Black faculty and staff and disabled employees build community through affinity groups

University Communications
May 2023

This is the third in an occasional series of articles looking at faculty and staff affinity groups at the University. The first, "University affinity groups have a new home," looked at the groups' move to University Initiatives. The second, "Attend, participate and celebrate – Affinity groups make space for colleagues from shared cultural backgrounds," highlighted three groups: Asian American Faculty, Staff and Alumni, the Latinx Faculty and Staff Association, and Skoden UA: Native American Faculty and Staff Association.

As the University's affinity groups continue to take shape and grow in their new organizational home under the umbrella of University Initiatives, their members are welcoming the opportunity to meet, socialize and simply unwind with colleagues who share similar backgrounds.

While some of the groups have been around for decades and others for only months, all of them are aimed at strengthening often underrepresented communities.

Read about two of the University's affinity groups below.

Sankofa, Black Faculty and Staff Association

Sankofa, Black Faculty and Staff Association has been around since 1996, and currently includes nearly 100 members. "It is designed to build community for Black staff and faculty, to advocate for those who are marginalized, and to uplift the voices, work and amazing scholarship of the staff and faculty who are Black at the University of Arizona," said Celeste Atkins, assistant professor of practice in the Graduate College and a member of the Sankofa steering committee.

The group's nine-person steering committee meets every other week, while a general membership meeting is held monthly. Members get together about twice each semester for social events, which often take place at local Black-owned businesses.

The name of the group – Sankofa – reflects its vision, says Denise TrimbleSmith, director of justice initiatives in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and a member of the Sankofa steering committee. She says the principle comes from the Akan people of Ghana and focuses on remembering and reflecting on one's past while continuing to push for future progress.

Approximately 4.1% of the University's employees are Black or African American, according to University Analytics and Institutional Research. Because the number is small, Atkins says, it is especially important for colleagues to be able to connect with others in the community on issues that go beyond their work at the University.

"Where do we get our hair done? When I moved to Tucson that was a huge issue for me," Atkins said. "Where can I get soul food like Grandma used to make? Where can I connect my daughter with other people who look like her?"

The group has outlined several primary goals, including supporting Black students, aiding in onboarding and professional development for Black employees, amplifying the work of Black staff and faculty, and supporting Black-owned businesses and entrepreneurs in Tucson.

Those interested in joining Sankofa or finding more information can contact Earl Lee, senior director for inclusive learning, engagement and leadership in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and a Sankofa steering committee member, at earllee@arizona.edu.

Disabled Staff and Faculty Coalition

The Disabled Staff and Faculty Coalition aims to promote and provide models of access, advocacy and inclusion for disabled faculty, staff, students and visitors, as well as increase the understanding of disability culture and communities.

The group started with a series of meetings in the summer of 2022, followed by social events in the fall. Sav Schlauderaff, access consultant with the Disability Resource Center, says feedback from those events will inform how the group moves forward.

"The main focus from talking to people who have attended is wanting a space to connect and socialize with other disabled staff and faculty on campus, and for it not to feel like another group for us to do trainings and workshops," Schlauderaff said.
So far, about 30 staff and faculty members have attended events, and Schlauderaff is hopeful that number will grow as the group sets a formal schedule of meetings and events in the fall. The group is open to all disabled and chronically ill staff and faculty members.

According to the Disability Resource Center, 183 employees have disclosed a disability or requested accommodations, which is an 86% increase since fall 2019. However, employees do not need to be registered with the center or have medical documentation to join the affinity group.

Those interested in more information or who would like to join the group’s mailing list can email Schlauderaff at sschlauderaff@arizona.edu.

If you are part of a faculty and staff affinity group that would like to be featured in a future issue of Lo Que Pasa, please email Andy Ober at andyober@arizona.edu.

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