



## *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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26 April 2023

Betsy Birmingham, Dean  
Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities  
Lakehead University  
955 Oliver Road  
Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5E1

Dear Dean Birmingham,

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).)

Lakehead University has advertised a tenure-track position in the Department of Gender & Women's Studies (Reference #SSH-2023-24-01). According to the ad, preference will be given to applicants "from an under-represented group, and ... with the knowledge, competencies and relationships derived from lived experience."

Preferring an applicant because of his or her group status is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that decisions at universities be consistent with academic values. By privileging candidates who possess certain non-academic characteristics, Lakehead University disadvantages many potential

applicants for no reason related to their accomplishments, abilities or promise. Devaluing meritorious candidates cannot be a sound way to achieve academic excellence.

Taking group membership into account when hiring has the effect of harming individual scholars because others may see them in stereotypical ways and wrongly undervalue their work. In addition, because professors want to be valued for the quality of their work, asking them to identify their race, sex or other identity invites them to suppress their dignity or forgo applying.

That a scholar possesses lived experience is irrelevant to his or her accomplishments or promise. Lived experience is, at best, raw material on which a scholar might draw in constructing ideas and understandings. Scholarship, on the other hand, is articulate and theoretical. To evaluate scholars for an academic position, a hiring committee must consider critically their scholarship as represented in their dossiers, and not look to their origins or

group membership. Gender & Women's Studies is asking that candidates meet non-academic criteria and seems willing to prefer those who do over more academically accomplished applicants.

Applicants are to work "in the areas of abolitionist feminism, feminist critical and anti-colonial carceral studies, and feminist critical race theory." Not only are these relatively narrow areas, and, as such, will put the position out of reach of many able scholars, but they seem to require candidates to have specific orientations to their subject matter and be committed to specific, if broad, conclusions. Rather than, for instance, asking for a scholar interested in colonization and prisons, it calls for applicants who take an ant-colonialist view. It should, though, be the prerogative of the professor which perspectives to bring to teaching and research. A hiring committee may seek a scholar in a field, but it is a violation of sound academic norms to require that a scholar is allied with a particular school or will come to certain conclusions.

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, flowing script.

Mark Mercer, PhD  
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