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Racism in the academy

Universities are considered to be among the most liberal institutions in society, yet many non-Caucasian scholars say they still feel excluded or denied opportunities. How does this happen?

BY HARRIET EISENKRAFT | OCT 12 2010

Update: See a [web-exclusive response](#) to this article.

Sociologist Peter Li's path from graduate student to fellow of the Royal Society of Canada started with questions about his ability to speak English because of his last name. Patricia Monture, a tenured professor with two law degrees, often faced incredulity about her status on campus when meeting a staff or faculty member for the first time due to the fact that she is aboriginal. Malinda Smith, when newly hired in political science, was often mistaken for a phys-ed teacher at the university, the assumption based on a single visual characteristic: she was a black scholar in a land of white ones.

This is what racism has looked like in the Canadian academy. The view rarely includes vandalism or hostile comments, although these have occurred on campuses in the last decade. Rather, scholars call this subtler version "structural racism" or "denial of opportunity" for racialized scholars, referring to those who aren't Caucasian.

Dr. Li, a professor of sociology at the University of Saskatchewan who specializes in race, inequality and immigration, says structural racism may occur in hiring, promotion, governance or research and curriculum, or it may sustain a biased status quo on campus.

The practice is "regularized and embedded in the social process of the institution, and it is not random," says Dr. Li. Because of that, it has more consequences than crude racist remarks tossed at an individual on a street corner.

In the early 20th century, many universities demonstrated overt prejudices. A dean from a U.S. Ivy League university famously instructed: "Never admit more than five Jews, take only two Italian Catholics, and take no blacks at all," no matter what the pools of applicants. That level of discrimination has been discredited. "But the practices that flow from it have not," asserts Dr. Smith, a political science professor at the University of Alberta and vice-president, equity issues, with the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

For decades, Canada has had laws against racial and other discrimination in the workplace. In 1984, the Report of the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, headed by Rosalie Abella, called for Canada to adopt policies and practices for four designated groups – women, non-whites ("visible minorities" in the report), aboriginal people and persons with disabilities. It called for "interventions" so that these groups could overcome "formidable obstacles." Out of the Employment Equity Act that followed, the federal contractors program mandates that any provincially regulated entity doing \$200,000 or more of contracts with the federal government must promote workplace diversity and document those efforts.

Universities have responded with reams of reports, commissions, committees, policies and plans. Not only do most have equity or human rights departments and offices, but the majority also state they want a more inclusive academy. Some institutions are making positive changes.

Yet “critical race” scholars point to a lack of sufficient progress in equity matters, particularly for “racialized faculty” (see “Contemporary terms about race”). This despite outcries and activity when graffiti is scrawled on doors or a teacher suffers taunting on campus. The programs and offices for equity may be among the first to go when the university enacts cutbacks, or these offices and programs may have always lacked bite, says Dr. Smith. In her view, attention to issues affecting racialized scholars and scholarship remains “perpetually deferred” in Canada.

Moreover, the backlash that accompanies every new report on systemic racism usually runs a swift, predictable and sometimes verbally vicious course. The response may be one of denial; and the reporting methodologies are often met with skepticism from faculty, administrators and the media.

Audrey Kobayashi is a professor of geography at Queen’s University who holds a research chair in racism and equity. She says the backlash to such reports makes administrations “careful.” One of the effects, she adds, “is to prevent progressive people from acting progressively.”

Constance Backhouse, a law professor at the University of Ottawa, adds that in Canada “we have a tradition, a mythology, that we’re race-less and racism-less, that we don’t have a problem. It’s rude to inquire.” Instead, “universities should be taking the lead on this,” insists Professor Backhouse, who has served as mediator and adjudicator for many human rights complaints.

Academics and their institutions often have trouble with the idea that they may practice racism. But, discrimination “is a matter of impact and not intent,” write Carol Tator and Frances Henry, both social scientists, in a new book they have edited, *[Racism in the Canadian University: Demanding Social Justice, Inclusion and Equity](#)*.

The issue starts with representation, or who gets in and how. According to the [2006 Census](#), about 14 percent of faculty positions are held by visible minorities, whereas 24 percent of all PhD-holders in Canada are visible minorities. About two percent of faculty posts are held by aboriginal professors.

The census also shows there are significantly more visible minority Canadians who hold PhDs in science and engineering than in the humanities and social sciences. And, many more racialized professors are working in faculties of science and engineering than in the humanities and social sciences.

But, if they are well-represented among qualified candidates, why is it that non-white candidates, once in a pool or on a short list, may still be overlooked? “Attitudes that exist in the general population also exist in universities,” asserts Jeffrey Reitz, a sociology professor and director of ethnic, immigration and pluralism studies at the University of Toronto. “People running them are highly educated and express a commitment to equity, but that doesn’t guarantee non-discriminatory hiring practices.”

The topic of representation always leads to a discussion of merit. Grace-Edward Galabuzi, who teaches in the department of politics and public administration at Ryerson University, says there is plenty of evidence that excellence and equity are compatible. “When you have a critical mass of PhDs in a whole range of disciplines, the issue of whether you have to choose between representation or quality becomes moot,” says Dr. Galabuzi, who co-chaired Ryerson’s recent taskforce on anti-racism.

Indeed, some are advocating for a different way of thinking about merit. Tom Patch, associate vice-president, equity, at the University of British Columbia, says, “Excellence in the academic setting requires equity and diversity.” Professor Backhouse is even more blunt: from department chairs on up, those administrators who fail to make progress on diversity are themselves “not meritorious,” she asserts.

While debate rages on about what constitutes excellence, research in the U.S. has made the point that excluding “under-represented minorities” may be deleterious to the academy’s strength and health. In a study published in *The Journal of Higher Education* (Aug.-Sept. 2002), Anthony Lising Antonio, a professor of education at Stanford University, looked at how racialized professors fared in four areas – research, teaching, integrating knowledge across disciplines, and enlisting intellectual work in the service of society – and concluded, “faculty of colour showed more commitment in all the areas of scholarship than their white counterparts.” In an interview with *University Affairs*, Dr. Antonio said, “[They] are leading the institution in these areas.”

Once hired, racialized candidates often encounter a “chilly climate” that may send them exiting through a revolving door. Scholars relate stories of disrespect from students, faculty and staff. One remembers a white student telling her that she held the position because she is non-white and that her salary was probably higher as a result. Some racialized scholars say that other faculty members may disregard their work and opinions at tenure hearings or curriculum meetings. Dr. Smith likens the situation to the days when excluding women was the norm on campus. “It comes down to historical or cultural practices,” she observes. “They don’t call it the ‘old boys’ club’ for nothing.”

After hiring and promotion committees have dealt with the issue of merit, “the intangibles of fit” always surface, says Dr. Smith. “Those in charge say, ‘Will I feel comfortable with this person? Can I invite them over for coffee? Can we collaborate and will this person help me move forward?’” She observes this, too, when other marginalized groups, like gay, lesbian or transgendered scholars, come up for review.

Dr. Li at the University of Saskatchewan says that when scholars put forward unusual views about racialized groups they may face rejection or indifference. As a junior faculty member, he was interested in studying the economic relations between Chinese immigrants and the dominant population, a topic that some faculty rebuffed because these interests weren’t in line with the prevalent focus on exotic Asian societies. Professor Monture, also at U of S, says aboriginal academics might meet resistance when they try to explore unique learning traditions, including oral ones, or put more emphasis on writing for publications that people in their communities can access, rather than in peer-reviewed journals.

The impressionistic evidence of racism on campus often provokes criticism about the methodology or lack of hard data. When Ryerson’s task force on anti-racism issued [its report \(PDF\)](#) last winter, the media were incredulous that so much prejudice could exist at such a diverse campus and questioned the data-gathering methods and the numbers.

Scholars who study race are used to this response. Dr. Henry, a social anthropologist who has researched racism for about 30 years, notes that critics say “either the sample is too small, or the participants may be exaggerating, or even lying. But they’re missing the point: that no institution should run in such a way that some of its practices actually affect or influence negatively any of its participants.”

Dr. Reitz of U of T says universities need to listen to these stories. His research shows that many people, particularly children and grandchildren of racialized immigrants, feel discriminated against, but white people tend to trivialize their experience as unimportant or attribute it to the racial groups’ own deficiencies. “We should take these perceptions seriously,” he says, “as facts to be addressed.” Dr. Smith, advocating for real-life stories, adds, “I use data, but when I walk into a [university] room, look around me and I’m the only non-white person there, tell me, what change can I believe in?”

There’s also the question of promotions. Baljit Singh, a professor of veterinary biomedical science at the University of Saskatchewan, sees growing numbers of racialized junior faculty in math and science “because there is a focus on candidates who will do outstanding [work], bring in lots of money and teach undergraduates.” But he doesn’t see the same level of opportunity for those candidates in filling leadership roles.

Dr. Reitz adds that when it comes to career advancement in other similar institutions, “deeply ingrained biases have prevented [racialized people] from moving up.” (He was referring to a case at Health Canada many years ago, when racialized scientists proved to a tribunal of the Canadian Human Rights Commission that their

inability as a group to advance to managerial posts was due to discrimination.) Dr. Reitz says the same may well be true of universities.

An area where some scholars are calling for significant change is curriculum. Dr. Kobayashi of Queen's says what's needed is a campus-wide strategy that mandates every faculty to provide an anti-racism course or program so that all students can learn about the issues. Usha George (now dean of Ryerson's faculty of community services), in her former role as director of the Anti-racism, Multiculturalism and Native Issues Centre in the social work faculty of U of T, helped to develop and integrate diversity content throughout the social work curriculum.

Revising the curriculum may also entail such innovations as including aboriginal culture in a course on antiquity, a subject that traditionally focuses on Greek or Roman history. It may mean that a music survey course includes music from cultures other than European. It would ensure that racialized faculty are included "as producers of knowledge, rather than objects of study," notes Dr. Smith.

In the last few years, however, there have been some shifts on Canadian campuses, and some cautious optimism. Ryerson President Sheldon Levy responded to a coalition of concerned faculty and students in 2008 by agreeing to participate in a task force examining racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia across all spheres of the university. Professor Levy says he's committed to hiring a vice-president for equity and diversity matters, to report either to the provost or himself. Ryerson will initiate other measures, including sharing data on representation and initiating diversity training; he is part of a group that's first in line for training.

Leadership, says Professor Levy, means he is willing to engage in the debate, to listen and to speak out. The backlash that often follows investigations such as Ryerson's, he observes, "is the unfortunate consequence of taking on the issue. But what are you going to do, hide it?"

Meanwhile, several universities have named senior administrators to equity leadership roles. Both UBC and the University of Guelph have appointed human rights lawyers, with direct access to the senior echelons of the university. Mr. Patch, the associate VP, equity, at UBC, says leadership in the matter is "essential but not sufficient at a decentralized university," and that all levels must sign on. Among other initiatives at UBC, data about representation in various faculties of racialized and aboriginal groups is posted online.

At Guelph, Patrick Case, director of the [equity and human rights office](#) since 1999, says the goal is consensus, "not a top-down approach." Years ago, his office organized data about internal representation, availability of potential candidates and salary systems, and presented the information in a way that the science-oriented senior faculty understood, while still telling the whole story about gaps and issues on campus. His office conducts equity orientation for all search committees, at the commencement of the recruitment process.

Mr. Case is not a big fan of diversity or awareness training, saying he has seen its limitations first-hand at other institutions. Instead, he works at "the policy, procedure and practice level to win the minds and hearts of people." He believes that changing the expectations institutions have of senior and middle-level administrators, and training to those new expectations, will eventually change their behaviours when it comes to hiring. But Mr. Case is unequivocal about the primacy of equity: "These institutions are paid for by the public. To the extent that there is a quality pool, [racialized candidates] are entitled to representation in the academy."

All three – Ryerson, UBC and Guelph – are looking at active outreach to include racialized faculty in their applicant pools. "The structure for outreach has to be an ever-present feature of the university," says Mr. Case, "the stance that a university says, 'welcome, we want you to come here,' and that there be a window on the world."

Being proactive may mean advertising jobs in non-traditional journals or community newspapers, and using personal contacts, but diverse ones. It may mean reimagining the job ad. In the U.S., where the Association of American Colleges and Universities has declared that "both white women and ethnic minorities are still grossly under-represented among college faculty," universities use aggressive recruiting tactics, including sending

faculty to conferences to seek out minority doctoral students, looking for papers presented by minority students in journals, and bringing racialized students and postdocs to campus.

Equity experts are also looking at mentorship as a catalyst for change. The Canadian network called RACE, for [Researchers and Academics of Colour for Equality](#), has a goal of mentoring and supporting colleagues and graduate students; it has held yearly conferences since 2001. U of Guelph is in the early stages of a two-year mentoring project for new racialized faculty who want to find their way around and who might be interested in administrative roles. Dr. George of Ryerson says it's essential to avoid the notion that "diversity by itself is a little project to be completed once and for all; it has to be an ongoing activity."

Dr. Singh of the University of Saskatchewan says he's optimistic; he believes that today's coterie of racialized graduate students, many of them confident second-generation Canadians, will change the academy as they ascend over the next 10 years. Indeed, the 2006 census shows that over time, more racialized faculty have been hired by Canadian universities, with higher representation among younger faculty members. Dr. Singh – a 3M National Teaching Fellow who himself benefited from mentorship as a graduate student at U of Guelph – spends much of his time counseling local and international students on the "mysteries of the place" and speaking out on the need for more resources into aboriginal education.

In 2004, Professor Monture, a legal scholar, switched departments at U of S from Native studies to sociology, and not long afterward attended a departmental faculty meeting. There, it suddenly dawned on her that her colleagues were asking her opinion on a matter that had nothing to do with aboriginal issues. They were "treating me like a faculty member with the same knowledge as anyone else in that room." It was the first time it had ever happened to her in a decades-long career.

Some people would say that this took too long. But Professor Monture says that her new department gives her hope for the institution.

Contemporary terms about race

- **Racialized:** non-white. Formerly called "visible minorities" or "people of colour."
- **Structural racism:** racism that is imbedded in the social process of an institution; non-random and not overtly rude or violent. Also known as "denial of opportunity" or "everyday racism."
- **Critical race scholars:** academics who focus on the political-social construction of race and racial difference, the legal and social reproduction of the idea of racial difference and hierarchy, and on experiences of and struggles against racism and social exclusion.
- **Scholars of ethnicity:** also study race, but tend to focus on social groups with shared nationality, kinship, religion, language and culture. These scholars often engage with issues of multiculturalism, pluralism and diversity.

Source: Malinda Smith, vice-president, equity issues, Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences

Is there racism in hiring and promotion?

Race scholars may soon find the data that they need to shed more light on systemic racism on campus. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council awarded a group led by Frances Henry, professor emerita at York University, a three-year grant to study the racism issue in a methodical way across the country's campuses. Scholars will look for precise and disaggregated data on representation by rank, disciplines and particular ethnicities of racialized academics, as well as what proportion may be staying longer than is usual in the lower ranks.

The study will also look at what voice racialized scholars have on campus, meaning their influence on programs, including representation on core committees.

A view from Quebec

Marie Mc Andrew, Canada Research Chair in Education and Ethnic Relations at Université de Montréal, says that racial diversity at francophone universities in Quebec has been slower to take hold than in other provinces “because traditionally immigrant minorities were always in the Anglo sector.”

That has changed. Now many immigrants to Quebec come from Haiti, North Africa and other francophone countries in Africa. But, she says, for university departments that have recruited significant numbers of non-white faculty members, this may reflect universities hiring scholars directly from abroad rather than the fact that “second- and third-generation racialized people have ‘made it’” in Quebec.

Dr. Mc Andrew says that racialized academics may face a “bottleneck” at the first hiring stage, but “once they’re in, there’s no discrimination, at least not on purpose.”

Her research specialty is multiethnic and minority education, and she says she has seen faster progress in Quebec’s K-12 system, where the province sets curriculum, than in university departments, which operate with academic freedom, a wide variety of input and no coordination. “I’m not saying that it’s right or wrong, but it makes it difficult to assess curriculum,” she says.

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