



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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president@safs.ca

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seligman@uwo.ca

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29 August 2022

Michael Benarroch, PhD
President, University of Manitoba
Room 202 Administration Building
66 Chancellors Circle
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2

Dear President Benarroch,

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.)

The University of Manitoba intends to hire a scholar for a tenure-track position in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management (position number 30168). According to the advertisement, this position is restricted to scholars “who identify as Indigenous, Black, or as a Racialized person.”

Reserving academic positions for members of specific races or ethnicities is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions be made on academic grounds only. By requiring candidates for academic appointments to possess certain non-academic characteristics, the University

of Manitoba 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.

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 scholars want to be valued for the quality of their research, their teaching, and their contributions to intellectual life, asking them to apply on the basis of their race, ethnicity or other identity forces them to suppress their dignity or forgo applying. 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.

According to the ad, “The University of Manitoba is committed to the principles of equity, diversity & inclusion and to promoting opportunities in hiring, promotion and tenure (where applicable) for systemically marginalized groups who have been excluded from full participation at the University and the larger community.” Using academic positions to pursue non-academic ends places burdens on scholars unrelated to teaching or research and diminishes the academic mission of the university. Attempting to serve non-academic ends at the expense of the merit principle signals that Manitoba is not committed to being the best academic institution it can be.

Goals consistent with academic values are best achieved by appointing scholars according to merit. The potential of a scholar to contribute new ideas and approaches to teaching and research is better evidenced by that scholar’s dossier than by their race or ethnicity.

The ad states, “This position is intended for a candidate who is committed to critical race studies within the context of kinesiology, recreation, and/or physical education” and whose research and teaching is “informed by critical scholarship.” The position is not, then, simply for a scholar working in a particular area, but for a scholar who takes a specific approach to the objects of his or her study and holds certain fundamental views or commitments toward them. Requiring that scholars think in a particular way or accept particular conclusions is contrary to the best academic traditions of free, fearless and independent inquiry. Scholars must be allowed to investigate race and racism as they will, and not be constrained by their institutions to abide by the tenets of critical race studies.

Because restricting positions on non-academic grounds is wrongfully discriminatory, doing so cannot serve to create a fair and equitable university. This normalizing of identity characteristics is bound to have long-lasting, unwelcome consequences, not only because it suggests that a candidate’s appearance or identity 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". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Mark Mercer, PhD
President, Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS)
1801 Chestnut Street
Halifax, NS B3H 3T7
president@safs.ca

<http://www.safs.ca/>

Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/safs.ca/>

Professor of Philosophy

Halifax, Nova Scotia

sergechestnut@gmail.com

<http://professormarkmercer.ca/>

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