



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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4 April 2022

David H. Farrar, President and Vice-Chancellor
McMaster University
Gilmour Hall, Room 238
1280 Main Street West
Hamilton, ON L8S 4L8

Dear President Farrar,

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.)

McMaster University is seeking to fill a tenure track position in the Faculty of Health Sciences. The ad states, "For this position, we seek qualified individuals who self-identify as persons of Black/African descent and lived experience."

Reserving academic positions for members of specific races or ethnicities is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions should be made on academic grounds only. By requiring candidates for academic appointments to possess certain non-academic characteristics, McMaster University 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 advertisement, restricting the position to Black scholars contribute to diversity, "inclusive excellence" and "the advancement of Black academic excellence across

all the university.” Increasing the representation on campus of members of a group is not an academic goal. 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 McMaster 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.

SAFS is also concerned that to be considered for the position, applicants must accept specific views and values. According to the ad, applicants must submit “a brief statement describing any contributions made or planned in relation to advancing equity, diversity and inclusive excellence in teaching, research, or service within higher education, community-based or other professional settings, including lived experiences and understandings of Black/African Diasporic peoples and cultures.” This requirement amounts to a political or ideological criterion for hiring and, as such, is contrary to the best university traditions of academic freedom and scholarly independence, traditions that enable scholars to fashion their own values and that enjoin hiring committees to consider fairly on academic grounds applicants who are critical of prescribed commitments and doctrines.

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', with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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