

# Racism more prevalent than racists: Why Dal is bridging diversity gap

RICHARD FLORIZONE, WANDA THOMAS BERNARD

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Two centuries ago, Lord Dalhousie proposed to the Nova Scotia Assembly the creation of a college open to all, regardless of class or religious belief. It was a bold vision of inclusion amid the sectarian loyalties at the time.

Diversity and inclusion continue as foundational commitments at Dalhousie University today. They are embodied as values in our senate constitution and a key priority in our strategic plan. Indeed, all great universities value diversity and inclusion, both as a matter of justice and in recognition of the need to welcome and develop the best talent and ideas.

We cannot afford to exclude anyone.

These values aren't just Dal values or academic values; they are Canadian values. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees equality of all people before and under the law, and allows for affirmative action programs for disadvantaged groups. A national poll by Leger Marketing in March 2017 found that three-quarters of all Canadians hold positive views on multiculturalism, with support even stronger among younger Canadians.

We should sincerely celebrate these values, which together make our institutions and our country stronger. They give us optimism for the future.

At the same time, we must openly recognize the fact that racism, misogyny, homophobia and other forms of exclusion are still widespread and systemic. There is a gap between our values and our reality.

For example, consider hiring at Dalhousie. In 2013, as part of 100 Days of Listening, we publicly acknowledged that hiring at Dalhousie was not representative of the demographics of Nova Scotia, with significant gaps in the

proportion of racially visible people, Aboriginals and persons with a disability. We aspire to be leading lights on diversity, but learned that we still have a long way to go.

A few months later, the Ivany report made similar observations about Nova Scotia as a whole, noting that the employment rate for First Nations people and African Nova Scotians significantly lagged the provincial average. The report identified “Becoming a More Inclusive and Welcoming Province” as one of 12 “game changers” to spur the transformative change in the province.

How can we bridge this gap between our values and our reality? There isn’t a single easy answer. These are systemic problems that require both systemic and personal solutions.

First, we must recognize that systemic discrimination is more widespread than intentional discrimination. That isn’t an extreme view, but rather a direct quote from the Supreme Court of Canada in the 2013 Whatcott decision.

This is an important distinction. When we think of racism, too often we think of actual racists running around in bedsheets. Those unfortunately do exist, but what the Supreme Court is saying is that systemic discrimination — the patterns of behaviour, policies, and practices in our culture and institutions that perpetuate discrimination — is more widespread than intentional and deliberate attempts to disadvantage an individual or group. Racism is more prevalent than racists.

So if we want real change, we need to look at how our own behaviours might be contributing to discrimination as part of our work to break systemic barriers.

This fits with our example of hiring outcomes at Dalhousie University, where recruitment is done on the recommendation of committees — made up of generally open-minded faculty, staff and students. Yet overall, our hiring choices are less diverse than the qualified labour market, reflecting systemic discrimination. No one individual is responsible, yet we are all responsible.

This was a clear imperative for a deliberate new approach. Today, Dalhousie's institutional approach to address systemic discrimination is through a comprehensive diversity and inclusiveness strategy.

Part of that strategy includes targeted hiring. Since 2012, we have hired more than 15 faculty, using recruitment specifically targeted to attract historically underrepresented groups. In 2018, we are using this same approach to recruit for an executive position for the first time.

But tackling discrimination also requires personal commitment. We must open our minds to the possibility of bias in our own thinking. Each of us can do something specific to help make inclusion a reality. It begins with considering who is being excluded and then actively inviting them in. Individual actions can and do lead to systemic changes.

Together we can make progress. Between 2015 and 2016, we reduced Dal's hiring gaps in racially visible professors, Aboriginal employees, and women in management by between 37 to 75 per cent.

Clearly, there is much more to do. Let's recommit to closing the gap between our values and our reality. If we can do this on diversity and inclusion, we can together build a better university, a better province and ultimately a stronger country.

*Richard Florizone is president of Dalhousie University. Wanda Thomas Bernard, ONS, C.M., is a Canadian Senator and professor emeritus of Dalhousie University .*