



## *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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23 November 2021

Alice J. Hovorka, PhD  
Dean, Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change  
York University  
HNES Building  
4700 Keele Street  
Toronto, ON M3J 1P3

Dear Dr Hovorka,

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](http://www.safs.ca).)

The Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change is advertising two tenure-track positions in Physical Geography. According to the [job ad](#), one position is “open only to qualified individuals who specifically self-identify as Black peoples of African descent.”

Restricting academic positions on the basis of racial, ethnic or other group identity is a violation of the merit principle, the principle that academic decisions be made on academic grounds only. By barring scholars on non-academic grounds, York University will disadvantage promising scholars

for no reason related to their academic accomplishments and abilities. Declining to consider fairly on their academic merits and their academic merits alone all qualified scholars cannot be a sound way to build an excellent faculty.

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 or other identity, asking members of preferred groups to declare their race or heritage forces them to suppress their dignity or deny themselves an advantage. 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.

Because favouring 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 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 long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mark Mercer, PhD  
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