

McGill Plan for Addressing Anti-Black Racism
Statement of the Dr. Kenneth Melville McGill Black Faculty Caucus
1 August 2020

The Dr. Kenneth Melville McGill Black Faculty Caucus stands in solidarity with the recent anti-Black racism protests, which began in the United States after the Minneapolis police killed George Floyd while handcuffed in their custody. These protests have reverberated worldwide, illustrating the need to confront and uproot the stigmatizing scourge that is systemic anti-Black racism—an existential threat to all Black people.

In Canadian society, systemic anti-Black racism permeates our institutions, including academe. McGill University is on the eve of commemorating its Bicentennial in 2021. That commemoration is inextricably linked to James McGill's chattel enslavement of people of African and Indigenous descent at his Old Montreal residence and Burnside Estate, the property on which McGill University now stands. The Bicentennial is also profoundly connected to the profits that James McGill derived from goods that enslaved Africans produced on West Indian plantations.

A long overdue reckoning with anti-Black racism and the need for reparative justice is pivotal to honouring the humanity of Black people within academia and beyond. Our Caucus is heartened by Principal Fortier's and Provost Manfredi's respective statements on June 30th and July 3rd acknowledging the urgency and pressing importance of addressing anti-Black racism for McGill University, and committing both to build the McGill Plan for Addressing Anti-Black Racism consultatively, and to allocate the resources necessary to realize its goals. We call on McGill University to take the following urgent, interdependent actions:

Task Force on Transatlantic Slavery and Colonialism

First, McGill must convene an official task force that will excavate its connections to transatlantic slavery and colonialism. Leading universities across the Black Atlantic and including Dalhousie in Canada have led the way in building high-profile, comprehensive, consultative, research-driven task forces with respected, community-rooted academics at the helm. The space was created for the academics involved to have the research time release necessary to produce work of the highest caliber, in the broad public interest. The task forces had resources to hire graduate or postdoctoral researchers, but the structure and reporting lines were distinct, seized upon the magnitude and gravity of the work undertaken, and built in accountability to the broader Black community. Those initiatives honour the courage and vision of the universities that have entrusted colleagues with this mandate. It is not too late for McGill to act decisively and consultatively, now, to commit to building a task force around the Provostial Postdoctoral Research Fellows on Slavery and Colonialism, which will affirm that equity is a key theme of McGill's Bicentennial (p. 7).

Targets and Timetables for Recruitment of Black Faculty, Students and Staff, and Accompanying Support

Second, McGill needs specific targets and timetables for the recruitment of Black faculty and students as it has rightly built for Indigenous colleagues, alongside targets and timetables for the recruitment of Black staff. Concerning faculty, the abysmally small current cohort of 10 self-identified Black tenured or tenure-track colleagues (out of approximately 1,700) illustrates the urgency with which McGill must recruit and retain excellent Black professors, and librarians. Representation should

go beyond census numbers, to take into account the need to build a ‘critical mass’ of Black academics, able to respond to the disproportionate but crucial responsibilities that we assume for mentoring and community engagement within and beyond the University in keeping with McGill’s mission statement. Recruitment and retention must include specific and careful attention to spousal hiring. Similarly, specific time-bound commitments are necessary for the hiring, retention, and promotion of Black managerial, administrative and support staff. There is a significant opportunity for McGill to undertake proactive community outreach-based recruitment measures in Montreal-area Black communities.

The specific time-bound commitments for the hiring of Black tenured and tenure-track colleagues need to be accompanied by targeted, supportive measures that apply throughout the academic lifecycles of our Black colleagues. McGill bears responsibility for equity throughout renewal, tenure and promotion processes. Our University should encourage supportive practice—including mentorship—and ensure accountability for equitable procedures and outcomes. McGill should also leverage the Canada Research Chair program and internal chair program to recruit and retain Black faculty. We reiterate the reflection of the McGill Working Group on Principles of Commemoration and Renaming that there is a significant opportunity to rename the internal professorships. Moreover, the messaging on EDI in McGill’s recent CRC announcement considers racialized candidates to be over-represented. McGill’s CRC announcement therefore prioritizes Indigenous applicants, as well as applicants with a disability, but not Black applicants. In the absence of disaggregated data, the deleterious effects of stereotypical assumptions are compounded, historical exclusions are replicated, while the exceptional under-representation of Black faculty is obscured. In other words, methodological problems arise when institutions do not pay specific attention to anti-Black racism and the Black experience. In keeping with international law alongside the momentum on disaggregation following the CRC program’s equity addendum, we urge McGill to disaggregate data for Black faculty in the attribution of research chairs, while paying careful attention to the internal messaging to Deans and departmental Chairs.

The commitment to recruiting more Black students should take into account our University’s integral connections to the city of Montreal, and its historic relationships to slavery here. Consequently, McGill must ensure inclusive outreach to various Black populations in Canada and beyond that include specific targets for the recruitment of students from the Black communities of the Greater Montreal Area. At present, students from these Montreal communities appear to constitute a very small percentage of the Black students at McGill, reflecting a historical pattern of student enrolment that has overlooked the Black communities in closest proximity to the University. McGill should create an appropriately funded entity focused on Black access at McGill, with responsibility for outreach, recruitment, support and retention of Black students. This entity would build on and formalize the work that has to date been undertaken by organizations like the Black Student Network and the McGill Black Alumni Association, among others, to promote McGill to High School and CEGEP students. The entity would also establish collaborations with schools and community organizations that serve local Black communities to establish strong educational relationships with Black students in the Greater Montreal Area well in advance of the point at which they make decisions about attending university.

We are encouraged by the scholarly interest in the study of new frontiers of African and Black studies, including slavery as a global institution and its legacies, and the importance of relevant curricular offerings to the decisions students make about their studies. We call on McGill to increase support to

the existing African Studies Program beyond its current focus on undergraduate teaching and facilitate its development and expansion as a centre of research, learning, and documentation as well as the study and teaching of Africa and the African Diaspora across the disciplines. This call is based on our shared premise that African Studies is a foundational field with a crucial role in focusing on—and providing support to—the lives and experiences of Africans and all peoples of African descent, that is, on Black life and anti-Black racism as it occurs in Canada and globally.

Institutionalizing Equity and Representation across McGill and in Senior Administration

And third, McGill must institutionalize equity with a specific focus on equity for Black persons within the institution. We call on McGill to create an Office dedicated to anti-racism. A Vice Principal—or another senior executive with University-wide responsibility—who shares our lived experience should oversee this Office, with a staff that includes other trained Black professionals who can recognize and support the unique experiences of Black faculty, students, and staff. Furthermore, the pursuit of equity must be manifest in the actions and diversification of the University's senior administration, and be sustained by practices of meaningful participation on the part of historically marginalized communities, including consultation with the Dr. Kenneth Melville McGill Black Faculty Caucus, in a range of decision-making processes.

These are trying times. But McGill has an opportunity to lead in confronting and uprooting anti-Black racism. Black excellence and perseverance alone in the face of unmitigated systemic anti-Black racism cannot ensure that Black faculty, staff and students will be treated equitably and with dignity. As we forge ahead in this U.N. International Decade for People of African Descent, McGill should cultivate a relationship in which members of the Black professoriate, alongside staff and students and alumni, are able to trust that substantively we are respected, valued members of the University community.

