'Attend, participate and celebrate' – Affinity groups make space for colleagues from shared cultural backgrounds

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This is the second in an occasional series of articles looking at affinity groups at the University. The first, "University affinity groups have a new home," looked at the groups' move to University Initiatives.

Faculty and staff from often underrepresented cultural backgrounds are connecting with colleagues who share those backgrounds through affinity groups, which offer events and other opportunities that promote networking as well as just socializing.

"These groups are here to foster a more inclusive community and environment for faculty and staff at the University, which can then have residual impacts on the students that we serve," said Ashlee Linares-Gaffer, associate professor of practice in the School of Nutritional Sciences and Wellness and co-chair of the Latinx Faculty and Staff Association. "You also just meet a lot of really cool people doing really interesting things throughout the University that may not be in your daily awareness."

In their new organizational home under the umbrella of University Initiatives, the groups are receiving logistical support as well as $3,000 each to be used to hold events or cover other expenses.

Linares-Gaffer says the groups offer people of different heritages, backgrounds and life circumstances a chance to connect outside of their day-to-day work.

"A lot of faculty and staff, particularly from underrepresented groups, may feel alone or isolated in their unit," Linares-Gaffer said. "For people who are feeling particularly disconnected, joining these groups can help you feel supported."

Read about three of the University’s affinity groups below. Additional groups will be highlighted in the future.

Asian American Faculty, Staff and Alumni

Founded in 1989, Asian American Faculty, Staff and Alumni aims to support and celebrate the achievements and interests of Asian, Pacific Islander and Desi American members of the campus community. Ted Tong, professor in the R. Ken Coit College of Pharmacy and president of AAFSA, has been with the University for more than 40 years and says he still appreciates the opportunity the group provides to connect and collaborate with colleagues he may not otherwise meet.

"It’s the joy of communicating," Tong said. "You can talk to someone who teaches architecture or teaches medicine or works anywhere else. Our jobs don’t always connect us that well. So, we’re here to be a family."

Approximately 12.6% of University employees are Asian, according to University Analytics and Institutional Research, with native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders making up an additional 0.6%.

Cheryl Tomoeda, assistant dean for alumni and development in the College of Science and AAFSA treasurer, says the group allows her to support the next generation of Asian American leaders.

"It’s an opportunity to give back and support efforts that bring our students and colleagues the sense that they do belong on this campus and they do have a safe place."

AAFSA’s advocacy has led to increased opportunities for University students, including the creation of an Asian Pacific American Studies minor, which was launched in 2021, and a scholarship program. AAFSA awards 45-50 need-based and merit-based scholarships each year, Tomoeda says, adding that the merit-based scholarships are generally $1,000 per academic year, while the need-based scholarships usually range from $5,000-$7,000 per academic year. The group holds an annual fundraising event to support the effort. This year’s happened in March at Topgolf in Tucson.

AAFSA is led by a 15-member board – which includes a president, vice president, treasurer and secretary – and meets at least nine times per year.

In addition to its annual fundraiser, AAFSA holds a yearly winter holiday event and participates in Homecoming celebrations.

Tong, who was among the faculty members who informally assembled the group in 1989, says there is always room for more members.
"Attend, participate and celebrate," Tong said. "We want you to come."

Those interested in joining the group or finding more information can email Tong at tgtong@arizona.edu.

Latinx Faculty and Staff Association

The Latinx Faculty and Staff Association was formed in late 2021 to build community and belonging among Hispanic faculty and staff, says Lysette Davi, assistant director of the Honors Global Experience for Arizona International and the group’s co-chair.

Nearly 25% of faculty and staff identify as Hispanic or Latinx.

"What we were hearing from people is that they were feeling really siloed in their offices," Davi said. "So even though we have a large population that identifies as Latinx, they were not meeting other people in that community. We wanted to create a culture where people could celebrate their identity."

The mailing list for the group, which is led by its two co-chairs, has about 200 subscribers.

At LFSA's meetings, called "cafecitos," faculty and staff members can share achievements, challenges and experiences. The group typically meets on the third Thursday of each month from noon-1 p.m. at the former Visitor Center at 811 N. Euclid Ave. Members can also join by Zoom. The group sends out the Zoom link through its mailing list.

This month's meeting is being replaced by the group's biggest event of the year, the Familia Picnic and LFSA Awards on April 20 from 4-6 p.m. at Highland Bowl, the grassy area north of Highland Commons. Awards to be presented at the event include:

- **Promising Professional Award**, presented to an employee who has worked at the University for up to five years and has contributed to the values of LFSA culture on and off campus.
- **Professional Excellence Award**, presented to an employee who has worked at the University for six to 10 years and has enhanced the campus culture and Latinx community through campus programs and initiatives.
- **Dr. Marla Franco HSI Servingness Award**, presented to an employee who has supported the efforts of the Latinx community through leadership service, innovation and encouragement. The award is named after the University's vice president for Hispanic-Serving Institution initiatives.

While everyone is spread thin, Davi said she hopes employees don't see joining the group as just another commitment.

"This group is supposed to be a solution to that really drained feeling," Davi said. "The feeling of, 'I don't have the time to commit to anything. I just want to relax and be myself with a good group of people.' And since there is no commitment and you can drop in when it fits in your schedule, it makes a space where people can just come to relax."

Those interested in joining the mailing list can find a link on the Latinx Faculty and Staff Association website.

Skoden UA: Native American Faculty and Staff Association

Skoden UA: Native American Faculty and Staff Association was formed at the end of summer 2022, when the Native American community was really starting to emerge from the pandemic, says Felisia Tagaban Gaskin, director of the College of Education's Native Student Outreach, Access and Resiliency program.

Its name, Skoden, is a cultural rallying cry used by Native Americans that means "let's go then!"

"Many of us felt disjointed and disconnected due to COVID and the impact that it had in our communities," Tagaban Gaskin said. "Since we didn't come back right away, we lost a lot of connection with each other. This affinity group has been an attempt to revitalize those connections."

Still in its early days, Skoden UA has held multiple social gatherings for its members and their families.

American Indian and Alaska natives make up about 3.5% of the University's workforce. Since the community is small, Tagaban Gaskin says it's important to ensure that people of Native American backgrounds continue to be part of the University's faculty and staff. Current employees can help that happen, she says, by connecting with colleagues to exchange ideas and best practices on how to support students who may be looking for research or faculty roles at the University.

"I'm also a third-year doctoral student, so it's been interesting to wear both hats," Tagaban Gaskin said. "I feel like I do represent a student perspective, but I can also share what it's been like to be a full-time professional on this campus as well."

The group currently meets online as needed and, because it's in its early stages, doesn't have formal leadership positions yet. Information on meetings and events is shared through the Skoden UA mailing list, which has about 20 subscribers. To join, send a message to skoden_ua@list.arizona.edu.

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