



Statement from the OAH Academic Freedom Committee on the Broader Implications of the UNC Decision to Deny a Tenured Appointment to Nikole Hannah-Jones

May 27, 2021—On May 19, we learned of the extraordinary decision to rescind an offer of a tenured appointment at the University of North Carolina’s Hussman School of Journalism and Media to Nikole Hannah-Jones, the award-winning Black journalist who spearheaded the *New York Times* 1619 Project. Instead, the Pulitzer Prize winner and MacArthur Fellow was offered a five-year appointment without tenure. The decision came not from the faculty nor even the UNC administration, but from the UNC Board of Trustees. The dean of the Hussman School, [Susan King](#), [commented](#), “It’s disappointing, it’s not what we wanted and I am afraid it will have a chilling effect.”

As the Academic Freedom Committee of the Organization of American Historians, we see the refusal to hire Jones with tenure as one more public step in the undermining of academic freedom and faculty governance by conservative state legislatures seeking to control the content of the curriculum in American history at public universities and schools across the United States. It is also the kind of punishment that happens particularly to successful intellectuals and scholars of color.

This decision to rescind tenure from the position being offered to Jones comes in a larger context in North Carolina. Six years ago, UNC faculty and students [protested the closing](#) of the UNC Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity by the Board of Governors in a similarly political move that related to the targeting of an individual faculty member. In 2019, the Board of Governors [expressed their disagreement](#) with the university system chancellor’s decision to remove the Confederate memorial “Silent Sam” statue from campus by giving it— together with a multi-million dollar endowment—to the Sons of Confederate Veterans, a group which [The Fayetteville Observer described](#) as “at best an apologist for a slave-holding regime and at worst a racial provocateur.”

Such moves within the UNC system indicate that the university’s state-appointed governance bodies are using their position to further a conservative agenda.

The refusal to offer tenure to Hannah-Jones is directly related to her work on the 1619 Project, which is currently being attacked by Republican-controlled legislatures across the country. State bills banning course content associated with either the 1619 Project itself and/or a vaguely defined “critical race theory” have passed in Idaho and Arkansas and are being proposed or debated in Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Missouri, Iowa, Ohio, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Michigan, South Dakota, Wyoming, Arizona, Tennessee, and, of course, North Carolina. These bills affect both K-12 and college curricula and are part of a national campaign against the recognition of the impact of slavery, race, immigration, and Native dispossession in United States history. The bills continue the work of promoting a nationalist version of American history that identifies critical analysis as “divisive” in the same vein as former President Trump’s [1776 Commission](#). At the heart of that commission’s report and Trump’s executive order establishing the commission is an attempt to officially repudiate arguments that the institution of slavery has played a significant role in the shaping of American law and institutions.

What makes this attack on Hannah-Jones and the 1619 Project so pernicious, as Alex Lichtenstein, editor of the *American Historical Review* (AHR) [wrote](#), is that for the most part, the 1619 Project “reflects how many, if not most, American historians already teach about that past in the undergraduate classroom.” We agree with Lichtenstein that what five historians described in their letter to the *New York Times* as “factual errors” in Nikole Hannah Jones’ introductory

essay, were better described as differences of interpretation and emphasis. The 1619 Project was, as he puts it, an effort to put in front of a wider public a view of slavery and racism as central to the history of the United States, a view that is utterly unremarkable to most historians. “If some historians might quibble with this or that specific conclusion drawn from such an approach, the overall reorientation strikes me as laudable, if unexceptional.” Conservative attacks on the 1619 Project and bills seeking to outlaw curricula that address race and racism effectively outlaw such interpretive debates even as they deny the consensus view among historians of the United States that white supremacy, slavery, and racism were foundational contradictions in the country’s history.

Not since the time of the McCarthy era have American public educational institutions experienced such a sharp political attack on university personnel decisions and the freedom of faculty to choose the curricula for their classes based on their own expertise and the best scholarship in their fields.

As [Silke-Maria Weineck wrote](#) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, conservative activists have argued that “the UNC Board of Governors should amend system policies to require every faculty hire to be vetted by each school’s Board of Trustees.” Weineck argues that such a policy “would almost certainly mean the end not just of responsible historical research in the University of North Carolina system but also the end of climate science, environmental studies, poverty research, and any other investigation that undermines Republican fantasies about the world as it is and as it ought to be. It is nothing less than a blueprint to bring universities under the dominion of the right.”

UNC is a state institution, and the Board of Trustees are acting as agents of state power. One trustee gave *North Carolina Policy Watch* a one-word answer to why the Trustees failed to act to offer Hannah-Jones a tenured appointment as Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism: “[Politics](#).” As the trustee explained, “This is a very political thing. The university and the board of trustees and the Board of Governors and the legislature have all been getting pressure since this thing was first announced last month.” In this context, the refusal to offer Hannah-Jones an appointment with tenure in conjunction with the ongoing efforts to ban materials in the 1619 Project has potential worrying ramifications beyond academic freedom. As the [AAUP has noted](#), freedom of speech and academic freedom are closely related, with one protection relating to the right to freely pursue academic inquiry and the other to “speak out about matters of public concern even when their views are controversial.” The interference with the Hussman School’s hire of a public intellectual because of her association with specific content that the state legislature is seeking to ban strikes at both.

The OAH Committee on Academic Freedom vigorously supports academic freedom, the best practice of history and the historical profession, and therefore condemns the decision to deny tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones and legislative efforts to narrowly define the content of American history that is permitted to be taught in our nation’s classrooms.

The Organization of American Historians Academic Freedom Committee was established in 2013 with the mandate to investigate reports of repressive measures having an impact on historians’ teaching, research, employment, and freedom of expression, and to report its findings to the officers and members of the OAH in ways it finds most useful and appropriate. In 2018, the OAH Executive Board approved the committee’s [Academic Freedom Guidelines and Best Practices](#).

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