



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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17 January 2022

Sudhakar Ganti, PhD
Chair, Department of Computer Science
University of Victoria
PO Box 1700, STN CSC
Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2

Dear Dr Ganti,

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.)

According to a recently issued job ad, the Department of Computer Science is seeking to hire two new faculty members “with preference for applicants from any of the following equity-deserving groups: Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, women, or those who identify as Black.” (<https://www.uvic.ca/ecs/computerscience/assets/docs/employment/research-stream-positions-job-ad.pdf>)

Choosing scholars for academic positions on the basis of racial, ethnic, gender or other group identity is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions should be made on academic grounds only. By favouring applications on the basis of non-academic characteristics, the Department of Computer Science will disadvantage promising scholars for no reason related to their academic accomplishments and abilities. Declining to consider qualified candidates rigorously on their academic merits cannot be a sound way to build an excellent faculty. As well, because favouring applicants on non-academic grounds is wrongfully discriminatory, doing so cannot serve to create a fair and equitable university.

The University of Victoria’s Equity statement says, “We know that diversity underpins excellence.” Diversity at a university should be about diversity of academic interests, methods and points of view. Hiring committees should, then, be concerned with the concrete details of the individual applicant’s academic work, not their race, ethnicity or sex. As well, to the extent that UVic wishes to promote equity, it should treat individuals as individuals, whose accomplishments are the result of their abilities and efforts, and not as representatives of groups. From both ethical and academic perspectives, UVic should be concerned with fairness

and equality of opportunity.

SAFS is also concerned that to be considered for the position, applicants must accept specific views and values. According to the ad, applicants must include an Equity, Diversity and Equity statement, and that statement “should briefly describe their experience with addressing EDI and/or how the candidate plans to contribute to the EDI goals of the Department.” 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.

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 identity, having them apply on the basis of non-academic criteria forces them to suppress their dignity or forgo applying. 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.

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 underline.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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