



Canada's Colonial Academy: Why Anti-Racist and Decolonial Transformation Work Cannot Wait

D. V. Mullings (2025). Unsettling colonial order: Anti-racism and decolonization in Canadian postsecondary institutions. Commissioned by the Canadian Network for Equity and Racial Justice (CNERJ). [You can read the full report here.](#)

Canadian postsecondary institutions continue to reproduce systemic racism, anti-Blackness, and settler-colonial structures. Gestures such as land acknowledgments, EDI statements, and limited equity hiring **mask ongoing structural inequities**. In fact, **performative EDI initiatives undermine transformation** if not given the resources and the authority required to implement sustainable change at the institutional and systemic level.

Persistent Inequities in Academic Outcomes

Progress made in access but remains limited in outcomes

- **Indigenous** students have the lowest postsecondary completion rates and are more likely to enter college vs. university programs.
- **Black** students remain underrepresented in degree and graduate programs despite rising enrolment; and Black graduates earn less than white peers with similar credentials.
- **For East Asian and South Asian** students, the model minority myth about academic achievements adds pressure to confirm and hides complex realities of exclusion; contributing to intragroup tensions.

Although institutions often celebrate their commitments to racial equity, the enduring presence of systemic racism and anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism challenges these claims.

Widespread Patterns of Systemic Racism & Institutional Violence

Students

- **Indigenous and Black** students experience surveillance, classroom hostility, racial profiling by campus security, and disproportionate accusations related to academic misconduct.
- **Indigenous and Black** students are often overlooked for high-impact opportunities such as (well-funded) research assistantships and mentorship.
- Existing student support services often fail to provide culturally grounded care (e.g., mental health care).

Faculty and staff

- Indigenous, Black and racialized **faculty and staff are overrepresented in non-permanent** roles.
- **Black** faculty require **higher** outcomes (e.g., publications) to be viewed as **equally** competent (“Black Tax”); and Black faculty experience racial scrutiny and devaluation, including from students and administrators.
- **Black and Indigenous** faculty and staff are routinely tasked with advancing institutional equity agendas but given neither the resources nor the authority and leverage to do so effectively.
- Across U15¹ institutions, the **senior leadership remains overwhelmingly white**.

Anti-racism initiatives: Symbolically Significant, Structurally Unsound

- Symbolic initiatives without accompanying structural change and enforceable accountability
- Equity roles without authority, often isolated from executive leadership
- Resistance to race-based data collection limiting transparency of disaggregated data
- Curricular tokenism (isolated Indigenous or Black content inserted without reconfiguring foundations)

1. U15 Canada is an association of fifteen leading research universities across Canada. <https://u15.ca/about-us/>.



- Anti-racism requires naming power**, not simply naming race
- Decolonization demands concrete material and political shifts** that centre Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge systems

Recommendations

1. Ensure enforceable accountability

- Establish race-based, disaggregated data systems.
- Tie senior leadership performance metrics to equity outcomes.
- Resource and embed equity offices within executive governance.

2. Transform Curriculum and Pedagogy

- Make Indigenous and Black studies core curriculum components.
- Validate and fund community-engaged, land-based, and relational pedagogies.
- Protect faculty who teach anti-racist and decolonial content.

3. Make Campus Environments as Safe and Equitable as possible

- Reform campus policing and security practices.
- Expand culturally grounded mental-health supports.
- Ensure fair adjudication processes for academic and non-academic misconduct.

4. Build Representative Leadership Pipelines

- Implement targeted hiring, retention, and promotion pathways for Black, Indigenous, and racialized scholars, including at the intersections.
- Expand mentorship programs and reduce the racialized service burden.

5. Honour and Resource Longstanding Activism

- Recognize and fund activist knowledge as legitimate scholarly labour.
- Create shared governance structures with local Indigenous and Black communities.

“This reimagined academy is not only possible, but also already being modelled in the mutual aid practices of students, the resistance work of precariously employed faculty, and the critical knowledge produced by community-based scholars. The task ahead is not to invent transformation but to resource, sustain, and institutionalize it.”

- Report, p. 50

