

# INSIGHT *Into Diversity*®

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## *Highly Selective Schools*

Some elite U.S. institutions have improved support for underserved students, but much work remains to ensure access and opportunity for all.

## *Canada's Universities*

An increased focus on diversity and inclusion drives Canadian universities' efforts.

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Ryerson University's campus in Toronto





# Canada Versus the U.S.

## The Varying Role of Diversity and CDOs Across Borders

By Alexandra Vollman

**A**s the first senior-level diversity leader at Ryerson University in Toronto — and one of the first in all of Canada — Denise O’Neil Green, PhD, is setting an example for other Canadian universities that are also hoping to become more equitable and inclusive. In her position as vice president of equity and community inclusion, she oversees the diversity office at Ryerson and reports directly to the university’s president.

Prior to joining Ryerson in 2012 — where she initially served as the inaugural assistant vice president/vice provost of equity, diversity, and inclusion — O’Neil Green was the associate vice president for institutional diversity at Central Michigan University. Her career has been unique in that she has overseen diversity and inclusion on both a U.S. and a Canadian campus.

*INSIGHT Into Diversity* recently spoke with O’Neil Green about the importance of diversity and inclusion work and the ways in which a chief diversity officer’s role differs between the two countries.

**Q: Is the general definition of diversity and inclusion in Canadian colleges and universities similar to that in the U.S.? If not, how do they differ?**

**A:** The terms equity, diversity, and inclusion are used very frequently here in Canada — just as much as they’re used in the U.S. — and the theme of inclusive excellence is very common across the two countries. That essentially means that [this work] requires the engagement of everyone, the engagement of many different

cultures, those with different social identities, and those from different backgrounds and different experiences. Some people use the [phrasing] “not only invited to the party but also asked to dance.” That really underscores the idea that inclusion is about engagement and intentionality. I would say that’s pretty common across both countries.

Both in the U.S. and Canada, we look at diversity ... with respect to demographics on our campuses. The difference, though, is with the terminology. In the states, you may say people of color or African American; here in Canada, it’s black Canadian or African Canadian. There’s also the term “racialized”; I’ve heard some people say “minoritized” in the U.S. So the terminology isn’t necessarily consistent. Native American, American Indian — here it’s indigenous, it’s aboriginal, it’s First Nations, it’s Inuit people.

**Q: Do accrediting agencies in Canada include any language in their standards requiring efforts around the recruitment and retention of underrepresented students or faculty?**

**A:** Very few accrediting agencies ... place an emphasis on the recruitment and retention of underrepresented groups. There is a greater push in the states, and I would say the whole concept of inclusion, equity, and diversity has been a focus in U.S. higher education for much longer than it has in Canadian universities simply because of the demographic shifts. These shifts have happened much earlier in the states.

Toronto is considered one of the



Denise O’Neil Green

most diverse cities, if not the most diverse city, in the world — and that is where I work. Ryerson University is in the heart of downtown Toronto with over 40,000 students, and about 55 percent of them are racialized (in the states you would say minority or underrepresented students). Because of that, there is what we call here not a melting pot, but a mosaic. The idea of inclusion here, with it being a mosaic, is that everyone is able to maintain their own culture and identity, but ... they blend together in a way that helps strengthen the country, the province, and the city.

So this idea of requiring aspects of recruitment and retention [in accrediting standards] has a longer-standing history in U.S. universities than it does in Canada. It’s just beginning to take hold here. In other parts of the country, there is a greater emphasis and a need to focus on that because [they’re] not nearly as diverse as Toronto.

**Q: Are there any legislative requirements in Canada that differ from those in the U.S. that affect how you do your job?**

**A:** One of the biggest differences is that the U.S. focuses on a civil rights framework, and in Canada, the focus is on human rights.

U.S. universities have civil rights and equal-opportunity offices that take complaints and address issues; you have Title IX legislation and so forth. Canada does not have similar types of legislation or requirements. The focus is on human rights. Human rights are different from civil rights because civil rights are derived from the fact that your country has laws that provide you rights — but if those laws don't exist, then those rights don't exist. Human rights [is the idea that] simply because you are a human, these are rights that you are expected to have, and it's not based on ... laws. That's a very unique difference.

Because we have human rights offices within universities here in Canada, everyone is able to go to that office and bring forward complaints based on specific [aspects] of the human rights code — race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and the list goes on. In the U.S., some of those same areas are embedded within civil rights legislation and policies, but the way they are adjudicated, the way they're examined, the way the complaint process works is very different.

In Canada, there is not a federal office that oversees higher education. Higher education laws here are [regulated] by each province. In the U.S., you have federal regulations related to higher education; you also have state regulations. In Canada, they're primarily provincial-driven. Funding and regulatory actions are at the provincial level, so that requires me to focus on what's going on at that level.

Some provinces may place a greater emphasis on, say, accessibility and accommodation. For example, the province of Ontario has what is called the AODA, which is the Accessibility

for Ontarians with Disabilities Act; it's [like] the Americans with Disabilities Act at the federal level in the U.S. So universities and colleges within the province of Ontario have regulations that they have to address connected to the AODA, whereas other provinces may not have that. These differences do impact the way we [as chief diversity officers] can do our work ... in Canada versus in the U.S.

**Q: How, if at all, do the institutional goals and priorities around diversity and inclusion differ between your current and previous institution?**

**A:** The issues [you face] are very much driven by where you are located. I would even say that's the same in the U.S. But one very specific difference is that, in the U.S., there's a history of slavery, there's a history of having greater inclusion of underrepresented

and how you go about [enacting] organizational change.

We recently did a two-year consultation at Ryerson focused on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report, [which] was made public in 2015. It provided background on how indigenous children were treated in the residential school system, which was very poorly. And because of how they were treated, because of that history, many universities in Canada, including the one where I work, have done their own truth and reconciliation process.

With our aboriginal elder (i.e., a wise and respected member of the indigenous community who counsels on issues related to that community) we did a consultation process and generated a report that we shared with the Ryerson community. It outlines some [recommendations]: increase the number of indigenous students,

**“Human rights [is the idea that] simply because you are a human, these are rights that you are expected to have, and it's not based on ... laws. That's a very unique difference.”**

groups, including African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans. Here, that focus is quite different. The focus is on students with disabilities; also, indigenous students are very much at the top of that priority list.

The drastic difference between the U.S. and Canada — although all the different student populations are extremely important — is that in the states, because of the history of slavery, there is a great emphasis on African American students. In Canada, there is a great emphasis on indigenous students because of their history here, and that drives a lot of the focus on priorities, how you accomplish them,

faculty, and staff; generate more funding support for these students; provide for indigenous content within the curriculum; and provide opportunities for knowledge-keepers to be a part of the faculty. Also, to offer across the campus very visible indigenous spaces, artwork, and signage to show that we are here to welcome indigenous faculty, staff, and students in the community at large.

In doing that, we have pulled together a campus-wide steering committee, [which] I'm co-chairing with our provost and elder. The president's and provost's offices have already set us on the path to addressing several of these recommendations.



Ryerson University Student Learning Centre in Toronto, Ontario, Canada (Photo by Alex Guibord via Flickr)

**Q: What are the differences in the job description and responsibilities between your new position and your previous one?**

**A:** I would say a big difference between how these roles are thought of in the U.S. versus Canada is that here they serve more of a human resources function.

In the U.S., you can find chief diversity officers in many different parts of an organization. However, these positions also [require] expertise focused on students. In my role in the U.S., my portfolio included functions [related to] students — student affairs and student support. My office focused on transition programs such as Gear Up and Upward Bound, helping to transition students from middle school to high school, from high school to college. I also focused a lot on the curriculum in my previous role.

Because these CDO roles are really just beginning to develop and flourish within Canadian universities, oftentimes, the focus is on human resource functions — increasing the number of diverse faculty, providing training for hiring, providing for promotion and tenure reviews — as well as preparing reports to show the diversity of the workforce. This

is actually driven by the federal government here; all universities, depending on the amount of money they receive from the federal government, are required to report the diversity of their faculty and staff.

Another difference is that a lot of data is collected on equity, diversity, and inclusion in the U.S., and that is really just beginning here. So in my role, I've helped establish a protocol for collecting equity data, sharing that so that it's transparent, and setting goals for equity ... among the faculty and staff. That function isn't common across all universities, and Ryerson is being seen as a leader in that regard.

**Q: In terms of the budget for your office, have you found a large variance between your institution in the U.S. and Canada?**

**A:** No, I [haven't]. There continue to be different approaches to how universities do this, because when I did my job in the U.S., it was in an office that had been established for many years prior to my coming on board. When I started in my role at Ryerson, it was brand new — nothing had been done yet — so I've gone from just a handful of staff to almost 30. I've gone from having a very modest budget to one that's

currently over \$3 million. The numbers really depend on the nature of the office, where you are located within the university, what initiatives you're taking on, and being able to articulate the cultural change that needs to happen.

**Q: In the past few years, many U.S. colleges have had to deal with campus protests, controversial speakers, and racist incidents on campus. Are Canadian universities also experiencing these challenges?**

**A:** Universities in Canada are dealing with the same issues. In 2015, when the situation at the University of Missouri and Yale University bubbled to the top, there were many students on Canadian campuses who gathered together in solidarity with those individuals to point out what was happening on their respective campuses. [A similar thing] occurred on our campus where students pointed out that they wanted more black faculty and staff, greater support, and so forth and so on.

How universities have dealt with this really depends on their leadership. Our leadership [made it a priority to listen] to students and their experiences and see if there was a way that we could address their concerns. As a result of what happened in 2015, as well as subsequent issues that have been raised by our students, we have set out to address a number of their concerns — one of them being to collect data ... in order to develop ways [to increase the] recruitment and retention of black faculty and staff.

The idea of examining the campus climate isn't something that is very common at Canadian universities — that happens more in the states — but we, in collaboration with our students, are looking to embark on a campus climate review that will look at anti-black racism, anti-racism, and various aspects of the climate for different diverse groups. ●

Alexandra Vollman is the editor in chief of *INSIGHT Into Diversity*.