

Is Tolerant Good Enough?

EAU CLAIRE AND THE PRACTICE OF WELCOMINGNESS

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INTRODUCTION

Immigrants are a vital part of community success, and many groups, such as Welcoming America, are advocates of inclusive communities. While the concept of sanctuary cities for immigrants was introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, the 2016 presidential campaign reignited the question of how communities receive immigrants. Our research team of seven honors students at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire examined the question of whether Eau Claire, WI is a welcoming city, and what would take for it to become one if it's not. In Fall 2016, we interviewed fourteen community city leaders (school board members, city council members, and various other community officials) about their experiences and perspectives. Their responses were compiled and analyzed for insights into how Eau Claire may or may not be a welcoming city, and what may be needed to be one.

WELCOMING CITIES

What is a welcoming community and how do we define it? Generally, a welcoming city is a city where people feel they belong, have a stake and say, and don't feel threatened. WelcomingAmerica.org has developed a set of criteria by which cities and communities can evaluate and determine whether their practices and behaviors are that of a welcoming city. For example, do newcomers have access to legal advice and 'know your rights' training? Our interviewees identified welcoming communities as socially inclusive and responsive to community needs. One interviewee pointed out that some local Eau Claire nonprofits helped immigrants file their taxes, a small but necessary aspect of economic inclusion. Inclusion and welcomingness can also have socio-spatial outcomes – where recent immigrants live and how they are involved reflect claims to community (Nelson & Hiemstra 2008).

Welcoming America defines a welcoming community as one that plans for long-term integration, commits to social and economic inclusion, communicates messages of unity and shared values, and sustains both this culture of interaction between new and old residents and economic vitality. The American Civil Liberties Union calls it a freedom city, one which "strives to generate...change that reaffirms our values and counters backward ideas that undermine the Constitution and American values" in order to make America welcoming again.

Interview Questions

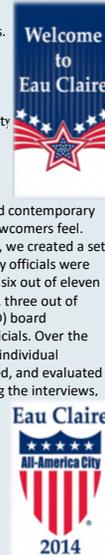
1. What do being an "immigrant friendly" and a "welcoming" city mean to you?
2. Is Eau Claire an immigrant friendly place? More broadly, is it a welcoming place to all peoples? Explain. What evidence and examples support this?
3. Why might some say that Eau Claire is not an especially welcoming place?
4. What obstacles are in place that prevent Eau Claire from being a more welcoming city?
5. What more can you and/or Eau Claire do to make the city more welcoming to all peoples?

MOTIVATIONS AND RESEARCH

Our research question was to analyze Eau Claire within the context of welcoming cities. Is Eau Claire a welcoming city? And, if not, what would it take for it to be one?

The motivation for our research included developing an understanding of the area, considering the influx of non-native university students to Eau Claire and the increasing diversity in the public schools (see graphic below). In addition, the current national climate towards immigration has hostile elements, and we wish to assess historic and contemporary attitudes, especially with regards to how newcomers feel.

In order to answer our research question, we created a set of five questions (see above). 26 community officials were contacted; 14 officials responded, including six out of eleven city council members, three county officials, three out of seven Eau Claire Area School District (ECASD) board members, and two out of four nonprofit officials. Over the course of three weeks, students conducted individual interviews, which were recorded, transcribed, and evaluated for common themes or perspectives. During the interviews, the same five questions were asked of each participant, and assurances of anonymity were intended to encourage participant openness and honesty. Consequently, individual respondents are not identified by name or position.



FINDINGS

Interviewees had similar responses to questions 1) and 2), that welcoming places celebrate citizens' differences and Eau Claire has historically welcomed newcomers. Specifically, in response to 1), seven interviewees said "immigrant friendly" and "welcoming" cities meant that there is a government response to newcomers; six said welcoming cities celebrate differences among citizens; four said such communities provide equal opportunities, and; four said welcoming cities must involve pro-active policy making. None of the responses were entirely shared by any one group – two out of three school board members or at most three out of six city council members had shared concepts of what characterizes welcoming cities.

In response to 2), six interviewees affirmed that Eau Claire is an immigrant friendly place and cited such examples as the city's historical reception of Hmong refugees and opportunities to minorities through Headstart. Two respondents said that Eau Claire has changed for the better and is more welcoming today. At the same time, many interviewees also pointed out that Eau Claire may not be so welcoming: eight said that the city is "not perfect," five said many residents still have internal biases against minorities, and two said that there aren't enough resources to properly help those in need. Officials with connections to Eau Claire city and county government administration seemed to respond with some degree of unity, but the City Council and ECASD School Board members responded more individually or independently, more anecdotal less and conceptualized. As captured in the pie chart to the right (Chart 1), there is an element of uncertainty to Eau Claire's welcomingness. Eau Claire is sort of welcoming.

On question 3), there was a noticeable lack of consensus. There were some areas of agreement regarding those things that make Eau Claire not welcoming: European/Midwestern heritage (six) and lack of resources for programming (five) were the most mentioned answers. Beyond that, the majority of respondents' answers were only mentioned by themselves or one other person and ranged widely, including the following: language and communication problems (two), cultural differences (two), change is too slow (one), power and class disparity (two), and fear of change (two). Again, city and county officials were more unitary in their responses (all cited lack of resources as a barrier). City Council and ECASD School Board member responses were much more individualized.

Similar patterns continue to question 4). There is little shared perception or appreciation of the obstacles Eau Claire faces in becoming more welcoming. The most commonly cited obstacles were education (four), and housing problems (four), out of 19 total different responses. City Council and ECASD School Board member responses were individualized and generally not shared by their Council or Board counterparts.

Responses to question 5) broke the above pattern, as interviewees seem to have a better collective sense of how to make Eau Claire more welcoming (rather than of the obstacles to it). Most respondents agreed that the city needs to open up places of dialogue (five), recognize barriers (three), and offer assistance to newcomers (three). While there were some individually-held ideas, there is a greater shared sense of what Eau Claire must do to be more welcoming.

CONCLUSIONS

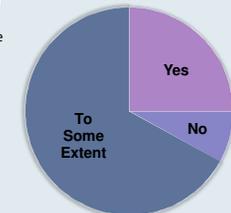
On 6 March 2017, the Eau Claire Area School District voted unanimously to be a Welcoming School District. Our research team is pleased to think that our project helped inspire this initiative. However, based on our research and findings, we are concerned. Without a shared understanding of what the issues and problems are, it is difficult to imagine building a solid foundation and developing consistent policies and practices. Communities may want to think of themselves as welcoming but need to accurately acknowledge the experiences of the many people on the margins, including newcomers, minorities, young people, the poor.

Welcoming does not just happen. It needs to be intentional, systematic, and an administrative priority. Being charitable, tolerant, or polite are not the same as being welcoming. Welcoming involves sharing, assurances, and shared burdens. This involves actively engaging and empowering its citizens, and drawing from their experiences and needs. This can be uncomfortable – as one interviewee said, Eau Claire likes "to look good, but [doesn't] like to look deep at problems." And, as suggested by the recent experiences of cities across the country that are committed to being sanctuary cities, there may be costs.

A city or institution is not welcoming simply by declaring itself so. Welcomingness is determined by actions and priorities, and demonstrated by outcomes. Eau Claire needs to have a coherent plan to identify problems and develop strategies for all people of the community. We suggest that Eau Claire systematically engage and use materials such as those developed by Welcoming America. The city can also learn from other cities that have drawn from their immigration histories and experiences to develop innovative programs that build a foundation of welcomingness (e.g., Utica NY, Toledo, OH, Fort Wayne, IN). Eau Claire has been called "risk averse" and "hesitant," but "fear of change" should not be an obstacle to becoming a great, welcoming city. Given recent events in the Eau Claire, for example, the Welcoming Eau Claire rally of 1 February 2017, there is a growing expectation of it.



CHART 1: RESPONSES TO QUESTION 2) IS EAU CLAIRE AN IMMIGRANT FRIENDLY PLACE?



Non-White vs. White Student Enrollment Percentages of ECASD High Schools



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