



Cultivating Connections that Make an Impact: CIRCLE – An Affinity Group Model for Supporting Professionals of Color in Higher Education

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Abstract

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) often fall short in supporting the holistic development and retention of professionals of color (Smith et al., 2007). This manuscript introduces CIRCLE: Creating Inclusive Relationships and Community for Learning & Engagement for Professionals of Color, as a model affinity group at Sand Shore University, aiming to address this challenge. Guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Strayhorn's Theory of Sense of Belonging, this case study explores CIRCLE's role in building community, fostering professional growth, and contributing to institutional change. It outlines the initiative's design, impact, and replicability at other institutions committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Keywords: affinity groups, employee resource groups (ERGs), higher education, professionals of color, sense of belonging

Introduction

CIRCLE emerged in response to a persistent retention gap in the career timeline of staff of color navigating a predominantly White institutional culture. The lack of representation in leadership, limited access to mentorship, and systemic barriers to promotion can create a hostile environment for professionals of color in higher education (Smith et al., 2007). Research indicates that staff of color at PWIs often experience racial battle fatigue, a psychological toll from navigating daily microaggressions and exclusionary practices (Smith et al., 2007). This environment not only hinders their performance and well-being but also leads to high attrition rates. Such conditions often remain unacknowledged in institutional assessments of employee

satisfaction and workplace climate.

Taken together, these challenges highlight a persistent gap: Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) often lack intentional and sustained structures to support the retention, belonging, and professional advancement of staff of color. While issues such as racial battle fatigue, limited mentorship, and systemic barriers are well documented (Smith et al., 2007), they remain largely unaddressed in institutional assessments and strategies. As a result, professionals of color continue to face disproportionate attrition and limited access to leadership pathways, ultimately weakening institutional commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This study responds to that problem by presenting CIRCLE as a model affinity group designed to address these gaps and demonstrate how such initiatives can foster meaningful change.

The development of CIRCLE was influenced by a desire to interrupt these patterns through intentional programming, advocacy, and community-building. This affinity group was not merely a social outlet, but a strategic intervention rooted in social justice and collective care. The founders recognized that professionals of color needed more than traditional professional development workshops, they needed a space to be affirmed, supported, and empowered in their identities. CIRCLE's curriculum was designed to address personal and professional growth simultaneously, allowing participants to bring their whole selves into the workplace. In this way, CIRCLE positions itself at the intersection of identity, community, and professional development.

The name CIRCLE, was selected to symbolize both harmony and resonance, suggesting not only collaboration among members but also the lasting echo of inclusion across the institution. Its inception involved a grassroots team of professionals of color who gathered to assess existing gaps and draft a mission grounded in affirmation and equity. Early iterations of

CIRCLE began in modest settings, such as shared conference rooms and lunchtime gatherings. Over time, it grew into a recognized initiative supported by university leadership and integrated into the fabric of Residential Education and Student Affairs at large within the University.

Importantly, CIRCLE aligns with broader national conversations about racial equity in higher education. Following the racial justice uprisings of 2020, many institutions issued public commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, the sustainability and authenticity of these commitments have come into question, especially when institutional efforts fail to center the voices and leadership of staff of color. CIRCLE stands as a counter-narrative to performative diversity, offering a model rooted in equity, authenticity, and accountability. Its programming includes mentorship, cultural celebration, identity-conscious leadership development, and critical dialogues on systemic inequities.

Sand Shore University's CIRCLE model also highlights the critical importance of campus partnerships. Collaborations with campus leaders, such as the Diversity, Inclusion, and Intercultural Initiatives Office (Diversity Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives), the broader Student Affairs division, and other departments across campus to provide structural support and visibility. These partnerships allow CIRCLE to influence policies, inform hiring practices, and integrate diversity goals into departmental planning. As CIRCLE matured, it began hosting campus-wide events like networking mixers, professional development workshops and a university-wide conference that focuses on mid to executive level women of color and allies within higher education that drew attendance from across student affairs and academic affairs.

This manuscript documents CIRCLE's evolution, impact, and lessons learned, with the goal of providing a replicable model for other institutions seeking to retain diverse talent and foster inclusive cultures. By centering the experiences of professionals of color and their allies,

CIRCLE challenges institutions to rethink how they define support, success, and belonging. The case study methodology allows for a deep exploration of participant narratives, revealing the transformative potential of affinity groups in reshaping campus culture. It is through these narratives that the depth and necessity of intentional community spaces come to life.

Ultimately, this work contributes to the growing scholarship on employee resource groups in higher education, adding to the understanding of how identity-affirming communities can serve as catalysts for change. CIRCLE's story is one of resilience, innovation, and hope, a testament to what is possible when professionals of color and their allies are given the space, resources, and trust to lead. As higher education continues to confront challenges of representation, inclusion, and institutional transformation, initiatives like CIRCLE offer a blueprint for sustained, meaningful progress that centers the humanity and potential of its most marginalized professionals.

Literature Review

The literature surrounding the retention and success of professionals of color at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) reflects a complex, multifaceted challenge rooted in systemic inequities. Numerous studies reveal that professionals of color routinely face structural barriers such as limited access to mentorship, tokenism, racial microaggressions, and exclusion from decision-making spaces (Gonzalez, 2020; Harper, 2012; Stanley, 2006). These challenges can lead to increased attrition and burnout, ultimately weakening institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), developed by legal scholars such as Bell (1995) and Crenshaw (1989), provides a foundational lens for understanding these experiences. CRT posits that racism is endemic in American society and that the dominant ideologies of neutrality,

objectivity, and meritocracy often mask systemic inequality. In higher education, CRT challenges institutions to acknowledge how policies, practices, and norms perpetuate exclusion and marginalization, particularly for staff and faculty of color (Delgado and Stefancic 2017) emphasize the value of counter-storytelling in CRT, a method that validates the lived experiences of people of color and critiques dominant narratives that maintain the status quo.

In tandem with CRT, Strayhorn's (2012) Theory of Sense of Belonging offers insight into the psychological and emotional dimensions of professional success. Strayhorn defines sense of belonging as the degree to which individuals feel accepted, valued, and included within a given environment. For professionals of color, this includes both interpersonal relationships and institutional culture (Strayhorn, 2012). Research indicates that a strong sense of belonging is positively correlated with job satisfaction, engagement, and retention (Strayhorn, 2012; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). In contrast, feelings of isolation or tokenization can undermine professional confidence and motivation Vaccaro & Newman, 2016.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), also known as affinity groups, have emerged as promising interventions to support the retention and development of professionals of color. Rooted in both grassroots organizing and institutional backing, ERGs serve as safe spaces for identity affirmation, professional networking, and advocacy (Welbourne et al., 2023). These groups allow members to share lived experiences, receive mentorship, and access resources that are often unavailable through traditional institutional structures.

ERGs also play a strategic role in driving organizational change by raising awareness of systemic barriers and proposing inclusive policies and practices (Brinson-Days, 2023).

In the corporate sector, ERGs have been linked to increased employee engagement,

innovation, and organizational performance (Alcaraz, 2021). Higher education institutions have begun to adopt similar models, though the literature suggests that implementation varies widely across campuses. Some ERGs are institutionally supported and integrated into strategic diversity initiatives, while others are grassroots efforts driven entirely by staff. The presence or absence of leadership support, funding, and clear purpose can significantly impact an ERG's sustainability and effectiveness (Crefton & Miller, 2023).

Despite their potential, ERGs also face limitations. Scholars have critiqued the tendency of institutions to place the burden of DEI work disproportionately on staff of color, often without adequate compensation, recognition, or authority (Ahmed, 2012). Additionally, affinity groups risk becoming performative if not meaningfully linked to institutional change. For ERGs to be effective, they must be embedded within a broader framework of equity and accountability.

Affinity groups like CIRCLE operate within this complex landscape. CIRCLE is informed by CRT's emphasis on counter-narratives and equity and draws from sense of belonging theory to create an environment where professionals of color and their allies feel seen and supported. It also models the best practices of successful ERGs, intentional programming, mentorship opportunities, institutional partnerships, and data-informed decision-making.

Recent literature also emphasizes the importance of leadership development within ERGs (Smith, 2024; Brinson-Days, 2023; Crefton & Miller, 2023; Welbourne, Rolf, & Schlachter, 2023). As professionals of color navigate often exclusionary institutional cultures, ERGs can serve as incubators for emerging leaders by providing opportunities to develop skills in advocacy, supervision, curriculum development, and public speaking (Smith, 2024). These

developmental opportunities not only benefit individual members but also contribute to building a more diverse leadership pipeline within the institution.

Moreover, scholars argue that ERGs can strengthen institutional capacity by fostering a sense of shared responsibility for inclusion. When ERGs include and train allies, particularly those in dominant identity groups, the work of equity becomes a collective project rather than the sole responsibility of marginalized staff (Sue et al., 2019). CIRCLE's inclusion of allies through trainings and community dialogues reflects this approach, helping to shift the broader campus climate toward one of empathy, understanding, and shared action.

As this review illustrates, the convergence of theory and practice in the development and implementation of ERGs creates a powerful opportunity for transformation. CIRCLE is situated within this growing body of knowledge and represents an intentional effort to translate theory into practice. By synthesizing insights from CRT, sense of belonging, and ERG research, this manuscript highlights how a culturally responsive affinity group can make a meaningful impact on institutional equity and staff success.

In sum, the literature underscores the urgent need for identity-affirming, structurally supported spaces for professionals of color in higher education. Through the integration of theoretical frameworks and empirical research, it becomes evident that initiatives like CIRCLE are not merely supplementary, they are essential. As institutions strive to meet their diversity and inclusion goals, the establishment and nurturing of robust ERGs should be seen as a strategic imperative, not an optional initiative.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the purpose, practices, and outcomes of CIRCLE, an affinity group at Sand Shore University. As one of the group's founders and current advisors, I approached this work from an insider perspective, incorporating reflexivity throughout the research process. Data were collected from multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews with CIRCLE participants and a review of program-related documents, to capture both individual experiences and organizational practices. This combination of methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the group's origins, operations, and perceived impact.

A case study design was particularly appropriate for this research, as it allows for in-depth exploration of a bounded system in a specific context (Yin, 2018). Since CIRCLE is a unique program situated within one university, this method supported a holistic examination of its development and influence. The study was guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Strayhorn's (2012) Theory of Sense of Belonging. CRT emphasizes the ways race and racism shape experiences within systems such as higher education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), while Strayhorn's framework highlights how feelings of connection, value, and support influence persistence, performance, and well-being. Together, these perspectives provided a lens for analyzing how CIRCLE functions as both a space of belonging and a vehicle for institutional change.

Data Collection

To collect data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 CIRCLE members. These included individuals who have been part of the group since its beginning, as well as newer members, with a mix of entry-level and mid-level professionals. Six of the 20 were allies and the remaining 14 were professionals of color. At the start of each interview, participants were asked whether they identified as a professional of color or as an ally. Based on their response, a specific set of questions tailored to their identity were asked of them. This ensured that experiences and insights unique to each perspective were captured. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were held via Zoom, depending on participants' availability and preference. All interviews were audio-recorded by Zoom.

In addition to interviews, I gathered CIRCLE-related documents such as meeting agendas, promotional flyers, curriculum materials, and feedback forms from events. These artifacts helped me understand how the program was developed and how it has grown. I also attended several CIRCLE-sponsored events, including book reads, professional development workshops, and cultural celebrations, to observe the group in action. Field notes captured these real-time experiences, offering further insight into how CIRCLE operates and supports its members.

This involved reading through the interview transcripts, documents, and field notes multiple times to identify patterns and themes. MAXQDA software was used to help with coding and organizing the data. Some of the themes were informed by the guiding theoretical frameworks, while others emerged inductively from participants' responses during analysis. Using MAXQDA software, I engaged in an iterative coding process that began with open coding to capture key phrases and ideas. I then grouped similar codes together, moving toward broader

categories and examining connections among them. This process allowed me to identify both framework-driven and participant-generated themes, and to explore the deeper meanings and patterns reflected in the data. I analyzed the data using thematic analysis, following the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). I analyzed the data using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six steps (2006). I began by reading and rereading the transcripts to become familiar with the data and note early ideas. Next, I used MAXQDA software to code interesting points across the dataset. From there, I grouped similar codes together and started to see broader themes take shape. I then reviewed these themes to make sure they reflected the data accurately and refined them so that each had a clear focus and meaning. In the final stage, I selected examples that best illustrated the themes and connected them back to our research questions and the existing literature.

To ensure that the findings were trustworthy and accurate, I took several steps. I triangulated data from different sources, interviews, documents, and observations, to confirm recurring themes. Throughout the process, I maintained reflexive notes to be mindful of how my own identity and position influenced the research. As a professional of color and one of advisors to CIRCLE, I recognized that my experiences might shape how I interpreted the data.

This research approach allowed me to explore CIRCLE in depth and highlight the ways it supports professionals of color and their allies at a predominantly white institution. Rather than just looking at data like retention rates, this study centered participants' stories and reflections, giving voice to the emotions, relationships, and affirmations that come with being part of CIRCLE. The case study method also helped me document how CIRCLE has adapted over time, especially in response to the racial reckoning of 2020, and how it continues to evolve to meet the needs of its members and institution.

In summary, by combining interviews, artifact review, and observation, this case study sheds light on what makes CIRCLE impactful. The voices of the people involved, especially professionals of color, are at the heart of the research, showing how intentional, identity affirming spaces can help reshape higher education workplaces for the better.

Findings

The findings from this qualitative case study reveal four central themes that highlight the impact and significance of CIRCLE: (1) fostering belonging and identity affirmation, (2) providing a platform for professional development, (3) serving as a vehicle for institutional change, and (4) navigating challenges to sustainability. These themes emerged from rich participant narratives and data sources, illuminating the multifaceted role CIRCLE plays in the professional and emotional lives of staff of color.

Fostering Belonging and Identity Affirmation

Participants consistently described CIRCLE as a space where they felt seen, heard, and valued. This theme echoed across narratives of individuals from varying professional levels and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Many participants used language such as “home,” “safe haven,” and “sanctuary” to describe their experience within the group. One staff member shared, “CIRCLE was the first time I felt like I didn’t have to explain myself... my culture, my experiences were just understood.” This finding aligns with Strayhorn’s (2012) theory, demonstrating how CIRCLE contributes to a critical sense of belonging often absent at predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

Several participants noted that CIRCLE provided a necessary counterbalance to experiences of microaggressions or feelings of isolation in their career thus far. The group’s emphasis on authenticity and cultural expression allowed members to be their full selves

without fear of judgment or misunderstanding. For many, this translated into increased morale, greater confidence, and a renewed commitment to their professional roles.

A Platform for Professional Development

CIRCLE also emerged as a vital space for career support and professional growth. Members described gaining access to mentorship, training opportunities, and leadership experiences that were otherwise unavailable to them. One participant reflected, “Through CIRCLE, I found my voice as a leader. I got to plan events, lead discussions, and even present at conferences. These were things I didn’t think were in reach for me before.”

Participants highlighted the intentional design of CIRCLE’s curriculum, which blends skill-building workshops with reflective conversations about racial identity, resilience, and navigating predominantly white workspaces. This model fostered both technical competencies and emotional intelligence. CIRCLE was also credited with enhancing visibility for staff of color, opening doors to promotions and committee appointments. The professional development impact of CIRCLE was particularly strong for early-career professionals, many of whom described the group as their “launchpad.”

A Vehicle for Institutional Change

Another salient finding was CIRCLE’s influence beyond its membership. Several participants emphasized the group’s growing role in shaping campus dialogue and DEI strategy. Through partnerships with senior leadership, cross-divisional initiatives, and public programming, CIRCLE has become a visible contributor to institutional equity efforts. Its feedback has influenced hiring practices, staff training, and community building frameworks. A senior administrator noted, “CIRCLE brings forward perspectives that often get lost in bureaucracy.” Their input has directly shaped how we think about staff development and

inclusive excellence. Other stakeholders confirmed that CIRCLE has become a resource for the broader university, with some departments requesting technique sharing for their own DEI efforts. This evolution from an affinity space to an institutional partner illustrates how ERGs can advance systemic change when supported and empowered.

Navigating Challenges to Sustainability

While the findings overwhelmingly affirm CIRCLE's positive impact, participants also surfaced concerns about sustainability and institutional support. Several members expressed fears that the group's success might lead to co-optation or overextension. As one participant put it, "There's always that tension between doing the work because we love it and doing the work because nobody else will."

Concerns were also raised about burnout among CIRCLE's core leaders, many of whom juggle their involvement with demanding full-time roles. Others highlighted the need for succession planning and capacity-building to ensure the initiative's longevity.

Finally, several participants noted the importance of preserving CIRCLE's cultural authenticity and mission as it grows. "We don't want it to become just another checkbox," one member said. "It has to remain rooted in community, truth-telling, and support." These insights underscore the delicate balance between institutional integration and cultural integrity that many ERGs must navigate.

Together, these themes paint a compelling picture of CIRCLE as a dynamic, culturally responsive affinity group that meets the unique needs of professionals of color while contributing to institutional transformation. The voices of participants reinforce that CIRCLE's strength lies not only in what it offers to its members but also in how it models inclusive practice for the wider university community. These findings offer valuable lessons for institutions

seeking to build or strengthen similar affinity groups, demonstrating that with intentional design, leadership support, and a commitment to equity, ERGs can play a central role in advancing belonging, leadership, and justice in higher education.

Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the transformative potential of affinity groups like CIRCLE in fostering environments of belonging, professional growth, and equity at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). CIRCLE's development and implementation demonstrate how intentional, identity-affirming spaces can disrupt traditional institutional dynamics and provide sustainable models for supporting professionals of color.

A central implication is the role CIRCLE plays in affirming identity and cultivating belonging. At PWIs, professionals of color often encounter systemic barriers such as microaggressions, tokenization, and exclusion from decision-making spaces (Stanley, 2006). CIRCLE shows that affinity groups can directly address these challenges by creating emotionally safe and culturally affirming spaces. Belonging is not optional, it is critical to staff well-being, engagement, and retention. This extends Strayhorn's (2012) work on the importance of belonging, demonstrating its relevance not only for students but also for professional staff. For institutional leaders, the implication is clear: intentional investment in identity-affirming spaces is necessary for both individual and organizational success.

Another implication lies in the professional development function of affinity groups. CIRCLE provided participants with opportunities to build skills, gain visibility, and strengthen confidence, often in ways not afforded through traditional promotion pathways at PWIs. Activities such as book reads, public speaking engagements, and mentorship positioned CIRCLE as a leadership incubator. This challenges the common perception of ERGs as solely social or

supportive spaces and highlights their potential as developmental pipelines. Institutions should recognize and support this dual function, investing in ERGs as spaces that simultaneously foster community and cultivate future leaders.

CIRCLE's influence on institutional culture further highlights the broader potential of ERGs. Through consultation with university leadership, contributions to DEI strategy, and campus-wide programming, CIRCLE extended its reach beyond its immediate membership. This demonstrates how affinity groups can act as trusted advisors and catalysts for systemic change. However, the labor that sustains these efforts must be adequately resourced. Without stipends, release time, or administrative infrastructure, ERG leaders, often professionals of color, risk burnout and exploitation, even as their contributions are celebrated. For ERGs to have lasting impact, institutions must pair recognition with tangible investment.

The case also illustrates the delicate balance between growth and authenticity. As CIRCLE expanded, it navigated aligning with institutional priorities and preserving its cultural integrity. This dynamic underscores the importance of grounding ERGs in their original mission of cultural affirmation and honest dialogue, while also adapting to evolving institutional landscapes. Practices such as regular assessment, leadership retreats, and listening sessions can help groups maintain this balance.

Theoretically, CIRCLE reinforces key tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), particularly the significance of counter-storytelling, recognition of community cultural wealth, and persistence of racialized structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Participants' narratives acted as counter-narratives, challenging deficit-based assumptions about professionals of color and demonstrating agency, resistance, and transformation. Their stories reveal how ERGs can reshape institutional discourse on race, leadership, and inclusion.

This study also contributes to the limited scholarship on ERGs in higher education. While much of the literature on ERGs is rooted in corporate contexts, CIRCLE provides a higher education example that blends community building, professional capacity development, and institutional influence (Welbourne et al., 2023). By amplifying the experiences of professionals of color and their allies, this study expands the conversation about organizational inclusivity and highlights the replicability of CIRCLE's framework in similar institutional settings.

Ultimately, CIRCLE's story demonstrates resilience, innovation, and community. Professionals of color are not passive recipients of institutional culture but active architects of more inclusive paradigms. When adequately supported, their labor and leadership can transform higher education into more equitable environments for all. ERGs like CIRCLE should therefore be considered central, not peripheral, to the mission of educational excellence and justice. While this study offers valuable insights, its findings are shaped by the single-site context of Sand Shore University and the researcher's insider perspective, which may have influenced interpretation despite efforts to enhance trustworthiness. Future research should explore multi-site case studies and include perspectives from institutional leadership to expand understanding of how ERGs function across diverse higher education settings.

Conclusion

This study has illustrated the profound impact that affinity groups like CIRCLE can have on the experiences of professionals of color within higher education. From fostering a sense of belonging and professional development to promoting institutional change and navigating sustainability, CIRCLE's story provides a rich example of how targeted, identity affirming initiatives can contribute to equity and excellence within predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

The introduction of CIRCLE at Sand Shore University was more than an attempt to establish a professional network, it was a response to systemic gaps in institutional support, visibility, and engagement for professionals of color. The group's evolution, intentional programming, and growing influence underscore the necessity of creating spaces that prioritize authenticity, cultural validation, and community care. Through structured learning, critical dialogue, and mentorship, CIRCLE has empowered its members to take ownership of their leadership journeys while also challenging institutional norms that have historically marginalized them.

The literature review provided a critical foundation, linking the experiences of professionals of color to broader theories of belonging, cultural wealth, and critical race theory. These frameworks helped contextualize CIRCLE's work and reinforced the importance of creating intentional spaces where underrepresented voices are amplified and celebrated. As institutions seek to operationalize diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments, it is essential to understand that transformation begins with relationships, cultivated, consistent, and conscious ones.

Methodologically, this qualitative case study offered insight into CIRCLE's impact through the lived experiences of its members. The findings highlighted the multiple roles CIRCLE plays: it is a sanctuary, a launchpad, a mirror, and a megaphone. The four central themes, belonging, professional development, institutional influence, and sustainability, show that CIRCLE is not just an internal support group, but a strategic and cultural asset for the University.

The discussion section reflected on CIRCLE's implications for institutional leadership, diversity work, and the broader higher education landscape. The highlighting of how fragile it

is to maintain cultural authenticity and scale institutional impact was particularly instructive, revealing how ERGs must continually navigate internal identity work and external institutional expectations. The importance of sustained investment, financial, emotional, and structural, cannot be overstated. Institutions must be willing to embed support for affinity spaces into the core of their operations, not as afterthoughts or special projects, but as essential components of thriving workplace ecosystems.

Looking forward, the lessons of CIRCLE point to several recommendations for institutions. First, institutions must recognize and reward the emotional labor performed by professionals of color, especially those who contribute to DEI efforts outside their formal roles. This includes compensating ERG leaders, offering release time, and integrating their insights into strategic planning processes. Second, institutions should invest in the long-term sustainability of affinity groups through leadership succession planning, ongoing training, and consistent dialogue with executive leadership. Third, colleges and universities should ensure that affinity groups are designed with input from their intended members, prioritizing their cultural context and lived experiences. Finally, institutions must develop assessment tools to evaluate the long-term impact of these groups, not only in terms of retention, but in climate, engagement, and equity outcomes.

CIRCLE's narrative is ultimately a story of what is possible when equity work is approached through care, collaboration, and courage. The group's success demonstrates that the creation of culturally grounded professional spaces is not only a strategy for retention but a moral imperative. As higher education continues to grapple with questions of representation, justice, and inclusion, models like CIRCLE provide a guiding light, offering practical frameworks and powerful testimonies that reaffirm the value and voice of professionals of color.

In conclusion, CIRCLE represents a model of how affinity groups can drive institutional transformation while simultaneously providing critical support to marginalized staff. It challenges institutions to move beyond performative inclusion and embrace systemic change rooted in authenticity, community, and purpose. For professionals of color, CIRCLE affirms that they do not have to navigate their careers in isolation, and for institutions, it provides a roadmap toward becoming places where all members can thrive.

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