

# Recognizing African Heritage Month

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Dear Members of the Acadia Community,

Today we mark the first day of African Heritage Month in Nova Scotia. Acadia University has a long tradition of educating people from all backgrounds, including those of African descent. The Rev. Dr. Edwin Howard Borden from Truro, NS who was the first person of African descent to graduate from Acadia with his Bachelor of Arts in 1892 and then his Master of Arts in 1896, is believed to be one of the earliest persons of African descent to graduate from any college or university in Canada. Since then, Acadia's alumni of African descent have turned exceptional student careers into successful careers in every aspect of business, politics, public service, and spiritual leadership in almost every country on the planet for more than 125 years. The role Acadia played in educating some of Nova Scotia's most influential civil rights leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is described in the large outdoor exhibit near University Hall that is dedicated to W.P. Oliver ('34) and forms part of the Mathieu DaCosta African Heritage Trail located in Southwestern Nova Scotia. Despite this proud Acadia tradition that is rooted in the Baptist heritage of our university, we know that for the majority of Nova Scotians of African descent, the opportunity to attend university simply did not exist. Today, we are seeking ways to remove those barriers but we have much more to do.

The 2019 provincial theme for African Heritage Month is "Our History is Your History" and, to quote from the provincial website, "..... recognizes the unique story of African Nova Scotians and how this story is interwoven throughout the past, present and future of all Nova Scotians. The theme reminds us that when we all acknowledge and understand the truths of our shared history through awareness, cooperation, dialogue and learning, we will be able to facilitate positive change in Nova Scotia". In order to ensure that Acadia steps up and does its part, I will be issuing an announcement later today that will outline some new initiatives to increase support for all students of African descent at Acadia.

These initiatives include the establishment of a Black Students Advisor and a Black Students Working Group, both of which have long been recommendations of the Black Students Association at Acadia. Recognizing the needs of students of African descent as distinct from the needs of other students is a well-established practice in post-secondary education and we are, frankly, behind the curve at Acadia when it comes to supporting our students of African descent. Acadia's history in attracting students of African descent from here in Nova Scotia as well as from nations around the world provides us with the imperative to do a better job of not only supporting students of African heritage, but promoting and celebrating their achievements internally and externally. We also need to find the means to make our campus more diverse and to attract faculty and staff who reflect our community at large. It is a big task, but it won't be completed if we don't take concrete action right now.

Acadia's Black Students' Association has a number of events planned throughout African Heritage Month and I encourage all members of the Acadia community to take in one or more of those events. I want to thank our students of African descent for being so active and persuasive in making their arguments, and

for making such amazing contributions to the life and voices of Acadia. Also, on February 9<sup>th</sup> in War Memorial Gymnasium between the men's and women's basketball games, Acadia and the Valley African Nova Scotian Development Association will hold their 10<sup>th</sup> annual event honouring Acadia's past and present student-athletes of African descent.

During African Heritage Month the African Heritage flag will fly above University Hall, as we join together to celebrate our students and colleagues of African descent, and pledge to make Acadia a more inclusive and supportive community.

Thank you for taking the time to read this message, and I look forward to the great work that will be done by the Black Student Advisor and the new Working Group.

With very best wishes,

Peter Ricketts

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