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Poverty center asserts own role after Edwards' exit



Jordan Green
News editor

Four months after North Carolina Senator John Edwards lost a bruising presidential election as Democratic nominee John Kerry's running mate in 2004, UNC-Chapel Hill announced that the defeated candidate would lead the new Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the university's law school.

With the stated goal of bringing together "faculty and other national public policy experts to examine innovative and practical ideas for moving more Americans out of poverty and into the middle class," the center might have seemed a ready-made opportunity for Edwards to keep his name in the national spotlight and develop policy ideas as he considered another run for president.

"I don't think it requires any stretch of the imagination to conclude that the poverty center was a political vehicle for John Edwards," said John Hood, president of the Raleigh-based John Locke Foundation. Following the launch announcement for the new center, the conservative think-tank, which favors free-market approaches to help the poor, teasingly offered to brief Edwards on poverty - an overture rejected by the former senator.

Less than two months after the 2006 mid-term elections Edwards did indeed announce himself as a candidate for the 2008 presidential election. On Dec. 28, the same day he launched his campaign with the hurricane-battered New Orleans neighborhood of the 9th Ward as the backdrop, UNC School of Law Dean Jack Boger received Edwards' letter of resignation.

Edwards, a 1977 graduate of the law school, noted in his letter that "almost two years ago, I began a series of discussions with the leadership of UNC-Chapel Hill about ways to reinvigorate the public debate on one of the most pressing moral challenges facing our country, the 37 million Americans who live in poverty." That theme has already resonated in his young presidential campaign.

Boger quickly appointed law professor Marion Crain, Edwards' deputy director, to





fill the new vacancy. Crain said that Edwards has raised a \$2 million endowment for the center, which will ensure its continued stability and viability.

"I've been running the center all along," said Crain, who has overseen day-to-day operations during Edwards' frequent trips out of the state. Edwards appeared with NC Rep. Alma Adams, a Greensboro Democrat, and NC Treasurer Richard Moore in May 2006 to promote a state minimum wage increase, but his efforts in North Carolina have been eclipsed by more high profile appearances on behalf of unions and living-wage campaigns from California to Iowa and Wisconsin. Crain said the staff "had set in motion plans for the center's future" prior to Edwards' resignation.

"Going forward we will likely have a couple programs in the spring," Crain said. "We've got a book, a collection of essays written by a group of scholarly folks and activists called Ending Poverty In America that's edited by John Edwards, Arne Kalleberg and myself, coming out. We've got a documentary film on the working poor coming out sometime in January."

The center's website had no upcoming events listed as of Jan. 5. Over the past two years the center has sponsored three conferences, a series of panel discussions and speeches by guests such as NC National Association for the Advancement of Colored People President William Barber.

Crain said the poverty center was conceived as a nonpartisan research organization to bring academics together with activists.

"We make an affirmative effort to include all positions," she said. "We'll have someone who espouses a free-market position or someone who espouses a more conservative position. We also include activists on every panel. They're not exclusively left; some are right. These are folks who are working in the field in concrete ways to address poverty."

Crain disavowed any notion that the center's purpose is to generate economic policy ideas for Edwards' presidential campaign over the next two years.

"We are completely separate from the campaign," she said. "He may of course listen to some of the participants on the panels and decide someone is making a good argument, but that is on an individual basis."

Hood, who heads the John Locke Foundation, argued that the center has little function beyond its association with the former senator.

"It all has to do with its proximity to Edwards," he said. "Poverty is not a new issue in North Carolina. We've had public policy groups that have been devoted to issues of poverty for a long time. From the right, groups like mine have been arguing about how to address poverty. The center has not been the center of much of anything."

Hood is quick to add that he does not minimize Edwards' presidential aspirations, and believes the candidate could inject his ideas about poverty into the national discourse by winning the Democratic nomination even if he fails to win the general election.

David A. Mills, the executive director of the Common Sense Foundation and one of the few representatives of left-leaning public policy groups in the state willing to comment on the record, said the poverty center has made a valuable contribution to the public discourse through its research.

"We've seen a lot of very interesting original research that has been sponsored in some way by the center, on the [earned-income tax credit], on hunger, on single motherhood and how that impacts poverty, on job training, which we think is one

of the critical issues of the twenty-first century," he said. "The center has, we think, established a great niche for doing policy research in North Carolina."

Mills added that Edwards' national profile has helped direct public attention to poverty.

"Anybody with his level of celebrity or public recognition can really bring something to the table when he gets involved in something like this," Mills said. "He has created media attention for things like the minimum wage and the earned-income tax credit, and I think that's very valuable."

Crain suggested that the center has advanced the discussion in meaningful ways that rely neither on conventional approaches of increasing government spending nor classically conservative free-market approaches.

"The sixties, seventies and even the eighties featured an emphasis on an old-style focus on poverty, meaning that government spending programs would address the problem," she said. "We are very clear as a center and as a nation that that can't be the whole solution. It's much more complicated than it might appear. Our center and [the] Brookings [Institution] are working on ideas about work as a path out of poverty, on creating not just jobs, but good jobs."

"Unions are one way they happen, although union density is declining," Crain added. "There are a number of other worker initiatives, some of them from faith groups and some of them that are community-based such as living-wage campaigns and living-wage ordinances enacted by counties and municipalities to ensure that companies provide good wages and benefits within specific geographic boundaries."

Other approaches are more basic.

"Quite a few of our panelists are working on smaller community-based efforts," Crain said. "Lack of literacy is a huge problem for the workforce. CEOs will tell you that is the biggest problem for hiring for low-level jobs."

Hood said he hasn't felt compelled to follow the center's progress. As a contender in the battle of ideas he said he finds it more critical to keep up with the reports issued by the NC Justice Center, a Raleigh anti-poverty organization formed in 1996 through the merger of two legal services organizations.

"If you wanted to find good quality work, the Justice Center puts out an annual report that's a screed for the living wage," Hood said. "And that's a substantial contribution to the discussion. I think it's wrongheaded. If things are so bad here, why is everybody flocking to North Carolina? ... The Justice Center has clearly had an impact on the poverty debate because they draw critics like me."

With the exception of Mills from the Common Sense Foundation, Hood's counterparts on the left appear to be reluctant to go public with their views about the center's efficacy as an anti-poverty organization. Representatives of the NC Justice Center, Institute for Southern Studies and the Raleigh office of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, or ACORN - organizations that, like Edwards, backed the \$1 minimum wage increase signed into law by Gov. Mike Easley last year - either declined to comment on the record about the center or failed to return phone calls for this story.

"Whether it's activism or service delivery or policy groups," Hood said. "North Carolina has a lot of poverty groups."

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I see you've been reading John Robinson's blog (at the N&R) and beat him to the punch on my suggestion.

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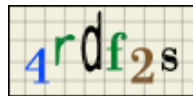
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