## A Critique of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Policies in Canadian Universities

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*As Canada has become increasingly multicultural, so have its universities – but their demographic representation (or lack thereof) creates a need for diversity, inclusion and equity policies to be evaluated. An intersectional analysis of university institutions reveals a lack of diversity among those who hold positions of power. This paper argues that while institutionalized diversity, inclusion and equity policies are well intentioned, they are also often poorly delivered. Focusing on proposed policy objectives rather than their impact can create barriers to meaningful and lasting change. After establishing a number of basic tenets to this argument, two main ideas will be explored: the importance of disrupting pre-existing assumptions about diversity, inclusion and equity policies, and the implementation of methods to substantively remedy the unequal power relations these policies can reinforce.*

### Introduction

The title of a "university" in Canada is protected under federal regulation, with the intent that institutions housing scholars of autonomous and critical thought need to maintain a particular standard of quality (Universities Canada 2018). As Canada has become increasingly multicultural, so have its universities – but their demographic representation (or lack thereof) creates a need for diversity, inclusion and equity policies to be evaluated. An intersectional analysis of university institutions reveals a lack of diversity among those who hold positions of power. This paper will argue that institutionalized diversity, inclusion and equity policies are weakened by focussing primarily on the proposed objectives of the policy, rather than its potential long term impact. After establishing a number of basic tenets to this argument, two main ideas will be explored: the importance of disrupting pre-existing assumptions about diversity, inclusion and equity policies, and the implementation of methods to substantively remedy the unequal power relations these policies can reinforce.

## Background and Context

The theory of Critical Race Feminism, which focuses on the intersection of gender, race, class, ability, and any other form of social oppression, will be used to frame this paper as the definition has "increasingly been used by educators to look at ways in which schools reproduce inequality, despite the rhetoric of equality of opportunity" (Childers-McKee 2015, 394). Adrienne Chan rightly extends the definition of diversity to encompass all principles of inclusion and recognizing difference (2005, 131). By acknowledging intersectionality and diversity as more than a set of categories to which people self-identify, underlying issues with diversity, inclusion and equity policies (herein referred to as "diversity policies") can be effectively explored. Intersectionality is defined by Crenshaw as a conceptualization of discrimination that does not operate on a categorical axis: it involves the simultaneous consideration of multiple aspects of identity (1991, 1244). However, it is acknowledged that intersectionality is a broad and challenging topic to engage with, which becomes evident through exploring scholarly research and institutional data. In this paper, intersectionality will be analyzed through specific examples, while recognizing the difficulty in representing all non-exclusive sub-categorizations encompassed by the definition.

The first step in assessing diversity and inclusion policies is identifying sources of power within university institutions, as done by Paul Ross. Although Ross analyzes a vast number of power sources in university institutions, the focus of this paper will be on faculty departments, as they primarily "deal with the daily academic business of the institution and are a main source of ideas and proposals" - meaning that they shape formal policies which uphold the bureaucratic power structures of educational institutions (Ross 2012, 65). Chan deepens the analysis of formal power structures by commenting that universities embody normalizing ideologies rooted in organizational structure and patriarchy, which becomes evident in policies created (2005, 141). For example, in 2014 only 23% of contributors to the Canadian Journal of Political Science were women (Vickers 2015, 757), and this is a common trend across disciplines in terms of who creates content and guides university policy-making decisions.

It is also important to clarify why diversity policies within universities are a relevant site of analysis. Chan comments that "policies for diversity did not originate as educational policies, but emerged from Canadian legislation and values" (Chan 2005, 130). Universities are a reflection of the changing values of society, and they are a learning platform for young professionals who will shape social constructs in the future. Educational institutions are also political sites because they control how "power is managed through the distribution of resources, knowledge, and information" (Chan 2005, 131). This political management, which occurs through faculty operations, can lead to institutional power benefiting dominant ideologies over 'othered' worldviews. Since universities incubate social change, a close analysis of diversity policies within this setting will illustrate their impact on both institutional and everyday life.

## Issues with Institutional Diversity, Inclusion and Equity Policies

In recent years, diversity policies have understandably garnered support, as accepting the need for diverse representation is often regarded as a step in the right direction. However, this paper asserts that such policies often fail to acknowledge the bias inherent in policy creation, as well as the systemic

and historical barriers that impact marginalized groups today. The "objective" of a policy will refer to the intentions of the policy writers, whereas the "impact" will refer to the substantial, long term change for the people the policy affects.

Policy-making tends to be a formulaic process, where the problem is considered as an unquestioned fact, and where potential solutions focus on how to "do it better" (Iverson 2007, 589). The issue with this approach is that policy solutions may lend further legitimacy to the socially constructed norms of a privileged majority. Iverson recognizes this issue with her comment of how "diversity action plans profess the rightness of democracy, while ignoring the structural inequality of capitalism" (2007, 603). When forming diversity policies, the process of defining the problem should be discussed in context to historical injustices against marginalized groups, and the solution should allow a space for the unmapping of this oppression. Another issue is that policies often only concentrate on one aspect of intersectionality such as race or gender, without considering the combined impact of all factors. As a result, policies that aim to empower all women may only be accessible to a particular demographic, such as able-bodied, middle-class White women. A truly intersectional analysis demands tailored recommendations to the subtle differences between groups to encourage substantive, long term solutions. However, institutional policies are often focussed on moving forward under the generalized democratic ideal of equality, failing to recognize comprehensive and often painful histories that create barriers for intersectional identities to exist within the university space.

An example of this shortcoming is observed through one objective in the Government of Canada's 2017 Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan, which aims to increase the diversity of Aboriginal representation in Canadian Research Chairs. It is interesting to note that the Action Plan identifies the four categories of women, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal Peoples, and members of visible minorities, yet fails to consider the intersecting identities within these defined groups, which instantly restricts the policy's scope of impact. One item in this policy calls for limiting the renewal of elected Chair term lengths to meet diversity targets (Government of Canada 2018). While this item is well-intentioned, it fails to consider the underlying barriers of economic and cultural oppression, which result in Aboriginal students entering university 21% less than the average Canadian (Statistics Canada 2015). Rather than encouraging higher Aboriginal representation in universities to then rise into Research Chair positions, increasing the Chair turnover rate creates an appearance of equity while leaving underlying barriers to accessing the education system untouched. This policy also reinforces a hierarchical, voting-based system of governance which does not reflect the traditional values of many Aboriginal bands who engage through consensus decision-making. The lack of consent and consultation in policy-making raises barriers for Aboriginal representation in the overall education system, and further marginalizes sub-identities such as gender by subsuming them within the Aboriginal category. In this way, the intended benefits of the policy are weakened because only the symptoms of the defined issue are addressed, while systematically avoiding root problems that reinforce institutional inequality.

A second issue with diversity and inclusion policies is the way in which measures of accountability are constructed. As Iverson notes, "a Critical Race Theory analysis interrogates the unquestioned use of a White, male majority experience as criteria against which to measure the progress and success of people of colour" (2007, 607). A predominantly White, male standard is the classic ideal of academic success, which threatens the intended objective of diversity policies to consider

intersectional experiences. An example from Iverson's research is how one university released a diversity report recommending a faculty professional development track for "high performing people of colour, women, and members of under-represented groups in staff positions" (2007, 595). The problematic nature of this criterion is that 'high performing' refers to individuals who were successful in the past, which is often not an accurate reflection of current groups in need of greater representation. While one may argue that this program is a positive opportunity, defining 'high performing' individuals through a White, male-centric lens ensures that those who rise to positions of power will identify with those already in power, thus defeating the intention of diversity policies to disrupt the conventional definition of success.

Thirdly, an issue arises in the discussion of accountability when quotas are set for the representation of women and marginalized groups. While having a particular number of women in a discipline may be viewed as a progressive action, this paper argues that setting quotas does not result in substantive change. On one hand, setting a number creates a clear measure of accountability that can force policy-makers to follow through with their promises. An example of this concept is Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's gender-balanced Cabinet. The general public appears to have accepted this decision with Trudeau's justification of "Because it's 2015", which was stated during the early days of his term. However, Vickers contrasts this idealistic view with her research demonstrating that although the number of women in the field of political science has increased drastically over the past forty years, topics about women and gender have not been normalized into mainstream political science (2015, 767). Simply increasing the number of women within a discipline is not enough to shift underlying beliefs about women's roles; in Vickers' study, women were less likely to be journal editors or department chairs, and even in Trudeau's Cabinet, historically male-dominant roles such as Minister of Finance and Defense have remained unchanged. While there are benefits to having women present at the table, it is troubling when achieving a numerical policy goal does not fundamentally alter deep-seated norms regarding the expected place for women.

The two arguments thus far, pertaining to policy formation and measures of accountability, can result in surface-level diversity policies. This issue is exacerbated when diversity policies do not enable those who create them to recognize their own privilege. As Henry and Tator state, "White university administrators and non-racialized faculty often do not realize that discrimination is a matter of impact, and not intent. White privilege is like an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions, passports, and resources" (2009, 29). Even though policy writers may have no ill intent, if they are not impacted by the policy themselves, they may fail to grasp its shortcomings. As a result, if a policy is approached with a 'checklist' mentality, an objective may appear to be fulfilled without creating its intended outcome. Iverson provides an example with how the implementation of diversity policies tends to increase a university's ranking and federal funding level. This incentive creates an environment where people of colour become "commodities to promote the self-interest of the White institution" (Iverson 2007, 599). An issue arises when policy writers fail to acknowledge their own privilege, because once a policy benefits the institution, there may be the appearance of a solution that in reality, has failed to create meaningful change.

## Methods to Substantively Remedy Unequal Power Relations

Upon identifying and analyzing issues with diversity, inclusion and equity policies, this paper will move into discussing how diversity can be effectively promoted within universities. Methods explored will focus on policy writers, the policy-making process, and those who are impacted by the policies themselves. A "substantial transformation" in this context refers to when the impact of a policy exceeds its stated objectives and envisioned intent.

"A barrier [in making political science more inclusive] is the expectation of mainstream political scientists that marginalized diverse groups are responsible for solving this problem" (Vickers 2015, 767). This comment indicates an inadvertent fallacy within diversity policies: that the privileged majority does not need to play a role in shifting the needle to benefit marginalized identities. In fact, a change in attitude amongst current policy writers is essential to creating policies that achieve their intended long term impact. This is where diversity policies that have been critiqued for emphasizing numerical targets can still be useful. By increasing women and people of colour within institutional settings, a greater number of interactions will occur with those currently in power. Collaborating with and recognizing the merit of marginalized groups in a conversational setting that policy writers are familiar with has the potential to shift perspectives of faculty management substantively.

However, improving diversity policies through the view of policy writers is only the first step. The second step is creating a space for the narratives of underrepresented identities to influence the impact of policies. Counter-storytelling is a central concept in Critical Race Feminism because it breaks the silence of how hegemonic cultures have distorted marginalized realities that cut across the boundaries of race, class, and gender, while also creating a space for common understanding (Henry and Tator 2009, 38). However, for the creation of this space to lead to healing and progress, institutions must be wary to avoid classifying marginalized groups as 'victims' in need of assistance. If institutions approach stories of diversity with a view of superiority, then there is a risk of creating an 'othered' space that further divides marginalized groups from the dominant group. Creating spaces in universities where marginalized groups can bring their stories forward, in a way where they are heard and valued in the policy-making process, will encourage substantive transformation in the intent and impact of diversity policies.

Methods of data collection in researching policies for intersectional groups must also be improved for the long term impact of diversity policies to be effective. Intersectionality is a relatively new concept in the political domain, with "little guidance and no synthesis of 'best practices' for scholars wanting to apply intersectionality methodologies" (Hankivsky and Cormier 2011, 225). A quick search of the University of Alberta's demographic information makes this challenge apparent: while there are statistics on proportions of age, faculty representation, and student status, there is no measure indicating the levels of these factors combined. Furthermore, it is very difficult to source public data on intersectional identifiers such as women of colour in universities, leading one to question what information is relied upon to inform policy-making. Aligning with the argumentation of this paper, Hankivsky and Cormier suggest that intersectionality research needs to consider the full impact of a policy on the marginalized groups it affects. They also discuss a "multistrand approach" of policy-making, which accounts for the simultaneous operation of various dimensions of inequality within

intersectional groups. This method focuses on engaging with the narratives of all stakeholders throughout the collection, analysis and synthesis of information, with a specific focus on monitoring policy outcomes and examining the cross-impacts between various identities, such as gender and race (Hankivsky and Cormier 2011, 223). By focussing intersectionality as a policy's guiding principle rather than its named objective, the counter-stories and complex relationships that an intersectional analysis demands can be reflected through policy design. This shift in methodology will enable faculty departments who collect information to measure the robustness of intersectionality in their research processes, resulting in more inclusive policy-making.

A final suggestion to substantively remedy unequal power relations focuses on the agency of those impacted by diversity policies. An example of the impact on intersectional groups is demonstrated through a Canadian study by Begum Verjee, which gathered the perspectives of women of colour engaged in service-community learning; a program that focuses on developing community partnerships to promote institutional equality. Findings of the study revealed that when faculty chairs lead curriculum development, there is often a lack of consultation with marginalized communities, resulting in 'add-on' methods of teaching where the dominant curriculum erases 'othered' worldviews (Verjee 2012, 60). To remedy this issue, it was recommended to teach principles of anti-oppression and regularly invite guest speakers from various intersectional groups into the classroom. By building constructive relationships with marginalized communities rather than cherry-picking from narratives to build a curriculum, the goal is that young professionals will become naturally attuned to the complex nature of discussions about intersectionality, and bring tangible skills of empathy and collaboration into the broader social space. Thus, the objectives of diversity policies can extend beyond ideation and impact the realm of lived experience.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the effectiveness of diversity policies in institutional educational environments. It is found that while diversity policies are often well-intentioned, a number of issues arise in constructing and assessing policies, which can subvert their intended impact. Substantive change is made possible by recognizing bias in the policy writing process, and encouraging community building between intersectional groups to create a space for diverse narratives. In researching this paper, it is interesting to note the limited information available on intersectional identities within universities, which is an area that is challenging to explore and requires improvement. When writing policy, intersectionality should be recognized through the unique and rich identities present within Canada's learning institutions. If this is achieved, diversity policies will not only give marginalized groups a seat at the table; they will also ensure that all voices play a role in shaking the foundations of the institutions that create social norms.

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