

Let's Build Our Future

College and University Campus Edition



A nationwide initiative for communities on college campuses and beyond to talk together, think together, and take actions to shape their future



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About Us

The National Issues Forums Institute is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with a mission to equip, empower, and mobilize people to use deliberation to take action for the public good.

Acknowledgements

“What's Next, America?” is informed by the deep insights and effective practices shared with the National Issues Forums Institute by colleagues around the country over the past four decades. Its structure and elements are based on the experiences and learnings of communities that participated in the West Virginia Center for Civic Life’s “What's Next, West Virginia?” and the David Mathews Center for Civic Life’s “What's Next, Alabama?”



“What’s Next, America?”

Do you have concerns about how our democracy is currently working? Take a moment to think and, if you do, write your biggest concern below.

What makes you hopeful about our democracy? Think, and write one thing that makes you hopeful below.

FAST FACTS

While over 65% of Americans trust local governments to handle local problems, less than 40% trust the federal government, according to [a 2025 Gallup poll](#). Similarly, over 50% of rural Americans trust the local news, while [less than 30%](#) trust national news.

- **So what?** Improving our democracy may require some local trust and local problem solving.

74% of respondents said they’d like to partner with someone different from them to achieve a goal that improves their community, according to [a 2025 report](#).

- **So what?** Americans want to work together to solve problems, not just talk about differences.

DID YOU KNOW?

The founders of our nation were super young! Thomas Jefferson was 33 when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, and the youngest person who signed it was 26. Betsy Ross is speculated to have sewn the first American Flag at 24 years old, and Alexander Hamilton was writing public essays in support of the Revolutionary cause before he was 21. Sybil Ludington rode 40 miles through the night to warn of an impending British attack in Danbury, CT when she was 16 years of age. While many of the most prominent leaders in our country today are much older, it hasn’t always been that way.

Democracy Rewind

Take a moment to explore this timeline to see more examples of young people on and off college campuses, since the time of our nation's founding until now, mobilizing each other and their broader communities to support and improve our democracy.

Students at Harvard refused to wear clothing made by British companies at their commencement in 1767 and 1768.

1770's

Leading up to the Revolution, students practiced developing and communicating their own opinions about political events through literary and debate societies, or through their academic work.

1767-1768

1960

College-age students were instrumental in organizing the first-ever Earth Day.

University students – most famously the “Greensboro Four” from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University – led the historic lunch counter sit-ins that became a centerpiece of the Civil Rights Movement.

1970

Today, young people helped pioneer the use of social media to communicate and collaborate on public issues, making civic involvement more accessible.

Many demonstrated to make their voices heard regarding police accountability and civil rights following the killing of George Floyd.

2020

Students are being trained as facilitators in deliberative discussions among peers or in their communities.

2026

They're running nonprofits that bridge political divides; starting nonpartisan organizations demanding Election Day civic education opportunities; and leading organizations that engage and center Gen Z.

What is an example of people your age taking action to strengthen our democracy that is inspiring to you? Write it in the space below and share with your group or a partner.

Now It's Your Turn!

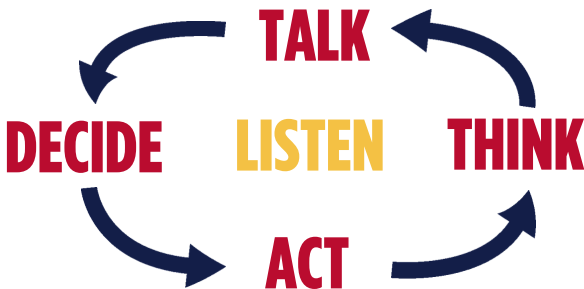
The next several pages provide tools to help you discuss, decide, and act together with people on your campus or broader community.

How long will this take?

Building and improving a community or a nation doesn't happen all at once. The progress we look back on took place over years, even generations, of people coming together, building trust, and working to address challenges step by step. Real, lasting change takes time to understand the issues we face, listen to one another, and find common ground. This guide is designed with that in mind - for your group to work through sustained conversation together to move beyond quick fixes toward meaningful, lasting impact.

What “community” are we talking about?

Prior to beginning the series of conversations outlined in this guide, have a discussion in your group about what community you'll be focusing on for the purpose of these conversations. While many people relate to multiple communities at once, we have found that it is helpful to collectively define which one you'll focus on for now.



Where Are We Now?

This is a discussion about the state of your community—where it is now and where it has been. It's a chance to take stock of its strengths, identify needs, and build a foundation for future work. Think back to the “community” you identified earlier in this guide book as you consider these questions together.

- 1 What factors led to where we are now?
- 2 How has our past shaped the community we are today?
- 3 What, if anything, would we want to retain from the past?
- 4 What are the greatest strengths of our community?
- 5 What are our community's greatest needs?
- 6 What information do we need to move forward? How will we gather it? Who else needs to be involved?

YOUR NOTES

What is surprising you? What new information are you learning? What new ideas are you considering?

MORE NOTES

What is surprising you? What new information are you learning? What new ideas are you considering?

For our next discussion...

We'll be talking about where we want to go. Think about this question: What does the community you want to have look like?

Invite others to be a part of the conversation.

Where Do We Want to Go?

This is a discussion about the options for making positive changes in your community – a challenge your community is facing and/or opportunities your community can build on. You'll have a chance to consider different perspectives, think deeply about potential actions, and set directions together.

- 1 Of the challenges and opportunities that we have identified, which one should we prioritize to work on first?
- 2 How might we go about addressing this challenge or building on this opportunity?
- 3 What are the greatest obstacles we might face if we work toward any of these options?
- 4 What different perspectives do we have about the challenge or opportunity?
- 3 How can we leverage the strengths that we identified in our community?

NOTE: Your group can work through questions 1-5 above for each challenge/opportunity that you'd like to consider.

Take a look back at the priorities you have considered

Which ones address time-sensitive or urgent needs? Which ones are most doable in terms of available time, energy, and resources?

MORE NOTES

What is surprising you? What new information are you learning? What new ideas are you considering?

For our next discussion...

We'll be talking about how we'll get to where we want to go. Think about this question: What are our priorities for action?

Invite others to be part of the discussion.

How will we get there?

Now for the exciting part – how will you go about achieving your goals? It's time to strategize, anticipate problems, think about the places and people where you can go to tap into support, and consider the steps that will move you forward. If we can't do everything at once, where do we start?

- 1 What actions will have the greatest impact?
- 2 What trade-offs are part of the actions we've identified?
- 3 What actions are most doable in the near future?
- 4 What actions require effort over a longer period of time?
- 5 What challenges do we anticipate as we move forward?

Take a look back at the priorities you have considered

Which ones address time-sensitive or urgent needs? Which ones are most doable in terms of available time, energy, and resources?

1. List your ideas

2. Which ideas have most impact and urgency?

3. Which ideas are most doable?

YOUR NOTES

What is surprising you? What new information are you learning? What new ideas are you considering?

Moving to action

Things to consider for the next session

What will your role be in addressing the needs your group has identified?

Who else needs to be involved?

What will you do to invite others?



What's Next? It's up to YOU!

Planning for Local Action

This next step provides an opportunity to review the key insights and reach out to others to be a part of taking action in your community. For a deeper look at planning and hosting an action summit, check out the planning guide at whatsnextamerica.com.

Before the "Action Summit"

- Summarize key concerns and directions that emerged in you discussions
- List action ideas that had the greatest support
- Continue outreach to involve others

During the "Action Summit"

- Prioritize actions
- Develop local action groups
- Make plans to stay connected

You'll find more information about developing a "What's Next America?" initiative in your community in the Planning Guide:

1 Planning your discussions

2 Spreading the word

3 Leading the discussions

4 Moving to action

Staying connected

In order to connect your ideas and work to the rest of the country, please stay in touch! We want to develop opportunities to learn from one another.

- Visit whatsnextamerica.com for resources and updates
- Visit nifi.org and click on "What's Next, America?" tab
- If you'd be willing to be interviewed about your local efforts, contact us at cfernando@nifi.org
- Join others online as we host periodic discussions, workshops, and trainings to share local ideas and learn from others across the country
- Sign up for our newsletter for updates and stories about what is happening across the country

Helping "What's Next, America?" grow

- Invite others to participate
- Find "What's Next, America?" on Facebook and Insta
- Create your own local social media pages
- Share national and local posts with others
- Use our hashtag: [#whatsnextamerica](https://twitter.com/whatsnextamerica)



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Thank you to the community members across the country using these resources to ask "What's Next, America?"

Learn more at whatsnextamerica.com.



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