

# President's Response to the Report of the President's Anti-Racism Task Force (PART)

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December 20, 2021

## Moving Acadia Forward as an Anti-Racist Institution

On July 31, 2020, I established the President's Anti-Racism Task Force (PART). This initiative was launched under the auspices of Acadia's Strategic Plan, *Acadia 2025: Transforming Lives for a Transforming World*. Equity, diversity and inclusion form an important part of Acadia's history and our educational mission today, going back to Acadia's founding in 1838 to provide access and opportunities for individuals and groups within society which, at the time, were facing barriers to or being excluded from university education. This openness resulted in some of the earliest opportunities for women and those of African descent to attend and eventually graduate from Acadia. Today, Acadia 2025 identifies diversity, inclusivity, equity and respect as key strategic values at Acadia, and a number of goals address these values either directly or indirectly, including "Creating an inclusive and supportive community campus culture," "Caring for the safety, health and wellness of our community," and "Msit No'kmaq – advancing Acadia's contributions to truth, reconciliation and decolonization." The work of the PART falls directly under the Strategic Direction entitled *Caring for our Students and Employees*, but it also speaks to the entire vision of the strategic plan in providing a transformative university experience and unleashing the potential of our students to prepare them for a transforming world.

As we consider the way in which the world is transforming, a critical component is the need to overcome historical legacies of racism and discrimination, break down barriers that create systemic racism, and actively work towards building a society that is diverse, inclusive, and respectful. Our society is transforming to become more diverse, and that means we must do more to address matters that lead to some being treated unequally and being discriminated against because of their background, appearance, or gender. This is

occurring at a time when Canadian universities are involved in national, regional and local dialogues on Truth and Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples of Canada and anti-Black racism.

Following the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Universities Canada developed and adopted a set of principles on Indigenous education that all Canadian universities are striving towards (<https://www.univcan.ca/media-room/media-releases/universities-canada-principles-on-indigenous-education/>), and these principles are currently being reviewed. In our own region, the Atlantic Association of Universities has established the Atlantic Indigenous Post-Secondary Education Committee with a Circle of Elders providing advice and direction.

Recently, an Inter-Institutional Advisory Committee for the National Dialogues and Action for Inclusive Higher Education and Communities has worked with Canadian universities and colleges to develop the *Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education: Principles, Actions and Accountabilities*. This is a comprehensive proposal to recognize and take action against anti-Black racism and discrimination in Canadian universities and colleges. The Charter adopts four overarching principles to apply to any initiative to redress anti-Black racism and foster Black inclusion:

- Black Flourishing – universities and colleges are central to enabling the just, full realization of human potential and thriving;
- Inclusive Excellence – embodies the recognition that not only is post-secondary education enriched by equity, diversity and inclusion, but also that equitable inclusion is critical to excellence;
- Mutuality – involving positive, interactive relationships with Black communities and the special role universities

and colleges can assume in Black community economic development; and

- Accountability – involving a commitment both to ongoing education, including self-education, and to courageous action built on deeply consultative processes. The principles-based commitments to action apply to four areas of activity, namely governance, research, teaching and learning, and community engagement.

In Nova Scotia, the MOU between the province's ten universities and the Government of Nova Scotia includes the commitment to partner with Nova Scotia's Mi'kmaq and Indigenous people to work towards fulfillment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action for post-secondary education and align with the Universities Canada Principles on Indigenous Education, and to address the education gap among all under-represented communities. These communities include Mi'kmaq and other Indigenous students, African Nova Scotians and other students of African descent, students with disabilities, rural students, and economically disadvantaged students.

All of these initiatives align with Acadia's strategic plan, *Acadia 2025*, and the work of the PART is especially relevant and timely. I want to thank the Co-Chairs, Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis and Patricia McCulloch; Vice-Chair, Zabrina Whitman; Elder Dr. Joe Michael; and all members of the PART for their work in preparing the report and doing so within the prescribed timeframe.

On December 7, 2021, I met with the members of the PART to discuss the draft of this response. I was very pleased with the richness of the discussion and the overall support of the response and how Acadia will use the PART report to make real progress towards anti-racism. I also heard that the real proof will be in the actions taken as we move forward, and that we make tangible and measurable progress quickly. The urgency of the current situation was emphasized, and it was clear that if we fall back into complacency and inaction, then this whole process will have been an exercise in failure.

The Task Force paid particular attention to racism faced by the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) communities. To quote from my announcement of July 30, 2020, establishing the PART, "While the Task Force will cover all forms of racism, the scourge of anti-Black

and anti-Indigenous racism is especially high on our minds. In the context of Canada and Nova Scotia in particular, racism against members of these two communities is especially endemic due to their historical and present-day importance in our province. In stating this, we recognize the particular forms of racism faced by the Mi'kmaq as the original peoples of this land, and African Nova Scotians due to the legacy of slavery and anti-Black racism that persists throughout our society. As Acadia has become a more diverse, inclusive and multi-national community over recent times, especially with the growth in numbers of our international students, it is inevitable that systemic racism has become more apparent and, therefore, it becomes more important than ever that we face it, define, understand it, and take action to eliminate it."

The PART report lays out the core values that must underpin and drive anti-racism at Acadia. These core values start with Acadia's University Motto, *In pulvere vinces* ("through hard work you will conquer") and include reference to the principles of decolonization and the interests of dependent peoples in the Charter of the United Nations; principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation; the principles in the UN Report on Canada for the International Decade for People of African Descent; accountability and the need to create systems and timeframes to report on progress of anti-racism work and actions and to close identified gaps in a timely fashion; the mainstreaming of intersectional, feminist, decolonial, anti-oppressive lenses into university processes; and the principles enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights regarding the fundamental human rights to be universally protected. These are all core principles which Acadia University endorses and will uphold as we proceed on our journey towards truth and reconciliation and anti-racism.

The report provides a series of short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations for Acadia which together chart a course for Acadia to become a more inclusive and anti-racist institution and community. The implementation of some of these recommendations will be a significant challenge for Acadia, especially where significant new resources are required. However, we need to commit to pursuing all of the recommendations as far as we can and continue to pursue them even when we can only do so

incrementally. Some recommendations can and will be implemented quickly, while others will take more time and further consultation. There is nothing wrong with stretch goals as long as we make enough progress to make real differences in the lives and experiences of Acadia students who face racism and discrimination on a daily basis.

Acadia University will use this report as a roadmap to direct our course towards becoming an institution and community that is proactively diverse, inclusive, and anti-racist. We will address all of the recommendations in the report and will seek to implement as many as possible, as fully as possible, and as quickly as possible. As stated above, some will be easier to implement than others, and some may be beyond our capabilities at this time and may be more aspirational in nature. However, making real and tangible progress will be achieved, and it is important that we put in place the mechanisms to ensure that the work of the PART is not just enclosed within the cover pages of the report, but rather leads to tangible and continuous change for the good.

As recognized in the report, anti-racism does not exist in a vacuum. Our efforts to become an anti-racist community must be part of our efforts to address all forms of discrimination and abusive attitudes and behaviour in relation to ethnicity, skin colour, gender, religion, background, and any other ways in which people are treated unequally and with disrespect.

## Ensuring Institutional Change

In responding to the PART Report, it is important that Acadia uses this moment in time to create real and lasting change. This means making strategic changes to how we make decisions, how we plan and coordinate our activities, and how we hold ourselves accountable for making progress towards our institutional goals and aspirations. This is what *Acadia 2025* is all about, and I am pleased to take this opportunity to announce three important changes to reset our institutional directions at the highest level. The first involves the creation of a university council to provide oversight and accountability for Acadia's progress towards EDI and anti-racism; the second concerns the establishment of a BIPOC Student Working Group; and the third is to align Acadia with the new nationwide initiative to eliminate anti-Black racism in

Canadian higher education by signing the Scarborough Charter.

### **Acadia University Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism (EDIAR) Council**

In order to ensure that anti-racism becomes an inherent core value and practice of Acadia University, I am establishing the Acadia University Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism (EDIAR) Council. This Council will be chaired by the Provost and Vice-President Academic and will report directly to the President and Vice-Chancellor. The EDIAR Council will provide oversight, co-ordination, and, where appropriate, direction on all matters relating to EDI and anti-racism at Acadia University. The Council will provide the institutional oversight to the many individual EDI groups and initiatives that operate in various sectors of the university and will play a major role in advancing the goals and objectives of Acadia 2025. The Council will be responsible for ensuring and monitoring institutional progress in implementing the recommendations of the PART Report and, in collaboration with the Acadia Indigenous Education Advisory Council, the Report of the President's Advisory Committee on Decolonization.

The composition of the EDIAR Council has yet to be determined, but it will have representation from students, faculty, administrative staff, and management. It will also have to liaise with other EDI committees and initiatives on campus. We will consult with the community as we develop the composition and full terms of reference for the Council. The Council will be large enough to be representative, but not so large as to be impractical. The Council will be responsible for reporting annually to the Acadia community on progress made in addressing the PART recommendations and priorities for the coming year, and for keeping the community informed and updated on a more regular basis. The work of the Council will also be part of the reporting on the implementation of the strategic plan, and as President and Vice-Chancellor, I will include updates from the Council in my regular reports to the Board of Governors and in other reports that I make to both internal and external audiences throughout the year. I will also provide a special section of the President's website to highlight and report on the work of the Council and EDI more generally.

### **BIPOC Student Working Group**

While the EDIAR Council will have representation from students, having a forum that focuses on giving students the opportunity to raise concerns and issues for attention by the university is also important. Some years ago, an informal Black Students Working Group was influential in raising my awareness of the challenges being faced by Black students at Acadia, and this led to the creation of the Black Student Advisor position in 2019. In consultation with the Valley African Nova Scotian Development Association (VANSDA), the position was reworked into the Black Student Success Navigator. Through an MOU, the new position was co-financed between Acadia and VANSDA, and the position was filled in December 2019.

The passionate voices of students on the PART were powerful influences on the deliberations of the Task Force and its recommendations. It is important that we continue to hear from and listen to our students, as they are the primary focus of all that we do. As Acadia restructures to a new student service delivery model following a review of the student experience and student services, we will ensure that BIPOC representation is at the very heart of that work, and a BIPOC student working group will be included in that new framework. We will be consulting with students about the structure of this new framework, and directly with BIPOC students on the nature and composition of the working group.

### **Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education**

On November 18, 2021, at a virtual ceremony, Acadia University became an inaugural signatory to the Scarborough Charter and joined the Inter-Institutional Forum on Inclusive Higher Education. This is an important national dialogue with a focus on action and accountability for making progress towards inclusivity and anti-racism in Canada's universities and colleges.

Signing on to the Charter at its launch is an important statement and commitment by Acadia that our journey towards anti-racism is not travelled alone, and that we are joining our partner higher education institutions across the country to "... foster pan-Canadian communities of learning that build practices of ongoing dialogue and action yielding inclusion, substantive equality and social transformation," to quote from the Charter.

Institutional oversight of commitments under the Charter will be the responsibility of the EDIAR Council. Together, the Charter and the PART and Decolonization reports will constitute a powerful guide to Acadia's commitments to Truth and Reconciliation, anti-racism, and EDI more broadly defined.

## **Addressing the Recommendations**

Below, I have provided a response to each of the main groupings of recommendations in the report, recognizing that many of the individual recommendations are directed towards different sectors of the university. I look forward to working with all of you on the next critical steps in Acadia's journey towards anti-racism and inclusivity. Working together, we will ensure that Acadia is a welcoming and supportive learning and living community for BIPOC students and others from diverse backgrounds who come to our campus from across Canada and around the world for that transformational experience, an experience that we must deliver for all and not just for some.

As part of our monitoring of progress, we will use the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in Acadia 2025 to measure progress, but we will also develop other data and measures that the EDIAR Council will need in order to fulfill its institutional mandate and implement the recommendations of the PART.

### **Starting Point – Short-term Recommendations**

While the EDIAR Council will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of recommendations in the PART report, as the Council is being established and becoming operational, we will proceed to address the short-term recommendations of the PART under the auspices of the President's Executive Council (which comprises the senior administration of the university) and the Strategic Leadership Council, comprising all executive administrators, deans, and administrative directors and managers.

I will immediately direct the various bodies and individuals identified in the report to assess each recommendation that has been attributed to them and develop plans on how to move forward on implementation. In some cases, it may make sense to move the responsibility for some recommendations, but no recommendations will be ignored. Some of this work has already begun, and

we will identify as many short-term recommendations for immediate action as possible. For example, we heard very early on that the current Black Student Navigator position was not delivering on what had been promised, so we proceeded with the reconfiguration of the position and posted and hired a new Black Student Success Navigator to provide better supports for Black students on campus. We also heard that financial barriers are significant especially for Black students, and so we proceeded with the establishment of the Edwin Borden and the Lalia Halfkenny Awards to provide increased financial support for Black students at Acadia. We have seeded those funds and are now actively seeking donations to make them sustainable in perpetuity.

We also heard that there was systemic discrimination in the way in which Residence Assistants (RAs) are chosen, resulting in very limited diversity. Residence Life made changes to the process, and we have seen an immediate increase in diversity in the RA population.

These are just a few of the ways that the work of the PART has already influenced decisions and produced results. As we work our way through the recommendations, we will ensure that the work of the PART is significant and long-lasting on the present and future of Acadia.

### **Changing the Narrative – Medium-Term Recommendations**

The EDIAR Council will be well established as we move to address the medium-term recommendations. However, we will also seek to identify any of these medium-term recommendations that can be addressed more immediately. We will not sit around and wait to address some of these recommendations simply because they are identified as medium-term.

I will task the EDIAR Council with identifying which recommendations can be accelerated, and to develop an Action Plan for addressing all of the recommendations of the report. This will include being transparent not only about progress on recommendations, but also about where we are not able to make progress and why.

### **Charting a New Acadia – Long-Term Recommendations**

These recommendations are by definition aspirational, and many are based on where we want to be in the future, but not too far into the future. As part of the overall action plan, the EDIAR Council will set reasonable timelines on when we would hope to have achieved these recommendations, and will use them to measure progress and achievements, and where gaps and weaknesses exist.

Ultimately, as we move to implement recommendations from the report, progress towards charting a new course for Acadia will be underway. Indeed, it is already underway with the work of the PART.

### **Appendices**

The appendices constitute an important component of the PART report, providing details of the discussions of the various working groups and recommendations for the observances of important events and time periods during the year commemorating Black history and emancipation. These details will be used to guide our responses to the recommendations throughout the main body of the report.

### **Call to Action**

The PART Report represents a call to action for Acadia as we seek to become an anti-racist community and make lasting contributions to the elimination of racism in society at large. This call to action is aimed at all of us who constitute the Acadia community, regardless of our personal background or whether we are administrative staff, faculty, librarians, managers, or students, to do our part in understanding how we contribute to racism and discrimination. To this end, I thank the members of the PART for providing us with such powerful direction on how we can support, both individually and collectively, the elimination of systemic racism in our community and our university.



**Dr. Peter Ricketts**

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