



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

Board of Directors

Mark Mercer, Ph.D. (Saint Mary's)
President
president@safs.ca

Paul Erickson, MCP, RCC
paul@wperickson.com

Janice Fiamengo, Ph.D. (Ottawa)
fiamengo@uottawa.ca

Steve Lupker, Ph.D. (Western)
lupker@uwo.ca

Clive Seligman, Ph.D. (Western)
seligman@uwo.ca

Robert Thomas, MLIS (Regina)
robert.thomas@uregina.ca

Paul Viminitz, PhD (Lethbridge)
pinziev@gmail.com

Frances Widdowson, Ph.D. (MRU)
widdowsonfrances@gmail.com

Past Presidents

Clive Seligman, Ph.D. (Western)

Doreen Kimura, Ph.D. FRSC (SFU)

John J. Furedy, Ph.D. (Toronto)

11 October 2022

Christopher Manfredi, PhD
Interim Principal and Vice-Chancellor
McGill University
James Admin. Bldg., Room 506
845 Sherbrooke Street West
Montréal, QC H3A 0G4

Dear Principal Manfredi,

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.)

McGill University is now receiving applications for a tenure-track position as Assistant Professor in Art and Visual Cultures of Canada. According to the [advertisement](#), “McGill implements an employment equity program and encourages members of designated equity groups to self-identify.” That McGill encourages members of designated groups to identify themselves in their applications implies that group membership will be counted in an applicant’s favour.

Preferring an applicant because of his or her race, ethnicity or sexual orientation 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, McGill University is disadvantaging many potential applicants for no reason related to their accomplishments, abilities or promise. Devaluing meritorious candidates cannot be a sound way to achieve excellence in healthcare.

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 professionals want to be valued for the quality of their work, asking them to identify their race, ethnicity or other identity requires them to suppress their dignity in order not to suffer a penalty.

According to the ad, “Candidates must demonstrate ... a commitment to ... the support of diverse intellectual communities” and possess the “skills and knowledge to engage

productively with diverse communities.” These phrases suggests that the position McGill is seeking to fill has a non-academic social or political component. Using university positions to pursue non-academic ends places burdens on academics unrelated to creating and disseminating knowledge. It also diminishes the academic mission of the university. Commitments to communities could force scholars to self-censor should their results be at odds with community preferences. They put at risk academic rigour and excellence.

It is troubling that the ad describes the areas of competence in the detail that it does, and even specifies the positions on controversial matters the successful applicant will hold. The area of specialization mentioned in the ad is “the visual and material legacies of Indigenous, Black diasporic, and/or immigrant and refugee experiences in Canada.” But the ad requires that applicants place their study within certain “critical dialogues” and suggests that the hiring committee will favour “*critiques* of Eurocentric canons of art history and knowledge” and advocacy of “*antiracist* and *anticolonial* museum and curatorial practice.” A university that values academic freedom would accept applications from all perspectives on the visual and material legacies listed and would leave scholars free to come to the conclusions to which their research leads them.

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
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/>

Cc.: Angela Campbell and Fabrice Labeau, Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic)
Lisa Shapiro, Dean of Arts
David Wright, Associate Dean of Arts
Michael Fronda, Associate Dean of Arts
Manuel Balán, Associate Dean of Arts

Tabitha Sparks, Associate Dean of Arts

Matthew C. Hunter, Chair, Art History & Communication Studies

Chriscinda Henry, Search Chair, Art History & Communication Studies