



## *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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25 July 2022

Mike Mahon, PhD  
President, University of Lethbridge  
A762 (University Hall)  
4401 University Drive  
Lethbridge, AB T1K 3M4

Dear President Mahon,

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 University of Lethbridge has recently invited scholars to apply to become the inaugural Jarislowsky Chair in Trust and Political Leadership at Lethbridge. From the advertisement, it is not clear that this Chairship is a strictly academic position. The ad seems to seek a person committed to a set of non-academic values and who will promote those values, primarily by inculcating them in students. Where, traditionally, academics are expected 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 ad continues by asserting that the goal of the Chair is “to promote ethical governance and fiduciary responsibility in politics and government” and to “support the ethical development of future leaders. They [the Jarislowsky Chairs] will provide innovative programming to spur future leaders to action.” Promoting, supporting and spurring do not sit well with the academic pursuits of investigating, evaluating, criticizing and discussing.

Another concern SAFS has is that the five Jarislowsky Chairs will be denied the academic freedom to teach as they wish. The Chairs, the ad tells us, are to collaborate in “the development of a pan-Canadian core curriculum that will be shared and taught within degree/certificate programs, or streams within existing programs at participating universities.” Academics may, of course, explore with each other teaching resources and ideas, but they must be free to construct their own syllabi and to teach as they will.

Applicants are required to submit an “EDI statement that provides an overview of how equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging have been successfully embedded into your approaches to research and teaching.” According to the ad, “We need to know how your work and values align with the Jarislowsky Chair programme.”

The requirement to submit an EDI statement and to be aligned with certain values 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, “The university as a whole embraces equity as a core value to be truly inclusive of the communities of which we are a part, and this requires ongoing intentional and systemic action. Through recruitment and support of individuals who further enhance our diversity, the University strives to create a diverse and inclusive community....” These sentences suggest that preference 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, Lethbridge 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,



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