

JEFFREY WARREN

Science for Hyper-Partisan Times

If the 2016 presidential election began an era of especially unbridled political rancor in the United States, North Carolinians were ahead of the curve by November 2010, when elections awarded Republicans the majority in both chambers of the General Assembly for the first time in 141 years. And as was true on the national political stage, environmental issues in North Carolina often split the legislature down the aisle. So as the new Republican majority began to develop environmental policy initiatives for issues including coastal management, domestic energy (e.g., offshore exploration and production, onshore shale gas, and coal ash), and broad regulatory reform, to name just a few, the agenda for holding environmental science hostage to hyper-partisan rancor was fully developed.

And then, a miracle happened.

In 2016, the Republican-led General Assembly authorized the creation of the North Carolina Policy Collaboratory. The initiative was spearheaded by Senate leader Phil Berger (R-Rockingham), in response to public suggestions that the expertise within the University of North Carolina System should be called on to help address state and local policy challenges. Berger's goal was to "have a direct contact at UNC to answer questions and make policy recommendations."

Headquartered at UNC Chapel Hill, the Collaboratory is a unique research-policy model able to leverage all 17 institutions of the UNC System. The Collaboratory's stated mission is "to utilize and disseminate the research expertise across the University of North Carolina System for practical use by state and local government," and it provides direct recommendations to the state's General Assembly. The core focus of the program is environmental and natural resources research within the state, as well as the development of new technologies for habitat,

environmental, and water quality improvement.

At first, the instinct for political rancor held sway. Media outlets, nongovernmental organizations, UNC faculty, and Democratic legislators seized on the emergence of the Collaboratory as a partisan attempt to co-opt academic research and thereby undermine academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The title of an article from Sound Rivers, a private nonprofit focused on protecting the state's Neuse and Tar-Pamlico River Basins, laid bare these fears: "Collaboratory: NC's new (cleverly funded) War on Science?" The UNC Chapel Hill student newspaper published an opinion column, "Environmental policy at UNC isn't for sale." Although the author acknowledged the Collaboratory seemed "a surprising step toward new effective environmental policy" for a Republican-controlled legislature, the column also stated, "Unfortunately, the current vision of the Collaboratory seems to be one of partisan gamesmanship, corporate pseudoscience, and antiacademic aggression." Faculty across the UNC System bristled at the realization the center had been established without their input and even suggested via faculty resolutions that the General Assembly had broken its own laws in doing so.

Antagonists cast their skepticism far and wide and immediately speculated that the Senate leader's science adviser had been pre-anointed as the Collaboratory's inaugural leader. That adviser was me. NC Policy Watch, an online news and commentary outlet of the NC Justice Center, proclaimed me "the mastermind behind the state's bad environmental laws," and correlated my staff role with a list of its top 15 bad environmental bills. State Representative Pricey Harrison (D-Guilford), one of the state's fiercest and highest-profile environmental advocates, said, "I can't think of an individual whose had more of an impact on the environment in a negative way than Jeffrey Warren."

Amid the speculation and attacks, UNC Chapel Hill forged ahead and named another individual, its chief sustainability officer and associate vice chancellor for campus enterprises, Brad Ives, as interim executive director of the Collaboratory; he was made permanent in February 2017. Ives worked with university and faculty leaders to establish an organizational structure that included an outreach liaison with time split evenly between the Collaboratory and the UNC Institute for the Environment. UNC also established a provost-appointed advisory board comprising faculty leaders from across campus to ensure the preservation of academic integrity and encourage transparency and trust through formal and informal peer discussions about issues that could be or were being taken up by the Collaboratory. Advisory board meetings were open to the public and fully transparent about the project selection process, budgets, and research findings. This peer-based safety net proved to be integral for the Collaboratory's eventual acceptance.

Early in 2017, the Collaboratory began a search for a full-time research director. This position required a

issues that are both ecologic and economic wins for the state. Projects are classified as either reactive (in response to a formal study bill or informal legislative request) or proactive (issues or problems identified by Collaboratory staff that might be of interest to state and local policymakers). However, curation is as far as it goes. The Collaboratory does not engage in research itself, but rather facilitates and funds research via independent principal investigators across academic institutions. Staff continually receives, reviews, ranks, and considers proposals, with the majority of awards funded from a recurring annual \$1 million appropriation. Grants average \$100,000 each, but smaller awards averaging \$20,000 are also given, often to fulfill state match requirements for federal funds or to launch pilot projects. If a study results in policy recommendations, these are the sole responsibility of the project investigator, made with complete independence from the Collaboratory.

The Collaboratory continually seeks to build trust and buy-in for its mission, through face-to-face meetings and phone calls with faculty, legislators, the media, and a wide array of environmental advocacy groups. Such outreach

As the new Republican majority began to develop environmental policy initiatives for issues including coastal management, domestic energy, and broad regulatory reform, the agenda for holding environmental science hostage to hyper-partisan rancor was fully developed. And then, a miracle happened.

PhD in a physical science field related to environmental science and natural resource management as well as executive- and legislative-branch science policy expertise. I applied and, after a nationwide search, was offered the position. When I served as the Senate's science adviser, I often advocated for "study bills" that would support funding for thorough academic studies of policy-relevant science problems, rather than more superficial literature reviews that were often the best a state agency with limited staff and budget could offer. Now I was staking my career on the belief that this approach could, and would, be a successful science policy model for North Carolina. As I tendered my resignation to the Senate leader, I recall telling him, "Don't think of it as losing your science adviser, think of it as gaining hundreds." But not everyone was happy. "Academics and environmental advocates were apprehensive, given Warren's reputation, the Collaboratory would become another instrument of obstruction," NC Policy Watch reported.

From its founding, the Collaboratory has curated a research portfolio centered around natural resource

efforts have proved especially valuable for high-profile legislatively mandated studies on issues such as oyster restoration, flood resilience, and the statewide extent and concentrations of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), a class of common synthetic chemicals. Outreach activities have not only increased the Collaboratory's familiarity with statewide issues, but also introduced staff to researchers and organizations who are actively working on these topics. In turn, as more faculty in the UNC System have become aware of the mission, many have become active research partners.

The Collaboratory is administratively and budgetarily efficient. Funding agreements are executed directly between the Collaboratory and the investigators or their units and are not managed by UNC's Office of Sponsored Research, meaning that project approval and funding transfer can happen within days or weeks rather than weeks or months. The Collaboratory is not permitted to cover indirect costs, so its awards are not subject to the overhead charges that go along with most federal grants to UNC scientists, which can exceed 50%. Yet initial projects funded by the Collaboratory often lead to larger, multiyear

federal funding awards (which typically do allow indirect overhead charges), so it also operates as a research incubator.

As the Collaboratory approaches its fifth anniversary, how can we gauge program success? To date, the program has funded 300 projects—many of them related to legislatively mandated research—across 15 research university campuses in the UNC System and one private university. The Collaboratory has received over \$62 million in legislative appropriations—funding that otherwise would not have entered the UNC System. In addition to its annual recurring budget of \$1 million, most of these dollars represent legislative earmarks for specific research projects, including \$2 million for flood resiliency, \$3 million for nutrient management, \$3.5 million for a matching grant to supplement externally funded research, and \$5 million for a statewide PFAS investigation. Most recently, the Collaboratory received \$44 million to award to campuses across the UNC System for a variety of COVID-19-related research, including development of vaccines and novel therapeutics as well as community testing and surveillance.

Of direct relevance for state policy, at least 10 recommendations have resulted in changes to state law, promotion of oyster restoration, improvement of nutrient management regulations in the administrative code, and a docket opened by the North Carolina Utilities Commission for further inquiry into energy storage considerations. And at least 10 bills being considered in the current legislative session reference or are awaiting study results, or provide dedicated funding for new studies and partnerships. In stark contrast to original media reports focusing on partisan concerns about the Collaboratory's origin and mission, coverage has increasingly focused on the substance of its research efforts. A recent internet search shows 10 stories in 2016, 91 in 2020, and more than 30 as of March 2021.

In January 2020, a few months after Brad Ives left the executive director position, I was promoted to interim and then permanent executive director. This time there was no visible or audible resistance. I was where I was supposed to be—out of the spotlight—as the Collaboratory gradually built its reputation as a trusted mechanism for collaboration between research campuses across the state and a legislature that values scientific expertise and advice.

Early suspicions about the Collaboratory among faculty seem to have been replaced by understanding and appreciation. UNC Chapel Hill Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz has stated that “the North Carolina Policy Collaboratory has been extremely important to us,” and Gillings School of Global Public Health Dean Barbara Rimer has described the Collaboratory as

The Collaboratory has curated a research portfolio centered around natural resource issues that are both ecologic and economic wins for the state.

“a model not just for North Carolina, but for the country.” And remember that stinging rebuke from State Representative Pricey Harrison? A little over a year ago, as the two of us engaged in a text exchange about PFAS, she not only messaged the following, but generously gave me permission to use her message in this article: “I will forever regret being so suspicious of the Collaboratory. You have created something special. Congratulations.”

Did the Collaboratory fall under increased scrutiny because of its partisan pedigree? The answer is unequivocally yes. However, despite initial skepticism, the unique model that is the Collaboratory has proven an effective bridge between academic research and policymakers. It is being used and endorsed by both sides of the political aisle, and should be a gentle reminder, in the midst of the nation's current hyper-partisanship, that we all stand closer together than some might have us believe.

So what can we learn? One takeaway should be that while federal science policy, with its tens of billions in expenditures, may drive the nation's science agenda, state-level science policy can (and dare I say should) cultivate especially effective, trusting networks of policy-relevant knowledge creation and use. Now that the Collaboratory has achieved a five-year record of success and widespread acceptance, it can also be a model for other states facing complex decisions that could benefit from scientific input coming from institutional arrangements trusted across the political spectrum.

Which leads to a final point: hyper-partisanship makes it easy to be skeptical of how “the other side” wields science in the name of politics. The North Carolina Policy Collaboratory story shows that, through a focus on open communication, transparent processes, operational efficiencies, and real-world problem-solving, it is possible to work in front of, rather than behind, the closed doors of political process to bring science and policymaking closer together.

Jeffrey Warren (jeff.warren@unc.edu) is the executive director for the North Carolina Policy Collaboratory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (www.collaboratory.unc.edu).