

A failing grade on EDI at SMU

BY: Cathy Conrad, President, SMU Faculty Union, and Full-time faculty member at SMU

According to Saint Mary's University's Employment equity and diversity policy, "...equity and diversity are integral to excellence and enrich our community."

But let me tell you about my friend with a physical disability who applied for a job at SMU. She disclosed her disability in her application and was eventually offered the job. However, accessing her office required climbing stairs - there is no elevator. When she told the employer that a lack of accessibility would force her to decline the job offer, they responded with regret rather than a willingness to amend the situation. Even if historical building issues present challenges, how difficult would it have been to find an office in an accessible part of campus?

Apparently, our new brand of "World Without Limits" didn't apply to her.

The policy for SMU states that "Saint Mary's strives to achieve and maintain a representative workforce of women, persons with disabilities, Indigenous persons, racially visible/visible minority groups and other equity deserving groups, while recognizing individuals' intersecting identities." As far as the SMU Faculty Union can see, there's little striving and a lot of failing - for a variety of reasons.

Every year, Saint Mary's University is required to report to Senate, the Board of Governors, and the Faculty Union by the first of December on our institution's "Positive Action to Improve the Employment of Women, Indigenous¹ Peoples, Visible Minorities, And People with Disabilities" (Saint Mary's Faculty Union Collective Agreement (CA) Art 10.4). In violation of the Collective Agreement, this was not undertaken in 2022. The Vice President Academic and Research informed the Faculty Union that the Employer is in non-compliance due to high turnover in HR and lengthy vacancies in positions.

In addition, recent data shows that Indigenous and visible minority employees are underrepresented. SMU has talked about a major equity cluster hire but ended up back-tracking at the negotiation table to something equivalent to what smaller institutions in Nova Scotia have already undertaken. SMU has also weakened covid protections with no plans for how these measures will affect high risk members of our campus community. I can only conclude that diversity, equity, and inclusion are not a priority at Saint Mary's.

Faculty leaders have been calling attention to the overwhelming lack of concrete equity hiring achievements. Promises have been consistently made that equity is a priority at SMU. Many committees and 'task forces' have been struck. Taking a legalistic approach to equity, as opposed to an ethical approach, seems to have become the modus operandi of the SMU administration. In a world where social justice matters, that just doesn't cut it. Here we are in 2023 with little to no achievements made. With accommodations, SMU isn't even meeting a bare minimal legal standard in some cases. SMU has no accommodations policy and therefore no reliable standard for what job applicants, workers, and students with disabilities can expect on SMU campus. This results in cases like my friend, who was offered an inaccessible office and no alternative.

There is an urgent need for SMU to move toward concrete and truly substantial equity hiring targets and accountability. Many other Canadian Universities, including those in our region, are far ahead of SMU in the implementation of meaningful measures to address EDI.

The failure to complete the report is a symptom of a chronic institutional problem. If positive actions to improve the employment of women, Indigenous peoples, visible minorities, and people with disabilities was a priority for the Employer, then the most modest collection of data would be completed on time. The equity policy of the University states that "The President of Saint Mary's University has ultimate accountability for the Employment Equity and Diversity Policy." Maybe he should accompany my friend who declined the faculty job offer for a day to witness the challenges she confronts as a wheelchair user in an ableist world. Had SMU offered her an accessible workspace, they could have met as SMU colleagues.

¹The language of our CA uses the dated term 'Aboriginal', which I changed here to reflect the preference of the Indigenous community.