Welcoming Communities
Discussion Summary for Session 2

Exploring the meanings and implications of "welcoming"

When you think of experiences where you felt welcomed or included, what was that like? How did you know or what happened to make you feel that way? Somewhat more broadly, what might it mean to be a "welcoming" community? Or what are some of the features or elements of welcoming or inclusive communities? And, what are some of the underlying values, goals, and concerns that emerge when considering welcoming communities? These questions and the ideas and issues they raised were the focus of the 2nd 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 key ideas that emerged from their discussions.

Different Features or Essential Elements of Welcoming Communities

- **Respect** for all
- **Listening** - openly, actively, genuinely
- **Acceptance** – you can be yourself
- **Inviting** others, sometimes repeatedly – to events, meetings, church, dinners, etc. Also..
  - greeting people warmly
  - Introducing newcomers generally and to others with a connection or shared interest
  - starting and sustaining genuine conversations
  - asking people to join your table
- **Civility, politeness**
  - Speaking, politely, to and acknowledging others both when they arrive at an event or place and in passing in public spaces
  - open, inviting body language – smiles, looking people in the eye but not staring, waves, and handshakes (pre-pandemic)
  - being included in the conversation
  - Remembering people's names and/or circumstances
  - Name tags and seating assignments for events where people don't know each other
  - Friendly tone of voice
- **Asking Questions**—asking others for their opinion, their input, their story or experiences; or to share their expertise, knowledge, and/or skills; or contribute, to help out with some shared project. And genuinely listening to, considering the responses
- **Looking out for, helping each other**:
  - offering to help, especially in times of personal crisis, challenge or transition
  - checking on each other
  - providing guidance and recommendations (if asked)
  - sharing the "ins & outs", the unwritten rules
  - showing people around

- **Sincerity; genuine interest** in and regard for people as unique individuals; not just as customers, clients, voters, or market opportunities
- Genuine and sustained **commitment to and support for welcoming, inclusion, and diversity** at all levels: by communities, organizations, institutions, and individuals
- Individual **expressions of personal interest** or concern that go above and beyond
- Active **"connectors"** who get to know people and introduce them to others
- **Shared Interests** - numerous and different opportunities, organizations, and support for shared interests and passions, including recreation/sports, the arts, scholarship, politics or advocacy groups, cultural organizations, etc.
- **Intentional, thoughtful, organized efforts**—not just left to chance or to individuals
- Thoughtful **leadership,** including transitions, mentoring and support for the next generation, and opportunities for new people and new ideas
- **Responsibility** – individual members of the community take responsibility to be welcoming and support others in doing the same
- **Compassion** – genuine expressions of concern and support for each other, for what people are going through
- **Generosity and expressions of kindness** – people sharing their time, treasure, skill or expertise; or often more importantly a listening ear, support, a hug
- **Personal, individual feelings and attitudes** also matter; so that people feel—
  - they can be themselves
  - self-confident; that they have value and skills and experience to share
  - a positive attitude
  - adventurous, even courageous in reaching out to others; trying and embracing the new and different
  - more forgiving of others (and of themselves) and less likely to assume intentional disregard or insult by others
- **Sustained efforts** – have to keep walking the walk, and re-checking the map
- **Shared community events & projects:** opportunities to get together, meet others, speak with others, work together, learn about and from each other

Foundational Values and Goals for Welcoming Communities

- **Shared, positive vision(s), goal(s) and commitments** among all levels of community and leadership to create and sustain a welcoming community that—
  - Is committed to—
    - respect and civility—especially across differences
    - supporting and sustaining diversity and inclusion for all, both within and beyond the community
    - seeking the "common good" for all, including safety
    - the "long game", strategic and long-term planning and sustained efforts
  - Is "intentional" and specific in expressing and acting on these values and goals; not just empty rhetoric

- o Supports personal and institutional growth and development and learning; what are our blind spots and how can we do better?
- o Supports cross-cutting or "intersectional" common interests – e.g., education, child care, safety/nonviolence, facilities/maintenance, civility, etc.
- o Is connected at all levels—there is frequent and effective communication within and across communities
- o Supports shared activities, events, celebrations for all different types and levels of communities
- o Supports individuals with all their diverse, unique, and sometimes evolving identities, heritages, skills, gifts, life experiences, abilities, interests, and needs.

- **"Intentionality"** – have to support, enact, and sustain policies, procedures, and organizations that actively and sustainably work to welcome others and support diversity and inclusion. Can't leave it to individuals, to chance.

- Attitudes that support **reflection, review, growth and change**

- **A culture of compassion** that actively supports not just friends and family but all neighbors, community members, and citizens, including those we don't know or in other communities

Some Key Concerns and Challenges for Welcoming Communities, including issues to be discussed in the next class session

- Given increasing political polarization, is some or any form of "community" (welcoming or otherwise) even possible?
  - o Stated differently, are a few certain shared or common interests enough to sustain a welcoming community when there is strong and increasing disagreement over essential issues of public safety or key values of diversity and inclusion?

- Acknowledging the reality that no rule, policy, or process can completely control individual behavior.

- How to determine or evaluate the "common good," and how does it intersect or conflict with individual rights and freedoms?

- How to think about, conceive of, and support the various roles, responsibilities, and obligations of individual community members to support and sustain a welcoming community.

- Supporting and sustaining a welcoming community in times of pandemic – may require new and different strategies.

- The challenges of considering and coordinating among different types and levels of "community"—in size (from building or block to state and country); in type (e.g., residential/geographic to virtual); or in shared interests or identities. How do these (or how should these) communities relate to or interact with each other? How can different communities be good, welcoming, and mutually supportive neighbors?