

The Faces of Race

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In 1962, Loyola was just starting to integrate minority students into the undergraduate college when five African American students enrolled in the school.

Today, 53 years later, Loyola is one of the most diverse universities in New Orleans, garnering the ranking of #2 in "lots of race-class interaction" from the Princeton Review.

For nine Loyola, Tulane and Xavier students and alumni, their experience as part of the minority population was different, but the same. And in many ways, their experiences were representative of the overall race/ class experience at these universities. Each individual had their own story to tell, and while most reported an overall positive experience at the aforementioned universities, a few felt the residue of segregation present in their experience.

All wished for more diverse institutions.

Roberta Kaskel, vice president enrollment management, explained that this accolade is so important because the Princeton Review is a peer-to-peer ranking program.

"Princeton Review asks currently enrolled students their opinions of the college they are attending. We have consistently ranked high in 'lots of race/class interaction' and our own students deserve the credit for this ranking," Kaskel said.

Kaskel said that, compared to the other universities in New Orleans, she believes that Loyola is a leader in the area of diversity.

"Loyola has had a long and rich tradition of living our values of respect and demonstrated acceptance of and dignity for individuals of all backgrounds. We sustain a community that goes beyond welcoming individuals of diverse backgrounds to establishing and sustaining communities of diverse individuals," Kaskel said.

Because Kaskel's experience at Loyola does not date back before 2007, she said that so much of what is celebrated today is the result of the convictions and hard work of generations of students, their families, faculty and staff who preceded her.

"My own early career did begin in a state that was under federal order to desegregate and still today that state has not accomplished half of the work that has been accomplished at Loyola. It is a great source of pride for me, and the entire enrollment team, that we represent a community that is clear about its values and lives it values daily," Kaskel said.

Though Xavier University is a historically black institution, Joseph Byrd, vice president student services, said that the school is open to all students, regardless of race.

"Xavier has a wonderful product to offer that is a quality education and we admit students not based on their race, creed, color or religion and so when we go out and recruit, we recruit all students," Byrd said.

Byrd said that Xavier has a large Asian population as well as a growing Hispanic and white population. He said that Xavier welcomes all students, and that they just want to make sure that they are part of the Xavier community and are there to get a good education.

"I think the American world puts too much emphasis on people's race rather than on their character. And I can say that's the wonderful thing about working at Xavier. I've been working here for 30 years, and we don't have problems with students of other races. They may be a minority numbers-wise, but otherwise they're just Xavier students," Byrd said.

Carolyn Barber-Pierre, assistant vice-president for multicultural affairs at Tulane, works to promote diversity at Tulane, and said that first and foremost, numbers are critical in determining if diversity has improved or not. She said that, in addition to a diverse student body, faculty and staff should also reflect diversity.

"Faculty and staff of color not only benefit other students of color, but they benefit the larger community and what they bring to the classroom," Barber-Pierre said.

Barber-Pierre said that she thinks that Tulane is in an opportune location to really have an impact on the community, and that she would like to see more classes on diversity being offered.

"Having a course that all students take on understanding diversity and inclusion in the 21st century I think is critical for many institutions, not just Tulane, but something that we're aspiring to do," Barber-Pierre said.

Kaskel said that students are drawn to Loyola for its diverse environment, and that the school has created a community where people can be themselves and live respected lives.

"When we get asked the hard questions about diversity at Loyola, we can answer freely and proudly," Kaskel said.

1. Steve Barbre, Tulane 1965-1968

Steve Barbre, who attended Tulane from 1965-1968, said that it was Tulane's local and national reputation that originally drew him to attend the institution, but that when he got there, his experience was mixed.

"I was looking forward to a positive experience. But once we arrived, we began to see that while things were in most aspects desegregated, there was still a residue of segregation," Barbre said.

Barbre said the director of admissions at the time, Cliff Wing, initially put the school on the road to diversity.

"He increased undergraduate enrollment from two students the class entered in 1963 to probably about 50 students plus by the time I entered in 1965. But Wing left that year, he left in 1965 to take a position at Harvard, and other people succeeded him, but I don't think they really pushed to increase black enrollment the way he did," Barbre said.

Though Tulane was an integrated university by the time Barbre arrived, issues of discrimination were evident.

"In terms of accommodations, many of the students lived on campus, but black students sometimes had this experience that if they were assigned a roommate who was white, that person might not stay. Now in most instances, that was not true, but there was always a possibility that someone would elect not to live with a black student merely for that reason, that they did not want a black roommate," Barbre said.

Barbre said that many black students began to look around and see these same situations prevailed across the country, and that it wasn't just Tulane.

"In many ways, there was too much of a residue of segregation at Tulane to make it the place that it should have been back then, but I think the school probably learned from that and tried to do things subsequently to become more diverse," Barbre said.

2. Ruoxi Li, Tulane student

Ruoxi Li, sociology and economics junior at Tulane, said that she does not necessarily feel disadvantaged as a minority student.

"My experience at Tulane has been great. If I treat myself as the same, people generally treat me as the same. I have felt the kindness and support of the community and have been given many opportunities to learn and grow," Li said.

However, Li said that she hopes Tulane will become a more diverse community.

"I think the opinions and thoughts I am exposed to here are relatively homogeneous, which is fine, but a little boring. I am looking forward to meeting people with more distinctive voices and stories," Li said.

3. Alison Richards, Loyola A'75

Alison Richards, who started at Loyola in the 70s, said that she didn't face discrimination during her time at Loyola.

"My experience was a very positive one. There were about 50 black students at the time that I was a freshman enrolled there," Richards said.

Students may have had a different experience at Tulane during that time, Richards said.

"I think that there may have been a bit more strife at Tulane than we actually had at Loyola. We had good relations with the black students over there, and they came from many of the same institutions that we had come from," Richards said.

Richards said that she thought of her class as the second wave of black students at Loyola.

"When my brother was there, there were only a handful of black students, most of them travelled to and from school together, most of them were from back here in our neighborhood. And you really could count them all on one hand. In my case, 50 was a lot," Richards said.

4. Dwight Richards, Attended Loyola 1969-1972

Dwight Richards said that, by the time he attended Loyola, there was only a handful of black students, so consequently every black student knew each other.

"It was overwhelmingly white compared to the black students there. Going to Loyola itself was a culture clash for me. I attended black schools all my life, I had gone to an all-boys black high school, very straight-laced, very studious, and when I got to Loyola, it was like a culture clash, first of all, to be around a huge body of white students," Richards said.

The small number of black students was evident, particularly in his classes, Richards said.

"I could go to class all day long and never see another black student in my class," Richards said.

Richards said that seeing Loyola become a more diverse university over the years means that what he saw take root back in 1960s and the 70s has come to fruition now.

"To see that Loyola's now one of the top schools as far as diversity's concerned, I think it's a great thing. I feel, in some small way, that I was a part of that in the formation of those things back in my school years so I'm happy to see those ideas have taken root and have grown to the point now," Richards said.

5. Ron Nabonne, Loyola A'69

When Ron Nabonne attended Loyola, there were many movements and protests that characterized his time there, including the Civil Rights Movement and protests against the Vietnam War.

An issue that Nabonne distinctly remembers was that the fraternities at Loyola would hold events at segregated venues, preventing students like Nabonne from attending them.

"We protested the fact that the social organizations had functions off campus at segregated facilities," Nabonne said.

Despite issues such as this, Nabonne said his experience was overall positive, and that some of the faculty encouraged him to be an engaged student.

"Obviously there were some faculty members who supported us, there were some faculty members who didn't support us, but Loyola in terms of education offered us all a great education," Nabonne said.

6. Shawn Kelly, Loyola student and BSU co-president

Shawn Kelly, sociology junior and Black Student Union co-president at Loyola, said that the campus does a pretty good job at building diversity, but that it could do a better job of attracting students like himself through outreach to local high schools.

"I had never heard of Loyola before I applied and I only applied because it was on the Common App. They never really came to my school. Tulane did. Tulane did a much better job than Loyola trying to attract students like myself and I think they have an even worse diversity problem than us," Kelly said.

Kelly said that Loyola's Princeton Review ranking is an example of how far minority students have come in New Orleans, and in American society in general.

"I think we still have a long way to go. I don't think diversity's just numbers. I think diverse is the way you appreciate different people on your campus, I think diversity is having policies that make diversity a priority. But I think we've made really great progress toward getting full diversity on campus," Kelly said.

7. Alveraize Saizan, Started Loyola 1962

As one of the five first African American undergraduate students at Loyola, Alveraize Saizan said that he experienced quite an adjustment when he began college.

"I had just come from 9 years at Corpus Christi and 4 years at St. Augustine into this environment where, for the most part, you weren't welcomed. It wasn't blatant like the James Meredith experience at Ole Miss, but you could sense that it was preferred by the students and the faculty and staff that you weren't around," Saizan said.

Though he experienced a sense of alienation at Loyola, Saizan connected with his coworker at Loyola's library when President Kennedy was assassinated.

"I do remember starting to work in the library at Loyola, and there was a young lady whose mother worked at the staff at the Library. She was an incoming freshman as I was, and she was very friendly to me. We were working there when President Kennedy got shot, and I remember crying with her," Saizan said.

Saizan eventually transferred to LSUNO before going into the Vietnam War. Of his experiences at Loyola, he said that it was more of a shift or change in the environment than anything.

"I wasn't expecting peaches and cream coming from St. Aug, but it was a very different environment with, for 13 years you interact and get along with people, and even if you felt everyone wasn't for you, you felt this communal support working toward learning whereas there, that first year, I didn't particularly feel that," Saizan said.

8. Bushra Ahmad, Loyola student

Bushra Ahmad, biology sophomore, said that she has been a minority student since preschool, particularly in the Catholic school setting.

"There are times, like in religion classes or ethics classes, that the Catholic views are controversial to my own, however, for the most part it's been alright. In college, there is more diversity so I feel as though there is more tolerance towards others and a genuine intrigue in minorities," Ahmad said.

Ahmad said that as a liberal arts university, she thinks that Loyola is quite diverse and, she's glad to hear of the Princeton Review's distinction.

"It's a great honor that I am a student of such a recognition. I think Loyola's on the right track with its integration," Ahmad said.

9. Carolyn Le, Xavier student

Carolyn Le, chemistry and history student at Xavier University, said that her experience as a minority student has been average.

"There are times where I feel our Vietnamese Association priorities as an Asian association are overlooked, but as far as I know, it's trying to get changed," Le said.

Le said that she gets the same privileges as everyone else in the school and that she is treated fairly.

"Xavier is actually trying to improve in terms of diversity. The Vietnamese Association is much more active and bringing more awareness to Asian culture," Le said.

