



UNC  
COLLEGE OF  
ARTS & SCIENCES

THE UNIVERSITY  
of NORTH CAROLINA  
at CHAPEL HILL

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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To: UNC Board of Trustees  
From: Patricia Parker and James Leloudis, co-chairs  
UNC Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward  
Date: May 26, 2021  
Re: Nikole Hannah-Jones, Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism

We, together with the undersigned members of the UNC Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward, join others in the Carolina community who have called you to account for refusing to review the faculty recommendation that Nikole Hannah-Jones be appointed Knight professor of journalism, *with tenure*.

Intentionally or not, you have enlisted the university in the project of historical denialism that refuses to confront the centrality of race and racism in our national past and in the life of our nation, state, and university today. In the absence of any measure of transparency, you leave us with deeply disturbing facts.

You denied a Black woman tenure after a rigorous review by Carolina faculty and external academic evaluators. Prior appointees to the Knight chair at UNC were white and were awarded tenure. Your claim that Hannah-Jones should be treated differently because she comes from outside the academy does not bear scrutiny. The stated purpose of the Knight chair is to bring to campus practicing professionals with distinguished records of achievement. Hannah-Jones – the recipient of a Pulitzer Prize, Peabody Award, and MacArthur Fellowship – clearly meets and exceeds that standard.

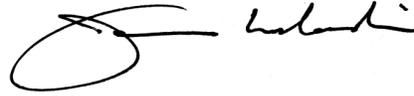
In your statements to the press, you also have referenced vague "concerns" about Hannah-Jones' work as an investigative journalist. We are well aware of the criticism of her 1619 Project, but producing controversial work does not disqualify someone for tenure. Tenure is meant to safeguard academic freedom and enliven the academy with robust debate. Scholars like Hannah-Jones open a space for civic discourse that invites participants from all perspectives to engage some of the most important issues of our time.

Two of Hannah-Jones' sharpest critics – Sean Wilentz and Keith Whittington, both chaired professors at Princeton University – underscored this point in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on May 25. "We have been critical of Hannah-Jones' best-known work in connection with 'The 1619 Project,'" they wrote, "and we remain critical. We also respect the judgment and the authority of the University of North Carolina's faculty and administration. For the Board of Trustees to interfere unilaterally on blatantly political grounds is an attack on the integrity of the very institution it oversees."

We concur, and in light of these concerns, we request that you convene a special meeting at the earliest possible date to review the faculty recommendation to appoint Hannah-Jones with tenure. To do otherwise imperils the integrity and reputation of the university entrusted to your care.



Patricia Parker, co-chair  
Professor and Chair, Department of Communication



James Leloudis, co-chair  
Professor, Department of History

**Commission Members**

Ariana Avila, doctoral candidate, Department of Anthropology

Delores Bailey, Executive Director, EmPOWERment Inc.; Chapel Hill community member

Giselle Corbie-Smith, Kenan Distinguished Professor of Social Medicine; Director, Center for Health Equity Research; Professor, Internal Medicine, UNC School of Medicine

Ronald Harris, UNC alumnus; student, School of Medicine, Duke University

Danita Horton, graduate student, School of Social Work

Sherick Hughes, Professor, School of Education; Founder and Director, Interpretive Research Suite & Carter Qualitative Thought Lab; Founder and Co-Director, Graduate Certificate in Qualitative Studies

Kenneth Janken, Professor, Department of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies

Dawna Jones, Assistant Dean of Students, Student Affairs; Chair, Carolina Black Caucus

Joseph Jordan, Interim Vice Provost for Academic and Community Initiatives; Director, Sonja H. Stone Center for Black Culture and History; Adjunct Associate Professor, Department of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies

Seth Kotch, Associate Professor, Department of American Studies; Director, Southern Oral History Program

Danita Mason-Hogans, Project Coordinator, Critical Oral Histories, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University; Chapel Hill community member

Josmell Pérez, Director, Carolina Latinx Center

Sydni Janell Walker, Undergraduate Student

Graham Watkins, Undergraduate Student