

NH EDUCATION

Dartmouth students, alumni alarmed after female professor of color denied tenure

By [Amanda Gokee](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 19, 2023, 10:44 a.m.



A bicyclist passes a college tour group outside the Baker Library at Dartmouth College. CHARLES KRUPA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

HANOVER, N.H. — Patricia Lopez is the kind of professor who will drive a student home in the rain. She did that for Steffi Colao, one of many current and former Dartmouth College students who described Lopez as both caring and brilliant, a shoo-in for tenure. That’s why Colao was so angry when she learned in April that Lopez’s bid for tenure had been rejected, something Colao and other students believe indicates a broader institutional problem.

“There’s nothing left at Dartmouth that made my experience good,” Colao said.

“Everybody else has been pushed out.”

Colao graduated in 2019 and credits Lopez with shaping the course of her studies by encouraging her to write a thesis, and influencing her career decisions, like going on to law school in Los Angeles. She described Lopez as an exceptional instructor and a strong contributor to her academic field. She remained close with Lopez after graduation and supported Lopez’s candidacy for tenure by writing a letter on her behalf.

Now Colao, along with other alumni and current students, is denouncing the college for its decision to reject a woman of color’s bid for tenure. They’re also criticizing the hiring process, which they said lacks transparency and perpetuates white supremacy. They have launched a support campaign that has garnered about 60 statements so far from current students, former students, and faculty members around the country, and are gauging interest in “collective action” on campus. In the [statements](#), professors from other schools describe Lopez as an accomplished scholar, generous colleague, and skilled teacher.

“Something is not adding up, and it’s pretty easy to understand that as institutional racism,” Colao said.

Léonie Newhouse, assistant professor of geography at Durham University, said the

problem is Dartmouth, not Lopez. “The denial of tenure fits a pattern at Dartmouth, where field leading BIPOC scholars are recruited and hired, and then shown the door five or six years down the line,” she said in a [statement](#) collected by Colao and other students.



Dartmouth professor Patricia Lopez (left) with student Jimena Perez. JIMENA PEREZ

Lopez is an assistant professor of geography who came to Dartmouth in 2014 as a postdoctoral fellow. In 2016, she was promoted to assistant professor, according to [her CV](#). On her website, [she notes](#): “Central to my thinking as an educator is the importance of building relationships of mutuality and trust to foster an inclusive learning and living environment.”

Lopez did not respond to a request for comment on this story. She is still teaching at the college, where she is guaranteed at least one more year of employment.

Her colleague Abigail Neely, an associate professor of geography, said Lopez has made Dartmouth a better place and called the tenure denial a “tremendous loss for the institution.”

“Professor Lopez is an exceptional educator and exactly the kind of professor higher education needs right now as it grapples with the ongoing impacts of racism, sexism, gender discrimination, and ableism,” Neely said in an e-mail to the Globe. “It is in tenure decisions that universities truly reveal their values and priorities.”

In response to the Globe’s question about why Lopez was not granted tenure, Dartmouth President Philip Hanlon directed a request for comment to a university spokesperson.

Dartmouth spokesperson Diana Lawrence explained in a written statement that a faculty committee makes tenure recommendations to Dartmouth’s president. If the president agrees, the Board of Trustees makes a final vote.

“Full-time faculty members oversee the tenure decision-making process, and all aspects of the tenure and promotion review procedure are deemed confidential,” Lawrence said.

Lawrence said three criteria are taken into consideration when making tenure decisions: excellence in scholarship, teaching, and service to community. And she called the decision to grant tenure the most critical personnel decision made by the institution, since it is a commitment that can last for decades.

“The strength of the tenure decision process lies in a system of layered review that incorporates multiple levels of internal and external evaluation assuring a thoroughly

considered outcome,” she said.

“Whenever a faculty member is denied tenure or leaves the College, colleagues and students who have worked closely with them experience an understandable sense of loss,” she added.

Colao and other students said this isn’t an isolated rejection, but part of a pattern where people of color are passed over for tenured positions. Colao pointed to the tenure denial of [Aimee Bahng](#) in 2016, as well as [Derrick White and Sharlene Mollett](#).

Among the 338 tenured professors in the Arts and Sciences at Dartmouth, 32 are “minority” women and 42 are “minority” men, compared to 93 white women and 168 white men, according to a [factbook](#) published by Dartmouth. One tenured faculty member is categorized as “international,” and the racial identities of two others were unknown. That means less than 10 percent of tenured faculty are women of color and about 22 percent are people of color. White men make up just shy of 50 percent of the tenured faculty.

Colao said that in contrast, [45 percent](#) of the class of 2026 are students of color.

Over the past three years, Lawrence said the college has made some headway on this front, increasing the percentage of tenured faculty in the Arts and Sciences who are BIPOC to 22 percent. The percentage of BIPOC faculty on the tenure track has gone up by 42 percent.

“Dartmouth has made progress in diversifying tenure-track faculty over the past decade, but we must and will do more,” she said. “Accelerating the pace of this work remains a major priority.”

Lawrence did not answer the Globe’s question about the percentage of faculty who

receive tenure. “We do not release that information publicly,” she said in an e-mail. In 2022, [12 professors](#) received tenure.

Nicholas Reo, an associate professor of Native American and Indigenous Studies and Environmental Studies at Dartmouth, said that during a new faculty orientation in 2012 peers and deans told him that roughly 50 percent of those who apply for tenure receive it.

Lawrence said those numbers are not accurate today.

For Dartmouth student Jimena Perez, there is cause for concern. Lopez is her thesis adviser and has mentored Perez for two years.

“Dartmouth continues to have poor retention of BIPOC faculty,” Perez said. “There’ve been numerous faculty of color denied tenure or structurally pushed out of Dartmouth and it’s concerning because [Lopez] is the only woman of color faculty in the geography department.”

No other women of color are tenured or on the tenure track in the department, another professor confirmed, although there are other women of color who are researchers and instructors.

Perez said Lopez’s presence brings students from diverse backgrounds into the department.

“Similar to Professor Lopez, I’m also Mexican and a first-generation student,” she said. Seeing elements of her own experience reflected in her professor helped Perez imagine pursuing a career in geography. She’s been accepted to pursue a PhD in geography at Berkeley, and won a competitive National Science Foundation graduate research [fellowship](#).

Perez sent an e-mail to alumni on May 15 alerting them to Dartmouth’s decision to reject Lopez and requesting support. She said students in the geography department flock to Lopez, who is popular given demand for her classes and as a thesis adviser.

According to Colao, the group has two goals: to show love and appreciation for Lopez and to put pressure on Dartmouth to promote faculty of color and to make the tenure process more transparent.

“The tenure decision was not public, and it’s really hard to find any public information about it,” Colao said. “There’s still a lot that Dartmouth couches in mystery — what happens here, who is up for tenure, what are the results?”

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