



New Politics at the University of North Carolina

By Jedediah Purdy

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January 16th, Tom Ross, the president of the University of North Carolina, and John Fennebresque, the chair of its board of governors, held a press conference to announce that the board had asked for and received Ross's resignation. With Ross sitting beside him, Fennebresque insisted, in effect, that he had been fired for no reason. Ross had been successful in every way, he told reporters: "exemplary" in his handling of recent athletic scandals, and a model of "work ethic" and "perfect integrity." "There was no precipitating event," Fennebresque, who looked by turns mournful and defensive during the twenty-minute exchange, said. "He's been wonderful."

In response to a series of questions, Fennebresque insisted that the decision was not about politics, at least not "to the best of my knowledge." Few observers believed that there was not some political motivation. Ross, a former judge, once headed the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, a major funder of progressive causes in North Carolina. Since Republicans, many of them affiliated with the Tea Party movement, took over the North Carolina General Assembly in 2010, the board of governors has become a Republican redoubt. Ross, in an answer to one question, did allude to the elephant in the room, observing, "There's been a dramatic change in the state's leadership, in policymakers."

For several years, there have been indications that the state's new leaders want to change the mission of public higher education in North Carolina. In 2013, the Republican governor, Pat McCrory, told William Bennett, a conservative talk-show host and former Secretary of Education, that the state shouldn't "subsidize" courses in gender studies or Swahili (that is, offer them at public universities). The following year, he laid out his agenda in a speech at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Using the language of business schools, he urged his audience to "reform and adapt the U.N.C. brand to the ever-changing competitive environment of the twenty-first century" and to "[hone] in on skills and subjects employers need." McCrory also had a warning for faculty members whose subjects could be understood as political: "Our universities should not be used to indoctrinate our students to become liberals or conservatives, but should teach a diversity of opinions which will allow our future leaders to decide for themselves."

On February 27th, the board, which had conducted a five-month-long review of all two hundred and forty centers and institutes at U.N.C., voted to eliminate three of them. Although the board has legal authority to govern U.N.C. as it sees fit, university policy and tradition had reserved this sort of decision for the schools. One of the closed centers was dedicated to the environment, another to voter engagement. The third, which many faculty members describe as the real target, was the Center on Poverty, Work, and Opportunity, run by Gene Nichol, a law professor and a vituperative critic of the Republican legislature. In one of a series of opinion pieces criticizing spending cuts, published in Raleigh's News & Observer, he had referred to the legislature's "unforgivable war on poor people." Nichol has no doubt that the closing of the center was intended as punishment. On several occasions, "my dean was compelled to call me into his office and relate threats received from Republican leaders of the General Assembly if I didn't stop writing articles for the News & Observer," he wrote in an e-mail. "The center would be closed, or I'd be fired."

Nichol, who has tenure, still holds his teaching position—more than a hundred faculty members have signed a statement supporting him—but both the closing of his center and Ross's dismissal have created an atmosphere of anxiety and caution. "People are telling me not to use their work e-mail, to call on their cell phone, if we're going to talk about anything controversial," Tamar Birkhead, an associate professor at the law school, told me. An untenured member of the humanities faculty, who requested anonymity, wrote in an e-mail, "I am constantly aware of the state's charged political atmosphere and the scrutiny of the university's political enemies. I know there are certain subjects I simply cannot write about in a public forum and topics I must handle gingerly in my teaching." Other faculty members spoke of receiving phone calls from legislators and requests to review syllabi from conservative advocacy groups. Donald Raleigh, a history professor, said that one of those groups, the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, requested the syllabus for his course "Gorbachev, the Collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Rise of the New Russia." The syllabus was freely available online, but the Pope Center wrote to the university legal office to request it under the state's open-records law. "I really don't know why they wanted the syllabus for this fairly conventional course, nor do I know what they did with it," Raleigh said.

Republican politics in North Carolina are characterized by a tight interweaving of elected officials with think tanks and advocacy groups. At the center of this network is Art Pope, who funds the Pope Center for Higher Education as well as several other conservative think tanks. Pope, a discount-store magnate, with his family reportedly gave almost a quarter of a million dollars in support of North Carolina Republican candidates in the 2010 election; advocacy groups with close ties to Pope gave more than two million dollars to those candidates. (Jane Mayer wrote about Pope's political activism for the magazine in 2011.) After Pope's family donated a reported two hundred and nineteen thousand dollars to Republican candidates and political groups in 2012, and his companies gave a reported four hundred and fifty thousand dollars, contributing to the party's takeover of the governorship and the state legislature, Pope

served as co-chair of Governor McCrory's transition team and then as his budget director. Pope, who has served as a board member of Americans for Prosperity, is also a link between North Carolina's Republican Party and leading national conservatives.

The Pope Center defines its mission as to "increase the diversity of ideas" on campus and "encourage respect for the institutions that underlie economic prosperity," including "private property," "competition," and "limits on government." It also deplures, as McCrory did in his speech at Chapel Hill, that "universities allow teaching to become shallow and trendy, failing to challenge students intellectually and disparaging traditional principles of justice, ethics, and liberal education." Much of the center's work is producing strategic documents setting out a conservative model of higher education.

The most interesting Pope Center materials sketch a two-pronged attack on public higher education as currently practiced. On the one hand, Pope Center researchers say that higher education should be regarded as an economic good like any other, and that low tuition rates "subsidize" it and distort the market. Based on this theory, the Pope Center argues for raising tuition in the U.N.C. system and shifting public funding to tuition grants for students attending private colleges, eroding the distinction between public and private institutions. Of course, increasing the financial burden on students in the U.N.C. system would likely cause them to cluster in safe pre-professional majors. This would be just fine, according to higher education's market reformers, because those are the programs that provide returns on investment. (The Pope Center declined to comment on its reports for this piece.)

The other reformist front is a call to revive the Great Books model of humanities education: literature and philosophy as a source of eternal truths, dating back to Plato, passing through John Locke, and perfected by Ayn Rand and the libertarian economist Friedrich Hayek. A Pope Center research paper published this year describes a "renewal in the university" through privately funded programs dedicated to teaching the great books untainted by relativism. The report devotes a great deal of attention to programs dedicated to "the morality of capitalism," which have been founded at sixty-two public and private colleges and universities. Many of these programs, which are often housed within business schools or economics or political science departments, were funded over the past fifteen years by North Carolina-based BB&T Bank, under its former president John Allison, who is now the C.E.O. of the Cato Institute. In a 2012 statement, Allison explained that he funded the programs to "retake the universities" from "statist/collectivist ideas." He also noted that training students in the morality of capitalism is "clearly in our shareholders' long-term best interest."

The Cato Institute recently hosted a forum on the private donors' so-called "renewal" agenda, featuring Jay Schalin, the author of the Pope Center report, along with the former BB&T president John Allison and C. Bradley Thompson, the director of the BB&T-funded Institute for the Study of Capitalism at Clemson University. Thompson was eager to emphasize the role that donor-funded teaching programs like his play in the conservative movement. "I meet too many

very smart businessmen and women who are giving millions of dollars every year to political candidates, and I have to ask the question ‘How has that worked out for you?’ And the answer has to be, ‘It hasn’t worked out very well at all,’” he said.

Once a round of supportive laughter died down, Thompson continued, “If they really want to change the culture long-term in this country, it’s not going to happen through politics. If you think the political system is corrupt, what you’re really saying is the American people are corrupt. And if you’re saying the American people are corrupt, then what you have to do of course is change American culture. And the way you change culture is through ideas. . . . If we’re giving tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars to political campaigns and we’re giving one-tenth of one per cent to trying to change the intellectual culture of this nation, you are by definition going to lose.”

Some version of a cost-benefit calculus for learning is inevitable in a precarious economy with expensive, debt-funded education. But to reconceive of public universities as the meeting place of two markets—students investing in their own “human capital” and private investors looking to influence curricula—is another thing altogether. The point of humanities education is to foster independent, critical thought and broad historical perspective, both in students and in university culture. A successful humanities education makes the obvious questionable and shows that the present is neither eternal nor inevitable. These are not goals designed to pass market tests or bend to the ideologies of wealthy donors.

After decades of funding cuts, rising tuition, and growing economic inequality, the old idea of higher education would be under pressure even if universities were not political targets. A twenty-first-century version of the idea that education is more a public good than a private investment will not arise without a politics behind it. Recent protests against tuition increases at the University of California and student-debt strikes by graduates of for-profit institutions are the merest glimmer of what those politics might look like. At the University of California, student protesters have hoisted signs reading, “Education is a right.” The new fights over public universities will help to determine whether education will in fact be a right, a privilege, or, as John Allison and others would have it, a commodity to be bought and sold by students and donors alike.