Ally/Affinity Groups
An Information Sheet for Parents

What are Ally/Affinity groups?

The term “affinity group” refers to a gathering of people who all share a similar piece of their identity. Some examples are a group like the Jewish Student Union or a Young Republicans club that meets regularly. First Grade is a type of affinity group structured around age, and a school alumni group is another example. Although members of the group may share a common identity, such as gender, religion, age, or race, it does not mean that everyone in that group shares the same experience. Rather, participants recognize that their identity has an effect on the way they move through the world. Our Middle School currently has two affinity groups (Spectrum - a group that discusses issues of gender and orientation, and a Black Student Union). These groups have a teacher sponsor who helps facilitate the conversations and goals of the group. Students join these groups voluntarily, and they meet regularly at lunch or after school. Four times a year we allow all of our students to participate in Ally/Affinity groups during the advisory time. Our teachers offer a variety of options suggested by our students (Muslim, Mediterranean, Physical/Mental Health challenges, Asian, Students of Divorced Parents, Bi-lingual Families, etc.). Students may choose a different gathering each time and they may participate as a member of the affinity or as an ally (someone who wants to learn, understand, and support).

Why does Bryn Mawr choose to offer these groups? What are their purpose?
Bryn Mawr’s mission, philosophy, and diversity statements speak clearly for the need for ally/affinity spaces. From honoring the “dignity and rights of all people” to engaging positively, productively, and compassionately with an increasingly diverse community and world, our ally/affinity spaces are integral to this mission. The goals of affinity/ally groups are to gain knowledge of various experiences and viewpoints within our community and be able to effectively communicate across differences; to have the ability to explore one’s own experiences/identity, and to appreciate the ways in which we are different from each other while at the same time, see our similarities. By becoming more comfortable with their own identity, community members are in a much better position to understand the experiences of others. Ally/affinity groups provide a space for reflection, dialogue, and support. They help students answer key middle school questions: Who am I? And how do I show up for others? Research from both the business world and educational institutions has demonstrated that affinity gatherings are a necessary component for the healthy development of organizations. They help students practice empathy, civil discourse, and leadership skills as they attempt to listen and understand the experiences of others. Finally, students often find peers within the middle school community that have common interests or experiences, which can open up new friendships and connections and bring our community closer together as students really “see” and respect their peers in a deeper way.

When and how do we lead them? What types of activities do groups engage in?
Our Affinity/Ally groups meet once per quarter (4 times per year). Our 6th graders do not participate in our fall groups in order for them to engage in introductory activities to lay the foundation for their participation. We have a variety of groups we offer to students and often take student suggestions in the formation of new groups that may meet their needs. Students may choose a different group every time or stay with the same group. During meetings, a faculty facilitator is present to foster student-driven conversations and guide students to remember our community norms and civil discourse. Students can engage in a variety of activities during our ally/affinity time. They may choose to talk about opportunities and challenges around identity, share movies, books, and music, learn about their history and culture, create connections to other groups and allies, educate adults and other students, advocate for change within the school, and celebrate who they are.

Will separating students on the basis or race, religion, or ethnicity create division or resentment?

Having conversations in ally/affinity groups allows us to examine some of the roots of why we see the world the way we do and to acknowledge that the way we experience the world may differ from someone else, even someone with the same affinity. This understanding allows for greater acceptance of other perspectives, allowing for more fruitful cross-cultural dialogues. Ally/affinity groups do sometimes discuss shared challenges, and it is true that we experience mistreatment from members of other groups at times, which could lead to feelings of resentment. However, a well-run ally/affinity space resists labeling of other groups and blanket assumptions of other groups. Instead, ally/affinity groups allow for a school-sponsored and facilitated space where students can explore identity, celebrate shared identity and debrief common challenges that members of the group face, and learn to be an ally. Research based on bias, prejudice, and stereotypes show that we naturally tend to categorize, compare, and create mental models based on limited information and internalize this misinformation at an early age. Ally/affinity groups offer a space to experience affirmation and allow for explicit conversations about differences and common humanity. Students become more comfortable talking about issues of identity, stereotypes, and discrimination that show up so commonly in the news, literature, history, and even perhaps in their own families and communities.

Brief Summary of Student Feedback
Each year we survey our students about how they feel about and what they learn from ally/affinity groups. Here are some of the results:

88% of our students appreciate and value our ally/affinity spaces, and here’s why:

“I think ally/affinity groups gives us all a way to connect and share our thoughts without feeling pressured.”
“Ally/affinity groups are a good way to meet other people who may identify with the same thing as you, or if you are an ally, it is a good way to learn about different groups of people and how you can support and respect them.”

“I think it’s a nice way to learn about each other.”

“I feel that the groups are very important, and I enjoy talking to people I can relate to.”

“Affinity/ally groups are a safe place where you can talk about your experiences so far and really connect with the people who are in your groups. Most people connect to you and others who are allies are telling you that they are willing to listen to your problems or learn a deeper meaning about what you stand for and how it affects your everyday life.”

“I really enjoy going to ally/affinity groups, and they make students feel less alone.”

**And here’s what students tell us they learn in Ally/Affinity spaces:**

“The most valuable thing that I have learned by being a part of our ally/affinity groups was that there are other people who support me inside of the school and who will listen to what I have to say!”

“That people in my grade also go through the same things I do and it was really really nice getting to relate to people.”

“I have learned about different cultures and beliefs.”

“I have learned who some other students are that I can go to if I felt the need to talk about a subject concerning me or being Jewish or having divorced parents. It’s also nice to know that there are some allies at Bryn Mawr.”

“That I have things in common with a lot of people.”

“I have learned that in mixed culture families people speak many languages and usually love their own culture.”

“The importance of standing up for yourself and making a difference because it may be harder because of your background, religion, and color of skin.”

“I’ve learned to listen, learn, and share.”

“I am not alone.”

**Where else can I learn about Ally/Affinity Spaces?**

Some information on this document is taken directly or indirectly from: Affinity/Alliance Groups Frequently Asked Questions, by Rosetta Eun Ryong Lee, Seattle Girls’ School, Seattle, WA
The National Association of Independent Schools promotes these spaces as a best practice of independent schools and offered [this article](#) explaining their purpose and benefits.

*Teaching Tolerance* is another excellent resource for schools and parents.