



# *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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1 November 2021

Mark Johnstone, PhD  
Chair, Philosophy Department  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, ON L8S 4L8

Dear Professor Johnstone,

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](http://www.safs.ca).)

McMaster University is advertising a tenure-track position in philosophy. According to the [job ad](#), “this is a targeted search initiative for Indigenous, Black and/or Racialized persons (including individuals who self-identify as persons of colour or BIPOC). The Department seeks a candidate who will contribute to the advancement of inclusive academic excellence at McMaster.”

Favouring 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 be made on academic grounds only. By restricting the search to candidates who possess certain non-academic characteristics,

McMaster University will disadvantage promising scholars for no reason related to their academic accomplishments and abilities. Declining to consider fairly on their academic merits alone all interested scholars 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 other identity, asking members of preferred groups to declare their race or heritage forces them to suppress their dignity or deny themselves an advantage. 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.

The ad states that the Philosophy Department welcomes “a variety of approaches to philosophical issues, including work that proceeds from non-Western, non-Northern and feminist perspectives, work that incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and scholarship, and work that centres on race.” Restricting your search on non-academic grounds is no good way to encourage applications from scholars outside the mainstream. Whether a particular scholar will add something new and different is a matter of the nature and quality of that scholar’s work, not his or her race or ethnicity. The best way to identify scholars who will bring fresh perspectives and alternative ways to McMaster is to judge individual applicants from an unrestricted pool simply on their research and teaching.

According to the ad, “The University seeks qualified candidates who share our commitment to equity, diversity and inclusive excellence.” This statement appears to impose what amounts to a political or ideological qualification. Candidates who oppose targeted hiring, for instance, could not expect to be considered. Requiring fidelity to received ideas is contrary to the best university traditions of dispassionate inquiry and to the prerogative of scholars to criticize their university’s ways or mission.

Because restricting 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Mercer', with a stylized, cursive script.

Mark Mercer, PhD  
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