

# Slash of vacant UNC positions short-sighted

## N.C. legislators fail to understand how universities work

PHILIP L. DUBOIS

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Anyone who has watched state government in action knows that legislators are faced with the difficult task of making complex decisions in a relatively limited time period and without always having the information they need to understand the consequences of those decisions.

Such appears to have been the case with the budget for the University of North Carolina system as passed by the N.C. House of Representatives. Although the House budget provides significant funding for enrollment growth, need-based student financial aid and salary raises for faculty and staff, it also includes a system-wide cut of \$68.3 million through the elimination of 1,088 faculty and staff positions that have been vacant for six months or longer.

"Well," you might say, "what's so bad about that? If the university doesn't fill its vacant positions, then it's obvious that it doesn't need them." An understandable reaction, perhaps, but one that turns out to be problematic, both in theory and in practice.

First, it is a rare large organization that can maintain "full employment." With more than 51,000 employees in 16 institutions that currently make up the UNC system, vacancies occur through death, resignation and retirement on an ongoing basis and may take several months to fill. Indeed, it is significant that two-thirds of the vacancies identified by the House are faculty positions.

### Recruitment takes time

Recruitments of faculty, usually in national searches, are typically launched in the early fall and conclude by late spring, a period that is obviously longer than six months. The process to generate a quality applicant pool requires advertisements in national journals, recruitment at disciplinary meetings, interviews on campus, and often delicate negotiations for top candidates with competing offers in hand. And some of these searches, no matter how carefully conducted, do not result in a selection. What a terrible message to send to our campuses -- it is more important to hire any warm body as quickly as possible than it is to identify the best possible candidate to join our faculty. Second, the House action is particularly detrimental to fast-growing campuses, like UNC Charlotte. A significant proportion of the faculty positions appearing for UNC Charlotte on the House "hit list" are new faculty positions we have received as a result of our continuing enrollment growth and our reclassification as a research and doctoral granting institution.

Most of the others are positions that, as a relatively new chancellor, I held open this year pending a comprehensive re-examination of how we are using our resources. I did so with the full support of my Board of Trustees, the Faculty Council, the Staff Organization and our student leadership, believing that the thoughtful stewardship of resources demanded it. It would be a shame to be penalized for trying to do the right thing at the wrong time. Moreover, loss of these positions would cripple our ability to serve our growing student body.

### Unspent salaries in budget

Third, the House may not fully appreciate that, as a result of legislatively imposed cuts to the base budgets of UNC institutions over the years, UNC Charlotte and all of its sister campuses have come to depend significantly upon the capacity to use unspent salary dollars, including those that accumulate while searches are being conducted, to meet critical institutional needs. These needs include the purchase of scientific equipment and library materials, upgrades to classrooms and laboratories, improvements in our information technology structure, other repairs and renovations, and even the payment of our utility bill.

At the end of the last fiscal year, for instance, UNC Charlotte spent almost \$16.5 million for these productive purposes from a total budget for personnel-related expenses of \$160 million -- about 10 percent. More importantly, that these expenditures are being made is no secret. This use of "lapsed salary funds" is, in fact, reported to the General Assembly each and every year by the Board of Governors as a result of the budget flexibility that has been granted to UNC institutions by the General Assembly since the early 1990s.

One can certainly empathize with legislators trying to find funds for a number of legitimate needs, including salary dollars for state employees, health care, education and public safety. So it is perhaps understandable that looking at vacant positions appeared to be a simple application of the principle of "use it or lose it." But, in this case, an understanding of the actual workings of the university would demand legislative application of an equally valid principle: "First, Do No Harm."

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*Philip L. Dubois is chancellor of UNC Charlotte. Write him at [pdubois@uncc.edu](mailto:pdubois@uncc.edu) or Office of the Chancellor, UNCC, 9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28223.*

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