Trust building activities

AERE Scholars Program

Co-created with the 2021-2023 AERE Scholars

The AERE mentoring program aims to engage a diverse group of early career environmental and natural resource economists in AERE while providing invaluable career guidance, skill development, and networking opportunities. We envision that as a result of this program AERE will exhibit substantially greater diversity and will help make economics a field that is respected both for its contributions to addressing the world's problems and for embracing an inclusive culture. This document outlines ice breakers and other activities that can be used to get to know your mentor/scholar and peer group better and help make these initial Zoom conversations easier.

Meeting Openings and Closings

Meeting openings and closings are important. They are used to transition between social and meeting time by providing the opportunity to become present and begin the meeting. They encourage conversation, engagement, and community, and can play a pivotal role in building team culture. They can also be used to build on previous outcomes and allow participants to check in and set the objectives for the day. There are many ways that you can open a meeting. Check-in questions framed as “go-arounds” (going around the room so that each participant can respond) is just one way to open a meeting, but likely the approach that is most amenable to Zoom (and therefore the focus here). Meeting closings provide the opportunity to review insights from the day, improve the likelihood of integrating new information, and celebrate accomplishments. Go-arounds work well for Zoom closings as well; like “In one breath tell me something that you’ll take from our meeting today.”

Check-in Questions

Check-in questions are questions that quickly reveal something memorable. Guidelines are that they are positive, don’t exclude, and provide information that is unique to the individual. For example, “What is your favorite alcoholic drink” would not fit these criteria because many would respond with beer or wine (and we’d have repeats) and, of course, not everyone drinks (so this would exclude). On the other hand, “What is something that recently made you smile,” will likely result in a different answer for all, would not exclude, and would reveal something about the respondents.

1. What is something totally mundane that you did this weekend?
2. If you had a warning label, what would yours say?
3. If you could be anywhere in the world right now, where would you be?
4. What helped you get through this week?
5. What is your most unusual talent or skill?
6. What is your best study or memory recall tip?

7. What is something that recently made you smile?
8. Share a word that describes your current feelings.
9. Have you ever had a nickname? What is it?
10. What's the last great TV show or movie you watched?
11. If you could learn one new personal skill, what would it be?
12. What's your favorite way to exercise?
13. If you were a wrestler what would be your entrance theme song?
14. If you could bring back any fashion trend, what would it be?
15. What's the most embarrassing fashion trend you used to rock?
16. *Risky choice* What is your closest near-death experience?
17. If you could choose one superpower/ magical power, what would it be?
18. Describe your quirkiest relative in 3 sentences (ish).
19. If you were forced to eat only one thing for the rest of your life, what would it be?
20. If you could time travel to a decade, which decade would it be?
21. If you had 1 year to train full time, what Olympic sport would you have the best chance of earning a medal in?
22. *Risky choice* If you could change/repeal a law, what would it be?
23. *RISKY CHOICE* Who did you vote for in 2020? (We're totally kidding, don't ask this one)
24. What's your favorite breakfast food (esp for morning meetings)?
25. What do you miss about life in 2020?
26. If you had to transform into a sea creature/other animal, which would you choose?
27.

Longer Check-in Questions

These meet the criteria above but will likely result in slightly longer answers. Better for smaller groups.

1. What's an interesting job you had prior to this one?
2. If you had to work on only one personal project for the next year, what would it be?
3. What is one new habit (good or bad) you have picked up during the pandemic?
4. Share a picture: provide a theme [like your favorite recent picture, a favorite nature picture, etc]
5. What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given? When did you apply it?
6. If you had to delete all but 3 apps from your smartphone, which ones would you keep?
7. If you could commit any non-violent crime and get away with it, what would you choose and why?
8. What is a time when technology went totally awry for you?
9. What is your best/worst vacation destination?
10. How does your life look from the point of view of your pet/plants/imaginary dog?
11. What is your to-go statistical software?
12. If you weren't an economist, what would you have been?
13. How would your parents describe what you do?
14. If you could talk to anyone, alive or not, who would it be and why?
15. What was your favorite non-economics course in high school/college/etc and why?
16. What advice would you give your younger self?
17. When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?
18. Share a song you've been listening to recently.

19. If econ conferences had “walk-out” music, what would your song be and why?
20. What’s a unique skill that you have?
21. What something you liked as a kid but do not like now?
22. Would you rather take $10 million now or go back to age 16 with the knowledge you have now?
23. Rose, Bud, Thorn:
    a. **Rose** = A highlight, success, small win, or something positive that happened.
    b. **Thorn** = A challenge you experienced or something you can use more support with.
    c. **Bud** = New ideas that have blossomed or something you are looking forward to knowing more about or experiencing.

Story Prompts

These are appropriate for get-to-know-you sessions and ice breakers. They meet the criteria above, but instead of only focusing on positive events they also include some self-deprecating and overcoming obstacles themes and of course require longer answers.

In **3 minutes** tell us about one of the times when...

1. you were injured when a kid (or for those who are parents, one of your kids was injured).
2. you got into a lot of trouble.
3. a presentation, lecture, or public speaking event went totally wrong.
4. something you were trying to do went totally wrong [you can set parameter like a school activity, work activity, outdoor activity, etc.]
5. you did something out of character
6. you got a scar. (What’s your best scar story?)
7. Something you recently made (food, art, woodworking, etc.)
8. You tried to fix something.
9. You felt you successfully taught someone something OR discuss a time when someone successfully taught you something
10. *risky choice* If you were a dictator, what would be the first thing you would change?
11. When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?
12. When you were a kid, what was your favorite “imaginary” or “pretend” game?
13. What’s the most memorable advice you’ve received? From whom did you receive it?

Games/activities

1. **Guessing Game.** Have each team member share a little known fact (something they did when younger, an interesting skill or story) and have others guess which fact belongs to which team member. Best for groups of 4+
2. **Share a Picture.** Ask everyone to share their most recent picture on their camera roll and explain it. There are many variations of this one. Possible themes: have people share a photo that’s meaningful to them, one of their desk or workspace, something they saw outside their house, one that is an embarrassing photo, or a favorite food they cooked. You can also use photos to do a variation on the guessing game - guess who’s baby picture is whose, or ask people to take very zoomed in pictures of objects in their home and have people guess what the picture is. These are easier to share with a screen share then from a phone.

3. **Share an Object.** This one's another classic that works great on Zoom—the old "Show and Tell" from elementary school. You can leave it open-ended or ask for something specific like something that reminds them of their goals, brings them joy, or makes them laugh.
4. **Essentials or Favorites.** Ask each person to share the most essential app on their phone, book on their shelf, appliance in their kitchen, etc. and compile a list of essentials to share with the group. Or, ask everyone's favorite recipe, TV show, song lyrics, movie lines, etc. and share those.
5. **It's a Draw:** Ask participants to draw the answer to a prompt (like what's your favorite dessert, or any of the questions in the "Essentials and Favorites" activity, using the Zoom whiteboard.
6. **Rate your Day.** Ask your participants to rate their day on a scale of one to 10. It is great for building a sense of community and getting to know how your coworkers are feeling.
7. **Describe your favorite movie/book/show poorly.** Ask participants to give the worst description they can of their favorite movie/book/show, and ask others to guess what it is.
8. **Skribbl.io** - free online game, one person sees a word and has to draw it, other participants guess what is being drawn and get points for getting the answer right
9. **Two truths and a lie**. Better fit for two or more team members.
10. **"Slouch lost his hat".** Every participant receives a number (1, 2, 3,...). The number assignment needs to be common knowledge. The game starts with the phrase: "Slouch lost his hat. Slouch does not have it, 1 has it". Then the person who has the number 1 needs to respond quickly ("1 does not have it, $anothernumber has it"). The phrase has to be said timely and correctly word by word, otherwise person 1 is out. $anothernumber needs to be a "valid" number, otherwise, person 1 is out. It's now $anothernumber's turn to say "Number $anothernumber does not have it, $yetanothernumber has it" $yetanothernumber needs to be a valid number, otherwise $anothernumber is out. If $anothernumber does not respond in time (~3 seconds), they are out, and it's person 1's turn again. The game ends when only one person is left, the winner.
11. **Group Story Time:** Start with a simple prompt such as "I was walking down the street when I saw…" and the next person in line has to finish the sentence and the group goes around the room until everyone has contributed and the story is complete.
12. **Song scramble**. As a group, select a well-known song, use the soundtrack and replace the lyrics with lines written by each team member. Finally, find a brave member to interpret the song for a solo performance.
13. **Make a silly story (in person).** The first person writes the first 2 lines of a story on a piece of paper. They fold it so only the second line is visible, then pass it to the next person. That person writes two lines, and folds it so only the last is visible. Repeat until the story is done.
    a. **Variation -** Same general principle but the story must be related to the life of an economist (i.e., research/teaching/policy work related).
14. **Guess the classic environmental economics paper.** The first person describes a famous environmental economics paper without revealing the author or the title and participants must guess the paper. Repeat until everyone has had a turn.