

SEARCH JOBS [Log in to Jobs Account](#)[Browse by Employer](#)

## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

This special feature is brought to you by  
the [AAAS/Science Business Office](#)



## Affinity Groups for Diversity

Laura Bonetta  
United States  
9 May 2008

They come under different names: affinity groups, networking groups, caucuses, or councils. What they do is provide forums for groups of students, faculty, or employees who share a common background or interest. In addition to groups that come together because of racial, ethnic background, and gender connections, affinity groups also bring together individuals based on country of origin, religion, physical disabilities, military service, age, sexual orientation, and many other commonalities.

At universities, affinity groups serve primarily a social and networking function, providing a source of support and community for participating students and faculty. In many cases they also raise awareness of diversity issues on campus and help with the recruitment and retention of minority students and faculty. At biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies, affinity groups have been integrated into the business fabric of many companies. In addition to providing activities of interest to their members, company-sponsored affinity groups come together with company management to find ways to recruit new employees and market products.

The activities and goals of affinity groups are as diverse as their names. What follows are a few highlights of what these groups are about.

Student- and staff-led groups at universities and biotechnology companies are helping to support and promote diversity in these settings.

### Enhancing Student Life

At many universities student-led groups provide a sense of community and belonging to their members. "For me you have to be well-rounded and happy to do well at school. The Black Graduate Caucus was a real life saver," says **Angela Fortner**. Having attended a historically black university for her undergraduate studies, Fortner says it was a real shock arriving at Princeton University in New Jersey, where she is currently one of two African American graduate students in the chemistry department.

According to the National Science Foundation, underrepresented minority students—African American, Latino/a, and Native American students—represent 24 percent of the undergraduate community, but earn just 16 percent of all science and engineering Bachelor's degrees and 6 percent of Ph.D.s. At Princeton, African American students are only 1.3 percent of all graduate enrollments.

The Black Graduate Caucus, established over 25 years ago, provides academic, social, and cultural activities for Princeton's diverse pan-African community. Its activities include assisting undergraduates with the graduate admissions process, mentoring local high school students, connecting black graduate students with faculty of color, as well as several social activities, including bowling, barbeques, and an annual formal with alumni. In addition, Black Graduate Caucus members reach out to prospective and

first-year black graduate students in similar fields to provide advice and support. “We check in with the first years to see if everything is going okay and we let prospective students know that there is a support community here if they decide to come to Princeton,” says Fortner.

Also at Princeton University, the Queer Graduate Caucus plays a similar function for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning graduate students and their allies,” according to its website. Founded in 2002 this caucus organizes many social events—including monthly bar nights and discussion groups—and also provides a list of student liaisons for prospective graduate students to contact with questions about each department.

Similar groups exist at many universities, focusing on the needs of different groups of students—Latino/a, Asian, Middle Eastern, and so on. The work of many of these organizations goes beyond social activities. The Minority Student Caucus (MSC) at the University of North Carolina, for example, a student-led group that serves minority students in the School of Public Health, has been organizing an Annual Minority Health Conference since 1977. The conference highlights health issues of concern to minorities and serves to attract students interested in minority health to the School of Public Health. “The conference is always over capacity one month before,” says **Bahby Banks**, a third year doctoral student in the department of Health Behavior and Health Education.

Banks, who co-chaired the MSC last year, created a new program called Taking Responsibility to Increase Access and Diversity (TRIAD). “As students we often complain that we need more minority faculty, more diversity in the school. TRIAD is meant to encourage and empower students to help make a difference,” she explains. Last year, TRIAD organized a one-day event for high school, undergraduate, and prospective graduate students to learn about UNC. “We gave an overview of public health to the high school students. For the undergraduate and graduate students we talked about health disparities and what they, as minority students, could bring to the table,” says Banks. “The feedback was great.”

While many student groups, such as the ones at Princeton and UNC, receive support from their universities, some are sponsored by professional societies. For example the Women in Engineering (WIE) arm of the IEEE—an association of 380,000 members in areas ranging from aerospace systems to biomedical engineering—sponsors 186 affinity groups worldwide, several of which are student groups based at universities.

According to WIE director **Karen Panetta** the affinity groups run a host of activities to “attract, retain, and sustain” women engineers. The affinity groups conduct projects in K–12 schools, provide networking opportunities and mentoring to engineering students, advise companies on best practices to support women engineers, sponsor special lectures and forums, and organize social outings. “I am a professor of electrical and computer engineering at Tufts. For 12 years I was the only woman in my department and was the first woman to get tenure,” says Panetta. “When I go to a WIE sponsored event it is great to see more than three women who understand what I do!”

### **Enlisting Faculty and Alumni**

While many faculty members participate in the activities of student-led groups, some affinity groups are specifically for faculty members and staff. The Black Faculty and Staff Council at the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) campus was established in 1978 to address “the unimpressive recruitment and retention of black administrators and faculty, as well as supporting students,” says professor **Natasha Flowers**, who co-chairs the council. “Between meetings with upper level administrators, the group works to stay connected with the day-to-day triumphs and struggles of black folks on campus.”

As one of its activities, the caucus coordinates the annual Ceremony for Black Graduates. “It is the most powerful and moving celebration of students who achieved their goals, many under dire circumstances,” says Flowers. “Recently our chancellor and other administrators have joined in this celebration and



**“The affinity groups evolved from social networks to become part of our companywide strategy for all employees.”**  
—Walter Hurdle  
Merck & Co.

witnesses' testimony of how solid study habits, close-knit family support, and the 'othermothering' on campus help to motivate students while on their journey to graduation."

Other organizations across the IUPUI campus include the Native American Faculty Staff Council, the Pan-Asian Faculty and Staff Council, and the Latino Faculty and Staff Council. These groups often work together to achieve common goals. "We write letters, have public demonstrations to promote diversity, and facilitate programming to encourage knowledge of and application of our heritage past and present," says Flowers.

Affinity groups are also a new trend among alumni associations, according to **Julie Harris** who acts as liaison between about seven newly established affinity groups and the alumni association of Northern Illinois University (NIU). "The purpose of the affinity groups is to connect alumni to their alma mater," says Harris. "In the 1950s there was a small number of graduates from each class and therefore alumni wanted to come back to NIU reunions to see their classmates. In the '60s and '70s class sizes jumped dramatically. Alumni from these years may not necessarily want to come back to a reunion to see their graduating class, but instead they want to see the folks who were members of the same groups as themselves." The affinity groups at NIU are not only focused around diversity but also common interests, such as the Marching Band Alumni Council.

### **Becoming Part of Business**

Several biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies have affinity groups similar in concept to the ones that exist on campuses. Merck & Co. Inc., a company that was ranked number 18 in the top 50 companies for diversity by the editors of Diversity Inc., has five employee-led affinity groups: the Black Employee Network, the Merck Hispanic Organization, the Asian Pacific Network, the Gay Lesbian Employee Association Network, and the Merck Women's Network. The groups are all based at facilities across the United States, but there are plans to start chapters for the Merck Women's Network in Europe and China in 2008.

"The affinity groups evolved from social networks to become part of our companywide strategy for all employees," says **Walter Hurdle**, diversity leader for the Americas. "They have become a resource." To reflect this transformation the affinity groups have been rebranded as employee resource groups, or ERGs.

The ERGs provide social activities for members, invite speakers, and organize outreach projects in the community. They also help the company with recruitment efforts and marketing. "When we produce products that primarily affect a specific population, we want to make sure that information is provided in a way that is sensitive to that population's culture," says Hurdle. "The ERGs help us make sure we achieve that goal."



**"As in any company, ERGs are primarily a US phenomenon, but we have seen a lot of benefit and a lot of energy and rigor in the United States."**

**—Michelle Gadsden-Williams  
Novartis**

Last year the company launched 10 global constituency groups focused on increasing diversity at Merck. "These groups are similar to the affinity groups but the members are at the executive level," says Hurdle, adding that some individuals are members of both types of groups. The new effort is meant to tackle diversity from both the bottom up and top down.

Novartis, another company that ranks high in terms of diversity, has 14 ERGs. "As in any company, ERGs are primarily a US phenomenon, but we have seen a lot of benefit and a lot of energy and rigor in the United States. So we want to launch them globally," says **Michelle Gadsden-Williams**, who is based in Basel, Switzerland, and is vice president and global head of diversity and inclusion at Novartis.

Gadsden-Williams says the ERGs are beneficial to both employees and the company. "The key driver for why you would want to join is that members come together for support and help one another with unique challenges," she says. For the company, the ERGs raise cultural awareness. "They help us figure out what we should do as a company around understanding and valuing differences," she says.

Companywide policies at Novartis have been instituted as a result of discussions initiated by ERGs. For example, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender ERG helped shape the domestic partner employee benefits to make them more competitive. "This particular ERG brought something to our attention that, unless you are a part of that community, you would not know much about the issue," says Gadsden-Williams.

Activities by ERGs have also helped boost Novartis's achievements in business. For example the women's ERG at the Novartis facility in New Jersey partnered with the Go Red Campaign of the American Heart Association to help educate women about the risk factors of heart disease. As a result, "We saw a surge in sales in our cardiovascular products," says Gadsden-Williams.

Some of the affinity groups sponsored by Novartis go beyond racial, gender, and sexual orientation issues. "We have several in support of a shared interest and experience," says Gadsden-Williams. "Our Cancer Hope group is a supportive network for people living with cancer or who have a loved one living with cancer. They work closely with our oncological business unit." Other groups include the Military Affinity Group, the Caregivers Affinity Group, and Working Parents Connections.

Genentech's Diversity Network Associations (DNA) also encompass a wide range of groups, including STAGES (Strengthening Ties Across Generations Seniors), which promotes an age-sensitive work environment at Genentech, and NextGen, which focuses on employees new to the work force. They are two of nine company-sponsored employee groups established to "complement and contribute to Genentech's common goals and align their activities and add value to Genentech's business," says spokesperson **Kelli Wilder**.

## Supporting Diversity

Minorities make up 17.3 percent of officials and managers in the pharmaceutical industry and 27.7 percent of professionals. At Amgen, a biotechnology company with headquarters in Thousand Oaks, California, minorities are 24.7 percent of officials and managers and 36.2 percent of professionals. But company management is striving to further increase these numbers. "The best way to get talent is to touch as many groups as we can," says **James Taylor** who heads the diversity initiative at Amgen. "We are in competition with many global companies, so it makes sense to get the best talent we have in this country."

More than 2,500 staff members—out of 18,000 total—participate in affinity groups at Amgen, which include the Amgen Asian Association, Amgen Black Employees Network, Amgen DisABled Employees Network, Amgen Latin Employees Network, Amgen Middle Eastern Employees Network, Amgen Network for Gay and Lesbian Employees, and Amgen Women's Interactive Network.

Chapters for any existing affinity group can be formed at any of the company's facilities throughout the United States, provided that there are enough people to participate in them. "A chapter has to have a vision, purpose, idea of activities and how they align with Amgen. They then have to select leaders, and we provide funding for activities," says Taylor.

According to Taylor the affinity groups play a critical role in recruiting and retaining employees. "If you bring people from different cultures to a place that is not the center of civilization, they might be worried that they will not make the appropriate contacts to feel part of the community," he explains. "People tend to stay in the place where they have made connections."

Another benefit for employees who participate in and lead activities for an affinity group is that they gain professional development. "An interesting outcome is to see people get new jobs," says Taylor. "They have a chance to lead and get training. They become more powerful, more confident, and they tend to get promoted."

Affinity groups are by no means unique to universities and biotechnology companies—but in these settings many of them are playing an important role in supporting diversity. "Who wants to sit in a room



**"The best way to get talent is to touch as many groups as we can."**

**—James Taylor  
Amgen**

of homogeneous looking people?" says UNC's Banks. "I walk through a door expecting to see diversity. If I don't see that, I ask why. And then I do something about it."

DOI: 10.1126/science.opms.r0800053

## FEATURED PARTICIPANTS

---

**Alumni Association, Northern Illinois University** - [www.niu.edu/alumni](http://www.niu.edu/alumni)

**Amgen** - [www.amgen.com](http://www.amgen.com)

**Black Faculty and Staff Council, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis** - [www.iupui.edu/~bfsc](http://www.iupui.edu/~bfsc)

**Black Graduate Caucus, Princeton University** - [www.princeton.edu/~bgc](http://www.princeton.edu/~bgc)

**Genentech** - [www.gene.com](http://www.gene.com)

**Merck & Co.** - [www.merck.com](http://www.merck.com)

**Minority Student Caucus, University of North Carolina** - [www.minority.unc.edu/sph/caucus](http://www.minority.unc.edu/sph/caucus)

**Novartis** - [www.novartis.com](http://www.novartis.com)

**Queer Graduate Caucus, Princeton University** - [www.princeton.edu/~qgc](http://www.princeton.edu/~qgc)

**Women in Engineering, Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Inc.** - [www.ieee.org/portal/pages/committee/women](http://www.ieee.org/portal/pages/committee/women)

## UPCOMING FEATURES

---

Careers in Product Companies (online only)—May 23

Biotech and Pharma—June 13

Focus on Europe—July 11