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Tenure Committees Are Too Tolerant of Mediocrity

A lapse in rigorous evaluation invites outside interference.

THE REVIEW | OPINION

By [Jason Roberts](#)

June 5, 2026

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill once again finds itself in the news due to a tenure controversy. The institution has drawn scrutiny in recent years for its Board of Trustees initially declining to give tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones in 2021 and later a broad delay of tenure votes by the board in the spring of 2025. Recently, the board continued its attack on tenure by refusing to approve a tenured appointment for Kiran Asher in the department of women's and gender studies.

These controversies are unquestionably bad for UNC. The uncertainty that the board's actions have inserted into the typically routine process of promotion and tenure will make all faculty — both tenured and untenured — less likely to accept or keep a position at the university. The quality of faculty who teach and do research at UNC will undoubtedly decline as a direct result of the Board of Trustees' actions.

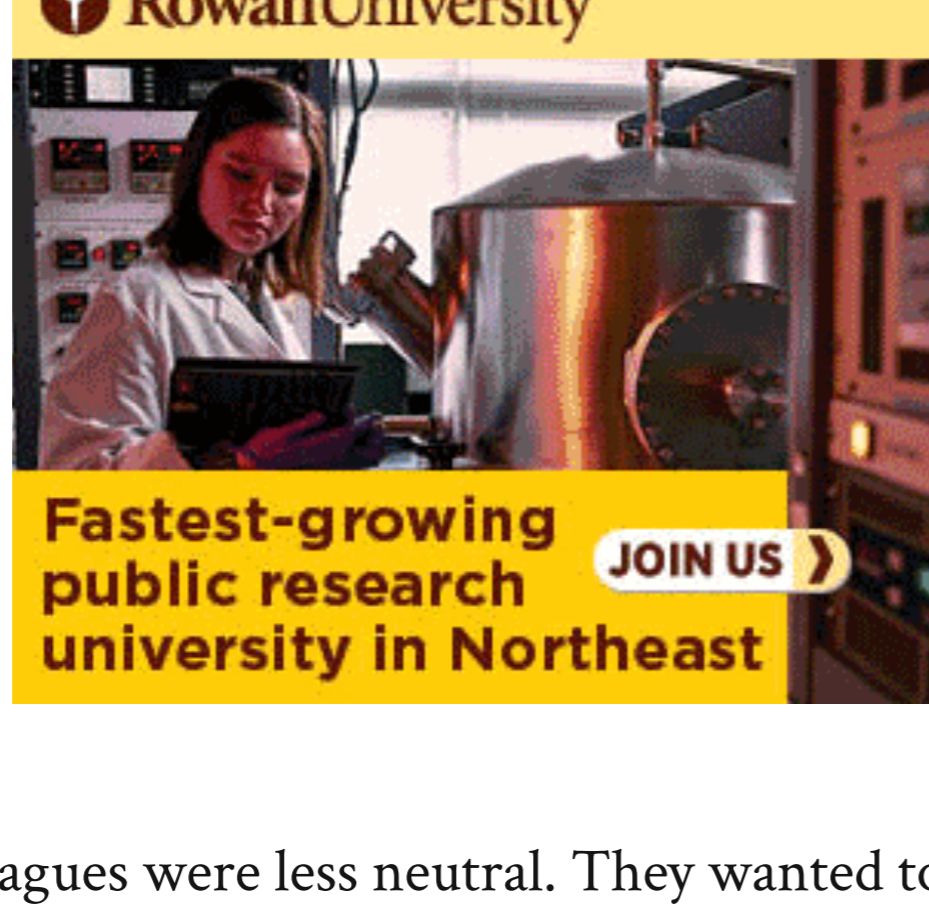
I have not read Professor Asher's dossier and was not privy to the deliberations over her case. What I can say is that the board's rejection of her case represents an institutional failure on multiple levels. UNC's board contains an impressive array of individuals with many professional accomplishments — but does not contain a single academic. Having a panel of nonexperts intervene in and make irreversible personnel decisions is a bad practice for any organization. UNC faculty members and administrators are justifiably upset by such meddling in the tenure and promotion process.

But they should also look at their own role in this failure. In my experience, tenured faculty members, academic departments, faculty committees, and administrators often fail to provide sufficient scrutiny to tenure files. Faculty members are eager to defend the merits of tenure as an institution, but they are often loath to exercise the judgment necessary to maintain the integrity of the process in individual cases. If faculty members, departments, and administrators refuse to do their part to maintain rigor and scholarly objectivity in the tenure process, we undermine the very institution of tenure, and give politicians and board members the ammunition they need to attack, and perhaps dismantle, the entire system.

I have been a tenured member of the political-science department at UNC for more than 15 years; I spent parts of three years on the university's Arts and Sciences Advisory Committee, whose role was to review and act on department recommendations for tenure and promotion across the entire college. In both roles, I saw it as my duty to be a neutral arbiter. Candidates for tenure and promotion certainly deserve serious and fair consideration. But tenure committees have an obligation to UNC and to the state's taxpayers to uphold the standards of an elite R1 university. If we were going to commit the university and the state to granting someone tenure, which implies in most cases a job for life, then it was my view that we should be certain that the candidate was likely to continue to be an active and productive scholar.

In my experience, this was too often the minority view. Both in my department and in the college-level committee, we rarely, if ever, disagreed about the facts. We never diverged on which cases were strong — most of them are — and which were weak. It is not difficult for a faculty member, in any discipline, to identify a thin research record, weak outside letters, a poor record of teaching, or the blurring of the line between activism and scholarship.

Disagreements have always been about what to do with such cases.



I often found that my colleagues were less neutral. They wanted to find a way to get to yes on almost all candidates. Departments were all too willing to send up weak cases, in some instances clearly hoping they would be overlooked at a higher level. Meanwhile, higher-level committees and administrators were quick to assert that it was not their job to question the judgment of departments.

Weak tenure cases are fretted about, but are almost always sent along to the next level.

Outside evaluators, often considered the key piece of evidence in a file, were too often unwilling to carry out their responsibilities. It is easy to find outside evaluators for strong cases, but when weak cases are on the docket, potential evaluators are eager to duck the assignment. Some institutions ignore such refusals, while others count them as negative evaluations. The fact that evaluation committees are left trying to decide if someone who refused to write for a candidate truly had a health or family crisis or is instead trying to duck the responsibility to provide a negative evaluation is absurd.

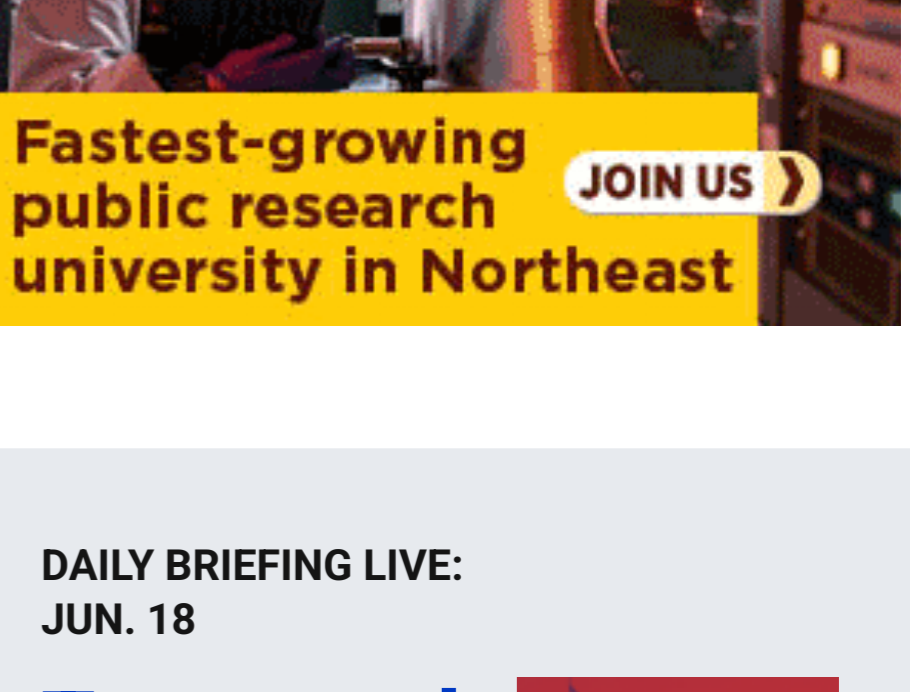
As a result, weak cases are fretted about, but are almost always sent along to the next level. This is true for all disciplines, but much more prevalent, in my experience, in the humanities than in the social or natural sciences. It is also true that the push to diversify faculty ranks has resulted in an unspoken understanding that tenure and promotion standards are applied with some flexibility for candidates who increase diversity.

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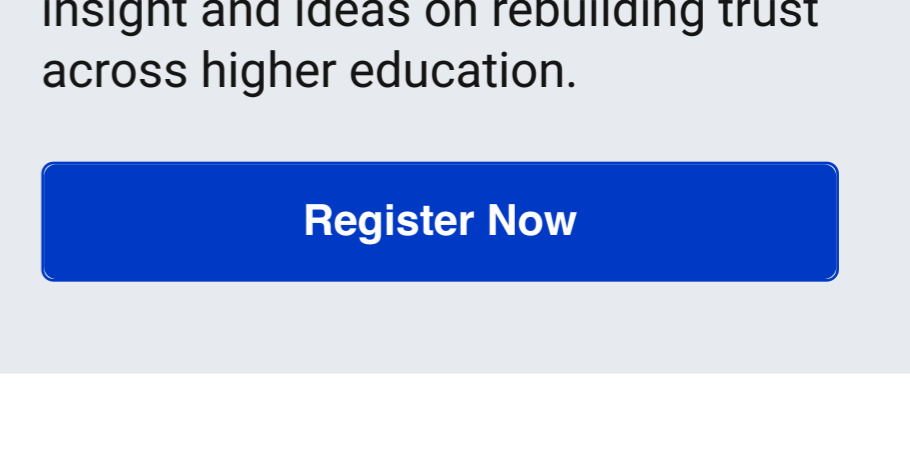
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I wish I could fully join my colleagues in their outrage at the rejection of Professor Asher for a position at our university. I wish I had the utmost confidence that her prospective department, the college- and university-level faculty committees who reviewed her file, the outside evaluators who wrote letters, and the administrators who approved the committee recommendations had provided critical and unbiased scrutiny of her dossier. I wish I could join in the bashing of our Board of Trustees for their meddling in this process. But the truth is I do not have such confidence. Instead, my reaction is: A pox on both your houses.

Let me be clear. I am a strong proponent of tenure. It is my view that faculty members need the protections of tenure and academic freedom to teach controversial topics and pursue truth in their research even when it is politically unpopular to do so. The current assault on academic freedom by the federal and many state governments demonstrates this clearly. However, faculty members and administrators, at UNC and elsewhere, need to look past their outrage and take a hard look at their role in the current attacks on the institution of tenure. If they continue to hold their noses and push forward weak cases, refuse to write for tough cases, blur the lines between activism and scholarship, and hold differing standards based on a candidate's demographics, then they should expect external actors to act for them.

I have never met a faculty member who enjoys voting to deny tenure or promotion to a colleague or enjoys writing a negative tenure evaluation. Voting to fire someone who you have worked with for years and often have personal affinity for is one of the most solemn responsibilities of a tenured faculty member. But if faculty members and administrators want to defend and maintain the institution of tenure, they need to show their boards and other external stakeholders that they are willing to make the judgments necessary to ensure the integrity of the process. If faculty want to keep the institution of tenure, then they alone are going to have to fix it.

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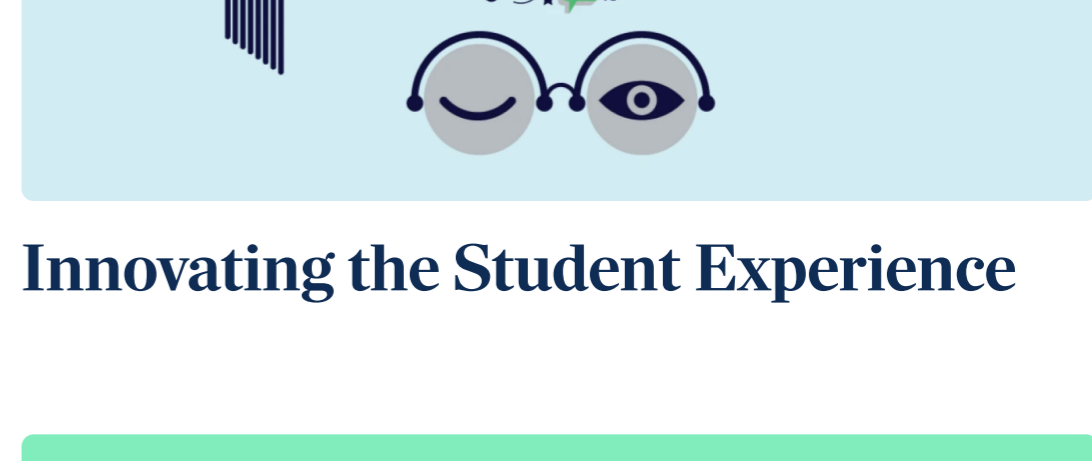
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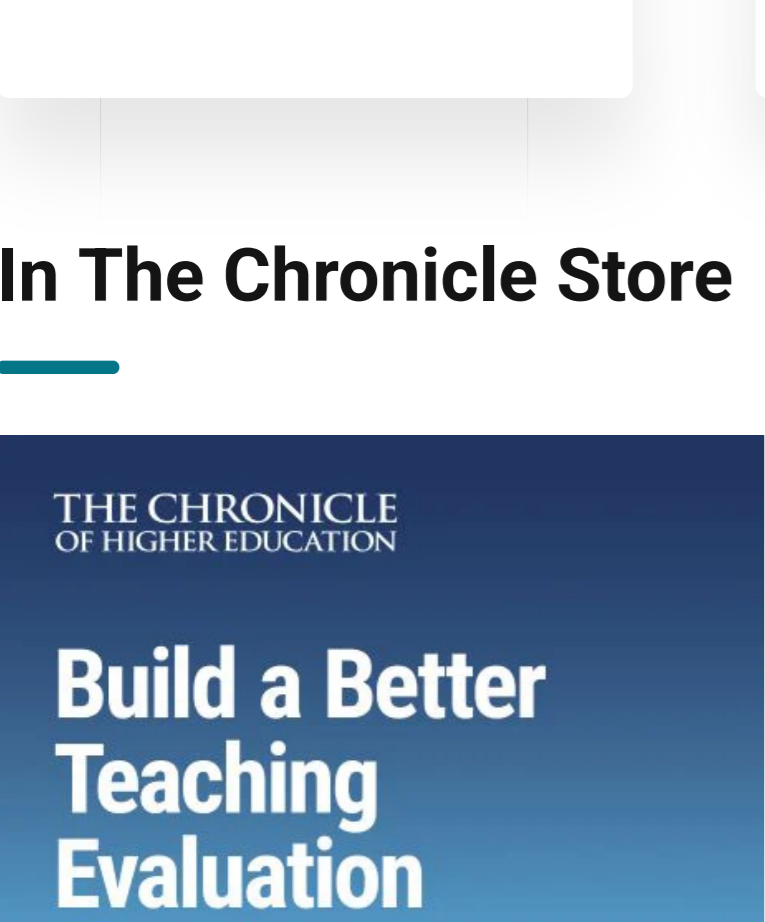


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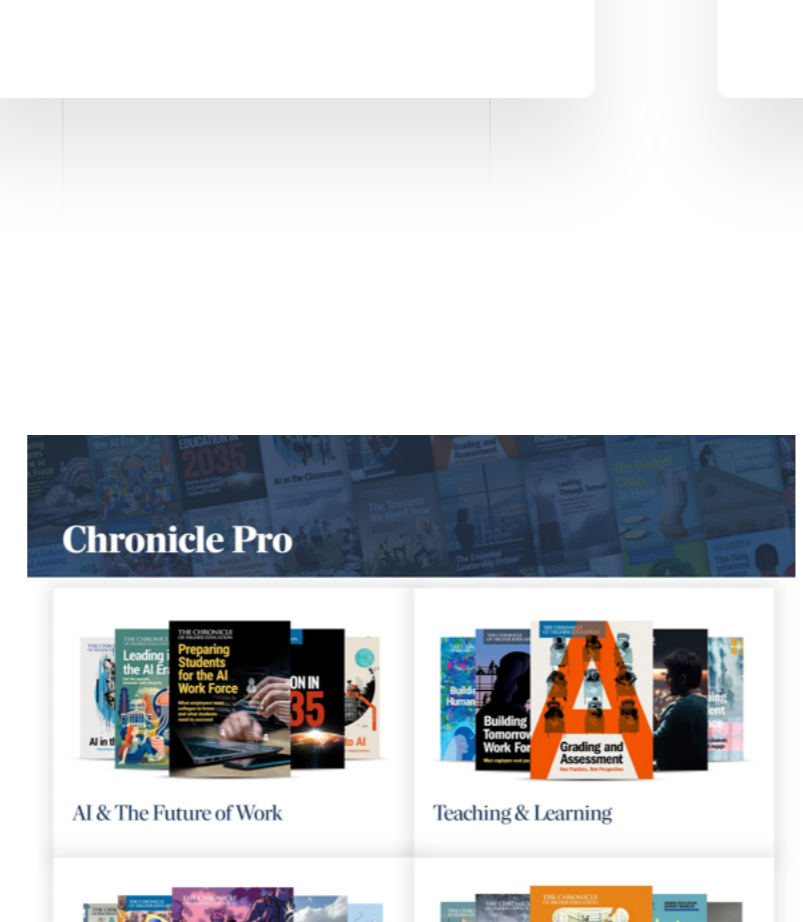


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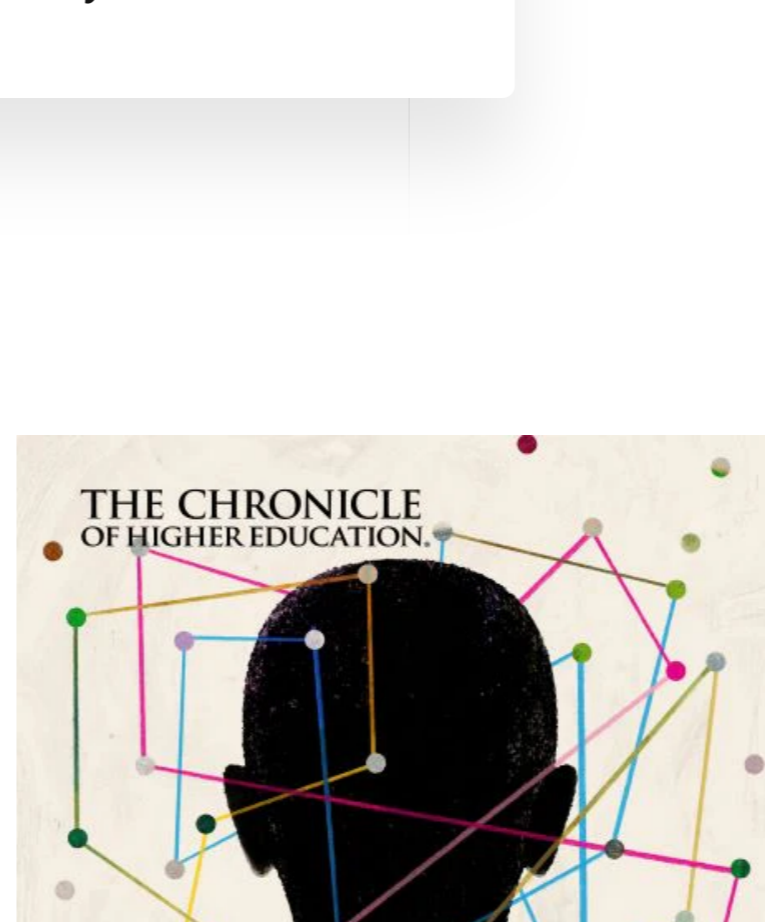
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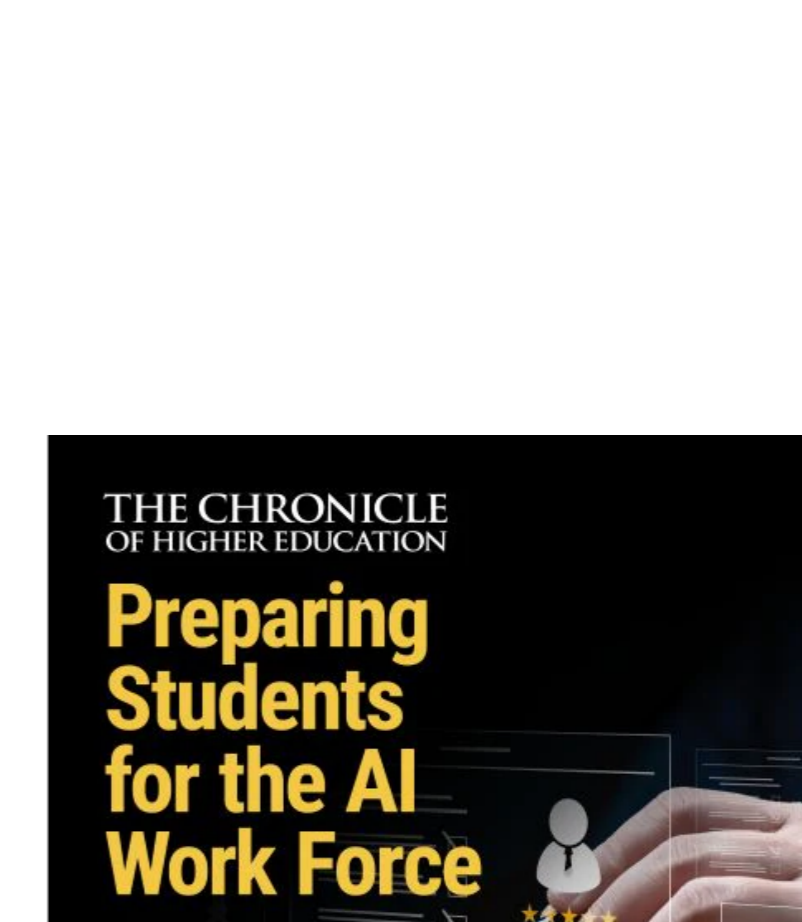
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