

Alternative School-Based Capitol Forum Models

NOTE: Alternative models allow for any content topics that fit the curriculum and inform the ultimate question of the role of the United States in the world. All programs culminate in participation in the U.S. role ballot activity. Students should also be encouraged to communicate their own views, their “Future 5”, beyond the classroom.

• In-Class Field Trip

Students work in groups to study selected issues in-depth within their classroom and then engage in conversation with community panelists as a culminating activity. Each group presents its findings to the panelists who are selected for their expertise on one or more of the topics. Following the presentations, the panelists are invited to converse with the students about their views and to enter into a deliberative dialogue on the topic. Parents can also be invited to attend the panel presentations as “Important Guests” and teachers can engage them in the deliberative dialogue as well.

• School-based Interdisciplinary Model

Teachers from a range of disciplines coordinate their preparation work on selected topics, each appropriate to their own discipline. Teachers from different disciplines are likely to approach their chosen topics differently. However, all should make sure to stress content and all should engage their students in deliberation on the trade-offs of each of the “Options” presented in their chosen unit(s). During the Inter-Disciplinary Capitol Forum, all students from participating classes join together to focus on the central question of the U.S. role in the world. At the forum students share their areas of expertise as they prepare in small multi-disciplinary groups to present their assigned Future in a hearing on the Futures. Following the hearing, students can work as one large group or be “jigsawed” into smaller groups (each containing students from each of the Futures groups and from multiple disciplines) to deliberate on the merits and trade-offs of each of the Futures presented. After discussion, students write reflections on the Future they would advocate (their own Future 5). The forum culminates in a facilitated larger group discussion of the role students feel the U.S. should play in the world.

• School or District-based Departmental Model

Teachers from several classrooms within a school or district coordinate for an in-school or in-district Capitol Forum. This approach could build on the “in-class field trip” model or the “school-based interdisciplinary model.”

• School-wide Model

The School-wide Capitol Forum takes place over a full day. Each grade level (9-12) is assigned a topic (immigration, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, etc.), corresponding with the social studies course at each grade-level. After students complete their grade-level work (as preparation in class or as the first session of the day), they move into multi-level heterogeneous groups for consideration of the Futures and deliberation on the U.S. role. In order to keep group sizes small enough, in most schools several Capitol Forums would need to be taking place simultaneously. Every four years, the program could be focused around the presidential election and candidates’ foreign policy platforms could be discussed. Mid-term elections could be incorporated as well. Variations on this approach would involve grade levels in different roles. Ex: 9th grade—“press corp” observing and reporting, 10th grade—charged to compare and contrast with another 10th grade experience and reflect on deliberation vs. debate, 11th grade—serve as delegates, 12th grade—selected students leading small groups.

• Community Forum Model

Organize a symposium involving community members and students in a deliberation on the U.S. role in a changing world. Community members should be selected based on their ability to bring real life experiences involving the issues under consideration into the deliberation. It might include leaders of international corporations, representatives of business that relies mainly on an immigrant workforce or deal with environment issues or recycling, Town Council members, or local attorneys or judges. Students would prepare using selected Choices resources in order to develop “expertise” on several issues that bear on the overall topic and gain experience in deliberation on the merits and trade-offs of divergent perspectives. At the Community Forum, students and community members work together in small groups focused on specific topics. Then students (prepared in advance) present the Futures to the assembled group. In breakout sessions, students and community members deliberate on the merits and trade-offs of each of the Futures, then participate in the online ballot on the U.S. role. Finally students and community members meet as one large group to debrief and to begin to articulate their own views.

For information about Capitol Forum and alternative models, contact the Choices Program at choices@brown.edu or 401-863-3155.

These are only examples of possible adaptations. They have been framed by teachers who have participated in statewide Capitol Forum programs or similar initiatives. Participating teachers include Kathy Beiser (International Studies Academy, San Antonio, TX), Julie Patterson (Renaissance High School, Indianapolis, IN), Kelly Keogh (Normal Community High School, IL), Christine Shaw (E. Greenwich High School, RI), Kevin Zupin (Winamac Community High School, IN). Descriptions for each model will be available on the web by fall 2006. The Choices Program is interested in hearing about experiences with these and other models.

Capitol Forum on America's Future

The Capitol Forum on America's Future engages high school students in study and deliberation on current international issues. The core goals of the Capitol Forum are to develop in students the skills for informed, analytical consideration of international issues and the habits of responsible participation in public policy. The content base for the Capitol Forum grows out of the curricular work of the Choices Program.

At the heart of the Capitol Forum program students consider America's role in today's changing international environment using a framework of four divergent "Futures" for U.S. policy. Each Future is framed in stark terms to highlight significantly different policy directions. Each is driven by different underlying values. These Futures serve as the central focus of student deliberation during the Capitol Forum and of the "Ballot" completed by all participating students.

The Capitol Forum is endorsed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), and the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS). Information is available at www.choices.edu/capitol_forum or by calling 401-863-3155.

Statewide Capitol Forum

Capitol Forum Statewide Programs involve students both within their social studies classroom and beyond the classroom at their state capitol. The centerpiece of statewide programs takes place in the spring when 80 to 100 high school students from 20 schools come to their state capitol as class representatives for an all-day forum. They meet in breakout sessions focused on specific international issues and then join in a forum to deliberate about the role they believe the nation should play in the world today and to share their views with elected officials and policymakers.

The program in each participating state begins with a professional development workshop for teachers in the fall and involves classroom preparation within the context of the participating teachers' regular courses. Individual students are selected to represent the class at the forum. Each prepares to be an "expert" on one of the topics to be addressed at the forum. Current topics include immigration, trade, environmental policy, terrorism, and nuclear policy.

Following the forum, student representatives return to their own classrooms to lead their fellow students in a dialogue on international issues modeled on the program at the forum. Finally, all students in participating classes take part in the Capitol Forum online ballot.

The Choices Program provides a state-by-state statistical report on student views and a national ballot report. In late spring, representatives from each state program join Choices national staff in Washington, DC to present the results of the year's Capitol Forum to elected officials and to meet with congressional staff from their states.

Statewide programs are currently taking place in Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, Nebraska, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Utah, Washington, and West Virginia. Information and organizing resources for statewide programs are available online at www.choices.edu/capitol_forum.

The Capitol Forum Year at a Glance

- Teacher Application, Acceptance, and Commitment: Summer/Early Fall
- Introductory Workshop: Early Fall
 - Overview of the Capitol Forum
 - Introduction to Choices approach and materials
 - Selection of two Choices units for use prior to pre-forum planning meeting
- In the Classroom: Fall
 - Introduce key concepts
 - Use curriculum unit(s)
- Pre-Forum Planning Meeting: January / February
 - Review details of the Capitol Forum day
 - Review goals and guidelines for breakout session leaders
- In the Classroom: February/March
 - Complete pre-forum lesson, "class statement" and class poster
 - Select and prepare student representatives
- Capitol Forum: March / April
- In the Classroom (within two weeks after the forum)
 - Complete post-forum lesson, online ballot, and Future 5 statements
- Ballot Report presented to Elected Officials: May/June