

TSL expands culture shift with diversity and inclusion team

LARKIN BARNARD-BAHN

In a time when many companies are all talk and no action, the student newspaper of the Claremont Colleges — The Student Life (TSL) — has finally put its money where its mouth is. This semester, Anushe Engineer SC '22 and Caelan Reeves CM '24 are the publication's first Diversity and Inclusion Editors, which are paid senior staff positions.

"Over the course of 2020, there was sort of this collective realization that [diversity and inclusion] work needed to be a concrete effort more so than just people being like, 'Oh, well, I don't foster racist ideology,'" Reeves said.

While the editorial board — comprised of the Editor-in-Chief and two Managing Editors — knew that diversity and inclusion efforts were a priority, they wanted to give control over the details to the editors themselves. Initially, Engineer said the board had planned to hire one editor, but she and Reeves are grateful to have one another because of the different strengths and perspectives they bring.

A columnist for Arts & Culture, Reeves had worked on diversity and inclusion with creative organizations, such as Chicago Youth Shakespeare.

"It was a skill set that I was really excited to be able to work on more," they said. "And so since I had already worked with TSL, I was like, 'Oh, this is a good opportunity to do more work in that area.'"

Because of the time commitment of senior thesis, Engineer knew she couldn't commit to being a News Section Editor again this semester, but she wanted to continue working for TSL.

"So I was like, OK, [Diversity and Inclusion Editor] is manageable in terms of the workload," Engineer said. "And I think also I applied because of my background, because I'm an international student from Pakistan."

"I have had a lot of issues with TSL in my previous semesters, some that you can let slide and then some that you would really appreciate more concrete steps taken towards. And that's just something that a lot of ed boards have just thrown under the rug. And I think this was my opportunity to actually do something and be in a position to actually have my ideas heard and implemented."

When Reeves and Engineer met to discuss their goals, they realized they were taking almost opposite approaches — ones that ended up perfectly complementing each other. While Reeves focused more on internal aspects, such as staff diversity, Engineer concentrated on the external side, such as more diverse sources and the accessibility of articles.

"To me, I think the most important part of it is making sure that everyone feels like their voice is given weight," Reeves said.

Historically, this hasn't been true for TSL. "TSL sort of has had a reputation of being sort of a white space, not just in terms of the composition of writers — because that changes a lot — but also for having very white senior staff and ed board," Reeves said. "And for publishing certain pieces that are maybe reflective of the fact that there's not a whole lot of ideological diversity on the board."

Similarly, sources tended to be white because those were the people staffers knew, which limited the perspectives of stories, according to Engineer. As an international student who had never been on a newspaper, Engineer found TSL inaccessible when she joined her sophomore year. She wished editors had been more understanding and trained her one-on-one in the technicalities of journalistic writing.

"I remember someone once made a really snide comment," Engineer said. "I don't think she meant to be malicious, but she was just like, 'Oh, do you not know how to spell?'" And I was like, 'Actually, it's British English because I did that for like 20 years of my life.'"

This was especially true for students who didn't speak English as their first language, and Engineer knew international students who left TSL because they found it too American-centric.

Moreover, in the past, TSL seemed to revolve around those with strong journalistic net-

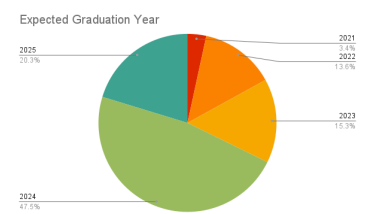
works.

"A lot of people who've graduated now came from families that had very close connections to journalism, parents who worked in huge newspapers," Engineer said. "So for [staffers then], TSL just seemed like a very competitive and white-, rich-centric space because those students came from those kinds of backgrounds, and it just seemed very inaccessible to those who didn't."

However, TSL's atmosphere during the past few semesters has been quite different.

"I feel like TSL has always been so, 'You have to get this piece in because we have to get it published and it has to go in print and if it's not in print, we're going to cut it! Do you understand? We're going to cut it!'" Engineer said. "And I think we're a lot less intimidating in terms of ed board. Ed board is so fun, vibey, kind of like the big brother vibe that you would go to. Like the jokes and banter and things like that. And it's not super exclusive and dictator style."

Several factors have contributed to this culture shift; for one, the editorial board, traditionally consisting of upperclassmen, is much younger. This semester saw a sophomore as Editor-in-Chief and two juniors as the Managing Editors. According to TSL's voluntary demographics survey, to which 59 of 111 staffers responded, 47.5% of the paper are sophomores, and 20% are first years.



Expected graduation years of 59 respondents to TSL's demographic survey.

"It's a very sophomore-centric TSL, and I'm hoping it goes in that direction because we have people fresh out of high school," Engineer said. "We have people with a lot more time and energy, and it's good to give them that kind of importance and respect and not be like, 'Oh, you're a sophomore. What would you know?'" As if being a senior makes you 100 years old or something."

Moreover, racial diversity, especially among the senior staff and editorial board, has improved. This has likely facilitated the increase in diverse sources and article topics, according to Engineer.

"In terms of the social atmosphere, I think we're doing a better job at being more communicative, more open more mindful of certain things," she said. "There was Diwali a few weeks ago, and one of our news editors was obviously going to take production night off because she wanted to celebrate her culture. And I think that's something that happened without any difficulty."

Though they feel the space is no longer white-centric, Engineer and Reeves want to see more diversity, especially regarding students from Black, Indigenous, international and first-generation, low-income backgrounds.

However, TSL's budget limitations prevent writers from being paid for their work, and even senior staff is not fully compensated for the correct number of hours worked. As a result, students who rely on work-study jobs may not have time to work for TSL for free.

"TSL is existing in a space which is primarily white, so there's a lot of things that we can't change in that regard," Engineer said. "So I think we're doing a pretty good job given the resources and budget that we have. We are putting in our best effort to accommodate everyone who comes in."

Despite these efforts, the inaccessible nature of journalism remains.

"When you are faced with a section that is largely white people, even if no one is saying something explicitly to you, it can still feel kind

of hard to speak up, or it can feel like a place that's maybe difficult to approach, or you don't feel like comfortable 100% of the time," Reeves said.

Reeves also received feedback that the story pitching process — in which staffers talk about their ideas with the rest of the section — can be intimidating for those with anxiety. To help with this, Reeves and Engineer added a section in the senior staff training that emphasized awareness in order to create a more collaborative space.

Editing the senior staff training was one of several accomplishments of the Diversity and Inclusion section's first semester. The team also created and conducted the demographic surveys (one for all staff and one for senior staff) with instructions on how to do so efficiently for future semesters.

In order to make TSL more accessible to those without prior journalism experience or connections, they aggregated resources for jobs, internships and fellowships. Looking to next semester, they are working on increasing accessibility in hiring, such as offering application workshops.

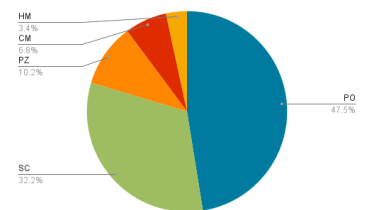
"[We're] generally making the application criteria more clear so that it doesn't feel like this in-group thing that some people have the cues for but not everyone does, to ensure that people of different backgrounds feel comfortable applying and have a chance of success in applying," Reeves said.

Perhaps most importantly, they laid the foundation for future Diversity and Inclusion Editors. Moreover, they ensured that such editors would not be considered separate from the rest of the staff and excluded from promotions to other positions, a common problem in diversity and inclusion work.

"A lot of times what can happen when you have diversity positions in organizations, because those people are brought in to do diversity work, sometimes they're not perceived as being specialized in what the organization actually does," Reeves said. "And this became a conversation because one of my good friends does diversity work for one of the consulting groups at CMC, but as a result, she kind of got locked out of the possibility of vertical movement in the rest of the organization."

Therefore, they worked with the editorial board to prioritize looping in Diversity and Inclusion Editors to senior staff and journalistic trainings.

"So if they're brought in as a D&I editor, they can be assured that they still have the skills to become a writer or editor later or potentially even get to an ed board position," Reeves said. "So that they're not locked out of the vertical structure of the organization — because that is the opposite of the point. Especially because D&I positions are where people of color feel comfortable entering an organization. And then it's like, 'OK, now you don't have access to the vertical growth that everyone else does.'"



Colleges of 59 respondents to TSL's demographic survey.

And this undertaking has quickly proven to be successful. Both Diversity and Inclusion Editors were promoted to Managing Editor for the Spring 2022 semester.

In the future, the team hopes that TSL will continue to become more inclusive, understanding and diverse.

"I also understand that not everyone wants to drag their identity into every club or organization they go into," Engineer said. "You might just want to be a writer at TSL and not a Black, first-gen, low-income writer who comes from XYZ city. So just being comfortable however you come and with whatever experience, little experience, no experience — you're just doing it because you want to. And that means that editors should be really accommodating and understanding of that."

Reeves hopes that the continued demographic surveys will display a dynamic pattern. To help with this, Engineer suggested possibly recruiting at identity-based groups and strengthening communication with them to cover more of their events.

"If there are people that do still view TSL as a white space or an inaccessible space, I would really hope that that perception shifts so that the makeup of the organization can shift along with it," Reeves said. "Because literally TSL is a main line to communicate your ideas and your perspective to the student body, and I feel like that is a valuable resource for marginalized students especially. I want the perception to shift so that students from diverse and marginalized backgrounds can feel empowered to take advantage of that opportunity."

Diversity and Inclusion Editors speak on org theory metaphors



Anushe Engineer SC '22 (she/her) and Caelan Reeves (they/them) are TSL's first Diversity and Inclusion Editors. Quotes on the left are Engineer's, while those on the right are Reeves'. The editors scored each metaphor for accuracy regarding TSL on a scale from 1-10, with 10 being a perfectly description of TSL culture.

1. ORGANISM

The organism metaphor applies to organizations who excel in collaboration and adapting with changing circumstances. In these organizations, change can be initiated by anyone, no matter their position, and the organization is interconnected with its environment.

"I think that happened this semester, especially with the creation of the D&I section. They came to Caelan and myself and said, 'OK, what are your plans?' Because they said in the job description, 'We don't have that concrete of a plan, so whoever ends up being D&I editor will have to figure things out and start building the foundation ground up. And I remember the five of us sat down, and we had a conversation about the kind of ideas we had, any ideas that they had, and we started working on that.'"

"This is a good one for representing how TSL operates, especially because of how there's such a quick turnaround with positions and everything. When people are a part of TSL, they very much move between different positions and adjust their levels of responsibility. There is very much the opportunity for people to turn their position into what is meaningful for them and work across sections. So that idea of interconnectedness and working as one big unit as opposed to isolated pieces I think is pretty applicable."

2. POLITICAL SYSTEM

Political organizations focus on members' individual interests and resources, with conflicts being solved through collaboration and negotiation for everyone's benefit.

"I think it applies to a pretty solid extent. Staff in general have pitched stories that they are either passionate about or things that they are really tied to, and ed board has definitely given that importance. When I was a news editor last semester, there were definitely a bunch of stories I pitched that were approved instantly. Like there was no pushback just because we've never done those kinds of stories before. And that was refreshing to see. Definitely trusting section editors with their job — I know ed board hasn't interfered much with the way they work, just encouraging greater cohesion and communication."

"I think it applies to like a pretty good extent. People are willing to have those conversations and listen to people's individual concerns and everything when they do come up, but there is still sort of this inherent anxiety or this inherent fear of approaching people that are above you in the organization, especially if you're a new writer. And I will say that those concerns are for the most part listened to, and I'm not 100% sure that all of them are carried through to fruition. But I think when people are like late on assignments or are struggling with the schedule, I do think they are given space to voice that, and it is a concern of the organizational structure and everything to make sure that individual people's needs are met in that sense."

3. BRAIN

Organizations that act like a brain are flexible and embrace making mistakes to improve. Hierarchy is de-emphasized, while collaboration, communication, learning, and participation are emphasized.

"We still have ed board. I think that's just how journalism works in general, like you have to have some kind of structure, and if that structure ends up being a hierarchy, that's not necessarily a bad thing. When you abuse the hierarchy, that's when it becomes really problematic. And I think other than ed board, most people on senior staff see themselves as equals."

"I think there is definitely strong emphasis on learning. Like I know a bunch of times like people writing for us for the first time have said, 'Oh, I really don't know how to do this,' and ed board or other people have stepped up and said, 'OK, this is how WordPress works. This is how we usually do things. This is how to use so and so software.'"

"In terms of flexibility, I think we're becoming less like super stringent on deadlines. We've had previous Editor-in-Chiefs where if a story is not in by Tuesday 6 or 8 p.m. it is not going into print. And we've been way, way, way more flexible, which is great because we've gotten more stories in, and it's given writers and editors some room to breathe. And obviously we're a newspaper, we have to stick to deadlines, but there's definitely flexibility in terms of deadlines and also the way we approach certain things."

"I definitely think that it does apply, if less in the actual structure of the organization than in the spirit of it. Because just with the way that pieces move through the process, that emphasis on hierarchy is still very much there, like across the production cycle. But while it is there, I do again at the same time feel like individually, there is that that focus on collaboration and participation across those lines."

"When people make mistakes at TSL, people are open about that, and people are good about being like, 'I dropped the ball, and I'm sorry, and here's what I'm going to do in the future.' And even the organizational culture of like making corrections, it's inherent to journalism."

