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# Moving Beyond Diversity Using Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought to Foster Black Inclusion Through Undergraduate University Admissions

## Transcender la diversité Recourir à la théorie critique de la race et à la pensée féministe noire pour favoriser l'intégration des Noirs dans les admissions universitaires de premier cycle

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Volume 45, Number 1, 2024

Dialogues and Reflections: The Scarborough Charter

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1114671ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1114671ar>

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Publisher(s)

Mount Saint Vincent University

ISSN

1715-0698 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Taylor, C. & Gomashie, G. (2024). Moving Beyond Diversity: Using Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought to Foster Black Inclusion Through Undergraduate University Admissions. *Atlantis*, 45(1), 39–51. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1114671ar>

Article abstract

This paper argues that concrete actions are needed to address anti-Black racism and foster Black inclusion in Canadian higher education. These pertinent actions should target the systemic barriers faced by Black students when accessing post-secondary institutions. Through our reflections on current admissions practices of research-intensive Ontario-based universities, this paper highlights how currently used frameworks of diversity and inclusion may not be effective in disrupting the myth of meritocracy and mitigating systemic barriers faced by Black undergraduate applicants. We recommend that undergraduate admissions practices be grounded in a critical understanding of the four principles of the Scarborough Charter (Black flourishing, inclusive excellence, mutuality, and accountability) to support Black admissions, and that critical race theory and Black feminist thought be used as frameworks to create specific admissions practices and programs that disrupt anti-Black racism. The paper will generate further discussions on what it means to foster Black inclusion through university admissions and enrolment in a transformative manner.

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# Moving Beyond Diversity: Using Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought to Foster Black Inclusion Through Undergraduate University Admissions

by Christopher Stuart Taylor and Grace A. Gomashie

**Abstract:** This paper argues that concrete actions are needed to address anti-Black racism and foster Black inclusion in Canadian higher education. These pertinent actions should target the systemic barriers faced by Black students when accessing post-secondary institutions. Through our reflections on current admissions practices of research-intensive Ontario-based universities, this paper highlights how currently used frameworks of diversity and inclusion may not be effective in disrupting the myth of meritocracy and mitigating systemic barriers faced by Black undergraduate applicants. We recommend that undergraduate admissions practices be grounded in a critical understanding of the four principles of the Scarborough Charter (Black flourishing, inclusive excellence, mutuality, and accountability) to support Black admissions, and that critical race theory and Black feminist thought be used as frameworks to create specific admissions practices and programs that disrupt anti-Black racism. The paper will generate further discussions on what it means to foster Black inclusion through university admissions and enrolment in a transformative manner.

**Résumé :** Cet article soutient que des mesures concrètes sont nécessaires pour lutter contre le racisme envers les Noirs et favoriser l'intégration des Noirs dans l'enseignement supérieur canadien. Ces mesures pertinentes devraient cibler les obstacles systémiques auxquels font face les étudiants noirs lorsqu'ils accèdent aux établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire. Par nos réflexions sur les pratiques actuelles d'admission dans les universités ontariennes de recherche intensive, cet article souligne comment les cadres de diversité et d'inclusion actuellement utilisés peuvent s'avérer inefficaces pour briser le mythe de la méritocratie et atténuer les obstacles systémiques auxquels font face les candidats noirs de premier cycle. Nous recommandons que les pratiques d'admission au premier cycle soient fondées sur une compréhension critique des quatre principes de la Charte de Scarborough (l'épanouissement des Noirs, l'excellence inclusive, la mutualité et la responsabilisation) afin de favoriser les admissions des Noirs, et que la théorie critique de la race et la pensée féministe noire servent de cadres pour créer des pratiques et des programmes d'admission qui perturbent le racisme envers les Noirs. Cet article suscitera d'autres discussions sur ce que représente le fait de favoriser l'intégration des Noirs de manière transformatrice dans l'admission et l'inscription dans les universités.

**Keywords:** admissions; anti-Black racism; Black affinity groups; equity and inclusion; restorative justice; systems change

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## Introduction

This paper reflects on current admissions practices of research-intensive Ontario-based universities and highlights that currently used frameworks of equity, diversity, and inclusion may not be effective in disrupting the myth of meritocracy and mitigating systemic barriers faced by Black undergraduate applicants. We argue that post-secondary institutions adopt admissions practices and programs shaped by the perspectives of critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and the foundational principles of the Scarborough Charter to address anti-Black racism and foster Black inclusion in Canadian higher education. Examining admissions practices is a key issue as post-secondary institutions acknowledge and work towards combating anti-Black racism as expressed in their signing of the Scarborough Charter in 2021. With over 50 post-secondary institutions as signatories, there is a strong national collaborative attempt to offer concrete measures to redress these current challenges and foster Black inclusion in higher education. Following the murder of George Floyd, post-secondary institutions in Canada have made varied, disparate efforts to address anti-Black racism, including activities such as issuing public statements, the formation of anti-Black racism task-forces, cluster hires of Black faculty, and in some cases the creation of Black Studies programs. Institutions, including but not limited to York University, the University of British Columbia, Dalhousie University, the University of Toronto, and Toronto Metropolitan University, have developed or are developing Black Studies or African and Africana Studies programs (CBC News 2021; Orford 2021). However, while post-secondary institutions are willing signatories, implementation of the non-binding principles and actions outlined in the Scarborough Charter is widely thought to be slow. As the signing of the Scarborough Charter passed its two-year mark in November 2023, we are interested in the ongoing initiatives of signatory institutions to mitigate

systemic anti-Black racism. In particular, we reflect on the public-facing admissions policies for domestic and international Black applicants seeking undergraduate enrolment in the 2023-2024 academic year. This real-time account provides a useful assessment of the resources post-secondary institutions have made available to Black applicants as they prepared to submit their university applications by winter 2023, the deadline for most undergraduate programs.

Our reflections, which contribute to future discussions on tracing the development and assessing the effectiveness of Black-inclusion programs, are shaped by our positionality. We, as researchers, feel that our social identities inform how we approach this work. Our research team comprises the following individuals working in Canadian universities: a Black woman who is a postdoctoral researcher in the field of equity; and a Black man working as a senior executive in equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism. Our races, genders, and lived experiences working within post-secondary institutions inform how we understand White supremacy, anti-Black racism, and the importance of the perspectives of critical race theory and Black feminist thought. We also want to point out that for this paper, we define "Black" as an aggregate term for individuals who identify as African, Black Caribbean, Black North American, Afro-Latin, and persons of African descent or origin. While we recognize the unique cultures, languages, and customs across these communities, we define "Black" in this way in consideration of ideological, political, and social constructions of Pan-African ideals of "Black" and in consideration of how the Black race-based data obtained through Canadian census reports describe Black student experiences and Black population numbers as aggregate data. However, we are cognizant of how "Blackness" is viewed as a shifting category for those who may, or may not, identify as "Black."

In the remaining parts of the paper, we contextualize anti-Black racism in the broader national environment in terms of Canada's image as a "multicultural nation," followed by the theoretical underpinnings of the study. We then identify the systemic barriers facing Black students when assessing higher education, highlight some case studies of ongoing inclusive admissions policies and practices, and share our conclusions and suggestions for future work.

## Multiculturalism in Canada

Canada is a settler-colonial nation-state that labels and prides itself as being multicultural - with the Government of Canada describing multiculturalism as a sociological fact of Canadian life (Brosseau and Dewing 2018). The results of the recent national census also support this multicultural image or reputation of Canada, with over 90% of the population, aged 15 and older, agreeing that "ethnic or cultural diversity is a Canadian value" (Statistics Canada 2022,1). The census also highlights a rich religious and ethnocultural portrait, with over 450 ethnic and cultural origins, 450 languages, 200 places of births, 100 religions, and a growing racialized (or non-White) population (16.1% of the total population). Black people are the third largest group, representing 4.3% of the total population, with a greater presence in Ontario and Quebec. Figures like these are often regarded with a sense of pride, as many feel ethno-cultural representation is one of Canada's strengths. However, underlying these numbers, as acknowledged by Statistics Canada, was the worsening of racial inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic, brought into the mainstream spotlight by the Black Lives Matter movement, anti-Asian discrimination, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on residential schools (Statistics Canada 2022). Political or ideological multiculturalism is not just about numbers. Rather, the census data should be "used by public decision-makers, employers and service providers in health care, education and justice to better meet the needs of all groups in Canadian society and to foster an inclusive society and social cohesion" (Statistics Canada 2022, 1). Leigh Patel, in *No Study Without Struggle: Confronting Settler Colonialism in Higher Education*, stated: "Understanding settler colonialism as an ongoing structure provides a more robust route to understanding how various populations experience distinct but deeply connected forms of marginalization from formal institutions... including higher education" (2021, 27). We contend that the contrived benevolence of "accepted" ideals of

multiculturalism obfuscates the true nature of settler colonial oppression in Canada.

Notions of "multiculturalism," particularly as it is understood in Canada since 1971, the year the country released its official policy on multiculturalism, subvert critical discussions about structural racism against non-White peoples, often ignoring their experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and oppression to make space for the cultural mosaic—Canada's seemingly-inclusive response to the American melting pot. This understanding of multiculturalism negates the true message of multicultural "inclusion" in Canada: that it must fit within a bicultural (phenotypically white and linguistically English and French) framework. Hence, the importance of applying critical race theory to the machinations of white hegemony in Canada. Ironically, when the Canadian government claims that "Canada's history of settlement and colonization has resulted in a multicultural society made up of three founding peoples—Indigenous, French, and British—and of many other racial and ethnic groups" (Brosseau and Dewing 2018), it erases the occupation, genocide, and acts of violence committed by European colonizers so as to emphasize the new "diverse world" created through settlement and colonization. In addition to the erasure of colonial violence, another challenge that arises through Canada's emphasis on "multiculturalism" is the aggregation of experiences of racism across racialized communities. In fact, institutions often do work to eliminate racism more broadly without understanding how different communities experience racial violence in distinct ways (Dei 2000).

Anti-Black racism, in particular, is a foundational feature of Canada, embedded deeply within institutions. Black Canadian scholars, including but not limited to Rinaldo Walcott (2021), Carl E. James (2023), Awad Ibrahim et al. (2022), Afua Cooper (2006), Robyn Maynard (2017), Barrington Walker (2020), Natasha L. Henry (2021), David Austin (2023), Funké Aladejebi and Michele A. Johnson (2022), Adrienne Shadd et al. (2009), and Kitossa et al. (2019), have researched and written extensively to expose the "myth" of the Great White North. These scholars have added to the literature on the historical and contemporary prevalence of Black exclusion and anti-Black racism in Canada. It was thirty years ago that Stephen Lewis, then Advisor on Race Relations to the Premier of Ontario, wrote that "what we are dealing with, at root, and fundamentally, is anti-[B]lack racism ... just as the soothing balm of 'multiculturalism' cannot mask racism, so racism cannot mask its

primary target” (Lewis 1992). Despite its inability to disrupt anti-Black racism, multiculturalism is a key concept that manifests in institutions across the country as organizations work to create social change using frameworks of equity, diversity, and inclusion. One may argue that the policies of equity, diversity, and inclusion in Canada are founded on the ideological principles of multiculturalism. Higher education is not exempt from these efforts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, attempts at social change often “amount to no more than well-worded mission statements and cosmetic changes” (Henry et al. 2017) that do nothing to disrupt the “inequality, indifference, and reliance on outmoded conservative traditions [that] characterize the modern neoliberal university” (Henry et al. 2017). Systemic anti-Black racism and normalization of Whiteness are also foundational to post-secondary institutions (Crenshaw et al. 1996; Henry et al. 2017; Lewis 1992) and require frameworks that move beyond equity, diversity, and inclusion to admit and support Black students, enabling them to flourish and thrive.

## **Critical Race Theory, Black Feminist Thought and Scarborough Charter**

The framework we use for this study is the Scarborough Charter (2021); we apply its four overarching principles, namely “Black flourishing,” “Inclusive Excellence,” “Mutuality,” and “Accountability” to Black university admissions. The Scarborough Charter was designed to support “inclusive excellence” for Black communities in post-secondary institutions in Canada. Intersectional Black flourishing recognizes the pivotal role of universities and colleges in advancing and disseminating knowledge and innovative research and their ability to address structural barriers for Black applicants to foster equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice. The principle of inclusive excellence encourages higher education institutions to embrace equity, diversity, and inclusion in their governance, research, teaching, and learning as well as lead the conversation and actions around redressing anti-Black racism and restorative justice and promote a more intersectional, equitable, and inclusive society. Furthermore, guided by the principle of mutuality in their engagement, interactions, and relations with Black communities at a local, regional, national, or international scale, institutions of higher education must acknowledge their role as anchor institutions in fostering economic development in the Black community. With accountability in mind, universities and colleges can commit to meaningful continuous education and improvement and pledge

to take concrete action to implement inclusion across their structures, policies, and procedures. They can advance policies that respect, acknowledge, and support the complexity and intersectionality of Black life. In adopting these principles, post-secondary institutions can perform actionable commitments in the areas of governance, research, teaching, and learning, and community engagement, as outlined in the Scarborough Charter.

Critical race theory and Black feminist thought are key references for the Scarborough Charter as they are essential to disrupting anti-Black racism through their analysis of racial power and Whiteness. Critical race theory was born out of extensive research by predominately racialized legal scholars whose work “challenge[s] the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole” (Crenshaw et al. 1996). Crenshaw et al. go on to explain that critical race theory scholars must work “to understand how a regime of White supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America” (Crenshaw et al. 1996). Broadly speaking, critical race theory affirms the existence of racism, racial power, and White supremacy. As such, social analyses using critical race theory must understand how White supremacy perpetuates the subordination of racialized people in order to change the current structures of racial power. Unfortunately, common interpretation of the term White supremacy focuses on individuals committing acts of racial violence, instead of systems of oppression. Legal scholar, E.L. Ansley, disrupts this:

By “[W]hite supremacy” I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of [W]hite supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic and cultural system in which [W]hites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of [W]hite superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of [W]hite dominance and non-[W]hite subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Ansley 1989)

Critical to the discussion of White supremacy is how invisible and covert it is in perpetuating systemic racism. In fact, “critical race theorists argue that the majority of racism remains hidden beneath a veneer of normality, and it is only the more crude and obvious forms of ra-

cism that are seen as problematic by most people” (Gillborn 2015). That White supremacy as the foundation to institutional structures, policies, and practices is often unseen implies there is a neutrality to institutions that is simply not true. This false narrative of neutrality furthers false notions of meritocracy in a feedback loop, which suggests that the experiences of racialized individuals are due to their own failings and not the system that oppresses and excludes them. It is unfortunate that in Canada, even with the reactions following the 2020 murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, most post-secondary institutions have yet to significantly challenge the ideals of “neutrality,” “merit,” and “excellence.” Critical race theory challenges the fallacy of fairness by making space to refute hegemonic ontologies.

Additionally, Black feminist thought layers atop critical race theory to ensure the unique experiences of Black women are not overlooked while institutions work to understand the racism and oppression faced by racialized people more broadly. Black feminist thought centers the experiences of Black women and ensures that anti-racism efforts examine the intersections of race, class, and gender, amongst other facets of identities (Crenshaw 1989). Black feminist thought also highlights misogyny to describe anti-Black racist misogyny experienced by Black women, which is often disregarded when institutions focus solely on gender diversity (Bailey and Trudy 2018).

In the academy, for example, there has been extensive focus (of late) on the recruitment of women into science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs due to their disproportionately lower enrollment rates (LaForce et al. 2016). Most institutions do not appear to disaggregate these data by race to identify specific approaches that are needed to encourage young Black women to enroll in STEM programs. Instead, there is a broader focus on gender “diversity” and an erasure of unique experiences of discrimination and racism being faced by Black women students.

## **Systemic Barriers Faced by Black Students**

The principles of critical race theory and Black feminist thought highlight why narratives of diversity and multiculturalism fail to disrupt anti-Black racism in education. Indeed, Lewis outlined this failure in his 1992 report on race relations to the premier of Ontario:

While it is obviously true that every visible minority community experiences the indignities and wounds of systemic discrimination throughout Southern Ontario, it is the Black community which is the focus. It is Blacks who are being shot, it is Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in schools, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping out.... (Lewis 1992)

These observations ring true decades later, and it is still well documented that domestic Black students experience disparate outcomes in education compared to their peers across Canada (James and Turner 2017; Turcotte 2020). In 2000, the Ontario Ministry of Education released a Code of Conduct for Ontario schools and made changes to the Education Act to provide educators with increased authority to suspend and expel students (James and Turner 2017). Assumptions of neutrality would suggest that since this policy applies to all students equally, this is a fair policy change that serves to keep classrooms focused and safe. Challenging the concept of hegemonic “neutrality” is at the core of critical race theory and Black feminist thought. In practice, however, it was Black students who were disproportionately impacted by the zero-tolerance nature of the new Code of Conduct. Toronto District School Board (TDSB) data released in 2015 reveal that 42% of Black students in high school were suspended at least once, compared to 18% of White students and 18% of other racialized students from 2006 to 2011 (James and Turner 2017). Expulsion data were worse: 48% of all expulsions were Black students, despite Black students only representing 12% of all students (James and Turner 2017). Not only were these punishments disproportionately experienced by Black students but they also contributed to the ongoing associations of criminality with Blackness and Black youth and exacerbated the school-to-prison pipeline (James and Turner 2017). Additionally, these disciplinary measures exacerbated the disparate outcomes experienced by Black youth as they resulted in students missing school, thereby impacting their grades for potential university applications. Since Black youth are not more disruptive than their peers, we must examine these data through a critical race theory and Black feminist thought analysis to see how the education system failed these students and how interpersonal anti-Black racism manifests in the discretion that educators use to selectively enforce this Code of Conduct. In addition to experiencing excessive

discipline, researchers found that 53% of Black high school students in the TDSB were enrolled in academic courses compared to 81% of White and 80% of other racialized students (James and Turner 2017). Once again, it is important that we use critical race theory and Black feminist thought to analyze these data and disrupt notions of neutrality. The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the period of enslavement and colonization in Canada and throughout the British imperialism in the Americas facilitated the dehumanization and criminalization of Black bodies (Maynard, 2017). Enslavement was a process of legislated illiteracy; it was illegal for enslaved peoples to read or write. “Education” was a tool for empowerment and liberation (Taylor 2016). Notably, Canadian universities are founded on admissions processes that prioritize academic courses in secondary school as a prerequisite for admission. This feeds into the fallacious myth of “merit,” a concept that critical race theory thoroughly rebukes. As such, James and Turner’s (2017) research on secondary school processes of disproportionately streaming Black students into applied classes is linked to the lower feasibility and likelihood of said students pursuing and attending post-secondary education. High schools play a key role in determining access to post-secondary education through academic and applied streams of study (Robson et al. 2019; Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario 2020). Students in an applied track of study, who are primarily racialized students, especially Black boys and those from lower-income households, are less likely to complete their high school education and gain admission to post-secondary programs as compared to their colleagues in the academic stream. They also obtain lower assessment scores for math and literacy (Robson et al. 2019; Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario 2020).

In fact, Statistics Canada data on educational attainment of youth in Canada also reveal disproportionalities for Black students at the post-secondary level:

Black youth were less likely than other youth to attain a postsecondary qualification. For example, among Black boys aged 13 to 17 in 2006, approximately half (51%) had a post-secondary qualification in 2016 (when they were aged 23 to 27), compared with 62% of other boys [and] 34% of Black girls aged 13 to 17 in 2006 had a university degree 10 years later, compared with 41% of other girls from the same cohort. (Turcotte 2020)

These data indicate that Black students are either not entering and/or not graduating from post-secondary institutions at rates equal to their peers. Given that post-secondary institutions are not neutral spaces and are grounded in White supremacy, this information raises questions about why these students have lower educational attainment at the post-secondary level.

Similarly, international Black applicants may face barriers caused by systemic racism when applying to Canadian institutions (Irete 2022). For example, a report highlighting experiences of racism by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (the federal government department responsible for administering student visas) revealed that there were “widespread internal references to certain African nations as ‘the dirty 30’” and that employees often stereotyped Nigerians as “corrupt or untrustworthy” (Pollara Strategic Insights 2021). These associations once again reveal the connotations of criminality rooted in enslavement that are associated with Black students, this time crossing international borders to create barriers to accessing university education.

Data on successful student visa applications also highlight how challenging it can be for international students to attend university in Canada: “In the first half of 2020, most African countries sat well below the 48 percent average approval rate. Countries like Ethiopia and Cameroon hovered at 19 per cent, and Burundi as low as four per cent” (Irete 2022). Inextricably linked to decisions regarding which international students are granted visas are capitalism and economic privilege. As part of the student visa application, all international students over the age of 18 must submit proof of financial support in the amount of at least \$10,000 per year, plus \$833 per month (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2022). These financial requirements do not take into account the high international tuition costs or the additional sums required to support any family members immigrating with the student. Therefore, even if a Black international student manages to have their student visa approved, there is a large concurrent financial obligation before relocating to Canada.

In addition to the systemic barriers that Black international students face at the government level, universities sometimes create access barriers to education. Some students are required to take English-language tests even if they speak the language fluently and have been educated in English (CBC News 2022). As highlighted in a CBC News story, Nigerian students, for example, are often

asked to provide proof of English proficiency, despite English being the official language of the country (2022). In the words of students cited in this news story: “In Nigeria from the preschool to kindergarten to elementary school to high school we have been taught in English” and “it’s unacceptable and likely just an oversight that has just continued on for decades” (CBC News 2022). Additionally, the fees for these tests can be prohibitive for some, creating an additional access barrier.

Finally, universities may not be equipped to analyze international curricula to ensure that applicants from countries outside Canada have the correct prerequisite courses. To be “included” one must “fit” within dominant and oppressive structures of admissibility. While some schools follow the British-patterned education system or the International Baccalaureate system (both of which are commonly assessed in Canadian universities), others may follow domestic education systems (e.g. West African Examinations Council) that may be unfamiliar to those reviewing university applications in Canada. If a university is unable to perform curricular analyses for school systems outside of Canada, this may add to the barriers that Black international students face as the prerequisite knowledge they have already acquired may not be understood or accounted for in the review of their application.

These barriers (racist stereotypes impacting visa approval, burden of financial proof, English-language proficiency tests, and lack of curricula conversions) all act to decrease access to university education for Black international students. For domestic Black students, systemic policies like streaming, coupled with the anti-Black racism seen in disciplinary decisions, create barriers that may prevent admission to undergraduate programs at the university level. It is important for post-secondary institutions to be cognizant of these barriers and effectively create and adopt policies and programs to remediate, if not eliminate, them.

## Case Studies

Having provided a brief overview of the challenges facing Black domestic and international students and the need for the perspectives of critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and aspects of the Scarborough Charter, we highlight some cases of specific policies and programs targeted at fostering Black inclusion in higher education. We contextualize our analyses and reflections

on admissions practices, and focus on six Ontario-based universities, namely McMaster University, Queen’s University, University of Ottawa, University of Toronto, University of Waterloo, and Western University. These universities are a part of a 15-member university association, known as the U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities, which includes some of the most research-intensive institutions in Canada. Collectively, the member universities of this association conduct research valued at \$8.5 billion annually and hold at least 80% of contracted private-sector research and university patents (U15 Canada 2023). Nationally, they train more full-time graduate students (58%) and attract more sponsored research funding (77%). These impressive numbers suggest that member universities are very well positioned to implement actions outlined in the Scarborough Charter framework to address anti-Black racism and therefore make good case studies. We limit our reflections and critique to admissions pathways and the availability of resources, while suggesting how these institutions can leverage the Scarborough Charter to foster Black inclusion.

Comparing the admissions pathways across the six universities, equitable access for Black students is largely limited to specific programs and is not wide-reaching institutionally. An example is the Black Student Application Program (BSAP), an optional application stream for Canadian and permanent resident applicants who are Black African, Black Caribbean, Black North American, or multi-racial with Black ancestry. It is only applicable to a handful of professional degrees such as medicine at the University of Ottawa and law at the University of Toronto. The BSAP has a dedicated admissions quota for Black students. Another such example is the Queen’s Accelerated Route to Medical School (QuARMS) which provides a unique pathway into its medical school for up to ten Indigenous or Black graduating high school students. There is a need for more comprehensive pathways that appeal to students interested in disciplines other than health sciences, medicine, or law. More non-discipline-restricted programs such as the University of Waterloo’s *Sankofa* Pathways to University (SPU) that launched in the summer of 2023 for Black youth in the Toronto and Waterloo region seem to be a promising option. Other programs could adopt examples such as McMaster’s Equitable Admissions for Black Applicants (EABA) for the Bachelor of Health Sciences (honours) program that supports equitable admissions to reduce barriers and mitigate bias in the supplementary applications evaluations for undergraduate programs. Universit-



ies could consider using equity admissions self-identification in conjunction with the academic record of Black applicants to confront systemic institutionalized racism and increase the global ethno-cultural representation of the student population such as what is done in the Queen's Equity Admissions Self-Identification (EASI) questionnaire. While universities have alternative pathways not necessarily tailored to Black students such as first-generation pathways, it is important that these are partnered with Black organizations, programs, and communities.

With regards to the resources, it is important that students know or expect that there is a community of support in their academic journey at their prospective university. While having Black-led clubs and activities on campus is very useful, examples of community and welcoming spaces should go beyond these efforts. Providing resources such as entrance awards, scholarships, admissions pathways, diversified curricula, academic support, supports for mental and physical well-being, immigration advising, mentorship, designated spaces, and anti-racism services are some of the ways to demonstrate a welcoming environment for students. Of the six universities, McMaster should be commended for its approach to fostering the overall well-being and success of Black students with their Black Student Success Centre (BSSC): none of the other institutions currently have a BSSC in addition to the regular student success centre. This BSSC's vision is to support, foster, and champion holistically the success and well-being of Black students in a welcoming, safe, and connected space. The BSSC provides services for enrolled Black students that include general check-ins, funding (scholarships, bursaries, and awards), application support, office hours with their Black faculty, financial literacy and coaching, academic advising, and student mentorship. Its website also boasts of several Black-focused student clubs and groups on campus and faculty-led initiatives to bring Black students and faculty together. This could be reassuring for a high school student looking to connect with a community on campus. Another university with amalgamated resources is the University of Toronto; it has a webpage dedicated to future Black undergraduate students which lists programs and resources, including enrichment programs, STEM, academic mentorship, summer programs, peer mentorships, to reduce barriers to post-secondary education. Its Award Explorer, a scholarship search engine, allows students to filter and specifically target admissions awards for Black students: other scholarship or funding tools could emulate this. The

other universities also provide resources for Black students including shared experiences from current Black students, anti-racism resources, leadership opportunities, and a webpage for entrance awards but they would benefit from creating a more centralized resource for future and current students. As related to academic programming, apart from Queen's Bachelors in Black Studies and Toronto's Bachelor of Arts in African Studies, the other universities have a minor, certificate, or interdisciplinary option in Black Studies, Black Canadian Studies, or African Studies. These are important opportunities for universities to expand and diversify their academic programming in response to the Scarborough Charter.

Additionally, as outlined in the Scarborough Charter, post-secondary institutions can apply the four principles-based commitments to action to admissions; in the areas of university and college governance; to research, teaching and learning; and to community engagement. This step offers a much more comprehensive approach to advancing Black inclusion in higher education. Our adapted Scarborough Charter Framework for Black admissions and enrolment in the appendix section can serve as guide for post-secondary institutions (see Appendix 1). In the concluding section of the paper, we share our final reflections, including limitations of the case studies and future directions for institutions to explore.

## **Final Reflections, Conundrums and Future Directions**

As this paper is designed as a reflection on current Black-focused initiatives in the area of admissions to post-secondary institutions, it is key for us to understand how programs such as admissions pathways, while laudable, do not on their own fundamentally enhance Black student numbers and experiences at these institutions. We suggest that not changing systems to make them more equitable, but creating programs that capitalize on the status quo may contradict "inclusion." For example, the Black Student Application Program, Equitable Admissions for Black Applicants, and *Sankofa* Pathways to University are needed programs and have moved the dial on Black inclusion. However, we contend that they may not be fully transformative as these programs' effectiveness are rooted in utilizing existing frameworks of post-secondary institutions (e.g. creating programs but not necessarily changing curricula, epistemologies, and ontologies). These institutions will also need a stronger emphasis on Pan-African and Black studies programs, con-

ducting reviews of governance structures, and humanizing Blackness and Black thought as respected academic archetypes. Post-secondary institutions in Canada must not only acknowledge that their institutions are predominately White, but unpack how anti-Black racism and Black exclusion operate within them. This must move beyond the simple recognition of Black “firsts,” “quotas,” “pathways,” or what Deborah Thompson refers to as the “only ones” (2022). However, while limited, Black communities on the campuses of predominately White institutions do create spaces of care and belonging.

While current admissions programs tend to target Black domestic students, additional steps could be taken to remove recruitment barriers for Black international students. The Scarborough Charter has made great strides in raising awareness of anti-Black racism in post-secondary institutions, building on similar work on equity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education such as Universities Canada’s *Principles on Indigenous Education* (2015), *Inclusive Excellence Principles* (2017), and *Report on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion* (2019), as well as *Colleges and Institutes Canada’s Statement on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion* (2021). However, there is room for further discussions and continued innovation, considering the Scarborough Charter’s seemingly benevolent utilization of the term Black excellence. Kevin Gosine (2019) argues that Black excellence is “actually an elitist concept that veils and enables systemic racism and resultant inequalities. Embedded in the meritocratic idea of ‘excellence’ is the belief that equality of opportunity flourishes, and understanding that, in turn, underpins an ostensible color-blindness or ‘treat everyone the same’ philosophy for creating an equitable society” (254). This disguises a class-based and power analysis of our historical understandings of Black liberation and Black peoples adopting white supremacist ideologies of heteronormative and “civilized” ways of being. In addition, “Black excellence” appears to be dependent on the fallacy of “equity, diversity, and inclusion” as a bastion of supporting “true” inclusion, but merely maintains the status quo (Taylor 2024). We must ask ourselves: if we bring in more Black students to conform to the existing system, why does it need to change? While the Scarborough Charter is necessary and signals needed “guardrails” for institutional and interpersonal change for Black stakeholders (faculty, staff, and students) in predominately White institutions in Canada, we argue that transformational change is needed for higher education in Canada to break away from its roots in exclusion. Hence, the interpretation of

“Black excellence” as set out by the drafters of the Charter needs to be understood and implemented.

We worry that despite the well-intentioned principles and actions proposed in the Scarborough Charter, the most benevolent outcome of many of the initiatives described in this paper could lead to pursuing a mirage of equity within an inequitable system. Sticking with the concept of “excellence” within a predominantly White institution could be a miscalculation of change. As such, the Scarborough Charter promotes Black equity within an inequitable system that risks supporting Black elites that adopt and achieve metrics of Eurocentric understandings of “excellence,” whether they are adopted as “inclusive” measures of excellence or not.

With these reflections and conundrums, this paper has sought to generate further discussions on what it means to foster Black inclusion through university admissions and enrolment. While most policies of equity, diversity, and inclusion in universities do not address in a transformative way the systemic barriers that Black students face when accessing post-secondary education, we welcome past and ongoing steps and measures being taken by them, such as signing the Scarborough Charter, committing to implementing the principle-based actions, setting up anti-racism units and working groups, performing institutional anti-racism reviews, drafting anti-racism reports, and implementing recommendations. What we look forward to from institutions is a stronger sense of urgency and the listening to and representation of marginalized Black voices.

As has been noted in the Scarborough Charter, there is a need for data-backed and evidence-based policies, programs, and student pathways to comprehensively support Black students across most, if not all, programs. While we understand that universities and colleges are working to improve the representation of their student bodies, we also encourage them to consider the heterogeneity within and across different Black communities, and not render Black students to a single sociodemographic check box.

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## Appendix 1: An Adapted Scarborough Charter Framework for Black Admissions and Enrolment

| Principle                   | Action   |  |  |   |
|-----------------------------|--|--|--|---|
|                             | Governance   | Research   | Teaching and Learning  | Community Engagement  |
| <b>Black flourishing</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leadership on equity across all governance structures, especially admissions boards</li> <li>- Inclusive admissions processes</li> <li>- Inclusion of Black faculty on admissions boards</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Proactive engagement to redress Black underrepresentation across research disciplines and grants</li> <li>- Research support practices in the form of mentorship, scholarship and sponsorship</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Welcoming and accessible spaces</li> <li>- Academic programs, curricular and co-curricular development that enable and support Black student leadership, insights, actions, well-being and success</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Comprehensive community-based studies on the histories of slavery, colonialism and racial injustice</li> <li>- Inclusion of the recommendations of these studies</li> <li>- Continuous dedication to research, teaching, and community engagement</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Inclusive excellence</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identification of the extent of underrepresentation of Black students through baseline data compilation and analysis, with recruitment as the initial focus for action to foster inclusion</li> <li>- Comprehensive strategies where gaps exist, including targets, timetables and transparency mechanisms, and providing sustained resource commitments to recruit Black students and support their successful program completion</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognition, critical engagement with, and celebration of traditions of Black intellectual excellence across the academy and plural communities of knowledge</li> <li>- Increased equitable and inclusive participation by Black students on research teams, internships, fellowships, and other forms of research recognition that celebrate student excellence</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Black and Black Canadian studies across academic disciplines that decentre epistemic Eurocentrism and broadens disciplinary canons to include Black expertise and knowledges</li> <li>- Scholarships, bursaries, fellowships, research opportunities, mentorship and alumni engagement to support Black admissions to universities and colleges, Black enrollment in graduate and post-doctoral studies and Black thriving through to program completion</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pathways for access to higher education for Black students, including student outreach with local, regional, national and international communities and robust “wrap-around” support</li> <li>- Mechanisms for ongoing outreach and sponsors for broader Black communities, including Black staff among career advisors and advancement professionals, as well as alumni mentors from Black communities</li> </ul> |
| <b>Mutuality</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reassessment of the existing campus security and safety infrastructure and protocols to protect the human dignity, equality and safety of Black people on campus</li> <li>- Periodic climate surveys that consider local community relations, to assess and guide initiatives to build inclusive campuses in a manner that is responsive to the specific needs of Black students</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-design and co-construction of research about Black communities</li> <li>- Collaboration on the development of Tri-Agency Canada guidelines on research affecting Black communities, fostering community-engaged research principles and advancing representation of Black community members and respect for their lived experiences</li> </ul>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Outreach programs from grade school through university and college</li> <li>- Policies, educational sessions and practices of inclusion that sustain harassment-free classrooms and other learning environments</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requirement of Black community prior-impact assessments, to move equity initiatives away from risk mitigation toward proactive, sustainable opportunity creation and integrating Black community impact assessments into any restructuring initiatives</li> <li>- Robust community partnerships with Black-led organizations</li> </ul>  |

|                              |   |   |   |  |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| <p><b>Accountability</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ethical data co-creation and governance practices</li> <li>- Data collection to foster inclusive, just, equitable post-secondary environments that are enabled by rigorous, evidence-based decision-making</li> <li>- Exercised caution in the face of the systemic inequalities and racial biases that may be perpetuated within artificial intelligence, big data, surveillance and other technological advances, and deepened understanding of technological inequities</li> <li>- Mapping, retrieving, maintaining and sharing of reliable, disaggregated data on Black representation over defined periods of time, and partnering with Statistics Canada and other relevant external institutions</li> <li>- Benchmarking data to enable comparisons over time and between signatories to the SC and promoting transparency about the reasons that any identified categories of data may not be collected</li> <li>- Suitably staffed office in senior administration dedicated in whole or in part to redressing racism across the university or college with responsibility for academic affairs, human resources and student life and learning</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Specific data collection on the representation of Black student researchers on research teams, in research grant awards, and fellowships</li> <li>- Robust reporting mechanisms and reward systems that assess and recognize research contributions to intersectional Black flourishing, inclusive excellence and mutuality</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anti-Black racism education for all members of the university or college, especially those on the admissions and recruitment boards</li> <li>- Performance expectations for members that build capacity on anti-racism and Black inclusion</li> <li>- Robust reporting mechanisms that assess and recognize teaching and learning contributions to intersectional Black flourishing, inclusive excellence and mutuality</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enabling and reporting on co-creation in the data collection process by communities most concerned</li> <li>- Retaining contact with professional orders and related regulatory bodies where they exist to be able to assess the admissions and career progression of Black university and college graduates</li> </ul> |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|--|