Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 10: Founders Day

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone, welcome to Yale Talk. I’m Peter Salovey, and I'm delighted to join you on Founders Day via video and podcast.

Today as Yale turns 319, it is fitting for us to reflect on Yale’s history, our current campus culture, and what we hope to achieve for the future. Of course, this reflection must take place in the context of this moment of social upheaval in our country. Our nation is in desperate need of leaders who can heal divisions and help us find a shared sense of unity, strength, and optimism. Together we need to teach our students to become such leaders. We need to work together to end the COVID-19 pandemic, and the social inequalities and health disparities that this public health crisis has emphasized. And we need to take action against longstanding anti-Black racism, injustice, and violence. We also need to find and implement solutions for other matters of existential urgency before it's too late. Our society needs cohesion in tackling these challenges. And we need research and educational institutions like Yale to explore the parts of our nature apt to help or hinder these monumental tasks.

In order to take on these, and all other great challenges and opportunities, Yale must attract, inspire, and support the finest and most committed individuals from every neighborhood in this country, every village in the world, and every point on the political spectrum. It is our responsibility to lead the change needed in society, through scholarship, research, and education. And of course, change begins within our own community of faculty, students, staff, and alumni. Earlier this week, I launched programs for the next phase of the “Belonging at Yale” initiative. Through these programs we will delve into our history, assess and build on our current actions, and support members of the university community.

These new initiatives are based on the recommendations of the President’s Committee on Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging. I formed this committee in January, and it was chaired by Kimberly Goff-Crews, university secretary and vice president for university life, and Gary Desir, vice provost for faculty development and diversity, Paul B. Beason Professor of Medicine, and chair of the Department of Internal Medicine. Kim and Gary are here with me today to discuss what it means to belong at Yale, and why it matters today, and to our future.

Kim and Gary, thank you for joining me for this special Founders Day podcast. I have questions for both of you.

Gary, you've been working on faculty excellence, recruitment, and retention for a long, long time. First as chair of Yale’s largest department, and now you also serve as vice provost for faculty development and diversity for the whole university. What are the best ways to continue to strengthen Yale’s ability to recruit the best educators, the best researchers, and practitioners in every field and from diverse backgrounds?

**Gary Desir:** Well, Peter, thank you very much for the invitation, and for asking such an important question. This is an important issue for me personally and professionally because of the impact I believe a diverse and excellent faculty can have in an academic community. As a university, we are very clear about our mission. In one aspect, we aim to educate and inspire the next generation, and we expand our fields of inquiry. What's perhaps implicit, but not often forcefully stated, is how do we go about achieving our mission? What else do we value? As we seek to attract and recruit talented faculty, who have other choices, who could join different institution, how we carry our mission becomes very important. I think faculty diversity matters. It matters because of scholarly excellence and a wide range of experiences and backgrounds. Underrepresented groups often look for mentors who have an understanding of their experience, and all students can benefit from opportunities to study and learn from faculty from diverse backgrounds.

I believe we should first commit to fostering a culture that is inclusive, collaborative, and professional; a culture that respects individual differences, that recognizes and values diverse talents, and one that helps each person reach their full potential. I am confident that such a culture would be very attractive to many talented faculty. Now as you know, faculty recruitment is carried out by individual schools and departments and programs. It’s important to appoint leaders who are committed to recruiting diverse faculty. And they should be committed to minimizing whatever institutional barriers that may hinder such recruitments. But I think it requires something else. I think it requires what I call an outward mindset, an open mindedness about the intrinsic value of certain fields of inquiry and a real commitment to fostering cultural respect.

And lastly, I want to say that an institution’s actions matter as much as its statements. In your recent announcement of an expansion of FEDI, which is the “Faculty Excellence and Diversity Initiative,” will allow us to push through a greater number of excellent scholars who bring diversity to the faculty. As you know, FEDI has been quite successful and has helped recruit more than 100 diverse ladder faculty to Yale over past six years. It has also brought to campus more than 40 presidential visiting fellows, who I believe have enriched our environment, our conversations, and our culture. I think those are some steps that will lead people to think of Yale as a place that values its faculty and wants to bring the very best here to New Haven.

**Peter:** Gary, there there’s no doubt that the commitment to recruiting a diverse and excellent faculty is there. And your work, and others before you, Rick Bribiescas, who had the position before you, are working very hard to bring faculty, here, across the university.

Then there's a second issue, and it has to do with keeping faculty here. Hoping that faculty will make Yale their life, stay here for a career, and we call that retention. How do we create, foster, sustain a campus culture that helps us retain exceptional faculty? How do we help faculty members really feel that they belong at Yale and never want to leave?

**Gary:** I agree wholeheartedly that faculty retention is something that we really need to focus on. It’s a real barrier to progress. Quite often we don’t know why faculty choose to leave Yale. There might be very good reasons or there might be reasons that are not so good. I think to better understand the issue, we will have to establish a formal exit interview process, which we will be doing. I also think that we should learn more about our climate. What is the campus climate? We should carry out surveys to obtain baseline data and then try to carry out what we can change and what changes over time.

I do believe that the process of retention is something that we should think about very early on in the process. It should be proactive, and really begin as soon as the person agrees to join Yale. Some important elements include the orientation process: what kind of mentoring plans we put in place, do we allocate resources in an equitable manner, or do we provide opportunities for networking, advocacy, and leadership development? I think all of these are important. Does someone have a voice? Are they feeling heard? And I think as importantly, faculty members need to feel a sense of connectedness. In my experience, affinity groups for faculty can play a role in improving the environment and climate and can increase one’s sense of belonging.

For instance, at the medical school, about 12 years ago, I helped organize the Minority Organization for Retention and Expansion. It goes by the acronym MORE and is an affinity group for faculty. For those underrepresented in medicine, it helps facilitate recruitment of faculty and trainees. It provides opportunities for mentoring, networking, leadership development, advocacy, and really importantly, social interactions. And that gives people a very strong connection. It gives people strength to navigate very large, very well-established institution like Yale. And we would like to expand MORE to the broader population at Yale, so they can feel a sense of belonging and actually stay here. This is clearly a work in progress, and I believe it will have a very positive impact on the climate.

**Peter:** So MORE started at the medical school, and now the idea is to spread it throughout the whole campus, right?

**Gary:** That’s right. We have a chapter of MORE for the sciences that’s in progress. And we are thinking of other chapters, for instance one in the humanities, and we are actively working on that.

**Peter:** You know I think about when I first started on the faculty, for me that was 1986. There was no formal orientation at all in those days. I got a key to my office, and in my office was a desk, a chair, and a file cabinet. And there you go: “Welcome to Yale.” But what really made me feel like I wanted to be here was my colleagues in my department. And someone who evolved into one of my very best friends was the faculty member next door to me, who started on the same day that I did.

There are many things the institution can do, but I love the idea of MORE fostering those social relationships that help someone really feel like they can make their lives here.

Kim let me ask you the same question but with the focus on students. You know the President's Committee on Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging made thoughtful recommendations on strengthening Yale generally, but what did they say about our students? What did you all say about our students?

**Kim Goff-Crews:** It’s interesting, Peter, because our sense is that when you help one constituency, you’re helping everyone else. And even our students will say that what you do for faculty retention, recruitment, the conversation that you and Gary just had, will actually help the student experience. And so, a lot of what we’re doing is going to help students as well. Of course, we have, as a committee, talked about continuing to support finding excellent candidates who are diverse and adding to the particular schools, continuing to support financial aid, so that we have socioeconomic diversity. All the things that we’re doing already for students, but I think that the recommendation that you have reached that I’m really excited about, is the one about supporting student’s ability to learn how to have difficult conversations.

This is one of the areas where students have been clear with us, that voiced that they would like to develop that skill set. And Marvin Chun and I had financed the pilot a few years back for peer-to-peer conversation about how best to do that. And we thought as a committee that we should reinstate that pilot, and you agreed. And I have to tell you that when I told the students that, “yes, we're going to do that,” they were very excited to be able to support their peers in that way, to have that skill. What’s interesting to me again, going back to the theme that once you help one community you are helping others, our faculty and staff, and actually alumni, who have actually said, “We’d like to actually develop that skill too.” As we are as working with students on the things that we’ve really highlighted for them, we’re going to be mindful about how that might carry over in other areas of the university as well.

**Peter:** It’s very, very important. It’s partly why we all went to college, right? We all enjoyed those interactions around difficult and challenging and controversial issues, and we learn in those conversations with our peers how to listen empathically and then how to really be willing to change our mind, as well as learning how to defend our own positions too.

Kim, you have served as vice president for university life for a year. What has been your proudest work so far?

**Kim:** What’s interesting about this particular expansion of my duties, because as you know I was really focused more on governance and the student experience specifically for several years, but now I have the purview of thinking about faculty, students, staff, and alumni, and the connection among all these groups. That has been a very rich experience, and of course, in this year, most of my time was spent working with Gary on creating these recommendations for you and for the university as we move ahead. That has been a really wonderful experience, working with these amazing colleagues, faculty, and staff, that were on a committee of students, faculty, staff, and alumni who spoke to us as part of this process. I think that probably the greatest joy has been delivering that report to you along with Gary recently.

**Peter:** Talk to me about what’s next. What are you looking forward to?

**Kim:** Well I’m looking forward to actually implementation. So, we have we’ve made a lot of recommendations. One of the things you have asked people to do is to write DEI plans. All of our units are providing DEI plans, and the reality is many people have been thinking about these issues for a long time. They have a sense of what they want to do, and now we’ve authorized him to really put that on paper and to figure out how they’re going to move forward. So, my excitement is actually to look at these plans, to be able to support leadership across the university, and making those a reality. I’m very excited to move into this phase of our planning.

**Peter:** You are very much right to point out this is not new. This is a continuum. We’ve been working on DEI for a number of years, and I look forward to implementing the new initiatives that have come out of the most recent planning process.

Gary, you and the other committee members have really made excellent recommendations for how we can work together to make Yale even more excellent in its ability to educate future leaders and create knowledge that benefits humanity. As I noted earlier, we’ve launched a series of programs that are based on your recommendations. With these programs, we hope to continue to lead the way in teaching and conducting research and scholarship that all can be of the highest caliber. To do that, we need to draw on the strengths, the diverse strengths of our community, and create a climate where members feel they belong and thrive.

What would belonging in that environment look like to you? How would you predict that future?

**Gary:** I think years from now as we walk around the campus and you ask anyone who is at Yale, staff faculty, alumni, students, you ask them, “how do you feel?” They would say, “well, you know we are valued, respected, and accepted by others. Our contributions to Yale, whatever they might be, are valued and respected. Our values match Yale’s values, and we feel safe here. We trust that Yale, the institution, has our best interests in mind. We are confident of that.” That’s what I would hope to hear from people who are at Yale.

**Peter:** So fundamentally it’s about respect.

**Gary:** It’s about respect.

**Peter:** And then how that gets internalized. Kim, what about you?

**Kim:** Yes, I have thought about this a lot, Peter, and one of the things in the research that we were reading is, as Gary said, is how people feel; that really a feeling of belonging is actually a feeling itself. Part of what I always remember is what we get to experience at commencement; is sitting on the stage looking out over this vast number of people, the students and their families, the faculty, and staff who were there to celebrate, and even the City of New Haven actually, celebrate their accomplishments. And we’re looking out, we see Connecticut Hall, which is the oldest building on campus, and this wave of humanity before us; all of the diversity of experiences and skill sets that are going be unleashed into the world. As well as having the next week, and the very next weekend, the opportunity to see our alumni in action as well. I think it’s that moment when you confer the degrees, where students, there’s this roar of excitement about the fact that we have all contributed to that journey. And I wish we could just bottle that because I think that’s the moment where people really feel they belong to Yale. It’s that Yale is an enterprise. That we all understand what the purpose is, because we’re seeing it in action, and we understand how we contributed to that moment. My view would be, I’d know we were successful because people feel that every day and not just on commencement or alumni reunion.

**Peter:** You know I was thinking about commencement and how much it makes one feel like, “This is my place. Yale is my place.” Right now, in the era of COVID, some of those big ceremonial opportunities just aren’t there. I would be interested, Kim, if you have any thoughts about how do we create that same institutional pride, same sense of belonging, when we are mostly working remotely over the internet?

**Kim:** Well, I think that we’re still all working on this, on similar projects, and still producing knowledge, and then we’re doing great teaching, and the fact that we’re doing it well and safely, considering everybody around us, is a way of staying connected. Yes, it’s wonderful when we are in the same space. Right now, we’re being mediated by Zoom, even in this conversation. But I do think that there’s a way in which we’re all trying to accomplish the work that we’re doing in this new space, and we’re using technology wisely. Even commencement, it was a celebration of the graduates, was successful because we all pitched in. There were versions of us—faculty, staff, and students—who showed up on our web performance for students. We’re going to use what we have, but I think it’s mostly about feeling connected to the mission of the institution, as Gary said, and as you’ve said, and knowing that that you know this will have passed.

**Peter:** This too shall pass. You know it’s interesting there’s no substitute for face to face interaction, and we all miss it desperately in this time of COVID. But I will say the ease with which we’ve all come to use technology, particularly ideal in some ways for pulling people in, for getting people to be part of a conversation, part of a group that they might not otherwise have been. I’m hoping that that spirit will carry forward when in fact COVID is behind us and when we’re all coming together for our teaching and research and other activities once again.

I have to thank you, Kim, and you, Gary, for the great work that you did leading this committee, but also for joining me for Founders Day. I’m so grateful for the time and effort and especially thoughtfulness that you put into being co-chairs of the President’s Committee on Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging. We have a lot to do to achieve our aspirations no doubt about it, and I look forward to continuing to work together with our colleagues, with our students, with our alumni, to improve every aspect of Yale’s educational and research programs, as well as campus life and campus operations. I think we can together foster a sense of belonging. I think we can continue to advance our university. I think these elements are essential to excellence.

To friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining me for this special episode of Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.