



# A Perspective on Higher Education Through the Lens of a Student Activist

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## ABSTRACT

Both historically and present day, students and youth have been at the forefront of social justice movements. Environmental justice, defence of undocumented students, whistleblower protection, international solidarity and labour rights are among a myriad of issues which have emerged to expand the range and scope of equitable education politics within student movements. This commentary provides a perspective on higher education through the lens of one student activist. This reflection shares some thoughts on the implications of high tuition fees for marginalized communities and emphasizes the importance of youth activism in advancing the struggle for accessible postsecondary education and socioeconomic justice domestically and abroad.

*“Walking down the halls...  
... Speaking back to the Walls”*

*This piece was motivated by years of walking down university halls as a student and wondering why things are the way they are... why classrooms are crammed, why so many barriers exist, lack of funding, inaccessible buildings, daycare waiting lists for students with children, line-ups at the University food bank... Yet at the same time the University's wealth is apparent when it comes to those fields of study representing commercial interests, millions in endowment funds, gambling away public money in stocks, or the construction of buildings driven by corporate profits.*

*We need to be aware of the decisions being made and take part in decision-making at the university. Perhaps it is time for students to get together communally to educate ourselves and each other in order to work towards transforming the academy — making this a publicly accessible, open, university, where the curriculum and teaching methods represent the diverse nature of our communities.*

—Commissioned for the Students by the Students



I came across this description beside a beautiful painting created by one of my colleagues. It was originally installed in the hallway of a college at an Ontario university before it was quickly taken down by the college administration. The college was originally built for part-time students; however, in recent years it has been moving away from its original mandate and vision to ensure full access for part-time students. This is not all that surprising. In recent years Toronto's universities have seen an increased attack on programming designed to enhance access to marginalized communities.

This past year, the University of Toronto attempted unsuccessfully to push through a proposal that would severely curtail the Transitional Year Program (TYP) through drastic budget cuts among other structural changes. TYP has its roots in the Black community in the City of Toronto and was founded 40 years ago as a second chance program for those who did not complete high school to attend university. This same year critical equity programs such as Disability Studies at the University of Toronto, Women's Studies at the University of Guelph and History and Philosophy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) have all been eliminated. We are also seeing the intervention of the Conservative government into the governing of Social Sciences Humanities and Research Council (SSHRC) grants and scholarships to make research legible to business interests (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2009). This comes at a time when York University is preparing to abolish the minimum funding guarantee for incoming graduate students—a particularly dangerous move that paves the way toward a two-tiered graduate education system and will inevitably bring higher education further out of reach for already underrepresented groups. This happens a year after a three-month strike by graduate students and contract faculty at that university, which mirrors ongoing labour unrest unfolding on campuses throughout the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). In this context, a narrative on the part of the university administration emerges which justifies cutbacks and reduces labour costs in the name of finer scholarship and a better education. This begs the question: "What is the university teaching us when graduate student employees are asked to subsist on sub-poverty level wages and when we're told to pay upwards of twenty thousand dollars to access higher education?"

The lesson here is deceptively simple: education is a privilege and not a right. Often times, those of us who are unable to come to university are not absent because we're not smart enough, but because we're not rich enough. I want to reflect on what this means for Black youth in our city. Given that the Toronto District School Board (2006) documents a 40% high school drop-out rate among its Black students and given that the median economic income for Black families in the GTA hovers at the poverty line, we are particularly concerned by the implications of unaffordable fees. Education is the great social equalizer, yet this door to upper equity slams shut to Black youth who cannot transcend the social and structural barriers which prohibit our full participation in universities. Those of us who do end up in university classrooms come to find that Eurocentric curricula and a lack of diverse representation among faculty and social stereotyping persist. It is not surprising then that we feel compelled to organize for systemic and structural changes that will make our universities more accessible to our community. Black student formations in universities in the GTA and for that matter across the country and even internationally have a long-standing history of engaging in social justice activism.

Both historically and in a contemporary context, university students have been catalysts for social change. From advocating for fair trade policies to national liberation struggles in the Global South, students have been strong and articulate leaders for political justice. From the sit-ins at college counters to abolish "separate but equal" legislation to transnational efforts to isolate South African apartheid, Black students have been key players in struggles to advance social equality. On the morning of June 16, 1976, thousands of Black youth orchestrated a high school walkout. The Soweto Uprising came as a response to the apartheid regime's having adopted a policy that would mandate Afrikaans as the primary language of instruction in all secondary schools. Contesting the language of instruction constituted a form of resistance to imposed cultural superiority and to a particular social order. The advocating for instruction in an Indigenous language signifies a form of cultural reclamation and a desire to maintain one's native values and knowledge system and thus bore profound symbolic and practical significance. The anger of Black youth living under apartheid in South Africa reached a boiling point and the children took over by taking to the streets. The world bore witness to what the South African Defence Forces would do to an unarmed and defenceless population. The riot resulted in hundreds of fatalities and marked a turning point in the global anti-apartheid movement. June 16 is now celebrated as "Youth Day" in South Africa to commemorate the Soweto Uprising.

The story of Black youth resistance in the United States echoes the South African struggle for self-determination. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was a leader in the American legislative reform and civil rights movement. This Black youth-led initiative ran voter registration programs and built the analysis and skills of some of the most prominent members of the Black liberation movement throughout the sixties and seventies. Universities have and continue to be major sites of social justice activism. This is conducive to a central function of the university which is to generate ideas that question and challenge the cherished beliefs of society and of the university itself. It is not surprising then to see students consistently engaging in politically charged activities of all kinds. It is also not surprising to see that the segments of the population disproportionately impacted by exclusionary university policies and practises are also at the forefront of those activities—including women and racialized students.

When the issue of accessible education is located on a multi-issue social justice platform, we can make links between war, migrants' justice, racism, poverty, sexism, academic freedom and labour solidarity. We have to see how unaffordable tuition fees widen the wealth gap, exacerbate pay inequity and disproportionately impact members of equity-seeking groups. This includes mature students, parent students, women, racialized groups, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) communities and first-generation students (those who are first in their family to attend university). We need to take up the issue of undocumented students whose precarious immigration status translates to constant fear of deportation. In the past two years, we have seen university students deported but we have also seen a successful "education not deportation" campaign which reversed the deportation order of one York University student thanks to a well-orchestrated mobilization. The popularized "don't ask, don't tell" policy calls for universities to be declared sanctuary zones. This would mark the campus off-limits to immigration enforcement and bar anyone in a university from asking and reporting students' immigration status to Immigration Canada. This means that all students would be able to study at university without fear and with dignity irrespective of their immigration status—a right protected under Section 49.1 of the Education Act (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004).

Those who advocate for migrants' justice are also the ones who work to counter racial discrimination. After a string of racist incidents at another Ontario university in 2008, the institution conceded to demands calling for a taskforce to investigate systemic racism. I was an undergraduate student at the time and remember spending late nights with other students writing press releases about the latest act of overt discrimination on campus. Among the list of incidents included death threats

to student leaders, the deportation of a campus community member, the setting of the African students' office bulletin board to fire, security using metal detectors to search Black students entering campus and so on. We the students, mostly women and mostly Black, fought back. When a member of the campus chapter of the Conservative Party issued a racist letter to a member of the United Black Students (Black students' union), we demanded and received an apology from the leader of the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party. When our bulletin board was put to fire, we got the attention of mainstream media where we identified the issue not as an isolated incident but as a symptom of systemic racism which empowers some people to express hatred without fear of reprisal. With minimal resources and a very restricted budget, but with a handful of dedicated young organizers, we shifted the terms of debate concerning equity on campus.

I am inspired by the work of the student movement in this province, across the country and globally. Accessible education is the door to a life free of poverty. Those of us from historically excluded groups who have accessed this door to upward social mobility have a special responsibility to ensure that the door remains open so that others can pass through. If the student movement is to remain relevant, it will have to continue to make connections between different social justice causes to strengthen the progressive character of these movements.

We need to remind our university communities that values of equity, civil discourse, human rights and relationships of integrity do not merely belong in textbooks and do not end when a seminar is over. We need to embody these values in our words, our actions and in everything we do. We also need to contest the notion of inclusion as it is sometimes defined, one that advocates adding more seats to the classroom and is prepared to add voices to an existing conversation—one with all of its philosophies and politics already established. We cannot be satisfied with the “add-a-seat-to-the-table” strategy which reifies existing inequitable social relations. We must be ready for the *transformation* of the conversations in the classrooms and outside of them. We can be confident that the learning which takes place in this context will be richer for it. We, young people, must take our learning beyond the four walls of our classrooms and actively engage in social justice work on our campuses if we are to realize a future of postsecondary education without user fees as presently exists in several states throughout Europe and the Global South. History has shown that the will of young people can drastically alter social and cultural norms. It is my firm belief that through creative imagination and political action, young people will be the ones to realize a Canadian postsecondary education system that is emancipatory, equitable, democratic, and universally accessible.

## References

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[www.ywcatoronto.org/women\\_distinction/2007/wod2007\\_young.htm](http://www.ywcatoronto.org/women_distinction/2007/wod2007_young.htm)