

Welcoming Communities

Discussion Summary for Session 4

Developing Core Questions & Concerns for Welcoming Communities

What are some of the core questions or concerns that need to be addressed for welcoming communities? When considering some of the key challenges discussed previously, including the limits of community, which of these challenges should be prioritized when we think of shaping our actions? What are some initial ideas about how we might respond to these challenges or answer these core questions?

These and similar questions were the focus of the 4th 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. In the remaining sessions, we’ll use these core questions to help us shape different possibilities for creating and sustaining more welcoming communities.

Different Core Questions or Concerns to be Addressed

- **What are different goals for communities—and how do these relate to the goal of creating welcoming communities?**
 - What are the appropriate limits to our notions of “community” and “welcoming”—and how might these differ for different types of communities?
 - Consider a residential community versus a faith community versus a book club
 - Depending on the type of community, what are—or should be—the limits to community or inclusion?
 - When is it ok, or even preferable, to exclude people?
 - How should we draw the lines? What moral values or standards might guide our thinking about whom or what we exclude or include?
 - Who should we exclude?
 - Age groups (for an age-restricted community)?
 - People of low economic status, who can’t afford a given community?
 - People with behaviors or beliefs that harm or threaten public health and safety, or threaten democracy, or threaten social cohesion (e.g. they are racist and unwelcoming of diversity)?
 - How might we deal with the legacy of exclusion that lingers in communities?
 - How might we balance our obligations to other community members against protecting individuals’ privacy interests or desire to be left alone.
 - How might we usefully distinguish a sense of “welcoming community” or “community spirit” and neighborliness from other stronger, more intimate and demanding relationships, like those of family or friendship?

- **How might we strengthen and sustain a healthy sense of community spirit, neighborliness, or public trust?**
 - What policies, procedures, actions, statements, and individual behaviors might strengthen or improve community spirit?
- **How can our communities be welcoming and inclusive for all while also celebrating and supporting our differences and diversity?**
 - How can we productively address the unconscious biases that we all have—and that pose a challenge to welcoming communities?
 - How can welcoming communities also create space for people to come together in groups formed around shared identities, where they can be unchallenged and be themselves without explanation?
 - How can communities also enable and encourage unlike people to come together and not be challenged to grow in knowledge and awareness of their differences?
 - What kinds of policies or approaches within various communities might help decrease the chance that our differences cause or contribute to divisiveness?
- **For our institutions and organizations, what are some specific goals, strategies, or policies, that might strengthen a welcoming community?** To be more welcoming, how should our organizations address—
 - Their goals, mission statements, policy statements, etc.
 - Recruitment and orientation for new members
 - Staffing, training, and budgeting
 - Media, public relations, and communications
 - Community relations or coordinating with other organizations and communities
 - Follow-up and responsiveness
 - Leadership, transitions, and mentoring?
- **As individual community members, how can we individually better support welcoming communities?** What individual behaviors, actions, and/or approaches may help strengthen our communities?
- **How might we use aspects of the pandemic as opportunities for new ways of strengthening welcoming communities?**
 - How might the shift to online interactions be used to increase inclusivity and strengthen community?
 - How might we use the pandemic, and our emergence from it, as an inflection point to consider other new ways to be create and sustain welcoming communities?

Some Initial Ideas for Addressing these Core Questions and Concerns

- **Focus on Better Defining the Limits of—and Expectations for—Our Communities**
 - Understanding the existing or given limits and exclusions for—
 - Our different types of community (e.g., a civic/public community versus a voluntary and private one).

- Different levels of membership (e.g., access, use, participation, ownership, voting or other governance rights).
- Re-consider what could or should be those limits and exclusions. For example, for all our communities (both public and private)—
 - Focus on how to be more inclusive, welcoming, and supportive—not only of different races, ethnicities, and cultures but also of different classes of income and wealth or of different ages.
 - Focus on addressing the legacies of exclusion that still pervade many of our communities.
 - Consider whether safety and community spirit would be strengthened by adding exclusions for those that threaten public health and safety, norms of democracy, or norms of community spirit (e.g. active racists or unwelcoming of diversity).
 - Focus on how increasing diversity and inclusion could have positive economic effects (e.g. increasing property values).
- Increased awareness of, appreciation for, and sensitivity to—
 - Our many cultural differences.
 - Better navigating the fine lines between positive interactions that are civil, supportive, and welcoming, versus negative ones that may be—or may be interpreted as being—demeaning, rude, intrusive, or over-bearing.
- Periodically re-evaluating what should be our mutual obligations as citizens and community members versus our individual rights and expectations.
- **Focus on Fostering Community Spirit, Neighborliness, and Public Trust**
 - Individually – focus on interactions that are civil, respectful, helpful, and patient if needed.
 - Acknowledge others, including strangers, in public spaces—greetings, making personal introductions, and other gestures of welcoming.
 - Try to remember names, engage others in conversations, ask questions, and listen to the answers.
 - Focus on having a positive attitude toward others, including making appropriate expressions of understanding, empathy, or support.
 - For organizations—
 - Have clear communications, with overt and genuine expressions of welcoming.
 - Be open to and welcoming to change, to newcomers and their ideas.
 - Follow-up with individuals to make sure they feel included.
 - Publish contact information and frequently asked questions, and update them.
 - Looking out for the health, safety, and well-being of others.
 - Make room for others, check in about their needs and with how they are doing.
 - Invitations to events, making introductions to others.

- **Focus on Supporting Difference & Diversity**
 - Support for many different community groups; interests, and activities: something or somethings for everyone.
 - All groups treated respectfully and equally by the wider community.
 - Groups encourage some outreach, including hosting some activities that are open to the wider community.
- **Some strategies or policies for our organizations/institutions:**
 - Expressly add “welcoming” and/or “inclusivity” and equity statements to the organization’s or community’s mission statement, website, recruiting or sales literature, etc.
 - If possible, have a paid staff position, with funding, that includes responsibilities for—
 - inclusivity and diversity in recruitment, retention, in communications, etc.
 - community outreach and coordination on inclusion and diversity issues.
 - Consider a networked position or an initiative that bridges several communities or groups.
 - Training for leadership and staff in inclusivity and cultural differences.
 - Improve written communications: plain language, less legalese; include a “short guide” or “starter” version; include “frequently asked questions”, and contact information for any questions and regularly update all information.
 - Regularly train, encourage, support, and reward volunteers.
 - Individual follow-ups so that welcoming goes beyond the welcome mat: schedule follow-up visits with new residents to ask how things are going, if they have any questions, etc.
 - Publicize and regularly update the names and contact information for all community officers.
 - Be open to and even inviting of change in “how things are done” and in leadership. Look for opportunities to encourage and empower the next generation of leaders.
 - Convene more community or cross-community events—more shared experiences for all, whether purely social, entertaining, educational, or project or program-based.
 - Reach out and coordinate with other communities. Consider a linked network of communities that actively support welcoming and inclusivity.
- **Focus on the Pandemic as an Opportunity for Change**
 - Reappraise what’s important—and look for new opportunities to learn and grow.
 - Develop initiatives to help all of us connect and re-connect after a very challenging time.
 - Continue to use and expand the use of online video conferencing (Zoom) as an opportunity to increase and improve inclusivity through online events. The personal training needed to enable others to use online conferencing is another opportunity to build community connections.