



*Association  
of American  
Colleges and  
Universities*

## **COLLEGE STUDENT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE**

**Prepared by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the  
Association of American Colleges and Universities**

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## **College Student Focus Group Discussion Guide**

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*This guide was originally prepared for a set of focus groups commissioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and conducted by Peter D. Hart Research in Summer, 2004. The findings of these focus groups can be found at [www.aacu.org/advocacy](http://www.aacu.org/advocacy). The following has been slightly modified based on the results of those focus groups and feedback from AAC&U member individuals. If you use this guide for discussions on your own campuses, we recommend that you use trained facilitators to guide a discussion with students using this outline and these questions only as suggested prompts. This guide is designed for a discussion lasting approximately 120-150 minutes in length.*

### **A. Introduction**

1. First, I would like you to go around the room and introduce yourselves (FIRST NAME ONLY). Please tell me:
  - i. Where you live
  - ii. Where you go to school
  - iii. What your major is or what your current favorite class is

### **B. General Attitudes About College (0:10)**

1. First, give me three words that describe your feelings about college.

PROBE: What are the most positive things about attending college?

PROBE: What are the most negative things about attending college?

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2. Do you think that every high school student in America should aspire to a college degree? Why or why not? Why is it important to go to college?
3. What does a college education mean for individuals? What are the outcomes or results?
4. What does a college-educated public mean for our society as a whole? What are the outcomes or results for society?

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### C. Preparing for College (0:25)

Now I would like to spend a little time talking about the college preparation process. I would like you to think back to when you first started preparing for college, and think about what you were told or what you heard were the best ways to prepare for college. I do not want to focus on the guidance you were given about how to prepare to *apply* to college, but rather the guidance you received about how to best prepare for your college experience generally and in terms of the academic opportunities and challenges you were going to face.

1. First of all, how knowledgeable were you going into college about what to expect from the experience and the academic opportunities that would be available?
2. Do you think that you had a pretty good idea of how to prepare for the academic part of the college experience?
3. And thinking about the advice you received about preparing yourself for college, what were you told?
4. What were the resources or people that you relied on for guidance and direction on how to best prepare yourself for college and its educational opportunities and challenges? Who gave you the best advice?

(PROBE IF NOT MENTIONED:) What about...

Friends

Parents/family

Teachers

College counselors/Guidance counselors

College & university guidebooks—Princeton Review/Petersons/US News

Colleges & universities

5. How well do you think your high school education prepared you to succeed in college?
  - a. Could your high school or high schools have done anything to better prepare you and your peers for college and the educational experience there?

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### D. Expectations For College (0:40)

1. And when you first started thinking about college what were your reasons for wanting to attend?
  - a. What did you hope to get out of your college experience?
  - b. How if at all have your expectations of the college experience changed?
  - c. How good of a job is your college or university doing at meeting your expectations?

PROBE: In what areas does it excel?

PROBE: In what areas is it falling short?

2. **(HANDOUT A)** On this handout you will find a list of reasons people may have for attending college. Please circle the three that you think are the MOST important, and then I'd like to go around the room and talk about what you picked. Please only pick three. Second, please put an X next to the two that you think are the LEAST important.

1. *A college education will bring more career choices and a greater number of job opportunities.*
2. *Attending college will give me the opportunity to meet new and interesting people and experience new social situations.*
3. *A college education will provide me with the knowledge, capabilities, ethics, and values that are essential to having professional success.*
4. *A college degree will help to ensure a higher paying job.*
5. *A college education will help me to be a more critical thinker and problem-solver, better able to adapt in today's ever-changing society and economy.*
6. *A college education will prepare me for a life of civic responsibility and leadership.*
7. *A college education will provide me with the specific skills and knowledge required in the field in which I hope to work.*
8. *Attending college will give me an opportunity to learn about and from people and cultures that are different from my own.*
9. *College will help me to gain more knowledge that will be helpful throughout life—both on and off the job.*

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*10. A college education will help to ensure that I make better, more informed decisions about my future, which will enhance my life in the long run.*

- a. What did you pick and why?
  - b. Which one or two did you think was the least important? Why?
3. What do you believe potential employers are looking for in college graduates?
- a. What are the specific skills that you are learning in college that are important in the professional world?
  - b. When it comes to your professional and career success, are there some skills that are more critical for the longer term and others that matter more for the shorter term?
4. On a scale from A to F, what grade would you assign your college or university on the job it has done in preparing you for professional and career success? What are the key outcomes of a quality college education? What are the most important specific types of knowledge, skills, and experiences to gain from your college experience?
- a. What are the areas of knowledge that you think are most important to study?
  - b. What are the intellectual skills that are most important to attain?
  - c. What are the practical skills that are most important to attain?

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5. **(HANDOUT B)** This handout lists a variety of specific outcomes of a college education. Please circle the 5 YOU think are the most critical for a successful life. Second, please put an X next to the two that you think are the LEAST important for a successful life.

1. *A sense of maturity and how to succeed on your own*
  2. *Improved ability to solve problems and think analytically*
  3. *Time-management skills*
  4. *Independent and critical thinking/reasoning skills*
  5. *Strong work habits*
  6. *Greater commitment to being involved in the community and more engaged and informed about contemporary social and civic issues.*
  7. *Strong writing and oral/speaking skills*
  8. *Tangible business skills, and a specific expertise and knowledge in your field of focus*
  9. *Competency in computer skills*
  10. *Expanded understanding of science and its relevance to other areas of study*
  11. *Expanded knowledge of American culture and history*
  12. *Expanded knowledge of cultures and societies outside the United States*
  13. *Knowledge of and respect for people of other backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and lifestyles*
  14. *Teamwork skills and the ability to get along with and work with people different from yourself*
  15. *Exposure to the business world*
  16. *Sense of values, principles, and ethics*
  17. *Leadership skills*
  18. *Self-discipline*
- a. Thinking about the outcomes that you think are most important, how good a job do you think your college or university is doing at preparing you to be successful and ensuring that you have the knowledge, skills, and experience needed?
- b. Is your college or university graduating students who are ready to compete in and contribute to today's marketplace?

PROBE: In which areas does your college or university excel?

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PROBE: In which areas does it fall short? Where does it need to improve?

- c. How much is your college experience contributing to your social and ethical development?
- d. In what ways has your college experience prepared you to be a responsible and contributing member of your community?



E. Liberal Education (1:15)

1. Have you ever heard the term “liberal education”?
  - a. Before we discuss your impressions of liberal education and what it means, please just write down what it means to you. Then we will come back and discuss it in a few minutes.
2. **(HANDOUT C)** This sheet lists two different views on the primary purpose and goal of a college education. Please read through each statement and then we will discuss your reactions.

*View A: The most important goal of a college education should be to provide students with a broad, well-rounded education that enriches them and allows them to discover their interests and abilities, in order to help them realize their full potential in life.*

*View B: The most important goal of a college education should be to provide students specific career knowledge and skills to help them realize their full potential in the work force.*

- a. What is your reaction to each of these statements?
  - b. Do you agree with both, neither, or only one?
  - c. Which statement comes closer to describing your college education thus far?
3. And thinking about your college experience, to what extent do you think these two views complement each other? Have you had to choose one approach over the other, or do you feel that you can get BOTH the career-specific skills you need AND a well-rounded education to help you discover your interests and abilities?

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4. I would like to go around the room and have each of you tell me what major or majors you have declared.
  - a. What were the key factors in choosing your major?
  - b. Do you feel that your college or university provides you with the opportunity to take courses that interest you or that you feel are important that are outside of your major?  
  
PROBE: How important is this to you?
  - c. How much do you think your choice of a major will matter in terms of your success after college?

5. **(HANDOUT D)** Turning back to liberal education, please read this description of liberal education and then we will discuss your reactions.

Liberal education is a philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility. A liberal education comprises a curriculum that includes general education that provides students broad exposure to multiple disciplines and more in-depth study in at least one field or area of concentration.

- a. What is your reaction to this definition of liberal education?
  - b. How important do you think it is for college graduates to receive and experience a liberal education?
6. To the best of your knowledge, does your college or university offer a liberal education? Why?
  - a. And for those of you who said “YES,” how accurately does this statement describe liberal education at your college or university?  
  
IF “NO,” PROBE: In what ways is this statement inaccurate?
  - b. How important has liberal education been to your educational experience?

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7. What are the advantages of a liberal education?

PROBE: What do you get from a liberal education that you wouldn't get otherwise?

8. Are there disadvantages you see in a liberal education?

PROBE: Are there any other concerns you have about liberal education?

9. Some people say that, while liberal education is a good idea in theory, it is not practical or relevant in today's economy in which it is important to have specific career knowledge and skills in order to get a good job after graduation. Given the cost of higher education today, they describe liberal education as an unnecessary luxury. What is your reaction to that criticism?

10. Do you think that a liberal education can provide you with the necessary knowledge, skills, and preparation to effectively compete in today's dynamic and challenging workforce?

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### F. Wrap-Up

1. To wrap things up, I'd like to go around the room and have each person tell me what one or two things you will take away from this discussion tonight. It can be anything relating to any of the topics we discussed over the last two hours.
2. Thank you very much for your time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## HANDOUT A

1. A college education will bring more career choices and a greater number of job opportunities. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Attending college will give me the opportunity to meet new and interesting people and experience new social situations. \_\_\_\_\_
3. A college education will provide me with the knowledge, capabilities, ethics, and values that are essential to having professional success. \_\_\_\_\_
4. A college degree will help to ensure a higher paying job. \_\_\_\_\_
5. A college education will help me to be a more critical thinker and problem-solver, better able to adapt in today's ever-changing society and economy. \_\_\_\_\_
6. A college education will prepare me for a life of civic responsibility and leadership. \_\_\_\_\_
7. A college education will provide me with the specific skills and knowledge required in the field in which I hope to work. \_\_\_\_\_
8. Attending college will give me an opportunity to learn about and from people and cultures that are different from my own. \_\_\_\_\_
9. College will help me to gain more knowledge that will be helpful throughout life—both on and off the job. \_\_\_\_\_
10. A college education will help to ensure that I make better, more informed decisions about my future, which will enhance my life in the long run. \_\_\_\_\_

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# HANDOUT B

1. A sense of maturity and how to succeed on your own \_\_\_\_\_
2. Improved ability to solve problems and think analytically \_\_\_\_\_
3. Time-management skills \_\_\_\_\_
4. Independent and critical thinking/reasoning skills \_\_\_\_\_
5. Strong work habits \_\_\_\_\_
6. Greater commitment to being involved in the community and more engaged and informed about contemporary social and civic issues \_\_\_\_\_
7. Strong writing and oral/speaking skills \_\_\_\_\_
8. Tangible business skills, and a specific expertise and knowledge in your field of focus \_\_\_\_\_
9. Competency in computer skills \_\_\_\_\_
10. Expanded understanding of science and its relevance to other areas of study \_\_\_\_\_
11. Expanded knowledge of American culture and history \_\_\_\_\_
12. Expanded knowledge of cultures and societies outside the United States \_\_\_\_\_
13. Knowledge of and respect for people of other backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and lifestyles \_\_\_\_\_
14. Teamwork skills and the ability to get along with and work with people different from yourself \_\_\_\_\_
15. Exposure to the business world \_\_\_\_\_
16. Sense of values, principles, and ethics \_\_\_\_\_
17. Leadership skills \_\_\_\_\_
18. Self-discipline \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## HANDOUT C

**VIEW A:** The most important goal of a college education should be to provide students with a broad, well-rounded education that enriches them and allows them to discover their interests and abilities, in order to help them realize their full potential in life.

**VIEW B:** The most important goal of a college education should be to provide students specific career knowledge and skills to help them realize their full potential in the work force.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## **HANDOUT D**

Liberal education is a philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility. A liberal education comprises a curriculum that includes general education that provides students broad exposure to multiple disciplines and more in-depth study in at least one field or area of concentration.