

National Dialogues and Action for Inclusive Higher Education and Communities
Day 2 - October 2: Actions, Accountability & the Scarborough Charter
Theme #4: Sector-wide Actions & Accountability 1:40 – 2:40pm

Panel Presentation by

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My name is Arig al Shaibah. I am McMaster University's Associate Vice President, Equity and Inclusion, and I have held this role since April of 2018.

I am joining you from Hamilton, located on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee and Mississauga Nations and, within the lands protected by the Dish with One Spoon wampum agreement.

I have spent nearly 30 years intentionally thinking about and doing work to advance EDI (10 years in the not-for-profit community-based sector and 20 years in the higher education sector), and the last 10 years holding different administrative roles at Queen's, Dalhousie, and now McMaster. I've held simultaneous senior administrative and adjunct academic appointments in all three institutions and have engaged in teaching courses on race and racism, feminist pedagogy, and diversity and human rights, and my most recent research activities relate to examining the efficacy of implementing EDI policy and procedural interventions in faculty hiring processes.

I identify as a racialized queer woman, an immigrant settler of Arab-Yemeni descent and a cultural Muslim. Of course, I have experienced racism in multiple forms, intersecting with the various other isms, but I have not and will never experience anti-Black racism. I have been gifted with the opportunity to become more deeply conscious of anti-Black racism given my family constellation that includes a beloved Black wife and Black son, and the past 25 years in intimate relationship with them has highlighted the profound inhumanity of both conscious and unconscious acts of anti-Black racism and the insidious ways that systems of White supremacy and White adjacency seek to co-opt me, all the time and always, into complicit acts that would reinforce systemic anti-Black oppression.

When asked to speak to sector-wide possibilities for action and accountability, from the place of being a non-Black racialized administrator, I thought I would simply pose and reflect on a few questions to stimulate discussion.

- The first question is where might we locate existing sector-wide networks – nationally, regionally, locally – that could be leveraged to proactively mobilize advocacy, action, and accountability across institutions? Are these appropriate fora to leverage this work or do we need to establish new bodies?
- Answering these questions depends on the answers to the next set of questions. What would we envision are the right strategic actions and accountability measures to be advocating from these sites, and is it possible to create coherence/coalition across regional jurisdictions? Can we imagine sector-wide national standards, for example, with appropriate flexibility or nuance for regional contexts?

Like other schools, often working within the parameters of their own systems and cultures, McMaster has been exploring a number of leading practices and emergent thinking to demonstrate action and accountability at the institutional level, and we've frequently wished we could lean on sector-wide endorsement and enforcement to mobilize change.

For example, would it be in the realm of possibility to have:

- Sector-wide tools to collect disaggregated demographic (census) and experiential (climate) data?
- Sector-wide sharing and transparency of reporting mechanisms?
- Sector-wide acceptance of key (qualitative and quantitative) performance indicators?
- Sector-wide institutional EDI assessment tools and scorecards with racial and gender equity indices as factors contributing to rankings of excellence and reputation?
- Sector-wide recognition and other meaningful incentives to reward progress?
- Sector-wide anti-racist leadership "competency" standards for senior academic and administrative positions and required attendance at an anti-racism leadership institute specifically designed for senior administrators?
- Sector-wide investment in and support for the growth, rather than diminishment, of critical race and Black scholarship, including African & African Diasporic studies?
- Sector-wide task forces to unlock "traditional/conventional" academic paradigms that are perpetuating systemic racism?

On this last point, for instance, do we want to interrupt the now widely accepted pretense of the general 40:40:20 expectation for research, teaching and service, which is reportedly really more like an 80:20 split between research and teaching? Can we collectively explore ways to incorporate flexibility into Tenure & Promotion policies and practice to better account for inequities, or, better yet, can we reimagine the split? What if it were 50% research and 50% teaching, where service is a concept truly integrated within notions of research and teaching excellence and where we think of research excellence as including contributions to disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship, inclusive and community-engaged knowledge generation and translation, and we think of teaching excellence as including credit and non-credit bearing educational activities, experiential, work-integrated and community-engaged learning contributions, student mentorship and student supervision in academic, professional and community setting? What if and why not...

White leaders are, *de facto*, the audience that needs to be most engaged to influence sector-wide change because they constitute the vast majority of the senior most positions in higher education who sit on institutional governing bodies and sector-wide organizing and advocacy committees. Yet, there is a question of whether Non-Black leaders have been able to demonstrate not only the moral and political will but also the anti-racism fluency, agency and humility to mobilize transformative change across the sector, with deference to Black leaders in partnership with Black communities.

Just over five years ago, I conducted a qualitative study¹ (al Shaibah, 2014)¹ which involved interviewing senior most administrators within U15 universities about their perceptions of the barriers and enablers to advancing equity in the academy. As part of the study, I inquired whether and how they thought their identities and positionalities mattered with respect to their inclusive leadership capacity. I asked them to voluntarily self-identify, and all study participants identified as White, with 30% identifying as women.

All but one did not think their identity and positionality mattered – that their core values and commitment to EDI were most important. Most of these senior administrators also expressed some version of the narrative that senior academic administrators have no authority or power (effectively no agency) to influence EDI change in highly decentralized ‘collegial’ – or democratic – university governance models where decisions are made at the level of the Faculties and Departments.

¹ al Shaibah, A. (2014). [*Educational equity in Canadian academe: Implications of neoliberal discourse and ideology.*](#)

This discourse of “collegiality” can be added to the discourses of meritocracy and equal opportunity, among many other discourses of democratic racism² (Henry and Tator, 2010) that abound in the academy. These discursive ideologies underpin the curious lack of political will and moral courage among even the most well-intentioned senior leaders.

There were a couple of examples of White Presidents and Provosts who described what I would characterize as courageous acts to counter these narratives – and they achieved success. I can also point to an example of working with a Science Dean, a self-identified White Western Woman, who has been very engaged and interventionist with Department Chairs in her Faculty. This Dean used her inclusive, relational and transformative leadership skills to influence what might be considered monumental change in one of the pure science disciplines that determined to change the wording of their Departmental bylaws, which had empowered the Department ‘committee of the whole’ (i.e., the entire faculty complement in the Department) to vote on faculty appointments. The skill and the will of the Dean were instrumental in influencing collective appreciation that the policy with sought to advance principles of collegiality and democracy was, in fact, counteracting their stated value for principles of fairness and equity.

Can the sector make a statement acknowledging how these paradigmatic conventions based on the myth of meritocracy and equal opportunity hinder equity and anti-racism efforts?

In the area of faculty recruitment, why aren’t leaders and the sector leveraging legislative and policy tools at their disposal? Leaders have (and therefore the sector has) legislative and policy tools to be leveraged: the Special Programs provisions in the Canadian Charter of Rights & Freedoms, Provincial Human Rights Codes, and institutional Employment Equity Policies.

For example, institutions would benefit from meaningful cross-sector discussions about when and how to ethically engage strategic accelerated diversity hiring initiatives, including cluster and cohort hiring models. A few targeted hiring practices (especially to meet egregious gaps in the representation of Black and Indigenous faculty) have recently been employed by Canadian institutions whose leaders are courageously championing and publicly standing behind the initiatives in the face of ever-present backlash to redress the systemic effects of anti-Black racism. I was not surprised to learn that the recent successful OCADU cluster hire of five Black full-time faculty – the first of its kind in the near 150 year history of the University – was initiated in a School led by the first Black Dean (Elizabeth “Dori” Tunstall) of a Design School anywhere in the world!

² Henry, F. & Tator, C. (2010). *The colour of democracy: Racism in Canadian Society*, 4th ed. Toronto, ON: Nelson Education Ltd.

A finding reported in a recent study³ on the efficacy of Senior Diversity Officers (Pihakis, Paikeday, Armstrong & Meneer, 2019) in US institutions of higher education has stuck with me as someone in the position of “senior diversity officer” at my institution. The study found no correlation between the presence of a senior diversity officer and the racial and gender diversity of senior administrators; however, it found that Presidents and Provosts who are female and/or racialized have overwhelmingly higher rates of gender and racial diversity among the senior academic and administrative leaders that report to them.

This reflection exercise crystalized for me what I consider to be two necessary pre-conditions for any sector-wide effort to succeed in enhancing educational and employment equity for Black learners, scholars and professionals in higher education: the need to significantly ramp up efforts (1) to increase representation of Black leaders who bring a critical race lens, and (2) to build capacity among non-Black leaders to influence change.

In other words, I leave you with the argument that leadership identity and consciousness about positionality profoundly matter to anti-racist organizational change in institutions and across the sector.

³ Pihakis, J. Paikeday, T.S., Armstrong, K, & Meneer, E. (2019). [*The emergence of the chief diversity officer role in higher education*](#). Russell Reynolds Associates