# Far-Right Incursions on Canadian Postsecondary Campuses 2012-2022: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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*Abstract: A qualitative content analysis of publicly reported attempts of far-right movements to establish presences on Canadian postsecondary campuses is provided to understand these movements' tactics and targets. 56 cases across 26 Canadian postsecondary campuses were identified between 2012-2022. Common tactics involved attempts to form white student unions on campuses, as well as physical posters and graffiti promoting white pride, white supremacy, and often hate toward a specific demographic group. Groups that were targeted the most included Black, Indigenous, and Jewish students. Anonymous social media platforms allowed for grassroots far-right movements in Canada to be inspired by their counterparts in the United States and use the same content. Near the end of the study period, tactics became less frequent but more violent, evolving into threats of physical harm and disrupting campus events, which suggests that far-right student movements are growing more extreme. While these attempted far-right incursions were for the most part successfully resisted by campus communities, far-right student movements need to be viewed as a security threat. Preventing future far-right surges and promoting post-incursion healing may involve intercultural dialogue events to foster communication about social justice issues and rehabilitation. Strong extracurricular participation can help ensure such events are effective.*

*Keywords: Far-right social movements, radical right, extreme right, white student unions, hate groups, white supremacy*

## Introduction

Racist and far-right movements have historically sought to exert influence on education systems (Berbrier, 1998). While studies have covered these infiltration attempts in colleges and universities in the United States, there is less research on cases in Canada. We examine multiple instances of far-right movements' attempts to infiltrate Canadian universities and establish entrenched student networks. We believe this study is needed because over the 2010s, far-right and white supremacist actors have been increasingly targeting postsecondary campuses across Canada. These forces have attempted to create standing structures within student life to propagate their message and challenge progressive elements within higher education. These attempts can pose considerable risk of steering student consciousness toward right-wing extremism. As graduate students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, we are greatly concerned of the risks that far-right student movements pose for us and our peers.

We provide qualitative content analyses of multiple cases of far-right attempts to infiltrate Canadian postsecondary campus student unions and related extracurricular spaces. We explore tactics these far-right groups have employed in Canada, their compositions, and their motivations. We examine far-right groups' propaganda and social media presences, as well as journalism, particularly student journalism, that have covered instances of far-right campus incursions. Findings suggest that the incident frequency of these attacks increased during the years of the Trump presidential campaign and presidency. While decreasing in the years following, the incidents that persisted were more violent. This leads us to suggest that following widespread political defeats in Canada caused by the solidarity of campus communities, far-right student movements have begun to transition from the radical right to more towards the extreme right, raising serious concerns for campus safety.

## Theoretical Framework

Cas Mudde (2007) differentiates between the "extreme right," which "is *in essence* antidemocratic, opposing the fundamental principle of sovereignty of the people," and "the radical right," which "is (nominally) democratic, even if they oppose some fundamental values of liberal democracy" (p. 31). Like the extreme right, the radical right is rooted in hatred of perceived out-groups, with an understanding of culture as "an essentialist and rigid category; it must be preserved and cultivated, while adaptation and relativism are believed to lead to decline and ultimately death" (p. 144). Furthermore, the radical right enshrines "order" as "the basis of freedom," and "that society should be structured according to strict rules and that the rule of law should be upheld at all costs" (Mudde, 2007, p. 145) in the sense of adherence to authority. There can also be an element of populism in the sense of eliminating liberal democratic safeguards protecting minority rights (Mudde, 2021; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). For the Canadian examples in this study, the populist idea of antagonism against a perceived corrupt elite may also be in play, with the elites being perceived by the radical right groups as leadership in higher education institutions and student governments who may be seen as largely endorsing progressivism (Binder & Kidder, 2022; Greven, 2016). In other words, the far-right sees

themselves as outsiders in higher education. We understand the far-right to encapsulate both the extreme right and the radical right, with the latter being more common on Canadian campuses.

We also acknowledge that these groups may simultaneously view themselves as having elite status seeking to uphold their wider societal power rooted in systemic oppression, to which they may view higher education as a threat. We use this definition of radical right (Mudde, 2007) to frame the racist incursions observed on Canadian postsecondary campuses because it can help explain these groups' attempts to work within established student governments and higher education systems to achieve their goal of becoming perennial facets of postsecondary student life. Higher education may thus be perceived by the radical right as going in a trend contrary to their beliefs, yet within a society that generally favours them. Such radical right fears may stem from the white replacement and white genocide conspiracy theories purported by white supremacists that claim race-mixing and immigrants dilute whiteness and threaten to remove white people from positions of power (Mowatt, 2021).

## Literature Review

Far-right movements grew in recent decades (Mudde, 2016). They have gravitated to social media as a tool for organizing and purporting propaganda to bypass traditional media gatekeepers (Ganesh & Froio, 2020; Stier et al., 2017; see also Chadwick, 2013 and Engesser et al., 2016 as cited in Stier et al., 2017). Furthermore, far-right movements can create social media accounts and become gatekeepers themselves while maintaining anonymity to avoid accountability (Atton, 2006; Hawley, 2017). Ganesh (2020) outlines that social media is used by the far-right to spread ideas that white people are under threat to instill white pride among their followers and potential followers, and to encourage outrage and action in response to perceived threats on whiteness. Social media and online chat rooms have allowed far-right activists to form networks in Canada, with some prominent members being university students (Carranco & Milton, 2019).

Far-right movements are largely rooted in white supremacy. Canada has a long-standing history of white supremacy, including through colonization, the enslavement of people of colour, and Indigenous genocide (Everett-Green, 2014; Trudel, 2013). Canada has also been host to a variety of far-right and other hate groups over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (O'Connor, 2006; McKercher, 2022). More recently, far-right influences on social media have contributed to cross-border radicalization (Coletta & Rauhala, 2021). Racist incidents in Canada have been rising over the past decade (Zhou, 2017; Perry & Scrivens, 2018). Moreover, higher education in North America has contributed to the perpetuation of systemic racism, which has been observed by Cabrera (2014) to be embedded in cultural mindsets of some white students.

Students with these dispositions may be vulnerable to joining the far-right, since one notable iteration of radical right student movements on postsecondary campus attempts to create white student unions or other white-focused extracurricular groups to promote whiteness. White student unions are not dissimilar from other organizations created by far-right elements in wider society, since both seek lasting institutional prominence (Pertwee, 2020). White student unions can be understood as a racialization of higher education spaces "in ways that not only normalize the existing racial and social order but ensures Whites' fantasy(ies) of complete dominion over place and space, as well as control over Brown and Black bodies" (Embrick & Moore, 2020, p. 1937).

In the United States, pushes for white student unions by far-right students and groups have been documented over the past 30 years in opposition to real or perceived affirmative action (Wilson, 1990). They have been closely linked with white supremacy, since "[l]eaders of most of the white-student groups say they are not white supremacists. But at some institutions, students involved with the groups are linked with the Ku Klux Klan" (Wilson, 1990, n. p.). In a recent case of an attempt to form a white student union at postsecondary campus in the United States, students involved similarly claimed that they were not racist while simultaneously seeking to create a sense of white pride on their campus (VICE, 2013). Attempts to create white student unions appear to have become more widespread in the 2010s due to anonymous social media sites like 4Chan that allow far-right individuals to either try forming their own white student unions or create fake white student union social media pages for schools they do not attend in the hope of making their movements seem more widespread (Abbas, 2016). In combination with social media, these far-right organizations are dangerous because they can serve as echo chambers that perpetuate extreme right ideologies and white supremacist views, which could increase support for electoral candidates who support those views (Veugelers et

al., 2015). More recently, far-right online presences have transitioned to applications such as Telegram after being banned from more mainstream social media (Al-Rawi, 2021).

Canadian postsecondary education has experienced growing far-right movements in recent years. These movements have developed presences in Canada and on social media, stoking fears of Canadian society being taken over by non-whites (Gagnon, 2020; Mirrlees, 2021). Social media serves a key function in these groups' mobilizations (Mirrlees, 2021; Tewksbury, 2021). There appears to be overlap between groups, as well as inter-group collaboration, which suggests that this network of groups has the potential to coordinate activities between multiple campuses (Tewksbury, 2021).

## Method

We conducted qualitative content analyses of far-right incursions on Canadian postsecondary campuses, including documents from a variety of student and professional journalism and social media primary sources. Cases were identified using targeted online searches in journalism databases. We used open coding to identify general themes of the observed radical right or extreme right groups, as well as to identify tactics and goals. We identified 56 cases from 26 Canadian postsecondary campuses between 2012-2022 where a racist or otherwise xenophobic incident had taken place that we identified as being associated with or potentially associated with far-right groups. We identified 1326 primary sources relating to reporting and/or online discourse. We then used NVivo to conduct open coding of the cases to identify common themes, tactics, and goals. Some descriptive quantitative statistics were calculated to supplement the qualitative analysis.

We added codes to denote instances where particular groups of people were targeted. These included incidents that were anti-Asian, anti-Black, anti-newcomer (including immigrants and refugees), anti-Indigenous, anti-Semitic, anti-Sikh, Islamophobic, and queerphobic (attacks against different sexual orientations were directed at the entire queer community). We also differentiated incidents that focused on creating white supremacist groups such as white student unions, the promotion of white supremacist propaganda, and violent threats. We understand that there may be other incidents that went unreported in journalism outlets or social media, which would make the actual total of incidents even higher.

## Analysis

*A North America-wide, Decentralized, Far-Right Movement*

The cases demonstrate a cross-border connection between far-right movements in Canada and the United States that proliferates through social media. 4Chan was popular, likely since it provides a degree of anonymity that protects identities (Hawley, 2017). 4Chan forums allow a single user to disseminate ideas and organize instructions to a wide audience without knowing who it reaches. Simultaneously, those implementing the instructions likely do not know the identity of the original poster. With this model, if one far-right activist gets caught, they would not be able to identify others beyond pseudonyms. The close proximity of Canada and the United States plus English being an official language in both countries are likely influences on cross-border far-right activism that we observed. Common language may also explain how some campaigns, such as posters with the slogan, "It's okay to be white," have occurred across campuses in Canada and the United States. By contrast, we did not find similar inter-campus collaboration tactics in Canadian Francophone colleges and universities, which leads us to suggest that any far-right Francophone activists in Canada may not be as coordinated with cross-border campaigns.

*A Timeline of Incursions*

Of the 56 instances of far-right incursions, the highest number occurred in 2017 with 14 (25%), substantially above the next highest years, 2015 and 2019, which each had 9 (16%). 53 (95%) occurred during the Trump presidential campaign and presidency (2015-2021).

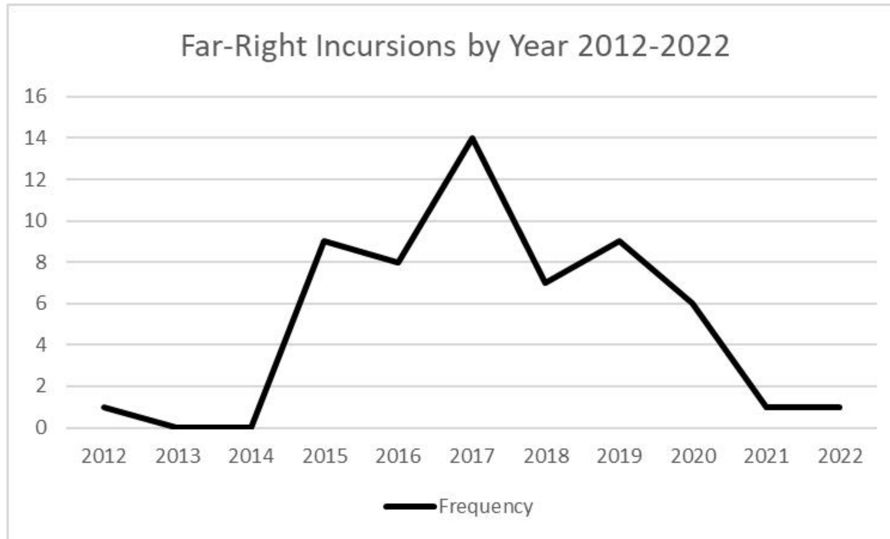


Figure 1: Frequency of far-right incursions by year

The cases reveal a push in 2015 to establish white student unions on Canadian campuses, coinciding with a similar effort in the United States. Far-right activists created a series of social media pages for white student unions on Canadian campuses, even on those with no organized far-right presence. The intent of this tactic was to make the far-right appear more numerous. This failed, which forced far-right activists to organize outside campus spaces.

For the remainder of the 2010s, we see a strategy change to more subtle forms of organizing through anonymous posters and flyers posted on campuses. The most prominent example consisted of a white poster with thin black lettering saying, "It's ok to be white." This campaign originated on 4Chan with an anonymous post calling on others to post the slogan on campuses. While also targeting the United States, in Canada, these types of incidents were most prevalent in 2017. In 2018, there was an instance of a student running for an executive committee position in the Dalhousie Students' Union, one of the most powerful elected roles a student can have on the campus, with clear far-right speaking points such as downplaying well-documented issues such as the Canadian state's oppression of Indigenous Peoples and sexual violence on postsecondary campuses (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Martin, 2016; Nutton, 2015; Wildcat, 2015).

Other tactics included white supremacist graffiti overtop progressive symbols, such as signs of student centers for marginalized groups, art displays, or flags and signs. Graffiti was spread out across the study period, from the earliest observed case in 2012 to 2021. Graffiti appears to be an easy and anonymous form of far-right mobilization since it does not require printing posters or organizing a student group. In one instance at Queen's University in 2019, photos of anti-Semitic graffiti posted online were targeted by hundreds of comments supporting the far-right and were shared on 4Chan in an apparent attempt to boost far-right morale.

In the late 2010s and early 2020s, the far-right resorted to threats of harm toward marginalized groups on campus and disrupting in-person and online meetings of established student organizations. In 2022, for example, an online event organized by the University of Toronto Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Asian Student Alliance was infiltrated by far-right individuals using pseudonyms who voiced and typed anti-Asian and anti-Black racial slurs in the meeting chat while one user turned on their camera and waved a machine gun threateningly at meeting participants. The switch to virtual learning and interactions due to COVID-19 thus made it easier for far-right actors to conduct their operations with anonymity.

While all the far-right tactics were met with strong opposition from campus communities, this evolution of far-right tactics is concerning because it appears to show a rise in far-right activists' confidence and/or intensity. When forming white supremacist clubs on campuses failed, they resorted to guerrilla tactics of anonymous posters and graffiti, which then turned into threats and disrupting mainstream student organizations. It seems that these movements began as radical right as defined by Mudde (2007) in the early 2010s and those remaining in the 2020s have been developing more toward the extreme right.

*Tactics and Targets*

Figure 2 displays tactic frequencies. Posters were the most frequent with 25 (45%), followed by graffiti with 13 (23%), attempts to form a white student union or similar organization with 11 (20%), threats with three (5%), interrupting meetings with two (4%), and targeted social media comments and running for student government each with one (2%). While graffiti may be less labour-intensive than posters, posters allow for detailed information to be included such as websites and instructions on how to join far-right groups. Far-right activists' social media collaboration may expediate poster design dissemination since a user can upload a template to a forum for any number of far-right activists to download, print, and post.

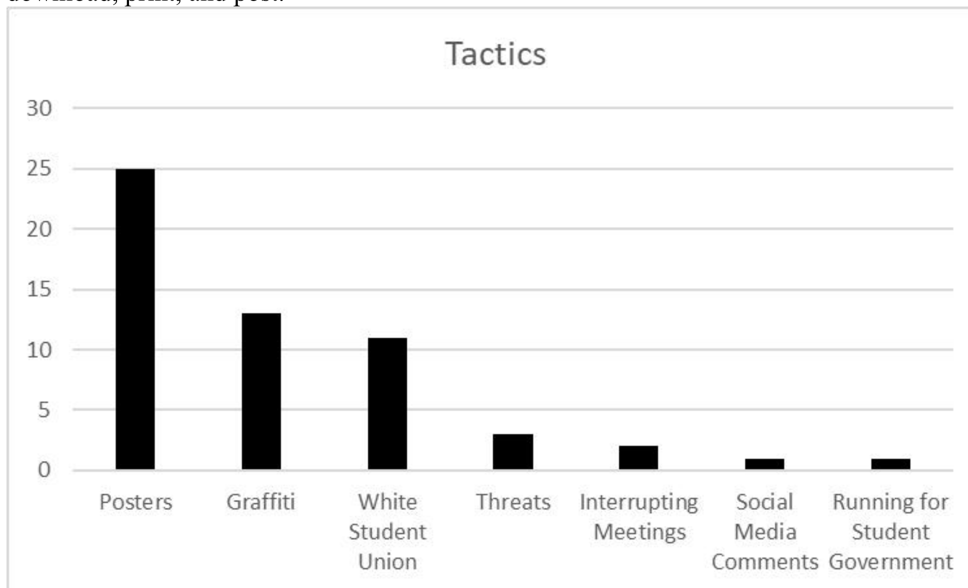


Figure 2: Frequency of tactics used by far-right activists and groups

We calculated frequencies of instances where a specific group of people were targeted, which are displayed in Figure 3. 36 (64%) of cases involved a specific targeted group while the remaining 20 (36%) focused on promoting white pride or recruitment. The highest frequencies for targeted incidents were anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Semitic, each with seven instances (12.5%). These were followed by Islamophobia with six instances (11%), anti-newcomer and queerphobia each with three (5%), and anti-Asian and anti-Sikh each with one (2%). Some incidents targeted more than one group; thus percentages above are calculated from the number of times each group was targeted.

Some targeting was very direct, such as threats of violence. Others were more subtle, such as posting "It's okay to be white" posters during Black History Month and strategically close to Black History Month promotional content. The anti-Indigenous examples often had a particularly Canadian flavor that differentiated them from cross-border campaigns, as evidenced by the inclusion of an old British ensign flag on posters in an attempt to evoke pride in the British Empire's colonialism, as well as rhetoric downplaying Residential "Schools" and/or attempting to frame colonization as beneficial for Indigenous Peoples. Anti-Semitic examples invoked conspiracy theories of Jewish people secretly plotting against Western culture, as in the case of one graffiti example at Queen's University referencing a case when an Israeli ship accidentally fired on the United States during the Six Day War. The three incidents with violent threats varied in their targets. For example, one incident at the Durham College and Ontario Institute of Technology campus targeted a Muslim student via social media who had been elected to the campus student government and who wanted to organize an event promoting solidarity with Muslim students in 2016. Another incident involved an anonymous note posted in a student residence building at Queen's University threatening violence against Indigenous and Queer students in 2019. The most recent example is the aforementioned 2022 machine gun incident at the University of Toronto that took place online targeting Asian and Black students.

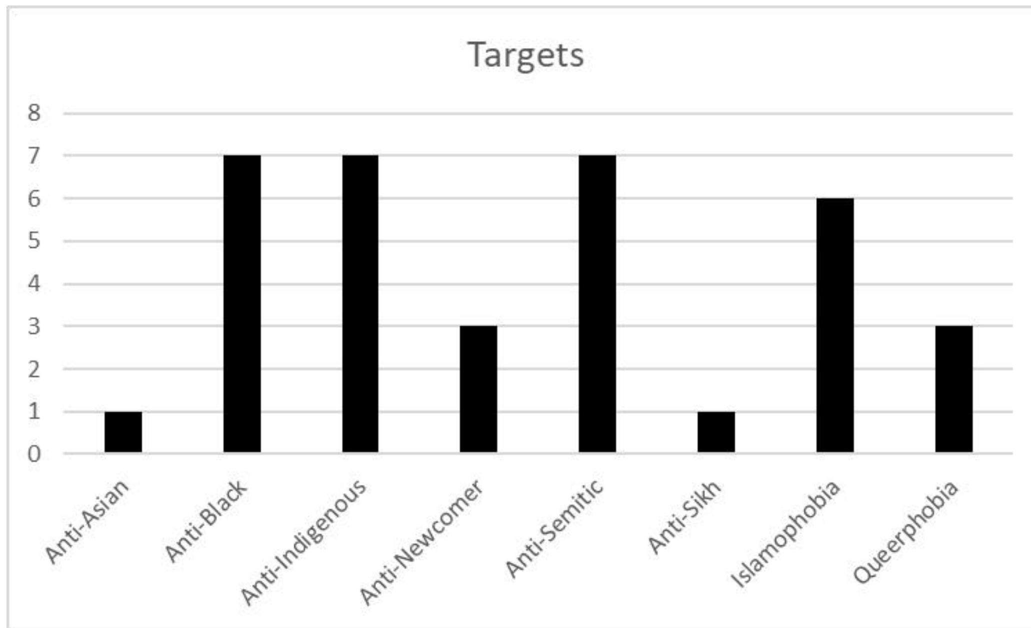

Figure 3: Frequencies of groups targeted by far-right groups

For incident frequencies by campus, all but two where cases occurred had three or fewer incidents that we could find public mention of. These two exceptions were Queen's University with seven (12.5%) and the University of Toronto with eight (14%). For Queen's University, there were six incidents in 2019 that ranged from posters to threats, graffiti, and the one instance of targeted social media comments to defend and/or glorify white supremacist postering. The University of Toronto, by contrast, had a steady stream of incidents from 2015-2022, with a brief lull in 2018 and 2019. Similar to the incidents at Queen's University, those at the University of Toronto involved a wide range of tactics, which included posters, graffiti, threats, and interrupting meetings. Graffiti was the most prominent tactic used at these high-incident schools, accounting for four incidents at each university, respectively. These two schools alone accounted for eight (62%) of the 13 graffiti cases that promoted white supremacy.

*Media Reception and Resistance*

The incursion attempts were generally resisted by school communities. Most of the media sources, posts, and institutional communications were staunchly opposed to the hateful incidents and the attempts to establish white student unions. However, many of the articles had comment feeds that often contained anonymous comments supporting the far-right groups. Nonetheless, the school community's response remained consistent in opposing white supremacist propaganda. One heartwarming example of the school community resisting far-right incursions occurred at the University of Alberta in 2016, where the organizing of an event to promote education about Sikhism took place. Participants could have a turban tied for them by a volunteer in a colour of their choice. This event appears to have been well-received and well-attended by the school community, including by both students and other education stakeholders. In the almost six years since the event at the time of writing, we did not find any other reported instances of anti-Sikh incidents on the University of Alberta campus, which suggests that these types of solidarity and educational events that invite the entire school community to participate can be a way to help eliminate barriers and oppose bigotry. A similar event was implemented at the University of Calgary in the same year following hateful posters targeting Muslims being found around campus, which involved members of the school community writing messages of support on a banner. However, the trauma experienced by marginalized groups on campuses may pose challenges for implementing such events.

*Relevance, Influences, and Implications*

The cases provide insights into far-right social movements in Canadian postsecondary contexts that align with Mudde's (2007) conceptualization of radical right and extreme right. This analysis contributes to this understanding by identifying a possible trend of far-right students transitioning from radical right to extreme right as they abandon

attempts to create formal structures for their movements in university spaces and resort to more violent tactics. This raises implications for security on university campuses as extreme right movements may pose physical risk to students. This is especially important to note because far-right groups have not always been viewed as security threats (Roach, 2021). University administrations and local authorities need to be aware of the threats extreme right groups pose for safety on campuses, and of the risk of radical right groups transitioning to the extreme right.

The xenophobic aims of far-right student movements in Canadian higher education are not unlike those of national far-right organizations. While there is a common gravitation toward social media, particularly anonymous social media, as a nexus for mobilization, there is a clear deviation of in-person tactics since instead of overt protests, far-right student movements tend to opt for less confrontational white supremacist graffiti or posters. This may be an attempt to preserve their anonymity and avoid repercussions. If a far-right student movement can establish a white student union as a permanent facet of student life, they may switch to bolder tactics.

The success of events at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary at promoting campus solidarity suggests that events promoting intercultural dialogue and solidarity among the campus community may be ways to heal campuses that have been plagued by far-right activities or to prevent far-right movements from developing presences. The effectiveness of such events would be contingent upon healthy levels of student engagement and participation in extracurricular life to ensure sufficient attendance. In addition to disciplinary measures, Misztal's (2016) analysis of the concept of political forgiveness as part of reconciliation and rehabilitation processes in post-authoritarian societies may be operationalizable in campus contexts as well to foster long-term hate prevention. Gadd (2006) applies a more micro-focused and psychological perspective to posit that far-right rehabilitation may be assisted by interaction with different groups of people to dispel bigoted projections while creating through "the independence of the other's existence outside these projections, new possibilities for identification and recognition" (p. 197). Creating more opportunities for such dialogue on campuses and fostering extracurricular participation may thus help reduce the risk of far-right resurgences. Campus student unions, which in Canada generally administer most extracurricular activities (Makela & Audette-Chapdelaine, 2013), may be able to facilitate such dialogues and community-building activities on campus-wide scales.

## Conclusion

Far-right student movements' attempts to cement their presence in higher education by forming structural beachheads within extracurricular life pose substantial risk to Canadian higher education. While there appears to have been a surge in these kinds of movements in Canada during the Trump presidency, the increasingly violent occurrences in recent years are cause for concern. Universities need to recognize far-right student movements as threats to campus safety and must foster inclusive, intercultural dialogues that promote healing, reconciliation, and community building in consultation with student unions and extracurricular groups.

However, drawing attention to far-right groups on Canadian postsecondary campuses should not detract from systemic injustice perpetuated by the status quo of higher education and Canadian society (Manchanda, 2021). These internal and perhaps less overt threats to social justice are long standing and require a consistent effort to be resisted. In other words, just because a university has few or no reported instances of far-right attempts to assert dominance does not mean that there is not work to be done to make campus spaces more equitable and inclusive.

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