

ON-CAMPUS POLLING PLACE AT EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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Updates by Sterling Bland, based on an interview with Alex Dennis on March 25, 2022

CASE STUDY

East Carolina University (ECU) is located in Greenville, North Carolina, a city of 100,000 people in the heart of eastern North Carolina. ECU is a public research university and is a member of the University of North Carolina system, with a student population just under 30,000. According to the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE), ECU students voted at a rate of 52.6 percent in the 2016 general election,¹ even though the closest one-stop early voting site was one mile away. This location was housed in the Willis Building, a campus building — but one that sits off main campus and is not utilized by students, with no easy access via public transportation. NSLVE also showed that most student voters (58.9 percent) voted early utilizing North Carolina's One-Stop Early Voting program, which allows for up to two weeks of early voting and same-day registration. In January 2019, ECU opened a brand new, state of the art student center which presented a great opportunity for a more accessible on-campus one-stop early voting site for students, faculty, and staff.

In an effort to remove barriers to voting that ECU students face, the Pirates Vote team, supported by The Andrew Goodman Foundation and Campus Vote Project, decided to begin work on a campaign to move the one-stop early voting site from the Willis Building to the new Main Campus Student Center. Before approaching the Pitt County Board of Elections (BOE), the team worked to build support on campus and to begin an initial discussion with the Director of Elections for Pitt County. The Pirates Vote team worked to acquire a 700-signature petition from students in support of the move, a unanimous Student Government Association resolution in support, and a letter of support from Dr. Virginia Hardy, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. After meeting with the Director of Elections, the team worked to secure the most ideal room

¹ See "Student Voting Rates for East Carolina University," 2012 and 2016:
<https://engage.ecu.edu/organization/center-for-leadership-and-civic-engagement/documents/view/1886442>

within the student center for voting, accessible parking for voters on campus, outdoor space for campaign signs and electioneering, and an easily accessible ADA compliant location for curbside voting. The team wanted to make sure all potential obstacles had been addressed and solutions made available prior to presenting the campaign to the Pitt County BOE.

On April 23, 2019, the Pirates Vote team presented to the Pitt County BOE, proposing a move from the Willis Building to the Main Campus Student Center for early voting. The team shared all the solutions and logistics that had been worked on, along with the overwhelming campus support. The Pitt County BOE would not decide the 2019 municipal election one-stop plan until August 20, 2019. The Pirates Vote team showed up again with strong numbers at that meeting, reiterating the main points from the April 23 presentation. In a 3-2 vote, the Pitt County BOE voted to move the early voting site to the Main Campus Student Center, but since it was not unanimous, the decision went to the North Carolina Board of Elections to decide. The State BOE approved the move and the student center served as a one-stop early voting site for the 2019 municipal election. The Main Campus Student Center saw a 0.6 percent increase of total voters compared to the Willis Building (18.2 percent of total votes in 2019 compared to 17.6 percent in the 2017 municipal election).

The Pitt County Board of Elections met on December 2, 2019 to vote on the one-stop plan for the 2020 election season. The Pirates Vote team again spoke to the BOE during the public comment period, highlighting the value of having the polling site in the Main Campus Student Center. They also shared over 130 comments from the university community in support of the Main Campus Student Center as a polling site. Additionally, staff reiterated to the Board the university's commitment to supporting the Main Campus Student Center site. In a 4-1 decision, the board voted to move the one-stop early voting site back to the Willis Building. Again, since their decision was not unanimous, it went to the State BOE to be decided. The Pirates Vote team along with faculty, staff, and even some national partners began a letter writing campaign to the state board in support of keeping the site in the Main Campus Student Center. On December 20, 2019, the state board voted to override the Pitt County BOE's decision and keep the site in the student center.

The Pirates Vote team worked even harder to ensure that 2020 primary voting went smoothly in the Main Campus Student Center and that students, faculty, staff and community members took advantage of the location. Ultimately, 1,763 people voted at the student center site during one-stop early voting for the 2020 primary election, which is 14.1 percent of all voters in the county. When compared to the Willis Building location during the 2016 primary election, this is a 4.7 percent increase. The Main Campus Student Center also had the largest turnout for ages 18-25 (70.6 percent) in the county. The Pirates Vote team continued to lobby the Pitt County BOE and fought to keep the Main Campus Student Center — through which roughly 20,000 students walk daily — as a one-stop early voting location for the 2020 general election. Because of the persistence of student advocates, the broader university community, and national partners, the Pitt County BOE is now completely on-board with the early voting site. Going into the election, East Carolina University had successfully registered 90% of eligible students.

Despite North Carolina’s having no online voter registration system, The Andrew Goodman Foundation, Campus Votes Project, and the Pirates Vote team transitioned their work to accommodate Covid-19 safety protocols, implementing an online voter registration module, boosting their social media engagement, and crafting new online-suitable democratic engagement plans to reach as many students as possible given the obstacles of the pandemic. As a result, voter turnout in the 2020 general election increased 20 percentage points, from 52.1% to 72.6% of students voting.²

East Carolina University is well on the way in institutionalizing a voting culture on its campus. Citizen U, a semester-long student affairs program, features a highly-anticipated, year-long civic engagement workshop series that discusses the ins-and-outs of everyday civic engagement on campus, media literacy, and personal financial literacy, to conversations about broader community work featuring guest speakers like Greenville’s mayor, Defense Attorney, and local police officers who cover a broad range of topics. Over Spring Break, students are given the opportunity to take Alternative Break Experiences, one of which is civic engagement themed, allowing students a hands-on experience touring the state governmental buildings, meeting elected representatives, and providing civic engagement-related service. The Pirates Votes Team sets up regular meetings called “Dinner and Discourse,” where instead of shrinking away from politically polarizing topics, they take them head on. Students from all political persuasions gather around the table for good food and tough conversation, creating an environment where equity and inclusion is rooted in a true passion for civil discourse. This bridges political divides to build student solidarity around civic engagement. As Alex Dennis, Andrew Goodman Campus Champion puts it, “at the end of the day, red and blue makes purple. Purple is our school color — we’re Pirates at the end of the day.”

Moving forward, student advocates will continue to use the Main Campus Student Center as an early voting site. They are pressing forwards, fulfilling a vision where students are registered to vote as early as first-year orientation, using a robust state-wide digital voter registration platform.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To find other case studies, visit [Securing On-Campus Polling Places: Case Studies from the Andrew Goodman Network](#). To learn how to bring a polling place to campus, visit [Securing On-Campus Polling Places: A Toolkit](#).

² See “Student Voting Rates for East Carolina University,” 2020: <https://engage.ecu.edu/organization/center-for-leadership-and-civic-engagement/documents/view/1886442>