Reflecting on Your Life:  
Grappling with Important Questions

Pointers for Discussion Leaders

Depending on the students’ interests and questions, each discussion group will likely take on its own focus and will likely follow its own path. In other words, not every group will be the same and we think that is a good thing. In the end, the point is not to strictly follow the outline but rather to offer students the chance to talk about what matters to them.

Because some of you have asked, the following general pointers may be helpful to you as you think about facilitating these conversations.

- Spend time planning your sessions in advance. While you may not end up using all that you have prepared, it is helpful to have it ready in case conversation stalls.

- Start the first session with an explanation of how you are approaching your role as discussion leader. You might also want to add a few words about why you wanted to lead a group.

- The discussions should be privileged. Students and discussion leaders need to agree that they will not use names or identifying information when talking about the experience with others who are not part of the immediate group. This should be stated up front.

- You likely will not know the “constitution” of your group in advance. Be aware that some individuals in your group may be more sensitive than others. Initiating a pre-meeting round of introductions over email may help you to learn about the personalities, backgrounds, and experiences of your group.

- The conversation will likely be personal. As the facilitator, you may feel the need to intervene if something uncomfortable is said. During the first session, it is worth telling the group that you may interrupt if you think it is warranted in the moment. Meanwhile, encourage the students to speak up if, and when, they are feeling uncomfortable about something said in conversation.

- Similarly, give some thought, in advance, to how much of your own life you would like to share with the students. Also, you might want to decide in advance if you want to do all or some of the exercises with the students.

- It is important to encourage everyone to participate in the conversation. Watch out for students who want to dominate and find ways to pull others into dialogue. During the first session, make a point that this experience will be more valuable for everyone if the conversation is as inclusive as possible.
• It may be helpful to ask about their experience with conversational patterns at Harvard. Best settings and worst settings? What makes someone “that kid” in section?

• Students may be tempted to turn to you, as faculty and administrators at the college, for the answer or the “final word” on an issue or question. Encourage them to question and push each other, rather than always relying on you to advance the conversation.

• If you plan to have a co-facilitator of your group, meet with that person in advance to discuss your thoughts and plans for each session. What will be your different roles?

• Consider the set-up of the space you are using for your group. Would you prefer to sit around a table or to arrange chairs in a more casual circle?

• Each discussion is meant to last approximately 90 minutes. Offer the students a break at some point during each session. Keep an eye on the clock and try to end on time.

• It may be helpful to keep notes on a dry erase board, black board, or flip chart.

• Having name tags or name plates in front of each participant will be especially helpful in the first session so that everyone can always refer to each other by their preferred name.

• Encourage the students to bring their own paper and pen to each session or be prepared to provide it for them. Make photocopies of any materials that you might want to distribute to the students.

• Offering snacks and drinks may help to make the session feel casual. (Hint: the students love berries, fruit, baked goods, and anything else that is not readily available in a dining hall.) You have a budget of $100 for snacks and supplies.

• You might want to keep notes for yourself about significant topics of conversation that came up during discussion. At the start of the subsequent discussion, it’s nice to be able to offer the students a “re-cap” of what was discussed the week prior.

• Past facilitators have found it helpful to communicate with each other in between sessions. Consider sending an email report to other facilitators, noting what exercises worked well or things that you would have done differently in hindsight.