

MULTIRACIAL EQUITY IN CANADIAN ACADEMIA

BY SHANTANU BASU

The summer of 2020 has been a time of reckoning and reflection on racial issues in North America. Well publicized cases of mistreatment of Black and Indigenous people by police, in the United States and Canada, led to a movement highlighting these injustices, punctuated by street protests that people of all races have joined. The isolation imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic may also have contributed to this movement, by giving people the time to reflect on larger societal issues and act on them.

How are Canadian universities faring? In a country that proudly promotes its multiculturalism, Canadian universities may see themselves as a bastion of diversity and inclusiveness. Does the data support this? Well, here is the first problem: *we don't keep much data!* In 2017, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [1], as part of an investigation on diversity, asked 76 Canadian universities if they kept data of the racial backgrounds of their students; 63 of these universities said that they did not. Tracking the race of university faculty and staff is also generally lacking. Some people think that collecting such data is not allowed, but according to the Ontario Human Rights Code, collecting such data for a Code-consistent purpose *is* permitted, and is in accordance with Canada's human rights legislative framework [2]. In the United States, the federal Affirmative Action program has meant that organizations receiving federal funds have to document their equity practices and metrics, and it has unquestionably led to significant changes in the racial diversity of American university campuses [3]. In Canada, we have no such mandate, so racial equity in universities has been left in the hands of those who run the universities. There is much to be done. As scientists we recognize the importance of quantitative data and would rightly feel that avoidance of data is unacceptable. Without data on diversity, there is simply no accountability. While I could relate

heartbreaking stories of inequity that I personally know about, without data on diversity in the university cohort, in hiring and promotion practices, on salaries, etc., such stories remain anecdotal and action is easily avoided.

Nevertheless, here is some data that we do have about Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) representation in academia. Black people constitute 6% of university students in Canada but only 1.9% of faculty members [4]. Indigenous people are 5% of the population but less than 1.5% of faculty members [4]. Blacks and People of Colour (hereafter BPOC) constitute at least 22% (2016 census) of the population and 40% of university students [4]. Their share of university faculty and staff positions are well below these percentages. A survey of physics departments in Canada estimated that there were less than five Black faculty members in the entire country and no Black women [5]. POC have greater representation, but still below their reference population numbers and spread unevenly.

The Canada Research Chairs program has taken the transformative step of requiring universities to meet equity targets for CRC holders. By 2030, the representation of women, BPOC, Indigenous people, and People with Disabilities should be 51%, 22%, 5%, and 8%, respectively, with a smaller percentage target of each that was to be implemented by the start of 2020. These targets were established after a legal settlement was reached from a complaint brought by eight academics to the Canadian Human Rights Commission [6]. The CRC goals are still modest, given the decade long implementation period, and the target representation of the fast-growing BPOC population for 2030 is based on the 2016 census [7]. There is also a concern that BPOC women (hereafter WOC) will be left behind in this implementation. As a result of this requirement, universities are keeping metrics of its CRC holders and I hope this will extend to the total (full-time and part-time) faculty and staff cohorts.

I focus now on my institution, Western, not just because I know it best, but because some of our experiences may be common across Canada. Ethnic/race data at Western is limited by the participation rate of respondents to a voluntary equity survey, currently estimated to be about 70% in the case of faculty members. According to available data presented through Western's Equity and Human Rights Services [8], the percentage of BPOC staff and faculty are



SUMMARY

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8.1% and 14.5%, respectively, while the percentage of Indigenous staff and faculty are 0.8% and 0.5%, respectively. The BPOC and Indigenous staff percentages represent one-half and one-third, respectively, of the reference populations in London. The BPOC faculty percentage is about two-thirds of the national level, and is also spread very unevenly, with one Faculty in the university carrying a significant part of the cohort. At the student level we don't have firm numbers, but they seem to be similar to the national numbers of 40% BPOC students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels [4]. Our student-body is offering us an obvious pathway to creating the diverse faculty cohort of the future.

An incident of egregious racism against a WOC student at Western in 2019 led our President to constitute an Anti-Racism Working Group (ARWG) that was tasked with gathering reflections from all university community members and issuing a final report. The ARWG report at Western [9] reveals a pervasive culture of racism that remains deeply entrenched and privileges some groups over others. It is unlikely that this is unique to Western. Findings included that racism is gendered and intersectional, in that WOC are the most likely to experience it. Students reported a desire to see more professors and support staff (including notably in the residence hall experience) who look like them. Training of all personnel on cultural competency and the nature of racial microaggressions was recommended. Finally, it was recognized that the scale of marginalization could not be fully understood or acted upon until there was robust and publicly accessible demographic data on Western's student, faculty, and staff populations.

In the United States, the American Institute of Physics undertook a two-year study by a multidisciplinary panel called TEAM-UP to assess the participation of African-American students in physics. The TEAM-UP report [10], released in November 2019, draws several conclusions. I note the first two: 1. Fostering a sense of belonging is essential for student persistence and success; 2. To persist, students must perceive themselves, and be perceived by others, as future physicists and astronomers. These are powerful insights and a call to action, illustrating that such a climate is largely lacking. Ask yourself: is it possible that in your department BIPOC graduate students do not have the access to faculty members for support and mentorship that their White colleagues take for granted?

One of the most effective ways to create a successful environment is to achieve a minimum level of gender and ethnic diversity. According to a study by the consulting firm McKinsey [11], companies that successfully implement Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) are likely to outperform those that do not. They found that for EDI success employees need to feel and perceive equality and fairness of opportunity in their workplace. There is also a clear correlation between superior performance and having at least 30% female representation on executive teams; the correlation with ethnic diversity was at

least as strong. In this article I will adopt 30% representation as the minimum requirement for creating an inclusive environment that is less likely to be described as "chilly". Another important study is the 2019 Universities Canada report on EDI [4]. It shows that gender balance has been achieved in most university senior leadership positions, but still lags somewhat at the top positions of President, Provost, and VP Research (although the percentage of women is now between 33% and 39% in these categories). However, the BPOC representation in senior leadership is only 8.3% and Indigenous representation is 2.9%. More than 70% of universities say that they either have no EDI strategy or action plan, or that it is still in development. Only 13.4% of universities say that they have an EDI plan in place and are fully implementing the plan and reporting on progress.

Here then are three main problems that I believe we face in Canadian academia when it comes to EDI:

1. A lack of comprehensive data on demographics, and on equity in internal processes like hiring, promotion, career advancement, and salaries, thereby reducing accountability for practices that are harmful to EDI.
2. The available data already points to systematic underrepresentation of BIPOC among faculty and staff, and in senior leadership positions.
3. Surveys of the climate/culture are turning up notable problems faced by BIPOC students, faculty, and staff.

The above issues are notable and are increasingly challenging to remedy as one goes down the list. Here are three recommendations that I feel are the minimum requirement to move the needle.

1. **Gather data.** All universities (and faculty associations or unions) should gather demographic data on their cohorts. While ethnic identity may be fluid and some may choose not to pick a category, it is important to emphasize that this is being done to improve EDI awareness and performance. I believe that most people will respond positively, and we can strive to collect data with at least as much completeness as do our American counterparts [12]. Furthermore, a systematic review should be done on hiring practices, the promotion and tenure process, career advancement, and salary as it relates to race and ethnicity. Most organizations have already done this when it comes to gender and are familiar with the methodology.
2. **Action toward creating a diverse and inclusive environment.** We need to acknowledge that search committees are plagued by implicit bias and affinity bias. Their decisions mean that universities can be very slow to diversify due to the length of tenured positions. Diversity training alone has proven to not make a difference [13,14]. All universities need to mandate gender and BIPOC diversity on their search committees, with at least 30% representation of women and

at least 30% representation of BIPOC members (of course some members will fall into both categories). A target should be set within each unit to reach at least 30% BIPOC faculty members within a reasonable time frame (less than 10 years!). Having a diverse cohort is ultimately the key requirement in building an inclusive environment that will make the institution attractive to BIPOC faculty and students. Faculty candidates should be required to submit diversity statements and expect to be asked about what they will do to enhance diversity. Departments should have mission statements about their commitment to diversity and a safe environment free of discrimination, bullying, and harassment, with concrete action plans to follow through.

3. Support for BIPOC students, the faculty members of the future. We have an amazing opportunity before us, given that at least 40% of the national undergraduate and graduate cohorts are BIPOC. A deeper effort can be made to recruit Black students, and Indigenous student numbers are still well below the population average. These can indeed be done, as the rapid success of the University of Toronto's

Community of Support initiative for its medical school demonstrates [15]. BIPOC students often feel lost without mentors or role models with whom they can identify. If a student finds a teacher or mentor who looks like them it can have a great impact [10]. We can foster networks at each university and at the national level, so that BIPOC students don't just seek support within their own department, where it may be limited or not exist. Excellent ideas like the Women in Physics conferences can be used as a template for building events (now online, which can expand inclusivity) to present work and connect with colleagues. Fostering a sense of belonging brings the confidence among BIPOC students that they can be the professors of the future.

We are currently in public health crisis that has also spawned economic and social crises. Higher education is strongly affected, and many of us are undoubtedly wondering if things will ever be the same. Let us also find an opportunity to remake academia in a more equitable mold, ushering in new ideas and progress in physics at the same time.

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