

The Diversity Gaps in Canadian University Leadership

(Edmonton, 18 August 2016) A new study by the Academic Women's Association at the University of Alberta found a significant diversity gap in the leadership of Canadian universities. As part of an ongoing, independent, and comprehensive equity audit of the university, the AWA examined the compositional diversity of presidential leadership teams at two representative clusters of universities – the [U15](#) research-intensive universities located in 7 provinces, and 14 major universities in 4 provinces in western Canada. In total, the study examined the 142 senior administrators on the leadership teams at 24 major universities in Canada. The study's findings suggest slow but steady progress toward gender equity but little progress toward racial/ethnic diversity in Canadian university leadership.

This leadership diversity study by Dr. Malinda S. Smith (AWA President), and the three accompanying infographics by Nancy Bray (AWA Communications Officer), is part of the AWA's ongoing equity audit of the University of Alberta in relation to comparative institutions across Alberta and Canada. The three previously released AWA studies found a significant gender gap in the distribution of research chairs; a continuing underrepresentation of 'equity-seeking groups' or '[designated groups](#)' in the professoriate; and an uneven allocation of prestigious recognition and awards for teaching, research, and community engagement. These studies led by Dr. Smith and Dr. Kisha Supernant (AWA Vice-President) are available on the association's [Diversity Gap Campaign](#) site.

The goal of this component of the equity audit was to examine the compositional diversity of university leadership teams in order to assess the representation and status of women, Aboriginal peoples, and visible minorities. These "presidential leadership teams" typically comprise the president and vice-chancellor, the provost and vice-president (academic), vice-president (research), vice-presidents (administration and finance), vice-president (facilities), as well as a number of other vice-president positions and portfolios. Some university "leadership teams" also include the university counsel and the university secretary. How diverse are these leadership teams? Do they reflect the diversity of Canadian society? In 2016, the leadership teams of most Canadian universities are overwhelming white and, despite slow progress toward gender equity, they are predominately male.

The AWA leadership diversity study shows that while there is slow, but steady, progress on the status of women in senior leadership positions, this is primarily evident at the level of vice-president. A glass ceiling persists at the level of the president, despite some initiatives within [Universities Canada](#) to mentor, recruit, and promote more women presidents. This leadership diversity study also revealed a 'concrete ceiling' and a significant racial/ethnic diversity gap, with most universities in the U15 and across western Canada constituted by an all-white presidential leadership team.

U15 Presidential Leadership Teams (n=99): The infographic on U15 executive leadership teams shows efforts toward gender equity at some, although not all, U15 institutions. While women constitute 40.4% (40) of the leadership teams, with two exceptions—University of Calgary and McGill University—the majority of these women are in vice-president positions. The racial/ethnic diversity gap, however, is significant. In 2016, the majority of the U15 institutions—73.3% (11)—have an all-white leadership team. More, of the 99 individuals on these teams, an astonishing 96% are white. Notably, of the 4% (5) who are visible minority men, 3 are university presidents (University of British Columbia, Western, and Waterloo). In 2016, not a single university had a visible minority woman or Aboriginal man or woman on their presidential leadership teams.

14 Universities in Western Canada (n=78): The second leadership diversity infographic of the executive leadership teams in Western Canada shows that all the institutions have at least one woman, 13.3% (2) have a woman president, 33.3% (5) have a majority of women, and 13.3% (2) have an Aboriginal or visible minority woman or man. Unlike the U15, there is some racial/ethnic representation among leadership teams: 26.7% (4) of the universities have an Aboriginal or visible minority president, and 40% (6) have at least one Aboriginal or visible minority woman or man on the leadership team.

U15 Presidents, Provosts, and VP (Research) (n=45): The third AWA leadership diversity infographic shows the compositional diversity of three of the leading academic positions in Canadian universities: president and vice-chancellor, provost and vice-president (academic), and vice-president (research). The majority of U15 presidents—87% (13) are men, with 66.7% (10) white men, and 20% (3) visible minority men. With the 2015 retirement of President Indira Samarasekera at the University of Alberta and the 2014 resignation of Ilene Busch Vishniac at the University of Saskatchewan, a mere 13.3% (2) of U15 presidents are women. Women are well-represented in the role of provost (40%), and, notably, the majority of U15 vice-presidents (research) are now women (46.7%). There are no visible minority or Aboriginal provosts, and visible minority men constitute only 13.3% of vice-president (research). In a nutshell, all the women in leadership are white and all the visible minorities are men.

Universities across Canada have had employment equity policies and programs for decades. Their websites often tout a commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion, and their job ads and other recruitment efforts typically include equity statements that “welcome diversity.” Yet, the research evidence suggests a significant disjuncture between the rhetoric and actual practice. A 2010 [CAUT Educational Review](#) found that most Canadian universities remain “overwhelmingly white and male.” Similarly, a 2010 [Maclean’s magazine](#) review, a 2013 [University Affairs](#) review, and a 2015 [Catalyst report](#) all found that despite the on-the-books policies, multicultural images on websites, and feel-good equity statements in recruitment ads, little has changed in practice. There is slow or stalled progress on the status of women, while Aboriginal peoples and visible minority face particular challenges in hiring, promotion, recognition, and leadership appointments. This 2016 AWA study makes clear that significant work is needed to close the diversity gap in university leadership.

“Canada’s 15 research-intensive universities bring distinguished minds to bear on the most profound challenges our nation and our world face,” states the [U15 website](#). These universities need to bring such “distinguished minds to bear” to the challenge of closing the leadership diversity gap in Canadian higher education. The AWA calls on all Canadian universities to examine why their leadership pipelines are leaking out diverse talent and leading to such a significant diversity gap in senior administration. Only a commitment to self-study and proactive measures will close this diversity gap. The AWA believes that the growing role played by private-sector head-hunters in university leadership recruitment at the level of dean and above may be an important factor in the persistence of diversity gaps in Canadian universities. All Canadian universities need to address systemic barriers, unconscious biases, cultural cloning and selection processes that impede leadership diversity in Canadian universities.

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