Based on a true story, *Hidden Figures* tells the story of three brilliant African-American women at NASA, Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson), Dorothy Vaughn (Octavia Spencer), and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe). Hidden away from their colleagues at NASA and the public, they serve as the brains behind one of the greatest operations in history, the launch of astronaut John Glenn (Glen Powell) into orbit, a stunning achievement that restored the nation's confidence, turned around the Space Race, and galvanized the world.

Even though *Hidden Figures* tells a story that took place half a century ago, it feels timely and relevant, in light of ongoing struggles and conversations around race and gender. As such, it is a vital film that demands to be seen and discussed in groups. Below are a series of discussion starters around this inspirational and challenging film.
As a title, Hidden Figures, relays a dual meaning. It first refers to the group of African American female mathematicians and engineers that formed the West Computer Group at NASA. Secondly, it refers to the equations, numbers, and mathematics that were either forgotten or had yet to be discovered that would eventually make manned space flight possible. Both uses are vitally important today, both in reality and as a concept.

Katherine, Dorothy, Mary, and their colleagues, due to America’s racist and sexist past, were literally hidden from view. They were cordoned off in the basement of an old building, separate and unequal from their white and male counterparts. While their inclusion in the program was something of a last gasp effort to beat the Russians into space, even their superiors never believed that they could actually contribute something of value to the process. Thankfully, they were all proven wrong in the end.

These women worked tirelessly to uncover the hidden figures (the numbers and equations) that would propel humanity into space. At that time, so much in technology and science that we currently take for granted was yet to be discovered. Like many other Americans, they stared into space and wondered, “What if?” They were motivated by a shared goal to dream big and reach higher. They worked together, against great odds, to achieve a seemingly impossible goal.

Hidden Figures is such an important film because it encourages us to keep our eyes open for the hidden figures, in the forms of both people and knowledge, in both the past and the present. It forces us to look beyond the “way things are” to see a deeper reality, namely, the way things could, and should be.

Questions for Consideration

1. Think about the world around you. Who are the hidden figures (people) in it?
   How can you help bring them into the light?

2. We might know more—scientifically and technologically—than the characters in the film, but we don’t know everything.
   What are we longing to know? What new discoveries are waiting to be made?
   How can you participate in discoveries waiting to be made?
Mary is a brilliant woman and excels at any task set before her at NASA. But she dreams for more...of becoming an engineer. However, both her race and her gender stand in the way. When she expresses her frustration and dismay to her supervisor, Karl Zielinski, he encourages her to pursue her dreams despite these challenges. He reminds her that he’s a Jewish immigrant, whose parents were killed by Nazis, that now works on a space shuttle in the United States. He tells her that, in a very real way, they’re both examples of the impossible.

*Hidden Figures* is a deeply human and intimate drama that takes place in a cosmic setting, in light of its characters’ work, hopes, and dreams. When we travel into outer space with John Glenn, we are reminded that we are tiny inhabitants of a vast universe. This should put our experiences into stark perspective. That fact that we are alive on, as far as we know, the only planet that can support life is an impossible miracle. That we have made leaps and bounds in science and technology in the fifty years since the events of *Hidden Figures* and that we now have an African American president that serves citizens that lived through the Jim Crow era are both realities that would have seemed like impossible miracles to many people only decades ago.

*Hidden Figures* reminds us that life has been, is, and can be difficult. But when faced with its great challenges, the reminder of our impossible, miraculous existences can be the inspiration we need to carry on.

**Questions for Consideration**

1. How does thinking about your life as an impossible miracle give you hope? How can this energize your work in the world?

2. Look around you and think about people in your communities. Do you see any impossible miracles there? If so, who are they and how do they inspire you?
Hidden Figures reveals a problematic reality for many people in our world. Women of color are dually oppressed as victims of both racism and sexism. Hidden Figures portrays this in poignant ways. Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary are questioned at every turn and forced to endure hardships that their white and male counterparts will never know. They are forced to use separate facilities (restrooms or coffee pots, for example) or have their work scrutinized by their "superiors."

In light of this dual oppression, Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary’s successes are doubly impressive. Thankfully, their oppression is not the end of the story as they excel to great heights both within the NASA program and in American history overall. As a result, their stories are even more inspirational for anyone that watches and listens.

Questions for Consideration

1. Consider the members of the communities in which you live. Where have you seen oppression, and where have you seen people overcome it? How does this inspire you?

2. Along with the previous questions, in what ways can you help alleviate the oppression or suffering that others experience around you?
Mary wants to be an engineer, but this requires additional classes that are only available at the local, segregated high school. In petitioning the local judge to let her enroll in these classes, she appeals to his ego. In doing so, she also points out the ways in which he—a white man—and she—an black woman—are similar. He was the first in his family to go to college and the first judge to be appointed by three different governors to the same seat. She is the first in her family to go to college and the first African American woman to graduate from West Virginia University. As she longs to be the first African American female engineer at NASA, she tells him that he can be the first judge to help her break this barrier.

Like Mary, many of us probably know what it's like to be the first member of our family to go to college or graduate school or to hold a particular job. We are familiar with the blessings and challenges that these experiences bring. Even if we aren't pioneers in our communities, we can still know the feeling of being first. We might live in (unintentionally) segregated communities. If so, opportunities to reach beyond those boundaries and practice inclusion abound. At the same time, we might be surrounded by friends, family, or colleagues that engage in offensive language or behavior. As a result, we face opportunities to be the first to speak out against that and to stand up for those that can't speak for themselves.

Questions for Consideration

1. Where have you seen someone be “first” in their community? Did this birth conflict or inspire change?

2. How can you be first in your community? What opportunities are available for you to stand up for others?
Hidden Figures is so inspirational because it reminds us of a time in our history when we were, at least in one respect, united in a common goal, the race to space. Men and women (black and white) were captivated by this quest and dared to dream the impossible. In many instances, as the film shows, people put aside their differences and transcended an oppressive status quo to achieve these goals and dreams.

We live in a deeply divided world, politically, culturally, and economically. These divisions run deep and, at times, seem like they can never be bridged, which makes speaking of a shared goal seemingly impossible. Even so, this should not deter us from pursuing the betterment of our communities, both near and far. While the challenges are huge, we should remember, and be encouraged by, the reality that true change rarely takes place overnight. Can we begin, in our own, small communities, to identify opportunities for change and improvement? Can we band together with people similar to, and different from, us to take on these challenges?

Questions for Consideration

1. Think about the times in which change has taken place in your communities, even the smallest change. What actions or events birthed that change and what brought it to fruition?

2. Where in your communities do you now see the need for change? What small actions could set that change in motion?
Hidden Figures should be required viewing, especially in our junior high and high schools. As it celebrates technology and the sciences, it uplifts women and revels in the very real contributions that they have made, and continue to make, in these fields. It also reveals how important education has been, and continues to be, in improving our individual and collective lives. It is important to note that this education doesn’t only take place in the classroom.

Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary are all very brilliant and excel at every level of education and task set before them. Despite their intelligence, wisdom, and success, they refuse to stop learning. Katherine accepts a challenging position, Mary applies for graduate classes, and Dorothy teaches herself an early computer language, which eventually leads to a promotion. These women are the products of, and a testament to, a good education. But education also takes place outside of the classroom. The men of NASA are all brilliant as well, but they still have important lessons to learn. Their education comes through encounters and shared experiences with others that may be different from them—here, namely, African American women.

To put it bluntly, racism and sexism are often examples of ignorance, pure and simple. This doesn’t always have to be malevolent and can simply be the result of a lack of education and/or experience. Hidden Figures reminds us that education, as both learning and encounter, can be the cure for what ails us.

Questions for Consideration

1. Think about your educational experiences. Where has education shaped and/or improved your life? Where have encounters with others shaped and/or improved your life?

2. Consider the communities of which you are a part and the challenges that you face. In what ways can education, as both learning and experience, meet those needs?