

NEWS | STUDENT LIFE

'I don't feel like I belong here': Students of color on the unique challenges they face at Columbia



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"I feel like being black on this campus is so much of my identity. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing yet, but it's just something I've been so cognizant of," Solace Mensah-Narh, BC '21, said.

BY [RAHIL KAMATH](#) AND [KHADIJA HUSSAIN](#) | NOVEMBER 18, 2017, 11:13 AM

When Sabina Thomas, SEAS '20, first moved into her room in Carman Hall in the fall of 2016, she expected a change of scenery from the predominantly white high school she attended in upstate New York.

However, as she made a concerted effort to get in touch with the black community on campus—getting involved in organizations such as the Black Students Organization and the National Society of Black

Engineers—she noticed an inherent disconnect between the experiences of students of color and white students that continues to pervade her Columbia experience.

“It’s pretty disheartening,” Thomas said. “I was excited to go to college, but for as diverse as Columbia claims to be, I don’t feel like there’s much of a unity here. Race relations as a culture could definitely be better, and it’s kind of disappointing.”

Despite the fact that Columbia has the most diverse undergraduate population in the Ivy League, students of color at both Barnard and Columbia experience [microaggressions](#) in and out of the classroom and feel a pressure to start conversations about race among students and faculty, such as by pointing out ingrained racism and microaggressions.

These challenges complicate Columbia’s already existing [unique stress culture](#) and [isolating campus environment](#). As a result, students of color face a college experience rife with a wider range of difficulties than their white peers face.

While some trainings have been implemented for student leaders and staff, such as Berick Center for Student Advising advisers, most of this programming is concentrated in a small number of University offices. Few recurring or regular initiatives have been institutionally mandated—faculty members, for instance, are not required to undergo any sensitivity training regarding issues of race.

Given the added stress induced by the racially charged rhetoric and policies of the Trump presidency, students feel this divide now more than in recent years.

“I feel blacker at Barnard than I ever have in my entire life,” Solace Mensah-Narh, BC ’21, said. “I’ve had to highlight that I’m black way more often than I usually have to. I know that comes with the political climate as well. I was a black woman in the time of Obama for most of my life, and now I’m a black woman in the time of Trump.”

Two dozen students of color were interviewed for this story. In conversations with Spectator, they described challenges they face that permeate academics, campus life, and interactions with administrative offices.

Silenced conversation

As a predominantly liberal campus, Columbia fosters a culture of political correctness that, according to some students, can hinder productive conversations about diversity. This atmosphere in turn perpetuates a lack of understanding, which is typically left to students of color to broach with their peers.

“The Columbia-Barnard community does lend itself to being a little bit more PC, so people are afraid of making mistakes while learning,” Sara Morales, BC ’21, said.

As part of the University's effort to expand critical discourse regarding race, the Office of University Life's Task Force on Race, Ethnicity and Inclusion was formed in 2015 in order to "engage in critical conversations about inclusion, campus climate, and community citizenship."

"The schools foster an environment in which we don't really have the language to talk about racial difference, because it's something that we don't even address. You have to actively seek that out," BSO President Braxton Gunter, CC '18, said.

Rather than propose institutional changes, the task force's work has focused on developing programming that encourages more inclusive student-to-student conversations. While it released its first official report this August, two years after its creation, the task force's proposed initiatives are still being formulated and most likely will not be introduced for at least another semester.

This sets the pace of Columbia's task force behind its equivalent at Harvard. Harvard's Presidential Task Force on Inclusion and Belonging released a draft report this September outlining clear recommendations for organizational restructuring. The task force called for regular reports assessing university progress on diversity and inclusion. Consistent self-evaluation of this nature would allow both students and administration to provide feedback and consider the successes and failures of relevant diversity initiatives.

One potential downfall of relying on student-led conversation, as Columbia's task force report acknowledges, is that the bulk of the responsibility can often fall on students of color to both initiate, as well as continue to promote, this discussion.

"It's usually the people who identify with these marginalized groups that are bringing it up, and that's exhausting. I shouldn't have to always be the one to ask, 'What about the students of color?' Everyone should just be always thinking about it," Aashna Singh, BC '19, said.

Associate Vice President of University Life Ixchel Rosal, who chairs the task force, recognized this as a main challenge that the task force is addressing as it develops programming to encourage difficult conversations.

"Students who come from these historically marginalized communities don't want to do that emotional labor of having to sit through a conversation and explain who they are, relive a traumatizing experience, or be put in the role of the teacher, yet again," Rosal said. "We want to make sure that everyone can participate, and the more we can facilitate student-to-student dialogue—making it as safe as possible for people—that sort of student-to-student engagement is really where true engagement with a topic can happen."

A stratified social scene

Due to their shared experiences and a lack of understanding from white peers, some students of color described feeling forced to self-segregate, turning to culturally or racially oriented organizations and spaces to fill a lacking sense of campus community.

“Although Columbia prides itself on its diversity, sometimes it feels like the diversity is so spread out that you don’t actually see any of it,” Gabby Ureña, CC ’20, said. “Everyone just sticks to their groups and doesn’t mix with other races or ethnicities.”

Though students of color report feeling supported by affinity groups, not all student organizations are accessible. While financial barriers to groups, such as club sports or Greek life organizations, are an obstacle for some, others are discouraged by the homogeneity of many clubs.

Particularly in humanitarian-focused clubs, some students describe discomfort when dealing with social justice issues that intersect with race and privilege.

“I’m in other clubs, and they’re really white. It’s a bit uncomfortable. I’m in Amnesty [International], and we’re talking about police brutality, and it’s just uncomfortable to have [white students] talk about the white savior complex,” Tirzah Anderson, BC ’21, said.

Similarly, students of color are often forced to confront blind spots of white peers in activist spaces.

“One trend that I see within feminist circles at Barnard is a lot of women only see themselves as women but forget the fact they’re white in a country where whiteness is the number one privilege,” Phanesia Pharel, BC ’21, said. “People want to be good, so when they do a microaggression they just can’t accept it because it’s like, ‘I’m a good person, I’m not racist, I’m a liberal.’”

Students of color argued that counteracting marginalization on a club level requires stronger internal support. In particular, some students highlighted the importance of advocacy from their peers within these organizations to help create a more inclusive environment.

“It’s not that the onus is on black people to join these groups where they are misrepresented, but more that, if you’re interested in it at least a little bit, just try it out. But the onus is on everyone in predominantly white clubs, whether they’re a person of color or they’re white, is to make sure that they are doing that outreach,” Sara Walker, BC ’20, said.

Outside of the club setting, this social segregation extends to even the most basic and universal of college experiences, including Columbia’s hookup culture.

“On the scene of dating and hooking up, socially you don’t want to be ‘that kid that gets with black girls,’” Thomas said. “If I’m interested in someone, I first think, ‘But do they like black girls?’ The fact that I have to ask myself that is ridiculous.”

A classroom divided

A lack of awareness by predominantly white faculty becomes apparent in the classroom. Over [80 percent of faculty](#) in Arts and Sciences are white, despite the University’s commitment of upwards of \$185 million into hiring and funding a diverse faculty.

Many students of color described experiences in which their professors made insensitive or uncomfortable comments.

“In my first-year seminar class—I’m Ghanaian—and my teacher was talking about how Africa is primitive and we need to go back to our roots, and as she was talking about this— about how African people are amazing and in touch with the earth and all that shit, she looked at me like “Come on girl, it’s your turn, come on say something,” Mensah-Narh said.

“A teacher called me out after class and was like, ‘I get that you have a very Latin personality, but you’re going to have to calm down in class,’” said Morales.

Comments such as these can make students feel like they don’t belong and often place pressure on students of color to either openly challenge their professors or to remain silent.

“You carry feelings of guilt, this burden on your shoulders a lot of the time, not only to represent your race but also to represent the background you’re coming from,” Kai Tinsley, SEAS ’20, said. “In class conversations, I’ll often just sit in silence, which is ironic because oftentimes we’re talking about things that directly pertain to my experience.”

In some cases, professors turn to students of color to “teach” the class about issues pertaining to their ethnicity, especially when their identity coincides with classroom material, forcing students into an undesired educational role.

“It becomes an always ‘on the clock’ thing when you’re trying to educate people,” Idris O’Neill, BC ’21, said. “To think our labor and our emotions and our energy are expendable and constantly renewable—they’re not.”

While Columbia recently implemented an [online training program](#) for all faculty focuses on Title IX, immigration law, and student mental health issues, the program does not include measures for talking with students about diversity or inclusion.

Although they are not mandatory, such educational materials for faculty do exist—the Center for Teaching and Learning released a [Guide for Inclusive Teaching at Columbia](#) that lays the framework for teaching principles that recognize diversity and foster a greater sense of belonging for students. CTL has facilitated [optional seminars for faculty](#), which Executive Director Catherine Ross said the center will look to continue to expand.

“We see part of our role as a part of the Center for Teaching and Learning to support the institution’s drive to increase inclusion and to increase thought around what that means,” Ross said. “This is across all campus and is a really significant part of the larger change in campus climate.”

Developing cultural competency training for all faculty is one potential solution to promote greater receptivity in the classroom and minimize discussion that make students feel uncomfortable or alienated.

The Office of Multicultural Affairs also runs a student advocacy group, the Student of Color Advisory Board, that works to identify and evaluate issues relevant to inclusion. Associate Dean of Multicultural Affairs Melinda Aquino said the office was looking into the possibility of SOCAB representatives participating in conversations concerning faculty training or diversifying the Core Curriculum, but was unable to provide a clear timeline for such a rollout.

Students of color who can't identify with their professors must look for support in adults outside the classroom. Although the University has pledged \$100 million to increasing faculty diversity, this investment does not extend to undergraduate advisers in CSA. The burden of mentoring often falls on the existing faculty and advisers of color, who are crucial to creating a sense of security for students with marginalized identities.

Fostering student understanding

The New Student Orientation Program diversity workshops—specifically, Under1Roof for Columbia and Discover Barnard BLUE for Barnard specifically—are some of the only diversity- and inclusion-oriented discussions that students are required to attend while at Columbia. Some students report having positive experiences during the NSOP programs, which include dialogue between first-years, returning students, and administrators.

Such conversations can help alleviate microaggressions and assumptions, as they offer the opportunity for students to share their experiences in a judgment-free environment, a key component of promoting honest and open discussion.

“Since I don't identify with a lot of these minority identities, and I have a lot of privileges, I want to be able to recognize that and hear how other people experience their identities.” Robert Winton, SEAS '21, said.

Many students, however, stressed the need for such programs throughout the year, saying that most students don't go out of their way to engage in difficult conversations about identity.

“In discussing these issues on the first day, it kind of allows the institution to check a box and say ‘We've done it, we've talked about diversity,’ so I left the event wondering what they're going to do in three months to follow up on it,” Carolina Cannon, CC '21, said. “It was a good first step, but I think for [the administration] it seems like a solution and it's not, it's a start.”

Aquino acknowledged that implementing a more long-term course of action could rely on participation and input from both the administration and students.

“It could be positive, but I think it depends on how it is implemented and really thinking about being very intentional and thoughtful with it,” Aquino said. “No matter what it would look like—in terms of long-term diversity education training or anti-oppression training, however it's framed—I think there has to be buy-in and shaping by students who it is directly going to impact.”

Students of color have signaled that legitimizing their concerns will require a more institutional effort from faculty, administrators, and students alike to make meaningful advances towards an inclusive campus.

“There’s a real barrier between me and fully engaging with the Columbia community,” Tinsley said. “Quite frankly, I don’t feel like I belong here. Not in the sense that I didn’t work hard to get here or that I’m less deserving of being here, but statistically, I’m not the average Columbia student. I’m just trying to get to a place where I’m OK with that.”