

Both the [NY Times](#) and the [Washington Post](#) have reported on a recommendation that the North Carolina Board of Governors close several university centers. [*Update: the recommendations were [adopted](#) by the Board a week later.*] There are strong allegations that this is part of a conservative attack on the university system. There are certainly [grounds](#) to suspect political motivation, given the political dynamics in the state. The centers deal with matters more beloved of liberals than conservatives (poverty, biodiversity, social change), as do many of the other centers singled out for continued examination. Moreover, the task force seems to have strayed from its original mission, which was fiscal, since its recommendations don’t involve any clear financial savings. This move also involves a degree of micro-management that seems unusual for a university board, which has already lost credibility by its [decision](#) to oust a well-respected system president.

As not only a faculty member, but also a director of an active Center, I can’t help but be deeply concerned about a possible political attack on centers at another major university.

Given that some of the centers in question are at law schools, and another is focused on biodiversity, the issues seem especially germane for this blog, which is sponsored by UC environmental law centers. We have to take possible political attacks on other centers very seriously.

But matters in North Carolina may not be quite as clearcut as they initially seem. In terms of the Biodiversity Center, East Carolina University has [said](#) that the recommendation to the Board of Governors (which goes by the unlovely acronym of BOG) has been misunderstood and is really designed to take the Biodiversity Center outside of some burdensome administrative requirements:

*“On February 18, 2015, a recommendation was made by the BOG Working Group on Centers and Institutes to discontinue the Center for Biodiversity at East Carolina University. The use of the term “discontinue” is unfortunate because it conveys a message that was not intended by the Board of Governors Working Group. In open forum on December 11, 2014, James Holmes as Chair of the Working Group praised the work of the Center and held it up as an excellent example of a center that runs effectively from within a department. . . [W]e interpret the recommendation of the BOG Working Group as acknowledgement that the Center is functioning effectively from within Harriot College of Arts and Sciences and the Department of Biology and that it should be redefined as an “other coordinating entity” outside of Policy 400.5[R].”*

In contrast, the Dean of the Law School at Chapel Hill has issued a [statement](#) defending accusing the advisory group of a politically motivated attack on the [Center for Poverty, Work, and Opportunity](#) there. The Center’s website does seem to emphasize advocacy in a

way that may make it more vulnerable to criticism, as can be seen by contrasting it with the website of Berkeley’s [Earl Warren Institute](#). But drawing the line between appropriate policy engagement and non-academic policy advocacy can be tricky. Another controversy seems to involve the law school’s [Center for Civil Rights](#), particularly its advocacy and litigation activities.

I’m keenly aware that I’m operating at a 2800 mile distance from this controversy, and that in any event I’m not an investigative reporter. There is still good reason to suspect political motivation by the Board’s working group. At least as to the Biodiversity Center, however, it now seems as if the working group’s recommendation may have been more benign than it initially seemed. The basic problem, it seems to me, was the decision to involve the Board directly in decision-making about individual centers. The Board’s competence to engage in such fine-grained decisions is limited. More importantly, given the politicization of the Board’s relationship with the university that already seems to have occurred in North Carolina, any decision by the Board about individual centers was inevitably going to look political.