A GUIDE TO FORUMS

NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS

www.nifi.org

Immigration in America:
How Do We Fix a System in Crisis?

The United States has always been defined as a land of opportunity, a refuge from persecution, and a nation of immigrants. Throughout its history, the United States has welcomed millions of immigrants from every corner of the globe. While most Americans believe that, historically, this influx has stimulated our economy and strengthened our culture, some wonder whether it's still good for our nation.

OPTION ONE

Welcome New Arrivals

The US immigration system is buckling under the strain of excessive backlogs and bureaucracy. We must shore up our existing system and provide an acceptable way for the millions of undocumented immigrants currently living here to earn the right to citizenship.

OPTION TWO

Protect Our Borders

By failing to stem the tide of illegal immigration, we've undermined our national security, stiffened competition for scarce jobs, and strained the public purse. We need tighter control of our borders, tougher enforcement of our immigration laws, and stricter limits on the number of immigrants legally accepted into the country.

OPTION THREE

Promote Economic Prosperity

Immigrants play a key role in keeping the United States economy dynamic and robust. We need to put a priority on our economic needs by annually adjusting the number of immigrants allowed in the country and granting temporary green cards to foreign students graduating from American colleges.

>>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 approach—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 approach. 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 choices. 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 approach. 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 approach, 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 approach when there is so much more that could be said. But in order to make progress, participants need time to weigh all the major approaches 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 approaches,
- all the major choices should be considered fairly,
- they will maintain an open and respective 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 approach. Here are some examples:

OPTION ONE

- What, if any, effect has immigration had on your community?
- What would be the advantage of allowing illegal immigrants currently living here to apply for citizenship under certain conditions? What might be the adverse consequences?
- Do you think that immigrants should be required to speak English in order to become citizens?
- Should small children brought to this country by illegal immigrants be allowed to apply for citizenship when they reach 18 years of age? If so, under what circumstances?

OPTION TWO

- Do you think there should be stricter penalties for employers who hire illegal immigrants?
- If the federal government cannot stem the flow of illegal immigration on our southern borders, should states be allowed to make and enforce immigration laws?
- Do you think we should withhold public health care for illegal immigrants? Do you think it is possible to do so?
- Should we allow fewer legal immigrants to enter this country? If so, what kinds of restrictions would you favor?

OPTION THREE

- Are there immigrants in your community who have started or grown successful businesses?
- Suppose illegal immigration could be stopped in its tracks. How would that affect American farmers? How would it affect food prices?

Questions continued on Page 6.

Questions, continued.

- Do you think there are enough Americans willing or able to take many of the low-skilled jobs, now largely held by immigrants—both legal and illegal? Would Americans work under the same conditions?

- Student visas allow many young people from abroad to earn degrees from US colleges and universities. Should we make it easier for them to stay in the United States after they graduate? If rates were reduced, what do you think corporations would do with the extra money?

>>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 choice
- 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.

Copyright 2011
National Issues Forums Institute
All rights reserved.

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? _____

_____

_____

_____

Which trade-offs were participants most comfortable with? _____

_____

_____

_____

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

_____

_____

_____

Did the group identify shared directions for action? _____

_____

_____

_____

Return with questionnaires to:
National Issues Forums Institute
100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777