

PRSA



voices 4 everyone

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
TOOLKIT

'Common Ground' & Conversation



Introduction and Purpose

America is at an inflection point as more people are politically and socially polarized on key issues affecting our democracy and stability. PRSA's Voices4Everyone initiative aims to help individuals, groups and organizations engage with those they disagree with in a constructive and respectful manner. Common Ground & Conversation mirrors the Jeffersonian Dinners, which Thomas Jefferson first held in June 1790. Considered one of the most momentous dinner parties in history, the concept brings together key influencers with differing points of view to build connections, strengthen relationships, and find common ground around issues of relevance. PRSA sees the value in conducting similar engagements to help people in local communities across America find common ground and ways to work together. PRSA strives to reduce polarization and incivility in America by helping people better understand each other's point of view through civil conversation and listening.

Event Objectives

1. Guests better understand opposing viewpoints.
2. Guests feel their views have been heard and respected.
3. Guests see the value in engaging with people they disagree with to find common ground and ways to work together.
4. Increase general awareness of the PRSA Voices4Everyone initiative and its role in helping Americans find common ground through civil discourse during Jefferson Dinners.
5. Increased PRSA members' affinity for the "Common Ground" model to bridge people across differences and increase civility in America.

The event can be any type of setting that encourage small group conversation around a a select topic of interest: Breakfast, brunch, lunch, or dinner.

'COMMON GROUND' & CONVERSATION PLANNING CHECKLIST

Pre-Event

1. Develop a budget for your event to include expenses for food, beverages and tips.
 - Find a location to conduct the event that offers a private indoor or outdoor dining area. Reserve the space for 2 1/2-3 hours and consider the best time of day for maximum participation.
 - Many venues offer a private dining space with a minimum purchase of food and beverages.
 - To reduce interruptions, work with the venue to create a fixed menu and per person cost so that guests can order their meal upon arrival and then focus on the discussion.
 - Recommend booking the location at least 4 weeks out so that you have time to send out save-the-date invites to selected guests.
2. Plan on inviting a group of 8-12 guests plus 3-4 who will help facilitate the event.
3. Determine your event's funding sources.
 - This may include creating sponsorship offerings depending on the size and scope of your group.
 - Keep it simple. Sponsors who are also guests, PRSA members, PR/marketing businesses and community groups focused on social change are all good options to consider.
4. Conduct secondary research to determine hot-button issues impacting your local community and select one issue to be the focus for your event. Choosing the topic is vital to the rest of your planning and meeting the event objectives, so take time to think through a few topics, if needed, to choose one that is of high concern to those in your local area.
5. Scan local media coverage, social media posts, community groups, and government sites for individuals who are passionate about the selected topic. As you make your guest list, ensure you include a diverse mix of individuals with differing perspectives, backgrounds, and social capital. Include underrepresented voices as well as senior decision-makers and activists connected to the chosen topic.

'COMMON GROUND' & CONVERSATION PLANNING CHECKLIST

6. Once you have your topic, venue, date of your event, and potential guest list confirmed, send out your save the date at least 3 weeks in advance.
 - The save the date should be short, succinct and impactful so that the guests clearly understand the purpose and objectives of the event.
 - Recommend inviting a first round of guests, and depending on who can make it, have another round of potential guests ready to invite.
7. During the weeks leading up to the event, develop a list of questions that will spark deep thought and discussion during your event. Review current media reporting, how different points of view on the topic are being discussed, and where there is room to find common ground.
8. Determine your event support staff.
 - The moderator, or co-moderators, have a very important role keeping the conversation flowing and posing questions.
 - Other support may include someone to take notes during the event, another to assist guests with any questions/issues they have to minimize disruptions, and 1-2 members of your team to participate in the discussion.
9. Develop a PR/communications plan that includes pitching the event to local media, event photos (if approved by guests), collecting short testimonials after the event from a few guests, doing short FB Live/IG stories during or post event, and a post-event news release.
 - Note: Common Ground events are not media events, i.e., the purpose is to create a safe space for discussion about critical topics in a civil environment
 - Media awareness should be limited to post-event criteria.
 - Events that have been conducted to date have found guests are more open to discussion in a media-free environment.

'COMMON GROUND' & CONVERSATION PLANNING CHECKLIST

Event Day

1. On the day of the event, set up a pre-event mixer for 30 minutes that gives guests time to arrive, meet fellow guests, and place their fixed menu order. This will allow you to maximize discussion time.
2. Once all guests are seated, provide a brief introduction about the event and have each guest introduce themselves. This really helps with getting everyone comfortable with sharing their perspectives and allows each person to be heard.
3. Provide event ground rules (see below) to your guests before the discussion starts, and answer any questions in advance. Move on to posing your first discussion question.
 - Be open to letting the conversation bounce from guest to guest but politely redirect the group if one person dominates the conversation or if you need to move on to the next question.
4. During the event have the scribe close enough to be able to type notes during the event or, if allowed by guests, you can audio or video record.. Ensure you get permission from your guests before recording.
5. As the discussion closes, ask your guests for candid feedback about the event, what they liked about it and what they'd like to see improved. Find out if they are comfortable with sharing a contact list of all guests. Also ask if they are willing to be interviewed by the media about their experience.

Post Event

1. Post about the event on social media, tagging your sponsors and key event guests the day after your event. Be ready to engage and respond to comments. Also, share the social media posts with event guests and sponsors.
2. Within 2-3 days of the event, send out a thank-you to all guests and include the event notes taken during the event.
3. Collect quotes from 2-3 event guests, complete your news release and send it out to local media along with event photos.

Event Rules

One person talks to the whole table and the whole table listens. Then another person talks to the whole table and so on. That's 12 brains on one topic. It's powerful and unique. This technique allows for deep listening and gives guests a chance to connect with each other across differing viewpoints.

References

- PRSA Voices4Everyone - voices4everyone.prsa.org
- Braver Angels - braverangels.org
- Jefferson Dinner - jeffersondinner.org
- The Village Square - tlh.villagesquare.us

EVENT SUMMARY EXAMPLE

On April 21, 2022, San Diego State University PRSSA Chapter members and the PRSA V4E program co-hosted a pilot event called, "Finding Common Ground," which brought together community members to **discuss and debate their diverse perspectives about San Diego County homelessness and affordable housing.**

In coordination with the [Public Relations Society of America's Voices4Everyone program](#), SDSU's **PRSA Student Chapter is the first Chapter in the country (of more than 300 Chapters)** to conduct this event modeled after the [Thomas Jefferson Dinners](#) he hosted to broaden perspectives, bridge divides and cultivate shared understanding. Funding for the event was covered by Reidinger Public Relations.

- Staci Reidinger, PRSA V4E Committee member and SDSU PRSSA Chapter Senior Adviser, partnered with several SDSU students to plan this event, which included:
- Selecting a polarizing discussion topic relevant to San Diego County.
- Creating a diverse guest list of senior officials, activists, service providers and at-risk individuals.
- Selecting the date, time, venue and event menu.
- Reaching out to invite selected guests.
- Developing a list of questions to ask event guests to spark candid responses and conversation.
- Developing a communications plan to support pre-, during and post-event messaging.

The event was an amazing success with 12 event guests in attendance as well as four SDSU students helping to facilitate the event and two SDSU PRSSA Board leaders. Before the event discussion began, guests learned about PRSA, the V4E Program and how "Finding Common Ground" originated. A scribe took notes during the event and another moderated the discussion with the PRSA V4E member on hand to help with navigating the conversation as needed.

All guests were very authentic in their responses to the topic questions, and despite differences of opinions, everyone stayed civil and respected each other's points of view. Although we prepared a list of 12 questions for the evening, the conversation between guests allowed us to naturally answer most of the questions and develop a few more that were not previously considered.

At the end of the event, all guests agreed this was a very valuable event, all wanted to share their contact information with each other (99% did not know each other before this event) and all wanted a copy of our event notes to reference as needed. The event notes act as qualitative data for guests to reference later and reduce the need for guests to take notes, which could distract from the conversation. For future events, if all guests opt in, audio and/or video recording the event would be optimal to help with post-event publicity, social posts, etc.

Additionally, several event guests provided feedback about what they liked best about the event and what they would like to see improved.

Guest feedback included:

- Really enjoyed meeting new people passionate about this topic and learning from them.
- New, creative way to get people to open up about their point of view; usually attend events where we are mostly standing up at a mixer and only really talk to a few people; this event allowed us to hear from 14 different people throughout the night.
- Would like to see more underrepresented voices about this topic at the table like someone who is or was homeless.
- Having someone moderate the discussion with guiding questions helped keep us focused and allowed us to touch on several important issues.
- Would like to have the students more engaged in the conversation because their opinions are very important.
- More elected officials would be helpful so that our opinions could influence the policies and programs they develop.
- Would prefer a private room vs. semiprivate because it was a bit hard to hear everyone speaking with other event guests in the venue.
- Absolutely loved the event format where we ordered our three-course meal ahead of time, had drinks served and we could focus on the event conversation; sitting down at one table really made sharing comments easier.
- When is the next event like this? Count me in and I'll help bring more elected officials to the table.

Event guests included:

- San Diego County District Attorney Summer Stephan
- Deputy Chief SD County District Attorney Rachel Solov
- PATH San Diego Regional Director Hanan Scrapper
- Wesley House Student Residence (SDSU) Executive Director Lisa Norombaba
- Lucky Duck Foundation Program Manager Will Shea
- Former SD County Board of Education Mark Powell
- Interfaith Community Services Development Director Fiona King
- Former Regional Task Force on Homelessness Vice Chair and Activist Michael McConnell
- City of Oceanside Director of Housing and Services Leilani Hines
- Regional Task Force on Homelessness San Diego Director of Policy and Communications Jordan Beane
- SDSU Economic Crisis Response Team Associate Director Keiara Allen
- SDSU PRSSA Chapter Professional Adviser and Reidinger PR President Staci Reidinger
- SDSU PRSSA Chapter President, School of Journalism and Media Studies Undergrad Erin Barker
- SDSU PRSSA Chapter member, PR Major Elle Seeler
- SDSU PRSSA Chapter member, PR Major Julie Johnson
- SDSU PRSSA Chapter member, Business Marketing Major Charity Christie-Foster
- SDSU PRSSA Chapter member, PR Major Rocio Rodriguez

Quotes from two students who helped organize the event:

“It was great to see how helpful everybody was, how they all feel passionate about resolving homelessness and to learn they all know that it begins with just giving these people a home,” shared **Rocio Rodriguez, SDSU PRSSA Chapter member and event organizer.**

“I volunteered for this event because I always learn and/or read about events like this one. It’s rare that instead of just learning about something, I get to participate,” shared **Elle Seeler, SDSU PRSSA Chapter member and event organizer.**

“Something that stuck with me throughout the event was how civil the conversation was,” Seeler added. “Every individual was respectful and truly listened to each other. Specifically, about homelessness in San Diego, I think it was incredible to hear from an ethical perspective how the homeless need to be treated with humanity and cared for in a humane way. It was amazing to hear that that was a priority to many of the guests attending,” added Seeler.

Looking Ahead

Overall, this pilot event exceeded our expectations. We weren’t sure how many guests would be interested in attending our event because it was new, and we didn’t know if our moderating techniques would lead to a fruitful debate. But thankfully it did work, and we believe the “Finding Common Ground” event is an excellent civic engagement tool for PRSA V4E to promote across our PRSA and PRSSA Chapters.



V4E is a strategic, evergreen community brain trust within PRSA; a positive space to address critical issues impacting the Society. A catalyst for creating social change, V4E offers a robust marketplace of ideas empowering PRSA thought leadership, and underscoring the role, value, and power of public relations for advancing and serving the public good.

Share your strategic work with the V4E Task Force.
V4E Content Contributor Form

Contact the V4E Task Force to share ideas and offer expertise at

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