Published on *University of Colorado* (https://www.cu.edu)

Faculty Voices - Faculty & Staff Support Through Affinity Groups: Finding Your People [1]

December 18, 2024 by facultycouncil@cu.edu [2]

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Affinity groups, also known as employee resource groups (ERGs), can be a source of support for employees who identify as belonging to a minority group related to race, age, gender, sexual orientation, veteran status, disability, economic class, among others. Research has shown that such groups provide a way for employees to feel more connected and engaged at work, meet peers who can provide validation and mentorship, and expand their social and professional networks (Schlachter et al., 2024, Green, 2018).

For many people, finding the support offered by affinity groups may be increasingly necessary–or at least helpful. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives–in educational settings as well as in corporate and governmental offices–are increasingly facing scrutiny and elimination, particularly in states where political leaders and legislators oppose DEI programs because they find them unnecessary, wasteful, divisive, and counter to their political and cultural beliefs (Betts 2024, Daniels, 2024).

This opposition has had an impact. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education's DEI Tracker [4], at least 213 institutions of higher education in 33 states have made changes to DEI policies and practices since they began tracking this trend in January of 2023. Additionally, the Chronicle reports that 86 pieces of anti-DEI legislation have been proposed in 28 state legislatures, with 14 already signed into law. Federal changes are also proposed, such as the "Dismantle DEI Act" championed by Vice-President-elect Vance, which aims to eliminate DEI-related programs in the federal government.

Although these challenges to DEI work and inclusive practices have not yet directly impacted institutions of higher education in Colorado, many of our faculty, instructors, and staff may feel concerned about potential future changes to DEI practices. Affinity groups, although certainly no panacea, are one way that people can find support in their daily work lives by providing an opportunity to develop a supportive and accepting community with whom they can share resources and pursue collective goals.

In September of 2023, CU Boulder actively encouraged faculty and staff to explore joining an affinity group by holding an event called the "Employee Affinity Group Summit," which gave people an opportunity to learn about, join, and even consider establishing an identity-based group that appealed to them. One of these groups, the Alliance for Neurodiversity (AND) is for neurodiverse faculty and staff. Established by Eileen Brown, Program Coordinator for the International Affairs department and supported by executive sponsor Katy Herbert Kotlarczyk, Vice Chancellor for Advancement, AND hosts hybrid member meet-ups several times per

semester.

Since its inception, AND has had some growing pains. Everyone involved is essentially a volunteer, including the chair and vice-chair, who have employed a shared leadership structure and sub-committees to try to engage and empower all members to attend and participate in social events, neurodiversity awareness campaigns, and advocacy for neurodivergent-inclusive practices at CU Boulder.

This year, thanks to the Dean's Innovation Fund [5] granted through CU Boulder's College of Arts & Sciences, AND is organizing neurodivergence-inclusive training for supervisors, which will take place in Spring semester 2025. If successful, AND hopes such training will be made permanently available in the future to provide better awareness, inclusion, and support for neurodivergent people on the Boulder campus.

What is neurodivergence? How does it impact work?

At the inaugural Arts & Sciences Disability Symposium in October 2023, AND founder Eileen Brown and a colleague presented about the challenges and benefits of being neurodivergent in the workplace. In their talk, the presenters defined neurodiversity as "a framework that acknowledges an intrinsic variety in human brain function and cognition." According to the Cleveland Clinic [6], examples of neurodivergence include a broad spectrum of human cognitive and neurologic variation, such as neurological and developmental differences (such as autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity-disorder, Tourette syndrome) mental health issues (such as bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety), sensory processing issues, learning differences (such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia), neurologic changes due to injuries (closed-head injuries, strokes), among others.

The above list demonstrates that there are many different ways in which people are neurodivergent, and every individual's experience is unique. However, one common experience of many neurodivergent people is that workplace expectations, processes, spaces, and practices are not designed with them in mind, which often leads to these people struggling to meet the demands of a workplace that does not allow them to function optimally due to inflexibility, social and communication styles and norms, bias, microaggressions, and exclusionary promotion and hiring practices. To counter this, neurodivergent people benefit from supportive work environments that include informed and proactive supervisors, supportive administrators or executives, and inclusive practices and policies.

Such an environment is, unfortunately, not the norm, which makes neurodiversity difficult to support, first and foremost because many people do not have enough information about what it means to be neurodivergent. Understood.org [7], an advocacy group, conducted research in 2022 [8] that revealed that large portions of the population in the US have a poor understanding of neurodivergence. This data indicates that there is a great need for increased and widespread education about this topic, from credible sources, which would be highly beneficial in the workplace and other essential spaces, such as in education and health care.

There isn't a simple checklist or one-size-fits-all way to support neurodivergent people in the workplace. Instead, supervisors and administrators need to communicate clearly and honestly with their employees in order to understand their specific needs to figure out how to help them be successful. Some common things that neurodivergent folks need include a flexible schedule, the ability to work virtually or in a space where lights, noise, smells, and distractions

can be controlled, as well as clear, specific, and linear communication and feedback.

Additionally, It is important for organizations and supervisors to understand that some neurodivergent people consider themselves disabled and seek a medical diagnosis that allows them to receive accommodations, which legally mandates the specific ways an individual must be supported. Other neurodivergent people do not consider themselves disabled, or do not have the means or desire to pursue diagnosis and/or accommodations, and therefore do not receive formal accommodations [9]. To help these folks perform to their full potential, it is up to supervisors to help figure out and implement support.

Neurodivergent employees may face challenges at work beyond the regular workplace stressors, such as encountering ableist microaggressions, inaccessible spaces, and feeling socially excluded, judged, or misunderstood. All of these issues are complex and important to understand in order to promote an inclusive environment. Due to the brevity of this space, you can find a more comprehensive discussion of these topics in resources such as podcasts (check out “Differently Brained,” “The Autism in Black Podcast,” and “Neuroinclusion,”) YouTube channels (such as “The Neurocuriosity Club” or “Neurodivergent Me,”) or other personal accounts about being neurodivergent or the impacts of ableism (such as graphic novels like Sensory: Life on the Spectrum: An Autistic Comics Anthology edited by Bex Ollerton and Schnumn or books–a really great one is The Canary Code: A Guide to Neurodiversity, Dignity, and Intersectional Belonging at Work by Ludmila N. Praslova, Ph.D.).

It is important to engage with resources produced by neurodivergent people, who can explain issues such as the strengths of neurodivergent people and the barriers that an ableist world throws their way from their own perspective. “Nothing About Us, Without Us” is a strongly held conviction within the disability rights movement and it is highly relevant for any discussion of neurodivergence. Other sources of information may be helpful, such as those produced by experienced managers, psychologists, or others who have worked closely with neurodivergent people, but there is often a disconnect between what members of the neurodivergent community think and experience and what is believed, seen, and expressed by their doctors, parents, and non-neurodivergent support network.

Why is AND important?

Although new and changing, AND provides an opportunity for neurodivergent employees and their allies at CU Boulder to meet each other and think broadly about ways to improve the Boulder campus for neurodivergent people. Members often express a profound sense of relief when they join this group: many find validation as they hear others’ stories about situations and struggles that are so similar to things they have experienced. AND provides a much-needed network of support and sense of belonging for neurodivergent workers, which compliments the support and accommodations already provided by the Institutional Office of Equity and Compliance [10] that works towards making the work environment at CU Boulder more inclusive.

AND is currently limited to the Boulder campus, but such a community would be helpful on every campus. Although all University of Colorado campuses provide support for neurodivergent students and staff who have a diagnosis and are entitled to accommodations through disability service offices (Colorado Springs, Anschutz, Auraria [11]), broader support to all university employees is needed. If you are interested in developing a similar group on your campus, you could contact the office of the Senior Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

[12] to learn about the CU Boulder affinity group program.

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