



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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28 April 2023

Silvia Tomášková, PhD
Dean, Irving K. Barber Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of British Columbia Okanagan
3187 University Way, ASC 413
Kelowna, BC V1V 1V7

Dear Dean Tomášková,

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 Economics, Philosophy and Political Science in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of British Columbia Okanagan seeks a scholar for a SSHRC Tier 2 Canada Research Chair (CRC) in Artificial Intelligence, Well-being and Ethics. According to the advertisement, “the selection will be restricted to members of the following designated groups: people with disabilities, Indigenous people, racialized people, women, and people from minoritized gender identity groups.”

Restricting appointments violates the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions should be made on academic grounds only. By favouring candidates who possess certain non-academic characteristics, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences will disadvantage scholars for no reason related to their academic accomplishments, abilities or promise. Excluding meritorious candidates from consideration for a CRC cannot be a sound way to achieve academic excellence.

Taking group membership into account when making appointments 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, favouring scholars on grounds of race, ethnicity or other identity forces them to suppress their dignity or decline an advantage. Finally, appointing scholars 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 University of British Columbia attempts to justify discrimination in making this appointment by saying that “Equity and diversity are essential to academic excellence. An open and diverse community fosters the inclusion of voices that have been underrepresented or discouraged.” But a university that would place non-academic goals and values above its academic mission cannot serve its students or the community well. And while seeking new perspectives and innovative work might be of academic significance, it would best be accomplished by looking at dossiers rather than ethnicity or skin colour.

As well, the ad asks that applicants have “a record of demonstrated commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion in leadership, teaching and research”, and it requires that applicants submit a “an EDI statement (up to 2 pages) that includes plans of attracting and mentoring a diverse group of students, trainees, and research personnel, and establishing an equitable and inclusive research environment.”

Requiring applicants 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.

Asking for commitment to equity, diversity 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.

Such demands are also 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 Economics, Philosophy and Political Science will suffer either because promising researchers and teachers will be screened out of competitions or because a chilling orthodoxy will envelop the university. To require that prospective CRCs 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.

A final troubling feature is that it is “an internal search and applicants must hold a full-time, tenure stream appointment as Assistant or Associate Professor in the Department of Economics, Philosophy and Political Science at UBCO.” Competition for academic postings should be open to all qualified scholars in the areas sought. Crafting an appointment so finely as this one would seem to indicate favouritism, which, like cronyism, is not merely unfair but contrary to a meritocratic academic ethos.

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 line extending to the right.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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