

### 300. Against the Scarborough Charter

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Over fifty colleges and universities in Canada have now signed the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion. This is unfortunate, as [the Scarborough Charter](#) is a profoundly anti-academic document. That so many institutions have signed it does not bode well for higher education in this country.

The Charter addresses five main areas: hiring, curriculum, research, ways of knowing, and responding to anti-black racism.

1. Hiring. According to the Scarborough Charter, universities need to hire more black professors, appoint more black administrators and staff members, and recruit more black students. Universities should take being black to weigh heavily in an applicant's favour. Even better, some faculty appointments should be reserved for black scholars.

The obvious response is that a university cannot hire the best professors and recruit the most promising students by focussing on such an academically irrelevant characteristic as race. The best teachers, researchers and students are to be identified by evaluating the dossiers of individual applicants against academic criteria alone.

But won't black people feel set apart if they are not represented on campus in large enough numbers? The answer to this point is that academics should see themselves as academics, as people living the life of the mind in a community of others living the life of the mind. The community is welcoming to all those who enjoy the ethos of a university community. And that ethos prevails when the commitment of those in the community to live the life of the mind is strong. Hiring on grounds other than academic merit diminishes that commitment.

2. Curriculum. The Charter recommends more teaching of black history and culture, and more discussion of black people and anti-black racism. To meet the goal of more black content, the Charter recommends that administrators use carrots and sticks to encourage departments and professors to alter their offerings.

A university might well want to increase black content in its programs and courses in order to promote depth or comprehensiveness or because students are asking for more black content. But decisions about curricula must be left to the departments and to the individual professors rather than imposed top-down. Department autonomy and academic freedom with regard to teaching

benefit both the students and the broader academic community by ensuring that professors are teaching what they take to be important and what they are passionate about.

3. Research. Traditionally, research that comes from universities has been valued above research from company laboratories, government surveys or partisan think tanks because it's perceived to have been less constrained by the interests of its sponsors. Researchers outside universities are expected to draw conclusions the sponsors approve of. University researchers, on the other hand, set their own research agendas and are free to follow the argument where it goes. Because university researchers are moved by their concern simply to know, their research is trustworthy.

The Scarborough Charter, though, directs that “research about Black communities or that is likely to affect the welfare of Black communities respects principles of co-construction.” Co-construction amounts to giving leaders in black communities veto power over research design and publication. As such, it is a recipe for substandard or fraudulent research.

4. Ways of knowing. The Scarborough Charter calls for “decentering epistemic Eurocentrism” to make room for “Black expertise and knowledges.” In the Charter, “making room” suggests accommodating and tolerating black knowledges or ways of knowing not because they might be true but because they are associated with black people. But at a university, black expertise and knowledges, if there are any such things, must not be protected or placed out of reach of criticism. Traditions are not to be kept separate and curated, as though they were museum objects. At a university, traditions and ideas are to engage critically with each other. Scholars must be left free to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of whatever ways of knowing present themselves.

5. Responding to anti-black racism. According to the Scarborough Charter, the way to combat anti-black racism on campus is through increased administrative oversight. But that would increase administrative bloat and also divert money from academic programs. As well, Charter universities are enjoined to revise their “disciplinary measures and protections against reprisal.” This would affect freedom of expression on campus and academic freedom, as students and professors will self-censor rather than risk saying something that might get them into trouble.

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Whatever barriers might still exist against full participation by black students and professors in universities, those barriers are best addressed simply by insisting on fairness and high academic standards.