

STRONG PARKS, STRONG COMMUNITIES

Tool 15: Jeffersonian Dinners

A “Jeffersonian Dinner” is a facilitated private meal for a small group – eight to 14 guests – the goal of which is connection with a topic and with each other. It provides an opportunity for guests to engage with content: for example, a compelling strategic vision that your group has articulated and about which it wants to generate energy and support. A series of Jeffersonian Dinners could lead to a year-end solicitation sent to all guests who attended a dinner.

To host a Jeffersonian Dinner, you will need:

1. **One table.** You will be having one conversation (technically you could push two tables together, but you get the idea). It is important that your table be able to comfortably seat all your dinner guests so they can see each. If your home cannot accommodate this, you can host the meal at a private room in a restaurant, winery, etc. If your park permits the use of any of its buildings for such an event, you could host your Jeffersonian Dinner there.
2. **From 8 to 14 guests.** Do not invite more people than can participate in a single conversation around your specific table. Anticipate a 50%-75% confirmation rate, because some people will have scheduling conflicts. For each dinner, generate a list of 20 names, prioritize, and invite up to the number of guests who will fit around your table. Track responses and invite additional guests as your prioritized invitees decline.
3. **A topic.** In the classic sense, *any* topic can make for a good Jeffersonian Dinner: a cause you are passionate about, a challenge that concerns you, an issue you are fascinated by. It is your dinner, you pick. That said, the intent here is to connect your guests with your national park and its stories, and your vision for the park. Frame your topic toward that end. Your guests should have a common interest in your topic.
4. **Food.** This can be a catered multi-course meal, a dinner hosted at a private table at a restaurant, a pot luck, or pizza take-out. Experience suggests that a cocktail drink at the beginning of the dinner (not wine or beer, but a cocktail) warms things up. Alcohol was always served at Mr. Jefferson’s table.
5. **An icebreaking topic-related question that you share ahead of the program.** Ask your guests to consider your question in advance, and to include something personal and heartfelt in their answer (remember, the purpose of the evening is for people to get to know each other as well as get to know your organization and connect with your park).

The following is adapted from www.jeffersondinner.org.

The Rule:

You must have a single conversation. You talk to the whole table and the whole table listens. The whole time. That is eight to 14 brains on one topic. It can be a powerful and unique experience for all involved.

The Progress of the Evening:

6. Prepare five to seven questions you might pose to deepen the conversation as it progresses.
7. Begin with your guests' stories. Each person shares a personal reflection on the question you posed ahead of the dinner. Try to connect with their personal passions around the topic. Let the conversation take you where the passion goes.
8. As host, make sure all participants feel welcome and have a chance to talk. Do not run it like a meeting ("Joe, we haven't heard from you yet") but as a congenial dinner party ("Joe, I'd love to hear more about how you feel about [something you know is of interest to Joe]." Bottom line: as it was for Mr. Jefferson, this is all about people connecting with each other.
9. Give your guests an opportunity to share something at the end of the evening – something they learned, an idea they found inspiring, or an item they plan to follow-up on in some way. Invite them to stay connected with your project.

After your Dinner:

Share contact information from the evening – this can be a simple email to thank the guests.

Here is a sample workplan to plan a Jeffersonian Dinner*:

TASK	TIMING (prior)	DATE
Set date and time	4 to 6 weeks	May 9
Determine which board member will host	4 to 6 weeks	May 9
Decide guest list	5 weeks	May 16
Prepare and send invitation letter / email	4 weeks	May 23
Board host calls invitees	3½ weeks	May 25
Send directions / map to guests	<i>(if appropriate)</i>	May 28
Draft topic guide or background info., if any	2 weeks	June 6
Send confirmation letters (email or snail mail)	1½ weeks	June 10
Finalize discussion questions	1 week	June 13
Arrange for catering	1 week	June 13
Make final confirmation phone calls or emails	2 days	June 18
Host and facilitate the dinner conversation		June 20
Send follow-up appreciation to guests		June 24

**Times indicated are in advance of the actual dinner. These are guidelines. Dates are examples, but we recommend Thursday evenings. This a plan for a dinner on Thursday, June 20.*