

Barriers Black-Identifying Students Encounter when Accessing Postsecondary Education in Ontario

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Abstract

Students who identify as Black often encounter significant barriers when accessing and participating in postsecondary education (PSE) in Ontario, which differ from those experienced by their White counterparts. This paper discusses the intrinsic barriers (e.g., discrimination, racism, social exclusion, lack of confidence) and extrinsic barriers (e.g., financial burdens, family responsibilities) that hinder Black-identifying students from attending PSE. The concept of intersectionality is used as an analytical framework to understand how these overlapping social injustices influence Black marginalized students. This paper argues that addressing these barriers requires structural shift in how universities support Black students—moving beyond simple admission toward identity-affirming programs. Current initiatives at York University, such as the Advanced Credit Experience (ACE) and Black Excellence at York University (BE YU) programs, are examined as successful models for this support. The paper concludes with future directions and recommendations for decision-makers, emphasizing the need for community-based support, earlier promotion of PSE, and increased parental involvement to make PSE access more easily attainable.

Keywords: *Black-identifying students, postsecondary education, access, intrinsic and extrinsic barriers, Ontario*

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Introduction

Students who identify as Black are often given the impression that attending a postsecondary institution and obtaining a postsecondary degree is their pathway towards a secure and successful future (James & Asres, 2024; James & Parekh, 2021). However, many individuals do not take into consideration that Black-identifying students face barriers when accessing and participating in postsecondary education (PSE) (Henry et al., 2017; Johnson-Myers, 2025; Sangmen et al., 2024). Black-identifying students also face barriers once they are attending a postsecondary institution—navigating the postsecondary system and seeking out resources and services on campus can be difficult for some students (Buckley, 2023; Luhanga et al., 2023).

The terms ‘Black-identifying’ or ‘Black’ are used interchangeably in this paper and refer to individuals of Black African descent, including those who self-identify as Black Africans and those connected to Black African peoples in the Diaspora (BC Black History Awareness Society, n.d.). These terms include all people of Black African descent living in Canada, regardless of their citizenship status (Maheux & Do, 2019). Furthermore, individuals who identify as Black are made up of a diverse mix of cultures, religions, backgrounds, and identities (Domey & Patsiurko, 2024). Throughout this paper, I use the terms ‘Black-identifying’ and ‘Black’ interchangeably for two reasons. Firstly, I adopt the term ‘Black’ when referring to the work of the researchers and authors included in this paper, as they use it themselves. Secondly, in this paper, I use the term ‘Black-identifying’ to recognize and honour the diverse individual experiences within the broader category of ‘Black’.

This paper will discuss the intrinsic and extrinsic barriers that Black-identifying students encounter when accessing PSE, which are often different from those of their White counterparts. It will explore how these barriers hinder attendance at a postsecondary institution and, in some

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circumstances, limit the completion of a degree. Intersectionality's significant role in shaping Black-identifying students' navigation of the Ontario PSE system will also be discussed. In examining institutional responses, this paper will consider how York University has addressed the challenges faced by Black-identifying students. Throughout the paper, research from community organizations, school boards, and educational policy bodies—including the Toronto District School Board, the Infrastructure Institute, the Washington Student Achievement Council, and national college-access networks—will provide a foundation for the analysis. The paper will conclude with future directions and evidence-informed recommendations for decision-makers striving to improve PSE access for Black-identifying students.

Context/Background

An abundance of research focuses on the African American student experience at the college level, the barriers they face accessing PSE, and retention patterns (Banks, 2010; Cokley et al., 2016; Harper et al., 2009; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Means et al., 2016). Canadian research, however, predominantly focuses on the Black student experience within K-12 educational settings (James, 2012b; James & Turner, 2017; James, 2019; Smith et al., 2005). Some Canadian studies have explored the experiences of Black marginalized first-year university students (James & Taylor, 2008). However, there remains a limited body of research focused specifically on racialized students within Canadian university settings (Caxaj et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is a distinct lack of data regarding the specific factors that either facilitate or hinder the participation and retention of Black students within these institutions (James & Parekh, 2021).

Research has revealed that first- and second-generation students of Caribbean, Latin American and East African descent exhibit lower levels of participation in PSE in Ontario (Cheung,

2007; CSA, OSTA-AECO, and OUSA¹, 2011; James & Turner, 2017). Black students, in particular, face disproportionately lower achievement and higher drop-out rates in PSE due to socioeconomic marginalization (Chatoor & Tishcoff, 2024; CSA, OSTA-AECO, and OUSA, 2011; Johnson-Myers, 2025; Thiessen, 2009). Originating from families with incomes below the Canadian average—approximately \$74,200 for economic families (Statistics Canada, 2025)—creates a significant barrier to their PSE participation, as the costs associated with tuition and other university study-related expenses become daunting (CSA, OSTA-AECO, and OUSA, 2011; Johnson-Myers, 2025; Maheux & Do, 2019). Moreover, curriculum-related factors, such as a Eurocentric focus that overlooks diverse experiences, cultures, and histories may also play a role in discouraging their participation (CSA, OSTA-AECO, and OUSA, 2011; George, 2023; James & Turner, 2017; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2023a; Persaud et al., 2025). Beyond these systemic hurdles, various intrinsic barriers further complicate the postsecondary experience for many Black-identifying students.

Intrinsic Barriers

Many Black-identifying students encounter intrinsic barriers when accessing PSE (James & Asres, 2024). Discrimination and anti-Black racism represent a significant intrinsic barrier, influencing success at both the secondary and postsecondary levels (Codjoe, 2001; James & Turner, 2017; Stirling-Cameron & Jefferies, 2021). Black-identifying students have suggested that teachers have preconceived opinions of them, including having little interest in education based on their skin colour and the neighbourhood in which they live (James, 2012a). These opinions cause Black-identifying students not to receive the adequate information and assistance from educators necessary to properly apply to and participate in postsecondary institutions (James &

¹ CSA stands for College Student Alliance, OSTA-AECO is an abbreviation for Ontario Student Trustees' Association, and OUSA is the acronym for Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance.

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Turner, 2017). With his research involving Black youth in East Scarborough, Ontario, Price (2018) notes that:

Many youths discussed how low expectations from teachers and guidance counsellors was a particularly challenging barrier. Youth shared that there is a lack of encouragement in neighbourhood schools concerning PSE enrolment. Parents shared that this lack of encouragement is compounded by curriculum and teaching staff—both in high school and PSE—that do not represent the diversity of the community. As a result, parents shared that Black youth do not have a sense of belonging in PSE, and this in turn affects how youth view themselves as capable learners (Price, 2018, p. 27).

These findings highlight how limited representation and encouragement within school environments may influence how Black-identifying students perceive postsecondary education as a viable pathway. When school curricula, teaching staff, and administrative structures do not reflect or actively support Black students, it may reduce students' sense of belonging and engagement with postsecondary aspirations (Ontario College of Teachers, n.d.; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2023a). Furthermore, the postsecondary application process can be complex to navigate, making guidance from teachers and counsellors an essential support for Black-identifying students pursuing postsecondary education (James & Asres, 2024).

Robson et al. (2018) found that Black students were less prepared for PSE than White students, as evidenced by lower grades, higher rates of special educational needs (SEN), and lower likelihood of being in academic courses. Caxaj et al. (2021) highlighted the struggle for racialized students studying at mid-sized Canadian universities to establish academic credibility due to inadequate support and mentorship. Additionally, these students often shared instances of

discrimination and highlighted the constant need to navigate and employ strategies to conscientiously counteract oppressive forces that permeate their daily lives (Caxaj et al., 2021).

Black Canadian high school students often experience marginalization within school environments, which can contribute to social exclusion and create barriers to accessing PSE (Cénat, 2025; George, 2023; Smith et al., 2005). James and Turner (2017) argue that Black studies and Black Canadian experiences are insufficiently represented across the Ontario curriculum broadly—rather than within any specific subject or grade. This lack of integration throughout JK-12 may contribute to Black-identifying students feeling disconnected from school (James & Turner, 2017). Unfortunately, visible minority students in Ontario may be alienated by a Eurocentric curriculum that ignores diverse experience, culture, and history (CSA, OSTA-AECO, and OUSA, 2011; George, 2023; James & Turner, 2017; Persaud et al., 2025). Visible minorities may also feel alienated by the divergent life experiences and the assumptions that others may make about how some students qualified for admission, for example:

while access programs that take into consideration racial, disability and gender barriers may raise university participation rates for these students, they can also lead to the characterization of students from these groups as lacking the academic skills necessary to qualify for university based on merit. In other cases, some students may feel that they do not fit with the dominant image of a university student, and that there is an implicit questioning of their presence on campus (CSA, OSTA-AECO, and OUSA, 2011, p. 16).

While access programs can support pathways to PSE, racially minoritized students may still experience imposter feelings or question their legitimacy within academic spaces (Cokley et al., 2017; Cranston & Bennett, 2024; Husbands et al., 2025; Sangmen et al., 2024).

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Motivational factors, such as lack of confidence, absence of parental engagement and encouragement, and lack of adequate preparation for PSE in primary or secondary school, are also intrinsic barriers that create difficulties for Black-identifying students accessing PSE (Norrie & Zhao, 2011; Robson et al., 2018; Sangmen et al., 2024). Students cannot see themselves in a postsecondary institution if they do not have someone encouraging them to pursue PSE and giving them the confidence they need to succeed, which is where a mentorship program would be useful (Hillman et al., 2024). I believe that it is important for Black-identifying students to be partnered up with a mentor who looks like them, has similar interests, and is pursuing PSE (Bascoe & Mitchell, 2025). Studies have demonstrated that racial matching helps improve self-esteem, belonging, and overall success in PSE environments (Garcia-Murillo et al., 2023; Taylor, 2023).

It has been shown that parental education is a significant predictor of postsecondary participation, with students whose parents did not complete postsecondary education being less likely to pursue it themselves (Chatoor et al., 2019; CSA, OSTA-AECO, and OUSA, 2011; Picot et al., 2023). Therefore, it is very important to have parents/guardians involved with understanding the postsecondary system from an early stage so that they have the information needed to prepare and encourage their children to participate in PSE. While intrinsic barriers are significant, they do not exist in isolation; extrinsic barriers within Canadian educational institutions further intersect to shape the opportunities and experiences of Black-identifying students (Caxaj et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2021).

Extrinsic Barriers

Several Black-identifying students face extrinsic barriers when accessing postsecondary education. Financial burdens or affordability is a significant extrinsic barrier, which unfortunately causes many students to not attend postsecondary schooling or finish their degree. Research has

shown that high costs and insufficient financial aid are common reasons that underrepresented students decline admission offers (CSA, OSTA-AECO, and OUSA, 2011; Legin & Hachigian, 2024). Some of these students need to maintain employment throughout their studies so it might be difficult for them to imagine having to pay for high tuition costs while still affording to pay for their other financial responsibilities.

Another issue is that Black-identifying students are not always given the proper information concerning bursaries and scholarships prior to entering PSE. The CSA, OSTA-AECO, and OUSA (2011) have suggested that “Underrepresented groups are more likely to be unaware of key information regarding the post-secondary options available, application processes, and financial aid programs. In turn, financial assistance programs or mentorship and academic support initiatives designed to facilitate the participation of students from underrepresented groups in PSE can be ineffectual, given that target populations are often unaware of their existence” (CSA, OSTA-AECO, and OUSA, 2011, p. 20). In addition to tuition costs, students must also budget for textbooks and course materials, rent—which continues to rise in high-cost cities such as Toronto—and transportation expenses for those living off campus, all of which contribute to the overall financial burden of PSE in Canada (Berger et al., 2009; eCampusOntario, 2025; Statistics Canada, 2023). These financial burdens often hinder Black-identifying students from attending postsecondary institutions.

Additionally, family values and responsibilities are other important extrinsic barriers that play a vital role in hindering access to PSE for Black-identifying students. It is important to understand that many students have other responsibilities outside of schooling that might create difficulties for them to attend a postsecondary institution. Hernandez-Ramdwar (2009) found that socio-economic factors and familial obligations may play an unacknowledged role in academic

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performance among Black and Black Caribbean university students. Recent Canadian research supports this, indicating that family socio-economic factors conditions, including parental income and related responsibilities, influence academic performance and postsecondary pathways for Black students, suggesting these factors are a significant but often overlooked influence on educational outcomes (Bonikowska et al., 2024; Johnson-Myers, 2025).

When examining the extrinsic and intrinsic barriers facing Black-identifying students, it becomes evident that various intersectional identities—including race, class, gender, and disability—can intersect to create compounded barriers that prevent them from accessing postsecondary institutions (Johnson-Myers, 2025). To understand these challenges, we must analyze how intersectionality shapes the way Black-identifying students navigate the Ontario PSE landscape.

Intersectionality's Influence on Black Marginalized Students

Intersectionality is an analytic framework that describes how social justice problems, such as racism and sexism, often overlap, creating multiple levels of social injustice (Crenshaw, 2017). These social dynamics combine to create unique challenges. When considering intersectionality, researchers can understand how different parts of individuals' identities interact within varying contexts shaped by social power dynamics and processes (Ted, 2016). It is imperative to consider how the identities of Black-identifying students intersect within systems of power, and how this influences their access to PSE.

Educators, including teachers, guidance counsellors, and school psychologists, must be aware of the different intersecting barriers to higher education access, such as race, social class, disability, religion, and gender, to support their students effectively. In Ontario, the intersections of Black-identifying students' identities are often overlooked (McPherson, 2020). Applying an

intersectional lens in educational settings can help unpack the barriers that prevent these students from accessing PSE and lead to marginalized educational experiences. This entails addressing systemic oppression and examining how it shapes representation, access to PSE, financial resources, and career opportunities. While there is no standardized mandatory training on intersectionality for all school administrators across Canada, some provinces have implemented professional learning initiatives focused on anti-racism, equity, and inclusion that include components addressing systemic oppression and intersecting identities. For example, Ontario's Ministry of Education launched a mandatory online human rights, anti-racism, and anti-colonial education program for teachers and school administrators designed to build awareness of discrimination and equip educators to address exclusionary practices in schools (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2021).

Alongside these professional learning efforts, postsecondary institutions have also implemented structural initiatives aimed at improving access to PSE for historically underrepresented students (Chatoor et al., 2022). One initiative the Ontario educational system has developed to address these barriers is pathway and bridging programs, which are designed to support student mobility and create alternative routes into PSE (Education News Canada, 2025). York University offers several initiatives that reflect this approach, making it important to examine how these resources work to dismantle systemic barriers affecting Black-identifying students.

York University's Response to Black-identifying Students Accessing/Participation in PSE

Pathway programs and platforms are available to help students select a postsecondary program and transition into one. For example, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) offers an Academic Pathway Program to help students earn high school credits and provide guidance (Toronto District School Board, 2022). Centralized platforms like Ontario Colleges and the

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Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) provide information and application resources for institutions across the province (Ontario Colleges, n.d.; Ontario Universities' Application Centre, 2025). However, the effectiveness of these general platforms in assisting Black-identifying specifically remains a question.

One important initiative is the Advanced Credit Experience (ACE)—a partnership with York University's Faculty of Education, the York University Faculty Association (YUFA), and the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The ACE program “aims to enhance university access for Grade 12 students from local high schools in the Jane and Finch community in Toronto, Ontario” (Advanced Credit Experience, n.d.). It provides an opportunity for students facing systemic barriers to take a university half-credit course in the fall of their grade 12 year. The credit is transferable to any university the student attends, and participants are eligible for York University scholarships, build skills through campus placements, and are mentored by Bachelor of Education students (Advanced Credit Experience, n.d.).

The ACE initiative is pivotal because it acts as a bridge over the “structural gap” that often prevents Black-identifying and local Jane-Finch students from transitioning from high school to university. This gap is primarily composed of systemic streaming, where students are diverted away from university-level pathways, and a lack of institutional transparency regarding the hidden costs and expectations of higher education (James & Turner, 2017; Pichette et al., 2020). By providing early exposure to university coursework and direct mentorship, the ACE program effectively dismantles these barriers, transforming the university from an inaccessible space into a tangible reality.

Once at university, it is instrumental for Black-identifying students to have access to inclusive spaces that foster both their identity and institutional integration (Haile & Daniel, 2024).

Providing resources and opportunities that align with students' future goals is essential for maintaining a strong sense of belonging and academic momentum (Haile & Daniel, 2024). York University addresses this need through the Black Excellence at York University (BE YU) program, a holistic support initiative designed to help Black students navigate the complexities of university life (Black Excellence at York University, n.d.).

This support begins even before the first day of classes through Postsecondary Transition Sessions, such as the Summer Leadership Program and the annual Welcome Event, which help students build confidence and community. The support continues through a Peer Mentorship Program that pairs students with upper-year Black-identifying mentors for academic and personal guidance. Furthermore, the Financial Empowerment Series provides crucial literacy regarding scholarships and budgeting, while Community and Cultural Events—including major Black History Month celebrations—foster a deep sense of belonging. Finally, BE YU's outreach efforts ensure these vital resources reach local high schools and community partners to promote long-term equity in education (Black Excellence at York University, n.d.).

The BE YU initiative is vital because it marks a critical shift from access—simply getting Black-identifying students into university—to success, ensuring they actually reach graduation (Black Excellence at York University, n.d.). Merely admitting Black-identifying students is insufficient if institutions do not actively support and retain them, as Black students in Canadian universities continue to report experiences of exclusion, institutional neglect, and a lack of supports that adversely affect their academic persistence and success (Johnson-Myers, 2025). Consequently, these programs are not merely 'add-ons' to the student experience; they constitute essential structural responses to the systemic barriers and exclusion that have historically hindered Black student participation and achievement in Canadian higher education (Johnson-Myers, 2025).

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Future Directions and Recommendations

To further support Black-identifying students, efforts should extend beyond existing university programs. Schools and educational institutions are not always perceived as safe or welcoming spaces by racialized students, and student testimonies from anti-Black racism consultations emphasize the need for culturally grounded and community-based supports to address exclusion and foster belonging (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2023b).

- **Community-Based Support:** More resources and government funding should be allocated to community centres in areas with large Black-identifying populations (Infrastructure Institute, 2022). These centres can provide regular, updated information on applications, programs, funding opportunities, scholarships, and bursaries through effective partnerships with postsecondary institutions and community workers (Toronto District School Board, n.d.).
- **Early Intervention:** Initiatives to promote PSE should begin earlier, at the elementary level, so that attending postsecondary education is not a foreign concept by the time students reach high school (Toronto District School Board, n.d.).
- **Mentorship and Parental Involvement:** Culturally relevant one-on-one mentoring programs with Black-identifying students can increase access (Toronto District School Board, n.d.). Because parents/guardians are the biggest influence on a child's decision to pursue higher education, their involvement is critical at all stages of schooling (Byrne & Kibort-Crocker, 2022). In addition to teachers and guidance counsellors providing PSE information, community resources such as community-based educational workshops can also support families by helping parents understand the postsecondary system from an early stage (Coalition for College, n.d.; Hodara et al., 2024).

My hope is that with these considerations in place, PSE access will be easily attainable for Black-identifying students.

Conclusion

This paper addressed the intrinsic (discrimination, racism, social exclusion, lack of confidence) and extrinsic barriers (financial burdens, family responsibilities) that hinder Black-identifying students from accessing and participating in PSE in Ontario. The concept of intersectionality was used as an analytic framework to understand how overlapping social injustices influences these students. I believe that if teachers, guidance counsellors, and school psychologists practice an intersectional lens when dealing with Black-identifying students, then they can help to unpack the barriers they face accessing PSE. Programs such as ACE and BE YU are important in helping students, but more work is required through community organizations, early promotion of PSE, and parental involvement to make access more attainable. However, more work needs to be done to help Black-identifying students access PSE, and this can be done through community organizations, promoting PSE at an earlier stage, and parental/guardian involvement.

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