

# Dalhousie University should just be honest about its affirmative-action hiring

**Affirmative action is sometimes a necessary evil. But let it be implemented in a candid spirit. No one likes to be lied to, or fed nonsensical dogma**

Dalhousie University in Halifax is restricting its candidate search for vice-provost for student affairs to “racially visible persons and Aboriginal peoples.”

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Conservative critics often denounce progressives for using mushy, politically correct euphemisms to hide the plain meaning of their words. So you’d think they’d have a kind word for Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, which has been admirably blunt in describing how it will staff the role of vice-provost for student affairs. According to a recently publicized email blast, the candidate search will be restricted to “racially visible persons and Aboriginal peoples.”

If the university had left it at that, it might well have been on safe ground.

Affirmative action remains controversial in the United States, and still gets tested in U.S. courts. But in Canada, it’s baked into Section 27 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which specifies that the Charter “shall be interpreted in a manner

consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians.”

Moreover, a lot of us — no matter what our politics — enact informal affirmative-action policies all the time. I sit on the board of a non-profit entity that has been making an active effort to recruit more diverse leaders and members. It’s something we talk about all the time. As a *National Post* editor, likewise, I tried to bring a mix of men and women into editorial meetings. Not because I’m especially enlightened in my political attitudes (far from it), but because when it was just me and Matt Gurney kicking ideas around, we tended to go with way too many stories about video games, SWAT-team tactics, and prostate health. (If you’re over 45, you should get checked regularly, by the way.)

Affirmative action is sometimes a necessary evil. It’s true that unchecked capitalism is a great force for diversity — because the smartest employers hire the best people regardless of race or gender. But it’s also true that, for historical reasons (including racist laws that discriminated against Indigenous people) members of some groups learned to avoid certain job and education sectors. Affirmative action can be justified as a temporary strategy to recruit a critical mass from a given group, thereby helping to erase toxic cultural residue, so that future cohorts can be recruited solely on merit.

That last word hangs heavy, I know. Indeed, writers who support affirmative action typically avoid the M-word altogether. Its mere appearance in a column of this type creates tension — because racial and gender preferences violate the meritocratic ideal that people shall be judged (in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.) not “by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

When progressives talk about merit at all, they tend to put the word inside quotation marks, to suggest it is actually just a made-up construct that white men use to justify their privileges (which certainly once was true, it must be said). Or, as in the case of Dalhousie University, they redefine the concept of merit in nonsensical, self-serving ways.

## As George Orwell put it: One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that

“From my perspective, there isn’t a merit argument that runs counter to this (race-based restriction on job applicants),” says Dalhousie assistant vice-president of human resources Jasmine Walsh. “In fact, this actually is the way for us to develop the most meritorious faculty and staff population ... It’s critically important that students who are coming onto campus are able to see themselves reflected.”

The implicit argument here is that “merit” encompasses a person’s race — since a person of race X will help someone of race X “see themselves reflected.” This definition is so absurdly broad that it could be used, in identical form, to swallow up just about any imaginable policy that organizes humanity according to skin colour, gender or any other criterion. Certainly, this is not how anyone outside the ivory tower would define “merit.” As George Orwell put it: “One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that: no ordinary man could be such a fool.”

## Modern university culture has become an unholy mash-up of MBA marketing gobbledegook and social-justice Twitter dogma

Walsh’s statement isn’t just a random act of violence against the English language. It’s also a microcosm of modern university culture — which has become an unholy mash-up of MBA marketing gobbledegook and social-justice Twitter dogma. (Amina Abawajy, president of Dalhousie’s student union, told

reporters that it's crucial the new hire "has an understanding of intersectional oppression and forms of oppression.") And one of the culture's effects, as this episode shows, is to protect the conscience of campus apparatchiks from the moral repercussions of their race- and gender-torqued policies.

A candid, adult justification for affirmative action would go something like this: "We know that deviating from the merit principle is wrong, and that this is tantamount to racial discrimination. But we feel it is morally justified — as a short-term measure — as a matter of social justice. And, in the long run, there is a business case to be made for it as well." But it is unpleasant to face up to the moral dimension of affirmative action policies in such stark terms. So officials such as Walsh prefer to describe such policies as a win-win for everyone. Which, of course, they're not: Many people are barred from applying to these jobs. And even those who do apply, and get hired, can become stigmatized as affirmative-action staff who didn't have the qualifications to be hired on the basis of merit alone.

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In most organizations, cynical language such as the kind used by Walsh gets called out by others. But university administrators have unique powers that help insulate them from criticism: The diversity and affirmative-action agendas they put forward typically come with speech codes that can be leveraged to stigmatize dissent as evidence of bigotry. This self-licking PC ice-cream cone has been with us so long that we've come to take it for granted. It takes an inventive maverick such as Laurier University's Lindsay Shepherd to make everyone realize how ideologically self-serving and intellectually corrupt modern universities have become.

My first encounter with this hypocrisy came in the 1990s, when I attended law school in the United States. The university I attended practiced a de facto affirmative-action policy to ensure that about 10 per cent of each incoming law-school class was black. This policy was broadly supported by members of the law-school community, even though it meant that the average black student was being admitted with lower undergraduate GPA and standardized test scores. But a scandal erupted during my third year at the school, when data was released showing that very few black students were being admitted to the school's prestigious law journal — the test for which was conducted on an entirely colour-blind basis.

These numbers sparked all sorts of exotic theories about how the staff and architecture of the school might be taking a psychic toll on black students. But almost no one talked about what was by far the most obvious explanation for the statistical anomaly — the lowered admissions standards for black students in the school more generally — because it was seen as taboo.

Instead, we talked up the idea of institutional racism, which was viewed as safe ground. These discussions in turn sparked calls for yet more aggressive diversity policies. In front of my eyes, I saw the ice-cream cone licking itself.

Fifteen years ago, I wrote an article about all this for an American magazine, in which I expressed opposition to affirmative-action policies. But my view has softened as I have seen the good that racial preferences have done in some industries. These days, it's not so much the substance of these policies that I rail against, but the cult of self-censorship and propaganda that has emerged to sweep away the legitimate concerns expressed about their effects.

If we are to implement affirmative action, let it be done in a candid spirit.

Administrators may find that staff and students actually can handle plain talk

about this subject. A forthright approach may generate more buy-in, too. No one likes to be lied to. And the surest way to foment resentment toward a controversial policy is to suggest that its validity rests on word definitions that everyone — probably including Ms. Walsh herself — understands to be complete nonsense.