

Minority professor denied grants because he hires on merit: 'People are afraid to think'

'I don't care about the colour of your skin. I'm interested in hiring someone who wants to work on the project and is good at it,' Prof. Patanjali Kambhampati says

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McGill University professor Patanjali Kambhampati: "I believe that meritocracy is a morally valid position." PHOTO BY JOHN KENNEY/NATIONAL POST

An award-winning Canadian scientist said he has been refused two federal government grants for his research on the grounds of “lack of diversity” — even though he is originally from India and has repeatedly suffered racism.

Patanjali Kambhampati, a professor in the chemistry department at Montreal’s McGill University, believes the death knell for the latest grant was a line in the application form where he was asked about hiring staff based on diversity and inclusion considerations. He says his mistake was maintaining that he would hire on merit any research assistant who was qualified, regardless of their identity.

“We will hire the most qualified people based upon their skills and mutual interests,” Kambhampati wrote on the application.

“I’ve had two people say that was the kiss of death,” said Kambhampati. “I thought I was trying to be nice saying that if you were interested and able I’d hire you and that’s all that mattered. I don’t care about the colour of your skin. I’m interested in hiring someone who wants to work on the project and is good at it.”

Kambhampati said he didn’t go public after the first grant was rejected but decided to speak out now because the increasing use by the government of equity, diversity and inclusion, aka “EDI,” provisions, as well as woke culture, are killing innovation, harming science and disrupting society.

“I believe this is an important stand to make. I will not be silenced anymore,” he said.

Kambhampati’s work explores the cutting edge of super-fast laser science, a field that spans everything from telecom to medicine. He believes Canada can become a world leader in the field.

If I want to focus on merit, fairness and equality, then you get called out as a racist or sexist

But his application for a \$450,000 grant this month from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) was turned down because, the council said, “the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion considerations in the application were deemed insufficient.”

His grant application a year ago to the federally funded National Frontiers in Research Fund — whose object is “to support world-leading interdisciplinary, international, high-risk/high-reward, transformative and rapid-response Canadian research” — was also turned down on similar grounds.

Because both applications were rejected at the bureaucratic level, it means that neither proceeded to the step where they would be forward to other scientists to review Kambhampati’s proposals.

But Kambhampati said he believes basing his hiring decisions on merit is a valid, moral position to hold.

“I think what’s happened is the woke and the social justice warriors have made a moralistic argument the way the religious right used to make moralistic arguments. And now people are afraid to challenge them. But I think it’s okay to say I believe that equality is a morally valid position. I believe that meritocracy is a morally valid position.”

A request for comment from NSERC was not answered on Tuesday.

Around the same time that Kambhampati’s latest application was turned down, another arm of the government, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, gave Dr. Lana Ray, a professor at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ont., a \$1.2-million grant to study cancer prevention using traditional Indigenous healing practices. When the award was announced, Ray said “We need to stop framing prevalent risk factors of cancer as such and start thinking about them as symptoms of colonialism.”

Kambhampati, 50, was born in India and moved to the United States when he was four. He lived and worked in Minnesota, Texas and California, before moving to Montreal in 2003 to take up a professorship at McGill. As an immigrant he said he had experienced numerous incidents of racism.

“In childhood I used to get constant beatings and name calling,” he told National Post, adding that as an adult, he would also get harassed by U.S. border guards, and has been racially profiled in Canada, too.

“Two years ago, I had eight police officers break into my house because I was sitting on my porch while brown. That happened on Canada Day.”

But he says his experiences taught him to treat everyone equally and fairly.

“People do different things. They have different abilities. They have different interests,” he said. “To me, the whole point is to treat people as individuals, so that’s what I do in my life. My way of dealing with racism, or sexism, or any other ‘ism’ is to treat people as individuals.”

As scientists, he said, “we don’t believe in EDI. We believe in merit, fairness and equality. You should be fair in your procedures and treat people as equals.”

However, “if I want to focus on merit, fairness and equality, then you get called out as a racist or sexist and I refuse to let that happen to me,” Kambhampati said.

“I actually get called a racist constantly by white university students who believe that prejudice plus power equals racism. And as a result (they say), I have internalized racism. So, if you are a minority who thinks that the racism of the woke left is overstated they say you have internalized racism.”

Kambhampati believes woke ideology, that is so prevalent on campus and has leached into government, is creating two major problems: self-censorship and a resistance to asking meaningful questions.

“There’s a lot of self-censoring. And certainly you see it among young people in the university. So young people in the university self-censor a lot. Now they are afraid to talk. That’s no way to advance our understanding of the world.

“As a scientist, our job is to think about how nature works, ask questions, and find answers without prejudice. We cannot do that anymore. We cannot ask how humans work, and how science and nature work, because the woke are interfering with us and saying, ‘You can’t ask those questions. You’re a racist. You’re a sexist. You’re a homophobe. You’re a colonialist. You’re a something.’ There’s some way in which the woke are trying to get people (so they’re) no longer asking meaningful questions.

“People are afraid to think. People are afraid to say what they think.”

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Kambhampati said woke ideology had accelerated in the last several years. “And now it’s the prevailing culture” but he believes “it’s 90 per cent of the normal people against 10 per cent of the vocal minority that has shamed everyone into self-censorship.”

Kambhampati said that as a child his mentors were “old, white World War Two vets” who taught him how to build radio-controlled airplanes. “And that’s what led me to build lasers 30 years later.”

Now, as a mentor himself, Kambhampati said he has helped men and women of different cultures and religions.

“I’ve actually made a huge effort to provide outreach to different types of people because that seems to be the humane thing to do. Not because I’m being ordered to do it.

“I’ve mentored minorities. I’ve mentored women. I myself am a Third World minority. And I have mentored people who have catastrophic illnesses. And I have mentored people who are LGBTQ, and not for any reason other than to treat people as equal.

“Some of my group are straight, white men. Am I not to mentor them as equally as the others? That’s what’s implied. I can’t do that in good conscience.”