



# *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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5 May 2021

Jade Ferguson, PhD  
Acting Director  
School of English & Theatre Studies  
University of Guelph  
Guelph, ON N1G 2W1

Dear Dr Ferguson,

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, see our website at [www.safs.ca](http://www.safs.ca).)

The School of English & Theatre Studies is advertising for a “tenure-track position in Creative Writing at the Assistant Professor level.” According to the job ad, “Our preferred candidate will self-identify as a member of a group that is traditionally underrepresented among university faculty.”

Favouring candidates for academic positions on the basis of racial, ethnic or other group identity is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions should be made on academic grounds only. By preferring candidates who possess certain non-academic characteristics, the University of Guelph will disadvantage promising scholars for no reason

related to their academic accomplishments and abilities. Declining to consider fairly on their academic merits and their academic merits alone all interested scholars cannot be a sound way to build an excellent faculty.

Taking group membership into account when hiring can have the effect of harming individual scholars because others may see them in stereotypical ways and wrongly undervalue their work. In addition, because scholars want to be valued for the quality of their research, their teaching, and their contributions to intellectual life rather than for their racial or other identity, asking members of preferred groups to declare their race or heritage forces them to suppress their dignity or deny themselves an advantage. Finally, invoking non-academic criteria can undermine respect for the ideal of dispassionate inquiry, as it tends to tie scholarship to advocacy and to create consensus around dogma.

The ad also states that “The successful candidate will collaborate with existing faculty in our

efforts to move our curriculum, school culture, and community connections in the direction of equity, diversity, and inclusivity.” The requirement to accept the tenants of EDI amounts to a political or ideological criterion for hiring and, as such, is contrary to the best university traditions of allowing scholars to make their own decisions about pedagogy and the academic mission of the university.

Because favouring applicants on non-academic grounds is wrongfully discriminatory, doing so cannot serve to create a fair and equitable university. This normalizing of racism is bound to have long-lasting, unwelcome consequences, not only because it suggests that a candidate’s appearance is a significant indicator of his or her promise as a scholar, but because it institutionalizes practices that have led to some of the worst outcomes in human history. Good intentions alone are never enough to exonerate such discreditable practices.

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 horizontal stroke at the end.

Mark Mercer, PhD  
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