



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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28 November 2022

Adrian Fiech, Head
Department of Computer Science
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, NL A1B 3X5

Dear Dr Fiech,

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 Computer Science at Memorial University of Newfoundland is seeking to fill three tenure-track positions. The advertisement states, "As part of Memorial University's commitment to employment equity, all applicants are invited to identify themselves as a member of a target group(s) as appropriate." That the department invites applicants who belong to designated groups to identify themselves suggests that the hiring committee will consider such group membership a factor in an applicant's favour.

Preferential hiring is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions be made on academic grounds only. By favouring candidates who possess certain non-academic characteristics, Memorial will disadvantage scholars for no reason related to their academic accomplishments, abilities or promise. Handicapping 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, seeking scholars for their race, ethnicity or other identity forces them to suppress their dignity or decline an advantage. 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.

The ad requires applicants to submit a “Brief description of commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion.” Requiring applicants to an academic position to swear fealty to a particular conception of university community and university goals amounts to imposing a political or ideological criterion on 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 alone, applicants who are critical of prescribed commitments and doctrines.

Demanding evidence of commitment to diversity equity and inclusion ideology pressures academics into serving a social movement they might well not support. It will encourage applicants to prevaricate or to misrepresent their actual views, and even to engage in self-deception.

As well, such requirements are inconsistent with academic commitments to intrepid and dispassionate research, for they will cause scholars to shy away from speaking positions they believe might appear at odds with EDI means or ends. The academic mission of the Department of Computer Science at Memorial will suffer either because promising researchers and teachers will be screened out of job competitions or because a chilling orthodoxy will envelop the department. To require that prospective professors show they hold a particular set of views regarding social relations and responsibilities cannot but undermine candour, respect for intellectual autonomy and academic values generally.

Because favouring candidates 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". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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