

Sociology Department Appointments Committee responds to *Excalibur's* articles

To The Editor:

The Sociology Department Appointments Committee wishes to respond in detail to the allegations of prejudice that appeared in two articles published in *Excalibur* concerning the committee's decision to offer two tenure-track positions to individuals other than Arnold Itwaru ("Top sociologist is snubbed," by Jeff Shinder, March 10; and "Outrage over Itwaru decision continues," by James Flagal, March 17). These articles are riddled with inaccuracies, half truths, and incorrect inferences. In this letter, we shall try to set the record straight, and shall also address some of the general issues that the Itwaru case raises.

We write this letter with great regret, because departmental appointment processes involve the handling of large amounts of sensitive and relatively confidential information, and are therefore normally carried out with considerable discretion. This serves to protect the right to privacy of all parties concerned: candidates, their referees, colleagues, students, etc. Since, however, you have chosen to contribute to the politicization of the process by front-page journalistic advocacy of a particular candidate, we find ourselves compelled to respond.

Your articles have claimed that the Appointments Committee failed to consider the views of students in making its recommendations. We want to stress that we took the expressed opinions of both undergraduate and graduate students into account in establishing the relative merit of the candidates. The Appointments Committee has the difficult task of selecting the best candidates, based on a range of criteria including scholarship, teaching and service.

In the second paragraph of your March 10 article, you assert that Dr. Itwaru has over 50 publications. Twenty-eight of the publications listed on our copy of Dr. Itwaru's vitae (the record that he furnished of his scholarly activities) appear in non-academic sources, such as newspapers, popular magazines, poetry magazines, and so on. Normally, works such as these are not considered as a basis for hiring into a sociology tenure track academic position nor do they usually appear on an academic vitae.

On the remaining publications, Dr. Itwaru's list of books and monographs includes several works of poetry, his unpublished M.A. thesis and his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, but no published work in sociology. We are neither competent nor willing to judge Arnold Itwaru's poetry, but it is in any event not relevant to his qualifications as a sociologist. Dr. Itwaru's vitae also lists papers delivered at conferences and those under review for publication. Though these categories of work are evidence of scholarly activity, they are not "publications" in the commonly accepted meaning of that term. Finally, Dr. Itwaru's vitae lists three book chapters, including two in books that have not appeared.

In brief, Arnold Itwaru has published one article in a refereed journal; he has never published in either of the two major sociology journals in Canada, nor in any major sociology journal. He has no books in sociology. By our count, he has two sociological publications in print and two more in press, one of which, we understand, is still under

review. There is, in addition, a partial book manuscript that does not appear on the vitae and which has received favourable review from a publisher. This manuscript was not made available to the committee. We cannot concur with your view that this is the record of a "top sociologist."

We do not wish to emphasize quantitative indices of scholarly merit, however. The appointments committee carefully read Dr. Itwaru's work and attended the colloquium that he delivered as part of our appointments process. It is our judgement that other candidates whom we interviewed have done sociological work of considerably higher quality. There is, of course, room for disagreement concerning judgements of merit, but we wish to be clear that we examined all candidates' work with care and attention. In fact, given the quality of the 98 applications that we received it is doubtful that Arnold Itwaru would have been among the candidates interviewed for these tenure-track positions if our department had not adopted the practice of interviewing automatically our contractually limited faculty—a practice, incidentally, that the Appointments Committee supports.

You quote in your article of March 10 from two of the letters of reference that were submitted to us on Arnold Itwaru's behalf. We find it odd, by the way, that you would have access to ostensibly confidential letters of references. We hope that you understand that we are constrained in what we can say about letters that were transmitted to us in confidence. Nevertheless, we can say that Dr. Itwaru's letters are not particularly remarkable: The majority of candidates for these positions had equally positive (or more positive) assessments from their referees. We leave the interpretation of this information to you. Note that one of Dr. Itwaru's referees, Arthur Kroker, is identified in your piece as the editor of the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, a journal that has declined to publish the paper recently submitted to it by Arnold Itwaru.

Jeff Shinder implies that the Appointments Committee was insensitive to student opinion in its decision to recommend the hiring of Dr. Itwaru. The committee included two graduate student representatives. Undergraduates were not represented because the undergraduate sociology students' organization died for lack of interest: The Sociology Department tried for many years to interest undergraduates in the affairs of the department; we gave up only after years of unsuccessful effort, concluding that students must organize themselves. You make much the same point in your editorial of March 17.

In the course of our deliberations, we solicited opinions from graduate students and from faculty who communicated with the committee orally and in writing. We received both positive and negative appraisals of Dr. Itwaru from graduate students. The written support for Dr. Itwaru that we received from undergraduates was in the form of a petition signed by students currently taking his sociology courses. We find it surprising that a student newspaper would fail to question the propriety of soliciting support of this kind from students currently in Dr. Itwaru's courses, and who have yet to receive grades. In addition, this expression of support for Arnold Itwaru is not based on a comparative assessment of his merits relative to those of

other candidates, nor is it in any sense a systematic expression of students' sentiments.

Your article of March 10 claims that our failure to recommend the hiring of Arnold Itwaru will eliminate important course offerings in our department. In particular, "Currently, approximately 500 students are enrolled in Itwaru's courses in critical sociology, underdevelopment Caribbean sociology (sic), and his graduate courses." In fact, Dr. Itwaru is currently teaching three courses in the sociology department with the large total enrolment of 382 students: (1) Overview of Sociology (i.e., a general introduction to the field); (2) Mass Communications; and (3) Sociology of the Body. These are all courses taught (though not necessarily in the current year) by other faculty members. Though Dr. Itwaru may teach sociology from a critical perspective, that is also true of many of the faculty members in our department. He has never taught a course on the Caribbean or underdevelopment in the Sociology Department at York (though prior to 1985 he taught a course on West Indian Presence in Canada as a Founder's College tutorial); he has never taught a course in our graduate program (with the exception of a reading course, which normally is not counted). The size of Dr. Itwaru's Overview course is, unfortunately, largely a function of our inability to maintain small courses in the first year: Any faculty member assigned to that section of the course would teach a large class.

You argue that our failure to recommend that Arnold Itwaru be hired is controversial because of his race. Our advertisement for the two tenure-track positions in question contained the following sentences: "York University is implementing a policy of employment equity. Qualified women and men are invited to apply. The Department of Sociology is particularly interested in increasing the representation of women and members of minorities among its faculty." The first two sentences are mandated by the York administration. The third sentence was written by the same Appointments Committee that decided not to recommend the hiring of Arnold Itwaru. Were we not committed to this policy, we would not have articulated it in the ad. The reason we did not recommend the appointment of Dr. Itwaru is because we had several candidates with far superior qualifications.

You quote a claim in your article that "visible minorities are visible in the lower positions, but completely invisible in terms of academia." At present, the Sociology Department has among its regular faculty two members of visible minorities: one is a Full Professor, and the other an Associate Professor. We stress that we support a policy that would increase the number of visible-minority faculty at York. That policy is not helped by misstating the facts.

Although York does not have a formally sanctioned affirmative action policy favouring members of visible minorities, it does have an official affirmative-action policy concerning women: Put briefly, women candidates must be hired where qualifications are substantially equal, in units (such as ours) that have less than 30 percent women. Put another way, we could not have hired Arnold Itwaru if there were two, or more substantially equal or superior female candidates. In fact, there were several; and superior male candidates as well. We find it particularly destructive,

and sexist, to oppose affirmative action for women on the basis of supporting affirmative action for visible minorities.

We would like to make some statements about the general issues raised by Arnold Itwaru's candidacy, beyond the issue of race. York has, for many years now, relied very heavily on part-time and contractually limited faculty to teach our courses—especially large, lower-level courses in the undergraduate programme. It is ironic that two of the members of the Sociology Department Appointments Committee have in other capacities fought long and hard to redress the inequities of the situation of contractually limited and part-time faculty. These two individuals were instrumental in formulating the initiative that produced the present programme of conversion of long-service, high-intensity part-timers to tenure-track positions.

There are several sociologists eligible for conversion to a tenure-track position, including Arnold Itwaru, who has been teaching at York for 10 years, and who received his Ph.D. in 1983. Arnold Itwaru taught as a part-timer from 1978 to 1985, at which point he received a full-time contractually limited appointment. These appointments are by their nature non-renewable after a specified term. Dr. Itwaru has also taught at two other universities and for three other units at York, none of which has offered him a tenure-track position.

In the March 17 article, James Flagal quotes an argument to the effect that we should hire Arnold Itwaru because he is a York graduate: "If this university won't recognize this degree, who will." Though we did not disqualify Dr. Itwaru because his degree is from York, you should realize that it is unusual for departments to hire their own recently graduated students: Many academic departments have formal rules preventing them from hiring their own recent Ph.D.'s.

Finally, we wish to comment briefly on your standards of journalistic accuracy and fairness. That your articles were seriously inaccurate can be inferred from what we have said to this point. Considerations of fairness suggest that you should have asked the Appointments Committee to comment on the allegations that were made concerning our conduct. Instead, you quoted our Chairperson and Graduate Director briefly and out of context. You did interview the Acting Dean of Arts, but the original decision was not his. As well, your articles include the most blatant sort of editorializing.

There is at present a climate of anger and confusion surrounding our appointment recommendations, a climate which has partly been produced by your inaccurate reporting. We therefore request that you print this letter in its entirety, despite its length. We regret that events have compelled us to state publicly our assessment of Arnold Itwaru's candidacy for a tenure-track position in our department.

Sincerely,
The Sociology Department Appointments Committee

The Sociology Department has paid for the publication of this letter due to its length and the lack of space in the Letters to the Editor section.

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