

HOW TO PLAN A

*Jeffersonian  
Dinner*

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The Jeffersonian Dinner can be a great way to launch the creation of a new cause-centered community. It can also help you to expand the network of individuals connected with an existing community. And although money is not the central focus of the evening, it's likely that, in the end, a Jeffersonian Dinner can activate far more resources than such traditional fundraising events as the annual gala.

So what is a Jeffersonian Dinner? To introduce the concept, we invite you step into a time machine . . .

Imagine being invited to a dinner in 1819 at Monticello, the elegant Virginia home of Thomas Jefferson—president, scientist, farmer, connoisseur, scholar, and author of the Declaration of Independence. Around his table, you'd encounter some of the leading spirits of the age—men and women steeped in politics, literature, the arts, the sciences, theology, history, mores, and manners—people that Mr. Jefferson invited because he found them, intriguing and delightful to spend a stimulating evening with. And an evening like this was also a prime source of education both for Mr. Jefferson himself and for the guests around the table, all of whom were engaged citizens, eager to share and debate the varied ideas that would shape the fortunes and spur the development of their rapidly-growing young nation.

This was the original Jeffersonian Dinner. Starting with dinners held for years in Monticello itself during the years when Jeff served as chairman of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, we've turned Jeffersonian

Dinners into opportunities to connect people and foment discussions about many different topics. As a result, vibrant networks and a host of passionate connections have been created around a host of important causes.

## **A Dinner Party—With a Twist**

For a Jeffersonian Dinner, approximately twelve individuals, some of whom may already know one another but others of whom do not, gather in a home, a private dining room, or other quiet location for an evening of food and shared conversation with a purpose. The dinner is often organized under the auspices of a particular nonprofit organization, and the attendees may include one or more individuals who are somehow associated with that organization—as staffers, board members, donors, or partners. However, the dinner is usually hosted by someone not directly affiliated with the nonprofit group—for example, a friend of a friend who may have access to a suitable dining room and is willing to provide the appropriate hospitality.

The attendees generally include people with no past link to the group, chosen because they are likely to be interested in the group's mission, have supported other related causes, or have background knowledge and connections that will enable them to contribute to an interesting dialogue about the work. Thus, the guests at a dinner organized by a nonprofit dedicated to education reform might include a professor of education from a local college, a veteran high school teacher, a producer of educational videos, a parent who is an active member of her local school board, the education reporter from the local newspaper, and the founder of a nearby charter school. There should be no dominant in-

dividual who will serve as the focal point or “star” of the evening. The dinner invitation includes a request for a brief written biography of the attendee. These bios are emailed to the participants a day or two before the dinner, so those who’ve never met before will have a least a general sense of the identities and interests of their dinner companions.

Unlike a fundraising event, there’s no formal presentation about a cause, an organization, or a social problem, nor is there a pitch for contributions or memberships. The purpose of the Jeffersonian Dinner is to build a sense of community and partnership around a shared interest or theme. (As you might imagine, the theme is generally related to the work of the nonprofit organization on whose behalf the gathering is being held.)

Most important, the dinner should be held in a setting where everyone in attendance can easily participate in a single conversation. Unlike the typical dinner party, guests are **not** encouraged to engage in one-on-one dialogues with their partners on either side. Instead, everything that is said should be directed to the entire group, just as Thomas Jefferson himself ordained.

To launch the conversation at a Jeffersonian Dinner, a pre-announced question is used to elicit personal feelings, stories, and experiences relevant to the evening’s theme. Some samples:

- For a dinner focused on the life-changing potential of philanthropy: “Describe a gift you made that produced a real difference.”
- For a dinner about education reform: “Who is your favorite teacher of all time?”

- For a dinner related to plans for a new film center: “What movie is your favorite guilty pleasure, and why?”
- For a dinner related to technology: “What technology innovation in the last ten years has most changed your life?”
- For dinner about bringing music to school kids in New Orleans: “What’s the first record you ever owned?”
- For a dinner about collaborative philanthropy: “Give an example of a time when you worked collaboratively with others successfully to have an impact.”
- For a dinner about non-profit leadership: “Who do you know who is a good role model for non-profit leaders, and why are they?”

Crafting the right initial question for a Jeffersonian Dinner is important. It must be designed to elicit stories (rather than, for example, canned opinions, theoretical discussions, or examples drawn from the media). Avoid a question that can be answered with a Yes or No, while also choosing a question that can be answered in around two minutes. The goal is to enhance the potential for personal connections among the guests, as well as a personal connection with the evening’s theme.

Moderating a Jeffersonian Dinner is an art in itself. The exact nature of the follow-up questions you ask may vary depending on the specific goal of the dinner. One effective approach is for the moderator to gently guide participants along the pathway of the public narrative as described by Marshall Ganz. That is, after each attendee has had a chance to

describe one or more personal experiences related to the theme of the evening (a story of self), the moderator can ask how these experiences are connected with the interests of the entire group (a story of us) and then with the work of the nonprofit organization that has sponsored the dinner (a story of now). It's an effective structure because it works!

Finally, as the time for concluding the dinner approaches, everyone in attendance is asked how they plan to follow up on the evening's discussion. There's no pressure to respond in a particular way. (And there's certainly no intention to elicit donations or pledges in support of the nonprofit organization.) One participant may offer a response as simple as "I intend to learn and think more about the topics we've discussed." Another may make a specific commitment growing out of the evening's conversation: "I'll be calling Susan, whom I met for the first time this evening, to find out more about her work and to learn whether my company might be able to support her in some way." And occasionally, the follow-up promises include the birth of a major new philanthropic commitment. Every response, from the most modest to the most ambitious, is entirely acceptable.

In any case, virtually every Jeffersonian Dinner we've hosted or heard about has generated a host of informal connections, networking opportunities, and follow-up conversations among dinner attendees, with long-term benefits that may take months or years to explore and develop.

## Why Hold a Jeffersonian Dinner?

As we've seen, a Jeffersonian Dinner is not a fundraising event. No pitch or presentation is made, no brochures are distributed, no checks

or pledges are solicited or accepted. So why are more and more nonprofit organizations choosing to use Jeffersonian Dinners as part of their community-building programs? What purposes do they serve?

Jeffersonian Dinners can help you achieve a number of important goals:

- ***A Jeffersonian Dinner enlists new allies.*** The list of attendees at the dinner should include a number of people who are new to you and your organization. The unusual nature of the evening will make your organization stand out as a place that is focused on collaboration, feedback, and community building.
- ***A Jeffersonian Dinner helps to create and disseminate ideas.*** Conversations around the table at Jeffersonian Dinners often help to spark fresh thinking about important topics. The interesting, partly-random assortment of attendees is likely to generate interesting insights that may provoke worthwhile new initiatives: "The story you just told reminds me of something we did in my community. What if the two ideas were combined somehow? . . ."
- ***A Jeffersonian Dinner expands attendees' networks.*** Almost every Jeffersonian Dinner we've attended has led to valuable new connections among people. We wish we had a dollar for every time we've heard an attendee say, "It was so great to have a chance to speak with so-and-so! We have so many interests in common, I can't imagine how it is that we never met before!"
- ***A Jeffersonian Dinner spreads knowledge about and interest in your organization.*** Organize a Jeffersonian Dinner

around the topic of your work helps to position your organization as a “thought leader” in the community. It will also greatly increase the visibility of your organization as a leader in thinking about the topic, perhaps even the “go-to” group whenever related issues are mentioned.

Fledgling organizations have used Jeffersonian Dinners to recruit partners, brainstorm solutions to policy problems, and spread the word about their team among those doing parallel work. Established organizations have used Jeffersonian Dinners to stay in touch with old friends, to meet new ones, and to get feedback and advice about potential new programs or changes in direction. Organizations that are about to embark on major fundraising initiatives or expansion programs have used Jeffersonian dinners to energize the community and get the word out about their exciting new plans.

Most important, Jeffersonian Dinners are **fun**. Participants almost invariably find them far more stimulating, thought-provoking, and engaging than either the typical purposeless dinner party (dominated by small talk and chitchat) or the traditional fundraising event (in which speakers “talk at” the audience rather than engaging in true, open-ended dialog). For nonprofit partners who have become weary of the ritual—and the expense—of the annual gala, the informality, openness, and intimacy of the Jeffersonian Dinner can be a breath of fresh air. And the simplicity of organizing a Jefferson Dinner—or even a series of dinners held throughout the year—is in stark contrast to the complexity of planning, funding, publicizing, preparing, and pulling off a star-studded gala. Most people, including nonprofit leaders themselves, regard the usual social activities in the nonprofit space as boring and enervating; they’re a major cause of burnout among nonprofit managers and fundraisers. By contrast, people who’ve attended a Jeffersonian Dinner love to talk about the

experience with friends; they’re thrilled when an invitation to a second such dinner arrives, and many of them get turned on to the concept of hosting a Jeffersonian Dinner of their own. Rather than producing burn-out, Jeffersonian Dinners create energy.

## How To Host a Jeffersonian Dinner, in Three Simple Steps

### ***Step 1: Planning (Beginning Four Weeks in Advance)***

- Invite between 8 and 15 people who have a common interest (e.g. music and kids, innovation in education, women’s health care).
- It’s usually best to invite a mix of people, some of whom know one another while others do no.
- Avoid inviting a “big kahuna”—a celebrity, powerful business executive, or political leader whose power or charisma are likely to lead others at the dinner to defer to him or her. Everyone at the dinner should feel equally free to contribute.
- If the dinner is to be focused on an objective, such as spreading knowledge of and interest in a nonprofit group, then work with the CEO of the group to tailor a topic that will interest the dinner participants.
- Choose a quiet location where the conversation can com-

fortably be heard, possibly a home or private room in a restaurant.

- Select an opening question that is related to the dinner theme and encourages each person at the table to tell a personal story (e.g., “Who was your favorite teacher of all time?”).
- Solicit brief written biographies (100-150 words) from each participant in the dinner.
- Send out the opening question and biographies ahead of time so people will be ready to carry on the conversation.
- Select a dinner moderator—someone with a light style but who can move the conversation around and stimulate discussion.

### ***Step 2: During the Dinner***

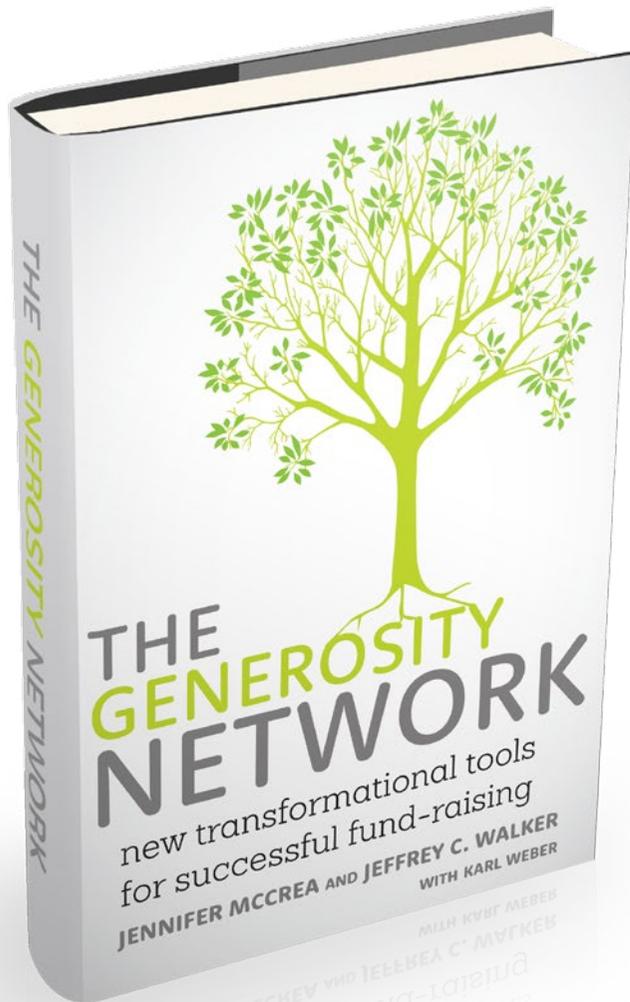
- 7 p.m.: Cocktails, light conversation before seating.
- 7:30 p.m.: Moderator opens by explaining the ground rules. Most important: No talking to your neighbor; we are having a whole-table conversation.
- Ask each person at the table to respond to the opening question.
- Moderator introduces a follow-up question to link the opening answers to the general theme of the evening. This

may propose a problem related to it that those at the table can address together. The question could be directly related to the work of the nonprofit organization, e.g., “How can we reduce teacher turnover in schools?”

- Let the discussion begin! Moderator should keep the conversation relevant, prevent side discussions from breaking up the table, and ensure that no one or two people are overly dominant.
- 9:15 p.m.: Moderator asks each person at the table to describe any ideas or thoughts they had during the discussion that they would like to follow up on or work with someone on . . . or just think about more.
- 9:30 p.m.: End dinner. Informal one-on-one conversations usually continue.

### ***Step 3: After the Dinner (Within Two Weeks)***

- Moderator or nonprofit CEO sends out a note giving the dinner participants’ contact information and summarizing the follow-up points listed at the dinner’s end.
- Follow up over the next few weeks, helping people connect with one another and with the nonprofit organization if desired. Nonprofit leaders may choose to set up one-on-one meetings with the dinner attendees they thought were interested in following up.
- If you are in the midst of an ongoing campaign of some kind—or in the process of launching one—invite some of



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Founder of the Hawn Foundation

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