

Guidance re: University Affinity Groups

All Northwestern University faculty, staff, units, and departments are required to comply with applicable anti-discrimination laws.¹ This memorandum has been prepared as a reminder to the Northwestern University community about the requirements under federal anti-discrimination laws and provides guidance regarding affinity groups offered at Northwestern University. University stakeholders with questions about affinity groups should contact ad-faqs@northwestern.edu for guidance.

Compliance with Non-Discrimination Laws

Affinity groups (including gathering spaces, housing, and online communities) at Northwestern are subject to, and must comply with, federal anti-discrimination laws. In all aspects of “student, academic, and campus life,” including affinity groups (whether they are comprised of students, staff, and/or faculty), decisions should not take into account individuals’ protected characteristics².

Student Affinity Groups

Student affinity groups focused on particular cultures, heritages, and areas of the world are permissible as long as they 1) are open to all students in both policy and practice and 2) do not treat students differently based on protected characteristics, engage in stereotyping, or create a hostile environment for students of particular protected characteristics. While identity-based or themed groups are generally permissible, student affinity groups must comply with the standards above.

Employee Affinity Groups

Employers are prohibited from limiting, segregating, or classifying employees based on race, sex, or other protected characteristics in a way that affects their status or deprives them of employment opportunities. This prohibition applies to employee activities which are employer-sponsored (including by making available employer time, facilities, or premises, and other forms of official or unofficial encouragement or participation), such as employee clubs or affinity groups. As with student affinity groups, employee affinity groups 1) must be open to all in both policy and practice and 2) must not treat employees differently based on protected characteristics, engage in stereotyping, or create a hostile environment for employees of particular protected characteristics.

Last updated: June 1, 2025

¹ Please refer to Northwestern University’s [Non-Discrimination Statement](#) and [Policy on Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct](#) for more information and resources.

² Protected Characteristics, as used in this document, refers to race, national origin, color, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, veteran status, or any other characteristic protected under federal, state, or local law.