



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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9 November 2022

Joy Johnson
President and Vice-Chancellor
Simon Fraser University
8888 University Drive
Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6

Dear President Johnson,

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 School of Computing Science at Simon Fraser University is seeking to fill a Limited-Term Lecturer position in Technical Writing and Ethics. According to the advertisement, "SFU will advance the interests of underrepresented members of the work force.... Candidates that belong to underrepresented groups are particularly encouraged to apply." Though the ad does not explicitly state that the hiring committee will prefer applicants on non-academic grounds, these phrases strongly suggest that belonging to certain groups will count in an applicant's favour.

Preferential hiring is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions should be made on academic grounds only. By favouring candidates who possess certain non-academic characteristics, Simon Fraser University will disadvantage 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, 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.

As well as suggesting preference will be given on non-academic grounds, the advertisement states that “An ideal candidate is expected to possess” a “Commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

That applicants be committed to the ideology and practice of diversity, equity and inclusion 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 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', with a stylized, cursive script.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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