

We Are...Community!

Michael A. Mogill

Just as COVID-19 first arrived in the United States, I gave a brief talk at a special event that was celebrated by our law school: the 185th anniversary of its founding. My remarks were centered on one of our school's four core values, specifically that of "community."¹ As adopted by our faculty, "we pledge that on a daily basis we will strive to foster a sense of community and mutual support between and among faculty, students, and staff, and in our interactions outside the Law School."² The importance of this particular core value is reflected in the comment to it which explains that "we not only view community as a proper ethos but also believe that cultivating the personal skills, respect, and tolerance that promote community will enable our students to more professionally and sensitively counsel their clients and accomplish their professional goals."³

As I first thought about this topic, I realized that this would not be as simple as going to dictionary.com and telling the audience that a "community" is "a social, religious, occupational, or other group sharing common characteristics or interests or perceived or perceiving itself as distinct in some respect from the larger society in which it exists."⁴ Instead, a certain song started playing in my head, and I recalled an inspirational comment by Coretta Scott King, who believed that "the greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate action of its community members."⁵

This then got me to thinking of the multifaceted importance of that word "community" and what it really means to me. So I then let my mind drift (which sometimes happens all too often!) and a word cloud formed itself, because when I think of "community," various descriptors appear:

Commonality, unity, connective, supportive, helpful, inspiring, giving, impactful, expansive, collaborative, empowering, caring, trusting, sharing, hopeful, safe,

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1. *Mission Core and Principles Statement*, PENN ST. DICKINSON L. (2022), <https://dickinsonlaw.psu.edu/mission>.
2. *Id.*
3. *Id.*
4. *Community*, DICTIONARY.COM (2022), <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/community>.
5. *King's Widow Urges Acts of Compassion*, L.A. TIMES (Jan. 17, 2000), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-jan-17-mn-54832-story.html>.

comforting, binding, fulfilling, cohesive, participatory, accepting, interactive, evolving, tangible, belonging, committed, responsible ... and on and on.

And what do these descriptors mean to me as a professor, a colleague, and one engaged in the life of the academy? I believe that “community” is more than a singular buzzword, more than any dictionary definition—it is, instead, part of my belief system, in that:

1. Community means receiving fulfillment in living a life with a meaningful purpose by helping others.
2. Community means building relationships and bringing people together, so that all feel a sense of fellowship and are treated with dignity and respect.
3. Community means together fostering a safer and stronger environment, where everyone feels welcome and valued regardless of any differences they might have.
4. Community means providing support that we can rely upon, to overcome trying times, to share our lives and ideas, to offer us love and encouragement.
5. Community means drawing strength and resilience from one another, reminding us that we do not have to go it alone, but that we can celebrate together.
6. Community means working together in a way that benefits everyone, with people interacting with one another peacefully and positively.
7. Community means allowing people to have a sense of caring, understanding that we would welcome more of a connection to others.
8. Community means having the commitment and ability to work on collective tasks and common goals to better all around us.
9. Community means challenging one another in a supportive, nonhostile manner.
10. Community means fortifying members to accomplish goals that they could not have done in isolation.
11. Community means building sustainability, which takes time, trust, and creating relationships that matter.
12. Community means helping us find and express our identity, including our place in a constantly evolving and complex world.
13. Community means that we are people with real lives, real stories, real hopes, and real dreams, who seek a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves.
14. And I believe, at the proverbial end of the day, that the meaning of community is most significant in offering us fundamental meaning in life, a true opportunity to have an impactful presence in knowing that we have truly affected others positively and contributed to the greater good.

So, yes, the word “community” is a type of catchall that evokes many different images, but it is one that goes beyond merely referring to a particular group or locale. And for those who gathered to celebrate our school’s founding, we certainly had a community, one with an interest and a purpose, consisting of those who gathered because they believed in a common mission and were passionate about the future of the law school and the greater profession. And I realized that the song that had been playing in my head, the 1980s anthem by Sister Sledge, *We are Family*,⁶ really did have a significance to my remarks, albeit with a slightly different theme—that the various descriptors and beliefs I have offered more strongly suggest that “We are . . . community”!

6. *Sister Sledge—We Are Family Lyrics*, GENIUS (2022), <https://genius.com/Sister-sledge-we-are-family-lyrics>.