# Affinity Groups: Redefining Brave Spaces

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Affinity groups are brave spaces convened by undergraduate social work faculty members for students who do not identify with dominant groups. Affinity groups are offered in response to diverse students' experiences of isolation and microaggressions as well as episodes of religious discrimination and flagrant racist, xenophobic, and homophobic actions. The term *brave space* is chosen to demonstrate that many spaces are never totally safe for those who experience oppression. The affinity groups offered at a midsized public university include Students of Color, LGBTQIAP+, and Coexist. Benefits of group experiences for students include identity development, within-group diversity, social networks, professional development, and faculty–student relationships. Benefits for the undergraduate social work department include modeling strong social work community and group practice, implementation of the implicit curriculum, and a more welcoming social work program for all students. Challenges include protecting group members from dominant group curiosity and microaggressions and accounting for faculty time and effort.

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At a time when it is common to see divisive messages posted on social media, spray-painted in public areas, and shared verbally with abandon, people from diverse communities feel particularly unsafe and isolated. College students are among those people and can be particularly vulnerable to these incidents (Reed, Prado, Matsumoto, & Amaro, 2010; Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012; Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). The Anti-Defamation League reported 107 incidents of White supremacist flyers posted on colleges and universities in 32 states between January and August 2017, and since September 2017 there have been 147 incidents of White supremacist propaganda such as flyers, banners, or posters on university campuses (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). On our own midsize public university campus in a small city situated in a conservative rural area, there have been racist, sexist, and heterosexist messages displayed in heavily trafficked areas.

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As undergraduate social work educators, we want to respond as advocates for social justice and supporters of our implicit curriculum.

Predominately White college campuses are often microcosms of the larger society, reflecting and projecting societal value sets. A diverse student body is defined for our purposes as one reflecting various races, ethnicities, nationalities, irreligions, religions, sexual orientations, and genders. We recognize that even within and among these broad categories there are variations and intersections of identities. This diverse student group comes to campuses with differing expectations and assumptions about the college experience. Many students are primarily concerned with how they will fit into the university, and they come with varying levels of clarity about their identity and how it fits into larger society. Some come equipped with a set of skills to navigate the college experience and a level of self-comfort and awareness to manage some of the ambiguity that may arise, illustrating that members of this diverse student group come with distinctive family, community, cultural, and personal histories (Giddings, 1984). For many students the entry into higher education brings new opportunities to explore concepts of privilege, oppression, intersectionality, positionality, internalized oppression, microaggressions, structural inequities, bystander stances, and allyship. Such campus exposure to human rights and social justice are not equal in their quality or intention.

Nonwhite members of diverse student bodies meet the environmental and interpersonal challenges of college life, but it is not always an easy place of support. These students can experience a variety of responses to their presence: isolation, a lack of cultural understanding, misinformation about their identity groups, voyeuristic curiosity, microaggressions, and physical and emotional harm (Nadal, 2013; "New Web Site Provides A Forum," 2008; Woodford, Han, Craig, Lim, & Matney, 2014). In discussing such vulnerable populations, undergraduate social work educators should be aware of these persons within their own settings.

This article reports on a social work department's efforts to create spaces of affirmation, pride, and dialogue for students through faculty-convened Students of Color, Coexist, and LGBTQIAP+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, pansexual, plus any other way a person may choose to identify, the expanded acronym decided on by the affinity group to be inclusive) affinity groups. These groups are advertised to undergraduate social work students as identity groups where participants select into a group with common experiences based on their self-defined identity. Participation is not mandatory or forced. This article provides rationales, discussion of processes, and implications for undergraduate social work education. The site is a mid-Atlantic regional state-funded, predominately White institution of 22,000 students with an undergraduate social work department of approximately 250 students.

## Safe Space Versus Redefined Brave Spaces

Defining spaces of engagement for people of various races and cultures has been met with the challenge of designation due to stated fears by dominant groups. In redefining safe space, affirmation of self-definition is forefront: “If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive” (Lorde, 2007, p. 134). Space is not for dominant groups to claim. Even an appropriate stance of allyship counters the understanding that allyship is determined by the group accepting it, not by the individual or group in support of the nondominant group.

Safe spaces have been defined in education literature as places for honest, sensitive, respectful, and civil discourse where ground rules are developed and used to facilitate conversations and manage group behaviors (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Boostrom, 1998; Singleton & Hays, 2008). Historically, safe spaces were convened for social justice and civil rights organizing by Blacks, women, and LGBTQ groups, and for shared cross-group work. These can be complicated, such as the sisterly confrontation within the Black Panther movement between Black men and women, or the tensions of race/ethnic or gender identity within the LGBTQ movement, and even within the larger civil rights movement between Black men and gay men (D’Emilio, 1999; Trounson, 2015; Vaid, 2012). Within-group dynamics may discourage participation and challenge group commitment; therefore, within-group discussions should occur about power distribution, roles, and strategies, to create in-group solidarity first (Malesky, 2014). Undergraduate social work education values and models these types of mezzo-level discussions.

Brave spaces reflect the reality of diverse people that no space is ever totally safe, even among similar, like-minded, or identified people. Despite this risk, gathering may be better than isolation and help to recognize unspoken lived truths. Gathering is a brave act of defiance regardless of possible sanctions or daily microaggressions. Brave spaces create a place for connection and recognition while also confronting within-group biases and internalized oppressions. Brave spaces simply establish spaces already presumed by dominant groups because of their numbers and dominance.

## Context Matters

The 2016 election season reignited the flames of hate and oppression with increased harmful and blatant actions targeting diverse persons. According to Online College Courses Staff Writers (2011), flyers of racist caricatures of African Americans were posted at the University of Texas at Austin. The election of a Black woman as student body president at American University in Washington, DC, was met with bananas hung by nooses from trees and lampposts with a sign saying “Harambe Bait” suggesting the name of the Cincinnati Zoo gorilla that was shot and killed when a child entered his habitat. A graduating African American, male, senior student awaiting an Uber at the University of Maryland was murdered by a member of an alt-right group. A California State at Chico Nigerian-born student body president was stabbed in his chest, arms, neck, and stomach when ignoring racial slurs did not allay his attackers. Palestinian students were beaten by up to 15 Guilford College football players in Greensboro, NC. A Rutgers University gay freshman’s life ended in suicide after a privacy invasion and public humiliation (Online College Courses Staff Writers, 2011). These are only a few of such incidents on college campuses across the country.

LGBTQ young people are vulnerable to verbal harassment, physical assault, cyberbullying, substance use, and physical and emotional health challenges as they navigate their environments for safety and security (Ahuja et al., 2015; Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011; Nadal, 2013; Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). Often the transition to college brings freedoms as well as difficulties in the coming-out process. Stewart and Howard-Hamilton (2014) identified the following issues affecting LGB undergraduate students: “claiming identity and language, navigating disclosure of one’s sexual orientation; negotiating heteronormative campus environments, reframing and redefining significant relationships and life events; intersections with other aspects of identity; and finding and developing mentoring relationships with relevant campus role models” (p. 121). Although they embrace new freedoms in a college environment, they often face discrimination and a hostile climate, including blatant victimization as well as microaggressions (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Seelman, Woodford, & Nicolazzo, 2017; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012; Woodford, Kulick, Sinco, & Hong, 2014; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Negative classroom experiences can lead to feeling silenced and marginalized, which results in disengagement (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). Students can also face challenges such as protecting their privacy and confidentiality, being placed in housing where they feel safe, identifying convenient gender-neutral bathrooms, and having their preferred name and gender identified on campus records and used in classrooms, including undergraduate social work classes.

The Department of Justice (2016) *Uniform Crime Report, Hate Crime Statistics* indicated a 67% rise in hate crimes against Muslims; though a 6% overall increase was noted, a steady increase was indicated against African Americans, Jews, and members of the LGBT communities. These statistics do not represent the many underreported or uninvestigated crimes or the daily microaggressions endured by diverse people. Alarmingly, 88.4% of the law enforcement agencies providing statistics to the Department of Justice reported zero hate crimes during 2015. In Virginia, a state of more than 8.3 million residents, only 158 incidents were recorded in 2015. Other states indicate similar numbers: Texas, population 27.3 million, 191 incidents; New York, 19 million, 500 incidents; or Indiana, population 3.2 million, 63 incidents (Department of Justice, 2016). Such statistics indicate that the experiences of diverse persons are underreported, not taken seriously, or not recorded as hate crimes by law enforcement.

## Theoretical Foundations

Some of the same theories taught in our undergraduate social work curriculum contribute to the development and use of affinity groups. Based on the realities of students of color (SOC), Galan's (1990) multidimensional model of bicultural identity discusses different quadrant types of adaptation that are transitional in terms of personal integration and cultural adaptability (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2011). Racial identity formation models are informative for the SOC affinity group (Cross, 1991; Helms & Cook, 1999; Sue & Sue, 2007). Cross (1991) suggested the five stages of racial identity development for African Americans as pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. Helms and Cook (1999) delineated similar stages in the Cross Model—conformity, dissonance, immersion-emersion, internalization, and integrative awareness—but their model applies not only to African Americans but also other people of color like Asians, Latinx, and Native Americans. Sue and Sue (2007) proposed a similar racial/cultural identity development model to explain the experience of the oppressed among racial/cultural minorities. These models help to explain the development of a positive racial self, appreciating one's own cultural aspects, and integrating aspects of other groups (Robbins et al., 2011).

Two theoretical models contribute to our understanding of the experience of LGBTQIAP+ students. Cass's homosexual identity formation model (1979), though dated, delineates six stages of coming out: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity integration (Robbins et al., 2011, p. 239). The stages "involve clashes with the heterosexist values of the larger society, individual expectations, lack of meaningful role models, and internalized homophobia" (Robbins et al., 2011, p. 238). An alternative to a stage model such as Cass's is D'Augelli's life span model, which accounts for the impacts of social context on one's sexual orientation identity. This model also "has the potential to represent a wider range of experiences than the theories related to specific racial, ethnic or gender groups" (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 28).

The Coexist affinity group is composed of atheists, agnostics, and non-Christians bringing together varying perspectives of identity. Marxism (Marx & Engels, 1845–1846), transpersonal theories, and spirituality (Maslow, 1943; Wilber, 2001) may apply. The atheist and agnostic students may have developed their concepts of justice and morality not from spirituality but from materialistic and humanistic philosophies. Marx stated that "religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." (Robbins et al., 2011, p. 64). Some atheist and agnostic students might share such an explicit rejection of religion and/or the spiritual. Maslow—himself a humanist psychologist—proposed that self-transcendence is "a completion and fulfillment of the self in communion with other beings and the Ground of Being, that is, the ultimate and sacred being or reality, that some call God" (Robbins et al., 2011, p. 380). Maslow was sensitive to religious and spiritual experiences and, in a final revision, put the need for self-transcendence at the top of his famous hierarchy of needs (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Many students of diverse faith might share this mind-set.

Spirituality refers to "a search for meaning, purpose, and moral standards for relationships between oneself, other people, the universe, and the ground of reality, understood in theistic, atheistic, animistic, or other terms" (Robbins et al., 2011, p. 17). Non-Christian religious students seek spiritual experiences from their religions or philosophies and acknowledge that these lead to their sense of morality and justice. Atheist and agnostic identity development in the affinity group may or may not be based on spirituality. Overall, students in the Coexist affinity group may have different transpersonal experiences with or without spiritual or religious elements but are likely to respect different experiences and different paths of development toward a sense of morality and justice.

A critique of this theoretical grounding is that it centralizes dominant groups as being the model of development, although many diverse groups would conceptualize their development as appropriate to their realities without comparison to a centralized group. Identity groups will have shared and differing values with dominant groups in their development. Value priorities may vary and change due to environmental factors such as safety, community composition, and community response to difference. This may also reflect cultural standards as well as issues of assimilation and acculturalization of diverse persons regardless of the dominant group.

## Overview of Affinity Groups

When a critical mass of mainly African American students was apparent in our undergraduate social work department, professors who identify as African American and naturalized Asian American convened the first gathering. Their effort was responsive, similar to other faculty member efforts to provide support to students at predominately White institutions (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008; Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016). This was the first affinity group in our department. Several years after that, faculty responded to growing populations of LGBTQIAP+ and non-Christian students to develop what is now a complementary network of supportive affinity groups.

At the beginning of the semester, the department chair sends out an explanation of affinity groups and list of the three offered groups. This announcement is also discussed in introductory level courses. These groups each convene a minimum of twice each semester with additional informal gatherings in the interim. Members may feel more comfortable in off-campus meeting sites, which are arranged as needed. Student attendance is voluntary and confidential. Outreach, meeting space, and food are facilitated by the faculty sponsors, and participation and content are decided by the members. Recruitment includes notices via e-mail, posting of flyers, and personal outreach by faculty members. Information is provided to all students about why these affinity groups are important and that they do not exist for the education of nonidentified students. At the same time, other opportunities for allyship are highlighted for student professional development.

## SOC Affinity Group

The term *students of color* was chosen to be inclusive and empower collectively rather than a word that reduces like “minorities.” This term choice requires explanation because the major subgroup within the SOC group is representative of African American students. Many students are not aware that a similar term, *citizens of color*, was used by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to organize across differences during the civil rights movement. People of color (POC) may be considered a derogatory term for some; however, most recently, POC goes beyond people of African heritage to include people of Native American, Latinx/Hispanic, and Asian or Pacific Island descent.

The early meetings involved identifying critical issues of inclusion within our undergraduate social work department and on campus, understanding the curriculum, socialization, and network building. The first meeting was highly emotional for all, as undergraduate social work faculty members recalled similar experiences of exclusion, bias, and isolation more than 30 years ago when attending their own BSW programs. Some of the early concerns of SOC group members were admission assumptions of entry considering race only and not academic ability; frequent microaggressions in class through comments or physical isolation; an assumption of poverty, neighborhood, or community experiences; and being selected last for group assignments. Additional topics have included the use of the N-word and social justice issues like police brutality against POC. Williams (2017) and Tatum (2017) identified environments where Black students are not the minority as advantageous for being able to speak out and feel heard as opposed to those times when being a lone voice can result in feeling hushed or dismissed. Later meetings have focused more on professional development and fostering opportunities for scholarship. This has resulted in creating specialized courses, research opportunities, and conference attendance.

## LGBTQIAP+ Affinity Group

College campuses, and undergraduate social work programs in particular, should be environments that embrace diversity and welcome differences, which benefits all students, particularly vulnerable student groups like LGBTQIAP+ students. Many LGBTQIAP+ college students exhibit agency as they begin to come out and identify in ways they felt unable to while still living at home. At the same time, they begin to speak out about their emerging identities, they refuse to have their identity reduced to sexual attraction, simply embracing it as one of the many things important about them (Cohler, 2009). An important protective factor for LGBTQIAP+ young people involves supportive relationships with peers and faculty members (Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010; Roe, 2015; Vaccaro, 2012). Although these relationships do not minimize the negative effects of marginalization and victimization, they still have a significant positive impact (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011). When family support is nonexistent or limited, supportive relationships become even more important (Needham & Austin, 2010).

Awareness of these risks and protective factors prompted the formulation of the LGBTQIAP+ affinity group. The group was originally the LGBTQ affinity group but expanded its acronym to LGBTQIAP+ to be responsive to students' identities. When a student attending identified as asexual, other members wanted to be sure they and others who identified as asexual or pansexual felt welcomed and acknowledged by the group's name. Intersex was also recognized as an important identity to welcome in the group, and students felt the plus at the end made it clear that the welcome was expansive. Topics have included exploring identities, identifying resources, coming out to family and friends, handling marginalization and rejection, choosing to stay closeted or come out in undergraduate social work internship and field placement settings, navigating the campus and community environment, recognizing invisibility/visibility in the classroom, and sharing relationship celebrations and challenges. Openness is fostered in the group so that no subject is taboo. What has emerged from each group are themes of hope and fear, speaking out and feeling silenced, acceptance and judgment, restoration and rejection, and resiliency and vulnerability.

This affinity group offers an accepting environment for those trying to figure out which identities fit them best. Many members have felt suffocated by heteronormativity and genderism and find freedom in this supportive group setting. During an academic year, students who have originally identified as gay or lesbian to the group may decide that a transgender identity and straight sexual orientation more accurately describe them. Other students come in as questioning and are given the freedom and support to remain questioning throughout their entire time in the group. It is encouraging and inspiring to witness the empowerment that comes from finding a place of acceptance and support. Reassurance comes in knowing one is not alone.

## Coexist Affinity Group

Coexist is an affinity group for undergraduate social work students who do not identify with mainstream Christian values. People of different faiths, no faith, or questioning faith are welcome. This group was developed in response to the misconceptions that some social work students have that the social work profession was founded on Christian values. Some Christian students believe they make discriminatory decisions inconsistent with the social work profession so long as they are grounded in their understanding of Christianity. Because non-Christian students experience "othered" status as a result of not participating in mainstream Christian behaviors or attitudes, the need for this group was identified.

Students self-identify as members and have come from Jewish, agnostic, and atheist descriptions of their faith perspective. Topics have included recent relevant news, such as hate crimes, published reports on attitudes toward different religions, feeling excluded from community during times of Christian holidays, and the perception that one is incomplete without religious beliefs or with dissimilar religious beliefs. Often students find camaraderie in their shared sense of oppression and othered status.

The group is somewhat eclectic in that the single unifying factor is that participants do not identify with the dominant religion in the United States and at our university. This means that people questioning their faith, firmly denying faith, and deeply believing a faith perspective can find comfort in each other's common sense of rejection. A typical topic of discussion is the degree to which Coexist members can pass without disclosing their religious beliefs.

Some Coexist students reported feeling anger toward their Christian classmates because they felt that these classmates believe they are without values or ethics because of their lack of affiliation with Christianity. They reported experiencing microaggressions when a Christian classmate voices that they were drawn to social work because of their Christian values—as if to imply that those without Christian values are lacking in some required motivation to become a social worker. Coexist students also express frustration with their Christian classmates' lack of willingness to confront the inconsistencies or atrocities committed by their own religion or in the name of their own God. Coexist students find their Christian classmates are quick to bring up times when they experience discrimination for their faith but are unwilling to own their own religion's discriminatory practices.

What makes this affinity group unique is the idea that religion is something that one chooses or can change. Some people may feel this way about LGBTQIAP+ people to a degree, but generally not about POC. This idea that students choose to be othered implies that with the right education, epiphany, or information, one can see the error of their ways and choose the correct religion—Christianity. When Coexist was announced, the faculty convener received a number of e-mails from Christians requesting to attend the group so they could learn about other religions. These requests were declined to protect the group, and those students were encouraged to take a religion course or attend an educational event. Those who do not belong to the group may be coming for their own education, but it is also possible that their involvement represents a threat of attempted conversion or danger. It is the duty of the undergraduate social work faculty convener to ensure the brave spaces are as safe as they can be.

### Challenges and Benefits of the Group

Although there are unique challenges and benefits for each group, there are shared experiences across affinity groups. These include identity development, within-group diversity, isolation and social networks, professional development, and faculty–student relationships. Undergraduate social work students self-select participation in affinity groups at a time when identity development is often progressing, which can result in mixed feelings. This may be more challenging for students who are coming to recognition of racial or ethnic identity as multiracial/ethnic persons, persons affirming or countering family differences with a nonreligious or religious stance, and those across the gender/sexual identity spectrum. Participation may come with varying feelings as some students appreciate the opportunity to identify, whereas others want to remain unnoticed or are not ready to be in a group with seemingly like-identified persons. Still other students have found a home in other campus groups like sororities, fraternities, service clubs, or student organizations.

There may be complicated dynamics around within-group diversity that present both benefits and challenges. For example, African American students may feel that their experience is minimized as other group priorities come to the forefront such as issues of immigration status or deportation versus the Black Lives Matter movement. LGBTQIAP+ students may experience this while marriage equality is celebrated and transgender people continue to fight for legislation concerning public restrooms. Coexist students may struggle with conflict around supporting fellow members who are affiliated with non-Christian religions while also witnessing violence committed in the name of these religions. Despite these challenges, affinity groups provide brave space for supporting those who are similarly othered in the face of these differences. Additionally, this provides undergraduate social work students who are not as exposed to other diverse persons to grow and learn from other students' stories of struggle and success.

Many students express relief at finally having a space to talk about their concerns and struggles without fear of judgment or further alienation. Students can strategize on how they may confront fellow students on their concerns or how they may cope with their feelings. Students who have been on campus for a few years can provide vital experiential knowledge to newer students about navigating the campus and community environment. How long a student has been on campus does not necessarily correlate to their identity development, so sometimes it is newer students who have more experiential knowledge to share about accepting themselves and navigating relationships with others. Oftentimes members state that they no longer feel so isolated and alone as they connect with each other over common issues. It is not uncommon to hear someone say, “I thought I was the only one.”

Affinity groups may increase a sense of social capital. Particularly, bonding social capital may be increased as students develop strong, supportive relationships among their semihomogeneous groups (Putnam, 1995). There is potential to increase bridging social capital as affinity groups recognize each other’s importance and brave space. Bonding social capital benefits the members of that group and bridging social capital can strengthen the overall community (Putnam, 1995). Thereby the presence and mutual recognition of affinity groups may strengthen the overall diversity of the undergraduate social work department.

Affinity group meetings often improve student social networks outside the undergraduate social work department where students provide academic support to each other across courses and levels in the program. They share meals, go to parties together, support those on sports’ teams, study together, provide transportation, and are there for each other in moments of crisis. For example, solidarity among SOC with different racial backgrounds, such as African American, Hispanic, and Asian American, resulted in the creation of a course, conducting research, developing presentations, and conference attendance. Out-of-class opportunities for engagement with undergraduate social work faculty conveners is positive and contributes to achieving support and professional development.

Opportunities for scholarship supported by and in collaboration with undergraduate social work faculty members can be positive preparatory activities for graduate school and future careers. Based on student needs and desires, scholarship and conference opportunities are developed within their financial means. The undergraduate social work department often supports students’ attendance to regional conferences by providing transportation and having other costs shared among participants. Opportunities to speak with diverse social workers occur through various efforts like introductions at conferences, e-mail connections, or Skype discussions. If students express a desire for graduate education, a recruiter or admissions coordinator may be invited to campus to share information and present various opportunities.

Although the meetings are a primary part of the affinity group experience, faculty–student relationships can progress beyond the groups. Affinity group members feel comfortable with faculty conveners and often seek them out for advice or when concerns arise. In those cases, discussions about the intersection of life and academics often occur. Faculty members as well as students have shared experiences that can bring clarity to their identities.

## Implications for Social Work Education

Affinity groups can be valuable entities on campuses where overall support is limited or not as accessible for identity group members. Diverse students and those with diverse perspectives experience a sense of validation through the affinity group experience. Social work is a profession rooted in celebration and recognition of strengths and sensitive to the challenges faced by vulnerable and oppressed groups. Faculty-convened affinity groups model for students one of the ways we, as undergraduate social worker educators, can be responsive to community dynamics.

As mandated by the Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, undergraduate social work programs are expected to make "specific and continuous efforts" to create "supportive and inclusive learning environments" (CSWE, 2015). Ongoing affinity groups support the implicit curriculum in creating environments in which diversity is clearly affirmed. Students in introductory courses are made aware of the groups, which encourages the interest in the major from diverse students. After diverse students are admitted to the undergraduate social work program, ongoing relationships with faculty members and advising support their academic success and retention.

Convening affinity groups generates additional work for undergraduate social work educators that should be accounted for and included as part of their workload, not assumed to be part of their everyday jobs. As "the implicit curriculum is as important as the explicit curriculum" (CSWE, 2015, p.14), the duty of implementing these elements must be recognized and supported by departments. Faculty identity is not enough to warrant development of affinity groups and may place undue burdens on diverse faculty members as they take on these additional responsibilities. Identity development brings up an emotional response in students (Tatum, 1992), and they may need additional support and time to process with faculty members following affinity groups. Advising sessions can be burdensome for affinity group-convening faculty.

Perhaps the most important benefit of offering affinity groups is that it creates an undergraduate social work department with high social capital that is more welcoming and responsive to all students. It both implicitly and explicitly demonstrates a commitment to valuing difference and diversity. At our university the undergraduate social work department has greater cultural and sexual orientation diversity as compared to the campus. Our department serves as an exemplar and has been recognized for these efforts in by a campus-wide diversity award.

## Conclusion

Affinity groups, such as SOC, LGBTQIAP+, and Coexist are brave spaces convened by undergraduate social work educators for students who do not identify with dominant groups. There are benefits and challenges of the groups for both students and the larger undergraduate social work program. Although the benefits have been observed consistently over years of offering affinity groups at one midsize public institution, this layer of implicit curriculum could be empirically studied to better understand the benefits for students and programs. Further formal research in this area is recommended. Nevertheless, this model can be replicated across campuses, and it is expected that similarly identified students and educators will notice a more welcoming environment for future social workers.

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