



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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25 October 2021

Denise Kenney, MFA
Head, Department of Creative Studies
University of British Columbia Okanagan
3333 University Way
Kelowna, BC V1V 1V7

Dear Professor Kenney,

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 Creatives Studies is advertising a tenure-track position in East Asian Art History. According to the [job ad](#), “the department is highly interested in equity-deserving candidates who will bring to their research and teaching the perspective that comes from the experiences of those underrepresented in higher education, particularly Indigenous, Black and racialized communities.”

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, and it is

inconsistent with the statement included in the ad that “UBC hires on the basis of merit.” By preferring candidates who possess certain non-academic characteristics, the University of British Columbia 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.

According to the ad, your department is seeking not only scholars who are indigenous, black or racialized, but ones whose research and teaching manifests their identities. It is far from clear that there is any essential core to the attitudes or work of scholars of the same race or ethnicity; moreover, it's disturbing that an academic department would want a scholar to represent some group to which he or she belongs rather than to think from a position of scholarly independence. The best university traditions value dispassionate inquiry and academic freedom. Universities should enable scholars to fashion their own theories and values, even should they be critical of received standpoints or interpretations.

The ad is correct to prize "the inclusion of voices that have been underrepresented or discouraged." Whether a particular scholar's voice will enhance an academic community, though, 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 new ways to the University of British Columbia is to judge individual applicants simply on their research and teaching.

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,

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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