

Campus Safety Commission Statement on the Board of Trustees Decision Regarding Professor Nikole Hannah-Jones

The Campus Safety Commission denounces the actions of the Board of Trustees (BOT) resulting in the appointment of Nikole Hannah-Jones to an un-tenured rather than a tenured position in the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media. Nikole Hannah-Jones is an award-winning journalist, having received a Peabody Award, a Pulitzer Prize, and a MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant.” Since the two previous recipients of the Knight Chair received tenure at the time of their appointment, it strains credulity to suggest that the reason for the Board’s action related to her background outside of academe.

While we recognize the role that the BOT plays in the tenure and appointment process, we decry the decision made in this case. The faculty identified that Nikole Hannah-Jones is pursuing path-breaking research on the racial history of the United States, which is consistent with the strategic plan endorsed by the BOT to emphasize “diversity, equity, and inclusion in teaching, research and service, and in hiring, evaluation, retention and promotion of under-represented faculty and staff.” Thus, her appointment is consistent with the goals and strategic vision of the University. Further, the actions of the BOT suggest a lack of respect and due deference for the hours of scrutiny and vetting by the faculty in the School of Journalism, the faculty on the Appointments, Promotion, and Tenure Committees, faculty consulted outside the University, and the Dean and Provost.

We believe that this decision makes a mockery of the University's strategic plan to promote faculty diversity and inclusive excellence at UNC-Chapel Hill. Decisions such as this harm the University's reputation throughout all academic disciplines. They also raise questions about whether the University can be a welcoming space and place to have difficult conversations about race and history.

The Campus Safety Commission is committed to a vision of the University where all members of the community, including those who were once not welcome on this campus, feel welcome. The actions of the BOT in this case make it harder for UNC to attract and retain the best faculty, particularly those of color, and hard for us to create the kind of inclusive and welcoming environment for which we strive. We call on the BOT to support a tenured appointment to Professor Hannah-Jones and to take other concrete steps to repair the damage that politically motivated decisions have had on this campus. To be a leader in higher education, UNC must be inclusive and welcoming. The BOT’s mission of furthering the interests of the University is not consistent with actions that harm our reputation for diversity and inclusion. Let’s build a legacy of truth and light.

Approved, May 21, 2021