**Addressing Invisibility: Gender and Race Affinity Groups on Capitol Hill**

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“Being a woman and being a Black woman certainly is unifying. Particularly for women who, may be the only person of color or maybe the only woman and person of color in her office, so many women come to me and say, ‘Look – I need BWCA. I don't see anyone that looks like me. No one understands me.” – Keenan Austin Reed, co-founder of the Black Women’s Congressional Alliance (BWCA)

The dominance of White men on Capitol Hill goes beyond the members themselves (CAWP 2019). While gender parity is evident among congressional staffers overall, gender disparities persist at the highest levels of staff leadership and power (Burgat 2017; Scott et al. 2018). Moreover, the continued dearth of racial and ethnic diversity on Capitol Hill is persistent across levels, but especially in high levels of leadership (Scott et al. 2018). In previous research (Dittmar 2018), I describe the influence of gender and race as forces shaping the experiences, power, and influence of congressional staff, noting that these forces have often been invisible in our analyses and understanding of Congress. But invisibility is not only a problem in research; congressional staffers who share identities that have been marginalized and/or underrepresented in Congress might feel invisible within an institution that has long privileged masculinity and Whiteness. In this paper, I engage both types of invisibility by investigating the presence, mission, and work of congressional staff affinity groups that organize along lines of gender and/or race. More specifically, I examine the role that these groups play in promoting staffers’ success and well-being within Congress as it is, while also disrupting the institution in ways that yield a more equitable balance of race and gender power. I find that while individual-level professional development, advancement, and solidarity are of primary focus for all staff affinity groups, the degree to which groups perceive themselves as and can be advocates for institutional change varies. Moreover, the limits to organizational reach and engagement confirm that these groups are just one site for advancing greater gender and racial equity on Capitol Hill.

**Congress as a Gendered and Raced Institution**

*Presence*

Price’s (1971) characterization of congressional staff as “staff men” was reflective more of the balance of gender power on Capitol Hill at the time than the mere presence of women versus men. Notably, women have been present among staff from the earliest congresses, taking on the majority of secretarial roles that made up the bulk of staff positions until the 1960s. With greater professionalization came greater role segregation on Capitol Hill, where newly defined policy or “professional” positions were allocated to men. Research and insights from women staffers throughout the 1960s-1980s reveal the ceiling that women staffers hit in seeking staff positions with significant policy and strategic influence (Dittmar 2018; Johannes 1994; Pierce 2014). Even by 1987, when insiders observed gender progress on Capitol Hill, 81% of clerical positions on Senate committee staffs were held by women and women occupied just 19% of “top positions” – staff director, minority staff director, chief clerk, or assistant to chair (Friedman and Nakamura 1991, 414). Progress has been made for women since then, but they remain underrepresented at the highest levels of congressional staff leadership. An analysis of 2016 staff directories revealed that women comprised about 45% of House staff in personal offices (Burgat 2017). Consistent with previous findings, strong majorities of schedulers (83%) and office managers (95%) were women, while women represented just about one-third of House chiefs of staff or legislative directors (Burgat 2017).

The exclusion of racial and ethnic minorities from staff roles, as well as from scholarly analyses, has been more persistent across congressional history (Dittmar 2018). And the data on racial and ethnic representation among congressional staff is itself incredibly sparse. In June 2017, the Senate Democrats released their *first* public report on staff diversity. It found that 32% of Democratic staffers in the U.S. Senate identified as “non-Caucasian” (O’Keefe 2017); 13% of Senate Democratic staffers identified as African American, 10% identified as Latino, 8% identified as Asian-Pacific Islander; 4% identified as Native American, and 3% identified as being of Middle Eastern/North African descent.[[1]](#endnote-1) Since then, the Senate Diversity Initiative has not released raw data on racial/ethnic diversity, instead opting to report percentages by individual Senators’ offices and committees; as of June 30, 2019, the proportion of people of color in Democratic senators’ offices ranged anywhere from 5% (Senators Tester [MT] and King [ME]) to 69% (Senator Booker [NJ]). Among Democratic committee staff, proportions of people of color ranged from 0% (Agriculture) to 86% (Indian Affairs); the highest proportion of people of color for staff on a Senate committee not focused on racial/ethnic issues was on the Senate Committee on Aging (40%). Notably, the representation of staff of color was below 15% on Appropriations, Armed Services, Energy, Finance, and Veteran Affairs. The Senate Diversity Initiative also reported data on gender and sexual orientation among Democratic senate staff. As of June 30, 2019, the proportion of LGBTQ-identifying staffers in Democratic senators’ offices ranged from 2% (Senator Menendez [NJ]) to 24% (Senator Cortez-Masto [NV]), and women were 46% or more of staffers in all but one Senate office. Among Democratic committee staff, LGTBQ representation ranged from 0% on five of 18 committees to 21% (HSGAC), while women’s representation ranged from 31% (Armed Services) to 61% (Environment and Public Works).

A September 2018 report from the Joint Center for Political Economic Studies provides some of the only recent data on racial and ethnic diversity among U.S. House staff across party, but is limited to top staff positions including chief of staff, legislative director, communications director, and committee staff director (Scott et al. 2018). According to their report, as of June 1, 2018, 13.7% of top House staff were people of color, though this representation is lower in offices of White Democrats (8%) and Republicans (3%) (Scott et al. 2018, 3). At that point, no staffer identifying as Latino/a, Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI), or Native American served as one of 40 committee staff directors or in the 24 top staff roles in party leadership offices (Scott et al. 2018, 3). The gender diversity among top staffers of color was notable in 2018, as 61% of top Black staffers were women; nearly 45% of Latina/o top staffers and under one-third of AAPI top staffers were women (Scott et al. 2018, 23). Finally, the Joint Center has monitored top staff hired by members of Congress elected in 2018. As of March 2019, people of color accounted for 21% of top staff hired by newly-elected U.S. House Members (27% percent of Democratic top staff and 8% percent of Republican top staff), and 8% percent of top staff hired by newly-elected U.S. Senators (Joint Center 2019). At that point, however, more than half of newly-elected House members hired no top staff of color. Together, Black (7), Latina (11), AAPI (13), MENA (1), and biracial (1) women of color held 9% of all top staff positions among newly-elected House members, while women jointly held 45% of all top staff positions in these House offices (Joint Center 2019).

As Cindy Simon Rosenthal (2000) writes, “Our understanding of institutions is inextricably bound to the dominant individuals who populate them” (41). Revealing the numeric underrepresentation of women and minorities on congressional staffs and disparities of power between them and White men is the first step to making visible institutional realities and dynamics that are less bound to the White men who have held the greatest amount of institutional power.

*Power*

But Congress as an institution is defined by gender and race in ways that go beyond the gender and racial distribution of bodies. Gender and race shape the behavior and experiences of all congressional actors. Acker (1992) explains a key tenet of gendered institutions in noting that, “Gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power” within them (567). The act of historically excluding women from political institutions ensured that gender would be central to their dynamics and function. Acker (1992) also notes that these forces are not isolated, writing, “Gender does not exist in a set of relations that are distinct from other relations, such as those of class or race, but as part of the processes that also constitute class and race, as well as other lines of demarcation and domination” (567). Likewise, Jones (2017a) makes clear that Congress is a raced political institution, whereby race is an organizing feature of the congressional workplace and both the historical exclusion of Black and other racial/ethnic minority staff and members has shaped the institutional culture, rules, and power dynamics in ways that advantage White men. As reflected in the descriptive numbers above, the efforts toward inclusion of racial and ethnic minority staff in Congress are only recent and ongoing, informing the ways in which staffers of color navigate congressional spaces. Finally, the intersectional realities confronting women of color in Congress were evidenced most explicitly in Hawkesworth’s (2003) influential work on the “race-gendering” of Congress, where she illustrates how “the production of difference, political asymmetries, and social hierarchies that simultaneously create the dominant and the subordinate” occurs in Congress and shapes the experiences and behaviors of women of color members in distinct ways (531; see also Dittmar, Carroll, and Sanbonmatsu 2018). Jones (2017a) applies this framework to the study of congressional staff, demonstrating that race and gender power dynamics of congressional institutions also inform the orientations and actions of legislative professionals.

The privileging of masculinity and Whiteness in the ways in which political institutions are structured, operate, and distribute power have implications for (1) who can access these institutions, (2) who can advance within them, (3) and what is required of institutional actors to not only enter and advance within them, but also to survive and thrive. Jones’ (2017) work demonstrates that Black congressional staff, for example, face structural sites of incompatibility to navigating established norms as “other” within a majority male, and majority White, institution. Women staff, too, have navigated a space in which they have been perceived as apart from the norm and have had to fight for inclusion and equity at the highest levels of power (Dittmar 2018; Foerstel and Foerstel 1996; Pierce 2014). Their experiences are not wholly different than women, minority, and minority women members of Congress and state legislatures who have reported more experiences of discrimination, skepticism of their abilities, exclusion from power, and greater demand to prove themselves as capable than their White male counterparts (Brown 2014; Button and Hedge 1996; Dittmar, Carroll, and Sanbonmatsu 2018; Hawkesworth 2003). In each of these accounts, researchers have revealed these actors’ resilience in the face of heightened hurdles to inclusion and power. But the work that surviving and thriving within these institutions takes for those cast as “other” requires more attention.

*Adaptation*

Some research on gendered and raced institutions emphasizes the work that individuals from underrepresented groups do to adapt to prevailing norms and rules that were not created with them in mind. For example, Puwar’s (2004) observes that women parliamentarians, in particular, are expected to adhere to “mutually exclusive scripts” of their gender and masculinized legislative roles, “managing” their femininity in the process to avoid the “collision of scripts” that brings unwanted attention to and concern about their “other”-ness (93-97). Duerst-Lahti (2002) illuminates this challenge for women in Congress, writing, “Congresswomen must adapt to, not challenge, structures in order to gain credibility. In the process of fitting in, however, congresswomen face a lose-lose situation: their success inside the institution paradoxically reinforces masculinism, which in turn perpetuates their difficulties in gaining power and influence” (382). Broader recognition of the pressures on marginalized groups to adhere to what scholars have termed “respectability politics” – what Strolovitch and Crowder (2018) define as “a politics informed by a conviction that marginalized groups must demonstrate that they adhere to normative values before they will be accepted or granted rights by dominant groups,” might also help to characterize the constraints on behavior and expectations of adaptation placed on racial and ethnic minority and LGBTQ individuals in White and hetero-dominated political institutions like Congress (see also Higginbotham 1993, 2015; Minow 1985).

*Surivival*

Adaptation to institutional norms and rules is a potential means to gaining success and power within those institutions. It may also be an act of survival. For example, Witt, Paget, and Matthews (1994) describe “women’s survival strategy” in elections as often compromising their femaleness and sense of self to meet the gendered expectations of the office they seek. But survival has meaning beyond institutional success or power. In navigating a space where those sharing your identity or identities are underrepresented, survival might entail finding solidarity and validation of your distinct experiences. Mahoney (2018) identifies this as one function of women’s legislative caucuses, writing, “The establishment of women’s caucuses in male-dominated legislative institutions can provide a safe space for marginalized legislators to support each other, as well as help develop and refine legislative initiatives” (14). Providing spaces where individuals feel safe – to be vulnerable, to emote freely, or simply to be – are key if the institution itself does not evoke the same sense of safety for all who are part of it. These identity-based spaces can also offer visibility in institutions where those like you – and relatedly, one’s distinct perspectives and experiences – might seem largely invisible. Jones (2017b) observation of the “Black nod” among Black congressional staffers points to this value of being seen. He writes, “If African Americans are socially invisible in Congress, then the nod acts as a way to affirm their social presence,” finding, “in one third of interviews with Black respondents who knew about the nod, they described the nod as meaning ‘I see you’” (Jones 2017b, 24). While the Black nod may send this message to Black staffers across congressional spaces, events and/or organizations that create spaces for specific groups of staffers based on shared identities offer more explicit tools to enhance staffers’ sense of belonging.

*Disruption*

In addition to institutions shaping behavior, individual behavior can influence institutions. Institutional theory has relied upon the “logic of appropriateness” to describe those norms and expectations that provide order, stability, and predictability to political institutions (March and Olsen 1989). In many cases, this sense of appropriateness is perpetuated by institutional actors who adhere to existing rules of behavior and uphold the unequal power distribution that values men and masculinity (Chappell 2006). However, consistent with conceptions of institutional dynamism, they concede that what is considered appropriate within institutions can and does alter over time (Katzenstein 1998). Although institutions may tend toward stability, they are not entities immutable to change (Thelen and Steinmo 1992). Instead, institutional structure, function, and culture may adjust from both external pressures and internal disruption.

Extensive literatures on gender, race, and legislative representation demonstrate that clearing hurdles to inclusion and power requires more than the adaptation of women and people of color to prevailing norms; instead, these actors’ non-conformity to established institutional rules, processes, and priorities has proven effective in disrupting prevailing gender and racial power dynamics in legislatures (see, for e.g. Brown 2014; Clark 2019; Dittmar, Carroll, and Sanbonmatsu 2018; Dodson 2006; Espino, Leal, and Meier 2008; Haynie 2001; Osborn 2012; Preuhs 2006; Reingold 2008; Swers 2002, 2013). Identity-based spaces like caucuses have also offered sites for institutional disruption and change. Katzenstein (1998) describes women’s caucuses as “protected spaces or habitats where activists can meet, share experiences, receive affirmation and strategize for change” (35). Mahoney (2018) adds, “Caucuses are a way to counteract institutional norms that may require women to play a man’s game, adopt a particular political persona, or adhere to someone else’s definition of appropriate political priorities” (14). While limited, the existing literature on gender, race, and representation among congressional staff also shows that staffers can play an important role in disrupting gender and race dynamics, whether within Congress itself or via their influence on public policy that Congress makes (Bell and Rosenthal 2003; Dittmar 2018; Johannes 1994; Jones 2017b; Pierce 2014;). Together, these findings suggest that staff affinity associations rooted in shared gender and racial identities might offer opportunities for staffers sites for affirmation and strategizing to challenge prevailing institutional norms.

**Method**

In this paper, I rely on interviews with current and former leaders of eight staff groups or associations that are organized along lines of gender and/or racial identities: the Black Women’s Congressional Alliance (BWCA), the Congressional Asian Pacific American Staff Association (CAPASA), Congressional Black Associates (CBA), the Congressional Hispanic Staff Association (CHSA), the LGBT Congressional Staff Association (LGBT CSA), the Senate Black Legislative Staff Caucus (SBLSC), the Senate Moms Group, and the Women’s Congressional Staff Association (WCSA). Leaders from three groups (CHSA, SBLSC, and WCSA) participated in a focus group sponsored by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) in April 2019 and I conducted interviews with additional leaders from all groups but CHSA in ten one-on-one interviews in June and July 2019. I conducted interviews via phone. Interviews lasted between 24 and 65 minutes, with an average length of 39 minutes per interview. Interviews topics included the staffers’ entry into Congress, engagement with and leadership of their organization, group mission and goals, perceived benefits and hurdles of group participation, and group work (recruitment, meetings/events, member engagement, and/or advocacy).

The groups included in this paper represent five of nine officially registered congressional staff organizations (CSOs) with gender or race focus in the U.S. House in the 116th Congress (CAPASA, CBA, CHSA, LGBTQ CSA, WCSA), in addition to one official Senate-based staff organization (SBLSC) and two groups not registered formally as staff organizations (Senate Mom’s group and BWCA).[[2]](#endnote-2) The histories of each association vary, and some are difficult to pinpoint due to the dearth of congressional and organizational records. However, I was able to identify group’s founding years for BWCA (2018), CAPASA (1998), CBA (1979), SBLSC (1977), the Senate Moms Group (2010), and WCSA (2008).[[3]](#endnote-3) CHSA reports on its website that it has operated on Capitol Hill for over two decades (as of 2019)[[4]](#endnote-4) and a co-founder of the Gay and Lesbian Congressional Staff Association (now LGBT CSA) says the group began meeting over 25 years ago (as of 2019).[[5]](#endnote-5) While membership information varies significantly and is not public for each organization, some leaders provided 2019 estimates to me, including CHSA (260 dues-paying members) and SBLSC (65 dues-paying members). In addition to dues-paying members, however, all groups included here provide services, hold events, and engage in outreach to all staffers. Moreover, some groups do not have formal membership processes at all, instead counting their email listservs as encompassing their targeted participants and/or, in the case of BWCA, considering all individuals on Capitol Hill sharing their gender/racial identity as a member of the group. Group leader Christina Henderson told me, “One of the things that we wanted [BWCA] to be very inclusive. So as a Black woman on the Hill you are technically part of BWCA because you are a Black woman in alliance with the rest of us.”

**Findings**

*Organizational Goals, Work, and Impact*

Staff affinity organization leaders offered important insights into the goals for their groups, how they try to meet them, and the benefits they provide to both individual staffers and the institution of Congress. In describing their impetus for and range of their work, group leaders emphasized three main areas: professional development, professional inclusion and advancement, and solidarity and community. I have organized the findings by theme in order to show where and how organizational goals, methods, and impact align. At the same time, I note where differences exist between organization’s goals and range of work.

Professional Development

All group leaders I spoke with discussed professional development for members as a primary organizational goal, offering various methods by which to support staffers’ professional success within the institution of Congress. Asked about the primary benefits of participating in her group, WCSA co-founder Elizabeth Whitney told me, “I think at its core it is really just about connecting with other people who are in a similar situation and being able to talk about professional development and to seek out professional development opportunities that are targeted towards a really unique set of professionals.” Her colleague and co-founder, Devon Barnhart, agreed, noting the educational benefits of participating in WCSA events and programs. She noted how her own experiences as a newcomer to Capitol Hill motivated her to found an organization like WCSA “to just make it easier for folks” and “to help folks be better at their jobs.” Barnhart added, “I thought [WCSA] was a nice place to be able to like figure out the tactics and the strategies that you need to be able to make your work function.” Likewise, a leader of CAPASA noted the organization’s focus on building capacity among staff, which would ultimately create a pipeline of Asian staffers ready to advance on Capitol Hill. They noted these benefits on a personal level, explaining, “Because I’ve done all this I definitely personally have grown, made contacts, learned how the Hill moves, and what to do where I want to go for me or for my boss.”

Organization leaders explained that they meet these professional development goals in various ways. They offer informational panels on: how to navigate Capitol Hill, legislative processes and policy, professional pathways, and even financial literacy. They also conduct workshops on how to write a resume, negotiate pay, prepare for an interview, and write for legislative roles (such as legislative correspondence). While the targets of and participants in these programs are often junior staffers, some organizations welcome individuals who are not currently on the Hill as a potential bridge to their move into congressional staff work. BCWA co-founder Christina Henderson said of the participation of Black women not currently on the Hill, “We are cracking open the door for some people who have no knowledge of how do you initially navigate the space [of Congress], and so that has been fantastic.” Other staffers explained that exposure to the Hill via staff affinity organizations might also expand individuals’ notions of what is possible for them, especially when they see Congress an otherwise White-dominated space.

These programs do not only provide informational and educational benefits to participants, they also help staffers build professional networks. Nearly all of the organizational leaders described happy hours and networking receptions as among the events they hold to support their professional development goals. A leader of the LGBT CSA explained that members who take advantage of those events and other programs will “develop their network that cuts across a lot of the different delegations [or] age gaps,” which will serve them well in their ability to reach out to a diverse group of staffers both for the work they do in their office and for advice or assistance related to their own career path. One staffer gave an example of this benefit, noting that her connections with other organization members has saved her time in outreach to other members’ offices because she can get a quick answer and/or connection to the right staffer from them instead of going through the front office. Networking events often also include alumni, lobbyists, or leaders of off-Hill organizations, providing current staffers access to other sources for information, support, and professional opportunities. The value of building professional networks is especially important for groups and individuals who do not come to Capitol Hill with established connections, which is often most true for staffers of color. A leader of CAPASA told me that while White men “have a natural comfort…[and] a natural network” on the Hill, “A lot of us come not because we know the member or have the connections.” Staff affinity organizations are “a way to build our own network,” they added. Among those added to staffers’ networks are mentors. WCSA, for example, has implemented a formal mentoring program whereby staffers sign up to mentor someone more junior than them, providing that staffer with advice and insights about how to be successful on the Hill and help to navigate challenging situations or plan their career path.

When asked why these professional development programs needed to be done in spaces aligned specifically by gender and/or racial/ethnic identities, the most common answer among organization leaders was that these spaces provided safety to participants who might otherwise be reluctant to raise questions or display vulnerability at a professional event. WCSA co-founder Elizabeth Whitney explained,

A lot of us notice that women behave differently in mixed-gender groups than they do when they are in a group that is organized [of] women. They ask different questions, they speak up more frequently, they behave differently. And we thought it was worth providing those forums so those questions can be asked, so those voices can be heard, and then I think as you get more comfortable, particularly for younger women…starting out in their career, the more comfortable you are speaking in front of a group that feels safe.

That sense of safety ensures that participants do not hold back in raising sensitive issues, she added. Devon Barnhart added that junior women staff are more at ease and more confident in these environments, ensuring that they get the most out of their participation. Likewise, another organization leader told me that participating in group events is more helpful “in a safe space where you don’t feel like you are being judged or where you’re gonna sound dumb.” Meredith West, an original member of the Senate Moms group, noted a similar benefit of shared experiences in the discussions held among group members. She noted, for example, that it “can be a scary thing to ask your employer” for altered hours to address childcare demands, and that speaking with other mothers on the Hill about how they navigated those conversations is a central benefit of the group.

West’s example raises the distinct role of these safe spaces for having sensitive or difficult conversations that are particular to the experiences of group members, whether it be due to their gender roles or gender and/or racial identities. Leaders from all organizations I spoke with noted the benefit of holding programs specifically centered around “difficult dialogues,” something that WCSA started at its annual summer conference for members. Since learning about that session and seeing its value, the Tri-Caucus of staff associations – which includes CAPASA, CHSA, CBA, and SBLSC – has conducted similar conversations among its members. Topics include things like dealing with microaggressions, salary inequity, or being profiled. They offer staffers tips on how to have difficult conversations with superiors or colleagues, whether directly, indirectly, or not at all related to their gender or racial identity. A leader of the LGBT CSA shared that their group also helps members navigate these situations within their offices, providing one example of the role that LGBT staffers often play in pushing their offices to be sensitive to the use of gendered pronouns when dealing with constituents. WCSA co-founder Elizabeth Whitney, who is no longer working on Capitol Hill, pointed to a particularly difficult situation that women staffers have been more likely to confront than men: sexual harassment. She noted that the role of WCSA in providing support in those difficult situations, at least while she was in leadership, was not to advocate for a system-wide solution or policy but instead to “provide a forum for people to talk through how difficult these issues actually are in practice and to give other women that sense of, ‘You’re not the only person that is grappling with this and struggling with how to handle things.’” Reflecting on the role that an organization like WCSA can play in supporting women congressional staff confronting broader systemic problems, Whitney noted, “These are harder questions and…it is not that joining women’s groups solves all of them, but they do make it a little bit easier to kind of unravel and untangle and navigate successfully, [showing] there are models for women who have done so successfully.”

*Inclusion and Advancement*

In addition to providing staffers with tools and information they need to successfully navigate Capitol Hill, all of the staff organizations I studied (with the exception of the Senate Moms group) share a mission to assist members with professional advancement. They do so by generating resume banks, circulating job announcements, helping with applications, and advocating for job candidates with hiring managers. In addition to supporting staffers who want to advance on Capitol Hill, these organizations also shared programs and services they provide to give staffers access to career options off of the Hill, whether onto campaigns or into lobbying. While these organizations are committed to supporting the professional advancement of individual staffers, they do so with an eye to institutional change. For example, WCSA co-founder Elizabeth Whitney described programming they developed “to help women rise through the ranks of Capitol Hill” because they had noticed a pattern of niching women staff into administrative instead of policy roles. Likewise, a leader of the LGBT CSA told me, “I think first and foremost a professional development goal [is] that we want to make sure that LGBTQ people have a seat at the table, if you will. And [here] I would almost co-op the Victory Institute’s perspective on effecting change through representation by queer people.” They added, “We still view our work as very much building the next generation of public servants and leaders who are going to be contributing to these conversations. And I think that our ability to help each other advance forward has a big …benefit [to] the institution.”

This motivation to support individual professional advancement toward a broader goal of institutional inclusion was most explicit in the 2018 founding of BWCA. Co-founder Keenan Austin Reed described two basic goals for the organization: “To get more Black women on Capitol Hill and, for the Black women that are on Capitol Hill [already], we want to get them into the most senior roles possible.” Another co-founder, Rhonda Foxx, described how the group was founded out of frustration with the underrepresentation of Black women on Capitol Hill, especially in high-level leadership. She explained that the group was created not only to prepare a pipeline of Black women, but to “take the argument that there is not a diverse pipeline off the table.” Christina Henderson noted that she and her colleagues founded BWCA asking, “How do we create in a similar way that we felt that White men have up here where if there’s a job opening not widely advertised they send it to the same six people and that’s how we just sort of perpetrate this cycle? What if we were able to have some sort of informal network whereby we can start to provide inside knowledge to other Black women around job openings and other things that are going on, and just really strengthen our numbers on the Hill?” The same co-founder told me that she and others were especially motivated after the murder of Trayvon Martin to push for institutional change, raising the consciousness about race overall and the need for staff who understand how racism and bias affect policymaking. She said, “I think that staffers have now hit the point of we cannot just let offices get away with thinking, ‘Well our staff assistants are Black and therefore we’re good.’ I think now people are starting to push and say, ‘No, your policy shop needs to also reflect the diversity of your state or the diversity of our country in a very similar way.’” In addition to conducting programming with these explicit goals in mind, BWCA has been among the most vocal organizations in pushing a public narrative about why the dearth of racial and ethnic diversity among congressional staff is a problem and advocating for solutions.

Along with leaders in BWCA, leaders of CAPASA and other staff associations have taken a more direct role in advocating for inclusion by reaching out to hiring managers directly. One CAPASA leader told me, “One of the things we are doing as part of our push to get more people of color is to engage with Chief of Staff and people who do hiring and letting them know we have resume banks, [that] we can supply them with resumes of people when they have positions open.” They report varying levels of success, with some group leaders pointing to specific members who have come to them for job candidates and ultimately hired from those recommendations while other members have been more reluctant to either reach out or follow through to hiring their suggested candidates. BWCA also hosted a career fair to further help facilitate connections between Hill employers and potential staffers. By acting as resources for hiring managers, these associations are not only advancing individual job candidates, but are also helping to address the lack of diversity institution-wide.

Promoting themselves as a resource to hiring managers is different, however, than explicitly advocating for greater gender equity or racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion on Capitol Hill. Some groups have been more vocal than others in advocating publicly for systemic solutions to the underrepresentation of staffers of color. BWCA in particular, which differs from the other groups in its concentration of senior staff among its leadership, has adopted a public communications strategy to push this narrative in media and has directly pressured leadership on the Hill to do better. Individual leaders in BCWA also have greater leverage within Congress to pressure hiring managers. As Keenan Austin Reed, BWCA co-founder and a Chief of Staff in the House, told me, “I think that it’s helpful to have managers at the table, people who are talking to other hiring managers.” Likewise, Chief of Staff Jennifer DeCasper explained her own efforts to create greater “intentionality” in hiring among her senior colleagues, telling me, “I’m a pain in the butt. My poor colleagues know that I’m going to ask them how many X or Y or Z they have in the office and then if they give like a low number I’m going to say, ‘Well how I can help you?’” But DeCasper also reflected on her ability to do this as a senior staffer, something that poses less risk than it would to more junior staff. “I think that it is both necessary and valuable for there to be organizations that are off the Hill that can draw attention to [the lack of diversity] because they can do something that a staffer either cannot do or is scared to do because they’re literally risking their job,” she told me, adding, “I’ve talked to a number of those organizations and I think that they are hugely valuable for carrying the voices of staffers anonymously and bringing light to an issue that is obviously super important to the diversity in…Congress.”

Some group leaders referenced these sources of assistance, whether they be affinity groups of lobbyists pressuring congressional leaders or an organization like the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, who has been among the most active in illuminating the dearth of diverse staff and suggesting policies to better promote diversity and inclusion among congressional staff. While this outside support is especially helpful, some groups – particularly those who are part of the Tri-Caucus – have found that their unity reduces risks in making public statements about inequity or underrepresentation, in addition to enhancing their power. One group leader noted about their efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, “I think that it’s hard for one person to do that by themselves. And the organization provides a unified voice behind issues like that.” Jennifer DeCasper returned to this point of collective voice as she reflected on the benefits of identity-based staff organizations. She said that in addition to creating a site for fellowship,

I also think [these organizations] have a more formal importance and that is again voice recognition. I think anybody standing alone can be drowned out by a group but I think when there is a large amount of you obviously your voices are louder. So I think having an organization that represents your voice is hugely important and essential particularly on Capitol Hill where voices get drowned out all the time by louder ones. So fellowship and echo chamber I think are the most valuable things of organizations.

While unity provides these organizations with strength in advocating for institutional change, coming together along lines of gender and/or racial/ethnic identity also provides solidarity that can have more individual and personal effects.

*Solidarity/Community*

In addition to helping staffers thrive in Congress, the staff affinity organizations included in this study also provide means for survival in an institution that still privileges masculinity and Whiteness. For all of the group leaders that I interviewed, a key goal for and benefit of their organization is to create community for those who share similar identities and experiences. “Fellowship” and “community” were mentioned by nearly every person I interviewed. The importance of creating community was tied explicitly to combatting loneliness for many. Meredith West of the Senate Moms group said of the group’s goals, “I think it was just meant to be a kind of informal network to bounce ideas off of and to share challenges and get advice and just not feel like you are in this all alone.” West noted that young mothers were hard to find when the moms group began, in part due to the difficulty of balancing caregiving responsibilities with the long hours required of congressional staff. The underrepresentation of women and racial and ethnic minority staffers also cues loneliness that staff affinity organizations try to address. For example, a leader from CAPASA noted, “We are a huge benefit because sometimes it is very lonely to be on the Hill and you can go through all day having meetings with people and not seeing another Asian person or another person of color or another woman.” WCSA co-founder Devon Barnhart agreed, “Especially for females – when we started this [you might be in] an office where you were the only female in the entire office. And so there’s a lack of – not that men can’t be supportive of women – but there’s a lack of sisterhood of support that you might need for any number of reasons.” Keenan Austin Reed, co-founder of BWCA, told me, “It is a great deal of sisterhood that is at the core of BWCA.” She explained that this sisterhood emerges, in part, from being one of few Black women on Capitol Hill:

So you already start with that commonality but then the women – being a woman and being a Black woman certainly is unifying. And particularly for women who may be the only person of color, maybe the woman or maybe the only woman and person of color in her office, so many women come to me and say, “Look – I need BWCA. I don't see anyone that looks like me. No one understands me.”

Organizations like BWCA and WCSA offer staffers, according to Barnhart, “the ability to find your tribe on the Hill.”

Finding your tribe is not only a remedy for loneliness, but also offers the understanding that Reed references. Some staffers described how their organizations offered “validation” of multiple types to members. First, Keenan Austin Reed shared, “It is a big goal of BWCA to validate our members and say you absolutely should be there. You’ve earned your place [and] you don't go in the room alone. Meaning that if a woman is the only Black woman in her office she’s not alone in that. You’ve got a whole network who believes in you and who support your growth.” Jennifer DeCasper said of the value to organization members, “Even if they’re not a super participant, just knowing that they belong to something that echoes their voice is beyond powerful.” A second type of validation is of experiences and perspectives that are distinct to those who navigate Capitol Hill as a woman and/or person of color. One staffer said of his organization, “It provides an opportunity for staffers to see other people that look like them and may go through similar trials and tribulations of working on Capitol Hill as being a person of color.” Other staffers stated simply that these sites for solidarity made them feel less “crazy.” They can also vent to those who feel similarly, as Henderson explained in telling me, “Sometimes you can’t say what you want to say and so … you could fire off a text in a safe space [so] that you don't make a fool of yourself and do it in an unprofessional way perhaps in your office.”

Safety was a recurring theme in group leaders’ discussion of organizational goals and efforts, reinforcing the role of these groups in providing means for survival. Asked about the primary benefit of having a group like BWCA in Congress, Jennifer DeCasper answered, “Well I think there is an answer that is simple, and that is optics. Any time you see something that looks like you, you feel safe, you feel like you have a place to go to.” BWCA co-founder Rhonda Fox seconded this value, describing her organization as a “safe haven for women of color” and adding that there was “never a time” that Black women do not “need refuge” to deal with what it is like to be on Capitol Hill. Christina Henderson explained that she sometimes recruits Black women to become a part of the organization by stopping them in hallways or offices and asking, “Who are you? Where do you work? Did you just get here? And are you okay?” Her final question references both a concern about and a desire to provide safe haven to women staffers who might be without it.

Organization leaders described multiple avenues toward offering solidarity, community, validation, and safety to their members, including holding social events, engaging in difficult dialogues discussions, creating listservs and group chats for communicating outside of events, and promoting individual relationships and mentorship that can bridge the professional and personal. These efforts also address the invisibility that staffers may feel if members of an underrepresented group. As Jones (2017b) describes the “Black nod” as a tool for telling Black staffers “I see you,” much of the work of staff affinity associations is done to tell staffers “I understand and support you.”

Organizational Constraints

Staff affinity organization leaders are optimistic about the benefits of their groups’ work to both individual staffers and to the institution of Congress. But they are also realistic about the limits to their reach. As noted above, membership of staff affinity organizations is small as a proportion of all congressional staffers (~12,000) and is much more likely to include junior versus senior staff. Asked about the potential hurdles to participation, group leaders perceived little professional risk to being involved for staffers at any level. Noting that most groups strayed from overt advocacy and that most events and work were done apart from their office responsibilities, group leaders emphasized that offices’ *lack* of recognition of the work staffers do for/with these associations is more of a challenge than *concern* about their involvement. In other words, staffers receive little professional credit for their association work. Relatedly, then, a significant hurdle to involvement is a lack of time. A leader of the LGBT CSA said, “We’re not asking for a lot of time from folks, right? But people lead very busy lives and, you know, we are not going to be everybody’s top priority.” WCSA co-founder Elizabeth Whitney connected this dearth of free time with seniority. She explained, “I think time is the biggest [hurdle] for congressional staff and that gets in shorter supply as you become more senior.” The difficulty for senior staff to make time to participate in organization events and leadership is compounded by differences in what they need from a professional organization. Whitney continued, “The interest level drops off,” adding, “I’ve even seen this in myself professionally as I’ve gotten older. The programming across organizations was of [less] interest to me and the networking opportunities are of less interest in general because the focus of my life has shifted from how am I going to advance in my career to how am I going to balance my career with family obligations and the things I want out of life?” Group leaders described efforts to better engage senior staff not only as mentors to junior members, but also via programming that better addresses professional challenges or issues that affect them.

Some group leaders also reflected on challenges they faced in making all potential members feel welcome. For example, the LGBT CSA has been male-dominated since its founding, causing some lesbians on Capitol Hill to either be less aware or feel less welcome in the organization; the current leadership has noted remedying this as a priority. Likewise, other race or ethnicity-aligned organizations have worked to be sure that they welcome individuals who identify as multi-racial in addition to being respectful of the diversity among their group members in racial or ethnic experiences and identification.

Finally, and perhaps most important, group leaders note that their groups are limited in the degree to which they can affect institutional change. Asked about whether or not her organization might help with staff retention, BCWA co-founder Christina Henderson stated, “I feel like community can only take you so far,” adding, “I think for some it certainly is helping them thrive and sometimes cope with the time that they are up here. But there are some other institutional issues that still exist that no staff organization is going to be able to overcome.” One of those issues mentioned by almost every group leader was low pay, which is a problem for all staffers, but especially those who come to Capitol Hill without familial wealth that might supplement their time with relatively low income compared to other professions. Other issues include office-specific problems or biases that are left un- or under-addressed by the lack of a formal human resources operation serving all congressional staff. Together, these issues go well-beyond the reach of any individual staff association and require initiatives both at the highest levels of congressional leadership and across all congressional offices.

**Analysis and Conclusion**

This initial investigation into the work of staff affinity organizations aligned by gender and racial/ethnic identities reveals that they share many goals, methods for achieving those goals, and perceived benefits to their members. Group leaders emphasized professional development, advice, and advancement as primary to their missions, with a related and important goal of increasing the presence and power of their race and/or gender communities in congressional offices. This valuation of diversity and inclusion on Capitol Hill distinguishes these staff organizations from other associations that align along other lines of interest or affiliation. To achieve these goals, these organizations are offering tools for both adaptation to existing norms and processes on Capitol Hill, while also promoting some avenues toward institutional disruption that will reduce barriers to entry or success for staffers who are not White men.

Another major emphasis of each of these groups is creating community and fostering solidarity among those sharing specific race and/or gender identities on Capitol Hill, recognizing the effects of historical exclusion, current underrepresentation, and/or persistent disparities in power along identity lines as creating distinct conditions for their members on Capitol Hill. Repeated references to creating safe spaces indicate that the work of these organizations also includes providing means for survival within an institution and/or within offices that can range from challenging to hostile.

Talking to organization leaders also raised important insights for further analysis and questions for future research. While celebrating the work of her group, BWCA co-founder Christina Henderson noted that their efforts were necessary *because of* persistent biases on Capitol Hill. They explained, “You have to be twice as good to get half as far. That is most certainly the feeling of staffers of color up here.”As a result, her organization works to be sure that they put forward job applicants who are “extra, extra prepared for anything that could possibly come in their way of being successful,” something that she does not see as required of her White counterparts. This observation is consistent with findings in the gender and politics literature that demonstrate that women candidates for office are, on average, more qualified than their male counterparts, and that that “performance premium” is necessary for their equal levels of success with men (Barnes, Branton, and Cassese 2017; Branton et al. 2018; Fulton 2012, 2014; Fulton and Dhima 2019; Milyo and Schosberg 2000; Pearson and McGhee 2013). In analyzing the existence and efforts of gender and/or race-aligned staff affinity organizations on Capitol Hill, it is important to consider the degree to which biases in perceptions of professional skills and capabilities, as well as exclusionary professional networks, make their work necessary for unprivileged staffers to achieve the same level of success as their White male counterparts.

Two other important considerations include the unpaid and additional labor being done by group leaders and whether the same labor is being done by staffers in more privileged positions. Staffers who lead these organizations do so voluntarily and with little professional recognition or credit. They offer their time and labor without compensation and apart from already long hours and relatively low pay in their primary staff roles. When I asked BWCA co-founder Keenan Austin Reed about this, she described her work of her and her co-founders as “a labor of love,” adding, “I’ll be honest with you, I mean especially in the first year we took money out of our own pockets to buy wine for our events. If we hosted a coffee, one of the five of us picked up the coffee and brought it.” But the costs are not only financial, these group leaders commit their time, energy, and even emotional labor to organization work. Noting *why* she and her colleagues are willing to take on this labor, Reed said, “Because we believe in it.” Christina Henderson elaborated, “For the majority of us we feel like we want to leave this place better than how we found it. And more diverse than how we found it. And this is our way of making an impact beyond being able to touch the legislative fabric of what’s happening up here, but being able to [change] the DNA of this place and to make it more like the People’s House.” BWCA co-founder Rhonda Foxx agreed, noting that she feels “a sense of responsibility” to help other Black women on the Hill. She added, “I refuse to give my job to someone who doesn’t look like me,” indicating that her work with BWCA is part of a larger mission she has to create institutional change. Other group leaders shared similar sentiments, crediting those who helped them with spurring them to do the same for other staffers and seeing their organizations as a way to do that. This discussion of motivation complements research on the impact of gender and racial diversity among congressional actors, demonstrating the difference it makes to have congressional staffers whose own experiences and perspectives expand institutional expertise and understanding, and whose priorities address issues (like institutional diversity and inclusion) that have too often been ignored.

But the additional labor of staff affinity organization leaders should be considered in contrast with the work being done by those who hold privileged gender and racial/ethnic identities in Congress. Discussing the work her group does to push hiring managers to seek out and interview diverse job candidates, BWCA co-founder Christina Henderson said, “For some, their personal networks are not very diverse and they are not even sure where to begin to look for diverse candidates, so it is up to us to do that work.” When I asked more directly if the additional labor to make Congress a more inclusive place was being done in equal parts by White and male staffers, Henderson said, “No, I still think that’s a problem. I don't think that the work is evenly distributed.” Recognizing the role and influence of privileged institutional actors in disrupting gender and racial power dynamics is key to analyzing the magnitude and opportunities for institutional change. In future research on gender, race, and congressional staff, I will examine the perspectives on and prioritization of institutional diversity and inclusion among privileged, especially White and male, staffers and leaders.

Finally, future research should expand the type of staff affinity organizations studied so that the personal, professional, and institutional benefits of more informal staff groups – those with no formal membership but providing similar benefits – can be considered. While difficult to identify, additional interviews with and surveys of staffers across levels and chambers can better reveal diverse strategies and spaces for navigating and succeeding within Congress. This research will also contribute to the broader goal of my own research to make what (and who) is often invisible – both on Capitol Hill and in congressional research – visible.

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1. Staff respondents were able to choose more than one racial/ethnic category. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In addition to these groups, other officially registered House staff organizations based on gender and racial/ethnic affinity include the Armenian-American Staff Association, the Korean-American Staff Association, the Luzo-American Staff Association, the South Asian-American Staff Association, and Gay, Lesbian, and Allies Senate Staff (GLASS). The Senate does not make public any list of official staff associations, and other informal groups aligned by gender and race/ethnicity must be identified in other ways. This will be a continued focus of my research. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A current leader of CAPASA notes in their interview with me that while the group celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2018, the group may have operated under a different name for a period before then and with a break before the current organization was launched. She noted the lack of congressional records as a challenge to identifying if and when another group may have existed for Asian American staffers. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See CHSA 2019: <https://www.chsadc.org/about.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Boston 2019: <https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/article/21071897/a-dc-pride-veteran-takes-stock>; A current group leader believed that the group started in 1993. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)