

LATINO

Texas A&M will pay \$1M to Black professor following botched hiring and internal review

The university acknowledged mistakes were made after they reduced an offer with tenure for Kathleen McElroy, a veteran journalist and academic, after conservative backlash.



— Kathleen McElroy, who graduated from Texas A&M in 1981, was announced as the director of journalism at a ceremony on June 13 in College Station, Texas. The university later reneged its initial offer as a tenured director. Meredith Seaver / AP

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By **Suzanne Gamboa**

An internal investigation of Texas A&M's botched hiring of Kathleen McElroy, a journalism professor and veteran journalist who is Black, concluded race and gender were not factors in the decision to reduce her tenure offer to a one-year position, following conservative backlash over her work around diversity.



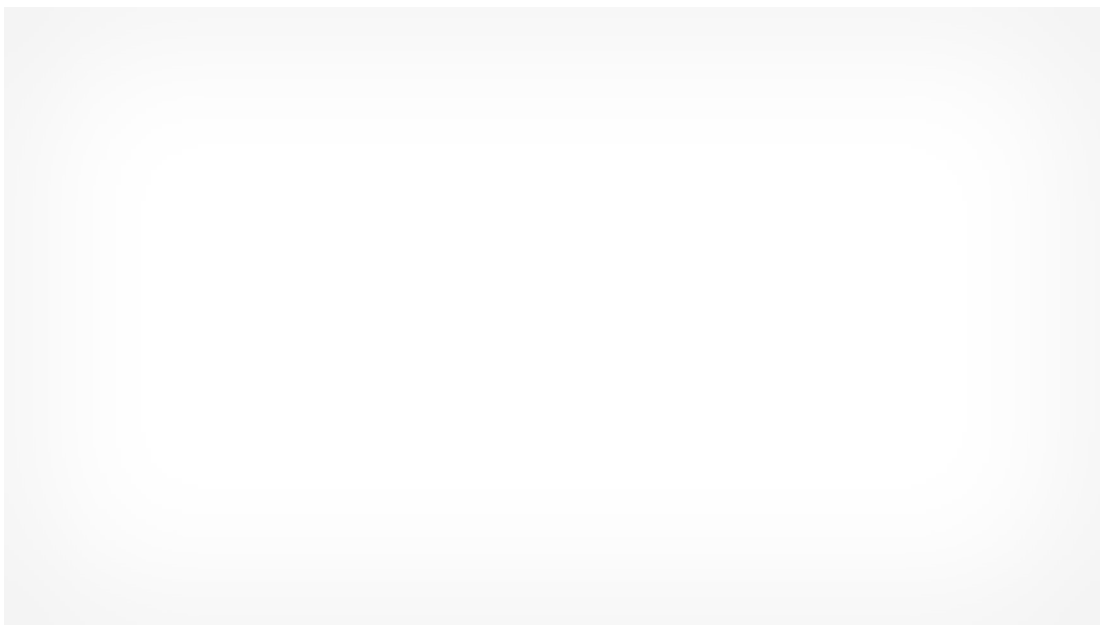
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The Texas A&M University System said Thursday it has agreed to pay \$1 million to McElroy in a settlement reached after watering down its initial job offer. In a statement, Texas A&M leadership apologized to McElroy "for the way her employment application was handled" and said it "has learned from its mistakes and will strive to ensure similar mistakes are not repeated in the future."

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The university had signed an offer letter in a public ceremony saying it would hire her as director in a tenured position to revive its journalism program. Soon afterward it reneged on the offer amid right-wing backlash over her work for The New York Times and interest in diversity, equity and inclusion.

The Texas A&M System [acknowledged in its review](#) that system and university administrators made mistakes in the hiring process, as certain procedures were not followed. Race and gender were not involved in any of the decisions made, the university said.

“The (Office of General Counsel) did not identify any other evidence that race was a factor in the internal hiring process. In addition, there was no evidence of gender as a factor in the hiring process,” the internal report said.

Some of the documents released with the report show what McElroy was up against.

"A win for Aggies! The leftwing "journalism" professor/DEI advocate that A&M tried to recruit won't be taking the job. After she was exposed by @Texas Scorecard for her racist beliefs, she decided staying at UT was a better fit," says a photo of a tweet under the name Michael Quinn Sullivan, the publisher of Texas Scorecard, a far-right website. The site published stories about her hiring that focused on her diversity work. The tweet that was part of a text from a board member included a photo of a Texas Tribune story about the hiring mess.

McElroy ended up refusing the watered-down offer for a one-year position and withdrew her resignation from the University of Texas at Austin.

The hiring fiasco pushed the university into the national controversy over attempts to curtail programs aimed at improving the presence of Black, Latino and other faculty and students in universities, government and other parts of society.

It also led to the resignation of Katherine Banks, former Texas A&M president. José Luis Bermúdez resigned from his position as interim dean of College of Arts and Sciences, which includes the journalism department, though he remains a professor there.

McElroy said in the joint statement issued with the investigation report that "Texas A&M University remains in my heart despite the events of the past month." She said she would not forget the support her fellow "Aggies" showed her and that she hoped the resolution of the matter "will reinforce A&M's allegiance to excellence in higher education and its commitment to academic freedom and journalism."

Hiring, then pushback

McElroy told the Texas Tribune last month that soon after the celebratory signing of an offer letter, she got word from Bermúdez of pushback from within the Texas A&M System over her hiring. The internal investigation verified that there were opposition phone calls and emails, but also said that her hiring had generated positive feedback, too.

McElroy told the Texas Tribune that Bermúdez told her he could not protect her from university leaders facing pressure to fire her because of “DEI hysteria,” a reference to conservative political campaigns against diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

However, Bermúdez told investigators he did not recall his specific comments to McElroy, the report said.

Investigators said Bermúdez told them he made comments to McElroy saying he believed “certain outside parties critical of the McElroy hiring could have been motivated in part by race.” Investigators said he told them he didn’t see any actions or comments from A&M officials indicating race was a factor in the hiring or in the offer change.

Texas A&M is the main campus in one of the two largest university systems in Texas. The other is University of Texas.

McElroy has a 30-year career in journalism, including a couple of decades at The New York Times in several management and editing positions. She also worked for the all-sports daily The National, and at the hometown paper of Texas A&M, the Bryan-College Station Eagle. According to her UT Austin bio, her research interests include racial discourse, collective memory, sports media and obituaries. She earned her doctorate in 2014 from UT’s School of Journalism.

The New York Times reported she was a “devoted alumna” of Texas A&M who helped start a fund to support its newspaper, The Battalion.

Concerns over Texas Legislature's anti-DEI efforts

The investigators said McElroy was verbally offered the position on May 11. Around that time, former president Kathy Banks asked to keep the offer hush-hush until the Legislature’s session was over, amid debates over anti-DEI and anti-tenure legislation.

Senior vice president Susan Ballabina first raised the issue of possible blowback under anti-DEI atmosphere in May.

Investigators said the original job posting said the position was eligible for tenure, but the appointment letter McElroy signed provided “tenure on arrival” contingent on approval by Texas A&M, the A&M System and board of regents. Investigators say the letter is clear that the job is “at will,” meaning she could be fired at any time.

Emails and other documents released in response to Texas open government requests showed there were fears of another [Nikole Hannah Jones controversy](#) and the optics of the hiring of a Black New York Times journalist while the Legislature was meeting.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott signed new laws limiting race and inclusion discussions on college campuses and [banning DEI offices](#) on campuses as well as restricting tenure.

Similar strikes at diversity are being seen in other parts of the country, such as Florida, and recently the Supreme Court struck down college affirmative action programs.

Conservative backlash led to a denial of tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones by University of North Carolina, despite being recommended for it by a tenure committee. Her predecessors had been given tenure upon appointment. Hannah-Jones also is a Black woman and veteran reporter. Hannah-Jones won the Pulitzer Prize for her work on the 1619 Project, a New York Times project that delved into slavery's role in the nation's formation and subsequent history as well as Black Americans' influence on key aspects of American life and culture.

In November 2019, Harvard denied tenure to [Lorgia Garcia-Peña](#), a former associate professor of Romance Languages and Literature who is a Black Latina, causing an outcry. A professor on her tenure committee had referred to her scholarship as “activism” rather than research, The New Yorker magazine reported.



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