Statement by Gene Nichol
Feb. 27, 2015

I have no words to match the gratitude I feel for the astonishing support the Poverty Center has received, in recent weeks, from thousands across North Carolina and the nation. Students, faculty, alumni, engaged citizens, activists, social services providers, political, religious and institutional leaders, and perhaps most movingly, Tar Heels living at or below the edge of poverty have raised their voices and banners in protest. Whether pressing for research on economic justice, or, more broadly, for university-defining traditions of academic freedom, their words and actions have seared my heart and, not infrequently, moistened my eyes. They are not to be forgotten.

On an otherwise dark day for the University of North Carolina, I am happy to announce that, in response to the censorship efforts of the Board of Governors, an impressive array of foundations and private donors have stepped forward to assure that the work of the Center, if not the Center itself, will continue and markedly expand. Generous grants and donations will allow for the creation of a North Carolina poverty research fund at the law school to support our efforts to describe, document and combat the wrenching challenges of Tar Heel poverty.

The fund will allow us to hire student, faculty and post-doctorate scholars to assist me in probing the causes of, and solutions to, economic injustice. We will carry forward the work of the Center within the halls of the university, but with greater flexibility and increased resources. North Carolinians are not easily cowered. They react poorly to petty tyrants. They always have. If the Board of Governors moves to block the creation of such a research fund – a turn that is not unlikely – I will be anxious to join them in federal court.

But despite this heartening support for our research, none should be confused about what happened today in Charlotte. The University’s governing board moved to abolish an academic center in order to punish its director for publishing articles that displease the Board and its political benefactors. The Governors said to a member of the faculty: we cannot allow your writings to go without rebuke. We may not be able to fire you, but we will do all we can to suppress your efforts. Criticisms of this Governor and of this General Assembly, at this public university, are not to be tolerated. Were I to have praised the legislature’s war on poor people, rather than decrying it, the Board would have placed laurels on my head instead of boots on my neck.

These acts of state-imposed censorship, of course, constitute a core violation of the first amendment. Lying about the motive for closure does nothing to assuage the transgression. The Board’s laughable charade of independent, merit-based
'centers review' has fooled no one. Dishonest censorship is no improvement over straightforward suppression.

An ill wind blows across the UNC system. Its chill does not go unnoticed, as faculty members alter their research agendas and temper their investigations. Others launch plans to relocate to universities that, yet, embrace academic freedom. The members of the Board of Governors have demonstrated unfitness for their high office. Their actions represent a profound, partisan, and breathtakingly shortsighted abuse of power. They deserve our disdain, not our approval. Their decisions call for defiance, not supine submission. With many others, I’ll do my best to provide it.

Gene Nichol