

# BREWS Follow-up Report on Persistent Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Shortcomings in EEB

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# I. Introduction to BREWS

[BREWS](#) stands for Broadening Representation and Equity **With Science**. Our core idea is that, as scientists, we ecologists and evolutionary biologists are well-suited to disentangling the forces driving complicated patterns of diversity (or lack thereof). The obstacles to recruiting, retaining, and supporting a diverse talent pool in the sciences often seem overwhelming, so BREWS focuses on quantifying the scope of the problem—including where intervention is most helpful—and identifying evidence-based strategies for making departmental life more equitable. To do so, we collate data from the literature, surveys, and other sources, and use it to initiate conversations, motivate specific actions, and define measurable goals that we as a department and individuals can strive to meet.

## II. Message from the BREWS team

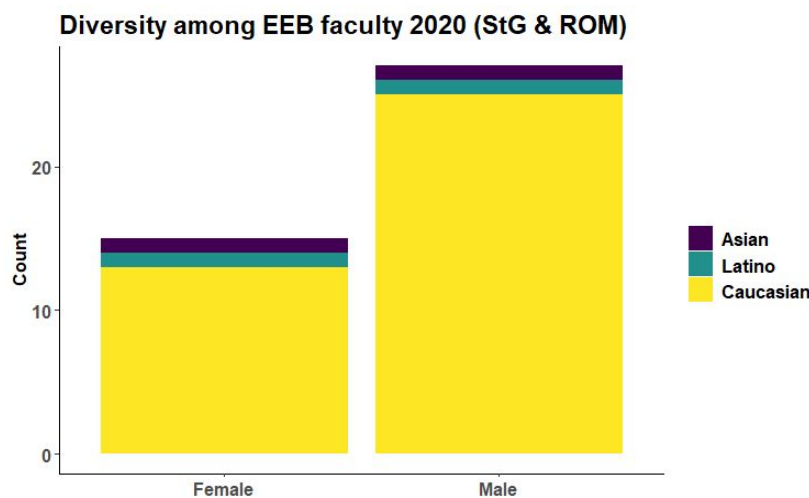
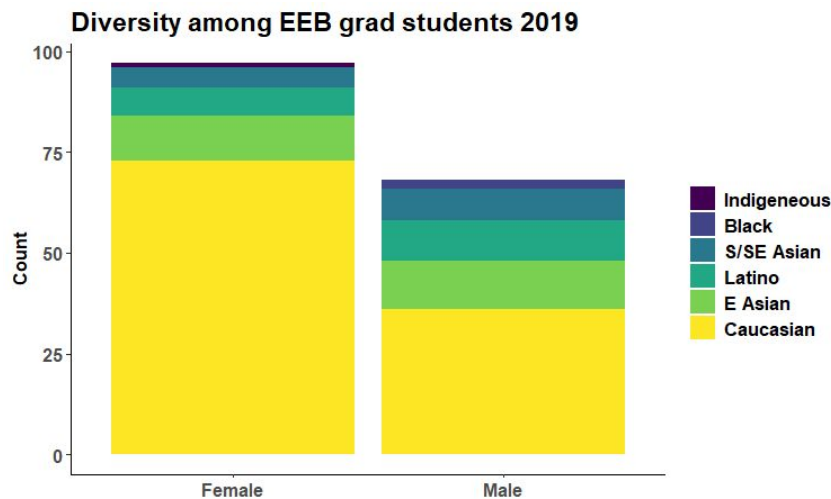
Recent acts of anti-Black violence in the US and Canada broke something in all of us. These events represent only the tip of the iceberg of systematic racism that the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) members of our communities have endured for decades. To borrow the words of Angela Davis, political activist and scholar: it is not enough to be quietly non-racist, now is the time to be vocally anti-racist. We are all compelled to act.

As one step towards sustainable action within our own community, we did what BREWS does: collected data on the scope of the problem and potential solutions. We thank members of EEB for sharing their observations and experiences of bias, discrimination, harassment and aggression, and for generously contributing ideas for improving the climate in our department.

Our survey and discussion made it abundantly clear that action is urgently needed to address the symptoms of systemic racism and other ubiquitous barriers to equity, diversity, and inclusion. This report reflects the breadth of what we heard from the EEB community and attempts to distill it into specific recommendations. This report is also imperfect: it is the result of a data collection process that centered voices with the energy and time to complete our survey or felt sufficiently safe to be expressed during our discussion. Being able to speak freely without fear of reprisal is necessary for open discussion and we hope that future conversations will be even more open. Generating a diverse, equitable, inclusive, and supportive environment, where everybody is treated with respect and provided with the opportunity to reach their full potential, is integral not only to our department's scientific success, but also to building a thriving community of happy and healthy scientists. Making the necessary structural and cultural changes to achieve this takes time, effort, and persistence. Fortunately, as biologists, we are trained to do difficult things, like challenging our preconceptions about the world. Together, we can embrace and create the change the EEB community wants to see.

### III. EEB by the numbers

Here we present the best available data on the current demographic make-up of the EEB community at the graduate student and faculty levels. Graduate student data was retrieved from the October 2019 EEB roster, which includes graduate students across the three campuses and ROM. Data for faculty were compiled from the [EEB Departmental Faculty website](#), which does not include faculty at UTM and UTSC. Emeritus faculty were excluded. Race and gender were subjectively assigned by faculty members with knowledge of the graduate student and faculty cohorts. We note that this practice is neither accurate nor sufficient, but it provides a snapshot of some of the diversity (or lack thereof) at different career stages. We recommend the department obtain self-identified racial and other relevant personal information (including, in particular, non-binary gender identities) about EEB members with their consent via surveys in the future (see [Goals and Recommendations](#)).



## IV. Soliciting input from the community

We collected data on persistent EDI shortcomings in our department through an anonymous online survey and a moderated discussion session. The survey was open to all members of the department from June 2 to June 19, 2020. The moderated discussion was hosted on June 16, 2020. Over 50 people responded to the survey and over 70 participated in the virtual discussion. The survey focused on personal experiences with EDI issues in EEB, and the exact questions can be found in Appendix A. In total, 65.4% of respondents reported having observed and/or experienced bias, discrimination or aggression in EEB. 18.4% stated they were willing to discuss their observations or experiences openly during the discussion session, as the relevant topics came up.

Responses received prior to the discussion session were used to curate a short list of topics for moderated discussion. In brief, many members of EEB experienced aggressions and harassment, and an overly competitive environment has made people feel unwelcomed, especially members from BIPOC communities and women. Aside from the fundamental unfairness, these problems undermine the pursuit of science, are detrimental to the performance of the folks in this department, and hinder our ability to progress towards recruiting and retaining a diverse talent pool. The consequent lack of diversity feeds into people not feeling welcomed because it serves as a constant reminder to EEBers from underrepresented groups that they are outsiders. Given the narrative that emerged from our survey, we focused on three themes:

1. Microaggressions and harassment based on race and gender are prevalent in this department. What can we do to make EEB a safe research environment for everybody?
2. An overly competitive atmosphere can be toxic and unwelcoming, and disproportionately affects BIPOC grad students. What can we do to dismantle toxic behaviours that have been observed across all academic levels?
3. Why isn't EEB more diverse? What improvements are needed to diversify recruitment? What benchmarks will tell us whether we are succeeding?

These discussion points were disseminated to EEB members in advance of the moderated session. Below we discuss each theme in turn, summarizing responses from both the survey and in-person discussions. Not every comment is reflected here, but we aim to convey the scope of the issue.

## V. Culture and climate at EEB

### Microaggressions and harassments

*“As a woman of color, I am frequently interrupted by people in meetings and group conversations. In a few extreme incidents perpetrated by white people, some may brain dump their thoughts on me and deprive me from contributing to the conversation further by simply ending or diverting the conversation. This sends me the message that my words and contributions are not valued.”*

*“Someone asked me after the Atwood Colloquium: “Why does everyone at UTSC have an accent? Are they only able to attract international students?””*

*“I was told by a fellow student that all brown people look the same (comparing Latinx and Southeast Asians) I've been at the receiving end of 'jokes' about prejudices of my ethnicity, and told to learn how to take a joke.”*

Racism and sexism are rampant at all academic levels in our department and appear to be predominantly affecting women, BIPOC, and especially those with intersecting identities against which prejudice exists, e.g., women of color, people of color who are foreign-trained (outside of North America and Europe) and/or speak English as a Second Language (ESL). Violations range from covert (microaggressions) to overt (differential treatment, harassment), and may relate to personal identity or scientific ability. Such negative interactions typically occur between peers or originate from superiors, but there have also been bottom-up aggressions from undergraduates to graduate students, their TAs, and course instructors, a sign of the pervasiveness of prejudice/bias at the university. The subject matters that EEB members “joke” about are extensive and disturbing, spanning race, culture, sexuality, gender, and neurodiversity. Multiple people reported being sexually harassed at departmental events. In research settings, women and BIPOC tended to be treated as less intelligent and were frequently deprived of opportunities to contribute (e.g., constantly interrupted and talked over in discussion groups). These interactions leave people feeling insulted, invalidated, and isolated.

Scientists often pride themselves in being highly objective and only concerned with scientific rigor, but that attitude ignores vast quantities of data to the contrary (see BREWS [summaries of past discussions](#) for a brief rundown) and allows bigotry to continue unabated. Minorities in STEM often carry the extra burden of having to overcome a presumption of incompetence, while others appear to enjoy the benefit of the doubt. This is profoundly unfair.

Junior scientists often mold themselves in the image of the examples they see (e.g., professors who appear to devote their entirety to academia), many identify strongly with being a scientist, and we all hope to have a place in the scientific community. For those who moved across the country, or even across the world, to be here, EEB is the closest thing to family. It is therefore

particularly crushing to find the environment so hostile. There are often no other sources of support.

The collective impact of discriminatory and exclusionary words and gestures weigh heavily on the receivers, regardless of intention. It is clear these hurtful behaviors need to stop, and our community has expressed a strong commitment to making EEB a safe environment for everybody by 1) speaking up as a bystander to microaggressions harassment, 2) being mindful not to perpetrate these behaviors ourselves, and 3) creating a pipeline for people to report inappropriate behavior and seek help (discussed in the depth in the next subsection).

Standing up to inappropriate language and behavior can be difficult when it comes from a superior due to the inherent power dynamics, but it is perhaps even more difficult when it occurs in a peer group, as it can be difficult to dissociate our friendship with the person from their behavior. For instance, when a friend makes a racist “joke”, it may be tempting to brush it off and keep quiet in order not to ruin the mood or make anyone uncomfortable. However, we can learn to intervene with tact and mutual respect for everybody involved. The Wellness Committee will be hosting bystander training and workplace civility workshops in the near future and those will not be discussed further here. In brief, role-play-as-learning style workshops have been suggested to be effective (e.g., CSEE SWEEET symposium has hosted them in the past), and the department is looking into soliciting training resources and personnel from various campus groups.

Besides official training on how to defuse such situations and to change the behavior of others, change also needs to come from within – we must not forget that we are all susceptible to committing offenses ourselves. Just as we need to stop giving others the benefit of the doubt and hold them accountable for their actions, we should first demand that in ourselves. There are numerous resources (e.g., [this list](#) curated by the Ecological Society of America), to help us dissect our words, actions, and body language. When someone, especially BIPOC, voices a concern, listen humbly as it is an important opportunity to learn and reflect. BIPOC are frequently taught to keep their heads down and just focus on work, so when they finally do say something, understand that the situation must be quite unbearable. The bottom line is to never use “until they tell me” as a shield to justify behavior because that is plain exploitative. It takes deep commitment and careful introspection to confront one’s own biases and change behavior. It certainly will not be a comfortable journey but it is necessary.

## Toxic and unwelcoming environment

*“...EEB is a highly competitive department with lots of amazing people in it. Competition can be both beneficial and negative. It is beneficial when everyone is striving to do better...science... However...I have witnessed an overwhelming amount of negative competitive interactions in which students put others down...We are also a department of many brilliant people, but while some people are gifted with both intellectual and*

*social brilliance, for others social aspects are more of a struggle... and at times I have seen shockingly low tolerance of people for whom these things could be ... an issue..."*

*"I have seen too many students call their colleagues "stupid"...especially after departmental seminars. This creates a toxic work environment, and...was really bad for my mental health. After hearing senior graduate students talk about how 'stupid' some of their colleagues are, it made me not want to talk about science or my research, I didn't want to present at student journal club, or have anyone from the department come to my conference presentations out of fear of them jumping to the conclusion that I'm dumb"*

*"...I was constantly sexually harassed over the years while doing my PhD to the point where I no longer participated as much in social ... activities. The toxic masculinity was suffocating. I never said a thing because the harassers were regarded so highly by the faculty. I am all for profs being friends with students, but just imagine how hard it would be to file a complaint about someone who is buddies with those in positions of power..."*

In addition to hearing individual experiences of a toxic or unwelcoming environment, these discussions touched on where those environments come from, how they are maintained and what we can do about them. The clear statement was made that "negativity trickles down from the top" and faculty have a responsibility to model appropriate behaviour and set the tone for interactions within and outside of our department. It is worth noting that faculty frequently laud the supportive nature of the department to potential hires (faculty celebrate each other's successes, comment on each other's draft grants, etc). What do we do to nurture this same level of support between peers at other academic levels?

Of course, part of what maintains an unwelcome environment is a disproportionate focus on certain metrics of academic success. The breadth of research in our department means that we are often publishing in different journals (and at different rates), applying for different awards, and sitting in different spots along a basic to applied biology spectrum. No single trajectory or research path is right or best.

A number of survey respondents noted that rigid ideas about what a scientist should look like, dress like, or act like persist within our department. This leads to some individuals feeling left out of -- or ignored in -- conversations (both scientific and social) and experience inappropriate, directed, disparaging comments. This is simply not ok. The data is clear that more diverse groups are more productive and impactful (e.g., more citations are garnered by more diverse teams, Campbell et al. 2013 PLoS ONE; Freeman & Huang 2014 Nature). Thus, we ought to embrace the more accurate notion that all sorts of people can be (and are) successful scientists and recognize that different experiences and competencies can be an asset for working on shared problems. Similarly people with diverse backgrounds may require diverse kinds of support. How do we develop a system to assess and then deliver the kinds of supports required? Can we create an environment where individuals "step up" to support others, rather than take actions that (perhaps unwittingly) "step on" those same people? Importantly, many of

our graduate students were once U of T undergraduates, meaning that they may already have a flourishing social network at the start of their program. This can be an additional source of alienation for students coming from different universities, provinces, or countries and cultures. What can we do to foster greater inclusivity in this context?

There was much discussion about how to confront individuals contributing to a toxic environment. First, knowing how to intervene in a constructive way can be difficult. People reported being afraid to speak up and directly to an individual exhibiting toxic behaviours for fear of retaliation or being labelled “too serious” about EDI issues. The risk of the receiver becoming defensive is real, but also odd when considering that, as scientists, much of our job involves seeking constructive feedback (e.g., peer review). With greater emphasis on building positive aspects of departmental culture, letting people know that particular behaviours will not serve them within that culture may be easier. Much like our papers in a first round of review, we all have shortcomings and must be willing to learn and unlearn behaviours.

Second, knowing who to talk to when greater intervention is needed has not always been clear. We support the plans of the Wellness Committee to identify departmental ‘allies’, who will be equipped with knowledge and resources that prepares them for difficult conversations and for recommending/taking/leading action when necessary. In addition to personal allyship, there should be a proper pipeline for reporting inappropriate behavior that people will feel comfortable using. There are already processes in place at the university level to deal with breaches of Workplace Policies and the Student Code of Conduct. We recognize that feeling secure in pursuing these options requires a commitment by the department to take even minor issues of departmental climate seriously. The departmental Statement of Values and Code of Conduct in development will explicitly set expectations for behaviours. In addition to delineating consequences for breaching those expectations, we hope that we as a department can develop approaches that support individuals in achieving them.

## Our inability to recruit a diverse talent pool at the post-grad level

*“The EEB program is predominantly white, and I am surrounded with predominantly white authority figures in undergrad and grad school. This sends the message that I am an outsider.”*

There were multiple ideas for how best to gauge equity in recruitment, since UofT draws people from all over the world. If recruitment were equitable, would incoming scientists reflect the diversity of Toronto or Canada as a whole? Both possibilities were discussed, but a third suggestion was to identify breakpoints where diversity changes sharply from one career stage to the next (e.g., UofT undergraduates compared with EEB majors, EEB majors to graduate students). Such discrete shifts in demographics suggest inequitable recruitment practices that could be improved.

We discussed how diversity is lost at multiple career stages, and the consensus was that small steps are insufficient to reverse this loss. Many spoke to the importance of prioritizing outreach



and equitable undergraduate recruitment into labs. Many of the experiences valued in graduate school applicants are expensive, including field courses and lab research experience (which often requires individuals to work for free, limiting these opportunities to those who can afford them). There is also [the expectation that scientists will be willing to move around, and such moves are deemed to be essential to developing one's skills as a scientist](#). Of course, such moves are made easier with privilege, and that expectation should be questioned. We also discussed the need for better engagement with the communities from which we recruit scientists and where we do research.

There are deep structural flaws in the ways we tend to think about diversity; for example, the focus is often on quotas and “diversity” hires who are often viewed as less valuable since they were only hired for diversity’s sake. In reality, the entire system we have developed to judge merit is biased. The way people are socialized to communicate their skills and abilities varies with gender, race and culture, and the way we are socialized to judge communication reflects the biases in our own cultures. In particular, ways of communicating associated with women, the LGBTQ2S+ community, BIPOC individuals, and immigrants are consistently and pervasively devalued. Overcoming these biases requires rethinking what we value in science, for example, the idea that papers and grants are of primary importance. Judging applicants in a more holistic way could be fruitful, but must be done carefully (that is, with clearly stated priorities) to avoid opening the door to implicit bias. We discussed a few possibilities for making faculty hires more equitable, including searches that explicitly prioritize underrepresented groups (similar to what is done for applications from Canadian citizens and permanent residents) and having search committees examine applications from members of those groups first.

The discussion necessarily wandered from the topic of recruitment per se, and the issue of retention was raised. Some potential areas for improvement include augmenting the teaching curriculum, and reprioritizing departmental awards to emphasize service both within and outside the department. It would be useful to have data on retention within the EEB program, and survey responses would greatly complement those data, enabling us to gauge whether people are supported and as well as what attracted them to the department in the first place.

## Summary of other survey comments

- The space is not physically accessible.
  - We lack clear signage on where to find gender-neutral bathrooms.
  - Doors separating the different sections of Earth Science Building are not accessible.
- Department reinforces Christian hegemony.
  - Would be good to celebrate holidays from other religions and cultures as well.
- Department needs to support LGBTQ2S+ individuals more explicitly.
  - LGBTQ2S+ people express reluctance to come out for fears of exclusion from field work, confrontation in professional/social interactions, and damage to their career progress.

- Disproportionate work burden associated with gender and race stereotypes.
  - Women researchers are expected to put more energy and effort into teaching than the men.
  - Women and BIPOC also take on a disproportionate amount of mentoring and EDI work, including identifying issues and finding solutions.
- Lack of follow-up after issues have been identified and solutions proposed.
- Outreach beyond our department is not valued. This fosters the Ivory Tower mentality, and prevents us from engaging with the community at large and ultimately decreases our diversity because that is the pool from which we are drawing.

## V. Goals and recommendations

### (1) Advocacy

**Foster a culture of healthy and supportive behaviours, collaboration, and inclusion.** We recommend that the department continue to pursue training and workshops that empower members of the EEB community to help themselves and others (e.g., bystander training). Community building events --- within-labs, across-labs, and department wide --- have become more difficult in the pandemic. Given the recent attendance at BREWS Zoom events, there is clearly an appetite (perhaps need) for informal, virtual departmental gatherings.

**Active recruitment from underrepresented groups.** This should start as soon as students encounter the EEB program, i.e., in our large introductory courses. Some strategies to bolster engagement, persistence, and success in our program include broadening the science stereotype by diversifying course material and increasing the student's sense of belonging by creating safe and equitable classroom space (e.g., the department Code of Conduct should specify what is appropriate instructor-student relationships). Coordinating curricular reform across EEB courses is necessary to maximize impact. General information about graduate school and potential EEB career paths should be made available to all students, including the fact that graduate school pays a stipend and that an EEB PhD or MSc in EEB can lead to a variety of possible careers. Setting up a grad-to-undergrad mentorship program can help to directly demystify the EEB program and academia. Create salaried undergraduate research positions for people who identify as BIPOC.

**Engage outside expertise.** Develop appropriate and ongoing institutional connections with other scholars at U of T who can provide a critical and expert view on the underpinnings of systemic racism and barriers to equity, diversity, and inclusion, particularly in biology. For example, U of T houses a whole

[Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology](#) and a [Department of Social Justice Education](#). An invited seminar series of individuals drawn from these sources of expertise would help EEB develop the knowledge with which to evaluate our curricula under the lens of bias, inequality, and history. Such seminars could also be incorporated into the regular departmental series to normalize EDI efforts and maximize reach.

## (2) Accountability

**Clearly articulate expectations for behaviour.** We applaud the Wellness Committee for committing to developing a Departmental Values Statement and Code of Conduct. In addition, we specifically recommend each lab develop an informal contract, delineating expectations for both academic progress and intralab interactions. Many survey respondents felt this would help to set a positive tone and limit the competitive atmosphere.

**Develop approaches for confronting breaches of expectations.** With a departmental Code of Conduct in place, it should be made clear what the consequences are for breaching that code. For example, as a conference attendee, every EEB member is representing themselves, their lab, and the department. If individuals fail to uphold the values of the department, then it seems appropriate that the department not support attendance at conferences (e.g., through the Harold Harvey Travel Award). The most constructive and appropriate response will vary with the type and severity of the breach, and these should be developed in tandem with the Code of Conduct.

**Establishing a protocol for reporting inappropriate behavior.** An effective reporting system guarantees protection of the source and provides clear guidelines as to what will happen with this information (e.g., who is going to read it, how will the complaint be documented). The source's agency should be respected, and it should be their choice whether to pursue disciplinary action or simply to file a report. This system would ideally be optionally anonymous so that the source can be contacted for follow-ups when necessary.

## (3) Oversight

**Regularly audit departmental climate.** We recommend that the department conduct a climate survey of all graduate students, postdocs, faculty, and staff at least as frequently as once every academic year; "inclusion" is often deeply personal and subjective, and we recommend formally analyzing the resultant qualitative data. The survey should make explicit which responses will be shared and with whom. For greater breadth of feedback, we recommend multiple approaches (e.g., anonymous surveys, discussion groups, focus groups). The

Wellness Committee could take the lead on identifying appropriate responses to any issues or shortcomings raised.

**Collect key data.** Demographically, who is applying to our grad program? Who is seeking undergraduate project placements? Who is applying for our jobs? How does this compare with the subset of applicants who obtain available positions? What is the NSERC fellowship success rate in our department? Who are we inviting to give seminars? We recognize that due to privacy issues, we may not be able to get data to answer all of these questions, but for the cases where we can, we should. We need to understand the baseline, or status quo, to both make our departmental community aware of the scale of any problems and to measure progress. It is not clear that there is currently a departmental group with the remit or access to data to do these analyses. If not under the purview of the Wellness Committee, we recommend the department form an explicit EDI Committee or hire an EDI RA for this purpose.

**Establish benchmarks and measure progress.** The department should clearly define targets of EDI excellence that are in line with our Statement of Values. These may include achieving equal success rates across groups in admissions and awards, having diversity reflected in all levels of our community, improving the sense of support and cohesion as a community, and creating more inter-campus academic and social events in order to strengthen bonds. Data required for progress assessment should be collected during climate audits. A report should accompany each cycle of audit and should include explicit evaluations of initiatives, including goals achieved and areas where continued attention is required.

#### (4) Transparency

**Share data.** Where appropriate, all data collected in the name of oversight, should be shared with the wider department.

**Regularly report the status of ongoing efforts.** In addition to regular audits and detailed reports on overall progress, frequent communication from the department regarding current status would be welcomed. For example, the department has made inroads on making the department more physically accessible, but those efforts take time. Regular updates would make it clear that this goal remains a priority in the department and empower EEB citizens to advocate for faster progress or contribute to finding solutions when obstacles present themselves.

**Remove barriers to opportunities.** The process for recruiting undergraduate volunteers or project students is currently opaque to many students, yet this is often the entrance to a research career and a major bottleneck. We recognize

that there is variation across labs in both process and need, but centralizing the submission of applications or statements of interest and standardizing the timing would make these opportunities accessible to a wider swathe of students. Similarly, we ought to rethink our process for recruiting graduate students, which almost invariably requires students identifying a mentor before applying. This is often also true for hiring postdocs and is [problematic from the perspective of EDI](#). Finally, if one does not exist, we should have a system for gauging financial need of applicants and waiving grad admissions fees.

## (5) Visibility

**Recognize positive contributions to our department.** More EEB awards, opportunities, and celebrations should explicitly consider contributions to EDI.

**Require EDI statements from applicants.** NSERC is now requiring such statements for Discovery Grant applications, so it is both appropriate and prudent that we require these for faculty job applicants. Further, since we expect all members of EEB to abide by our Code of Conduct, and reflect our shared Values, it is important that we ask for an explicit statement of agreement (or an independent EDI statement), from applicants for **any** position in our department. Finally, invitations to any external guests (e.g., seminar speakers) ought to be accompanied by a link to our Code of Conduct.

## VI. Summary

It is clear that action is urgently needed. Libraries could be filled with ignored reports on institutional racism, systemic barriers to equity, diversity and inclusion, and how to address these ubiquitous problems. In some cases the department is taking action and doing itself a disservice by not communicating those actions to the rest of EEB. In other cases the department still needs to take action. We have tried to be as specific as possible in our key recommendations, in five important areas, but ongoing dialogue, learning, and engagement with new (or old, but new to EEB) ideas will further illuminate the path to progress. We again thank everyone for their contributions. It is an honour to be trusted to represent your voices.

## Appendix A. Questions included in EDI survey

Q1. What topics would you like to see covered in the upcoming EDI panel discussion? (e.g., I would like to talk about how inaccessible ES is.)

Q2. Have you personally experienced, or observed, bias, discrimination, or aggression in EEB?

- A. No.
- B. Yes, I have experienced it.
- C. Yes, I have observed it.
- D. Yes, I have both experienced and observed it.

Q3. Would you like to share your personal experience, and/or observations at the discussion session?

- A. No.
- B. Yes, I will contribute as the topic comes up.
- C. Yes, I want to be allotted a couple minutes to speak on a particular topic.
- D. Yes, but only anonymously.

Q4. You can share your experiences/observations here if you wish.

Q5. What specific actions and changes would you like to see in our department?

Q6. Your name (optional).