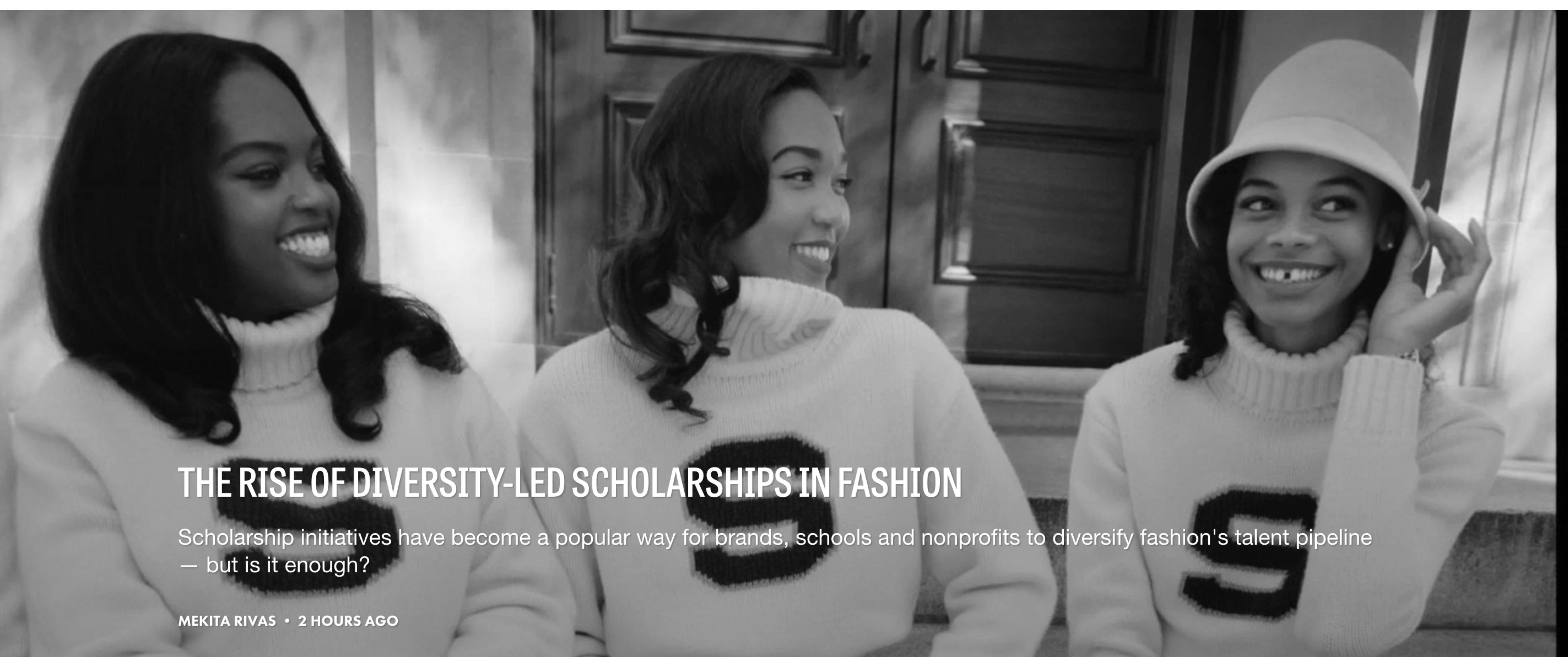


FASHIONISTA



THE RISE OF DIVERSITY-LED SCHOLARSHIPS IN FASHION

Scholarship initiatives have become a popular way for brands, schools and nonprofits to diversify fashion's talent pipeline — but is it enough?

MEKITA RIVAS • 2 HOURS AGO

Photo: Nadine Ijewere/Polo Ralph Lauren



When [Olivia Landau](#), founder and CEO of the jewelry startup [The Clear Cut](#), was studying to be a gemologist, she realized just how much everyone around her looked like, well, each other. The lack of diversity was stark for Landau, who's a woman of color and a first-generation American.

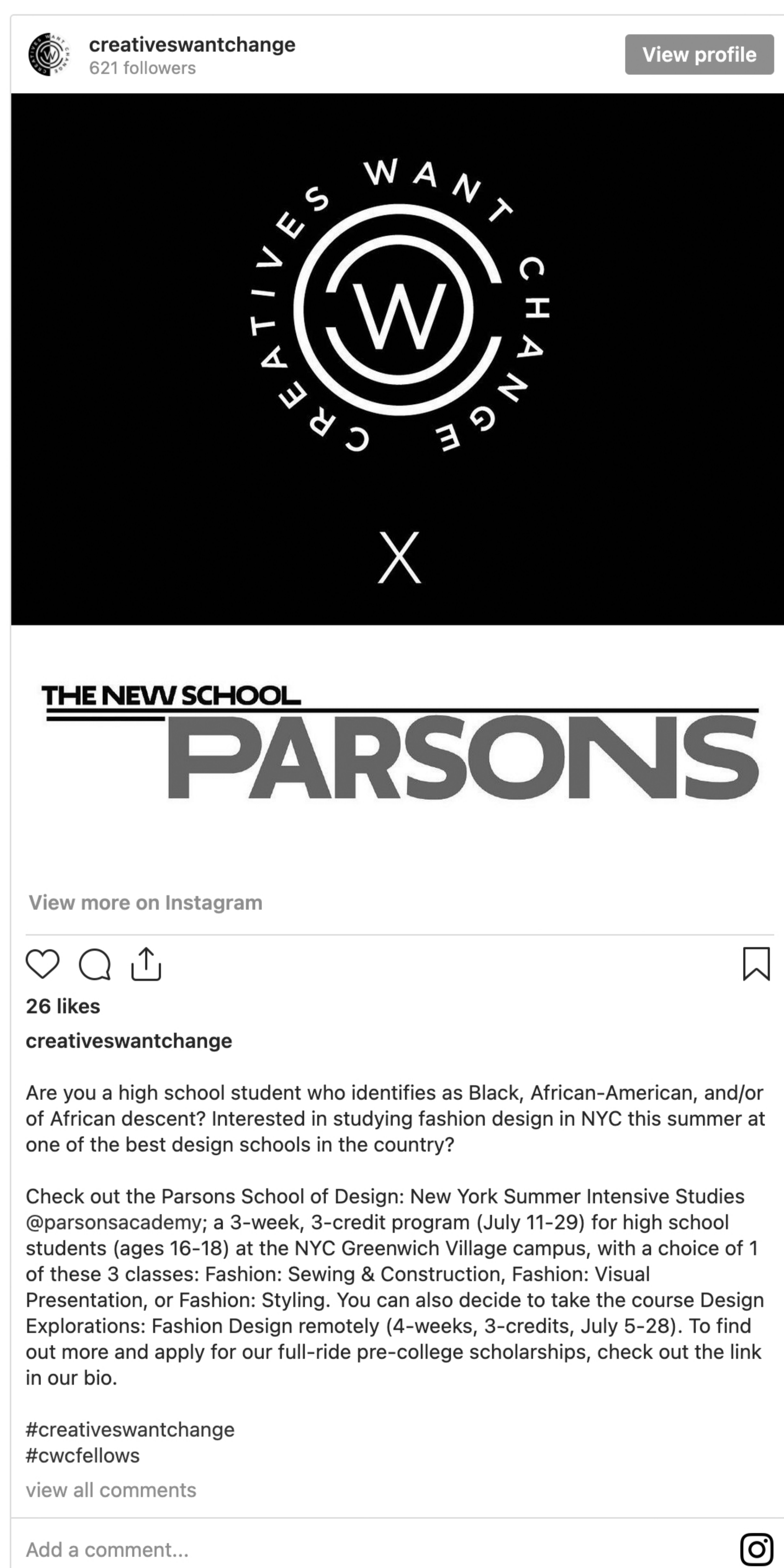
"The diamond industry, historically, [has been dominated by mostly middle-aged men](#)," Landau tells Fashionista. "Even to be a female entering this space is pretty new."

While attending the Gemological Institute of America, she noticed most of her peers already had familial connections to the industry. And because it's so insular, it's also inaccessible, Landau argues. "It's very niche, and it might not be a career many people had access to or knew was even an option," she says. "That leads to the industry being very homogeneous."

Landau set out on a mission to be different. Launching her own business meant she could inspire a new standard within the industry and open doors for underrepresented groups. In March 2021, in honor of International Women's Month, The Clear Cut created its first-ever Scholarship Fund for BIPOC women who want to pursue a career in the male-dominated jewelry industry.

THE NEED TO DISRUPT

Scholarships are only one piece of the puzzle, and in hopes of creating a more holistic support system for their communities, many BIPOC fashion execs are taking matters into their own hands. Launched in 2020, the non-profit [Creatives Want Change](#) aims to cultivate Black creative talent interested in the fashion industry, beginning at the high school level and continuing into early professional development.



The organization was founded by Randy Cousin, SVP of product concept and the People's Place Program for Tommy Hilfiger; Joe Medved, founder of Joe's Blackbook; and Matthew Kane, design director at Club Monaco. As part of the inaugural year, CWC announced 25 scholarships to Black American design students who went through pre-college summer fashion design programs during summer 2021. Program pillars included pre-educational opportunities, mentorship with industry professionals, college scholarships, internships and apprenticeships, and community exposure.

"The role brands can play in leveling the playing field for BIPOC students who want to work in fashion is to invest in an educational pipeline that disrupts the current college system," says Cousin. Tuition cost is [not the only roadblock](#). "Most BIPOC students can't afford to do pre-college programs, unpaid internships and SAT prep classes, all of which help most students get into college and land their first job. In addition, BIPOC students often go into tremendous debt to stay in college, and if they are lucky enough to finish their degree, find themselves in jobs that don't pay enough to survive and pay their debts."

If corporations really want to meet their diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) goals, Cousin posits, they must create paid internships and apprenticeship models "that circumvent the current college system," and train people with the skills they actually need, and then hire them directly. Companies can also help students through mentorships that give them the confidence and support they need to know what is possible in fashion and to eventually reach leadership roles beyond design positions.

"Most fashion students don't know all the career options available to them," notes Kane. "What about the VPs, COOs and CEOs of companies in fashion?"

While the CWC founders agree that a rise in diversity-led scholarships has been a step in the right direction, it's not enough to fundamentally shift the industry at large.

"I hope this trend continues. However, sending a few of the best students to college will not solve the broken system," says Cousin. "It's simply treating the symptom, not the illness. You can't give a student \$20,000 and think you have done them an immense favor, if every year of their degree costs \$50,000."

That's why, he explains, CWC is focusing on pre-college scholarships. The organization can fully cover the cost of the program: tuition, fees, room and board, travel, computers, sewing machines and other supplies. While CWC would like to eventually cover full-ride scholarships for undergraduate degrees in fashion design, Kane says that will require large multi-year commitments from companies to fund.

"Making significant change requires a dynamic response," says Kane. "It requires significant financial capital to account for income disparity that reduces opportunity, as well as human capital to foster the next generation and share a wealth of experience and expertise. Both of these investments require a long-term commitment because addressing systemic inequality can't happen overnight."