



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: AFFINITY GROUPS

Q: What is an affinity group?

A: An affinity group, sometimes known as a resource group, is a gathering of people who share an identity (e.g. race, gender, religion, country of origin, language, family status, etc.). Individuals who participate in affinity groups recognize that their identity affects the way in which they move through the world. Affinity groups provide opportunities for participants to reflect on that shared identity and their experiences within the context of a community or an organization. Although members of the group may share an identifier, not everyone may share the same life experiences.

Q: What are the benefits of affinity groups?

A: The main purpose of an affinity group is to promote diversity and inclusion. These groups provide a space for individuals, usually members of historically underrepresented or marginalized groups, to connect, share experiences, exchange resources, and identify successes and challenges that impact their ability to engage with others or with an organization. Research has demonstrated that affinity groups are important for the healthy development and sustainability of organizations. There are many educational institutions, as well as corporations, that utilize affinity groups to improve communication, relationships, and collaboration with a diverse group of people.

Q: What happens in affinity groups?

A: Participants of affinity groups share personal successes, reflect on their own identity development, and support one another in identifying and addressing challenges that impact their ability to engage within the community. Facilitators set conversation norms and ground rules, create an agenda, support active involvement of all participants, and pose questions to members of the group that promote discussion and self-reflection. At times groups may engage in educational opportunities to learn more about that shared identity.

Q: Can I participate in more than one affinity group at Lakeside?

A: Yes. It is possible to be able to identify with more than one identity group. For example, same-sex parents and guardians of a student who is Asian American would be able to participate in the same-sex parents and guardians affinity group and the parents and guardians of Asian American students affinity group.

Q: How often will Lakeside parent and guardian affinity groups meet?

A: Parent and guardian affinity groups will meet approximately four times a year.

Q: Why isn't there an affinity group for me?

A: Lakeside is a diverse community and we strive to provide multiple opportunities for families to engage with each other and contribute to the community. There are a number of groups in which parents and guardians are able to participate based on similar interests or group membership. As we develop the parent and guardian affinity-group program, we will continue to improve and respond to the needs of the community. The lack of a specific affinity group at this time does not necessarily mean that it will not exist in the future.

Q: I am a member of a so-called privileged group. Are there affinity groups for me?

A: Those of us who have privileged identities often find ourselves in groups and gatherings where we are the majority. Additionally, we are affirmed on a daily basis in many ways: we are reflected in government leadership, in media, in school curriculum, and more. For example, those of us who are white do not have to look very far to see a role model, protagonist, or leader who looks like us. Those of us who are able-bodied rarely enter a building where we have to worry about whether we can get upstairs, whether there are braille signs for us to navigate, or if announcements will be posted as well as verbally announced on the paging system. Those of us who are of comfortable income aren't consumed by thoughts of where our next meal is coming from or whether we will have a roof over our heads by week's end. We don't consider these special privileges because we are granted them almost all the time. However, there are members of our community with identities that are rarely given that affirmation – in fact, we are told disparaging things about our groups. Affinity groups offer a space where marginalized groups can experience welcome and affirmation. For many of us, this is a unique and rare space.

Q: Shouldn't we be having dialogues about our differences all together rather than in separate groups?

A: We learn a great deal from conversations and interactions with people from all backgrounds and experiences, which happen on a daily basis at Lakeside School. However, we have unique identities that make us see the world in different ways. Several people can be in the same room and experience the same thing, yet a woman might notice things differently than a man. A person of color might be impacted differently than a white person. A young person may interpret the situation differently than an adult. Often, we engage in intercultural dialogue without examining how our identity affects our perceptions, and we stumble into conflict because someone else does not "see" the same things we do. Having conversations in affinity groups allows us to begin to examine why we see the world the way we do and acknowledge that we all experience the world differently. This understanding engenders greater acceptance of other perspectives, allowing for more fruitful intercultural dialogues and interactions.

Q: I already know what it means to be xxx. Could I hear what the yyy folks are saying?

Affinity groups allow for an exploration of one's own identity, celebration of shared identity, and debriefing of the common challenges and experiences that members of the identity group face. To have people from other groups present would require time to be spent on hearing from each group's experience, explaining the nature of common experiences for different groups, and curbing conversation for fear of being misunderstood or offending. Often, we want to know what's happening in another group because we worry that they are talking about us. Affinity groups are not designed for gossip or to put down other groups – they are designed to affirm the group that is gathering. It is true that we learn much from hearing people's story. However, people from marginalized groups have historically faced the burden and frustration of having to teach others about their experience or being asked to represent their group's perspective. Affinity groups can be a space safe from that burden and frustration. A better way to learn about another's experience is to build genuine relationships and ask questions from a place of humble curiosity.

Q: Shouldn't we focus on our similarities and not our differences?

A: At Lakeside we value difference and believe it is a strength of our school community. By only focusing on similarities, especially in diverse environments, we devalue, ignore, and minimize difference, and diversity begins to be associated with something negative or taboo. Talking explicitly about difference, celebrating and embracing it, honors diversity. Being able to talk about difference helps us to improve the ways in which we engage with diversity and with people who are different from us. Affinity groups allow people who are often considered to be different or whose difference is not always portrayed in positive ways to receive support and validation from others who share in that identity.

For more information on parent and guardian affinity groups, please contact Lakeside PGA at lakesidepga@lakesideschool.org.

Adapted from the “Affinity/Alliance Groups Frequently Asked Questions” by educator and consultant, Rosetta Eun Ryong Lee.