

# Media outrage erupts over decision not to grant 1619 Project architect Nikole Hannah-Jones tenured professorship

Niles Niemuth  
21 May 2021

Media outrage erupted this week after it was reported that *New York Times* journalist and architect of the discredited 1619 Project, Nikole Hannah-Jones, did not receive a tenured professorship at the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill after the intervention of conservative groups.

Instead of a life-time appointment for her first academic position, Hannah-Jones, who has a Master's degree in journalism from the university and was awarded the school's Distinguished Alumna Award in 2019, was offered, and accepted, a fixed five-year sinecure with the possibility of tenure at the end of her term. Starting July 1, she will be the school's Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism as a Professor of the Practice with funding from the Knight Foundation.

The furor that has erupted over the failure to grant her tenure exposes the bankruptcy of intellectual life in the United States. The campaign demanding it be granted never asserts why she should be given a tenured professorship, aside from the fact that she has been generously awarded, including a Pulitzer Prize and MacArthur Fellowship.

The decision by the board of trustees not to consider and approve the journalism school's recommendation for tenure has ignited fulminations among those layers of the upper middle class who are obsessed with race.

Nancy Costello, director of the First Amendment law Clinic at Michigan State University College of Law, told *USA Today* that the decision was rooted in "white privilege" and claimed that Hannah-Jones is "being penalized for producing in-depth, robust journalism that disturbs privileged people."

*The Adam Atlas Review*, deemed university's failure to bestow tenure an act of suppression and an effort to "punish Hannah-Jones personally, and thereby discredit the 1619 Project as a whole, rather than contest its individual assertions or arguments."

Robert Reich, secretary of labor under President Bill Clinton, tweeted that "cancel-culture conservatives" had blocked tenure for Hannah-Jones "because she's a Black woman who tells the truth about our country."

Undoubtedly, there has been a campaign from the political right against Hannah-Jones and pressure brought to bear on the board of trustees to place limits on her position. The 1619 Project has been wielded as a political football by the Democrats and Republicans since its publication in August 2019.

However, there is no evidence to back up the sweeping claims that this incident exposes systemic racism or sexism. Reviewing the roster of the Hussman School's faculty shows that it is highly diversified. Out of 43 faculty members one-quarter are nonwhite, and 51 percent are women.

As has become increasingly common, the real issues that confront students and faculty are ignored and obscured.

Thousands of people who have dedicated years to producing scholarship and eminent works go year to year trying to find a steady job. Graduate students toil for years in the hope of attaining an academic position in their field of expertise, working for poverty wages as teaching and research assistants, relying on food stamps and handouts just to survive. Graduate students at Columbia and New York University have gone on strike this year to demand better pay and improved

working conditions.

For the average person who makes it into academia, the road to tenure is a difficult process, typically lasting seven years, in which the individual must go through innumerable hoops before being approved by a board of trustees.

Tenure protects academics from firing on the basis of their speech, research or publications, providing them with lifetime job security. Despite its importance for protecting academic freedom, it is rare for academics to achieve the status of tenure, with the American Association of University Professors reporting that the share of faculty with tenure in the US has declined to 21 percent.

Meanwhile, Hannah-Jones is being handed a five-year tenure track position on a golden platter. It is not clear what her academic responsibilities will be. However, it can be certain that they will not come close to the burden borne by a typical professor struggling to attain tenure.

Not only is it difficult for the typical professor to attain tenure, the number of academic positions open to Ph.D. students has been declining. The American Historical Association reported in 2019 that there was an average of 122 applicants per advertised academic position in the history field. A 2013 study by Richard C. Larson, Navid Ghaffarzadegan and Yi Xue published in *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* found that just 12.8 percent of engineering Ph.D. graduates can expect to find an academic position in the US.

The odds of even the most highly accomplished and awarded student of attaining a tenure track position at a university is exceedingly small. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon. Albert Einstein, the greatest physicist of the 20th century, spent years seeking an academic position after submitting his dissertation in 1905. He labored in a Swiss patent office before finally becoming a full professor in 1911. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the greatest philosopher of the 19th century, did not receive a salaried university post until he was 46 years old.

Hannah-Jones is not being given the professorship at UNC at Chapel Hill for any extraordinary genius in her field, journalism. The corpus of work at the *New York Times*, where the average reporter makes over \$100,000 per year, comprises just 23 bylines in the course of

more than six years, averaging about four articles each year. Her focus has been on presenting every issue, from schooling and police violence to the very founding of the country, as fundamentally racial. If the term has any meaning at all, her work makes clear that Hannah-Jones is in fact a racist.

The 1619 Project, which rejects the progressive character of the American Revolution and the Civil War and dismisses the interracial fight against slavery and racial inequality, has been a gift to the right. It has allowed Trump and his fascistic acolytes—who sought to carry out a coup and overthrow the Constitution on January 6—to posture as defenders of America’s democratic heritage.

With all the resources and editors of the paper behind it, the 1619 Project turned out to be nothing more than an exercise in the racist falsification of American history. When the poor journalism of the 1619 Project was exposed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Hannah-Jones claimed to be writing history. And when her shoddy history was demolished by leading American historians, she declared that it was just a work of journalism.

In fact, Hannah-Jones is neither a journalist nor a historian. She is a celebrity, someone who is famous for being famous. She has been created and promoted by the *New York Times* as the public face of an effort to racialize American history and political discourse. All her awards have been based on nothing more than the need to shore up this false narrative.

Far from being marginalized, large sums are being invested in Hannah-Jones. Much is at stake for all the corporations and billionaire investors involved. A single online Zoom lecture in February brought Hannah-Jones a check for \$25,000. From book deals with Random House imprints One World and Kokila, to film, television and documentary deals with Oprah, Lionsgate and Disney owned Hulu, the 1619 Project is being spun into a major money-making operation.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**