

AWC Day – Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at Western University

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Western University – November 18th, 2020 – On Africa-Western Collaboration (AWC) Day, current students, alumni, and faculty members shared their research and experiences on a variety of topics affecting global health and academic collaboration. Dr. Isaac Luginaah established the tenor that resonated throughout the rest of the event during his keynote presentation.

In his presentation “Why Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Matters at Western,” Dr. Luginaah shared his observations and insights during his time as a PhD student at McMaster University and now as a faculty member at Western University. He emphasized that not all places with diversity are inclusive, and speaking metaphorically, that many have been invited to the party without being asked to dance. He continued by identifying challenges, both anecdotal and systemic in Canadian institutions, and providing recommendations on how Western can deliberately establish an environment of true belonging.

Dr. Luginaah believes that equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are necessary to establish an environment of belonging where everyone can thrive and succeed, where everyone is given a voice. These environments allow individuals to reach their full potential and integrate their values into those of the organization. Despite Canada’s multicultural population, persistent systemic barriers and implicit biases act as barriers to many groups and individuals seeking belonging. Activities encouraging EDI have now become a policy priority in many Canadian institutions, but as Dr. Luginaah candidly suggests, such passive and superficial commitments still leave much room for improvement.

Canadian universities are not immune to these systems-based inadequacies. Blind confidence in one’s own or an institution’s fairness leaves no room for improvement. Such issues may manifest as unconscious bias, inclinations that form outside our own awareness, in small interactions or major decisions, such as hiring faculty. Addressing EDI within Canadian universities will improve the academic and social experiences of students and set them up for personal success. During this pandemic and on this AWC Day, we have witnessed how easy it is to connect virtually and learn from others around the world, demonstrating the importance of preparing students to work in diverse teams.

Western’s past history and reputational legacy is far from perfect, including underrepresentation of minority students and racial insensitivity on Dr. Philippe Rushton’s flawed research on race and intelligence. The acknowledgement and institutional willingness to shed light on this past has provided a path for Western to move forward. Most recently, Western has set up the President’s Anti-Racism Work Group, attracted more international students by proportion of the student body than the Ontario average, increased female tenure track faculty from 31% to 37% in the past ten years, and much more in services, committees, and advocacy.

Despite all this progress, Western currently has reasonably accurate statistics on only one of four federally mandated categories: women. There is no reliable faculty-specific information on racialized/visible minorities, persons with disabilities, and indigenous persons. In our own Global Health Systems program, women consist of more than half the class and visible

minorities seem to be adequately represented. However, not all dimensions of diversity are visible, and not all diverse environments are inclusive. Data, surveys, and focus groups are one of the most fundamental ways to include voices of underrepresented groups. More needs to be done in terms of gathering data in order to provide recommendations based on evidence and to assess the progress that Western has made over time. Dr. Luginaah presented the steps needed for institutional change at Western and the reflection and action required from all of us.