



How to Hold a Symposium, or Student Conversation

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STAGE 1: PLANNING

Symposium Topic: It's best to decide on this as early as possible. Make it relevant to the group you want to hear from.

The first Covering Communities symposium at the University of Kansas centered on thefacebook.com, with the discussion focused on community involvement and students' definitions of community. Our second symposium was on news media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the role that bias, or preconceived notions, plays in how people receive and report news.

Timeliness is an important factor. For example, if there is a breaking story on your campus or in your community, buzz surrounding it may be strong and you may want to quickly convene a student group to discuss the topic and its news coverage.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** What is my target group talking about? (Remember, not all issues are interesting to all ages.) Which issues will actively affect the audience I'm trying to reach? How can I communicate this topic in an appealing way?

Participants: Before recruiting, choose which students you want to invite. Do you want them to be available after the event for follow-up focus groups or feedback? If so, pick students who won't be leaving school soon (college sophomores and juniors, as opposed to seniors).

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Am I going to try to branch out from the people and opinions I already know? Where will I find new voices? Do I want to include community residents who aren't students?

Logistics: It's important to confirm a location months ahead if the event will be on a college campus and you want a large venue. Also consider the time of day. For students, a late afternoon or early evening mid-week may work best. Remember to check academic, sports and community calendars to avoid competing with a major event. Plan to provide snacks and beverages. Consider audiovisual needs and make arrangements for equipment and technical help.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Is there a place I can hold the symposium that is well-known among the participants and easy to get to? What else is on the campus or town calendar?

Format: Decide if you want one large group discussion or you want to break into small groups. Plot a detailed timeline for the event. Small group discussions give people more opportunities to speak, and conversations might take unexpected but revealing paths.

Small groups require more moderators to keep the conversation on track, lead the discussion with open-ended questions and take notes to bring back to the overall group. Be sure to train moderators ahead of time. Graduate students were moderators at the Hurricane Katrina event; they had an hour of training the day before.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Is there a professional facilitator who can train the moderators? Do I want to record every table's conversation or just have moderators take notes?

Guest Observers: Invite news professionals and others in the community who can learn from and add to the conversation. You may want them to participate, or simply listen. Be clear on what kind of involvement you'd like, and tell them.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** How can I benefit from the voices of off-campus observers? How can they use what we're discussing? Will they be willing to participate in our evaluation of the symposium once it has taken place?

Consent Forms: If you are conducting the symposium as part of a research project, you may need a consent form. Regardless, be sure to tell participants if you are taping or taking notes, and how you will identify them and use their comments.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Do I need an approved consent form for research purposes? How will I use participants' remarks?

STAGE 2: RECRUITING

Advertising: Use traditional tools for advertising as well as creative ones. We put fliers in hallways where students would see them. We visited classrooms to invite people directly and explain what a "symposium" is – a word not every student knew. We created an event invitation on thefacebook.com to send to select groups of students.

When we held the symposium on Hurricane Katrina, we searched for facebook members who were from New Orleans or belonged to Katrina interest groups. This step, followed by personal e-mails to students who said they were coming, reminded them of the upcoming event.

One successful strategy: Contact Resident Assistants from the campus residence halls and invite them and the students on their floor. Plan to invite more people than you want to come; about one-third will say they're coming, but won't show.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Where do potential participants spend their time? How can I remind them of the event without being annoying? Do I know any RAs who might bring the students in their residence halls?

Target Groups: Market the event to the specific groups the symposium is geared toward, to save time and effort. At the same time, think of how you might attract a broad spectrum of views.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Are there student organizations (i.e. the university paper, radio and TV stations, various clubs) that I need to contact? Who will be affected by the

symposium topic? Do we want to invite news media to cover the event? Will we blog about it?

University Faculty: When working at a university, faculty and staff can help. They can tell you of students who may be interested in your topic, or direct you to a large class where you can speak to tens or even hundreds of students. We found that visiting classrooms was the most effective recruiting strategy. We talked to classes, passed out a card asking for information from interested students, and left an information card about the event. We quickly followed up with e-mails.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Who has large classes where I might be able to talk about the event? Would professors be willing to pass out fliers or offer extra credit to their students for participating?

Moderators: If you're planning small group discussions, consider who might be interested in moderating. We recruited graduate students and required them to come to a training session first. The payoff for them? They learned about small group dynamics and then got practical experience.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Which graduate students may already have an interest in the symposium topic? Will learning how to moderate discussions help them in their own research work?

STAGE 3: THE ACTUAL EVENT

Record Attendance: Have participants sign in and give you their contact information for follow-up opportunities. Have several people assigned to greet participants as they arrive. We asked for names, e-mail addresses, majors, intended year of graduation and how they heard about the event.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Do I have a prepared sign-in sheet? Do I want to create a "Feedback" or "Comments" card they can turn in as well?

Guiding the Conversation:

Conversation Leader: This person helps the group stay on topic, guides discussion and keeps the event on schedule. Make sure to let participants know about any ground rules. The Harwood Institute likens the rules to those for a "kitchen table conversation." Everyone participates, no one dominates.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Who is best associated with the topic I am covering? Who is a strong public speaker and a good listener? Can he or she adapt to whatever comes up during the event and still keep us on track?

The Discussion: It's important to start the symposium with an explanation for the event, along with what is expected of participants. Visual aids help spark conversation and keep people interested. Small group moderators and the overall conversation leader should remember to summarize themes that develop.

Find a way to give participants some kind of "take-away" thoughts: conclusions from the discussion, ideas about how the key points might come up in the future.

- ***Ask Yourself:*** Do I have a structure for the discussion? Are there specific points I don't want to leave out? Am I aware of the typical responses I may get in response to the questions? How can I dig deeper?

STAGE 4: FOLLOW-UP

Survey: It's important to get feedback. The best way is to have participants fill out a card before they leave. You can e-mail a survey using a tool such as SurveyMonkey.com; but remember: Students are busy, and once the event is over, most of them move on to something else. Even those most interested in the topic often don't respond to follow-up emails.

Thank-You Notes: While planning the event, keep a list of everyone who's helped. Professors, department heads and graduate students may all be a part of this list. Send each a thank you letter. A hand-written note stands out in this age of e-mail and text messages.

Consider a follow-up session: After the KU Facebook symposium, we held a small focus group discussion with six participants to expand the discussion. A follow-up conversation should occur within a week or two for maximum benefit.