



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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11 April 2022

Janet Morrison, Ph.D.
President and Vice Chancellor
Sheridan College
Davis Campus
7899 McLaughlin Road
Brampton, Ontario L6Y 5H9

Dear President Morrison,

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.)

Sheridan College is seeking to fill faculty positions in Film and Television, Interaction Design, Interior Design, and Storyboard and Animation. According to the advertisements for these positions, they are restricted to scholars who are either Black or Indigenous.

Reserving academic positions for members of specific races or ethnicities is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions should be made on academic grounds only. By requiring candidates for academic appointments to possess certain non-academic characteristics,

Sheridan College will disadvantage promising 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, asking them to apply on the basis of their race, ethnicity or other identity forces them to suppress their dignity or forgo applying. 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.

According to the ad, the goals of restricting the positions on the basis of race or ethnicity are “to achieve equal opportunity, respond to under-representation of groups, promote substantive equality, and eliminate discrimination.” Neither increasing the representation on campus of members of a group or substantive equality is an academic goal. Using academic positions to pursue non-academic ends places burdens on scholars unrelated to teaching or research and diminishes the academic mission of the university. Attempting to serve non-academic ends at the expense of the merit principle signals that Sheridan College is not committed to being the best academic institution it can be.

The best way to achieve equal opportunity and eliminate discrimination is to recruit and appoint scholars according to merit.

SAFS is also concerned that to be considered for the position, applicants must accept specific views and values. According to the ad, applicants must “embrace our values of equity, anti-racism, and inclusion.” This requirement 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 restricting positions 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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