

**NEAR Group FAQs**

1. **What are NEAR Groups?**

The Network for Employee Affinity Resource (NEAR) Groups are a centralized employee support and retention effort out of the Office of the Vice President for Diversity. The NEAR Groups structure centers employee voices and needs by creating and sustaining virtual channels for those within, across, and in support of various affinity groups to build community; share information and resources relevant to working at CSU or living in Northern Colorado; and employ effective means for supporting one another.

Many informal affinity groups and community-centered spaces have organically developed over time to respond to a broad spectrum of employee needs at CSU. Recognizing the importance of such efforts and the value they provide for the well-being and success of our employees, the NEAR Groups are intended to offer additional institutional support, collaboration, and longevity for existing and new employee-based efforts that promote an inclusive and equitable culture at CSU and reflect our Principles of Community.

1. **Who can join NEAR Groups?**

Any CSU employee can request to join the NEAR Groups Team and specify to which affinity spaces they would like to be added. Every member must agree to our Terms of Use and Community Guidelines before being added.

The naming of affinity spaces is an inherently imperfect practice, and as such, differences even within affinity groups are to be acknowledged and affirmed. The NEAR Groups structure is established with intersectionality in mind -- this includes the recognition that our different identities situate us differently within multiple systems of privilege and disadvantage, and the most effective way to create inclusive culture change is by prioritizing the needs of those who are marginalized within multiple systems.

Solidarity, support, and allyship are demonstrated by honoring designated spaces for people to connect in community and showing up for others when and how they ask of us.

These groups are for employees and not intended for undergraduate or graduate students. Student seeking additional resources and support, contact [Student Diversity Programs and Services](https://studentdiversity.colostate.edu/), [Student Leadership, Involvement, and Community Engagement](https://catalog.colostate.edu/general-catalog/cocurricular-engagement/slice/), or contact your advisor. Those with post-doctoral appointments are encouraged to reach out to the [Graduate School](https://graduateschool.colostate.edu/) for information on available resources.

1. **What is the intended use of NEAR Groups?**

Different communities will have different needs and priorities, so there is flexibility around how community members utilize Group Channels to create unique affinity spaces.

We encourage using Group Channels to support community building and informal interactions among members in ways that best address community interests and needs. Files can also be used to collect, store, and share information about pertinent University policies and/or resources in the surrounding community. Other possibilities include organizing to advocate for policy change, fostering collaborations, and supporting each other personally and professionally, etc., all of which can be done collectively.

1. **How much time commitment is expected if I join one of the NEAR Groups?**

As little or as much as you want! Participation is completely voluntary. Members are encouraged to engage to whatever degree feels appropriate for them, and to do so because they want to, not because they feel pressured to.

Those who are particularly enthusiastic about engaging with others in an affinity space may volunteer to be a Group Channel lead or initiate other modes of engaging with others in their community.

The NEAR Groups are not committees, though they could develop or leverage their own internal structures to meet community needs (if this is appropriate). They could also potentially partner as informative resources for University committees or units working on related issues.

1. **I am part of a group that communicates and meets on our own. Are we automatically part of the NEAR Groups? How do we request to join?**

While there are many benefits to being part of this centralized effort, it is not mandatory that all existing affinity groups participate since this structure may not be appropriate or desirable for every group. Those that choose to affiliate with the NEAR Groups can do so in whatever way is useful, even if that is simply to increase visibility and access for new people to get connected.

Existing affinity spaces and employee groups that uphold our Principles of Community may request to be added to the NEAR Groups through Microsoft Teams with a designated Group Channel. Employees may inquire about the creation of new Group Channels to meet additional community needs. Please email [Cori Wong](mailto:cori.wong@colostate.edu) to discuss the potential to add a new group, or fill out [this interest form](https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=Aoi1r3r_sUurITZ_8uz8iyADuwsaqHNFjbaGOAqyB61UOExZVU5MVDgzOUZUNlM0VEFVNTZXS0ZaVyQlQCN0PWcu).

1. **Why move groups to one place if they were functioning fine before?**

NEAR Groups are a resource for employees who have ever thought, “There have to be more people like me at CSU, but I don’t know who they are, how to reach out, or where to find them.” Having affinity groups centrally listed and maintained makes them easy to find and easy to join. It also makes it easier for other units to refer employees to affinity spaces for additional resources and support.

Any existing groups that choose to become part of the NEAR Groups won’t need to dramatically change how they function if they don't want to. A designated Group Channel could simply provide additional tools for organizing, communicating, and building community.

Finally, the NEAR Groups create increased means for communication when new issues or ideas arise, both within affinity spaces and across group interests and identities. The NEAR Groups will also help facilitate more direct two-way communication between employees and the Office of the Vice President for Diversity.

1. **I want to stay connected, but I don’t like Microsoft Teams. Can I just join a mailing list for updates instead?**

The NEAR Group structure is an effort to help minimize the need for separate mailing lists. Once you join the NEAR Groups, important messages sent through Group Channels can also be delivered to your email inbox, so you can stay up to date just as you have before without ever having to login to the NEAR Groups Team. To avoid flooding email inboxes, only Channel leads and VPD staff are to send email messages to NEAR Group members through a Group Channel.

Remember that notifications and involvement through Teams depends entirely on your preferences. You can heavily engage through multiple Group Channels for informal interactions and access to shared resources, or you could hide the NEAR Groups Team, keep all notifications turned off, and only check in when you want. It’s up to you!

1. **How can employees that don’t have access to computers, email, or Microsoft Teams be included in these affinity spaces?**

While creating virtual resources for affinity spaces can be more inclusive for employees who do not work on campus or otherwise cannot connect in person, there are still access challenges when primarily using digital channels for communication. This is no exception. However, members of Group Channels can identify alternative ways to connect with others in their community who do not have digital access, and coordinate methods amongst themselves.

For example, a simple call-buddy system could be an option. Files can be created within Group Channels to organize rosters and processes for contacting those who would benefit from more intentional outreach. A small group of members could volunteer to create a call/text tree to share updates, information, and check ins with those who don’t have access to the Team.

As groups come up with helpful and inclusive strategies for leveraging their Group Channel, VPD staff can easily share them with other NEAR Groups through the General Channel. This is an example of how different groups can learn from and help support one another.

1. **Will the Office of the Vice President for Diversity organize programs and events for NEAR Groups?**

Group Channel leads and members set the tone for how they prefer to utilize the online Team platform, including how and when their group interacts, both virtually and in person.

If it is of interest to gather in person, NEAR Groups are encouraged to organize and plan their own opportunities for community building, such as lunches or social gatherings. VPD will not take the lead in organizing small, informal events for affinity groups.

In cases where it is important or necessary to create larger affinity spaces, such as listening sessions or programming across NEAR Groups, please don’t hesitate to reach out to VPD staff. We will do our best to offer any available support, whether directly from our office or by coordinating collaborations among NEAR Groups and appropriate campus entities that may support related programming.

1. **What if someone causes harm or disrupts the NEAR Group affinity spaces?**

Channel leads and all members are expected to hold themselves and others accountable to the agreed upon NEAR Groups Terms of Use and Community Guidelines, as well as [CSU’s Principles of Community.](https://diversity.colostate.edu/resources/principles-of-community/) When necessary, VPD staff will help moderate and intervene. Any employee and/or their activity that is disruptive to the NEAR Groups will be subject to removal.

**15) What is the process for joining?**

To join a NEAR Group, please fill out [this interest form](https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=Aoi1r3r_sUurITZ_8uz8iyADuwsaqHNFjbaGOAqyB61UOExZVU5MVDgzOUZUNlM0VEFVNTZXS0ZaVyQlQCN0PWcu). Upon agreeing to the Terms of Use and Community Guidelines, you will be added to the NEAR Group Channels indicated on your form. All employees who join the NEAR Groups will also be added to the General Channel, which will occasionally be used to share important messages from VPD staff to all NEAR Group members.

**18) What is the level of privacy within the NEAR Groups?**

The NEAR Groups Team is not public; only CSU employees who join by agreeing to the Terms of Use and Community Guidelines have access to the Team and Group Channels to which they are members. Members within a channel are visible to each other. Any employee who joins the Team will be added to the General Channel. VPD staff serve as Team owners ad have access to all the NEAR Groups. Chats and communication through the NEAR Groups Team are subject to the same privacy regulations as University email.

The NEAR Groups may help facilitate communication and interactions among employees, but they are not the only way to connect. Groups are also encouraged to gather, convene, and communicate offline when needed.