Bus tour put challenges in front seat

By PHILIP COHEN

Last month's Tar Heel Bus Tour was a five-day crash course in North Carolina. The trip revealed both the state's "challenges" and its "opportunities," to quote UNC Chancellor James Moeser, who graciously hosted three dozen new faculty, librarians and administrators on a journey from Halifax to Beaufort and Charlotte to Chimney Rock.

Crash courses aren't the best way to learn, but they are a way, and this one was no exception.

The tour is a privately financed program to spread UNC's good will while educating Chapel Hill immigrants like me in the ways of the state -- and teaching us the words to "Hark the Sound." The events of the week told a coherent story: For the many challenges the state faces, UNC has answers. Examples of primary interest to this sociologist of inequality include:

- In Rocky Mount, economic decay has produced a public health crisis, especially among poor black residents. In response, UNC public health educators and researchers have joined with a local nonprofit to provide HIV/AIDS and cancer screenings and mobile health clinics.

- In Duplin County, Grady Elementary School has seen its Latino population jump from near zero to more than 50 percent in less than a generation, representing the tip of the iceberg of Latino migration into the state. As the school has attempted to adapt, UNC researchers have helped develop new programs and assess their progress.

- In Robeson County, the Lumbee Indian community was written out of federal Indian support by special Congressional legislation that ostensibly extended tribal recognition to them. The leadership is struggling to put together other sources of support -- including foundation money and public health work from UNC-Pembroke, and political activism from students in Chapel Hill.

- Most famously (thanks to a well-placed New York Times story when the U.S. Open came to town), several all-black communities around Pinehurst have experienced decades of neglect, exclusion and harassment (including visits from robed Klansmen in the 1990s). As the white towns around them have capitalized on golf-related tourism and sprawling retiree McMansions, unincorporated areas such as tiny Jackson Hamlet are going without sewer lines and other essential services. The cultural vultures of gentrification are circling. The UNC Center for Civil Rights has stepped in to help represent the communities.

Each of these cases represents a unique combination of events and personalities that might just lead to a local solution. A few hard-working and charismatic local leaders have developed strategies for coping with their troubles that include cobbling together disparate state and foundation support, as well as tapping into the strengths of UNC and the good will of its members. But there are a lot of places the tour didn't stop.

So the undercurrent of the bus tour's narrative is not so upbeat. I wouldn't claim to understand the chain of failures at the federal, state and local level that led to these cases -- and I know such problems aren't unique to this state. But for all of the successes recorded here -- seen thus far more
in the enthusiasm of responses than in the abatement of crises -- it's clear that each is also a story of government failure. These are failures in the systems of education and health care, and a failure of government protection for civil and human rights. And in the evolving legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, the underlying failure is the failure to overcome what sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois labeled the problem of the 20th century, the "problem of the color line."

As the bus rolled through rural North Carolina, we had a fascinating lesson from UNC's James Leloudis, a historian of the modern South, who referred to the Reconstruction period as one of the landmark attempts at interracial democracy in American history. During much of that time, the campus at Chapel Hill was closed.

This trip was a great chance to get to know my new state and a few of its people. Everywhere we went, people rolled out the red carpet for us -- even when they learned one of the new faculty members (just one) is a vegetarian. For that I'm grateful to our hosts and to the tireless tour organizers. I don't doubt that UNC has a unique ability and obligation to serve the underserved in this state. I just don't want to lose sight of the limits of that influence, or forget the "challenges" we face.

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