One Book One Northwestern Discussion Guide 2017-18

Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality

By Danielle Allen
Using the Discussion Guide

One Book has created this discussion guide for groups interested in discussing specific topics related to Danielle Allen's book. This guide is split up into themes around equality, government, and freedom. The guides utilize Allen’s text to explore real-world case studies and contemporary examples of these themes. They present questions to facilitate critical thinking about the topics and ideas inspired by Allen's writing, and to serve as a starting point for larger conversation.

We have provided PowerPoint and PDF versions of each discussion guide for anyone in the community—including residence halls, residence colleges, and academic and professional departments—to use when leading discussion groups.

If you would like a One Book fellow to facilitate a discussion group for you, email us at onebook@northwestern.edu or call us at 847-467-2294, and we will set up a date and time for your book group discussion.
General questions for discussion

Before we discuss more specific topics related to current events, let’s talk about a few general questions to help us dive into the biggest ideas *Our Declaration* asks us to consider.

- Do you agree with Allen’s argument that guaranteeing individual liberties/freedoms depends on first acknowledging everyone’s equality as political actors?

- What does Allen mean by the “art of democratic writing,” and do you agree with her argument that “human intelligence” is a “collective force.”

- Do you agree with Allen’s basic premise that the authors of the Declaration of Independence shared a basic philosophical commitment to human equality

- How has your understanding of the Declaration of Independence changed as a result of reading Allen’s book?
Education

In *Our Declaration*, Allen recounts her experience teaching adult learners through night school at the University of Chicago. In the book, she describes how some of these adult students worked multiple jobs, juggled work responsibilities with their children's needs, and had to depend on poor public transportation. This sheds light on some of the challenges that students face in trying to access education.

The following case study examines public schools in Illinois and financial barriers to equal education for all students.
Case Study: Illinois Public Schools

In 2010, Illinois cut $32 million from prekindergarten programs. These cuts disproportionally affected poor communities. As a result, students in these areas do not have equal access to a quality education.

• Think back to your previous educational experiences. Do you think your schools were well supported financially? What specific experiences lead you to your conclusion?

• Academic under-preparedness is a major issue affecting students who attend poor quality schools. How does the quality of education before college might affect a student’s ability to succeed in college?

• Does an unequal education system threaten the Declaration’s ideal of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”? Why or why not?
Throughout *Our Declaration*, Allen discusses the power of law, and the role of the government in our society. According to Allen, “The Declaration tells us that government is the tool that humans use to secure life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Since entering office, President Donald Trump has been vocal about his desire to undo so much of President Barack Obama’s legislative legacy, including “Obamacare.” In three separate attempts between July and September 2017, the Senate failed to repeal the law. Though the proposal was ultimately rejected, it has brought issues of access to healthcare to the forefront.

The following case study considers how laws can impact people’s quality of life.
Case Study: Healthcare

In an effort to help the millions of adults without health insurance, President Barack Obama signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA)- or "Obamacare"- into law in 2010.

• Referring back to Allen’s quote, how does the U.S. healthcare system serve as a tool for people in securing life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

• Apart from having access to healthcare, what are some aspects of your life that can potentially impact your health?
  * For example, think about your neighborhood, the physical environment, and the food options available to you. How might this affect your diet and exercise? How does financial status play a role?

• How could people utilize the government to address some of these larger issues affecting their quality of life?
Free Speech

In addition to equality, *Our Declaration* focuses on themes of liberty and freedom. Today, liberties can be expressed in various spheres of life. One of the major debates taking place in colleges and universities, and cities and towns, in the U.S. has to do with free speech. At the heart of these debates are issues of free speech and safe spaces.

The following case study explores the comments made by Brown University president, Christina Paxson, on the subject of freedom of expression on college campuses.
Case Study: Free Speech & Safe Spaces

In an opinion piece in the Washington Post, Brown University president, Christina Paxson, stated, “Colleges and universities protect the rights of members of their communities to express a full range of ideas, however controversial.”

• Do you think colleges have the right to restrict certain topics or ideas from being expressed on college campuses?

• Are there any negatives to preventing certain ideas from being discussed? Does it take away from students’ learning?

• Have you ever felt uncomfortable due to something being discussed in a class? How did you cope with the situation? Did you address what was being said?