As a scholar of the history of black education and a native North Carolinian, I am appalled that Elizabeth City State University was on the chopping block before the state Senate amended its proposed budget. Only lawmakers suffering from political amnesia would use the school's declining enrollment numbers as a rationale to close the institution. The state's historic underfunding and lack of program investment have caused many of the university's problems.

Elizabeth City State dates back to 1891 when the legislature established the normal school to train black teachers. In 1937, during the administration of college President John Bias, Elizabeth City State became a four-year college. I mention Bias because he was the father of Elizabeth Cofield, an educator and politician at the forefront of the desegregation of Raleigh and Wake County schools. As a member of the Raleigh Board of Education and later the Wake County Board of Commissioners, Cofield fought for the equitable allocation of public resources.

Elizabeth City State University is one of five public historically black universities in the UNC system. All five have suffered from discriminatory underfunding since their inception. State lawmakers need to consider the paltry allocation of resources they have made to Elizabeth City and other public black universities in the state over the years.

In North Carolina's 2007 higher education appropriations, UNC-Chapel Hill received the most of any institution with $490.3 million. Elizabeth City State received the least with $31.4 million. In May, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found that "North Carolina's publicly funded black colleges are as underfunded and undervalued as ever.‘ Funding per full-time student enrolled is one measure of equity. The highest FTE among the state's black universities in 2011 was $10,618 at Winston-Salem State University. UNC-CH's FTE during that same time was $17,992, and N.C. State's was $15,558. And yet, despite having to make do with less, the state's five historically black institutions of higher education confer more degrees to African-Americans than the UNC system's other 11 public universities combined.

Federal officials urged the state to address the inequitable disparities decades ago. When the Department of Health, Education and Welfare outlined criteria for acceptable compliance with desegregation orders in 1977, it urged North Carolina's lawmakers to create new and attractive programs such as medical schools, law schools and veterinary schools at the black schools. The thinking was that enhanced academic programs and increased white enrollment would be both academic and financial booms for black institutions.

HEW officials went so far as to suggest that the state should close the nursing program at UNC-Greensboro to avoid duplication of programs and bolster admissions at nearby black schools. The UNC Board of Governors and lawmakers balked at such a suggestion. However, in 1974, the board had voted to put the state's first and only school of veterinary medicine at NCSU rather than at North Carolina A&T. That same year, the legislature appropriated funds to establish a four-year medical school at East Carolina University. On more than one occasion, the state had the opportunity to bolster its black colleges with professional programs but failed to do so.

Things appeared more promising in 2001 when the state budget included a provision to study opening a pharmacy school at Elizabeth City. The second public pharmacy school in the state, and the large number of students it would bring, would have revitalized the small, isolated university in Pasquotank County. Even though the state Senate approved a $14.2 billion budget in June 2002 that called for a full pharmacy school at Elizabeth City State, in the end lawmakers decided to create a joint venture between Elizabeth City State and UNC-Chapel Hill. Once again, an opportunity to make one of the black colleges a state priority was purposefully squandered.

Although unnecessary tax cuts have left us with significant budget shortfalls, now is not the time to rob Peter to pay Paul. Elizabeth City State has endured the state's short-changing throughout its existence. Lawmakers who ever supported the now defunct provision to close Elizabeth City State should be ashamed of themselves.

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