



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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7 July 2021

Dr. Shahirose Sadrudin Premji, Director
School of Nursing, Faculty of Health
York University
104 Scholars Walk
Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3

Dear Dr Sadrudin,

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 Nursing at York University is currently advertising to fill a tenure-track appointment in Indigenous Health, History, and Healing Practices at the Assistant, Associate or Full Professor level. The [advertisement](#) indicates that only scholars who are indigenous will be considered for the position.

Reserving academic positions for members of specific racial, ethnic, cultural or other groups 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, York University will disadvantage promising scholars for no reason related to their academic accomplishments, abilities or promise. Declining to consider on their academic merits all interested and qualified scholars cannot be a sound way to build an excellent faculty.

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 rather than for their racial or other identity, having them specify their race, ethnicity or heritage 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 ethnicity or heritage tends to confuse scholarship with advocacy and to create consensus around dogma.

SAFS is also concerned that to be considered for the position, applicants must not only work in certain fields, but take specified approaches to their fields and, even, hold specific views. According to the ad, applicants must recognize “the intersections of Indigeneity, health equity, and social determinants of health” and acknowledge “equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonisation as central themes to the curriculum.” These provisions are at odds with academic freedom and scholarly independence, which enable scholars to pursue their projects as they will and enjoin hiring committees to consider applicants who are critical of prescribed commitments and doctrines.

Further, according to the ad, the successful applicant will “teach and develop future advocates for the use of Indigenous knowledges and healing practices.” The ad, then, would have the successful applicant assume a political role. Scholars, though, should be free to participate or not in politics and to hold whatever political views they wish. No position at a university should require an allegiance to an ideology or a political program.

Finally, the ad requires the successful candidate to “collaborate with Indigenous Elders, healers, and knowledge keepers consistent with the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.” This requirement would again impinge on the freedom and independence of the successful applicant. It is for professors to decide with whom to collaborate. Moreover, a university may not insist that a professor’s work be consistent with a state document.

Because restricting 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 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, flowing script.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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