OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST

DEJA DUNLAP

Revisiting the race issue in the Engineering department

Two years ago, I wrote an article about the race issue in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, or SEAS. Much has happened since then: the first freshman class at Yale following the end of affirmative action, Yale's creation of an institutional voice policy and the Trump administration's attacks against DEI, to name a few. On the precipice of my graduation, I wanted to revisit the issue that I spent so much of my Yale tenure considering.

I want to start this article with a few facts that I recently learned. In 2015, former Yale President Peter Salovey GRD '83 '84 '86 committed $50 million to increasing faculty diversity across all of Yale. In 2020, the commitment was upped by an additional $85 million and the launch of the five-year "Belonging at Yale" initiative. Now that we are one year out from this effort, I think it's important to ask: Did Yale increase diversity in its faculty population?

On the surface, the answer is yes. The publicly available database Yale shares about its faculty demographics shows, from 2013 to 2025, the number of Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and Pacific Islander tenured or tenured-track professors nearly tripled across departments. But how much of this increase was concentrated in the SEAS department?

Four.

Not 4 percent, four people. SEAS went from five underrepresented minority — or URM — faculty members in 2013 to nine in 2024. While the overall faculty in the SEAS department increased 44 percent, only four of them were from URM backgrounds.

With this foregrounding, I still hold many of the opinions I expressed in my original article. The SEAS department has continued to not seriously consider the racial disparities in the same manner that they have other disparities like gender. Engineering continues to lack representational diversity in the workforce, a fact that has been exacerbated by the Trump administration's attacks on DEI.

And, for the rest of my time at Yale, I continued to be one of the only Black students in my math and engineering courses.

Where I differ is in my relationship to this disparity. More specifically, I no longer feel an inclination to prove my worth. Perhaps this is a natural symptom of maturing, but I've come to believe that my talents speak for themselves.

What I've come to realize is that, no matter if I were to graduate with a perfect GPA and the most prestigious post-graduate job, it wouldn't be enough to change the culture. Whether my professors remember me by my name or as "the Black girl in the class" — personally offensive as it is — it won't fix the systemic injustices minorities face in the field.

One person's exceptionalism doesn't change a culture built on centuries of systematic exclusion and erasure.

What, however, does change it is to address that such a culture even exists. While SEAS and Yale more broadly have made significant progress in terms of diversity, it is not enough.

In an environment where all things DEI are heavily scrutinized, it may seem reckless to openly address something like this. But, as the recently published report from the Committee on Trust in Higher Education states, an emphasis on intellectual diversity is critical to nurturing an academically productive environment. While the report focused on political diversity, I would argue for the extension to all axes, including race. Besides the multiple documented benefits of diversity, it's just the right thing to do. As Yale is one of the most televised universities in the world, what Yale chooses to do in this critical moment in history could have widespread effects on Black engineers everywhere.

I'll end the article urging for the same things I did before. Yale should publish racial student demographic information by major. SEAS should invest more in SEAS-affiliated affinity-oriented student organizations. SEAS should build and expand partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic Serving Institutions to build diverse graduate student and faculty populations. And SEAS should invest in programs that improve minorities' retention.

By proactively addressing the race issue, hopefully Black engineering students in the class of 2036 will look back at this article in disbelief at the covert and overt instances of racism described, shocked that this is what SEAS was like in 2026. But if we do nothing, I promise future students will read this article and feel as though they could have written it themselves, how eerily similar their own experiences will have been.

It's time Yale addresses the race issue in the engineering department.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

PERICLES LEWIS

On conversation

Graduating seniors: four years ago — before move-in, before shopping period, before the first blue book or lab report — I welcomed many of you during Bulldog Days and framed this place as more than somewhere you would attend. I asked you to think of Yale as a community you would have to practice: a community based on conversation. I invited you to learn with humility, to assume good intentions and to value complexity and nuance over self-assurance and stereotype.

I opened those remarks with a question from Confucius: "Is it not a pleasure to learn…? Is it not a joy to have friends coming from afar?" Four years later, you can answer for yourselves. I hope that learning has been a pleasure — sometimes thrilling, sometimes difficult, maybe sometimes both — and that friendship has arrived from farther away than geography can measure. As you leave Yale College, I hope you take with you not only what you studied but also how you learned: in dialogue, across difference, with humility. I also hope that you do the same in the conversations ahead, wherever you land next.

Commencement speeches usually urge you to go out and change the world. Maybe you will. But here is a more tangible and, in many ways, more urgent charge: to use conversation as a practice, and as a public good. The habits I named four years ago — openness to challenge, resistance to stereotype, generosity in interpretation — are not just campus niceties; they are civic equipment. In workplaces, communities, families and public life, you will enter conversations already underway, many of them fragile. The question is whether your contribution will narrow or widen them, whether you will flatten someone into a category or make room for the full complexity of their story.

That charge matters because it is the antidote to what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "the danger of a single story." In those Bulldog Days remarks, I shared her reminder that stereotypes are not always false; they are usually just incomplete. And if that is true of places and people, it is also true of a graduating class. The class of 2026 will be remembered, inevitably, through a few stories we repeat: the breakthroughs we celebrate, the conflicts we debate, the moments that made news. But you also carry thousands of narratives that rarely make headlines: the late shifts at a campus job followed by rehearsal, the times you cared for a friend in crisis, the decision to change majors or plans, the discipline of showing up week after week for people who depended on you.

I also borrowed an image from Tennyson's "Ulysses," where "all experience is an arch wherethro' / Gleams that untravell'd world" — an image for how education expands the horizon. Many of you have felt that expansion in obvious ways: new fields of study, research methods, languages, archives, data sets, artistic forms. But maybe you have also felt it in quieter, more human ways: the first time you ate with someone whose life story upended your assumptions, the first time you realized you had been casually repeating a stereotype, the first time you learned to ask a better question rather than deliver a faster answer. The horizon does not expand because Yale is magical; it expands because you do the work of moving toward the unfamiliar.

You have also lived through four years of polarized, often bleak public dialogue. You have watched debates harden into slogans, and you have seen how quickly misunderstanding can become moral certainty. Yale is not immune to dogma — no university is — but I still believe we can aspire to a higher kind of conversation: one where arguments are tested rather than traded, where listening is not a concession but a skill and where the goal is not to win but to learn. That work is hard. It asks for patience when impatience feels righteous, for generosity when cynicism feels safer and for the courage to say, sometimes publicly and sometimes only to yourself, "I might be wrong."

So as you prepare for graduation, I come back to that original invitation — not to grade yourselves against it, but to use it as a bookend. Commencement tempts us to summarize four years into a single story: the headline accomplishment, the defining crisis, the proudest milestone, the hardest setback. But if Yale has taught you anything, I hope it is that your lives — and this class — are bigger than their easiest summaries. As you leave, keep practicing conversation, especially when it is hard. Assume good intentions. Value complexity and nuance over stereotype and certainty. Keep moving your horizons outward. And help one another, wherever you go, to build communities worthy of the people in them.

Congratulations, class of 2026.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

RYAN WANG

The death of college exploration

If you read my application to Yale, you would probably guess that I spent my bright college years flitting between economic research seminars, physics labs and a political campaign office. Instead, I spent my first week of classes grinding through applications for the Yale Student Investment Group or the Yale Undergraduate Consulting Group. By the end of sophomore year, I had climbed the ranks of the consulting group and was running its client acquisition team. Academically, I dropped my physics major and rarely strayed outside of economics and mathematics classes. Sometimes, I mourn for the kid who eagerly submitted his Yale application. I suspect I am not alone.

In his 1852 treatise "The Idea of a University," the English theologian John Henry Newman argued that a college education should cultivate the intellect broadly, not provide vocational training. Newman was not alone in his position. Yale's own 1828 report on academic instruction declared:

Our object is not to teach that which is peculiar to any one of the professions; but to lay the foundation which is common to them all.

Yet for many of us Yalies, this vision has not materialized. Somewhere between 1828 and today, the dream of spending our college years exploring our passions and career interests remains only that — a dream. Exploration is dead. The question is: who killed it?

My first suspect is one familiar to most Yalies: our future employers and graduate schools. In the past two decades, the college internship has devolved from an act of exploration into a prerequisite for entry. During my time at Yale, top consultancies have steadily moved recruiting timelines earlier. The proliferation of sophomore summer internships and pre-professional clubs pressures new students to dedicate their underclassmen years to breaking into the industry. My friends in other fields tell the same story. The aspiring investment banker needs a boutique stint before junior year, the software engineer needs a project portfolio to capture the attention of tech companies, the mechanical engineer needs lab experience before finishing their core requirements and the future policymaker needs a D.C. internship before their first political theory seminar.

Yalies interested in further academic study face the same curse. Matriculant GPAs at top medical and law schools have crept up consistently, while aspiring doctors now spend thousands of undergraduate hours on clinical experience and research to remain competitive. Students drawn to doctoral studies face National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health fellowship applications demanding research experience dating to freshman year.

Career preparation has superseded exploration across campus. Yet, can our future employers and schools be fully to blame? I have a second suspect for the murder of exploration: us. When younger Yalies seek career advice over dining hall meals, I first ask if they have found their guiding purpose. The conversation usually plays out like this:

"What is your north star?"

"Right now, I'm locked in on securing that McKinsey internship."

"Yes, but what's your end goal? Your own guiding mission?"

"…I'm not sure yet. Maybe law school?"

The ambition that carried us to New Haven is easily hijacked by arbitrary measures of success established by the student community. Within weeks of arriving, first-years are exposed to what "success" looks like in each realm of campus:

"You should apply to YSIG if you're interested in finance. They have a ton of alumni at Goldman Sachs."

"If you want a shot at a T14 school, you should have a 4.0 and a law journal publication."

Rather than charting their own paths, Yalies often co-opt a communal definition of success and work tirelessly to achieve it. First-semester me — the kid that raved about particle physics and economic policy in his Yale application — sleepwalked my way up the ranks of a consulting club without ever asking if that was what I had really wanted.

So, who killed college exploration? Both suspects are culpable. Employers and schools impose aggressive recruitment timelines and stringent requirements, and ambitious students eagerly rise to the challenge. This hyper-competitive applicant pool encourages firms to raise their standards again, fueling an arms race. Consequently, higher education produces a generation of over-prepared, under-explored graduates. Students determined to succeed within a single field never discover what they truly want, arriving at 22 in a job they chose at 19 for reasons that were never really their own.

Is there a way to break the cycle? Employers and graduate schools should ask which of their requirements still measure genuine ability, and reckon with what they lose by screening out candidates who spent college actually exploring. Absent institutional change, I find it naive to tell Yalies they should simply ignore post-graduate pressures. Instead, I recommend "strategic exploration:" invest seriously in at least two fields you actually care about, fulfill your distributional requirements early to explore the whole range of classes Yale has to offer, and ask whether your ambitions are genuinely yours or inherited from the students around you.

I broke out of autopilot at the end of junior year. I rediscovered my love for economics, reneging on a full-time consulting offer to pursue academic research. The world today rewards the straightest path, yet there is a quiet tragedy in arriving at a destination you never chose for yourself. The kid you described in your Yale application is still in there — go find them.

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