

Black Students' Experiences of Anti-Black Racism on Campus

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Abstract: *Catalyzed by numerous high-profile incidents of anti-Black police brutality within the context of systemic anti-Black racism, a global movement advocating for racial justice for Black lives has ignited conversations in academia. While universities across North America issued statements pledging commitment to racial equity, many lacked systemic mechanisms to enact meaningful change. With research on anti-Black racism in academia primarily focused on the U.S., the experiences of Black students in Canada remain underexplored. In this context, activist scholars from a Canadian university in Alberta conducted a two-phase mixed-methods case study to examine Black students' experiences. This article presents findings from phase one, an online survey informed by critical race theory, completed by 113 self-identified Black students. Respondents shared insights on the university's climate, incidents of anti-Black racism, its impacts on well-being, and dissatisfaction with institutional responses. Findings underscore the urgent need for systemic changes in representation, support, training, and curriculum development to address anti-Black racism meaningfully.*

Keywords: *Anti-Black racism, critical race theory, racism, Black social work students, social justice, social work education, EDI*

Against the backdrop of an unprecedented global pandemic that disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020; Khare et al., 2020; Shadmi et al., 2020), along with multiple high-profile incidents of police brutality against Black individuals (Eichstaedt et al., 2021; Stelkia, 2020; Wu et al., 2023), the Black Lives Matter Movement emerged as a global phenomenon. The movement catalyzed a sharp focus on the historical legacy of slavery and the ever-present reality of systemic anti-Black racism, both nationally (Diverlus et al., 2020; Potvin, 2020; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019) and internationally (Ransby, 2018; Shahin et al., 2021; Solomon, 2023). In response to protests, many universities issued statements of solidarity with Black communities (University of Toronto, n.d.; Turpin, 2020) and declared their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI, McGill University, 2020); University of Alberta, 2020; University of Calgary [UCalgary], 2020), as well as anti-racism (Dean, 2023; UCalgary, n.d.a; University of Windsor, 2020). However, these surface-level responses from many post-secondary institutions lacked concrete mechanisms to address anti-Black racism on campus, ultimately functioning to quell the growing calls for systems and sustainable change (Ahmed, 2006).

Research consistently demonstrates that both overt and covert forms of racism persist at all levels of academia, in Canada (Grant et al., 2017; Mohamed & Beagan, 2019; Stirling

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Cameron & Jefferies, 2021) and in the United States (U.S.) (Ahmed, 2012; Mwangi et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2016). In the Canadian context, the education system has historically served as a tool for advancing white supremacy (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). Specifically, in higher education, Black Canadian students face multiple barriers, including a lack of institutional support, as well as racism from their peers, professors, and university administration (Bombay & Hewitt, 2015). Despite this concerning evidence, until recently, minimal attention was paid to advancing racial justice within post-secondary education, placing the bulk of the burden to racialized and Indigenous faculty, staff, and students who are forced to simultaneously navigate systemic barriers in relative isolation while advocating for change (Adams, 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2021). In the Canadian context, the term *racialized* people refers to individuals or groups who are categorized and marginalized within societal structures based on socially constructed ideas of race, often tied to physical characteristics such as skin colour, facial features, or cultural attributes. The term emphasizes the systemic nature of racial categorization and its impact, rather than framing race as an inherent or biological reality.

Limited consideration of anti-racism in institutional decision-making, insufficient dedication of resources for EDI and anti-racism work, and lackluster engagement with students in institutional anti-racism efforts are symptoms of institutional negligence (Campbell & Candler, 2020). However, the last three years have seen heightened demand for transformational change within academia (Duhaney & El-Lahib, 2021). While the term Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is commonly used in the U.S. and often centers on addressing historical racial inequities, this paper uses EDI to reflect Canadian usage.

History and Effects of EDI Implementation in Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions

EDI initiatives were first introduced in Canadian universities in the 1980s (Douglas, 2022). However, the topic resurfaced in 2017 for several reasons, including the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S., sparked by the murder of George Floyd, and an increased focus on decolonization in Canada (Marom, 2023). In response, post-secondary institutions became more reflective about their policies and practices (Marom, 2023). Universities Canada (2017) emphasized the importance of EDI, stating:

We believe our universities are enriched by diversity and inclusion. As leaders of universities that aspire to be diverse, fair, and open, we will make our personal commitment to diversity and inclusion evident. We commit our institutions to developing and/or maintaining an equity, diversity, and inclusion action plan in consultation with students, faculty, staff, and administrators, particularly with individuals from underrepresented groups. We commit to demonstrating progress over time. (para. 5)

This commitment was further reinforced by the Canadian federal government in 2017, which required institutions applying for Canada Research Chair funding to have developed EDI action plans (Government of Canada, 2022). This provided strong incentives for Canadian universities to implement EDI policies. Canada's dedication to addressing EDI was further solidified by the development of the National Scarborough Charter on anti-

Black racism and Black inclusion in higher education, signed by several Canadian universities (Marom, 2023). EDI in Canadian universities is generally strengthened through: “1) political commitment; 2) student recruitment; 3) programmatic supports; 4) research and scholarship; and 5) institutional climate” (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019, p. 51).

Despite these advancements, EDI policies are not without flaws. Many Canadian universities lump all EDI issues under singular policies and action plans, failing to consider the distinct challenges faced by different groups (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). Additionally, fewer than half of Canadian universities explicitly define EDI in their policies, which leads to inconsistent application (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). This inconsistency can create challenges for racialized students and faculty, especially as some universities prioritize specific EDI issues over others.

Although EDI policies have been successful in increasing diversity through targeted recruitment, research has shown that they are typically developed by senior leadership, which remains predominantly white. Furthermore, fewer than half of Canadian universities have dedicated EDI offices, and this number appears to be decreasing (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). Evaluating the effectiveness of EDI policies is challenging due to variations among universities, the absence of tracking for students and faculty, and a scarcity of evaluative studies (MacKenzie et al., 2023). Furthermore, there has been resistance from right-wing political groups who label EDI efforts as “woke culture” (Marom, 2023, p. 1086).

The increasing presence of Black students at post-secondary institutions in midwestern provinces such as Alberta highlights the urgent need for establishing long-lasting measures to extinguish anti-Black racism on Alberta campuses. Limited inquiry into Black students, faculty, and staff experiences of anti-Black racism, however, has produced limited data from which to draw recommendations for systemic change. This case study seeks to advance and mobilize research on lived experiences of Black students facing anti-Black racism at all levels within the UCalgary by asking, “What are the experiences of anti-Black racism at the University of Calgary?” This research is part of a larger mixed-methods study aimed at understanding Black students, alumni, staff, and faculty members’ experiences of anti-Black racism at the UCalgary. The objectives of the study are to, a) examine Black students’ lived experiences of anti-Black racism; b) provide key recommendations that promote equity and anti-racism to enhance current policies and practices at UCalgary; and c) contribute to and advance Canadian research on anti-Black racism in Canadian institutions of higher learning, informing future national research agendas.

Positionality

In this study, we recognize the importance of situating ourselves as authors and researchers to provide transparency about our perspectives, motivations, and the lenses through which we approach this work. As a diverse team of scholars committed to addressing anti-Black racism, our positionalities reflect varied experiences, identities, and commitments to social justice. Understanding that our backgrounds, privileges, and social locations influence our research, we provide these positionality statements to acknowledge our roles and responsibilities in both perpetuating and challenging systemic oppression. Our collective efforts are grounded in a shared dedication to promoting racial equity and

justice, particularly within academic institutions, and to supporting the voices of those most impacted by anti-Black racism. The first author is a Black woman activist-scholar whose work is driven by a personal and professional commitment to eradicating anti-Black racism in academia. An advocate for systemic change within the Faculty of Social Work and the wider university, she has played a critical role in promoting racial equity and justice. Her efforts are grounded in a belief in the power of activism and scholarship to transform institutional policies and practices that perpetuate anti-Black racism. The second author is a 2.5 generation white Italian settler and anti-racist activist scholar. Her involvement in racial justice work focuses on challenging anti-Black racism and amplifying the voices of Black students and faculty in their fight for equity. She is committed to using her position to disrupt white supremacy and support meaningful, long-term changes within academic and community spaces. Her work reflects an awareness of her own privilege and an unyielding dedication to dismantling systemic oppression. The third author is a white cis-gender male settler of Norwegian, German, and Scottish descent, living on unceded T'sou-ke territory. As an activist scholar, he focuses on social justice, allyship, critiques of whiteness, masculinities, and anti-racism. With over 15 years of community-based experience, his work is informed by a critical examination of his own positionality and a commitment to challenging racial hierarchies. He actively contributes to efforts aimed at eradicating anti-Black racism and promoting equity within both academic and broader social contexts. The fourth author is a second-generation Chinese immigrant and social worker whose research and practice are guided by anti-racist and intersectional feminist frameworks. Her lived experiences of racism, combined with an awareness of anti-Black racism within Asian immigrant communities, drive her commitment to combating these issues. She approaches her work with an understanding of how various forms of oppression intersect and a dedication to fostering solidarity across racial and ethnic lines to address anti-Black racism and promote systemic change.

Literature Review

Anti-Black Racism

Anti-Black racism is a system of racial injustice that has historically subjugated, marginalized, and dehumanized people of African descent (Duhaney et al., 2022). Rooted in the enslavement and the relentless systemic denigration of Black identities (Kendi, 2019), anti-Black racism is evident across societies and employs blatant methods to undermine Blackness while centring whiteness and asserting white supremacy (Duhaney et al., 2022). Anti-Blackness is embedded in policies, practices, and social norms to propagate the inferiority of Black people (Kumsa et al., 2014; Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021).

Prevalence of Anti-Black Racism in Higher Education in Canada and the United States

Anti-Black racism is prevalent across Canadian university campuses (Moore, 2021; Stirling Cameron & Jefferies, 2021). However, empirical research on students' experiences

with anti-Black racism often relies on studies from the U.S. Research in the U.S. has demonstrated that Black students experience negative campus climates characterized by inequitable treatment, microaggressions, lack of representation, and systemic racism; which contribute to feelings of isolation and lack of belonging (Koo, 2021; Mills, 2021) that impact students' overall campus experiences and students' outcomes in terms of retention, academic success, and graduation (Campbell et al., 2019; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). The most common forms of racism reported by Black post-secondary students are racial microaggressions (McCabe, 2009). Anti-Black and racial microaggressions are defined as: "commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Butts (2002) emphasized the complexity of racist aggression, which functions at the individual, community, and policy levels, reinforcing multi-faceted trauma.

Mwangi and colleagues (2018) examined the racial climate at a U.S. university campus. In their qualitative responses, students described a hostile climate where Black students are often targeted by campus police and security; experience intensified police presence at events held by Black student organizations; and endure fear and anxiety about walking around campus after seeing themselves reflected in the murders of Black men and women in the news (Mwangi et al., 2018). Students in Smith and colleagues' study (2016) reported experiencing anti-Black male stereotyping and hyper-surveillance. Participants described being racially profiled and surveilled by police on and off campus (Smith et al., 2016). In some instances, Black males reported being perceived as a criminal/predator or assumed to possess "ghetto-specific" knowledge (Smith et al., 2016, p. 1197).

In Canada, racial discrimination and anti-Black racism on post-secondary campuses require further attention from researchers and institutional leaders (Katchanovski et al., 2015). A key factor in an act of complicit invisibilization is the institutional neglect to collect race-based data from universities and colleges in Canada. According to a 2017 investigation by the Canadian Broadcasting Company, of the 76 Canadian universities surveyed, 63 disclosed that they do not collect race-based data and could not provide a demographic breakdown of the ethnic and racial composition of their student bodies (McDonald & Ward, 2017). Some universities providing explanations for not collecting race-based data indicated that they did not want to discriminate against certain racial groups. Despite the lack of race-based data, there is an increasing body of scholarship within Canada calling attention to the pervasiveness of racism against racialized students and faculty and the neglect of racial issues in the curriculum (Hampton, 2016). For example, a qualitative study with 16 Black students enrolled in or recently graduated from a Canadian university (Gosine, 2007) found that some students in fields such as math, sciences, and business, perceived the university climate as less hostile than students in the humanities, social sciences, and law. The latter group expressed concerns about Eurocentric curriculum, biased treatment from racially insensitive faculty, conflicts with white peers, and a lack of Black faculty (Gosine, 2007). Leath and Chavous (2018) revealed in their study that Black women students faced a more hostile racial climate and experienced decreased academic satisfaction, despite similar levels of academic knowledge when compared to women from other racial groups. Similar results were documented by

Dortch and Patel (2017), who found that Black women students experienced persistent racial and gendered microaggressions, including isolation, exclusion, and having their intelligence and capabilities questioned and undermined. The authors further noted that Black women experiencing anti-Black racism may be reluctant to respond for fear of being categorized as the stereotypical “angry Black woman” (Dortch & Patel, 2017). This same pattern was revealed in a study exploring the racialized students’ responses to racial microaggressions, where Jones (2021) found that Black women refrained from responding because they were the only Black person in the situation or environment and feared that they would not be believed or supported. Caxaj and colleagues (2021) drew parallels between Black and other racialized students’ (e.g., Black, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, immigrants, and refugees) experiences in a qualitative study examining how students navigate campus life in a mid-sized Canadian city. Racialized students in this study reported being perceived as “outsiders” or “threats,” and surveilled and questioned due to their racialized status (Caxaj et al., 2021). Students also pointed out that the onus for addressing racism was placed on them, and they had little institutional support, creating a pressure that these students felt their white peers did not have to deal with (Caxaj et al., 2021).

Consequences of Anti-Black racism

The impact or consequences of anti-Black racism are significant for Black students who may feel unsafe, experience depression, and self-police their own behaviours to avoid further targeting. Corbin and colleagues (2018) reported that participants in their study policed themselves to avoid being labelled as angry, loud, irrational, aggressive, or argumentative. In Maffini and Dillard’s (2022) U.S. study of Black and white undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 30, Black students reported feeling significantly less safe than white students on campus. A larger number of Black students reported feelings of hopelessness, anger, and suicidality than white students (Maffini & Dillard, 2022). Black students who reported feeling less safe also experienced disproportionately high rates of assault victimization (Maffini & Dillard, 2022). A lack of belonging and feelings of isolation were other impacts reported by Black students who spoke of their university’s campus climate (Hampton, 2016), which contributed to psychological distress.

The depth of psychological harm was also uncovered in a study examining the relationship between racial microaggressions and symptoms of depression, in which Marks and colleagues (2021) found that Black students who reported feeling unwanted or discredited also expressed feelings of depression. Blume and colleagues (2012) also examined the impact of microaggressions on racialized university students at a historically white institution in the U.S., where racialized students reported experiencing microaggressions more frequently than white students. Their findings also suggested that experiences of microaggressions were linked to a greater risk for anxiety and binge drinking (Blume et al., 2012). Black students, in a study by Smith et al. (2016), shared that they were subjected to hostile environments in their universities, describing psychological stress and symptoms of racial battle fatigue. Racial battle fatigue has been defined as the accumulation of social and psychological effects of racial micro- and macro-aggressions,

leading to negative health consequences, including physiological symptoms and psychological stress (Smith, 2004, 2010; Smith et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2016).

Anti-Black racism is prevalent across university campuses, leaving Black students with little recourse or support. Some researchers observed that Black students experiencing racial microaggressions were tasked with dealing with the effects of racially oppressive encounters, correcting those perpetuating them, while also navigating the negative impacts of these racial microaggressions on their well-being (Hollingsworth et al., 2018). This issue is further exacerbated by university administrations who are often more preoccupied with increasing the recruitment and matriculation of Black students than with addressing the negative effects and impacts of anti-Black racism on students within university campuses (Maffini & Dillard, 2022). Maffini and Dillard (2022) further emphasized that administrators are not paying sufficient attention to the actual day-to-day experiences that Black students endure during their studies, nor to hostile campus environments that may decrease the likelihood they will enter university, persist with their studies, and achieve their degree.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) was employed as both a theoretical framework and a methodology in this study. Originating from U.S. legal scholarship, CRT emerged as a critical response to mainstream liberal perspectives, and as a radical alternative to the faltering progress of traditional civil rights litigation in producing significant social reform (Gillborn, 2006; Taylor, 1998). CRT conceptualizes racism as pervasive and deeply embedded within everyday life, culture, and longstanding sociopolitical systems and institutions (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Gillborn, 2006). The theory emphasizes the historical and contextual nature of racial dynamics and their impact on the present day (Taylor, 1998). As a framework rooted in struggles for racial justice, CRT rejects myths and claims of meritocracy, neutrality, objectivity, and racial colour-blindness (Gillborn, 2006). Grounded in social justice and praxis, CRT seeks to promote racial equity and dismantle race-based oppression (Graham et al., 2011). While it foregrounds race and racism, CRT also critically examines the intersections of race, gender, class, and other social identities (Graham et al., 2011). Crenshaw's foundational work on intersectionality is significant, highlighting how race and gender intersect to shape Black women's structural, political, and representational experiences (Crenshaw, 1989, 2016).

As a methodological approach, CRT integrates theory, experiential knowledge, and critical consciousness to uncover and challenge systemic racism and its consequences (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). By "center [ing] in the margins" (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010, p. S31), CRT shifts the focus of discourse from the dominant perspectives to groups on the margins. It critiques the normative dominance of Eurocentric perspectives, which has led to an "apartheid of knowledge" that marginalizes and erases the knowledges and experiences of racialized communities (Malagon et al., 2009, p. 254). Through methods like counter-narratives, CRT focuses on the experiential knowledge of racialized communities (Graham et al., 2011). Researchers employing CRT often include their own lived experiences with racism and racialization, as these personal narratives enrich the

analysis and connect with the lived experiences of the communities being studied (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Parker, 2019).

Methods

This study was conducted in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder and the global amplification of the Black Lives Matter movement, an era marked by increased awareness of anti-Black racism. The research employed a community survey methodology to examine the prevalence and experiences of anti-Black racism among Black students at UCalgary (Berkowitz, 1996; Halvorsen et al., 2022). Petersen and Alexander's (2001) six-stage assessment protocol was adapted for the study, encompassing planning, strategy development, data identification, formulation of broad research questions, and implementation and analysis through consensus decision-making.

This article reports on phase one of the study, which used an online survey method to capture quantitative and qualitative data. Brief surveys increased response rates while respecting participants' time constraints (Kuechler, 1998). The inclusion criteria specified that participants must be current university students aged 18 or older. Ethics approval was obtained from the UCalgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (REB20-1817).

During survey design, the research team could not locate validated tools that aligned with the study's needs assessment objectives. The lead researcher defined the research questions and broad topics, then developed the survey. Five team members, chosen for their expertise in CRT, anti-racism, and research methods, engaged in a peer-debriefing process (Creswell, 2013). These members also had a history of activism against anti-Black racism within the university community.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling (e.g., student organizations, listservs from 13 faculties or departments at UCalgary, and referrals) and snowball sampling (e.g., personal contacts and referrals, Patton, 2002). Purposive recruitment also occurred through Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter groups, local organizations (i.e., Social Work Student Association [SWSA]; and the Association of Black Social Workers), as well as in classrooms, and public lecture visits. All recruitment materials included an overview of the study and a link to the survey, that was uploaded to Qualtrics (2021) web-based software.

The survey was administered over 16 months, from December 2020 to March 2022, yielding 304 responses from students using non-probability purposive and convenience sampling methods (Creswell, 2013). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team extended the recruitment and data collection period to ensure students had ample opportunity to participate. Of the total data collected, 191 surveys were removed for incompleteness (surveys where three or more questions were answered were kept for analysis), or because the participant did not identify as Black. A total of 113 surveys were included in the final analysis. The Qualtrics platform was used to select the analytic sample and perform univariate analysis. We focused our quantitative analysis on descriptive statistics and identified key themes through our qualitative analysis. Tables and figures

were produced in Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data were exported to Microsoft Word, analyzed, and coded using thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) by one team member.

Trustworthiness was ensured throughout the research process. The research team reviewed the survey and adjusted questions to minimize participant reactivity by removing affirming and non-affirming elements and using neutral language (Padgett, 2008). Trustworthiness was also established in the analysis stage. Initial codes were confirmed through a consensus procedure to ensure agreement on their meaning (Creswell, 2013). Where consensus could not be reached, the qualitative comment was reviewed within the context of the entire survey response. If consensus remained unattainable, the comment was excluded from analysis. After the thematic analysis, relevant quotes were selected to illustrate recurring themes. The lead researcher and a co-researcher subsequently reviewed the findings to confirm that the quotes chosen accurately represented the themes. All authors involved in the analysis have academic training in CRT, which informed the study's interpretive framework and analytic approach.

Findings

UCalgary student participants were invited to share their views on the university climate, experiences, and the impact of anti-Black racism on their well-being, Black representation, and institutional responses to reports of anti-Black racism. Several themes were identified below that encapsulate their responses.

Demographics

All participants selected for the analytic sample ($n=113$) self-identified as Black students. Most (63%) identified their current level of study as undergraduate, while 29% were in graduate or post-graduate studies, and 8% reported that they were enrolled in continuing education. Age was collected in six, five-year age categories beginning at 17 and ending at 43 and older. Most students (42%) were ages 17-22. Participants were primarily female (68%), with almost one in three (29%) males and a small percentage (3%) identified along the gender spectrum (transgender, gender fluid, non-binary). Most participants identified as straight/heterosexual (79%), and the remaining indicated that they were sexually diverse (15%) or preferred not to answer (6%).

An equal number of participants reported being born in Africa and Canada (36%, respectively), while 10% stated that they were born in the United States, 4% in the Caribbean and Bermuda, 4% in Europe. The remaining 10% were born in places not listed in the survey (e.g., Brazil, "Middle East," and Venezuela). Most participants (90%) identified English as their primary language. The remaining participants (2%) identified French as their primary language, while 8% did not specify their primary language. Household income was collected in seven categories, beginning with under \$10,000, increasing in \$20,000 increments to \$150,000 and over. Most participants responding to this question (19%) identified their household income as \$50,000 to \$69,999 (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. *Demographics (n = 112)*

		n (%)
Education	Undergraduate	70 (62.5%)
	Graduate	30 (26.8%)
	Post-Graduate	3 (2.7%)
	Continuing Education	9 (8%)
Age	17-22	47 (42%)
	23-27	25 (22.3%)
	28-32	14 (12.5%)
	33-37	11 (9.8%)
	38-42	7 (6.3%)
	43 and older	8 (7.1%)
Gender	Female	76 (67.9%)
	Male	33 (29.5%)
	Transgender	0 (0%)
	Gender Fluid	0 (0%)
	Non-binary	2 (1.8%)
	Not listed, please specify	0 (0%)
	Prefer not to answer	1 (0.9%)
Country of Birth	Canada	40 (35.7%)
	Caribbean and Bermuda	5 (4.5%)
	Africa	40 (35.7%)
	United States	11 (9.8%)
	Europe	5 (4.5%)
	Not listed, please specify	11 (9.8%)
Primary Language	English	101 (90.2%)
	French	2 (1.8%)
	Not listed, please specify	9 (8%)
Household Income	Under \$10,000	11 (9.8%)
	\$10,000 to \$29, 999	18 (16.1%)
	\$30, 000 to \$49, 999	12 (10.7%)
	\$50,000 to \$69, 999	21 (18.8%)
	\$70,000 to \$89, 999	20 (17.9%)
	\$90,000 to \$149, 999	19 (17%)
	\$150,000 and over	11 (9.8%)

Climate of Anti-Black Racism at UCalgary

Participants were asked if, as Black individuals, they believed that UCalgary was a welcoming environment, using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sixty-two percent of participants agreed, while 23% disagreed. Participants were then asked if they believed that as Black individuals, they were valued at the university. Most participants (54%) agreed, 27% disagreed, and the remaining participants neither agreed nor disagreed (19%). Participants were also asked if they believed they were supported at the university. Many participants (49%) agreed, and about a third (32%) disagreed, with the remaining (20%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Participants were asked whether they generally felt safe on campus. Most (67%) responded yes, while 34% were either "not sure" (19%) or indicated they did not feel safe

(16%; see Table 2). Eight participants who reported feeling safe provided qualitative responses that shed light on the complexity of their feelings, such as “physically yes, not psychologically” or expressing “I need to justify my presence”; these responses elucidated the tensions experienced by Black students in claiming to experience safety on campus. Two participants who were “not sure” of their level of safety stated that they had not yet been to campus. Those who indicated that they did not feel safe did not provide further details to explain their response.

Table 2. *Climate of Anti-Black Racism*

Question	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean*</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
UCalgary is a welcoming environment.	113	3.78	1.59	1-7
You are valued at the UCalgary.	113	3.55	1.62	1-7
You are supported at the UCalgary.	113	3.40	1.66	1-7
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>		
Do you feel safe on campus? (<i>n</i> = 70)				
Yes	47	67.1%		
No	10	15.7%		
Not sure	13	18.6%		

*Scale: 1= Strongly disagree to 7 =Strongly agree

Experiences of Anti-Black Racism on Campus

Fifty percent of respondents (*n* = 35) indicated that they had experienced anti-Black racism on campus, while 8% were unsure if they had experienced anti-Black racism. Over half of respondents (*n* = 35; 51%) also shared that they had witnessed anti-Black racism on campus, while 16% of participants were unsure if they had witnessed it. When asked where on the university campus they had experienced anti-Black racism, students reported that they most frequently experienced it during interactions with peers (35%), on campus/online from professors (18%), and on campus/online from administrative staff (13%; see Table 3). Students also stated that they experienced anti-Black racism in multiple spaces and circumstances while on campus, including the fitness centre, during intramural sports, while living in residence, in a clinic setting, in response to a program application, on public billboards, in the student life building, on campus transit stops, and in the library.

Some students described their experiences with anti-Black racism in greater detail, ranging from daily aggressions to systemic erasure. One student shared that “in class, anti-Black racism takes the form of micro-aggression and being silenced” most often, “they are not blatant racist acts.” Another form of anti-Black racism reported by students was how others dismiss their experience of being Black. One student stated that “As a Black person my opinion does not count when talking about social justice because I bring up racism too much. I am viewed as angry, and my comments are ignored.” In a further troubling statement, another student shared that they had experienced a racist attack on campus, noting that, “I was confronted/yelled at by a racist individual to leave.”

Table 3. *Experiences of Anti-Black Racism*

Question	Response	<i>n</i> (%)
Have you experienced anti-Black racism at the University of Calgary? (<i>n</i> = 70)	Yes	35 (50.0%)
	No	29 (41.4%)
	Not sure	6 (8.6%)
Have you witnessed anti-Black racism at the University of Calgary? (<i>n</i> = 69)	Yes	35 (50.7%)
	No	23 (33.3%)
	Not sure	11 (15.9%)
Where on campus did you experience anti-Black racism? (<i>n</i> = 83)	On campus/online from peers	29 (34.9%)
	On campus/online from professor	15 (18.1%)
	On campus/online from administrative staff	11 (13.3%)
	University Fitness Centre	1 (1.2%)
	Residence	2 (2.4%)
	Not listed, please specify	16 (19.3%)
	Prefer not to answer	9 (10.8%)

Students also provided structural and institutional examples of anti-Black racism, related to a lack of representation of Black students, faculty, and staff on campus, and the absence of Afrocentric and Black history and course content. One student shared that “My learning experience is not balanced. The perspective regarding the historical context of today’s societal issues is never fully explored.” Some Black students shared that they felt tokenized in certain classes, burdened with the expectation to represent their entire race. They described being treated as a monolith, with white professors often assuming they were less intelligent, which negatively impacted their academic performance. Some students also noted that they had limited access to funding and awards. In this context, students observed that, while the university claims to be committed to diversity, “racist comments are not addressed” and that “inherent racial discrimination is rampant on the campus.”

Impacts of Anti-Black Racism on Student Well-Being

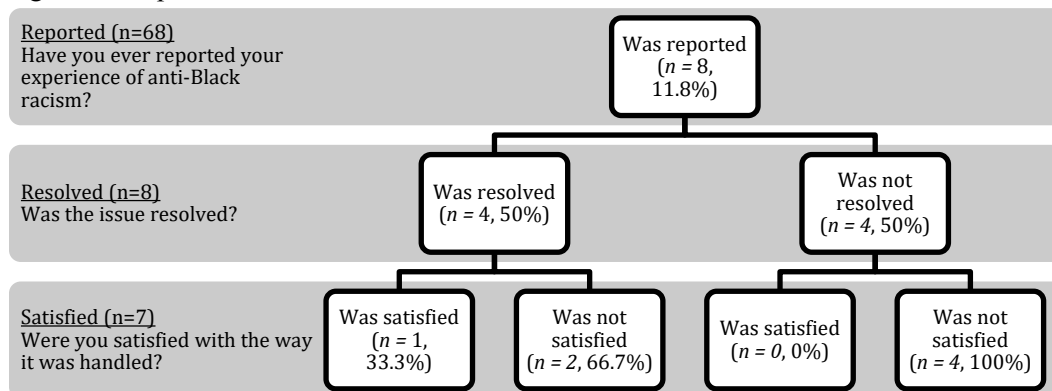
All participating students were asked to identify the most significant impacts of anti-Black racism they had experienced. Impacts were multifaceted and profoundly harmful, with almost half (*n* = 50) stating that they lost their sense of belonging (48%). Furthermore, 28% of the students reported experiencing reduced self-confidence, 22% reported experiencing mental health challenges, another 22% indicated reduced academic performance, and 4% shared that their social interactions were affected. One participant elaborated on the sense of exclusion, “I am the only one around and my pillars are white people who will never understand my life as a Black person in 2020.” Several other participants said the experience of anti-Black racism did not affect them because they were “used to it” and another elaborated by saying that while it did not impact them, “it is wrong to have to go through that [anti-Black racism].”

Responses to Anti-Black Racism

Despite the pervasive and multifaceted ways that anti-Black racism was experienced by Black students on campus, only eight of the participants (12%) who responded to this question said yes. Individuals who reported the incident shared their experiences with one or more of the following: the police, academic staff, friends, colleagues, supervisor, human resources, or the dean. Although the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, and the Protected Disclosure and Research Integrity Office serve as official channels for reporting incidents, only one student reported accessing these services. When asked if the reporting of anti-Black racism had helped bring the issue to a resolution, only half (50%) of the participants said yes. In comparison, the remaining 50% indicated that the issue remained unresolved.

Furthermore, among those who stated that the incident was resolved, only one participant said they were satisfied with how the incident was handled, while two other participants shared that they were not satisfied with the outcome. Of those who reported that the incident was not resolved ($n = 4$), none were satisfied with how the incident was handled and one student who reported an incident of anti-Black racism did not disclose whether the report was resolved or if they were satisfied with the result. One student provided further detail, noting that they had reported two separate incidents to multiple people, including their supervisor and human resources, and they were not believed. They stated, “I was informed I did not understand the context and gestures clearly.” In summary, among the participants who reported experiences of anti-Black racism, only one was satisfied with how the incident was managed (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Responses to Anti-Black Racism*



For most students, who did not report their experiences of anti-Black racism, we asked them to expand on their reasons. Of the 22 responses received, a majority (68%) indicated that they did not believe reporting would make a difference. Underscoring the trauma associated with anti-Black racism, others stated that they were discouraged from speaking out due to stigma, fear, guilt, and shame. One participant said, “I didn’t want to be labelled ‘that Black girl’ before I got the chance to succeed.” Reflecting on Canada’s justice system,

one participant noted that, "hate crimes barely lead to convictions in Canada; I have done my research."

Considering the current environment, experiences, and impact of anti-Black racism at UCalgary, we asked participants whether they believed the university was committed to addressing this issue. Most students (57%) said no. In their responses, some participants shared further incidents of anti-Black racism which went unaddressed by the university, and another student commented that they would like to see the metrics "used to evaluate the effectiveness of their EDI [the university's Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion] strategy." Thirty-two percent of participants agreed that the university was committed to addressing anti-Black racism. Many of the comments from students who agreed the university was committed were cautious, as one student shared, "Conversations have started, and I hope they will continue." For one participant, appointment of the Equity Diversity and Inclusion VP was "not something I thought would actually ever happen, and to see senior administrative staff take the recommendations of student activists seriously and implement their recommended changes was surprising and a positive step forward for the university."

When asked if there were appropriate supports to address discrimination and anti-Black racism on campus, 73% said there were not appropriate supports. One participant perceived that existing programs were ineffective, commenting: "A lot of the programs on campus are window dressing of diversity and inclusion." A second participant identified a need for further training in the student counselling office that addressed "self-esteem issues related to race, fear, and anxiety [and] the way the world receives Black individuals."

Table 4. *Perspectives of the University*

Question	Response	n (%)
The university is committed to addressing anti-Black racism. (n = 77)	Yes	25 (32.5%)
	No	44 (57.1%)
	Not sure	8 (10.4%)
Do you believe you have appropriate supports to address discrimination or anti-Black racism on campus? (n = 74)	Yes	17 (23%)
	No	54 (73%)
	Not sure	3 (4.1%)
Are you aware of any current policies at the University of Calgary that address inequities, in particular anti-racism? (n = 68)	Yes	26 (38.2%)
	No	42 (61.8%)
If so, do you believe they are effective? (n = 26)	Yes	7 (26.9%)
	Maybe	8 (30.8%)
	No	0 (0%)
	No Opinion	11 (42.3%)
How important is it to you that the University has policies that address inequities, in particular anti-Black racism? (n = 68)	Extremely	39 (57.4%)
	Very	15 (22.1%)
	Moderately	5 (7.4%)
	Slightly	3 (4.4%)
	Not at all	6 (8.8%)

In addition to programs and supports, the students were asked if they were aware of any current policies at the university that addressed inequalities, specifically, anti-racism. Most participants (62%) were unaware of any policies, while approximately one-third

(38%) stated they were aware. Of those who knew of current policies, 27% expressed that they were effective, 31% shared that they may be effective, and 42% had no opinion. While most participants were unaware of equity and anti-racism policies on campus, a significant majority (79%) indicated that the existence of these policies was either very or extremely important (see Table 4).

Discussion

The demographic data highlights that Black students at UCalgary represent a diverse group across age, gender, education levels, and geographic origins. However, the findings emphasize a need for tailored support structures, particularly for undergraduate students who make up the majority (63%) of the sample. The underrepresentation of students from regions such as the Caribbean, Europe, and Latin America underscores a gap in fostering global inclusivity. At the same time, the predominance of English speakers suggests that students with diverse linguistic backgrounds may face additional cultural or linguistic barriers. Addressing these nuanced aspects of diversity can help foster a more equitable campus climate.

These findings underscore the complex and nuanced climate that Black students experience at UCalgary, reflecting a broader pattern of anti-Black racism that is prevalent across Canadian campuses (Mullings et al., 2016). Although most participants viewed UCalgary as a welcoming environment, it is concerning that a significant portion of students did not feel welcomed, and many reported not feeling valued. This discrepancy highlights a disconnect between institutional claims of inclusivity and the lived experiences of Black students, suggesting that the university's climate may be more alienating than it appears at first glance.

The issue of safety has emerged as a crucial concern, with more than one in three students unable to affirm that they felt safe at UCalgary. This aligns with findings from Maffini and Dillard (2022), who highlighted that Black students often feel less safe compared to their white peers. Responses such as “physically yes, not psychologically” and “I need to justify my presence” reflect the psychological and emotional toll that racism takes on Black students, as they navigate daily environments where safety, both physical and psychological, is compromised. These contradictions underscore a broader societal pattern in which Black individuals face “everyday racism” (Essed, 1991), highlighting the urgent need for universities to address this normalized hostility in their campus environments.

The prevalence of anti-Black racism at UCalgary is alarmingly high, with half of the participants reporting direct experiences of racism and more than half witnessing such incidents. This finding echoes the broader climate of anti-Blackness across Canadian universities, where Black students regularly encounter implicit and explicit racial discrimination (Anderson, 2023; Ng & Lam, 2020). The uncertainty among some participants about whether their experiences could be labelled as racism reflects the insidious nature of these encounters. It aligns with the phenomenon of racial gaslighting, where individuals are made to question the validity of their own lived experiences. This normalization of racism within academic settings has been well-documented, with

incidents often minimized or dismissed, reinforcing existing power dynamics and systemic inequities (Bell et al., 2021).

Furthermore, many students reported that speaking out about racism often led to punitive reactions, such as being labelled as “angry” or “confrontational.” This response, in line with the concept of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), highlights how white individuals often evade responsibility for perpetuating racism by positioning themselves as victims. The resulting hostility during race-related discussions reinforces existing power imbalances, further marginalizing Black students and hindering meaningful conversations about race.

The impact of anti-Black racism on students' mental health was profound, with many participants describing feelings of isolation, diminished self-confidence, and ongoing mental health challenges. These findings align with research by Arday (2018) and Este and colleagues (2018), who document how race-related stressors create emotional and psychological trauma for Black students. For many participants, the harm was not only individual but collective, with some noting the transgenerational impact of racism and the burden of carrying the weight of historical oppression. This underscores the need for universities to provide robust mental health supports that are responsive to anti-Black racism and the structural harms Black students endure across academic and social settings.

In addition to mental health struggles, racism also significantly affected academic performance. One in four students who experienced racism reported a diminished ability to succeed academically, echoing findings from Bombay and Hewitt (2015) as well as Edman and Brazil (2009). Interestingly, some participants stated that racism had become so normalized in their lives that it no longer affected their academic success. This normalization reflects the coercive socialization that Black students undergo, where enduring systemic discrimination becomes part of their educational experience. It highlights the need for institutional change to break this cycle of racialized trauma and create a truly equitable academic environment.

The findings from this study reveal that only 12% of participants who experienced anti-Black racism at UCalgary chose to report their experiences to institutional authorities. Participants described a deep skepticism toward reporting processes, citing concerns that their complaints would not be taken seriously or might result in retaliation. These concerns are echoed in broader scholarship. For instance, Cranston and Bennett (2024), in their review of over two decades of literature, highlight that racialized individuals often perceive institutional responses to racism as superficial or ineffective, leading many to question the usefulness of formal reporting. This perception closely mirrors the reactions in this study, where participants described existing systems as inaccessible or largely symbolic.

Further reflecting this distrust, Hussain (2023) found that anti-racism and anti-discrimination frameworks at Canadian universities are frequently implemented in fragmented and inconsistent ways. Such institutional incoherence can result in students being unaware of available reporting avenues or feeling doubtful about their impact. These findings are also evident in this study, with many participants unfamiliar with UCalgary's Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion or the Protected Disclosure and Research Integrity Office. Among those who did file complaints, dissatisfaction with the outcome

was common. While not exclusive to Black students, Oh et al. (2025) demonstrate that perceptions of absent or ineffective anti-racism efforts are associated with poorer mental health outcomes across student populations, including depression and anxiety. This suggests that when institutions fail to respond meaningfully to racism, they risk not only undermining trust but also contributing to psychological strain among students.

Beyond individual instances of harm, the study revealed systemic barriers within the academic structure. Participants reported a lack of Black representation in faculty and leadership positions and the absence of Afrocentric content in the curriculum. Cameron and Jefferies (2021) highlight how Canadian educational institutions often marginalize Black knowledge and histories, reinforcing a Eurocentric standard that sidelines racial equity. Their findings align with participants' frustration that, while symbolically present, diversity efforts often lack meaningful curricular or structural change. Similarly, Opini and Radebe (2023) argue that "discourses on decolonization, antiracism and equity in the education system are sometimes taught in a manner that works to reproduce the status quo" (p. 465).

One of the study's most emotionally charged findings concerned how participants were treated as tokens. Many felt expected to speak for all Black students or to educate others about racism. James and Asres (2024) explore this same dynamic, illustrating how Black students are often cast as symbols of institutional diversity, a role that reinforces rather than challenges dominant power structures.

The study also found unequal access to scholarships, research opportunities, and mentorship, which further entrenched racial inequities. Participants described difficulty navigating financial aid systems or securing academic support. Sangmen et al. (2023) report similar findings in their study of Black graduate students, showing that institutional structures often fail to distribute academic opportunities equitably. Their work reinforces this study's conclusion that resource access is shaped not only by merit but also by entrenched racial hierarchies.

These findings suggest that UCalgary's current anti-racism strategies are perceived as inadequate by the students they are intended to support. While policy frameworks exist, implementation falls short. The evidence reviewed here supports a need for more profound institutional transformation, beyond performative gestures. This includes creating transparent, responsive reporting systems; diversifying leadership and curricula; and offering material and emotional support tailored to Black students. Without such changes, racial inequities will persist, and institutional trust will continue to erode.

Limitations

This case study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced participants' experiences and perspectives, particularly regarding their virtual educational experience. Some students expressed uncertainty regarding the level of safety at UCalgary due to their absence from campus. The survey was designed to gain a broad understanding of student perspectives on anti-Black racism at UCalgary, with the primary inclusion criterion being identification as a Black student. While additional demographic

information was collected, the impact of intersecting identities on students' perspectives and experiences was not explicitly explored in this research. Notably, the study had limited participation from Black male students, and students from Caribbean regions. Future research should explicitly examine the intersectional lived experiences of anti-Black racism and provide recommendations for institutional change that supports students facing multiple forms of marginalization.

Implications for Social Work and Higher Education and Practice

Although the findings of this study have implications across postsecondary institutions, they are particularly significant for social work education and practice. Social work programs are uniquely positioned to address anti-Black racism through curriculum, field placements, and ethical practice frameworks. Integrating these findings into social work pedagogy can equip students to critically assess systemic racism, challenge institutional harms, and develop anti-oppressive, trauma-informed responses in their future practice. The Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS, 2021) outlines anti-racism and equity as core competencies, and social work regulatory bodies increasingly emphasize the importance of equity-informed, justice-oriented practice. As Bernard and Smith (2022) argue, transforming the profession requires confronting anti-Black racism at all levels of education and practice. Mullaly's (2010) work further emphasizes that dismantling oppression must be central to social work education if it is to meet its ethical mandate.

There is often a significant gap in institutional responses and supports to address daily experiences of anti-Black racism, which tend to be limited or ineffective. We discuss the implications of these findings for academia.

Like much of the historic and contemporary denial of racism in Canada, many academic institutions continue to "vehemently deny and actively perpetuate racist beliefs" (Ghoussoub et al., 2021, p. 4). Many universities lack metrics to identify, measure, and address experiences of anti-Black racism. Additionally, there are a few mechanisms to enforce anti-racist policies or ensure accountability for remedying racist incidents (Tomlinson et al., 2021). The homogenization of groups who are marginalized, without recognizing their diverse concerns, needs, perspectives, and histories does a disservice to all. Universities must not only articulate but also fulfill their commitment to combatting anti-Black racism. This includes developing and implementing comprehensive policies and procedures, creating mediation and complaint processes, and identifying situations where disciplinary actions should be enforced.

Representation

Increasing racial representation in the student body, faculty, and administrative positions is crucial. Racial representation in faculty and administration enhances institutional innovation, exposes students to diverse perspectives that are often absent from Eurocentric teaching, and fosters positive learning environments that increase retention of racialized staff and administrators (Cukier et al., 2021; Lim, 2021). Representation in the

classroom is equally important (Gershenson et al., 2021). Studies show that Black students excel academically, are more engaged, attend classes more regularly, feel more fulfilled, and communicate more easily with Black instructors (Gershenson et al., 2021).

Black students also experience the effects of “racial battle fatigue syndrome” (Smith, 2010, p. 266), which refers to the exhaustion of navigating persistent racial discrimination. At predominantly white institutions, Black students “desperately need spaces that affirm their right to do more than survive—but also to matter” (Daniel, 2021, p. 2181). Creating “racial oases” on campuses, where Black students can escape the pressures of predominantly white spaces could help facilitate open, brave spaces where they can address the harms caused by racism, engage racial socialization, develop mentoring relationships, and foster healthy racial identities (Daniel, 2021). These spaces could allow students to discuss the deleterious effects of racial discrimination and create meaningful relationships to support one another (Ijoma et al., 2022). These spaces can also benefit the broader campus community by enhancing the campus climate and offering educational resources on African and African American history and culture (Pittman, 1994).

Supports

Black students often face barriers in accessing mental health services, particularly in predominately white institutions, where there is a shortage of Black or racialized therapists with expertise in racial trauma (Arday, 2018). It is critical to provide a continuum of supports to address anti-Black racism on campus, including access to mental health services from providers with specialized knowledge of racial trauma. These supports can improve both social and academic outcomes for Black students (Moore & Toliver, 2010).

Training on Anti-Black Racism

Confronting anti-Black racism requires both immediate and sustained institutional commitment to critical, anti-racist education. Professors and instructors must be equipped to engage in discussions about anti-Black racism that move beyond culturally competent or multicultural frameworks, approaches which often depoliticize racial harm and fail to address the structural nature of systemic oppression (Wilcox, 2023). Anti-racism training should be embedded into the core infrastructure of the university and made mandatory for all members of the campus community. This training must name whiteness, interrogate power and privilege, and align with the university’s responsibilities to uphold racial justice.

Additionally, offering courses that focus on Afrocentric and Black centered content across programs and curricula helps create counterspaces that challenge dominant narratives and allow for critical engagement with systemic oppression. These spaces are vital for Black students to interact with Black peers and faculty, challenge previous miseducation about Black histories and identities, increase awareness of their racial identity, and develop a critical racial consciousness (Chapman-Hilliard & Beasley, 2018).

Conclusion

The UCalgary recently restructured its institutional equity initiatives by establishing the Office of Institutional Commitments (OIC), which integrates Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA), Community Mental Health and Well-being (CMHW), and Sustainability under a single strategic framework (UCalgary, n.d.b). While the university frames this consolidation as a step toward more coordinated action, it remains unclear how this new structure will sustain the specific focus and accountability needed to uphold its commitments under the Scarborough Charter and meaningfully address anti-Black racism. This exploratory case study is the first to explicitly center the lived experiences of Black students at UCalgary, shedding light on how anti-Black racism and white supremacy continue to shape post-secondary environments in Alberta. Although grounded in UCalgary's context, the findings reflect a broader national pattern of systemic anti-Black racism that undermines Black students' academic success and well-being across Canada (Joseph, 2020; Ryerson University, 2020; Schnarr & Wehkamp, 2016; University of Toronto, 2021). Despite widespread institutional declarations of solidarity following the murder of George Floyd, few universities have taken substantive action to redress these longstanding inequities. A major barrier is the chronic lack of disaggregated, race-based data, especially data that captures the specific experiences of Black students. Without it, institutions are ill-equipped to diagnose the problem, let alone implement meaningful solutions (McDonald & Ward, 2017). Addressing anti-Black racism requires more than symbolic gestures or general commitments to equity. It demands sustained, intentional, and data-informed interventions. Canadian universities must prioritize the collection of race-based data to uncover systemic barriers and guide strategies that are both targeted and effective (Campbell & Candler, 2020). As UCalgary navigates this organizational shift, it must ensure that its commitment to the Scarborough Charter remains more than symbolic. Only by centering Black students' voices and investing in the necessary institutional infrastructure can universities begin to dismantle the systemic conditions that enable anti-Black racism to persist.

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