

# Black-affirming campus spaces are vital for Black student academic success

June 28 2024, by Fikir Getaneh Haile and Beverly-Jean Daniel

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Credit: Safari Consoler from Pexels

Several universities and colleges in Canada signed on to the [Scarborough Charter](#) on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education in November 2021.

In so doing, universities and colleges committed to promoting Black flourishing in their classrooms and campuses.

In the context of these urgent aims, it's important to acknowledge [the importance of Black-affirming community spaces](#) and understand the role they play in Black student well-being and academic success.

Black-affirming academic community spaces are designed specifically for Black students and have an explicit focus on academic success. These spaces also provide opportunities for psycho-social skill development and opportunities for exploring racial counter-narratives.

As such, Black-affirming community spaces offer Black students a [physical space](#) to develop positive Black identities, which are vital for academic success.

## Countering anti-Black racism

The prevalence of [racism](#)—specifically anti-Black racism—in higher education is well-documented across several different contexts.

Studies show that in the [United States](#) and the [United Kingdom](#), Black students are subjected to both covert and overt forms of racism in post-secondary institutions.

U.S.-based studies have also shown that in a context of pervasive anti-Black racism, dedicated Black community spaces support Black [student inclusion](#) and [well-being](#).

A [similar trend](#) is emerging in Canada. For example, in recent years, the [University of British Columbia](#), [Toronto Metropolitan University](#), and [Acadia University](#) have opened Black student spaces.

## **Student voices now**

Following commitments by some universities to open or sustain Black community spaces, in 2023, we and colleagues conducted a study. We are currently finalizing analysis of the data in preparation for publication.

The study was conducted under the leadership of Beverly-Jean Daniel, one of the authors of this article and an associate professor in the School of Child and Youth Care at Toronto Metropolitan University.

The study aimed to document the experiences of Black students in Canadian post-secondary institutions, and to assess the formal and informal resources Black post-secondary students draw upon.

Researchers conducted interviews with over two dozen Black college, undergraduate, masters and Ph.D. students in Ontario between December 2022 and March 2023 to identify the supports Black students employ to navigate institutions of higher education.

The students hailed from seven universities and colleges across Ontario and represented diverse disciplinary backgrounds.

While some participants had access to permanent dedicated Black academic spaces, others discussed their experiences with virtual or pop-up Black spaces on campus.

## **Peer-to-peer support**

A master's student described Black community spaces as spaces of "Black life making ... [an] environment for Black people to succeed."

Participants shared that Black-affirming academic community spaces are centers of peer-to-[peer support](#), [which studies show promotes](#) academic success.

Participants noted that Black students from across different programs and disciplines offer mutual aid and support, share resources and opportunities, and establish informal mentoring relationships in these spaces. Students reported that seeing other Black students' [academic success](#) increased their confidence, motivation and the belief that they can excel in their fields.

In addition, they shared that Black-affirming academic community spaces provided the [emotional support](#) and encouragement that empowered them to persevere in difficult circumstances.

Second, students described how these spaces provide them a place to share their experiences with anti-Black racism in higher education.

[Studies](#) show that having spaces to unpack covert and [overt racism](#) they experience is vital for the well-being and positive development of Black youth.

Participants said they could freely and openly share their experiences with anti-Black racism without fear of judgment or dismissal in these spaces. These spaces therefore serve as hubs for important conversations around race and racism both in academia and in broader society.

## **Sharing Black cultures and histories**

Moreover, respondents shared that these spaces facilitate sharing Black cultures, histories and futures in holistic ways, which enabled them to develop positive Black racial identities. With this sharing, students said they found mutual support to counter the [anti-Black messaging](#) they

frequently receive.

## **Resourced spaces needed**

What we heard from students in our research echoes earlier findings, and provides additional data to [support calls](#) for dedicated and resourced [Black student spaces](#) in Canadian institutions of [higher education](#).

Signatories to the Scarborough Charter should lend material and institutional support to cultivate designated spaces on campus that can serve as community hubs. Planning for this should begin now, as campuses forge plans for a new cohort of students in the fall.

Additionally, universities and colleges should provide financial and institutional support to bolster Black student groups and community organizations who are working to create Black community spaces.

Black community spaces have begun to [attract some criticism](#) from some commentators.

In the face of this, it is vital that institutions publicly state and consistently demonstrate their commitment to protecting these spaces. This is critical as part of their efforts to promote the inclusion of Black students.

Together, these actions can play a key role in supporting Black flourishing and inclusive excellence, two of the overarching principles guiding the Scarborough Charter.

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