

## ***Reflecting on Your Life: Grappling with Important Questions***

### **A Note to Discussion Leaders:**

The outline provided below is meant to provide you with a possible format for your discussion group. Each of the three sessions begins with several primary questions that are meant to be the focus of that day's discussion. To help frame and inspire conversation, multiple *optional* exercises and general discussion questions have been provided for each session. If you choose to use one of the exercises, know that there will likely only be time to do one or two exercises per meeting (given the total length of time allotted for each session). The sessions are designed sequentially and many of the suggested discussion questions build on issues discussed in previous meetings.

### **Goal of the Project:**

*The goal of the project is to create an opportunity for freshmen – outside of the classroom – to reflect on their lives. Over the course of three sessions, students will be asked to grapple with multiple important questions. Who am I? Where am I headed and what is my ultimate personal dream? How might my college experience influence my dream? What do I value and will my time in college impact my values? What are my responsibilities, if any, to my community and to make the world a better place?*

### **Session 1: THE LIFE I WANT TO LEAD**

Who am I? Where am I headed? What is my ultimate personal dream? How might my college experience influence and contribute to my ultimate personal dream?

#### Outline of Session One

##### I. Welcome and Introductions:

- Open session with welcome to the group. Explain the purpose of *Reflecting on Your Life* and remind students of history of program (started in spring 2008 after graduating seniors had commented that Harvard should have a class on how to live life). For some, beginning to answer the question “what does it mean to live a good life?” means taking time to think about a personal dream, personal values, and personal responsibilities to a local and global community. Remind students that this is a project of the Freshman Dean's Office in collaboration with Professor Richard Light and Professor Howard Gardner. It might interest students to know that over 200 freshmen were interested in participating in *Reflecting on Your Life* this spring.
- Invite everyone (including yourself) to introduce themselves. Rather than sticking to the usual information (name, hometown, etc), consider asking students a more pointed question. – e.g. What is your biggest surprise in coming to Harvard? What's one of the significant items that you brought with you to college, from home (this can be literal or metaphoric) and what is one thing that you left behind? Name one thing that you've always wanted to do, but have never done?

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- Discussion leader should review his or her role in facilitating the conversation. It may be helpful to note early on that the program is meant to be a dialogue between students and that the exchange will be more fruitful if all participate.

II. Ground Rules: Initiate a conversation with the students about how to have a productive dialogue. Given the subject matter, and the potential that students and discussion leaders may share personal, sensitive information, conversations should be privileged. While students and discussion leaders may talk with others (outside of the group) about the content of the discussions, names and identifying information should never be used. Discussion leaders could also invite the students to brainstorm other principles or ground rules for the conversations.

III. Getting Started Exercises (choose one):

Exercise #1: This exercise will help students to get thinking about the questions that are on their minds and will help you to know what they want to talk about. It's also an easy way to ensure that everyone participates.

1. Distribute blank sheets of paper and pens to all students. Ask them to take a few minutes to write down the questions that are on their minds--the questions that they would like to discuss with their peers--over the course of the next three weeks. They should NOT write their names on the paper. Explain that you are going to collect the papers when they are done and that the questions written on the papers will be read aloud.
2. Once it appears that the students have had enough time to think and write, collect all the papers. Shuffle them, and redistribute to the students, making sure that students do not get their own original paper.
3. Ask the students to read the questions aloud, one at a time.
4. After listening to all the questions, try to synthesize themes that you heard. Ask the students which questions they think are the most compelling.
5. Save the papers for the next session, as the students' questions may be a helpful starting point for that conversation. Or, take them out at the end of the first session and ask students to choose the question that they would like to start with at the second session. Either way, it's useful if you can tie future conversations back to any of the original questions raised by the students.

Exercise #2: This activity will help to break the ice and will help the students start thinking about what's important to them.

1. Develop a list of 12-15 thought-provoking but fairly basic questions. The questions should be the kind of question that will encourage the responder to need to reflect a bit before answering – e.g. what fictitious character do you most relate to and why? What do you hope to learn from being in college? What three words best describe you? What's something you've always wanted to do but were afraid to try? What is one of your goals for 2014?
2. Write each question on a small piece of paper. Fold up the papers and put them in a small bowl.

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3. Send the bowl around the circle, instructing each student to take one piece of folded paper from the bowl. Ask them to read the question and ponder the answer.
4. Invite students to randomly read aloud and answer the question they got from the bowl. Ask them to introduce themselves again before they begin talking.

IV. Discussion Prompts: Now that the group is acquainted and “warmed up” start the conversation with a brief reflective activity. Explain to the students that you are hoping this first session will give them time to think and talk about their identities and their dreams for themselves.

Reflective Activity #1: This activity is intended to get the students to discuss what they think about their past and current lives as well as how they aspire to be in the future. (This exercise can likely be modified and used in different ways, depending on what prompt you give the students. Feel free to be creative!)

1. Spread the packet of laminated images face up on a table.
2. Invite the students to look through the images and to pick out three images that they think best represent the following prompts:
  - Myself before coming to Harvard
  - Myself as a current Harvard student?
  - Myself as a Harvard graduate – maybe 10 years from now.
3. As they are perusing the images, encourage them to think about what they value about their lives currently? What do they wish they could change? Likewise, ask them to consider their future. What do they think will make them feel fulfilled in the future? How do they hope to feel about their lives, 10 years from now.
4. Once each student has selected their images, invite each member of the group to share with the group, explaining what each image meant to them and why.
5. After the group has shared their images and reflections on those images, you might follow-up with various group discussion questions such as:
  - What do you notice about the you of the “past” and the you of the “present”?
  - Who or what do you think has been the greatest influence on the you of the “past”? What about the present?
  - What were you expecting college (aka “the present”) to be like?
  - What commonalities do you notice amongst the group, especially when thinking about the present?

Reflective Activity #2: This exercise, which asks students to articulate their “ultimate personal dream,” will help students begin to move beyond the present to a more robust contemplation about the future. This activity tends to be VERY hard for the students. It may be encouraging to remind students that Henry David Thoreau, who attended Harvard from 1833-1837 and lived in Hollis Hall, said “I have learned, that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours...”

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1. Give each student a blank sheet of paper.
2. Ask the students to write a scenario of their life, 25 years from now. The scenario should capture their major commitments and pleasures. Encourage the students to be colorful and detailed. For instance, instead of “having meaningful work and enjoying family” a student might start with something like: “living in a cabin in the rural northwest, starting an environmental organization with my legal training, and home-schooling our four children”. If they would prefer not to write, drawings or random thoughts are fine as well.
3. Invite students to pair up and share their “ultimate personal dream” with their partner.
4. After several minutes, bring the whole group back together and ask one or two students to present their “ultimate personal dreams”.
5. Raise several follow-up questions with the whole group:
  - What excites you most about your dreams and the future you imagine for yourself?
  - What are your fears about your future?
  - What will be the greatest challenge for you at Harvard? After Harvard?
  - What are the opportunities here and now – in college – that might move you toward realizing your dreams?
  - Can you share a DREAM you had, that just didn’t work out? Did you learn anything from this experience, beyond the predictable disappointment that your dream didn’t work out? Novelist William Faulkner talked about the importance of ‘magnificent failure’—what might he have meant about that?
  - What sacrifices will you have to make to realize your dream?
  - How will your friends describe you in 25 years?

V. Concluding Moment:

1. Using no more than one word, ask students to describe their reaction to the day’s discussion.
2. Jot down the words they use in case you want to use them to summarize the discussion at the start of the next session.

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**Session 2: REFLECTING ON VALUES**

What do I value? Will my time in college impact my values?

Outline of Session Two

I. Welcome and Introductions

- Ask for another round of introductions, as a way to remind everyone of names.
- During the introductions, encourage students to share a “take-away” from the last session. This will help to launch the conversation and will serve as a bridge between session one and session two. Or, ask students to share a highlight from the past week. Asking the students to identify a highlight will help set a reflective and yet positive tone for the conversation.
- Consider offering a “summary” of what you heard the students saying at the last meeting. Maybe share some of the questions that they generated at the start of the first session or share some of the words they used to describe the session at its conclusion. These “reminders” will help to build a bridge between what was discussed at the first session and what will be discussed at the second.
- Explain that this second session will offer them time to reflect on their values and what really matters to them.

II. Discussion Prompts: As with session one, the following reflection activities will help spark conversation and contemplation on values.

Reflection Activity #1: Core Values Assessment from Center for Ethical Leadership ([www.ethicalleadership.org](http://www.ethicalleadership.org)). This exercise will ask all students to identify the values that are of greatest significance.

1. Pass out a list of core values (found in your packet of materials). Ask the students to review the list and to consider for themselves whether any additional values should be added. The group may decide to add aspects of life that they value, such as health. They can add whatever they like to the list even if you might not think of health as a value.
2. Of the values listed on the sheet, ask the students to circle the eight that seem to them to have the most import personally.
3. Next ask the students to choose the four values, from the eight they originally selected, that seem most significant.
4. Lastly, ask the students to choose the two that are their “core” values.
5. Once the students are finished, ask for volunteers to explain how they chose their two “core” values.
6. Follow-up with questions such as:
  - What is a “value”? Are all of these concepts on this list values?
  - Have these qualities, traits, and values always been important to you? Have they changed over time?
  - In what ways might your values or convictions be challenged or strengthened while in college?
  - What values were not chosen and why?

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- Do you believe that there exist, in your life, certain moral, ethical, absolute values? Or do you think of living your life as being hesitant to “judge” other people, and other entire cultures? Might your TIME AT HARVARD help you to think about resolving this question for yourself?
- Would your family members have chosen the same values? Your friends?
- What happens when our values conflict? These moments can be stressful and often lead us to do something uncharacteristic.

Reflection Activity #2: This exercise will give students a chance to see if their daily activities aka “commitments” match their values aka “convictions” (Sull, Donald N. and Dominic Houlder, “Do Your Commitments Match Your Convictions?” *Harvard Business Review on Managing Yourself*. p. 70-102. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA. 2005.)

This exercise is best to do after having run Reflection Activity #1.

1. Ask students to draw two lines down a piece of paper, making three open columns.
2. In one column, ask students to make a list of their daily activities. They should be sure to somehow note their major commitments (i.e. work-study job at Office of Career Services, IM rep for entryway, public service groups, etc)
3. Once they are finished, ask them to make a list of four of their values/convictions in the other column (i.e. peace, justice). These should be four of the values that they found most compelling in the earlier activity.
4. Encourage the students to consider the two lists side-by-side. Invite them to draw lines connecting any of their commitments that match their convictions.
5. Some follow-up questions may be helpful for getting the group to reflect:
  - Do you see anything surprising between your two lists? Any omissions?
  - How are your current commitments providing you an outlet for exploring new fields of study, new skills, and/or new experiences?
  - How does your ultimate personal dream, developed in the last session, relate to your current commitments, or your core values?
6. As a conclusion to this activity, ask the students to make a list, in the final column on their paper, of the things they WISH they spent more time doing.

Reflection Activity #3: By focusing on a person they admire, students will be subtly encouraged to delve into what is most important to them. Also, if all students are asked to participate, this exercise can help students to get to know each other through the stories they tell about their role models.

1. Invite students to get into pairs.
2. Ask students to talk with their partner about a person they admire.
3. Each pair should consider the following questions: What do you admire about this person? What are this person’s values? In what way are you similar to the person you admire and in what way are you not? Are there any aspects of the person that are less admirable? In the last session, we discussed your dreams for your own life. How do your own hopes and dreams relate to the life of the person you admire? What lessons can you learn from his or her life that might help guide you in realizing your own dreams for your life?

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III. Concluding Moment: Drawing upon the commitments v. commitments activity from earlier in the session, ask each student to identify one concrete step they can take this semester to realign their days/time with one of their values.

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**Session 3: MAKING MEANING OF THE LIFE I WANT TO LEAD**

What are my responsibilities, if any, to my community? What are my responsibilities to make the world a better place?

Outline of Session Three

I. Welcome

- For the sake of friendly and inviting conversation, consider whether it is once again important to remind each other of names. Ask students to share something that they have been thinking about since the last session. Or, being conscious of what's happening at this point in the term, ask students to comment on how they are dealing with pre-midterm stress.
- Introduce the session by explaining that today's conversation is meant to begin to answer the question about how to live a good life. Students will be asked to consider the meaning of their dreams and their values, as a step toward discerning their purpose and responsibilities.
- Again, if possible, draw connections to the questions the students wrote during the first session.

II. Discussion Prompts: As you plan this session, you may want to consider whether you have time to do four reflection activities. Planning to do three of the exercises below may be more realistic, leaving time for organic conversation and tangents.

Reflection Activity #1: This exercise utilizes a "case study" to prompt discussion about living, responsibility, and happiness.

1. Copy and distribute to students a copy of the *Parable of Success*, included in your discussion leader packet.
2. Ask the students to consider the life that the fisherman is living. What is he doing for himself? For his family? His community?
3. It may also be revealing to ask the students to relate to the characters in the parable. Whose path or philosophy do the students want to follow, if any?
4. This parable can also be a good segue to prompt students to think about responsibilities. What responsibilities do we have to our communities? Who are we responsible to?

Reflection Activity #2: This exercise asks students to very directly consider their responsibilities as well-educated people.

1. Most everyone has heard the expression, "to whom much is given, much is expected...."
2. Pair up with a partner to discuss what these words mean to you? Do Harvard students have more responsibility than students attending other universities or not going to college at all?
3. Do you consider this expression a serious bit of philosophy or just a platitude? How might this thought affect the way you live your life?
4. How do you currently think about your responsibilities to your family? To your community? To the broader world? If you recall the dream you created for yourself

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in session one, and then think ahead those 25 years, do you think about your future responsibilities in a different way?

Reflection Activity #3: Students participating in *Reflecting on Your Life* often raise questions about happiness and its meaning. Push students to examine this issue through reflection on the concepts of 1) good, 2) useful, 3) successful, and 4) happy life.

1. Break the students into four groups. Assign each group a topic: What constitutes a good life? What constitutes a useful life? What constitutes a successful life? What constitutes a happy life?
2. Ask the students to define what it means to live that certain type of life. They should keep a record of their conversation and then to report findings to the group.
3. After hearing their reports, ask them to respond to what they've heard from each other.
  - What are the similarities and differences among the types of lives?
  - Can you lead a good, useful, successful, happy life all at once?
  - How would they describe their current lives? Happy? Successful? What makes it so?
4. If feasible, shift the conversation toward the issue of finding one's purpose. Helen Keller said, "many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose."
  - How would you describe your purpose up until coming to Harvard? What is your purpose now? Is it different from before?
  - How do you imagine you'll determine your future purpose?
5. To conclude, try to tie the question of happiness and the future back to past sessions.
  - As you think about your dream for your life, and your personal values, what aspects of your future do you imagine will bring you the greatest happiness? Or perhaps the greatest fulfillment?

Reflection Activity #4: This writing-based exercise will act as a time capsule of sorts for students, and serves as a good capstone for *Reflecting on Your Life*.

1. Bring a stack of blank paper and envelopes to distribute to the students.
2. Encourage the students to take time to write a letter to themselves. As a prompt for the letter, you might ask the students to respond to any of the following statements or you could make up one on your own:
  - What matters to me is...
  - The life I want to lead is...
  - Annie Dillard noted "how we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives."
3. Students should write their name on the front of the envelope and should write the semester and year when they would like the letter to be mailed back to them. The date should be written on the back flap of the envelope. For example, if a student wants their letter returned to them during their sophomore fall, they would write fall 2014.
4. Direct the students to put their letter in the envelope and seal it. Collect the letters from the students and bring them to the FDO. The FDO will store the letters and will send the letters at the appropriate time.

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III. Wrapping-Up *Reflecting on Your Life*: Bringing *Reflecting on Your Life* to conclusion is difficult, especially because of the breadth of issues discussed. Thank the students for participating and for their commitment to the group. Acknowledge the pleasure of getting to know each of them and encourage them to stay in touch if it seems appropriate.

1. As a final exercise, ask each student to share:
  - What has *Reflecting on Your Life* meant to you?
  - What will you do, moving forward, to continue the thinking and conversation that you've done here?