

COMMUNITY BUILDING ACTIVITIES

History of Your Name

Students and the group leader sit in a circle. Each person introduces themselves and offers an explanation of their name. For instance, a student might explain that they are named after a family member from a past generation or that their name has a special meaning in their culture.

Twenty (or so) Questions

Give each member of the group a small piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Invite them to write a question that they would want to ask of anyone in the class. After each student has written a question, ask them to fold up their pieces of paper and add them to a basket or hat. Once you have collected all the questions, send the container of questions around the room and ask each student to take a piece of paper. Each student should now hold a question written by someone else in the room. Make sure that no one gets their own question. Then, ask the students to go around the room introducing themselves and answering the question prepared by one of the other members of the class.

Pennies

Collect enough pennies for every student in your class/ section. If possible, choose pennies that are imprinted with a year between 1993 and 2011 (more recent years are preferred). Invite each student to take a penny. Ask the students to look at the year on the penny and to think of something that happened in their life during that year, or something of significance that happened in the world, during that same year. Give the students some time to think about this. Then, ask them introduce themselves and to share the story.

Step-into-the-Circle

Students and the group leader stand and form a circle. Using a pre-determined list words and phrases, participants step into the circle when they identify with the word or phrase that is read aloud. For instance, if the phrase “I am from the southern part of the United States” is read, a student from Mississippi would step into the circle. The words or phrases can get more personal and deep if the group seems to be safe and trusting. The participants can get involved by calling out their own words or phrases. Encourage the group not to react vocally when either a large group, only a few, or no one, steps into the circle.

Share an Object

Invite every member of the class/ section to come to the meeting with an object that is significant to them. At the meeting, ask the students to present their object and share the story that corresponds.

Interesting Facts

Give each student an index card and a pen/pencil. Ask them to write down something about their background, family, childhood, education, etc. that is important to their identity. This fact does not need to be something extremely personal but something that is at least significant and that they are willing to share. Let them know that you’ll be collecting the cards and then redistributing them at random amongst the group. After the students have had time to think of a fact and write it down, you can collect and redistribute the cards. Once everyone has a card (make sure they did not get their own), ask them to stand up and try to find the person in the group who connects to the fact on the card. Encourage them to introduce themselves to each other as they are chatting about the facts on the cards. Once most people have made the connections, ask the group if they would like to reveal their facts to each other.

BINGO

In advance, prepare several special BINGO boards that have “unique experiences, talents, or interests” in the boxes instead of numbers. For example...

- First language was not English
- Is a vegetarian or vegan
- Traveled more than 500 miles to get to Harvard University
- Grew up in a rural area
- Is an agnostic
- Knows how to sew
- Plays a musical instrument

Photocopy the boards so that you have enough for each participant. Make sure everyone has a pencil or pen. The students must walk around the room, getting to know the other students until they meet another student who “grew up on a farm,” for example. The student from a farm then writes their initials in the box on the other student’s form. (An optional trick would be to tell the students that they must ask each other two other random questions before asking whether or not they “grew up on a farm.”) The goal is for everyone to fill in every spot on their BINGO board. Being done first does not mean that you have won. Instead, people who are done early should help introduce students to others.

Trainwreck

This activity involves lots of movement. Caution participants to be careful not to bump into each other as they are playing. Participants stand and form a circle. One person should volunteer to be in the middle. The person in the middle calls out a word or phrase that applies to them and that they think may also apply to someone else in the group. For instance, assuming the person in the middle is from MA, they would yell “anyone who grew up in Massachusetts.” At this point, anyone who grew up from Massachusetts must leave their spot in the circle and move to another location in the circle, vacated by someone else from MA. If the person in the middle cannot get to another spot quick enough, or is the only person from MA, then they must remain in the middle. They must start again by trying to come up with another identifier that they think they will have in common with someone else. If the student in the middle absolutely cannot think of something that they might have in common with another, they yell “trainwreck.” At this point, everyone in the circle moves to a new spot and the game restarts or concludes.

What’s Most Important to Me

On a sheet of paper, participants list 10 characteristics of their identity. Examples: gender, race, ethnicity, religion, hobbies, interests, etc.

Then participants are asked to discard one of these aspects of their identity, the aspect of their identity that is least integral to their sense of themselves and their own identity. Each participant should strike one identifier off the list. After this, two or three participants can share what they struck and why.

This process of narrowing down the list of identities should continue for the next four characteristics until students are left with five of the original 10 characteristics on their paper. This part of the activity should be conducted quietly. Then each participant in the group can go around and share which aspect they retained and why (participants can pass if they so choose).

Discussion Questions:

1. What choices were the easiest? Why?

2. What choices were the most difficult? Why?
3. What was the hardest choice to make? Why?
4. Would the order in which you select identifiers be different at home? In high school? In other contexts?
5. Were you surprised by what you ended up with? Why or why not?
6. Can you think of any real world moments where you have to choose between aspects of your identity?

Where in the World?

Draw out an imaginary world map on the ground (i.e. “ok, here is North America, here is Europe, here is Asia, etc.”). Tell everyone to go to where they were born, then have them share. Next, say, “if you could be magically transported to any place in the world right now, where would you go?” Have them move around, then share where and why. Finally, ask them to think about where someone who is really important or has had the most impact on their life is, and have them go there. Again, share why.

Stand Up/ Sit Down

A facilitator will read a series of questions (your choice as to what to ask, it will vary with your objectives). Tell the participants to stand up if the statement applies to you and then to sit down when the facilitator says to.

Everything In Common

Pair up you team, preferably with people they don’t know. Give them a piece of paper and marker/pen and tell them to find everything they have in common. This can be anything from eye color to personal philosophy. Give the whole activity a time limit of 2-5 minutes, whatever you feel would be best. At the end, the pairs should report 5 (or so) interesting things they had in common. See who got the most in common. This is really good for finding stuff out about each other.

Concentric Circles

Split the group up into two equal groups (facilitator can participate to even the group). Have on group form a circle with each person facing out. Then have the other group make a circle around the first group facing in. Each person should be facing one another. Read a statement and then have the pairs discuss or answer the question. Then have one group, either one, rotate one to the left or right. Read another question and continue for however long you would like.

Life Map

In this exercise, students create a visual representation of how their life journey resulted in an interest in course topics. An example slide from Sky Marietta and Sabina Nuegebaur’s doctoral module is below.

Life Map



- Consider what events in your life have led you to HGSE, and, more specifically, this class:
 - Use the provided paper to make a visual representation of this trajectory
 - You may draw a map, create a timeline, or use any other format that feels comfortable for you to express this progression
 - Be prepared to share your “map” with the group

What do You Know About the Topic?

Ask students to pair up (or form small groups) to share what they already know about course content through academic, personal, or professional experience. After this small group work, students should be prepared to share their single most important learning on the topic with the larger group.