

Welcoming Communities

Discussion Summary for Session 3

Diving Deeper on Key Challenges for Welcoming Communities and Their Underlying or Root Causes

What are some of the key challenges that you've faced in welcoming someone to a community or in feeling yourself welcomed by others? What happened? Looking deeper, what do you think was at work there, or what factors do you think were behind this challenge? What might be some of the underlying issues or root causes for this and other challenges? And what values, goals, or public goods are related to them? These and similar questions—as well as the ideas and issues they raise—were the focus of the 3rd class session of “Welcoming Communities: Re-imagining Our Communities,” an online course of exploratory discussion with residents of Leisure World in Silver Spring, Maryland. Below you'll find a summary of the main ideas that emerged from their discussions.

Different Key Challenges to Welcoming Communities

- **Our Differences and Divisions**
 - **Conscious and Unconscious Biases**
 - **Divisions—and “isms” that put down a group or groups:**
 - Race and racism—discrimination based on race or ethnicity
 - Sex, gender, and sexism
 - Age and ageism
 - Disability and ableism
 - Religion and cultural differences (including regional differences)
 - Political differences
 - Seniority (how long you've been in a position) and youth
 - Classism
 - Size-ism
 - **What it often looks like - signs of divisions**
 - Overt exclusions, like those based on race, sex, or financial status
 - Implicit biases, assumptions, and automatic judgments we make about others and that they make about us
 - Unwritten but systematic discrimination based on race or other factors
 - Treating disfavored groups (e.g. African Americans) as if they are invisible, automatically less qualified, or less deserving of full participation (e.g. mistaking them for service staff)
 - Using language (names, comments, stories) to express the inferiority of a disfavored group
 - Expressing biases around gender, height, personality types
 - Gaslighting or otherwise diminishing those who call it out
 - Exclusive social cliques, unwritten rules, and other actions that exclude newcomers

- Possible **root or underlying causes**:
 - Fear of the “other,” of differences
 - Desire for the familiar, the comfortable, the unchallenging
 - Anxiety, insecurity, self-hatred, or self-loathing
 - Maintaining the power structure—helps those at the top of the power structure to sow divisions among those below; keeping them focused on their differences rather than on challenging the power structure
- **Limits of Community**: What are the defensible reasons to exclude others or to limit our sense of community?
 - Limits of membership by financial status or other demographics such as age (e.g. not everyone can afford to live in a given community)
 - Limit to those who share a willingness to follow public safety measures, and excluding those who will not follow public health measures (masks, social distancing, vaccinations, etc.)
 - Limit to those who share beliefs in tolerance, diversity, inclusion, equality, equity, and justice for all people
 - Limit to those who share certain foundational democratic beliefs or norms, including voting rights and access to the ballot for all citizens, respecting election results even—or especially—when their side loses, and the peaceful transfer of power
 - Concerns over individual liberties, such as privacy, and our right to be left alone
 - Good fences make good neighbors: concerns about asking too much of our community and recognizing that we all need some separation and limits to shared activities or interests
 - Possible **root or underlying causes**:
 - Capitalism with its focus on private property and private financial interests can drive divisions within
 - Public safety concerns
 - Growing political polarization, with the rise of conspiracy theories, the politics of resentment, and the demise of bipartisan or respectability politics
 - Focusing on justice over inclusion: the desire to “do the right thing,” to support and stand up for others—and for democracy, as more important than including everyone
- **Difficult Demands of Self-Governance**
 - Good leadership matters and takes effort to sustain—setting the tone for welcoming community (e.g. personally introduce newcomers, avoid references to seniority, following up personally).
 - First impressions and small gestures can matter a lot (e.g. remembering names, personally following-up).
 - Clear, transparent, timely, and plain-language communications and coordination also matter (e.g. introducing newcomers to written and unwritten expectations and norms).

- Commitment, follow-up, consistency, and follow-through over both the short and the long-term also matter.
- Possible **root or underlying causes**:
 - Complacency
 - Fixation on the status quo, especially if we have power (“we always do it this way”; or “that’s not how we do things.”)
 - Failing to prioritize our limited funds, time, or talents and to make the hard choices to support equity and inclusion
- **Challenges from the Pandemic**
 - Social distancing has meant few or no in-person events for the past year—and many communities or groups have been unable to move activities online (the digital divide).
 - Masks have added another challenge: the difficulty of reading even hearing each other.

Some Core Questions That Arise from These Key Challenges

- How might we help our communities do a better job of simultaneously supporting and celebrating all our differences while also being welcoming and inclusive for all?
 - What kinds of policies or approaches might help decrease the chance that our differences cause or contribute to division?
 - How can we productively address the blinders or unconscious biases that we all have—and that pose a challenge to welcoming communities?
- What are, or should be, the limits to community or to inclusion?
 - When is it ok, or even preferable, to exclude people?
 - How or where, should we draw those lines?
 - How should we deal with the legacy of exclusion that lingers in communities?
 - What moral values or standards might guide our thinking about whom or what we exclude or include?
- How might we help our communities be more effective in sustaining the hard work and meeting the administrative demands to support welcoming initiatives?
 - What policies or practices could make a difference?
- In a world re-shaped by the pandemic, what new practices, policies, or approaches might help all communities to be both safer and more welcoming?

What other questions need to be addressed for welcoming communities?