



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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29 July 2022

Peter J. Ricketts, PhD
President and Vice-Chancellor
15 University Avenue
Acadia University
Wolfville, NS B4P 2R6

Dear President Ricketts,

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.)

Acadia University has recently invited scholars to apply to become the inaugural Jarislowsky Chair in Trust and Political Leadership. From the advertisement, it is hard to see how this Chairship is an academic position. The ad seems to seek a person committed to a set of non-academic values who will promote those values, primarily by inculcating them in students. Where traditionally academics are invited to engage in the free and open pursuit of knowledge and to help students to become able to think for themselves, the Jarislowsky Chair will begin with certain social or political conclusions and attempt to pass them on to others.

The ad states: “The aim of the national network [of five Jarislowski Chairs] is to educate the next generation of politicians and public sector leaders in ethics, democratic values and responsible governance within the contexts of Canada’s diverse citizenship, democracy and commitment to meaningful Truth and Reconciliation.” It does not appear from this statement that students will engage in arguments for and against various theses regarding ethics, democracy and government, or that they will gauge whether and to what degree to form commitments to the findings of a government commission.

“The Chair’s research and teaching at Acadia will focus on how to strengthen and deepen democratic governance in Canada in the context of rising political extremism, reduced trust in government institutions, and failures of political leadership.” The Chair will provide “opportunities for students to address the erosion of political efficacy, integrity, and trust in ways that contribute to a more just and equal Canada.” The Chair’s endeavours seem at odds with the academic pursuits of investigating, evaluating, criticizing and discussing.

Another concern SAFS has is that the Jarislowsky Chair at Acadia will be denied the academic freedom to teach as he or she wishes. The five Chairs, the ad tells us, will collaborate in this training program. Academics may, of course, explore with each other teaching resources and ideas, but they must be free to construct their own syllabi and teach as they will.

Applicants are required to submit “A statement providing information about how you have worked to advance diversity, equity and inclusion in academic, professional and/or community contexts and how you will bring a commitment to these principles to the work of the Chair.”

The requirement to be aligned with diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives amounts to a political or ideological criterion for hiring and, as such, is contrary to the best university traditions of academic freedom and scholarly independence, traditions that enable scholars to fashion their own values and that enjoin hiring committees to consider fairly on academic grounds applicants who are critical of prescribed commitments and doctrines.

According to the ad, “Candidates who identify as a member of one of the aforementioned groups, and who wish to have the application considered as such, are invited to submit the online Employment Equity Voluntary Self-Identification Form as part of their application package.” Preference, then, will be given to scholars who belong to specific races, ethnicities, sexualities or genders.

Taking group membership into account in hiring is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions should be made on academic grounds only. By favouring candidates for academic appointments who possess certain non-academic characteristics, Acadia will disadvantage promising scholars for no reason related to their academic accomplishments, abilities or promise. Excluding meritorious candidates cannot be a sound way to achieve academic excellence.

Scholars can be harmed by being chosen on grounds of group membership because others may see them in stereotypical ways and wrongly undervalue their work. In addition, scholars want to be valued for the quality of their research, their teaching, and their contributions to intellectual life, not for their group membership. Finally, recruitment based on a non-academic criterion undermines respect for the ideal of dispassionate inquiry, as summoning people by identity tends to confuse scholarship with advocacy and to create consensus around dogma.

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', written in a cursive style.

Mark Mercer, PhD

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