

UNIT 3: Issues Identification

It can be difficult to develop and maintain an interest in things like government, community service and citizenship just for the sake of knowing about them. Some people enjoy memorizing the structure of government and the names of various government officials. This is an important part of being an active citizen, in its own right, but for many people it often takes more to spark an initial interest. When we begin to think about citizenship in the context of issues and problems that affect our lives and the lives of people around us, the ideas of government, community service and citizenship become more real and meaningful.

Keep it focused on the issues

Understanding and awareness of public and community issues is a key component of citizenship. In order to stand up for the rights of oneself and others, it is first necessary to look at where these rights are not being fully respected. It is also important to look at how things can be improved upon even in instances where there are no rights violations. When we come across a point or matter in our communities over which there is a desire for change, then we are presented with an issue. Issues range from minor concerns (for example, whether or not to install a street light) to problems and concerns of greater consequence (for example, what to do about poverty). If a decision can be made to affect the matter, then the matter becomes an issue.

Issues of public importance affect all of us, to varying degrees of significance. Everybody in a community has an interest in how an issue is decided – whether they know it or not. This interest often takes the form of taxes that people pay to

finance public spending. Take the example of a city deciding whether or not to install another street light.

The outcome of this decision may mean very little to each individual city resident, but to the people who live in the vicinity of the street light, it may be very important for their sense of safety. But all city residents have an interest, too, if they are taxpayers. It's their money that will pay for the streetlight. Or, the money used for buying and installing the streetlight could have been spent on a basketball hoop to be installed in a popular city park. Public and community issues are often a matter of money and a question of who pays for what.

Principles of Citizenship:

- Character
- Issues

Becoming informed

Issues grab us. Some of us become interested because of the personal consequences decision making can have; some of us become interested out of compassion for others; and sometimes these two motivations overlap. In order to understand what issues our communities are faced with, we have to research, ask questions, explore and think critically. Even if we are unaware of an issue, it can still have an impact on us. There are a variety of ways to inform ourselves about community issues, and the activities in this unit offer a number of approaches.

After we have an understanding of some of the key issues in our communities, the next step is to identify which issues we want to work on. These should be issues that we deem important, but also issues that we are passionate about. The problems that we focus on will serve as the vehicle for learning about how local government works, as well as how community action happens.

Resources for issues identification

- Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets by John Kretzmann and John McKnight.
<http://gearup.ous.edu/gusaccess/documents/pdf/BuildingCommunitiesInsideOut.pdf>
The introduction to this book provides a number of useful handouts for identifying community problems and assets.
- "Our Communities, Our Lives," from YEA! Youth Experiencing Action: A Community Service Learning Guide (4H1553), Michigan 4-H Youth Development
http://web1.msue.msu.edu/cyf/youth/cls/documents/YEA_Community_book.pdf
This online curriculum has a variety of experiential activities to aid in the issues identification process.
- "Social Issues," Multnomah County Library; Multnomah County, Oregon
<http://www.multcolib.org/homework/sochc.html>
This is a highly useful and comprehensive site for researching specific social issues.
- Walking Neighborhood Surveys, *Junior Citizen Planner*, Michigan State University Extension
<http://web1.msue.msu.edu/cplanner/jcp/walksurvey.pdf>
This activity guides young people in exploring their neighborhoods and identifying issues.



“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.”

—Eleanor Roosevelt

ACTIVITY:

It's My Right!

Description:

Through brainstorming and discussion, this activity leads youth to define what it means to be human and to relate human rights to human needs. After, youth work together to create a map of their community and identify the rights associated with each major institution.

Participant Age:

13–19

Activity Objectives:

The participants will:

- Discuss and define human rights.
- Apply human rights to their community.
- Explore where human rights are and are not being upheld in their community.

Learning and Life Skills:

Critical Thinking; Concern for Others

State of Michigan Social Studies Standards:

Standard II.3 Location, Movement, and Connections; Standard III.2 Ideals of American Democracy; Standard VI.1 Identifying and Analyzing Issues

Materials, Equipment, Handouts:

- Newsprint
- Easel or tape for recording on newsprint
- Markers, pencils, other drawing utensils
- Writing or drawing utensils, for each participant
- Handout: “Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in Brief”; for a complete version of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” go to <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

Time:

120 minutes, broken up into two parts

Setting:

Indoors, tables and chairs for all participants

Procedure:

Before the meeting:

- Review activity directions and materials.
- Set up easel for newsprint or tape newsprint to wall. On a sheet of newsprint, write “Human Rights” at the top and draw a large outline of a person, large enough to accommodate writing.
- Read over the “*Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in Brief*,” if you prefer to use the full version of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” go to the United Nations web site at <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>. If you are unfamiliar with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, go to the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute’s web site for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at <http://www.udhr.org> for information on the document’s history.
- Print one copy of the handout, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in Brief,” for each participant.

During the meeting:

Part I

1. Give each participant a sheet of paper, and have them write the words “Human” and “Rights” at the top. Below the word “Human,” instruct the group to draw a circle or the outline of a person so that there is enough room to write inside. Ask the group to brainstorm what qualities define a human being (for example, intelligence, sympathy) and to write the words or symbols inside the outline or circle. This should be done individually.
2. Then ask the group to write what they think is needed in order to protect, enhance and fully develop the *positive and desirable* qualities of a human being. Ask them to write their answers outside the outline or circle under the word “Rights.” For example, “education,” “friendship,” “loving family.”
3. After everyone has finished, display the sheet of newsprint that was made before the meeting with “Human Rights” at the top and the outline of a person. Ask the group to share their responses to the question, “What qualities define a human being?” and record responses inside the person outline. Next, ask the group for their responses to the question, “What is needed in order to protect, enhance, and fully develop the positive and desirable qualities?” Write down responses outside the outline or circle on the newsprint or under the word “Rights.”

Reflection Activities and Ideas:

Ask the following questions to the group to stimulate discussion:

- Based on this list, what do people need to achieve their full potential?
- What is the difference between achieving one’s full potential and merely surviving?
- For items recorded outside of the human outline, which would you consider rights and which would you consider luxuries? What is the difference?
- What happens when a person or government attempts to deprive someone of

something that is necessary to human dignity?

- What would happen if you had to give up one of these human necessities?
- Can a person realize his or her full potential without any of these necessities?

Part II

1. Refer to the newsprint depicting the human outline from Part I. Explain that everything inside the human outline relates to human dignity, the wholeness of being human. Everything written outside the human outline represents what is necessary for people to achieve their potential as human beings. Human rights are based on these necessities (for example, education, health care, freedom of speech). (Make clear that not having access to basic human rights does not make a person less human – we are all human despite our differences.)
2. Distribute the handout, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in Brief,” to each participant. Explain that the United Nations created the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* in order to clarify the rights that every person in every country should enjoy – human rights. Either (a) read over the *UDHR* articles as a group or (b) give everyone sufficient time to read over the articles individually. After reading over the *UDHR* articles, ask the group what they think of the human rights represented here. Provide clarification if there is misunderstanding. “Is anything missing? Should anything be removed?”
3. Divide participants into teams of two or three, give each team a sheet of newsprint, and ask them to draw a map of their town (or neighborhood in the case of larger communities). They should include their homes, major public spaces and buildings (for example, parks, post office, city hall, schools, places of worship) and public services (for example, hospitals, fire department, police station) and any other places that are important to the community (for example, grocery stores, cemetery, cinemas, gas stations).
4. When the maps are complete, ask each team to analyze their maps from a human rights perspective. What human rights do they associate with different places on their maps? For example, a place of worship with freedom of thought, conscience and religion; the school with the right to education; the post office with the right to information, to privacy and to self-expression. As they identify these rights, they can use the *UDHR* as a guide.

Try This, Too:

- It may be necessary for participants to draw their community maps independently, if they are not from the same areas.
- Visit the University of Minnesota Human Rights Resource Center web site at <http://www.hrusa.org> for more resources and activities on human rights.
- With the permission of local officials, create posters representing articles of the *UDHR* and post them in the community.

Adapted with permission from University of Minnesota Human Rights Resource Center, *Human Rights Here and Now*, edited by Nancy Flowers, 1998, p 54-55.

Retrieved July 10, 2007, from <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/hreduseries/hereandnow/Part-3/Activity7.htm>

Reflection Activities and Ideas:

Have each team present its map to the whole group and summarize its analysis of human rights exercised in the community. Ask each team the following questions:

- Why is it important to protect a person’s or group’s human rights?
- Are there any rights or articles of the *UDHR* that seem to be especially exercised in this community? How can this be explained? Are there any rights or articles of the *UDHR* that no group included on their map? How can this be explained?
- After discussion can anyone see new ways to add rights to their map, especially those that were not included in the first version?
- Are there any places in this community where people’s rights are violated? Are there any people in this community whose rights are violated?
- What happens in this community when a person’s or a group’s human rights are violated? How can we determine when there is a violation?
- Are there any places in this community where people take action to protect human rights or prevent violations from occurring?
- What can a good citizen do to protect people’s rights?

HANDOUT:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in Brief

Article 1

Right to Equality

Article 2

Freedom from Discrimination

Article 3

Right to Life, Liberty, Personal Security

Article 4

Freedom from Slavery

Article 5

Freedom from Torture and Degrading Treatment

Article 6

Right to Recognition as a Person before the Law

Article 7

Right to Equality before the Law

Article 8

Right to Remedy by Competent Tribunal

Article 9

Freedom from Arbitrary Arrest and Exile

Article 10

Right to Fair Public Hearing

Article 11

Right to be Considered Innocent until Proven Guilty

Article 12

Freedom from Interference with Privacy, Family, Home and Correspondence

Article 13

Right to Free Movement in and out of the Country

Article 14

Right to Asylum in other Countries from Persecution

Article 15

Right to a Nationality and the Freedom to Change It

Article 16

Right to Marriage and Family

Article 17

Right to Own Property

Article 18

Freedom of Belief and Religion

Article 19

Freedom of Opinion and Information

Article 20

Right of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Article 21

Right to Participate in Government and in Free Elections

Article 22

Right to Social Security

Article 23

Right to Desirable Work and to Join Trade Unions

Article 24

Right to Rest and Leisure

Article 25

Right to Adequate Living Standard

Article 26

Right to Education

Article 27

Right to Participate in the Cultural Life of Community

Article 28

Right to a Social Order that Articulates this Document

Article 29

Community Duties Essential to Free and Full Development

Article 30

Freedom from State or Personal Interference in the above Rights

Adapted with permission from University of Minnesota Human Rights Resource Center, *Human Rights Here and Now*, edited by Nancy Flowers, 1998, p 141.

Retrieved July 10, 2007, from http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/hreduseries/hereandnow/Part-5/8_udhr-abbr.htm

ACTIVITY:

Agree to Disagree

Description:

Youth express their opinions on current public policy issues in order to demonstrate the complexity of issues and the range of possible positions regarding them.

Participant Age:

13–19

Activity Objectives:

The participants will:

- Identify their opinion on current policy issues.
- Share their views on contentious issues.
- See that there are multiple perspectives on controversial policy issues.

Learning and Life Skills:

Communication; Accepting Differences; Decision Making

Michigan Curriculum

Framework:

Standard VI.1 Identifying and Analyzing Issues

State of Michigan Social Studies Standards:

- Newsprint and markers
- Handout: “Current Public Policy Issues”
- Tape for displaying newsprint

Time:

30–60 minutes (varies according to number of issues addressed)

Setting:

Indoors, enough open space for all participants to move around

Procedure:

Before the meeting:

- Review activity directions and materials.
- Create five signs using the newsprint and markers that read: “strongly agree,” “agree,” “no opinion,” “disagree” and “strongly disagree.”
- Post the five signs on the wall from left to right in this order: “strongly agree,” “agree,” “no opinion,” “disagree” and “strongly disagree.”

During the meeting:

1. Tell the group that they will be presented with a series of statements and that they must decide whether or not they agree with it. Direct them to the wall on which the five signs are posted. Tell the group that they should stand in front of the sign that indicates their opinion on the statement. Explain that they should consider each statement individually and not be influenced by the opinions of others in the group.
2. Before beginning, tell the group that some statements may have personal significance for some members; it is therefore important to create guidelines to follow throughout the activity to ensure that everyone feels safe to share their ideas. Ask the group to brainstorm guidelines, and write down their responses on a sheet of newsprint. Some examples of guidelines are:
 - Be respectful.
 - Listen to each other.
 - Remain open and non-judgmental.
 - Be sensitive to group members’ personal significance regarding some issues.
 - Honor the seriousness of the learning and conversation.
3. Read the first statement on the “Current Public Policy Issues” handout, and allow participants to move to the sign that best represents their opinion. Remain objective and do not make comments about where individuals are standing under the signs. After all participants have decided where they stand, ask for volunteers to explain why they chose the position that they did. Encourage all participants to share their opinions. Try to hear comments from both the “agree” and “disagree” side. It is important to effectively mediate this sharing; make sure that conversation focuses on the issue, not the person, and that one person talks at a time.
4. Repeat step 3 for each statement on the handout.

Reflection Activities and Ideas:

Ask the group the following reflection questions:

1. What did you think about as you decided where to move?
2. How did it feel to be part of the majority opinion group? How did it feel to be part of the minority group?

3. Were you with the same people on every issue? How did it change?
4. Were there any issues for which everyone had the same opinion? Who might have a view different from the group on these issues?
5. Why is understanding that there are different sides to an issue an important part of citizenship?

Try This, Too:

- It is strongly recommended to develop a list of issues more relevant to your community. It is best if the policy issues relate to the issues that the group may be interested in exploring later on.
- If you believe that the group may have difficulties defending their positions on these issues, or if you think that the nature of the issues may cause too much disruption, try this. Prepare a handout with all of the issue statements listed in order, and have participants privately write “A” or “D” next to the statement (add SA for “Strongly Agree” and SD for “Strongly Disagree” categories, if you like). After, shuffle the responses and redistribute them to all participants. As you read through the issue statements this time, have participants go to the sign that represents the opinions given by the handout that they received. Once there, have participants try to argue in favor of the position stated in the handout they received, even if this is not their personal stance on the issue. Add the reflection question: “What did it feel like to have to argue a position that you don’t agree with?”



HANDOUT:

Current Public Policy Issues

Consider your opinion on each of the issues below and move around the room to the sign that reflects your view:

1. Vending machines with pop should be banned in public schools.
2. A student who misses more than the normal number of school days should be denied a driver's license.
3. School districts should be required to develop anti-bullying policies.
4. Police officers should be able to pull a driver over for not wearing a seatbelt.
5. There should be a law that requires bicyclists under age 16 to wear a helmet.
6. Any student found carrying a weapon on school grounds or at a school function should be permanently expelled.
7. For safety purposes, there should be a limit to the number of passengers in a car driven by a teenager.
8. Public schools should have the right to post the Ten Commandments on school property.
9. Affirmative action should apply to college admissions decisions.
10. The government should give subsidies – contributions of money – to farmers.
11. The government should allow people from other countries to freely immigrate into the U.S.

ACTIVITY:

We Have Issues

Description:

Through research and brainstorming, youth begin exploring important issues in their community. After identifying issues, they decide which are most pertinent for their group to address.

Participant Age:

13–19

Activity Objectives:

The participants will:

- Analyze different media resources.
- Identify issues in their community.

Learning and Life Skills:

Wise Use of Resources; Concern for Others

State of Michigan Social Studies Standards:

Standard VI.1 Identifying and Analyzing Issues; Standard V.1 Information Processing

Materials, Equipment, Handouts:

- News articles concerning local issues in the community; these can be compiled (a) by the facilitator or (b) as a “homework” activity for participants prior to the meeting
- Handouts: U.S. Census Bureau fact sheet (if computers are available, it is preferable for participants to locate these materials themselves)
- County Profile for each participant (available online from Michigan State University Extension at <http://web1.msue.msu.edu/countyprofiles>)
- Handout: “Common Community Issues”
- Newsprint and markers
- Easel or tape for recording on newsprint

Time:

120 minutes, broken up into two parts

Setting:

Indoors, tables and chairs for all participants

Procedure:

Before the meeting:

- Review activity directions and materials.
- If facilitator is compiling news articles, browse local media sources for stories about local issues. Cut out the articles and make copies equal to the number of participants.
- Go to the Michigan State University Extension web site at <http://web1.msue.msu.edu/countyprofiles>. Choose a county from the drop down menu. Click on the icon on the right top of the page to view a profile or “Portrait of this County” in PDF format and print one copy of your county’s profile for each participant.
- Go to the U.S. Census Bureau web site at <http://factfinder.census.gov> to find statistical information on your community. Type in the name of the county, city, township or zip code area to get detailed social, economic and housing information. It is good to get information for a broader region (such as a county) and also more specific localities (such as zip codes) within the county to highlight contrasts. Print one copy of the county census information for each participant.

During the meeting:

Part I

1. Explain to the group that this meeting will be spent identifying issues and problems in the community.
2. On a sheet of newsprint, write “strengths” and “problems.” Ask the group, “What are the strengths of your community?” Record responses on the newsprint. After everyone has had a chance to respond, ask, “What are the problems in your community?” Record responses.
3. Explain that an issue is a point, matter or dispute, the decision of which is of special or public importance. For example, an issue could be the condition of public parks. There are generally two or more sides to an issue. For example, one person may believe that the public parks are enjoyable, while another may believe that they are too few and in disrepair.
4. Distribute the handout “Common Community Issues.” Allow time to read over the list together or individually.

Reflection Activities and Ideas:

Ask the group what they think about the lists.

- Which of these issues is applicable to their community? Which are not? What would they add to this list?
- Why is it important to consider both strengths and weaknesses of the community?

Part II

1. Divide the group into teams of three or four.
 - i. If computers are available, assign each group to a computer and have them visit the U.S. Census Bureau web site at <http://factfinder.census.gov>. First,

- ask the groups to type in the name of their county. Instruct them to note interesting statistics (for example, poverty rate, unemployment). Give them time to explore the site and assist participants with questions regarding the statistics. After, have the groups search for their specific zip codes and ask them to note the differences between these and the county.
- ii. If there is no computer access, distribute the handouts of the county census information to each group. Instruct them to note interesting statistics (for example, poverty rate, unemployment). Assist participants with questions regarding the statistics. After, give the groups the handouts on specific zip code census information and ask them to note the differences between these and the county.
2. After each team has had the chance to look over the census information, distribute the news articles, the County Profiles and the “Common Community Issues” handout and have the individuals read them over. When they have finished, ask each team to think about the census information, the news articles, the County Profiles and the “Common Community Issues” handout to discuss what they feel are the most important issues in the community; give ample time for discussion.
 3. Have each group record on a sheet of newsprint the issues they consider most important. Post this list on the wall, or otherwise keep it for future activities.

Reflection Activities and Ideas:

Reconvene the group and ask each team to share their thoughts on community issues. Ask each team the following questions and record their answers:

- What did you learn about your community from the census information?
- What did you learn about your community from the news articles?
- What did your group decide are the most pressing issues in the community?
- As a whole group, what issues do we want to focus on in the community?

Try This, Too:

- For Part II, have each small group draw a map of their community to include important landmarks and institutions (schools, hospitals, parks and others). Once completed, have each group make additions or changes to the map to represent what they would like their community to look like ideally. After, ask each group to explain the changes they made and discuss what problem or need these changes addressed.
- As another way of researching community issues, give each participant a disposable camera several weeks prior to the meeting with the instructions to take pictures that represent their community (instructions can be more specific, for example, take pictures that capture local issues). These photographs can then be used as another medium for the issues identification process.
- Have participants interview or survey adults and youth in their communities in order to get another perspective on local issues of importance. Look at the differences in opinion according to age, gender, race/ethnicity, class, etc.
- After the meeting, have the group organize an open forum for area teens to discuss issues and voice their opinions about what issues in the community most concern them. This feedback can help guide the group’s focus.



HANDOUT:

Common Community Issues

Recreation

Lack of parks
Parks in disrepair
Need for recreation centers
Need for sports facilities
Lack of recreation programs
Lack of walking/biking paths

Education and Health

School violence
Lack of textbooks
Drop-out rates
Truancy
Overcrowded schools
Poor test scores
Child abuse
Lack of child-care centers
Childhood illness
Teen parents
Pollution (air or water)

Crime and Safety

Violent crime
Gangs
Drugs and alcohol
Theft
Police-community relations
Traffic accidents
Vandalism
Litter

Economy

Youth unemployment
Lack of job training
Poverty
Homelessness

Diversity

Hate crimes
Race relations
Gender issues
Age discrimination
Affirmative action issues

Administration

Public transportation
Lack of sidewalks
Sidewalks in disrepair
Poor lighting on streets
Zoning problems
Abandoned buildings
Vacant lots
Tax or budget issues

Other

(add you own ideas)

ACTIVITY:

Cause and Effect

Description:

Using identified community issues, youth will analyze the cause and effect of the issues. They will then brainstorm groups in the community that influence these issues.

Participant Age:

Ages 16–19

Activity Objectives:

The participants will:

- Brainstorm causes and effects of community issues.
- Identify interest groups for community issues.

Learning and Life Skills:

Critical Thinking; Planning/Organizing

State of Michigan Social Studies Standards:

Standard VI.1 Identifying and Analyzing Issues; Standard V.1 Information Processing

Materials, Equipment, Handouts:

- Newsprint and markers
- Tape to display newsprint
- Sticky notes (three [3] different colors, and at least five [5] notes of each color per participant)

Time:

30–60 minutes, depending on discussion time

Setting:

Indoors, tables and chairs for all participants

Adapted with permission from “Cause-Effect Mapping,” by Elizabeth Moore, in *Developing Community Leadership*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Extension, 2005.

Procedure:

Before the meeting:

- Review activity directions and materials.
- Make sure the group has already identified an issue or issues that it would like to focus on. If they previously created a list of issues, have this available for the activity.
- Tape a sheet of newsprint to the wall.

During the meeting:

1. If the group has not yet narrowed their focus to one or two community issues, use the list of issues that they have generated, and have them select one or two issues to focus on. This can be done by voting or using dialogue to build consensus.
2. Write the issue at the top of the sheet of newsprint on the wall. Draw a vertical line down the middle of the newsprint dividing it into two columns. Label the first column “Causes” and the second “Effects.”
3. Give each participant five same-color sticky notes, and ask them to brainstorm and write down causes of the chosen issue. Provide more sticky notes, if needed. When participants are finished, have them post the sticky notes on the newsprint under “Causes.”
4. Ask what effects on the community this issue has, and repeat Step 3 for “Effects,” using sticky notes of a second color.
5. Read through the responses for “Causes” and “Effects.” Related responses should be grouped together. Once this is done, draw arrows connecting correlated causes and effects.
6. Pass out more sticky notes of a third color to participants, and ask what people or groups in the community influence these causes and effects? Who has the power and interest to do so? Write down people and groups on the sticky notes and post them next to the cause/effect that they influence. For guidance, suggest that participants think about community organizations, non-profit organizations, government officials, businesses, school groups and other groups.

Reflection Activities and Ideas:

Have a group discussion and ask the following questions:

- What have we learned about this issue?
- How could we learn more about this issue?
- What can we do to address these causes?
- Who else in the community do we need to work with in order to effectively address this issue? (see Unit 5, “Taking Action” for a list of potential partners)

Try This, Too:

- Invite a government official, employee of a non-profit organization, member of a community organization or member of the business community to attend the meeting and discuss issues and their causes and effects.
- Have participants do individual or group research projects on the issue and present their findings at the next group meeting. These research projects could also be used in presentations to government officials or community organizations.