

Nikole Hannah-Jones turns down UNC-Chapel Hill for Howard



The 1619 Project creator's decision follows a battle over tenure exposing faults among politics, donors, board governance and academic freedom.

Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones is declining to join the ranks of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to accept a tenured job at Howard University, a historically Black institution in Washington, D.C.

The announcement deals a major blow to UNC-Chapel Hill, which initially snubbed her application for tenure before granting her the status Wednesday after weeks of student and faculty outcry and media scrutiny.

In a statement, Hannah-Jones called out the university's board of trustees for succumbing to political pressure to initially ignore her tenure bid. "I have never asked for special treatment," she wrote. "I did not seek it here. All I asked was to be judged by my credentials and treated fairly and equally."

Inside the tenure decision

Hannah-Jones is best known for spearheading the 1619 Project, a massive journalistic effort for The New York Times Magazine that examines how slavery and Black Americans shaped the present-day nation. Her introductory essay for the project won her the Pulitzer Prize.

The project has drawn the ire of some conservatives, including state lawmakers that have sought to ban its teaching in colleges and public schools and claim the work is inaccurate. The Times Magazine has clarified one passage in the project's introductory essay but stood by the work.

UNC-Chapel Hill sought to hire Hannah-Jones as its Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Reporting, a position that has been tenured since the 1980s. Instead, she accepted a tenured position at Howard, where she will train aspiring journalists.

Hannah-Jones accepted the new position after a drawn-out battle to receive tenure at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Conservative groups with connections to the University of North Carolina System's governing board raged against her appointment because of their objections to her work on the 1619

Project, NC Policy Watch reported. That criticism reportedly led Chapel Hill's board members to ignore her tenure recommendation, despite faculty members' strong support for her appointment.

Instead, the school offered Hannah-Jones a five-year contract. She said she initially accepted the contract because she did not want to battle UNC-Chapel Hill or bring controversy to the school. Students and instructors were angered by the decision, with some voicing concerns that it would make it harder for the university to recruit faculty members of color. After the ordeal erupted into a national scandal, UNC-Chapel Hill's trustees granted her tenure in a 9-4 vote.

Hannah-Jones explained why she declined the tenure offer in an interview with CBS' Gayle King on Tuesday. "Look what it took to get tenure," she said. "To only have that vote occur on the last possible day, at the last possible moment, after threat of legal action, after weeks of protests, after it became a national scandal — it's just not something that I want anymore."

Can UNC-Chapel Hill's governing board improve?

In a statement, Hannah-Jones laid out several recommendations for UNC-Chapel Hill. Among them, she urged changes to how the system and university board members are chosen so they reflect demographics and not "whims of political power."

The legislature appoints all of the voting members of the system's governing board. The Republican-controlled state legislature appoints four university trustees, while the system's board of governors chooses eight. The university's student body president also gets a seat.

"If we care about advancing racial equity in higher education, we must pay closer attention to boards and figure out how we hold them accountable, especially when it's clear their loyalty is to the political actors who appointed them and not to the mission of the institution, as was the case for this situation," Royel Johnson, a higher education professor at Penn State University, said in an email to Higher Ed Dive.

Johnson noted that turnover in the university board this year could provide an opportunity to approach things differently, adding that members should work with the faculty committee to ensure faculty voices are central in the tenure process.

College governing boards have become increasingly politicized in recent years, with some members imposing their political will on campus issues that have historically been outside of their domain, The Chronicle of Higher Education reported.

However, governing boards should leave promotion and tenure decisions to faculty members, said Richard Reddick, associate dean for equity, community engagement and outreach at the University of Texas at Austin's education college.

"My hope is that boards across the country would take notice of this," Reddick said.

The events also underscore the influence campus donors can have — positively and negatively, said Felecia Commodore, a higher education professor at Old Dominion University.

For instance, a UNC-Chapel Hill megadonor wrote to several campus officials about his opposition to Hannah-Jones' hire, NC Policy Watch reported.

Yet the Chapel Hill position for which Hannah-Jones had been recruited was endowed by the Knight Foundation. The Knight Foundation was also among three organizations and an anonymous donor to give \$20 million to Howard University, which will be partly used to support appointments for Hannah-Jones and author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates.

"As we talk about governance and leadership," Commodore said, "there is a role that people with purse strings can play in either moving institutions in the wrong direction or moving and supporting institutions that are moving the right direction."

(Higher Dive article, Natalie Schwartz, Reporter)