

# Affinity Graduations: A Mosaic of Educational Achievement

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## **What is an affinity graduation?**

Affinity college graduations are a meaningful way for institutions of higher education to value, honor, and celebrate the educational journeys and perseverance of their students. Affinity graduations inspire people of all backgrounds to envision themselves as future students and successful graduates and are of particular importance to communities of students who have historically been denied access to higher education because of who they are. A college or university may create space to celebrate the graduation of Asian American, Black, Latino, Native American, or disabled students, or those who are the first in their family to graduate college, women, Jewish, former foster youth, or identified with any other community. Open to all students, these graduations demonstrate an institution's commitment to equal educational opportunity and desire to remove barriers limiting students' attainment based on who they are.

## **Affinity graduations are a representation of the nation's robust, multiracial democracy.**

Colleges that create space for meaningful affinity graduations and take into account students' full life experiences, including their race and ethnicity, offer their campus community an experience that will be cherished for a lifetime. For a significant time in our nation's history, people of color, women, and some people of faith were systematically excluded from achieving a higher education. Civil rights leaders, such as James Howard Meredith, dreamed and fought fiercely for the inclusion and belonging of all people in higher education.<sup>1</sup> Today, colleges and universities continue to hold a responsibility in achieving the national imperative of racial equity.<sup>2</sup> Institutions of higher education can foster a deep sense of belonging and inclusivity on their campuses by creating space for affinity graduations that celebrate the extraordinary milestones and achievements of their students.

## **Affinity graduations are aspirational and a reflection of students' dedication to achieve their dreams.**

At some institutions, affinity graduations are a long-standing tradition that have opened the doors for students of color to honor their heritage and cultures. These ceremonies bring together families, community members, faculty, staff, student groups, businesses, and policymakers committed to celebrating diversity and equity in higher education. Students who participate in affinity graduations often wear regalia with cultural and historical significance or receive stoles or cords that represent a cultural identity. Graduation speakers are thoughtfully selected, and programs are curated to empower graduates as they transition beyond postsecondary education.

**As opponents of racial equity in higher education seek to divide us, affinity graduations bring us together.**

Our country thrives when we benefit from the talents of students from all backgrounds and build respect for everyone. Affinity graduations offer all students the opportunity to be in community with their entire campus and honor each other’s accomplishments. While creating the opportunity to celebrate specific communities, cultures, and traditions, these events underscore the value of every student to the school community — no matter their background.

**Participation is open to all students who choose to take part in an affinity graduation.**

While it would be unlawful to deny students the opportunity to participate or attend an affinity graduation (or any school event) based on their race, color, national origin, sex, or disability, federal civil rights laws allow for cultural celebrations and observances.<sup>3</sup> Affinity graduations open to all students are not race-conscious decision-making and therefore not subject to the heightened level of scrutiny that applies when decisions are made that account for an individual’s race.

**Did the *SFFA* decisions say anything about affinity graduations?**

No, the *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard* and *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. University of North Carolina (UNC)* decisions held that those two schools could not use race as a tip in admissions in order to increase diversity. There is no reference to affinity graduations in the case, and the decision does not prevent a college or university from creating space for an affinity graduation that is open to all.

**But what about the Office for Civil Rights’ Dear Colleague letter from February 14?**

On February 14, 2025, the Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education published a “Dear Colleague letter” about race in education.<sup>4</sup> Usually, Dear Colleague letters provide information to students, families, and educators about what laws mean and how they will be applied and enforced, although they never have the force or effect of law or have the ability to change the law. In this instance, the letter did not accurately reflect what the law is but instead reflected what the Trump administration wished the law would mean.<sup>5</sup> There are specific references in both that document and a subsequent FAQ released on February 28, 2025 to “segregation by race at graduation ceremonies.”<sup>6</sup> While this may be an effort to mischaracterize affinity graduations, these documents issued by the Office for Civil Rights have no effect on the continued lawfulness of affinity graduations and the continued prohibition on excluding students based on their race, color, national origin, sex, or disability.

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<sup>1</sup> On September 10, 1962, in *Meredith v. Fair*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld James Howard Meredith’s right to attend the University of Mississippi. Even after the ruling, additional federal intervention was needed to enable Meredith to enroll and attend. See: [James Meredith Civil Rights Activist and Writer](#) and [Meredith v. Fair: Seeking Equal Education Through the Court System](#).

<sup>2</sup> Visit [WeShallNotBeMoved.org](#) for a list of 100 policy recommendations for institutional, state, and federal policymakers to achieve racial equity and diversity in higher education.

<sup>3</sup> For additional information about race, school programming, and the law, see [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Letter from Craig Trainor, Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education, to Colleagues](#) (February 14, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> For more information about the February 14 document, see the fact sheet [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, [Frequently Asked Questions About Racial Preferences and Stereotypes Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act](#) (February 28, 2025).