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June 3, 2026

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Opinion

Colao: Stop Pushing Professors of Color Out

Professor Lopez's recent tenure denial is emblematic of Dartmouth's discriminatory tenure decisions.



By **Steffi Colao**

Published May 9, 2023



Throughout and after college, I've had to ask a lot of my professors: recommendation letters, thesis supervisions, career advice and article edits. When I was asked to write a tenure evaluation for geography professor Patricia (tish) Lopez, it was a no-brainer — I could finally reciprocate some of that energy by advocating *for* her. Professor Lopez is one of the College's most beloved teachers, according to both

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current students and alumni. Not only that, but she's exactly the type of professor the Dartmouth administration promises its students. The opportunity to work and learn with her remains one of the reasons I'm grateful to have gone to Dartmouth, despite my complicated feelings about the College.

On April 20, 2023, Dartmouth denied tenure to Professor Lopez. If it weren't obvious already, Professor Lopez's shocking tenure denial makes it clear: Dartmouth has a problem. Dartmouth has a terrible track record with retaining faculty of color. As of 2022, only 13 women professors of color were tenure-track, compared to 25 white women professors, out of 150. Only 21 percent of faculty are people of color, yet 45 percent of the class of 2026 are students of color. There is a serious lack of faculty representation to support students of color. Professor Lopez's denial is symptomatic of Dartmouth's inability to support faculty, staff and students of color.

I'm angry, as are many alumni. But following Professor Lopez's example, I don't want to talk about anger. I want to talk about care. We as alumni care about Professor Lopez, as well as our other former professors. Our professors have provided us countless hours of care. Yet Dartmouth does not care about the

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professors we've loved the most. I, and other alumni, are asking Dartmouth to realign its values when it comes to tenure decisions: we want Dartmouth to care about its faculty of color, we want Dartmouth to care about the experiences of its current and former students and we want Dartmouth to care about all the labor it requires of professors when it makes tenure decisions, particularly the time-consuming care work — like mentorship or support — that disproportionately falls to younger faculty of color.

My first winter on campus in 2016, students protested the Dartmouth Committee Advisory to the President's decision to deny tenure to Aimee Bahng, after tenure denials to Derrick White, Sharlene Mollett and numerous other faculty of color. The year prior to my arrival on campus, student activists had just presented Dartmouth with the Freedom Budget, a set of goals which included in its demands increasing the representation of faculty of color to at least 47%. The Freedom Budget specifically noted that “because professors of color are often called upon for mentorship and service work, tenure processes should recognize these forms of labor.” Yet almost a decade later, CAP has not changed its pattern of discrimination, and Dartmouth has not

done better. Still, just 12 percent of its tenure-track faculty are people of color. It is once again time for a serious reckoning with the unjust tenure process.

These tenure denials show two things. One, that CAP acts in complete disconnect, if not total opposition, to student opinion. CAP does not retain the educators who students clearly love, value and want to work with. Their method of evaluating tenure candidates does not prioritize what students value — mentorship, faculty involvement and support. Professor Lopez’s student evaluations speak for themselves. She’s described as “outstanding,” “amazing,” “definitely the most compassionate AND smart[est] professor I have ever had,” “one of the most understanding people I have met” and “a passionate geographer that made me [fall] in love with her area [of study].” Students love and care about Professor Lopez, and her classes make a difference.

Second, CAP clearly does not value or respect the disproportionate labor that falls to faculty of color, particularly younger, woman-identifying and queer faculty of color. There are many reasons for this. Dartmouth is a predominantly white institution, and in an overwhelmingly white, rural town, many students of color need faculty who can

help them navigate this often isolating experience. Students also look to professors who might share their beliefs or their politics, feeling more comfortable seeking mentorship from someone who “gets it.” On the other side, white students also often feel more entitled to request labor from faculty of color. As previously explained by Professor Treva Ellison, who has since left Dartmouth, “the temporary, precarious and disavowed labor of people of color at Dartmouth is [the College’s] purposeful and intentional diversity solution.”

When faculty of color, particularly those on the tenure track, receive disproportionate asks for recommendation letters and thesis advisories, they are spending time on this work that they cannot spend on research and writing. The year I wrote my thesis, Professor Lopez had the most supervision requests of any professor in the geography department, and in one month she received 20 recommendation letter requests. But much of this care work is immeasurable. I saw Professor Lopez attend student performances, answer emails almost immediately, meet with students in coffee shops and have a line out the door for office hours. I’ve never had another professor who seemed so willing to develop meaningful

relationships with students. The trust she cultivated is not an accident or mere popularity — it is the product of her very intentional commitment to care work as part of being a professor.

Professor Lopez loves and cares about her students, as do many professors. But that does not mean that the work she does is not “work,” or that it is entirely her “choice.” I would not have finished a thesis, participated in research or maybe even stayed at Dartmouth if I did not have her support, and I think a lot of students can say that. In that sense, her care work is not only time-consuming but invaluable to student success at Dartmouth. Yet CAP seems to devalue this care work — and its burden on faculty of color — by disproportionately denying tenure to professors who have made this investment.

Dartmouth prides itself on having “innovative scholars who love to teach.” Presently, Dartmouth “ranks number 5 in undergraduate teaching.” Its current Call to Lead Campaign urges investment in Dartmouth’s “distinctive educational model,” described as an “incomparable student experience ... placing topflight teacher-scholars in the classroom,” with professors who are “readily available to their students outside of classroom hours.” Dartmouth capitalizes on the care work that its professors do, using this

labor to fundraise and advertise. Clearly, this work has considerable value to the administration. If Dartmouth wants to trade on faculty mentorship, availability and student connection, it needs to reward faculty like Professor Lopez who are emblematic of this “incomparable” educational model.

I am tired of seeing people I care about pushed out of this school, whether through tenure denials or otherwise. I and other alumni call on Dartmouth to do better by its current faculty, staff and students of color. We ask that Dartmouth stop disrespecting faculty that actually made us grateful to have gone there, who made it possible for us to stay and who invested in us as scholars and humans. Most importantly, we want Dartmouth to seriously investigate and reject the white supremacy embedded in its tenure evaluation processes, which devalues and actively punishes professors of color for the care work that is disproportionately asked of them.

Steffi Colao is a Dartmouth alum who graduated in 2019 with a major in geography. Colao is writing on behalf of a group of students, alumni and scholars who are organizing as “Dartmouth Denies Tenure.”

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be the original work of the submitter. Submissions may be sent to both opinion@thedartmouth.com and editor@thedartmouth.com. Submissions will receive a response within three business days.

Correction Appended (May 9, 1:35 p.m.):

A previous version of this article incorrectly spelled Professor Lopez' preferred name. The article has been updated.



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