

Why Affinity Groups?

See Paragraph 5 first sentence.

Diversity makes a community richer and more resilient, but building community is complicated. What's the best way to support a diverse community and yet help all to feel known and respected?

Affinity groups are both proven and helpful in this regard.

LHP has a long history of inclusion, accepting students from a wide range of backgrounds, religions, heritage, and perspectives and inviting them to be part of our community. We work to integrate students at every level, expecting all to treat each other with love, genuine concern, and mutual respect.

So why do we support organizing homogenous groups and encouraging students and faculty with similar backgrounds to meet and hold exclusive discussions?

Affinity groups are not new—they often happen at lunch or in dorms informally—and in recent years, they have gained significant attention in educational and even corporate communities nationwide. With careful and intentional planning, they can bring together people who don't even know they have something in common and help them strategize and support each other. Furthermore, supporting affinity groups recognizes that various community members have different needs and need safe spaces to ask questions and find answers.

"The greatest strength of any organization depends on its ability to value the pluralistic identities of its members. Forced assimilation risks wasting talent, crushing spirit, and failing to maximize any given group's potential. At LHP, we want to value the many identities that students bring to our campus. The creation of affinity groups says, 'We see you, we value you, and we are going to create space for you.'"

Five things one should know about affinity groups:

1. Affinity groups are gathering opportunities for people who share a common identity.

Affinity groups allow people to connect with other people who share aspects of their identity, especially in situations in which aspects of their identity are in the minority or are marginalized. It's a chance to gather, share experiences, wrestle with self-image questions, and strategize solutions to common problems. Students who share a Jewish heritage, students of color, students

who share a common vocational interest, students who identify as LGBTQ+, and white allies--these are all affinity groups that could be formed at LHP. It is a space where students and adults don't have to be afraid of being judged/ridiculed and can say things/ask questions that they might not be able (or comfortable) to ask in mixed groups. For the short time when a group is together, members can find comfort in knowing that someone else has gone through what they are going through.

A relatively new, but increasingly common type of affinity group that has formed at many schools in the recent past has colloquially been called the "STEMinists," a group of female students who meet, support each other, and consider the school's learning culture, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) classes. During their conversations, the girls have come up with strategies for supporting each other in the classroom and celebrating their shared passion for STEM.

As we work towards being a more inclusive school that prides itself on its dedication to community, we need to first recognize that not all students can easily find community at LHP because not all of their integral identities are acknowledged, visible, explored, or celebrated. Understanding this irrefutable fact should answer any questions about the need for affinity groups.

2. Affinity groups require both the head and the heart.

Participating in affinity groups starts with a willingness to be vulnerable, to admit to not knowing all the answers, but possessing the will to try. One has to care enough to engage in the process of trying to make things better. They must be willing to speak their truths. Additionally, it also takes a significant amount of thought and consideration. Participants have to be willing to consider their world perspective and how their community may be affecting them and their own agency in the creation of that community. They have to walk in another person's shoes and participate in conversations that may throw everything they think they know out the window and start again. It's about caring and compassion as well as intellectual perseverance.

3. Each affinity space functions differently.

Affinity groups serve different purposes for different groups. How they are organized, the questions they consider, the outcomes they seek will vary from group to group. Male affinity groups, for example, might consider the question, "What does the #metoo movement mean for me?". In contrast, female affinity groups might focus on supporting each other in building confidence and self-respect.

In another example, when Holocaust survivor Marion Blumenthal Lazan spoke at a special assembly and shared her experiences, it was an opportunity for

the whole community to learn and grow. Afterward, time was set aside for Jewish students to meet with Marion, supporting an affinity group that shares a common heritage and allowing its members to share their common feelings and perspectives. Before that meeting, many Jewish students didn't even know each other; however, this meeting gave them a chance to get to know each other and perhaps be a bit more confident in acknowledging their heritage now that they know others.

4. Affinity groups both challenge misconceptions and build positive identities.

Affinity groups are an opportunity to dismantle negative misconceptions and help develop positive perspectives as well. Affinity groups are an opportunity for students to better understand and build their own identities independent of the common norms of the larger community.

Part of building a positive identity may also involve supporting others. Affinity groups provide a healthy forum for discovering and discussing ways in which participants can support others who may be different. It is about learning how to be an effective ally and actively work against injustices. It can often be an empowering and enabling force for people without doing the work for them.

5. Affinity groups need to be structured to support growth.

The school should have a well-defined policy for establishing and supporting affinity groups. Some meetings will be closed, with only those who share a particular affinity invited to participate. Other meetings will be open, or open by invitation. They will involve intentional dialogue on a prepared topic and may take the form of a panel discussion or a question-and-answer activity. The final type of affinity group involves members of a specific affinity group safely sharing their thoughts and ideas to the greater community. This could take the form of discussing a contemporary article, the 'message' of a particular art exhibit, or an organized assembly for a formal presentation/Q&A session.

In an article published by the Association of Independent Schools in New England, author Michael Brosnan writes, "Schools need to believe that the cross-fertilization of ideas makes for 'the maximum learning opportunity'." LHP wants our students to be engaged in their communities and able to comfortably work /live together to help move our democracy towards its ideals (liberty and justice for all). This cannot be done in a monoculture, and we need/want a diverse school community and a multicultural curriculum. LHP is committed to this ideal and works to create a strong community in which all members feel supported to be ready to participate in a democratic world. Affinity groups will help us get there.