

Creating Welcoming Communities

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mental ability, gender, sexual orientation, education, finances, or age. The environment we live in — whether rural, suburban, or urban — also affects our development and experience of culture. Together, shared cultures help to form a sense of community. Part of what creates our communities and makes them welcoming is the *culture* of that community, such as the shared culture of being a Kentuckian.

What is culture?

Everyone has a unique combination of different identities. *Culture* is a combination of identities, whether in an individual or group. While culture often includes race and ethnicity, it may also include other components such as faith, physical or

Learning about culture

Think about the last time you joined a new community, such as a faith community, hobby group, or a new job. What made you feel welcome? Did someone strike up a conversation with you?



Did people ask questions to get to know you? Were they curious and respectful, even if they didn't know you well? We can use these same ideas to make people from different cultural backgrounds feel welcome in our communities.

It can be challenging to understand cultures that are unfamiliar to us or that differ from our own. However, being respectful of someone's unique culture(s) could have a positive impact on their well-being. One of the first places to begin creating welcoming communities is to examine and understand yourself. Understanding yourself helps you become aware of the biases you may have based on your unique lived experience. *Biases* are positive or negative judgments we make about people based on stereotypes. These shortcuts in thought can lead to rash decisions or discrimination. We all have biases based on our own knowledge and experiences. If we do not reflect on our biases and are unaware of them,

we can unintentionally make people feel disrespected or unheard.

Addressing biases

One way to explore what biases we hold is to use the ADDRESSING acronym. Each letter of ADDRESSING stands for a part of a person's identity:

- A**ge and generational influences
- D**evelopmental disabilities
- D**isabilities acquired in life
- R**eligion and spirituality
- E**thnic and racial identity
- S**ocioeconomic status
- S**exual orientation
- I**ndigenous heritage
- N**ational origin
- G**ender



Take time to learn about other cultures. Reach out to those from different backgrounds, share your story, and listen as they share their story.

As you move through the acronym, think about each letter, reflecting on what snap judgements or stereotypes you have made in the past about that attribute of someone's identity. This exercise can help identify cultural biases we may have across these different areas.

For example, a bias about gender might be believing that men can't cook. While this example is not inherently serious, other biases are serious and can cause real harm. (Besides, we all know great and not-so-great cooks of different genders!) Valuing differences does not mean we have to agree with others' beliefs or cultural practices. Rather, we should give others the same respect we hope to receive, regardless of how our practices, beliefs, genetics, experiences, or circumstances differ.

Valuing differences

Another important part of creating welcoming communities is seeing diversity within cultures. What you learn about a culture might not be true for every member of that culture. For example, even among the same race or ethnicity, life as a woman will likely be different than life as a man. Similarly, two women of different races will likely have different experiences despite a shared gender.

You may have seen examples of this within your own cultures. Does everyone your age have the exact same experiences? What about those who share your spiritual beliefs? Are you the exact same as those with the same national origin? The answer to these questions is likely "no." Another way to think of this is to imagine that we are all a stained-glass window. Some of us might have a few of the same glass pieces in our window, such as for being a man or for living

in Kentucky. However, none of us will have the same window. Despite the similarities and differences among our stained-glass windows, there is beauty in them all.

Unsure? A-S-K!

In our increasingly diverse world, it is helpful to learn about other cultures. Not sure where to start? Just ASK! When we ask questions, we're *always seeking knowledge*. Hearing how other people experience the world helps us become more aware of and compassionate toward those around us. We can ask people about their culture, visit a library, or search online for information written by people of the culture in which we are interested.

If you are curious about someone's culture, consider asking open-ended questions. A question such as, *"I've never heard of that holiday. Would you tell me more about it?"* shows respect because it allows a person to share at their comfort level. Learning about other cultures is a life-long process that takes practice. And remember, it is not possible to know everything about everyone's experience of a culture. When meeting those from a background different from our own, we may make mistakes in the language that we use or assumptions that we make. The key is earnestly trying to practice *cultural humility*, or the willingness to learn from others and honor their customs, beliefs, or values.

Taking responsibility

When practicing this, we are likely to make mistakes – even professionals mix up their words sometimes. The important thing is that we continue to learn from the mistakes we make and put in the "work"

to do better next time. We are always learning, and mistakes happen as we learn. However, regardless of our intent, we can still harm others with our words or actions. For example, using outdated, offensive, or hurtful language or excluding others based on an assumption we make about them. When this happens, it is important to take ownership of our actions and admit that we have made a mistake. One way to do this is by offering a sincere apology keeping the following tips in mind:

- Avoid placing blame on the other person for how they feel, even if our words or actions were misinterpreted. For example, saying “*I’m sorry you feel that way*” might make them feel as if it is their fault for feeling upset.
- Instead, take ownership of our hurtful actions, even if they were unintentional. Perhaps say, “*I’m sorry I said something hurtful. Thank you for letting me know.*”
- We may feel defensive if someone tells us something we said or did was hurtful. Rather than arguing, take a deep breath, apologize sincerely, and use the experience to learn.
- Are you not sure why something was hurtful? Ask if they would be willing to explain. If they are not willing, set aside time to do some research and talk to a trusted friend or colleague.

As our world becomes increasingly diverse, reflecting on how you can welcome others is increasingly important. Take time to learn about other cultures. Reach out to those from different backgrounds, share your story, and listen as they share their story. You

may be the first person to lend a listening ear and make them feel welcome. Sharing cultural stories helps everyone develop a broader perspective on the world, and it creates welcoming communities.

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