



## *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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18 December 2019

Neil Fassina, PhD  
President, Athabasca University  
1 University Drive  
Athabasca, AB T9S 3A3

Dear President Fassina,

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and the merit principle in higher education. (For further information, please see our website at [www.safs.ca](http://www.safs.ca).)

An advertisement recently posted by Athabasca University invites “applications from Indigenous scholars for two tenure-track appointments” in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (<https://g.co/kgs/pznUjh>). The ad gives the impression that scholars who are not indigenous, no matter their qualifications, accomplishments, or promise, will not be considered for the positions.

Appointing scholars to academic positions according to race, ethnicity, or cultural affiliation is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions should be made on academic grounds only. Excluding a significant proportion of qualified candidates cannot be a sound way to

build an excellent faculty. As well, because appointing scholars on such grounds is wrongfully discriminatory, making such appointments cannot be a sound way to create a fair and equitable university.

Restricted hirings can have the effect of harming individual scholars from the designated group, because others may see them in stereotypical ways and wrongly undervalue their work. Indeed, it is conceivable that qualified indigenous scholars will not apply for restricted positions at Athabasca, wanting to be valued for the quality of their work rather than for their group membership. Finally, restricted hiring can undermine respect for the ideal of dispassionate inquiry, as it tends to tie scholarship to advocacy and to create consensus around dogma.

It might be thought that restricting the positions to indigenous scholars would serve Athabasca University’s committed to promoting higher education for indigenous students. But

universities best serve the interests of students when they seek to appoint candidates who excel at teaching. To find excellent teachers, universities must not exclude any qualified applicant from consideration.

We ask that Athabasca University remove the discriminatory intention from its job advertisements and consider all qualified candidates for positions on their merits alone.

We respectfully request that you respond to our letter. With your permission, we will post your response along with this letter on our website.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Mercer', with a long, sweeping underline.

Mark Mercer, PhD  
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