



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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2 August 2022

Deborah Saucier, PhD
President and Vice-Chancellor
Vancouver Island University
900 Fifth Street
Nanaimo, BC V9R 5S5

Dear President Saucier,

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.)

Vancouver Island University has recently invited scholars to apply to become the inaugural VIU 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.

Vancouver Island University wishes to hire a senior scholar to engage in “scholarship (teaching and research) that will expand knowledge and training in the ethical practice of politics, fiduciary responsibility and democratic governance.” The ad states: “The aim of the national network 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 these statements that students will engage in arguments for and against various theses regarding ethics, democracy, fiduciary responsibility and government, or that they will gauge whether and to what degree to form commitments to the findings of a government commission. The Jarislowsky Chair’s purpose seems to be training rather than educating.

Applicants are required to submit “a statement of equity, diversity and inclusion in teaching, research, and service.” 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.

Another concern SAFS has is that Vancouver Island University is prepared to consider an academically irrelevant characteristic in hiring for the Chair. “We encourage members of all equity-seeking groups to self-identify within their application cover letter. When a candidate voluntarily discloses this information in their cover letter, the information will be used only for the fulfillment of the career opportunity. Disclosure and/or self-identification with an equity-seeking group will not lead to advantageous treatment of a candidate who is not qualified.” These sentences imply that belonging to an “equity-seeking group” will weigh in a candidate’s favour.

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, Vancouver Island University will disadvantage promising scholars for no reason related to their academic accomplishments, abilities or promise. As well as being unfair, 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', with a stylized, cursive script.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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