



June 22, 2021

Dear Members of the UNC Board of Trustees:

As Chair of UNC's Department of Religious Studies, I urge you to approve the Provost's recommendation to hire Nikole Hannah-Jones with tenure in the Hussman School of Journalism. Doing so will reaffirm the serious commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion and restore confidence in the tenure process at this great public university.

Since arriving at UNC-Chapel Hill in 2005, I have seen our department grow increasingly diverse. I have witnessed the positive impact of this diversity on the breadth of our course offerings and faculty research, our ability to serve the widest range of students, and our increasing excellence as one of the most highly ranked programs of Religious Studies in the country. Over the past decade, we have grappled with the challenges our campus has faced from racial tension to an academic and athletic scandal and the COVID-19 pandemic. Department faculty and staff have given our all for this university and the students despite our exhaustion and lower compensation than at private peer institutions. I fear that the Board's inaction in Nikole Hannah-Jones's tenure case will lead the faculty in my department to reconsider their strong commitment to the university. The burden on BIPOC faculty has been especially great, and I am particularly concerned about this group. As you know, several Black and Indigenous faculty members in other departments have recently left the university to pursue their careers elsewhere. I am worried that BIPOC faculty in our department might do the same. But the matters at stake in this case have the potential to erode the trust of all faculty, including those who are not members of underrepresented groups.

As Department Chair, I have first-hand knowledge of the complex process through which tenure decisions are reached, beginning with external letters by expert reviewers, the deliberations of departmental personnel committees and faculty, and the Chair's letter of recommendation to the tenure and promotion committee and administrators outside the department. A tenure dossier is carefully vetted at every stage before it reaches the Board of Trustees. Having been tasked to write many such letters of evaluation for other academic institutions, I know how labor intensive and demanding this task is. Reading the candidate's published work and providing a detailed assessment of the dossier from an expert's perspective typically takes multiple days. The same holds true for the Chair's letter for tenure cases of departmental faculty members. The Board of Trustees' failure to consider Hannah-Jones devalues this process and leads to the perception that the integrity of the process has been sacrificed for political considerations. This will have a chilling effect on potential new hires and will make it more difficult to recruit and retain faculty. As I prepare to solicit external letters of evaluation for the next round of tenure and promotion

cases in my department, I am also concerned that potential reviewers will be unwilling to invest their time and labor for a university that appears to pay little heed to expert reviews.

Continued inaction by the Board of Trustees will irreparably damage the reputation of this great university and the State of North Carolina. I call on you to restore trust in the tenure process by approving the Provost's recommendation to hire and tenure Nikole Hannah-Jones.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'B. R. Ambros', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Barbara R. Ambros
Professor and Chair
Department of Religious Studies