



## Affinity Groups: Organizing Alumni Affinity Groups

**An Affinity Group is a set of people who share a common interest or identity.**

**Affinity groups have been organizing for centuries** as dining clubs, fraternal organizations, guilds, athletic associations, political action groups, and social change collectivities. Alumni affinity groups at university have been organizing at least since the 1850s, when Yale alumni self-organized to form the “Crew Association” to support undergraduate rowing at Yale. More recently, especially since the turn of the twenty-first century, university alumni relations departments and associations have found affinity groups based on identity or other shared interests to be an effective way to engage alumni across classes, regions and schools, as well as within classes, regions and schools.

**Affinity groups can be organized from the top down, or from the bottom up.** In other words, the university may be instrumental in promoting the formation of specific alumni affinity groups that are of institutional interest, or the university can provide a climate and culture in its alumni relations that enables self-organization among the alumni in such groups. Generally, there is an element of both.

**Organizing alumni affinity groups originating at the university:** A recent example is the formation of YaleWomen as a nation-wide affinity group within AYA. The process involved both the AYA and Yale – and active women Yale alumni leaders. Both AYA and Yale invested considerable resources to encourage and nurture the formation of the group. For a Case Study, see attached. The institution can increase the chances of success by some crucial early steps:

Hold one or more galvanizing events of interest to potential members and leaders of the group. Use the gatherings as a way to build a database of potential members and leaders. If more than one event, engage some of those enthused by the first event to help plan the second. Use to recruit leaders for the next step.

Help stage a strategic planning retreat. Make sure that significant aspects of the planning come from leaders emerging from the earlier events. Provide expert consultants and facilitators so that the new organization develops a community and a plan.

Provide ongoing database, communications, and organizational support.

The aims of community organizing for social action are different than a university’s alumni engagement so the standard guidelines about tactics and specific plans for social action often differ from those of a university. Nonetheless some of the insights are still crucial. For example, to become involved people must see (a) a benefit (or harm) to themselves if the group succeeds (or fails) and (b) their involvement will make a difference. For other important teachings, including that the most important victory is the group itself, see: <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers97/beckwith.htm> . See also <http://www.worc.org/userfiles/file/Howto-Understand-Role-of-Community-Organizer.pdf>.

**Organizing alumni affinity groups from the bottom up:** A recent example is the explosive growth of [Yale in Hollywood](#). The original idea for an entertainment industry affinity group came from a sub-group of the Yale Club of Southern California. The organizers of one event found the attendees so enthused (and asking for more), that they proceeded to organize larger events and are now bi-coastal. Some local chapters of YaleWomen were organized from the bottom up. See attached. One formulation (<http://localcircles.org/2012/05/17/what-is-an-affinity-group/>):

Start with a handful of people you know.

Do something soon.

Learn consensus building and how small groups can make decisions effectively.

Bring all of yourself - build friends and community, not just an action group.

Meet over a meal.

An alternate formulation of organizing tips from <http://www.occupylv.org/spokes-council-organizing-affinity-groups> is “Form a group with your friends! Be loud! Look exciting! Have fun!”