



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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16 April 2021

Robert Platt, Interim Chair
Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Occupational Health
Purvis Hall
1020 av des Pins Ouest
Montreal (QC) H3A 1A2

Dear Dr Platt,

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 Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Occupational Health (EBOH) at McGill University has advertised a tenure-track professorship in epidemiology. According to the advertisement, "Among candidates deemed to meet with equivalence the requirements of this position, preference will be given to Black candidates." ([Job ad.](#))

Choosing candidates for academic positions on the basis of racial, ethnic or other group identity is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions should be made on academic grounds only. By favouring certain candidates because of their non-academic characteristics,

EBOH will disadvantage promising scholars for no reason related to their academic accomplishments and abilities. Declining to consider qualified candidates rigorously on their academic merits cannot be a sound way to build an excellent faculty.

Taking group membership into account when hiring can have 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 rather than for their racial or ethnic identity, urging them to state their race or ethnicity forces them to suppress their dignity or forgo an advantage in a tight job market. Finally, invoking non-academic criteria can undermine respect for the ideal of dispassionate inquiry, as it tends to tie scholarship to advocacy and to create consensus around dogma.

According to the ad, the position is “to advance research on social determinants of health” and, in particular, on race and racism as factors in health and illness. The ad also states that “Systemic racism, in North America and globally, harms health through multiple adverse physical, social, and economic exposures that accumulate over the life course and across generations.” The position, then, is not simply for a scholar interested in race and racism as social determinants of health, but for a scholar committed to the view that North American society is systemically racist and harmful to the health of non-white people. These are substantive claims, ones that scholars should be free to accept or reject. Holding the view described in the job ad should not be a condition of academic qualification to study the social determinants of health.

Because favouring applicants on non-academic grounds is wrongfully discriminatory, doing so cannot serve to create a fair and equitable university. This normalizing of racism is bound to have long-lasting, unwelcome consequences, not only because it suggests that a candidate’s appearance 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,



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