

Feeling Isolated and Excluded

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Two institutions with major diversity initiatives have their work cut out for them in terms of improving campus climate for minority graduate students. Studies released by a student group at Yale University and by a graduate school at the University of Michigan suggest ongoing concerns that could have implications for retention as they work toward diversifying the Ph.D. pool. And since many minority undergraduates are pushing colleges and universities to [find and hire more minority Ph.D.s](#) as faculty members, these findings could have an impact at all the places that might do so.

“The biggest takeaway is that there continue to be disparities in students’ experiences and treatment on campus on the basis of race and ethnicity,” said Sameer Jaywant, a law student at Yale and chair of its Graduate and Professional Student Senate’s diversity and inclusion committee, which recently released a [report on race, diversity and inclusion](#). “The data and personal anecdotes both seem to confirm that even facially neutral institutional policies and structures can have negative impacts on students, and that personal bias and prejudice continue to exist in settings of higher education like Yale.”

Yale University

Wanting to gauge the experiences of Yale’s graduate students in light of national campus diversity discussions last year, the Student Senate sent out a survey to about 7,000 graduate students. Some 17 percent responded, and their answers and comments are the basis of the new report. Regarding availability of resources, some 56 percent of respondents of all races said they wouldn’t know where to go to report an instance of race-based discrimination. Some 22 percent of students said they’d reported an instance of race-based discrimination to a staff or faculty member; of those, 63 percent said they felt their concern was taken seriously, while 18 percent said it wasn’t.

Latino students were the least aware of available resources, but black students were the least likely to feel comfortable accessing discrimination resources of which they were aware.

One-third of respondents said they’d experienced bias, discrimination or harassment, which the report calls an “unacceptably high rate.” Some 72 percent of black students said they’d been subjected to overt or implicit bias, discrimination, or harassment due to their race, compared to 50 percent of Asian students, 44 percent of Latinos and 26 percent of whites.

About half of black students said they’d experienced bias within their home departments. Some 58 percent of black students said they’d experienced it in a social setting while at Yale.

Research on minority graduate student retention -- a key part of many faculty diversity plans -- points to the importance of mentors and networks. So the Yale report says it’s “concerning” that 40 percent of respondents said they didn’t have a faculty mentor. Black and Asian students were less likely than their Hispanic and white peers to have faculty mentors, and Hispanic and Asian students were less likely than their white and black peers to know of faculty members who share their ethnic backgrounds.

Concerning community, the report says it’s notable that white students reported having the most people in their academic cohorts with whom they identify, whereas Latino and black students identify less with their social and academic peer groups. Some 30 percent of black students disagreed to some extent with the statement “I belong at Yale,” compared to 11 percent of white students. Latino students were most likely to say they were “strongly dissatisfied” with Yale, at 11 percent of respondents in that ethnic group. About 18 percent of respondents over all and 25 percent of nonwhite respondents said they felt their contributions were valued less than those of their peers.

“Nonwhite students tended to think that Yale doesn’t try hard enough to make an inclusive environment for them

compared to white students,” the report says.

Yale launched a five-year, \$50 million faculty diversity initiative last year. Part of the plan is to support emerging faculty by continuing to sponsor “pipeline programs” aimed at increasing the number of minority students who pursue Ph.D.s. And while additional services are planned, the graduate senate report emphasizes that success is “not simply a question of increasing the numbers of historically underrepresented minorities who attend Yale,” but supporting them once they’re there. Put another way, it’s about retention, not just recruitment.

To that end, the graduate senate report makes a number of recommendations, including transparency about university diversity initiative developments and data it collects on the student experience. The report says the Student Senate should hold diversity-related events throughout the year, and that faculty, staff and students should participate in diversity training programs and workshops “designed to provide education regarding cultural awareness, unconscious biases, discrimination and privilege,” among other things.

The report further calls for the creation of a public, universitywide discrimination policy that, like Yale’s sexual misconduct policy, lays out definitions, standards and procedures related to discrimination and harassment. A formal, standard reporting system is also needed, it says, as is more mentoring support for students of color.

The Student Senate recently sent the report to university administrators; public affairs officers did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Jaywant said the senate’s recommendations matter because they would “create or reform mechanisms of transparency and accountability in the administration’s decision-making processes, while also calling on decision makers to implement common-sense policies that would promote diversity -- for example, streamlining the public availability of resources, consolidating dispute resolution mechanisms and supporting students who have specific initiatives that aim to achieve a climate of genuine inclusiveness.”

University of Michigan

Michigan also recently launched a major diversity initiative. Some 49 individual school and program diversity plans informed a five-year, \$85 million campuswide project organized around three major themes: creating an inclusive and equitable campus; recruiting, retaining and developing a diverse university community; and supporting innovation and inclusive scholarship and teaching.

One of the 49 individual plans came from the Rackham Graduate School, with input from graduate students through forums and several rounds of surveys. Responses to the [Michigan surveys](#) from hundreds of students in the sciences are similar to those in the Yale graduate senate survey. Regarding access to mentoring, for example, underrepresented minority students were more likely to report having to seek a faculty mentor outside of their department or program than were their peers who are not members of underrepresented minority groups. The majority of surveyed students did not have a mentor of their racial or ethnic background, even outside their departments -- something that was especially true for those in the sciences, math and engineering.

Underrepresented minority students reported at greater rates than their peers instances of microaggressions, such as being ignored, dismissed and treated rudely or as if they were unintelligent. They were also more likely to report experiences of discrimination due to their race, ethnicity or socioeconomic background, and have perceptions of a less equitable racial climate.

The implications for these students’ academic engagement and career interests were apparent: experiences with racial climate issues related to less trust in faculty members, lower senses of belonging within a department, lower identification with a discipline over all and lower satisfaction with the graduate student experience.

Here are some examples of open-ended comments from student respondents:

“Definitions of diversity (when even discussed) mostly focus on black/white issues but rarely address Asian students, international students, class issues, disability, etc.”

“As a white student, I don’t feel like all people feel it is appropriate for me to engage in conversations around diversity, equity and inclusion in my department. For this reason, I have taken a backseat in these discussions, choosing only to listen.”

“Some issues regarding diversity and inclusion that affect me ... the inability to see myself represented more. From the doctoral students coming for interviews to the visiting faculty from outside universities, I do not feel as though my race and ethnic background are highly represented or the efforts to recruit more individuals like me are a high priority.”

“Burden of being a student of color and overly involved in organizations advocating for this body of students. It is hard because it feels like you are not getting your work done and I often have to deal with the guilty feelings of not being able to get everything I want done. Additionally, as I am doing this advocacy work, my white colleagues are just focused on the research tasks, networking and making career moves that will help them to advance faster than I will. At least that is what I think. I don’t always see the direct benefit of the work that I do as a scholar activist because I know that it goes to benefit those who will come after me. But sometimes I struggle to know what is going to sustain me now, when I often feel bitter and tired about the work that I am doing despite knowing that it is really important.”

“I relied entirely on my program’s faculty when I came in, and had they not been able to provide all the support that they did, I think that the general campus climate would have been enough to push me out. I often hear derogatory comments made about students of my racial background, and have previously experienced some. Moreover, I don’t think that the university is nearly as inclusive as it claims to be, and I take issue with the way race relations are handled.”

“I feel that professors will often give preferential, unconscious treatment to white students. This is particularly noticeable when I [a black male] am the only person of color ... and four different professors never make eye contact with me and teach to the side of the room where I am not located.”

'What does support mean?'

Rackham’s report takes an inventory of current programs promoting and supporting student diversity, but it also presents ideas for addressing change. They include learning more about “strategies for engaging faculty colleagues around mentoring, especially for those that do not already see the value in investing in their mentoring relationships and skills development” and the “need for more faculty supports for addressing diversity and inclusion in the classroom.”

Kimberly Griffin, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Maryland at College Park who has studied early-career [choices](#) by academics of color, said underrepresented minority students need support, “but the question is how and what does support mean?”

Griffin’s own research, along with that of others, suggests that students of color often feel “like their colleagues view them as less well prepared and able to do good work.” Such perceptions “result in exclusion from opportunities to connect academically and socially with peers and faculty,” she said, “and these biases can appear when faculty are choosing which students to mentor and provide with additional opportunities, in how students choose study groups, and in who gets invited to continue the conversation about class or research at the bar or over pizza.”

As just one example of ways to support graduate students of color, Griffin cited [a study](#) suggesting that non-academic “coaches” for biomedical Ph.D. students promote persistence toward academic careers. Over all, she said, “It’s important to really think about how we perceive students of color, and to be as intentional about fostering inclusion as we are about avoiding exclusion.”

