

FORUM

Dear Governor: Help protect HBCUs



Ken Spalding
Guest Columnist

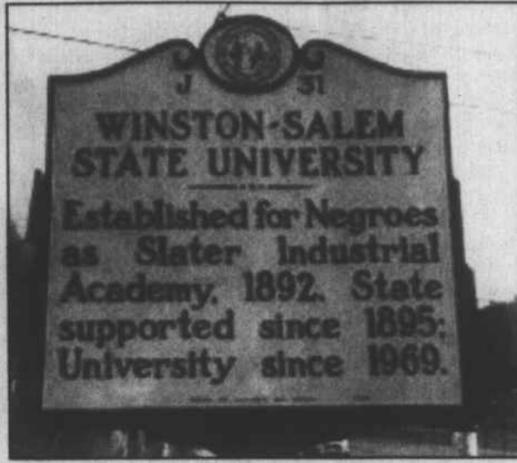
Governor Pat McCrory
Office of the Governor
20301 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-0301

Dear Governor McCrory:

I call upon you to join me in supporting all of our state supported Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and in opposing attempts to close any of these most valuable institutions of high learning. These institutions have produced tens of thousands of proactive and successful North Carolinians including a governor of this state and a nationally renowned astronaut.

I bring this to your attention at this time because countless North Carolinians are extremely concerned about the previous unwarranted actions of the Republican controlled University Board of Governors and what those actions portend for the existing state supported HBCUs.

The unjustified termination of Dr. Tom Ross, University President, and the underserved elimination of the three university-based centers which focused on the environment, poverty and voter engagement demonstrate a proclivity of this Board to



Under the guise of cost savings, it is anticipated that the next ideological target will be our state's HBCUs. I wish to point out that these important institutions provide a wide range of educational opportunities to thousands of minority students along with non-minority students, as well. These institutions provide essential aca-

dem skills which create a pathway to success and a productive economic future for so many of our young people.

The financial impact of HBCUs on the communities which house them are critical to their vitality and economic security. The inter-relationship between "town and gown" is unmistakable and important to our state's success.

Therefore, as Governor and leader of your party, I call upon you to make it clear to your Republican controlled Board of Governors that funding should be secure for these productive and successful HBCUs in North Carolina. We need no further divisive actions in this state. Educational opportunities in our HBCUs continue to open doors for all North Carolinians who choose to avail themselves of their culturally rich and important value.

Sincerely,

Ken Spalding

(Ken Spalding is a Democratic candidate for governor of North Carolina.)

Doomed UNC centers sang the wrong songs



Steve Ford
Guest Columnist

It's easy to imagine what the conservative Republicans who rule North Carolina's legislative roost were thinking: "Here we've gone to all the trouble to take control of the General Assembly. We appoint the University of North Carolina system's Board of Governors. We set the system's budget.

"So why should we have to put up with the jibes of an impudent Democrat law professor who uses his university job to accuse us of ignoring poverty? What do he and his liberal pals know about putting more money in poor people's pockets? They don't even understand that tax cuts are the way to boost the economy.

"We may not be able to shut this guy up completely, but we're counting on our minions on the Board of Governors to knock him down to size. After all, we didn't put those folks on the board just because we liked their looks!"

There's no telling what sort of signals Republican legislators may actually have sent to board members regarding the fate of UNC-Chapel Hill's Gene Nichol and the anti-poverty center he has headed since 2008.

But after a months-long evaluation of 240 scholarly centers and institutes across the UNC system — an evaluation ordered up

by those same legislators — a grand total of three flunked the test. Nobody could have been the least bit surprised that among the trio hit with an administrative death sentence was Nichol's Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity.

That organization must close by Sept. 1, as must NC Central University's Center for Civic Engagement and Social Change and East Carolina University's Center for Biodiversity. Of course, if there hadn't been such an obvious desire to whack the poverty center, the other two might have avoided being dragged down with it. But with their emphasis on social justice issues and environmental protection, they proved to be expedient targets as well.

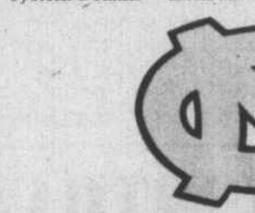
To those of us who think that promoting civic engagement in pursuit of social justice and encouraging the study of the effects of climate change and other environmental threats are good things, zapping those two centers rubs salt in an already painful wound.

Certainly, it reflects conservative animosity toward agendas that are commonly assigned a liberal label — even if encouraging people to vote and following the paths of science where they lead are activities that should appeal across ideological lines.

Freedom flummoxed

The common denominator here is a stifling of academic efforts that run afoul of conservative

orthodoxy and Republican political convenience. That's a blow to academic freedom, almost by definition. It risks tarnishing one of North Carolina's most precious assets, its nationally renowned system of public higher education. No wonder there's been an outcry up and down that system's ranks — from fac-



ulty, students, and administrators.

There's no getting around the fact that the poverty center, for all of Nichol's important efforts to rouse North Carolinians to the scale and consequences of poverty in their midst, has operated with a certain Democratic flavor.

Nichol himself, during an earlier phase of his career in Colorado, ran in Democratic primaries for the U.S. Senate and House, losing both times. Fast-forward to 2005, when as UNC's law school dean he helped recruit former U.S. Sen. John Edwards as the center's first, part-time director. The center thus gave Edwards, the Democratic candidate for vice president in 2004, a temporary base of operations as he geared up for what became his failed populist bid for the party's presidential nomination in 2008. Republicans were not amused.

After Nichol was named to the director's job, he became a thorn in the

side of state leaders who he insisted were not doing enough to fight the poverty that plagued North Carolina's inner cities, struggling small towns and rural outback. Democrats weren't spared from his barbs, but the Republicans who took over the legislature in 2010 really felt the heat.

Their patience might well have snapped during 2013, when the Moral Monday protests led by the NAACP focused national attention on the state's rightward lurch. Nichol and the N.C. NAACP chapter under the Rev. William Barber had teamed to explore and expose the poverty problem, with Nichol contributing a series of op-ed articles that ran in *The News & Observer*.

Although Nichol was justifiably proud of those articles — listing them as among the poverty center's accomplishments in his attempt to convince the Board of Governors to keep the center alive — his message was clear: Republican leaders, including Gov. Pat McCrory, were doing nothing of substance to alleviate the poverty in which many thousands of North Carolinians were ensnared, and indeed were making matters worse.

Still, Nichol's outspokenness was not among the

reasons cited by the Board of Governors committee in recommending that the poverty center be closed.

Free market solutions?

The committee noted that UNC-Chapel Hill "is working on other, multi-disciplinary poverty efforts" — as if that would eliminate the value of a center focused solely on examining poverty's reach, causes and remedies.

Perhaps it was fair for the panel to question the poverty center's tie to the law school as opposed to, say, the university's School of Social Work or Department of Public Policy — although a fair response would be that it was a law professor who figured out how to make the concept work and secured outside funding to run it.

But the most telling critique was that the center "did not provide a wide-range (sic) of alternatives for addressing poverty."

In other words, the center didn't favor tax cuts to help the "job creators" of whom Republicans are so solicitous.

It didn't favor cutting back on unemployment benefits so that people would be even more desperate to find work that often simply isn't there.

It didn't favor blaming poor people for their own predicament.

Among the steps the poverty center has conspicuously, and properly, favored is a robust investment in public education — the kind of investment that's made even more dif-

ficult by the legislature's fixation on lower taxes. Nichol — recipient of the Council of Churches' Faith Active in Public Life award — has written forcefully for the Council about education's power as an anti-poverty antidote.

Now the Board of Governors, in cracking down on three university centers whose agendas challenge Republican dogma, moves to enforce a needlessly constricted view of how public universities can serve the people in whose name they operate.

Even when the affected personnel such as Nichol hold tenured posts and thus have a degree of job protection if they continue to speak out — as Nichol says he intends to do — the board's action hampers work that's entirely consistent with the mission of a public university system.

That's especially so in the case of the UNC system, which over the decades has spearheaded so much of North Carolina's social and economic progress. All those who want that progress to continue — and to be shared by our neighbors who still find themselves on the outside of the prosperity window, looking in — should be sad to see the universities' legacy of activism in behalf of positive social change now being eroded.

Steve Ford, former editorial page editor at Raleigh's News & Observer, is now a Volunteer Program Associate at the North Carolina Council of Churches

The bullying politics of revenge continues in Raleigh



Chris Fitzsimon
Guest Columnist

Raleigh during the last four years was on the wane can't have much hope left after watching the Senate leadership last week.

The Senate not only voted to change the election districts in county commission races in Wake County and city council contests in Greensboro, they refused to even allow debate on the Senate floor about allowing people in those communities to have a say about the changes in their own local elections.

The political arrogance and overreach is breathtaking, even for the crowd currently in charge in Raleigh — and that's saying something.

The Senate approved plans by Sen. Trudy Wade to change Greensboro elections and Sen. Chad Barefoot to change districts for the Wake County Commission with both senators using the same justifi-

cations, that power in the current system in both areas has become too concentrated and the districts needed to be redrawn to better serve all the people of Greensboro and Wake County.

Putting aside the irony of Senate leaders complaining about an undemocratic concentration of power, the justification is absurd on its face.

The bills to change the elections didn't come after a popular uprising in either area. No mass of voters in Greensboro or Wake County came to the General Assembly demanding a different way to select their local leaders.

No, what happened is that votes in both areas elected Democrats and the Republicans in control of the General Assembly simply can't have that, especially in two of state's largest urban areas. So after losing the elections, they used their supermajorities in Raleigh to change the rules of the elections the next time the voters go to the polls.

As brazen and appalling as the abuse of power seems, taken in the context of the last few years it's not all that surprising. There's been a war on urban areas of the state since the Republicans took over the House and Senate, from attacks on the

water system in Asheville to attempting to change who runs the Charlotte airport.

They have already changed the elections in school board races in Guilford County and Wake County and they abolished the privilege license fees cities charge businesses, costing cities millions of dollars. They don't like the urban areas and they certainly don't like the way the elections in cities are turning out these days.

And not just liberals are complaining about the heavy-handed tactics. Gov. Pat McCrory, a fellow Republican, said recently that the General Assembly should stay out of local issues. The next day, Senator Barefoot introduced his bill to distort the Wake County Commission races for Republican advantage.

Senate Republicans don't listen to their own governor. They don't listen to anybody. And they are not too interested in what the people of North Carolina think either.

That was made clear during the debate on the Senate floor about the Wake County and Greensboro power-grabbing proposals. Democrats offered amendments to both bills to put the changes up for a referendum, to let the people affected by the

proposal actually have a say in it.

But in both cases, Senate leaders wouldn't even allow the subject to be debated, much less voted on by the entire Senate. Instead they used a parliamentary move to kill the idea.

The people can't vote on changes to their own elections and the people they send to Raleigh can't even talk about whether they should have that right. Senate leaders know best.

The episode brings to mind the quote from Senator Tommy Tucker a couple of years ago when he famously told someone expressing a contrary point of view, "I am the senator. You are the citizen. You need to be quiet."

Senate leaders just told the people of Raleigh and Greensboro the same thing last week. They know better and they'll decide who runs your school board and city council and don't really care what you or the people who represent you in the Senate think about it. You need to be quiet.

Chris Fitzsimon writes for NCPolicyWatch.com.