

Towards Closing the Diversity Gap in Research Chairs

(Edmonton, 2 May 2019) Over the past four years, the Diversity Gap infographics have disseminated independent research and analyses on equity, diversity and intersectionality at Canadian universities and colleges with the aim of assessing how on-the-book policies intersect with outcomes. The two Diversity Gap infographics on Canada Excellence Research Chairs (CERCs) and Canada 150 Research Chairs released today provide an independent equity audit of the two programs. They draw attention to key opportunities and challenges of equity, diversity and intersectionality in the research funding enterprise. They also inform debates about the equitable distribution of research funds, the diversity of talent and institutions that benefit, and those who continue to be disadvantaged by such programs.

Consecutive Canadian governments have created signature research chairs to attract world-leading talent to Canadian universities. In 2000, the Chrétien government allocated \$900 million per year to establish the Canada Research Chairs Program that funds up to 2000 mid-career and senior scholars. The Harper government established the Canada Excellence Research Chairs (CERCs) Program that it launched in 2010 with the aim of recruiting “world-class” scholars to Canada. The Canada 150 Research Chairs Program was created by the Trudeau government to mark Canada’s sesquicentennial. Announced in Budget 2017, the program allocated a one-time funding of \$117.6 million, “to enhance Canada’s reputation as a global centre for science, research and innovation excellence.”

- Canada Research Chairs Tier 1 are worth \$200,000 annually, tenable for seven years and renewable once (or more in exceptional cases).
- Canada Research Chairs Tier 2 are worth \$100,000 annually, tenable for five years and renewable once.
- Canada Excellence Research Chairs are worth \$10 million over seven years.
- Canada 150 Research Chairs are worth either \$350,000 or \$1 million annually for seven years.

Since 2000, these prestigious research chairs have helped to retain Canadian talent and, also, to attract world-leading talent to Canada. They are rightly touted as a “brain gain” for universities and the broader research enterprise. Yet, one key equity issue they raise relates to representational diversity in the distribution of chairs. Equitable representation has been an issue since the launch of the CRC Program. For example, in 2001 only 15% of chairs were held by women, and in 2004 only 17% of the 1,035 CRCs were held by women. Little to no attention was paid to the so-called “other equity groups,” namely visible minorities, Indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities. Disaggregation and intersectional data were either not collected or not disseminated. The inequities led to a successful human rights challenge by eight women that required the CRC Program to be inclusive of all equity groups in chair allocation.

Equity was again raised when the CERCs were launched and all 19 inaugural chair-holders were men. This led to the establishment of [An Ad Hoc Panel on CERC Gender Issues](#) and a report to the Minister of Industry in April 2010. Still, institutional nominations continued to reflect very little representational diversity. In May 2016, and again in May 2017 and September 2018, Dr. Ted Hewitt, the President of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), wrote an [open letter to university presidents](#) encouraging them to address the slow pace of change and to become more proactive, transparent, and accountable in their efforts to close the diversity gap in the distribution of research chairs.

What does the evidence suggest about universities' efforts to close the diversity gap? The data show an uneven commitment to equity for the four Federally-designated Groups (FDGs)—women, visible minorities, Indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities. In many cases, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has led universities to focus on Indigenous targets in hiring alongside broader indigenization initiatives. In other cases the focus on gender equity has led to stalled efforts to advance equity for visible minorities and persons with disabilities. Of the 24 new Canada 150 Research Chairs, 58.3% are women and 41.7% are men. An intersectional analysis reveals that visible minority men and women constitute only 17% of chairs, while Black and Indigenous scholars are notable for their absence. Of the current CERCs, 37% are women and 63% are men. Of these, visible minority men and women constitute 19%. In 20 years of the program, there has never been an Indigenous or Black CERC chair-holder. In both programs, there is a persistent data gap for persons with disabilities.

A deeper analysis shows that part of the issue may be a structural inequity in research funding at the level of the federal government. There is an uneven distribution of chairs across the three granting agencies and, relatedly, across disciplines. Of the 24 Canada 150 Research Chairs 62.5% are in NSERC, 16.7% in CIHR, and 20.8% are in SSHRC disciplines. Of the 16 CERCs, 56.25% are in NSERC, 31.25 in CIHR, and 12.5% in SSHRC disciplines. In a previous [Diversity Gap analysis in August 2016](#), we suggested a problem may be the structural inequity in federal funding that prioritizes disciplines and fields of inquiry that are known to have an underrepresentation of members of FDGs.

Third, and perhaps the thorniest equity issues are the interconnections between the diversity of regions and institutional diversity in distribution of chairs. These research chair programs invest millions of dollars to attract a relatively small number of scholars to a small number of universities within Canada. With few exceptions, most of the scholars are recruited from Europe, the United States, and Australia. Within Canada, 82% of CERCs and 75% of Canada 150 Research Chairs are located at U15 institutions. While U15 institutions are across Canadian regions, there are no CERCs or Canada 150 Research Chairs based at major universities in Atlantic Canada. These issues highlight the need for diversity of sources of recruitment and the need for research support for talent within medium and small universities and colleges across regions within Canada.

Finally, the chairs are designed to recruit world-leading talent and fuel ingenuity, creativity and innovation. The equity debate centres on where and how the federal government should invest limited research funds in order to benefit the overall research enterprise across Canada, including whether the programs should prioritize the recruitment of external candidates over internal ones. The debate also highlights the need for greater levels of research funding to support Canadian universities and colleges as they nurture and train the next generation of promising undergraduate and graduate students, ignite the potential of postdoctoral fellows and new scholars, and support the innovative research and scholarship of mid-career and established scholars.

For more information, please contact:

Dr. Malinda S. Smith (PI)
Professor, Political Science
Past President & Chair of Research, AWA
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta
Email: malinda.smith@ualberta.ca

Dr. Nancy Bray
Lecturer, Communication Fundamentals for
Professionals & Writing Studies,
Communications Officer, AWA
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta
Email: nbray@ualberta.ca