cons of various approaches to enhancing student success efforts, communicates that there are no easy answers and that many points of view are welcome and essential. This technique (which Public Agenda calls "Choicework") also helps people with very different levels of expertise engage both the issues and each other more effectively than less structured forms of dialogue.

## Commit to Real Work and Ongoing Co-creation

Too often, community engagement is viewed as a box to be checked. It's tempting and common for colleges to approach engagement in thin ways through one-off listening sessions or the creation of an advisory group that is consulted periodically. Be clear-eyed about the fact that meaningful community engagement entails a commitment to ongoing, long-term collaboration and to the co-creation of real work.

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# THREE STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Various strategies can be employed to reach out to stakeholders, raise their awareness, gain their insights, and build the common ground from which real collaboration can flow. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, and they are best pursued in phased combination. We will discuss the following community engagement strategies here:

- Focus groups
- Stakeholder dialogues
- Community forums

## Focus groups

Focus groups—essentially small group research interviews—are a tool that can accomplish some, but not all, of the goals of community engagement. They are an efficient means of informing the Planning Team of the priorities and concerns of various stakeholders.

Moreover, there is no better way to prepare for the open give and take of broader community engagement efforts than by exploring issues first via focus group conversations. Doing so can help you understand critical stakeholders' starting point attitudes, frame the issues you wish to talk about, develop background materials for deeper engagement, surface the interests of key stakeholders, and identify potential hot-button issues that could threaten deeper collaboration.

But, while focus groups achieve some community engagement goals, they do not achieve them all. They provide a reading of people's state of mind, but do not, by themselves, help them develop their thinking very much. They can illuminate confusion but do not constitute the communication needed to correct it. They clarify differences in priority among various stakeholders, but do not help communities work through those differences to build the common ground and collaborations that can best serve students and improve colleges.

While focus groups are an efficient way to gain input from various important stakeholders or from the community more generally, these sorts of engagements do not do as much to legitimize your plans with stakeholders and the community overall as other broader, more inclusive strategies.



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## Stakeholder dialogues

Focus groups, the method just discussed, keep control in the hands of those conducting them. For example, people are typically incentivized to attend focus groups, either by being offered a stipend or otherwise compensated for their time. Because a focus group is a form of research, it's easy for the organizer to steer conversation directly to the topics he or she wants to discuss, and the resulting information is theirs to do with as they choose.

By contrast, stakeholder dialogues are by nature a less controlled process. Participants are not research subjects; they are stakeholders external to the college community who are voluntarily contributing their time and ideas. These sessions can be conducted with highly homogenous groups—like local employers, for example. Or, depending on your purpose, they can be more diverse, with several different stakeholders represented, such as staff from community-based organizations, local employers and faith leaders.

The idea is to engage key stakeholders in productive dialogue about the work of the college, to elicit their interest in and ideas about said work, and to identify opportunities for collaboration. Stakeholder dialogues allow you to target the specific groups that are most important to your work. They are less transactional than focus groups and therefore don't require compensation for people's time. Because they aren't a formal research strategy, they are more likely to serve as a vehicle for relationship-building and for the cultivation of relational trust between college practitioners and potential community partners. The downside of stakeholder dialogues is that they remain relatively contained, and thus do not help with raising broader awareness of and engagement with your efforts. Because they tend to focus on smaller groups of formal stakeholders, these types of dialogues are also more likely to become echo chambers for a small subset of influencers.



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## Community forums

In contrast to the research emphasis of focus groups, and the contained nature of stakeholder dialogues, community forums are a common strategy for engaging a broad cross-section of a community in dialogue, including both specific stakeholders and average citizens. Community forums are the most public of the community engagement strategies we are discussing in this manual in the sense that these are large-scale civic events meant to engage all sectors of the community in the work of the college.

While there are several models that have been widely applied for broad-based community dialogue, most are variations on a basic set of elements. Public Agenda's Community Conversations model has been used in scores of communities across the country, including in dozens of community colleges. The key features of the Public Agenda Community Conversations model may be summarized as follows:

- Nonpartisan coalition of sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants
- Small, diverse dialogue groups
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help a wide range of actors better understand an issue and consider options for action/collaboration
- Trained, nonpartisan facilitators
- Forum follow-up and follow through

Community Conversations are designed to reach the largest number of people and gain the broadest input. Because of the intentionality with which experts and non-experts are engaged as equals in deliberation, Community Conversations are most likely to yield "ah ha!" moments and fresh insights for the college, external stakeholders and "ordinary citizens" alike. Through broad-based engagement of this type, college practitioners come to understand their work in new ways, formal stakeholders in the community connect the dots between their priorities and those of the college, and the insights and experiences of students, families and taxpayers become vital resources for problem solving and creative collaboration.

While Community Conversations are certainly the most robust of all the strategies, they are also labor intensive. Not only do they require a significant amount of lead time to plan carefully, but they also entail the development of a host of capacities for the organizers. Framing issues for deliberation, organizing a sponsoring coalition, training facilitators, executing follow-up and implementing chosen actions are among the most critical tasks involved in successful Community Conversations work. If you are not already experienced in public forum work, capacity-oriented technical assistance from engagement experts can be helpful. In the next section of this guide, we provide some of the basic tools for Community Conversations. A detailed Community Conversations Organizer manual is also available on the Achieving the Dream website: <http://achievingthedream.org/resource/140/planning-guide-campus-and-community-conversations>.

**Table: Strengths and Weaknesses of Three Community Engagement Strategies**

Type of Engagement	Pros	Cons
Focus groups	Efficient way to gain insights from key audiences	Less inclusive, less likely to be viewed as legitimate
	Allow for maximum control of information	May require money and expertise to do well
Stakeholder dialogues	Engage key groups as advisors and thought partners	Limited impact on community overall
	Support relationship-building between college and community	Can become echo chambers for a small number of influencers
Community forums	Raise broadest awareness of the college's work	Labor intensive, require significant lead time and follow-up effort
	Generate wholly new ideas and partnerships	Require special skill sets or technical assistance

### Community Engagement as a Pedagogical Opportunity

One final note: As an exercise in democratic decision making, community engagement efforts can offer interesting and important pedagogical opportunities for your students. Students could, for example, receive extra credit for helping to organize Community Conversations. They could be part of action teams that follow up on engagement activities. They could act as facilitators or recorders at dialogues as well as being participants. They could follow the public policy implications of the questions you're pursuing as they stretch from the community to the state and even the national level of government. Your engagement activities could thus provide valuable experiences for students in the areas of democratic process, citizenship and community politics, thereby serving your Achieving the Dream initiative in yet another way.

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# PUBLIC AGENDA'S COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS MODEL:

## A Guide for Organizers

Public Agenda's Community Conversations model involves several key principles and guidelines that can be applied flexibly to different settings and issue areas of interest to the college. Whether you're looking to strengthen partnerships with K-12 schools, more effectively engage faith communities and community-based organizations to enhance supports for at-risk students, or build stronger working relationships with local employers and regional economic development agencies, Community Conversations can serve as a powerful catalyst for progress.

In the following pages, we provide a step-by-step overview of the activities involved in organizing and catalyzing the results of Community Conversations in the service of deeper and more durable community engagement. This information and these checklists are designed to take some of the guesswork out of your higher-stakes community engagement efforts and ease the burdens that come with hosting and making the most of large community forums.

To recap, the key elements of a strong Community Conversation include:

### **Local, Nonpartisan Planners and Sponsors**

Community colleges will be most successful in recruiting diverse participants and creating powerful follow-up if they enlist the help of a diverse group of stakeholders to assist in sponsoring and planning the dialogue. Purposeful involvement of community-based organizations, K-12 schools, employers and others in the planning process is crucial for success.

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

True Community Conversations should include representation from a broad cross-section of participants. Participation should reflect the diversity of the community (not just the professional community), the college's Advisory Board members, and a few well-known concerned citizens. The goal is to include students, families and taxpayers as well as experts and professionals and to ensure that all groups and stakeholders are represented.



## Dialogue in Small, Diverse Groups with Trained Facilitators and Recorders

A genuine exchange of views occurs most easily in small, diverse groups with well-trained nonpartisan facilitators to facilitate the dialogue and recorders to document the proceedings for effective follow-up. Carefully structured, small group dialogue entails careful attention to issue framing, process design, and the preparation of facilitators and recorders. See Appendix B: “A Recipe for a Great Facilitator: A Self-Assessment Tool.”

### Careful Issue Framing

Over the last 15 years, we have found effective, nonpartisan issue framing to be essential for providing people with a structure for engaging in an issue with which they may have little experience. Public Agenda has created dozens of “Choicework Discussion Starters” on a range of topics to help frame issues for broad-based community engagement. In 2006, Public Agenda developed a Choicework Discussion Starter for use by ATD colleges called “Success Is What Counts: A Community Conversation to Help All Community College Students Achieve.” We updated the original Choicework in 2016, and sharpened its focus to help a diverse array of stakeholders think about their potential role in collaborations aimed at strengthening the student success efforts of ATD Colleges.<sup>1</sup>

### Follow-up and Follow Through

It is important that these dialogues be part of a process that connects to the college’s ATD agenda, thereby contributing to success at the college. If the dialogues are only discrete meetings that come and go, with no discernible connection to the life of the college, the ATD initiative, students, or the community, then they will have been of little value. Thus, a major focus of this guide is how to connect these dialogues to actions aimed at helping more students succeed through effective follow-up activities.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A.



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# PICTURING A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

Each Community Conversation should be a significant event that serves as a point of departure for ongoing collaborations of various kinds. Typically, each will have somewhere between 60 and 120 participants. The session begins (or sometimes ends) with a celebratory meal and is followed by welcoming remarks by the conversation’s sponsors or planners, after which participants move into small discussion groups of about 10 to 12 people each.

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

## Community Conversation at a Glance—Sample Agenda

5:30–6:10	<b>Registration, Dinner</b>
6:10–6:30	<b>Introduction</b> Host provides welcome, purpose, agenda overview Brief presentation of key college data points to set the stage Instructions for breaking into small groups
6:30–8:15	<b>Small Group Discussion</b> Break into groups of 10-12, each with a trained facilitator, recorder and Choicework discussion starter materials
6:30	Overview, introductions, ground rules
6:40	Presentation/discussion of Choicework materials
7:20	Interim summary of common ground, concerns/ disagreements, outstanding questions
7:30	Bridging from dialogue to action
8:00	Prioritize action ideas for report out
8:30–9:00	<b>Lively, Fast-Paced Report Out</b> Rep from each group shares 1-2 minutes of highlights: key priorities, ideas for action, or difficult areas of disagreement





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# GETTING GOING:

## Creating the Planning Team for a Community Conversation

The Planning Team is responsible for the actual work of organizing the Community Conversation as well as making sure that appropriate follow-up takes place in a timely manner. The team should be a diverse group of individuals who are interested in the project, bring a variety of skills and resources to the table, and are 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 populations you want to participate in the conversation (e.g., a local immigrant community).

### What Does the Planning Team Do?

- Makes major strategic decisions, including topic selection and customization of discussion materials; conversation location; media policy; etc.
- Creates workgroups to manage various planning tasks, drawing from its ranks and recruiting additional people as needed to get the job done
- Spearheads communication efforts (in coordination with workgroups) such as developing talking points, promotional materials and media guidelines
- Coordinates and executes follow-up activities such as mailing thank-you letters, drafting and distributing conversation summary report, etc.

### Who Should be on the Planning Team?

Although your college is taking a leadership role in this effort, Community Conversations work best if they are presented and run by a 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. Wider sponsorship brings a greater variety of skill sets to the proceedings and opens up possibilities for long-term partnerships and follow-up.

Plan for about 5-10 different community organizations/institutions to join the Planning Team, which should have about 12-20 members total. In addition to college personnel, the college 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? Might any of your trustees enjoy this kind of project? What about alumni?

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In addition, you should consider approaching the following potential community partners:

- Local employers (especially those who hire community college graduates) and/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, YMCA, religious institutions, social service organizations and the like
- Local government officials
- Respected active citizens who have worked with you in the past, or with whom you would like to develop a relationship
- A local community or education foundation

This is a great opportunity to reach out to organizations and potential partners with whom you may not have worked in the past. Colleges may be tempted to take on the lion's share of work themselves, particularly if they have a public relations or community relations department. But 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 Community Conversations and your long-term possibilities for follow-up work will benefit.

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. Planners 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 those parties from the beginning.

### A Note on Additional Conversation Sponsors

There may be organizations and/or individuals you'd like to have at the table who, for one reason or another, may be unable to join the Planning Team or provide staff, but who would be interested in lending their name and general support or endorsement to the endeavor. We suggest you think of these people and groups as "sponsors," and feel free to list their names in your materials and communications about the conversation. In addition, sometimes it's a good idea to reach out to certain groups or organizations for political reasons, or to help diversify your team. Of course, it's always preferable if they can join the Planning Team, but if they can't, you can still offer to include them as a sponsor.

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## Explaining the Initiative to Potential Planning Team Members and Sponsors

It's best to be ready with a brief and straightforward "pitch" that explains the purpose of the Community Conversation, why you are hoping these particular people or groups will want to get involved, and what that involvement will entail. Your "talking points" might include the following:

- We are organizing a Community Conversation about helping more community college students succeed.
- It is based on a model of public engagement developed by the organization Public Agenda, which has been used in dozens of communities nationwide. 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 facilitators and recorders working with small groups of diverse participants and carefully prepared discussion materials.
- The conversation is an integral part of the college's work through its Achieving the Dream Initiative, which is about closing achievement gaps on campus and helping more students reach their goals. The results of the conversation will be used to:
  - Further refine our understanding of the issues and help generate solutions.
  - Build support for efforts already in place and develop new programs.
  - Forge new community relationships and strengthen existing partnerships.

It is best to explain the Community Conversations 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, their work at the college 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.

For example, when talking to local employers or the Chamber of Commerce, you can explain how a successful process will ultimately lead to better-prepared potential employees, and that a community that sees its local businesses getting involved in community life is more likely to support those businesses in the future.

It's important that members of the Planning Team and sponsors understand that 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 pre-decided solutions.



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# DIVING IN:

## The Community Conversation Organizing Structure

Your Planning Team should begin its process with a three-to-four-hour Planning Workshop to review the Community Conversations model, set the goals of your conversation, make some key strategic and practical decisions, and divide into workgroups to follow through on various planning tasks.

There are four main categories of work to be done, so it usually makes sense to divide responsibilities into four working groups. Each step requires attention to detail as well as a vision of how it contributes to the overall conversation. The four working groups can each address one of the following categories of work: recruiting participants, organizing nuts and bolts (logistics), managing conversation facilitators, and coordinating strategic communications and follow-up.

### 1. Recruiting Participants: Reaching Beyond the Usual Suspects

This work group...

- Should be composed of diverse members with knowledge of and standing in the various sectors of the community you wish to recruit.
- Implements your recruitment plan by distributing fliers, making follow-up phone calls, etc.
- Keeps track of participant registration in advance of the event, and pre-assigns registered participants to small discussion groups.

#### TIPS FOR RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

- Invitations should come from personal contact by credible sources and respected figures within targeted sub-communities.
- Over-recruit those participants least likely to come.
- Consider involving students through appropriate classes. For instance, a political science or education professor might offer class credit to his or her students if they get involved in the 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.
- 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 this meeting is different—more interesting, engaging and welcoming—than most community forums or meetings.
- Also communicate that this meeting matters. Talk about why it is so important to improve outcomes for local community college students, and that the organizers are going to use the results of the meeting to improve policies and support new initiatives to help students succeed.

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## 2. Planning Tasks and Timeline: Organizing the Nuts and Bolts

This work group...

- Selects and secures the location for the Community Conversation.
- Coordinates meal and meal-related needs.
- Ensures that all necessary equipment and supplies are prepared and in place.
- Sets event timeline and oversees day-of-event staffing (including participant registration, equipment/venue set-up and clean-up, etc.), and provides general support and troubleshooting to other workgroups.

### CHECKLIST FOR MANAGING THE PLANNING TASKS AND TIMELINE

#### 10-12 weeks before Community Conversation

- Establish the Planning Team
- Schedule an initial Planning Workshop

#### 8-10 weeks before Community Conversation

- Planning Team members attend two-to-three-hour Planning Workshop
- Set date and location of Community Conversation
- Define scope of community; choose and/or customize conversation topic
- Decide on media and observer policy; address other strategic considerations
- Planning Team members join one of four workgroups; workgroups begin their tasks

#### 4-6 weeks before Community Conversation

- Extend invitations to participants and observers (via mail, email, in person, etc.)
- Recruit facilitators and recorders
- Confirm location and food reservations/orders
- Planning Team and workgroups meet as needed

#### 2-3 weeks before Community Conversation

- Continue recruiting participants; use targeted outreach to assure a diverse participant group
- Begin initial contact with media (if appropriate)
- Planning Team and workgroups meet as needed

#### 1 week before Community Conversation

- Hold facilitator/recorder training

- Make reminder calls to participants.
- Finalize all logistics; walk through meeting spaces and confirm placement of tables, food, etc.
- Finalize opening and closing plenary plans, decide who will handle questions, etc.

#### 1 day after Community Conversation

- Planning Team debrief (invite facilitators and recorders to attend)
- Send participants a simple, thorough thank-you letter that includes your timeline for issuing a report of the results and a rough outline of next steps. Encourage them to help increase community engagement by inviting their networks to learn more about what you're doing and how they can get involved.

#### 1-3 weeks after Community Conversation

- Invite participants to join an online discussion network for ongoing conversation (if appropriate)
- Follow-up workgroup (or entire Planning Team) meets to plan follow-up actions
- Analyze small group discussion outcomes
- Compile evaluation results
- Create summary report
- Share report with participants and internal stakeholders

#### 1 month (and beyond) after Community Conversation

- Create recommendation memo or other follow-up action plans
- Report to participants about what actions have been taken and/or what other impacts the conversation has had
- Use the report to engage the internal campus community in new ways



### 3. Preparing Facilitators and Recorders: Committing to Skillful Facilitation

This work group...

- Recruits and plans training for facilitators and recorders.
- Plans and manages moderating needs for all opening and closing plenary sessions in coordination with the “nuts and bolts” team.

#### TIPS FOR MANAGING FACILITATORS AND RECORDERS

##### Recruiting Facilitators

We can't stress enough how important it is to focus on recruiting good facilitators (and recorders). Facilitators play a key role in conversations and have a very large impact on the experience. While the following guidelines can help you to select facilitator 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 facilitators you will need for your conversation (one each per small group of 12-14 people), you should recruit a few extra people who are willing to act 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 that 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 Community

Conversation, you will want to have a selection of trained facilitators who can serve in the future. Finally, some people prefer to co-moderate or co-record, so you can double up on these functions in a couple of instances if you wish.

##### The Best Facilitators

- Know the material and are familiar with the issues, but are not advocates
- Are simple and straightforward, providing leadership for the dialogue process without being controlling
- Remain nonpartisan and steer the conversation away from herself/himself and toward the group
- Diligently work to ensure that all voices are heard and valued

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

- Group facilitation skills and experience—especially in working with diverse groups and the general public (as opposed to only with professionals).
- Ability to create an environment in which it is safe and comfortable for people to express their views.

- 
- o Ability to help participants articulate the reasoning, experiences and values supporting their positions.
  - o Ability to play devil’s advocate and challenge people (in a friendly, civil way, of course) to consider alternate viewpoints.
  - o Comfort with and ability to manage group conflict.
  - o Ability to take a nonpartisan moderating stance and put the health of the conversation above any other interest in the topic.
  - o 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.

- o Some general familiarity with community college and education reform debates, although expertise is not required. This attribute is less important than the others.
- o Ideally, the facilitator team overall will roughly reflect the demographics of the community. Diversity of race, ethnicity and gender is important in any conversation about community college student success.

See Appendix B, “A Recipe for a Great Facilitator: A Self-Assessment Tool,” to help ensure facilitators are adequately trained.

#### 4. Coordinating Strategic Communications and Follow-up

This work group...

- Creates basic communications tools and products, such as talking points for recruiting participants, a flier/ invitation for the event, and a “pitch letter” to explain the event to potential partners and allies.
- Manages media relations.
- Creates a post-forum summary report and leads post-forum communications with participants.
- Manages communications with participants about action opportunities both before and after the event.





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## COORDINATING 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. There are three fundamental communications tools you will find useful:

- A set of talking points to help you explain the initiative that convey factual information about the conversation as well the intent behind it.
- A flyer that succinctly explains the purpose of the Community Conversations and gives basic information—such as when and where it will take place—in a visually appealing presentation.
- A “pitch letter” that explains the event to potential partners and allies and includes talking points tailored to each recipient.

The Planning Team should use multiple venues and strategies for disseminating information about the Community Conversation. While social media is an essential tool, personal outreach is equally important.

## LINKING COMMUNITY DIALOGUE TO MEANINGFUL ACTION BY THE COLLEGE AND THE COMMUNITY

In our experience, almost everyone who attends a well-organized, well-run Community Conversation comes away feeling that the experience was exciting, refreshing and extremely valuable. To this end, the Planning Team should think early on about how to create the conditions for effective follow-up after the event. See our Checklist for Managing the Planning Tasks and Timeline for a proposed timeline and process for turning your dialogue into action through careful follow-up.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See pg. 17

## Tips for Basic Follow-up

- Send a brief thank-you email to all participants the day after the conversation, and outline your next steps. Do not wait more than 24 hours after the event to connect with participants.
- Provide a summary report of the Community Conversation to all participants. If you think it will take considerable time to put this together, make sure your initial thank-you note indicates that a report will be following in the coming weeks.
- Report back to the community on the themes and ideas for action that emerged and the commitments made by participants, and give a description of future community engagement plans. Also offer opportunities for participation/collaboration on any of the follow-up work, and encourage report recipients to share the report and invitation with their networks.

## Tips for Deeper Follow-up

- Create action task forces to plan and promote specific policies or initiatives based on the directions for action that emerged from the Community Conversation.
- Continue and expand the dialogue that was begun in the Community Conversation via an online platform or through additional face-to-face meetings.
- Convene a leadership session to react to the results of the deliberations and use the Community Conversation outcomes as tools for the engagement of faculty, staff and administrators at the college.
- Conduct a focus group to better understand the areas of disagreement identified at the meeting, and/or to dig further into issues participants asked for more information about.
- Take 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.



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# APPENDIX A:

## Choicework Discussion Starter: Success is what Counts: Improving Community Partnerships to Help All Community College Students Achieve

Nearly half of all students seeking higher education choose a community college, but less than half of them finish what they start. Although over 80 percent of the 1.5 million students who enter community colleges each year indicate that they intend to attain a bachelor's degree or higher, less than 40 percent earn any form of college credential within six years.<sup>3</sup> Low student completion rates coincide with economic forces that have made a postsecondary degree more important now than ever.

Community colleges remain the nation's gateways to good jobs for millions of students who dream of a better tomorrow. Yet too often these dreams are cut short. For the first time in our history, the current generation of college-age Americans will be less educated than their parents' generation. Those without an education will be unable to compete in a national landscape that more than ever before demands high-level job skills.

As colleges across the country innovate to better meet the needs of the diverse students they serve, many are increasingly focused on deepening their community engagement efforts. For these colleges, high-functioning community partnerships are critical components of the student success agenda.

This Choicework Discussion Starter was created to help diverse stakeholders from the college and broader community engage in action-oriented dialogue about the potential for strengthened partnership on behalf of better outcomes for students.

It is important to note that Choicework materials such as these are not meant to limit the conversation to only three ideas, but to provide a useful, stimulating starting point for dialogue. When properly moderated, they help people from a wide range of backgrounds engage in collaborative problem solving.

This guide can be used in a range of settings, including focus groups, stakeholder dialogues and broad-based Community Conversations. It can also be used for a variety of purposes: to take stock of and improve existing community engagement efforts, to surface fresh ideas about new forms of partnership, or to build new shared understanding across boundaries of various kinds. Regardless of the setting or specific purpose of the dialogue, the guide aims to help colleges and community partners cultivate a strong and durable sense of shared responsibility for student success.

<sup>3</sup> Community College Research Center, 2014.

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## Three Approaches to Building Strong Community Partnerships

1. Make sure students are prepared for college-level work through stronger K-12 partnerships
2. Help students manage the pressures in their lives through deeper collaboration with community-based organizations
3. Ensure a rigorous and relevant academic experience through creative partnerships with employers and four-year institutions

While all of these are worthy and important goals, each with a firm evidence base, the purpose of this dialogue is to help us explore opportunities, set priorities and get clear-eyed about the hard work involved in building strong community partnerships on behalf of better outcomes for our students.

### As you discuss the approaches below, consider the following questions:

- What's difficult about each approach? What's easier?
- Given the needs of our students, and what our data tell us about what is most likely to derail them, which of these approaches is most important for the college to pursue?
- To what extent do we already have these partnerships in place? Are our current efforts strong and effective enough?
- Because we don't have the resources to do everything at once, where should put our focus and why?
- What specific steps are entailed in moving from ideas to action here? Can we sketch 3-month, 6-month and 9-month action plans aimed at moving us forward in concrete ways?



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## APPROACH 1: Make sure students are prepared for college-level work through stronger K-12 partnerships

For a variety of reasons, too many students arrive at community college without a solid enough foundation for success. With adequate preparation, students are better able to take advantage of the educational opportunities the college has to offer, and less likely to be thrown off course by the pressures in their lives. Our highest impact community partnerships will be those we build with K-12 schools to ensure that students graduate from high school ready for college-level work.

### Therefore, we should do things like:

- Work with high schools to create a data dashboard that assesses student progress starting in 9th grade to ensure students will be ready for college-level work by the time they graduate
- Build strong dual-enrollment programs that allow students to earn college credits—and get exposure to the culture of college—while still in high school
- Develop summer bridge programs with high schools that help acquaint at-risk students with college culture and fill gaps in academic and study skills before their first fall semester

### Questions for Approach 1:

While strong partnerships between colleges and K-12 schools might be our best bet for closing achievement gaps and helping far more students succeed, this approach depends on multi-level relationship-building based on the shared recognition that high schools and colleges are jointly responsible for student success.

- What is the quality and depth of the current relationship between the college and nearby K-12 schools?
- Are the schools' senior leaders in regular contact? In what ways do college faculty and high school teachers currently interact?
- Do high school guidance counselors and college advisors tap common sources of information about career pathways and/or communicate regularly with each other?
- What are the current incentives and disincentives for focusing on improving K-12 partnerships?

### Helpful Resources:

Promising Directions for K-12 and Community College Partnerships  
<http://www.sr.ithaka.org/blog/promising-directions-for-k-12-and-community-college-partnerships/>

K-12 and Community College Partnerships for Access, Readiness, and Success  
<https://www.hobsons.com/resources/entry/k-12-and-community-college-partnerships-for-access-readiness-and-success>

Self-Assessment of Effective Community College/K-12 Partnerships  
<http://www.careerladdersproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/H2C-Partnership-Self-Assessment-Tool2.pdf>



## **APPROACH 2: Help students manage the pressures in their lives through deeper collaboration with community-based organizations**

Many community college students have complicated lives. Most have many responsibilities and few resources, and many are first-generation college-goers who are unconfident learners. Too many of our students' college aspirations are overwhelmed by the pressures they face. Community-based organizations tend to be trusted in the community because they understand the social and cultural context of the individuals and families they work with, and they structure their services to respond quickly and flexibly to the needs of the communities they serve. For these reasons and others, creative partnerships with community-based organizations are our best shot at helping significantly more of our students persist in the face of life's challenges.

### **Therefore, we should do things like:**

- Partner with individual community-based organizations serving key populations (e.g., formerly incarcerated individuals, transitional youth, displaced workers) to deliver jointly-developed programming focused on academic skill-building, tutoring in critical reading and self-management strategies
- Commit to a long-term, coalition-based strategy for multiple community-based organizations and the college to pursue common student success goals, focusing first on the creation of data and information sharing systems and key progress indicators (KPIs)
- Work with local faith leaders to identify opportunities to weave support and encouragement for postsecondary attainment into the work of churches, mosques and synagogues

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### Questions for Approach 2:

While strong partnerships between colleges and community-based organizations might be our best bet for closing achievement gaps and helping far more students succeed, this approach depends on multi-level relationship building in a context of scarce resources and competition.

- What is the quality and depth of the current relationship between the college and community-based organizations?
- Do senior leaders from community-based organizations and the college interact regularly and in meaningful ways?
- In what ways are faculty and staff from the college exposed to or made aware of the work of key community-based organizations and how it relates to the lives and prospects of students?
- What are the current incentives and disincentives for community-based organizations to partner with the college?

### Helpful Resources:

The Role of Community-Based Organizations in the College Access and Success Movement  
[http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/pubs/pcn\\_roleofcbo.pdf](http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/pubs/pcn_roleofcbo.pdf)

Best Practices for Working Effectively with Community-Based Organizations to Support and Connect with Underrepresented Students

<http://docplayer.net/3194651-Best-practices-for-working-effectively-with-community-based-organizations-to-support-and-connect-with-underrepresented-students.html>

Partnerships Between Community Colleges and Prisons: Providing Workforce Education and Training to Reduce Recidivism

[http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/prison-cc-partnerships\\_2009.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/prison-cc-partnerships_2009.pdf)

### APPROACH 3: Ensure a rigorous and relevant academic experience through creative partnerships with employers and four-year institutions

The most important thing we can do to promote student achievement is to provide a clear, coherent and high-quality educational experience that is challenging and engaging, and that gives students the experiences they need to meet their educational and career goals. It is not enough for the college to focus only on students' completion of certificates and credentials: the college must also work to ensure that students' educational paths lead to career advancement and/or further education. The most important thing the college can do to help students achieve is to focus on partnerships with transfer institutions and employers to create clear programs of study and educational experiences for students that are rigorous and relevant.

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### Therefore, we should do things like:

- Work with employers in high-growth sectors to provide work experience programs for students (internships, co-ops and job shadowing) and externships for faculty, and to tap in-kind resources that businesses may have available for colleges (space, materials and expertise)
- Build partnerships between faculty members at the community college and four-year institutions to provide community college students with more project-based experiences and undergraduate research opportunities
- Partner, on an ongoing basis, with key employers in the community and the four-year institutions that graduate their employees to ensure the community college curricula and programs of study are clearly aligned with labor market needs and the program requirements of the four-year institutions

### Questions for Approach 3:

While the creation of clear pathways for students that begin with the end in mind (careers and/or further education) is likely our best bet for ensuring that more of our students achieve their potential, this approach depends on translating the work of the college for an employer community that may not understand its value, and on building multi-level relationships with four-year institutions in the context of competition for students and resources.

- What do we know and not know about the labor market outcomes of our students, the needs of local employers, and the credentials that are most sought after in our community?
- What are the current incentives and disincentives for employers to partner with the college?
- Do senior leaders from the college and our transfer institutions communicate regularly and in meaningful ways?
- In what ways do faculty and staff from the college and our transfer partners currently work together to create clear pathways for students? What makes it harder and easier for us to work with four-year institutions?

### Helpful Resources:

Breakthrough Employer Engagement Practices

<http://achievingthedream.org/resource/16229/breakthrough-employer-engagement-practices>

Business and Community College Partnerships: A Blueprint

<http://www.iwnc.org/documents/LearnEarnBlueprint.pdf>

The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two- and Four-Year Colleges

[https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2016/05/aspen-ccrc\\_transferplaybook\\_05-2016.pdf](https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2016/05/aspen-ccrc_transferplaybook_05-2016.pdf)



# APPENDIX B:

## A Recipe for a Great Facilitator: A Self-Assessment Tool

Skill Area	Poor (1)	Great (10)	Personal Score (1–10)	Improvement Strategies
Listening	Poor listening skills, including the inability to discern what others are saying, track the line of thought being expressed, or pick up on the subtext of the conversation. Short attention span. Cuts people off mid- sentence. Distracting or closed-off body language.	Ability to hear beyond what is being said to identify the core meaning. Can answer the questions: What does this person’s statement say about what they value? What is the main point they are trying to make? What are they trying to say that others might miss?		
Objectivity	Biased about the subject matter; biased about groups and/or persons involved with or affected by the subject matter. Unable to refrain from commenting about the subject matter or inserting personal opinion into the conversation. Seen as having a position or agenda regarding the issue at hand.	Reflects good “behavioral neutrality” on the subject. Ability to refrain from making personal comments about the subject matter. Does not reveal a personal position on the subject. Remains unbiased and neutral in conversation and when moderating.		
Self-awareness	Lacks awareness of the group’s perceptions of and reactions to the facilitator’s style and behavior. Rigid or inflexible style of delivery and speech.	Sensitive to the group’s perceptions of and responses to the facilitator’s style and behavior. Can flexibly adapt speech and method to best suit the situation.		
Group Awareness	Low awareness of group dynamics. Inability to read body language including when participants are confused, uncomfortable with the conversation, or tuning out.	Aware of group dynamics, including what is signaled by body language. Ability to sense how participants are responding to turns in the conversation. Knows when it is time to move on in the conversation, or when more elaboration is needed on an issue.		

Skill Area	Poor (1)	Great (10)	Personal Score (1–10)	Improvement Strategies
Responsive Control	Either over-controlling or insufficiently assertive. Not able to maintain an appropriate level of control of the group, or to moderate the tenor of the discussion. Inability to reign in dominant or aggressive speakers or to elicit comments from silent participants. Intimidated or “cowed” by experts, politicians and loudmouths.	Knows when and when not to intervene in order to reinforce ground rules, and to keep the conversation on track. Can effectively ensure that all participants have an opportunity to speak by drawing out silent participants or managing dominant or aggressive speakers.		
Sense of Humor	Either excessively dour or serious, or inappropriately or excessively comedic.	Able to use humor appropriately to set a relaxed, informal tone for the conversation, or to defuse a difficult or awkward situation.		
Adaptability	Overly dependent on scripted, predictable environments. Does not handle uncertainty or last-minute changes well.	Able to adapt to unexpected situations with grace and humor, while keeping the key principles and objectives in mind.		
Public Speaking	Poor verbal communication skills. Either intimidated by speaking in front of groups, or has a need to be the center of attention.	Comfortable and eloquent when speaking in public settings; sets a relaxed and respectful tone. Uses language appropriate for the audience. Able to verbally synthesize information well.		
Image	Perceived as either elitist/ aloof, or as overly charismatic. Seen as unprepared or disorganized, short-tempered, manic or volatile.	Seen as warm, calm, approachable; can “connect” with people from a wide range of backgrounds, ages, experiences, etc.		





#### **About Public Agenda**

Public Agenda helps build a democracy that works for everyone. By elevating a diversity of voices, forging common ground, and improving dialogue and collaboration among leaders and communities, Public Agenda fuels progress on critical issues, including education, health care and community engagement. Founded in 1975, Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in New York City.

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#### **About The Kresge Foundation**

The Kresge Foundation is a \$3.6 billion private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grantmaking and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services, and community development in Detroit. In 2015, the Board of Trustees approved 370 grants totaling \$125.2 million, and nine social investment commitments totaling \$20.3 million.

*For more information, visit [kresge.org](http://kresge.org).*

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**For more information about this study, visit:**  
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**Or contact: [highered@publicagenda.org](mailto:highered@publicagenda.org), tel: 212.686.6610**