

258. Dal's skin-tone directive tramples individualism

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The search for a new vice-provost student affairs at Dalhousie university “will be restricted to racially visible persons and Aboriginal Peoples at this time,” wrote Carolyn Watters, Dalhousie’s provost and academic vice president, in a memo announcing the search (“Dal restricts search for new VP to ‘racially visible,’ Indigenous candidates,” *Chronicle Herald*, 13 February, <http://thechronicleherald.ca/metro/1545239-dal-restricts-search-for-new-vp-to-racially-visible-indigenous-candidates>).

Hiring according to race, ethnicity, or cultural affiliation is wrongfully discriminatory almost everywhere, even when it is legal. It is especially wrong when done by a university. That is for two reasons. First, it is a violation of the merit principle, the principle according to which academic decisions should be made on academic grounds only. Second, it undercuts the university’s ethos of individuality.

According to the *Chronicle Herald*, Jasmine Walsh, the assistant vice-president of human resources, says that this discriminatory hiring is part of Dalhousie’s efforts to increase the number of people from underrepresented groups on campus.

Why is it that some groups are underrepresented on campus? If there are barriers to people joining the Dalhousie community, then removing those barriers should be Dalhousie’s focus. Racially directed hiring doesn’t remove a barrier to participation; it adds one.

Of course, the best way for a university to attract people to campus is to adhere to university values of scholarly community and fairness. A fair competition to identify the person best suited for the job would serve to promote Dalhousie’s reputation among all scholars and students, and thereby attract those from underrepresented groups.

Discriminatory hiring is sometimes said to be warranted on academic grounds by the need for role models and mentors for minority or female students. But whatever qualities make for good and inspiring administrators, those qualities are present or absent in individual scholars, not in scholars considered as members of ethnic groups. Students are best served by hiring committees that look at the qualifications and skills of individual candidates rather than candidates taken to represent a group.

Indeed, hiring on the basis of race, ethnicity, or cultural affiliation might have the effect of harming individual minority or indigenous scholars, because it may lead others to see them in stereotypical ways. It is conceivable that qualified minority or aboriginal scholars will not apply for the position, wanting to be valued for the quality of their work rather than for their skin colour or cultural affiliation.

Would a person of colour opposed to racially directed hirings thereby be at a disadvantage should she apply for the position? After all, a candidate will be selected at least in part on the basis of how well she fits in with the administrative culture already in place and its values. Dalhousie would seem, then, to be looking not just for a racially visible or aboriginal scholar, but one possessed of the proper attitudes about race and racially directed hiring. That would, for quite a few minority scholars, be a barrier to joining the Dalhousie community.

In general, universities best serve the interests of discovery, of students, and of the community at large when they adhere to the merit principle. Dalhousie should seek to hire the candidate who best suits the position on offer. To find that candidate, Dalhousie must not exclude any qualified applicant.

The other criticism of racially directed hiring at a university has to do with the culture of individualism that should predominate at a university. Universities should be places committed to teaching students to think for themselves. In learning to think for oneself, one is emancipated from the ideas and habits of the various ethnic and cultural groups to which one belongs. Instead of being the passive product of forces beyond one's control, one can evaluate one's inheritance and consciously accept the good and reject the bad within it.

The culture of a university should be one of disputation, where any idea or suggestion can be discussed critically and no one is under the pressure of their identity to think or feel one thing rather than another. Unfortunately, universities have not been nourishing the culture of disputation but turning away from it. University culture is now often the culture of celebration. Celebrating identities requires that they be protected from examination and criticism.

In a university culture of disputation, individuals create cultures through their choices. In a university culture of celebration, though, individuals are submerged into unchosen groups, and aspire not to understand things but to represent their groups authentically and well.

Race directed hiring at a university is part of the attack on individualism and the culture of disputation. Dalhousie, by restricting the search for a vice-provost student affairs to racially visible and aboriginal candidates, is telling the world that it has abandoned its mission to protect and promote intellectual engagement with the world.