

# GUIDELINES FOR SUSO FORUM PARTICIPANTS: ORGANIZERS, FACILITATORS AND PANELISTS

## I. GUIDELINES FOR ORGANIZERS AND FACILITATORS:

NOTE: For each forum, an SUSO committee member will serve as the “organizer” (planner) and usually, as the “facilitator” (“emcee” at the forum) as well. Occasionally however, an organizer will recruit a facilitator outside of the SUSO committee and the organizer and facilitator will plan the forum together. In such cases, the organizer is responsible for making sure these Guidelines are followed. Below, instructions are often directed to “facilitators,” since they run the forums, but the tasks mentioned may be shared by a “facilitator” who is not on the SUSO committee and an “organizer” who is. In addition, each forum will be assigned a “back-up” person from SUSO to help with these tasks before and during the forum.

Keep in mind that your forum is probably a higher priority for you than for the other people you're relying on for help, so give them lead time, keep them informed, and if necessary, send gentle reminders of deadlines.

### A. Organizing and managing the panel

#### Panel Selection:

Invite people with expertise on your topic to be panelists or to recommend others. (SUSO members may have had certain people in mind for the topics, so check with them.) You're looking for panelists who are good conversationalists and who have knowledge of the topic, but you also want a panel that is both ideologically and demographically diverse. (Historically, our forums have been more popular with people who describe themselves as liberals, progressives, or independents than with conservatives, so if your topic gives rise to differing political viewpoints, give particular attention to locating conservative panelists.) Panelists are usually drawn from CMU faculty, but often include administrators and staff as well. You may consider panelists beyond CMU, but check with the SUSO committee before “going off campus.” Also, we include students on every panel. We don't expect them to be “experts,” but we do expect them to be familiar with and interested in the topic, and able to engage others in open minded discussion. Speaking from a student's perspective and asking good questions make them valuable and effective panelists. The panel should be limited to about five people, since active audience participation is one of our most important goals, and it is reduced if there are lots of panelists who want to talk – which, if you've chosen the right people, they certainly will!

#### Instructions for Panelists:

E-mail these Guidelines to panelists and request that they read them to get a picture of how SUSO forums are conducted and what is expected of all participants.

#### Meeting with Panelists:

Panelists are good resources to draw on for the rest of your planning and preparation. Schedule a meeting with the panelists at least a month before the forum to:

- 1) Discuss the Guidelines and make sure panelists understand and agree to the goals and methods described there.
- 2) Formulate about five discussion questions to focus and structure the forum discussion. These usually reflect the interests and expertise of the panelists and particularly newsworthy aspects of the topic.

- 3) Discuss and/or preview video(s) which will be shown at the forum. (Sometimes the discussion questions drive the video selection and sometimes it's the other way around. Either is fine.)
- 4) Discuss other materials for the SUSO website relevant to your forum. Send these to Andy Blom ([blom1a@cmich.edu](mailto:blom1a@cmich.edu)) and update with flier and other info, links, images, etc. as you go.

## **B. Choosing audios and/or videos**

Your panelists have expertise/special interest in your topic, so as you recruit them, ask for their suggestions for videos to use at the forum. Aim for at least 20, but no more than 30 minutes of video material which includes varied points of view. The video segment helps generate conversation because it gives everyone a shared experience and shared information about the topic of discussion. Make sure all panelists view the videos before the forum.

Perfect videos would be concise but comprehensive, provide background information, articulate varied perspectives on the issue, be entertaining/info-taining, and make people want to talk about the issue. In reality, the best of them achieve only some of these characteristics. But, while great videos can really make a forum work, less than perfect videos rarely ruin a forum, so give it your best shot without obsessing. Aim for what's most important: videos that generate a response from the audience and provoke discussion.

You can find useful video collections at Media Services (at the CMU Library website), in department libraries and other institutional units such as Minority Student Services. Check also offerings available through interlibrary loan and of course, the internet.

Prepare ahead for smooth performance. Make sure your videos are in order and practice with them at the UC auditorium before the day of the forum.

## **C. Publicity**

Although Sarah Buckley and Merlyn Mowrey handle some of the publicity for SUSO, there are several tasks the forum facilitator needs to do or at least, check on:

1. Website: Contact Andy with info, images, links, etc. for your forum beginning one month before the event. Update with flier and other info a.s.a.p.
2. Fliers: Merlyn has a template for the fliers for each forum. ([mowre1me@cmich.edu](mailto:mowre1me@cmich.edu)) Contact her for an electronic copy and insert your forum title, facilitator, panelists, discussion questions, and some effective images. Start on this early and get your flier to Ulana at least two weeks before the forum, preferably sooner, for copying and distribution. ([klymy1au@cmich.edu](mailto:klymy1au@cmich.edu)) Make some extras and get help posting them on bulletin boards in classroom buildings. (SUSO will reimburse you.)
3. Calendars: Send forum info to Susan McTaggart Dennis at PBS two weeks before your forum, for a Community Calendar Announcement. (Sarah and Ulana post SUSO forums on the College, University Events and Multicultural events calendars and CMU Today.)
4. Public Relations office: The CMU public relations office will need information from you to produce a press release. Contact them at least two weeks before your forum.
5. Radio: Merlyn sends WCMU info about the SUSO series each semester and discusses with David Nicholas the possibility of interviews with facilitators/panelists for particular forums. Be in touch with Merlyn about this. (If interviewed, you can request a copy from WCMU.) She will also send information about forums to 91.5 Modern Rock Radio.

6. CMLife: The college newspaper should be notified 10 days ahead of each forum so that they can do a story before the forum and send a reporter to cover it. (Merlyn works with the CMLife reporter assigned to SUSO so contact her for assistance.)
7. Large banner: Ulana stores the banner that is hung in front of the UC for the week before each forum. The PSC student organization, Pi Sigma Alpha, is responsible for hanging the banner, but you need to make sure that has happened. Merlyn can give you contact information.
8. Pi Sigma Alpha handles SUSO t-shirt sales at forums. Check on this through Merlyn.
9. Small banner: Merlyn has a small banner that we hang on the panelists' table at each forum. Get that from her or arrange for her to bring it. Bring tape to secure it.

## **D. Logistics**

### Equipment

Notify the UC building manager/tech staff of the technology requirements for your forum. Generally you'll want a visualizer, microphones, and audiovisual equipment to show your video. Ask if you need to bring a laptop to control the equipment and if so, be sure you have sufficient power (batteries fully charged), the necessary software, and the appropriate cables. Have a "dress rehearsal" ahead of time. Make sure the audiovisual staff will be available at 6:30 before the forum in case there is an equipment problem. Also, request a table with chairs and microphones on the stage for panelists and water and glasses for all participants.

### Assessment fliers

You will need about 150 assessment fliers. On the back of your forum flier, photocopy the assessment questions we use to collect data at all forums. (Get electronic copy from Merlyn.) You can photocopy these in your department and SUSO will reimburse you, or with lead time, the students in the Dean's office will do the photocopying. Bring these to the forum and arrange for your SUSO back-up to distribute them to all audience members as they arrive at the forum and collect them as they leave. Turn these in to Merlyn after the forum.

## **E. The Day of the Event**

Arrive by 6:30 and check in with the audio-visual staff (at the UC Information Desk.) Make sure all of your equipment is unlocked and working and your videos are ready to go.

The SUSO back-up person should arrive by 6:30 to help (hang the banner from the panelists' table, check on the t-shirt sales, etc.) and to distribute assessment fliers as audience arrives

Panelists should also arrive by 6:30.

Remind them that this is a discussion-based event and not a lecture, so they should limit their opening statements to 3-4 minutes so that audience participation begins by 7:50. (Do the math re: length of video and number of panelists to meet that 7:50 starting point.)

Explain to panelists that you prefer to recognize them just as you will recognize audience members, but be flexible about this – some conversational exchanges should take their own course. In fact, panelists usually do speak more than other individuals, after all, they have been chosen for a reason, but remind them to keep their focus on engaging the students.

Also ask them to help keep the discussion on track and to keep things civil and rational if they get too heated. (Lively and contentious we like, shouting and name-calling, we don't. The students themselves will call out people for such behavior, often before the facilitator has to!)

Have them sit in the audience until after the video so they don't block the view of the screen.

## **Forum Format** (our usual M.O.)

### **Greeting – 7 p.m.**

1. Welcome the audience and the panelists (by name), to the forum.
2. Thank the various sponsors of the event (listed on the bottom of the forum flier.)
3. Make announcements, including upcoming SUSO forums, etc.
4. Hold up the forum flier/assessment survey and ask if everyone has one. Ask them to complete the survey (on the back) and leave it with SUSO folks at the end of the forum.
5. We are working on a “proof of attendance” form which some students have requested. Explain how that works.
6. Describe the **format** briefly. Emphasize that this isn’t a lecture or a performance, but an open discussion, and that audience participation, civility and respectful conduct are necessary for any serious conversation to “work”, including this one.  
Also, students often complain about the disruption of people coming and going during the forum and so we ask that they sit tight until 8:20 when we’ll take a break. Meanwhile, tell them that we’re glad they’re here, urge them to settle in, tune in and speak up.
7. Introduce the video.

### **Video Presentation**

#### **Introduce Panelists**

After the video, invite the panelists to take their seats on stage. Ask each of them to say a few words about their expertise/interest in the topic, and perhaps, identify points of interest to them raised by the discussion questions or the video everyone has just seen. Watch the time and begin the larger discussion with the audience by or before 7:50 p.m.

#### **Open Discussion – begin by 7:50**

Begin with a discussion question from the flier. As “emcee” you want to be sure that the conversation stays focused, that no one person or point of view monopolizes the conversation, that even if things get contentious, people observe basic manners in dealing with one another, and that as many people as possible get to speak. (Watch for raised hands in the back of the auditorium, which can be hard to notice.) The discussion questions will provide focus and structure, but it’s okay if the conversation veers a bit or if you don’t get to every one of the questions. Try to read the audience’s interests and although you need to stay on topic, be flexible, keep things moving, ask follow-up questions, ask for comments on points that have been overlooked, ask for opposing views when one line of argument has continued for a while or play devil’s advocate for positions that are not getting a fair shake in the debate, etc. Basically, use the same skills you’d use to keep a discussion moving forward in a classroom.

#### **Break – 8:20**

Around 8:20, take a 10 minute break. Mention the next issue to be discussed when everyone returns, and pick a good one to encourage people to stay!

#### **Resume – 8:30**

#### **Conclude – 9:30**

At 9:30, thank the audience and the panelists for their participation. Remind the audience to turn in their surveys, and promote the next SUSO forum. Collect the assessment surveys, the small banner, any videos and equipment that you brought, etc.

## **F. After the Forum**

Send an e-mail to the participants (and others who have been especially helpful) and thank them for their contributions. Solicit any recommendations and/or comments they may have.

Return the small banner and assessment surveys to Merlyn.

Return any equipment, audios or videos that have been borrowed.

Pat yourself on the back.

## II. GUIDELINES FOR PANELISTS

1. The forums work best when students become actively involved in the discussions. In preparing for the forum, think ahead about ways to draw them into the debate. One of the best methods is to develop several provocative questions that you think would spark student responses. (For ideas, reflect on the video, focal points of interest to you, and recent events in the news that are relevant to the topic.) During the forum, ask these questions as a way to generate dialogue.
2. Watch out for group think. Occasionally the panelists end up agreeing on everything, which makes for a boring forum. Be willing to play the devil's advocate—and be explicit about doing so (in fact, this is another tool students might pick up).
3. Also, be aware during the forum when the panel starts to dominate the discussion. Be proactive about bouncing the ball back to the audience.
4. You have been asked to sit on the panel because you have some expertise or special knowledge of the topic. Your expertise is important for informing the debate and you should make use of facts, statistics, and theories in your comments as appropriate.
5. Equally important, we have designed these forums as opportunities for students to develop their critical thinking skills and we see panelists as role models for these skills in action. We hope students will get practical lessons in how to think critically, argue from reason rather than emotion, listen to and question others effectively, agree and/or disagree respectfully. If all goes well, students should leave the forum with an expanded intellectual tool box and a very different view of political/public discourse than is served up on TV.
6. Another goal of the current events series is to create a more informed citizenry. Where possible, steer the discussion towards aspects of the issue being discussed that are connected to the choices we must make as a society, especially public policy choices. Include in your comments, ways students can become more informed on the issues being discussed.
7. A final goal is that we all have fun. Go for it!

## CHECKLIST FOR ORGANIZERS/FACILITATORS

1. Select panelists with the goal of forming a demographically diverse panel which also represents a range of different positions on the forum topic.
2. E-mail each panelist a copy of the “Guidelines for Participants” and ask them to read it carefully.
3. Schedule a meeting with the panelists a month before your forum to:
  - a) Discuss the Guidelines and assure that the panelists understand and agree to the goals and methods described there.
  - b) Formulate about 5 discussion questions (which reflect the interests, priorities and/or expertise of the panelists) to give focus and structure to the forum conversation.
  - c) Discuss possible videos (20 – 30 minutes in length) to show at the forum to introduce the topic. (Sometimes the video decision comes first and then drives the decision about the discussion questions. Either way is fine.) Make sure all panelists view the video before the forum.
  - d) Discuss other materials relevant to the forum that can be posted on the SUSO website. Send these to Andy Blom and update as more info becomes available.
  - e) Request that panelists arrive at the forum by 6:30 so that they have time to see the physical set-up and orient themselves.
4. Publicity:
  - a) Website – contact Andy Blom about your forum and send materials, links, etc. that he can post beginning a month before your forum date. As other materials are available, send them on for posting.
  - b) WCMU – When a forum includes some unusually newsworthy issue, speaker, etc. Merlyn will discuss the possibility of an interview with David Nicholas. Discuss with Merlyn three weeks before the forum.
  - c) Flier – get basic format from Merlyn and update with info about your forum. Include title, facilitator, panelists, discussion questions and relevant, attention-getting images. Have a copy in Ulana Klymyshyn’s hands at least two weeks before your forum. She will copy and distribute. Make additional copies and get help posting them in classroom bulletin boards.
  - d) Community Calendar announcement – Send forum info to PBS c/o Susan McTaggart Dennis at least two weeks before your event.
  - e) Public Relations Office: Submit info about your forum to the PR office for a press release two weeks before your event.
  - f) 91.5 Modern Rock Radio – send flier and any other info that might be of interest two weeks before the forum. See Merlyn about this.
  - g) CMLife – contact reporter covering SUSO with flier and any other info that might be helpful at least 10 days before the forum. See Merlyn about this.
  - h) Banners – Check with Pi Sigma Alpha to make sure the large SUSO banner goes up in front of the UC a week before the forum. Get small banner for the panelists’ table from Merlyn.
  - i) T-shirts – Check with Pi sigma Alpha about t-shirt sales one week before the forum.
5. Prior to the forum:
  - a) Make 150 copies of the flier with the assessment questions on the back. (Get questions from Merlyn if you don’t have a copy.) Take these to the forum and have your SUSO back-up distribute them as people enter and collect them as people leave.

- b) Make appointment (UC Auditorium X 7477) to check equipment before the forum and to do a trial run with your video. If you need any extra equipment, make your request several days ahead of time.
  - c) Remind panelists and SUSO back-up to arrive at the forum by 6:30.
6. At the forum:
- a) Arrive by 6:30 so you and your SUSO back-up have time to check on equipment, panelists' table and microphones, t-shirt sale, etc.
  - b) Attach small SUSO banner to the panelists' table.
  - c) SUSO back-up should distribute forum flier/assessment survey.
  - d) Begin within 5 minutes of the 7 p.m. starting time.
    - 1) Welcome attendees and panelists (name them, but wait for more substantive intros until after the video.)
    - 2) Thank sponsors (listed on the bottom of the forum flier.)
    - 3) Announcements, including upcoming SUSO forums, etc.
    - 4) Ask if students have a forum flier. Call attention to the assessment questions on the back. Ask them to answer the questions and to turn them in to SUSO people before they leave.
    - 5) Identify the topic and explain the basic format for SUSO forums (include what happens when, and remind attendees of our goal: a town hall like discussion with emphasis on audience input, the importance of becoming informed about varied serious positions on the issues, good critical thinking and civility in disagreement.)
    - 6) Request that people stay for the whole forum, but if they can't, ask them to wait to leave until the break (which will be around 8:20 or 8:30. Explain that we get many complaints on those assessment questionnaires about people coming and going during the forum.)
    - 7) Introduce the video and be seated while it plays.
    - 8) After video, invite the panelists to take their seats on stage and introduce them, giving each 3 minutes to explain his/her expertise and interest in the topic. Observe the time limits so that you can open the discussion to the audience by 7:50 p.m. at the latest.
    - 9) Begin with the first discussion question, or some observation/question about the video. Be sure to draw in the audience, and if only one point of view is getting expressed, solicit views from other perspectives. The panelists can help with this. Your main job is to keep things focused, lively, varied, civil, student-oriented and fun. Go!
    - 10) Take a 10 minute break around 8:20 or 8:30 or so.
    - 11) Before concluding (at 9:30) remind people to leave their assessment responses with the SUSO people at the back of the auditorium.
7. Collect questionnaires and the small banner and return to Merlyn. Don't forget the video and any other materials you've brought to the forum. Thank the panelists, pat yourself on the back.

## TIMELINE OF TASKS FOR ORGANIZERS/FACILITATORS

NOTE: See Guidelines for instructions/information re: these tasks.

### 6 weeks before your forum:

- Begin recruiting panelists
- Get panelists' suggestions for videos and for materials for the SUSO website
- E-mail Guidelines to panelists
- Arrange to meet with panelists one month before the forum

### 4 weeks before your forum:

- Meet with panelists to discuss Guidelines, videos, discussion questions, website, etc.
- Send forum info to Andy Blom for the SUSO website and update as plans emerge

### 3 weeks before your forum:

- Develop your forum flier and send electronic copies to Ulana, Andy and Merlyn

### 2 weeks before your forum:

- Last possible moment to get flier to Ulana! **DO NOT MISS THIS DEADLINE!**
- Send flier to Susan McTaggart Dennis at PBS for "Community Calendar" announcement
- Check with Merlyn about radio announcements (WCMU and 91.5)
- Send forum info to the PR office for a press release

### 10 days before your forum:

- Check with Merlyn about story in CMLife

### 1 week before your forum:

- Check to make sure SUSO banner is hanging in front of the UC
- Check to make sure arrangements have been made for t-shirt sales
- Make 150 copies of the forum flier with the assessment survey on the back
- Contact the UC (X7477) to discuss your equipment and the stage set up
- Arrange to visit the UC Auditorium to practice using equipment and videos

### The day of the forum:

- Take to the forum
  - the forum flier/assessment surveys
  - the small banner and tape to secure it
  - Forum format (p. 3 of Guidelines)
  - Videos, etc.
  - Laptop and/or other equipment that you are providing
  - Info on announcements you are making (upcoming forums, Writing Prize, etc.)

### At the forum:

- 6:30 – all participants arrive (facilitator, organizer, back-up, panelists)
- Check all equipment, table, chairs, microphones (contact UC staff for help)
- Secure small SUSO banner on table
- Check on t-shirt sales
- 7:00 – start your engines!
- 9:30 – collect questionnaires and small banner (return to Merlyn) and other equipment and materials.