

### **Topic I: The Role of Affinity and Identity in Professional Development**

The legal profession has seen an increasing presence of professional identity groups, often referred to as affinity groups, that function to support professionals who typically identify as members of a minority group, such as women, LGBTQ+, people of color, etc. These affinity groups aim to help their members navigate their journey in the legal profession by offering a network of mentors and peers, as well as supporting unique systemic challenges faced by that group within the profession. The development of these affinity groups within the legal profession has created an essential support structure for lawyers and practitioners who identify as minority members of the profession.

While some may worry that the increased presence of these affinity groups could potentially limit the organic integration and networking of diverse attorneys within the broader legal community, this worry is misplaced. The idea that the presence of affinity groups within the legal profession alienates or restricts members of such groups from networking within the broader legal community operates under the assumption that those members will only network within their respective affinity groups. That assumption, ironically, reflects the problem that affinity groups were formed to address – that, historically, only similarly situated individuals within the profession, typically white men, interacted and networked with one another. Affinity groups formed as a response to the exclusion of women, LGBTQ+, people of color, etc., within the profession, to provide these individuals a space where they could form meaningful professional relationships and share advice based on their lived experiences within the profession and beyond.

Further, though progress has been made in diversifying the profession, the fact remains that minority groups still remain underrepresented in the legal profession. The National

Association for Law Placement (NALP) 2024 Report on Diversity in U.S. Law Firms found that in 2024, of all partners, only 28.83% were women, only 12.73% were people of color, and only 5.28% were women of color.<sup>1</sup> Further, of all associates, 51.62% were women, 31.46% were people of color, and 18.76% were women of color.<sup>2</sup> Across all lawyers in 2024, women represented 40.87% of the population, people of color represented 21.46%, and women of color represented 11.77%.<sup>3</sup> Encouragingly, among summer associates in 2024, women made up 55.44%, people of color made up 43.07%, and women of color made up 26.08% - substantially above these categories throughout the profession overall, though room for growth remains.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, in 2024, of all partners at law firms, only 2.75% identified as LGBTQ; of all associates, only 7.75% identified as LGBTQ; and of all lawyers, only 5.13% identified as LGBTQ.<sup>5</sup> However, in 2024, 12.92% of all summer associates identified as LGBTQ, again reflecting a higher representation in this category than across the profession itself.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps one reason why the representations of the categories in summer associates is higher than that of the categories in the legal profession itself is the presence of affinity groups on law school campuses, as well as the connections between these law school affinity groups and bar affinity groups. The presence of affinity groups on law school campuses allows students from underrepresented communities to form meaningful professional relationships with practicing attorneys who share similar backgrounds and lived experiences. These relationships can often then lead to mentorship and introductions to job opportunities such as these coveted summer associate positions. Speaking from my own experience, I served as President of the

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<sup>1</sup> NAT'L ASS'N FOR LAW PLACEMENT, INC., 2024 REPORT ON DIVERSITY IN U.S. LAW FIRMS 16 (2025).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 41.

Women's Law Caucus during my 2L year at Rutgers Law School (Camden) and through that position I got to network and form relationships with female attorneys, judges, and other legal professions that I may otherwise never would have come into contact with had it not been for my involvement with that affinity group at Rutgers Law School.

Further, in that role as President of the Women's Law Caucus, I not only networked within my own community but also regularly attended events hosted by other student affinity groups at the law school. I also attended the Inclusive Excellence Law Student Summit, where various law student affinity group leaders from Rutgers Law School, Seton Hall School of Law, and New Jersey bar affinity group leaders came together to engage with one another and discuss how these organizations could expand and strengthen inclusion efforts between law students and practitioners. Through these experiences, I witnessed firsthand the tremendous value of affinity groups and why the fear that such groups will lead to alienation within the profession is unfounded. At these events, there were members from women lawyer affinity groups, LGBTQ lawyer affinity groups, lawyers of color affinity groups, etc., all coming together to discuss how each group could support each other and the profession. This same collaboration undoubtedly extends beyond my own experience, as bar affinity groups collaborate in a similar manner within the profession. Given the work that remains to be done in achieving meaningful representation of underrepresented groups within the profession, such collaboration between bar affinity groups is essential.

Additionally, by being involved in an affinity group, members can bring their shared experiences and perspectives back to the broader legal community. Members of affinity groups may also be involved in other bar associations, such as those related to legal practice groups, serving on bar committees or committees within their firms, or other larger professional

networks. Through these varied forms of participation, affinity bar members can indirectly support their peers by serving as a bridge between affinity groups and the broader legal community, ensuring that the perspectives and experiences of underrepresented lawyers have a meaningful voice beyond their affinity groups within the broader legal community. Further, these varied forms of participation negate the concern that participation in a bar affinity group will limit the organic integration of diverse attorneys within the legal profession.

An important thing to note is that this concern about professional segmentation is rarely discussed in connection with other professional associations, such as practice area associations, county bar associations, etc., in comparison to how the concern is discussed in connection with affinity bar groups. New Jersey, for example, has twenty-one different county bar associations for each of the state’s twenty-one counties.<sup>7</sup> These county bar associations offer membership to attorneys who practice within that respective area of New Jersey and referral services, in addition to a host of other professional benefits. For instance, membership within the Camden County Bar Association provides “unparalleled leadership and networking opportunities” through its committees and members-only professional events for attorneys practicing in Southern New Jersey.<sup>8</sup> The Camden County Bar Association also helps new attorneys navigate the profession through its Young Lawyers Committee.<sup>9</sup> This example highlights an important parallel, which is that county bar associations – or any other legal professional association for that matter – and affinity groups share the same core function – to provide professional support and opportunity to similarly situated practitioners. That core function does not change simply because the commonality shared is gender rather than geographical location. Yet again, only affinity groups

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<sup>7</sup> *County Bar Associations*, NEW JERSEY STATE BAR ASS’N, <https://njsba.com/resources/county-bar-associations/> (last visited January 22, 2026).

<sup>8</sup> *Membership Benefits*, CAMDEN CNTY. BAR ASS’N, <https://www.camdencountybar.org/membership-information/> (last visited January 22, 2026).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

face the concern that they may hinder the integration of their members within the broader legal profession. Thus, the concern regarding affinity groups appears to be rooted not in their function, but rather in the shared commonality around which these groups form. Facilitating conversations on this distinction between the interpretation of affinity groups and other legal professional associations would help encourage the integration of diverse lawyers into the broader legal community far more effectively than discouraging participation in affinity groups.

Affinity bar groups based on professional identity function primarily as an essential support structure for underrepresented lawyers to help navigate unique systemic challenges and provide a professional community with shared lived experiences. The disparities in representation of women, LGBTQ+, people of color, etc., that still exist within the profession highlight the ongoing need for a shared space that these affinity groups provide. The worry that these groups create segmentation is unfounded and again operates under the assumption that the members of these groups will only network and engage with one another – something that real-world experiences, including my own, refute. The bigger issue the legal community should turn to address is why it has concerns about the segmentation of these identity-based groups and not about other professional legal associations. In responding to that issue, the profession should consider whether these same concerns would arise if affinity groups served the demographics that have always been well represented, and thus whether the real discomfort stems not from segmentation itself, but from the steadily increasing representation of those who were historically marginalized within the profession.