

Opinion

The Seattle Times

# SPU must confront a hiring policy that discriminates based on sexual orientation

April 23, 2021 at 1:10 pm | Updated April 23, 2021 at 1:10 pm



Seattle Pacific University in Seattle is in turmoil over its hiring policies. (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times, file)

By [Dyana Herron](#)

*Special to The Times*

Former Seattle Pacific University adjunct instructor Jéaux Rinedahl's [discrimination lawsuit](#), filed in response to being told he was ineligible for a full-time position due to his sexuality, brings to light a hiring policy the school has long tried to keep from the public eye.

The policy hinges on two documents. A 2005 “Statement on Human Sexuality” affirms that within the teachings of the university’s religious traditions, both marriage and sex are “intended between a man and a woman,” and a list of “Employee Lifestyle Expectations” prohibits “sexually immoral behavior which is inconsistent with Biblical standards.” Taken together, these guidelines disallow employees from engaging in sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage.

SPU can argue that it does not discriminate against an individual’s *identity*; rather, the restriction is behavioral. Theoretically, a gay person could be hired and uphold lifestyle expectations — as long as they are celibate.

But that begs the question: At what point are gay (or unmarried heterosexual) applicants asked if they are willing to forgo sex during their time as an employee?

Compared to arguments that can be made — and are being made, forcefully, by many members of the SPU community — against the ethics of this practice, questions about how it is carried out may seem inconsequential. Especially if you assume that gay folks who know about SPU’s policy wouldn’t want to work there anyhow. But Rinedahl still does. And so do gay alumni. And so do gay people already employed at the school who are closeted at work.

The question also is important because it challenges SPU and employers with similar restrictions to explain how, even if these policies are legal (which remains to be seen; lawsuits from Rinedahl and others will test the boundaries of exemptions for religious institutions), they can be carried out in a hiring process that is transparent and fair.

During my time as an employee at SPU, I had the opportunity to ask. As part of a universitywide diversity initiative, my department reviewed our hiring procedures through an equity lens to eliminate barriers for underrepresented populations. We hoped to make more space for candidates of various race and ethnicities, genders, ages and abilities.

But what about gay candidates? Most often, of course, we didn't know the sexual identity of our applicants, but sometimes they would self-disclose this information in a required essay about their faith journey.

When my team asked Human Resources whether we could move gay candidates forward for interviews, we were told not to contact them, even if they were otherwise fully qualified. Our request to share the lifestyle expectations in advance so applicants could decide themselves whether to continue was also denied. It became clear that even if SPU's policy is behavior-focused, in practice it excludes based solely on identity.

I left SPU not long after, in part because my colleagues and I were told there was no place to have transparent conversations about how this hiring policy works, why it exists and whether it should continue in the future.

I am sad and angry that it took a lawsuit to elevate the issue. And sadder and angrier to hear about the SPU Board of Trustees' recent decision to uphold the Statement of Human Sexuality and related behavioral expectations, despite most surveyed faculty and staff supporting change.

If SPU believes this policy is made necessary by its faith tradition, then it should claim it as boldly as any other part of its Christian identity, make behavioral expectations clear to applicants from the beginning, and leave the decision of whether or not gay candidates apply up to them.

But if the university feels the need to hide its policy, or cannot find an appropriate way to ask its prospective and current employees whether they are having sex and with whom, it should confront that the policy itself is shameful and inappropriate.

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