

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What will these conversations create?

These conversations will help you gain a stronger sense of people's aspirations for the community and education. Community Conversations are a window into how people talk about their concerns and lives and create a way to develop or deepen partnerships with non-traditional groups. With this knowledge United Way's can be more effective, more relevant, better mobilize people around education and ultimately have greater impact in their communities.

These conversations are uniquely local, you'll be asking about your community and learning about people's aspirations. But, while the conversations are local because United Ways across the country are participating, your local results will inform a national report that United Way Worldwide is compiling. So you'll be able to learn locally AND benefit from a national effort to mobilize people around creating change on education.

2. What do I ask?

Use the Harwood Community Conversation Guide. This guide has been tested over 20 years and across the country. It lays out the questions to ask and walks you through the conversation. We know from experience that it will work and spark a great conversation.

3. Who should I talk to?

These conversations are designed to help you deepen your understanding of the community – so that means you'll get the most out of them by reaching out to people across the community. Use what you know about your entire community to cast a wide net. You should talk with people in different parts of the community and those you imagine will have different types of answers (you'll likely find folks have more in common than you expected). Test yourself by asking, do we have a strong sense of the breadth of the community? Are we working to go beyond “the usual suspects.” (Find suggestions of groups and individuals to engage see page 21 of the Workbook)

4. How many do I need to do?

For the Campaign for the Common Good, you can start with just one conversation. Together with other local United Ways this will help us gain a broad picture of people's aspirations for their community and education. Beyond that we suggest doing 3 conversations as your next step. We find that three conversations are enough to identify some strong patterns and from there you can decide how to best move ahead. Ultimately don't let doing three conversations prevent you from doing one. Beware of the trap of spending so much time worrying and planning that you never get into the community. After your first conversation the next steps become clearer.

A quick test to see if you've held enough conversations: Could you stand up in front of 100 people and talk about their concerns, aspirations, the issues that they wrestle with – and would they believe you? If not, that's fine, but it probably means you need to spend a little more time in Community Conversation.

5. How long are the conversations?

Community Conversations generally last about 90 minutes.

6. Where should I hold the conversations?

You should hold the conversations in a place where folks are used to getting together and where they will feel comfortable talking. You want to find a place that is “part of the community” – that is usually not a government or “official” place, nor is it a school. You want places that are easily accessible, and open for evening conversations.

Other things to consider when picking a location:

- Look for a comfortable place where you can get work done –not too noisy or full of distractions.
- A place that is easily accessible to participants.
- Examples: Community center, library, YMCA, places of worship, etc.

Frequently Asked Questions

7. How many people should I invite?

Ideally you want a group of between 8-15 for the conversation, the ideal tends to be 12 participants. Generally that means inviting 30 or more people. But don't worry, you can and should work with partners and others to help you reach out. For more information on recruiting for the conversations check out the Community Conversation Workbook. One other note it's a good idea to track RSVPs so that you have a sense of the size of the group. If you find you're much above 15 then it may be a good idea to try for two conversations – on different nights.

8. Who should lead the conversation?

You want someone who can engage participants, someone who is able to remain neutral, and isn't seen as having his or her own agenda. You want someone who is curious about what people think and who will gently push people to consider different perspectives — helping folks to understand why others think. Lastly, a good conversation leader doesn't have to be an expert on education issues, they do have to be committed to guiding, not participating in, the conversations. We have found that it is not a good idea to have educators lead these conversations, their expertise can intimidate people and reduce their openness.

9. How will I gather up and make sense of what I'm learning?

The Community Conversation Workbook includes tools for taking notes and making sense of your findings.

10. What do I do after the conversation?

After the conversations use the note taking tool (Workbook pages 15-16) to gather up what you learned from the conversation. Then you want to set up a meeting with key decision makers in your United Way and use the identifying theme tool (page 17) to talk about the two or three most important things you learned. Remember to focus the conversation on what you learned, rather than the process. Be sure you can answer: What did we learn? What are the implications for our work?

11. Do I need to follow up with people?

These conversations are a great opportunity to build relationships. You'll want to collect names and contact information (use the tools provided as a starting point). These are people that may raise their hand and demonstrate a real interest in giving, advocating and volunteering. After the conversation you'll want to follow up with people. Be sure to thank them for their participation. Share what you learned and how you're going to use what you learned. This can be as simple as telling people that the conversation prompted you to think of new questions about your work, or as weighty as sharing that through these conversations you're considering a new initiative. Whatever follow up you choose be clear with them about expectations and thank them for their time and for sharing. And remember you want to engage with these people over time around the ideas and topics they have expressed interest in.

12. Won't people expect us to take on all of these issues?

It's important to set clear expectations for the conversations. Tell people that you want to listen and learn to get a better sense of how the community thinks. Make sure that they know you'll report back to them what you learn and how you plan to use what you learn and people will be eager to participate.

13. Where else could Community Conversations be useful?

You can use the Community Conversation guide, note taking tool and theme tool with audiences like: workplace employees, Leadership Councils, young leaders, loyal contributors, major gifts/Tocqueville donors, existing partners, student United Ways, and others.