



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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23 January 2023

Roberta Iannacito-Provenzano
Interim Provost and Vice-President, Academic
Toronto Metropolitan University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3

Dear Dr Iannacito-Provenzano,

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.)

Toronto Metropolitan University is to be commended for offering four two-year postdoctoral fellowships this year. These fellowships will enable young academics to gain experience and to contribute to research and scholarship early in their careers. The scholars themselves will benefit, but so too will their disciplines, the universities at which they will eventually be professors, and the scholarly community generally. Would that more universities offered similar opportunities for new academics.

According to the announcement, though, these postdoctoral fellowships are restricted to scholars who “self-identify as Black.” This is unfortunate because, for a fellowship program to succeed academically, applicants need to be judged not on their group membership but on their capacity as individuals to contribute to intellectual life.

Restricting academic positions 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, Toronto Metropolitan University will disadvantage scholars for no reason related to their academic interests, accomplishments, abilities or promise. Excluding meritorious candidates from consideration cannot be a sound way to achieve academic excellence.

Taking group membership into account when awarding fellowships can harm 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, bestowing opportunity 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 announcement of the fellowships speaks of “building a more diverse and inclusive academe, and supporting the flourishing of Black scholarship.” The goals of diversity and inclusion are best served by the fair application of high academic standards. Black scholars, like all others, flourish when taken simply as scholars and granted opportunities based solely on the quality of their academic performance. An open call that focuses on the dossiers of applicants would stand a greater chance of identifying worthy scholars than will a search that begins with skin colour.

The restriction to race is said in the announcement, with no suggestion of irony, to *remove* “barriers to equal opportunities for education and employment.” Likely enough, it will reinforce those barriers to accomplishment that stem from instituting dependency and low expectations.

Because restricting academic positions on non-academic grounds is wrongfully discriminatory, doing so cannot serve to create a fair and equitable academy. This normalizing of identity characteristics is bound to have long-lasting, unwelcome consequences, not only because it suggests that an academic’s race bears on his or her interests or capacities 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', written in a cursive style.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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