

## ON-CAMPUS POLLING PLACE AT UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

Original story by Yael Bromberg, with Andrew Goodman Ambassador Karlie Galarza and Andrew Goodman Campus Champion Lesley Graybeal

Updates to the story by Emma Strother, based on an interview with Graybeal, March 17, 2022

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### CASE STUDY

The University of Central Arkansas (UCA) is located in Conway, Arkansas, a city nicknamed the “City of Colleges.” Over 10,000 of the 65,000 Conway residents reside on the UCA campus, so UCA has hosted an Election Day voting site on campus for years. In January 2018 the voting site was suddenly revoked by the Faulkner County Election Commission, presenting an obstacle for over 15 percent of the city’s potential voters.<sup>1</sup>

The Election Commission cited various reasons for removing the voting site. There were concerns about public accessibility to the site, a lack of reliable and trained poll workers, and difficulty securing voting machines on campus. The Andrew Goodman Campus Team knew they needed to disprove these concerns and reinstate the voting site. Thus, the team joined forces with UCA President Houston Davis, campus administrators, Student Government Association, and a coalition of politically engaged student organizations and took action. President Davis scheduled meetings with local elections officials (LEOs) and campus administrators to understand why the voting site was removed and to discuss how to reinstate the site, a worthwhile effort as students were determined to get the site back. Former UCA Andrew Goodman Ambassador, Karlie Galarza, indicated that, “without us coming together to show [President Davis] our commitment, he might not have understood how much it meant to us. We are incredibly grateful our administration fought with us.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hurtado, Kevin. “Collaboration Increases Voting Accessibility at University of Central Arkansas.” *News* (blog). The Andrew Goodman Foundation, May 1, 2018.

<https://andrewgoodman.org/news-list/collaboration-increases-voting-accessibility-at-university-of-central-arkansas>

<sup>2</sup> Hurtado, *Collaboration Increases Voting*.

While the administration and President were meeting with LEOs and state officials, the Andrew Goodman Campus Team convened a coalition of student organizations and faculty to develop a contingency plan and share ideas for educating on-campus voters about the process and requirements prior to the midterm election. For example, the Student Government Association drafted a resolution and gathered letters of support from student groups to present to the Elections Commission demonstrating why it was so important the voting site be reinstated. UCA Andrew Goodman Campus Champion Lesley Graybeal reflected on AGF's role in this coalition: "AGF provides centralized support for voter engagement and works with many different campus organizations for the broader goal of civic engagement."

With the hard work of the students, faculty, administrators, and President Davis, the voting site was finally reinstated in time for students to use in the 2018 midterm election. Lesley attributes the success to "the importance of both grassroots organizing and a supportive administration in making sustainable progress in civic engagement in higher education."<sup>3</sup>

According to the 2018 National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement<sup>4</sup>, approximately 45 percent of UCA students voted. This was a decrease from the percentage of students who voted during the 2014 midterm by 8 percent, but there exists a possible explanation for this. Earlier in 2018, the voting site was revoked during the primary elections. Therefore, students did not have access to an on-campus voting site in May 2018, and potentially were unaware the site was reinstated in time for the general election.

This situation not only demonstrates the importance of maintaining a consistent presence of on-campus voting sites, but shows that removing a site from a campus can adversely affect student participation in elections. It can take years to re-educate students on voting opportunities in their community. For example, many people do not know that Arkansas has a uniquely open ballot initiative process, with citizens' initiatives relatively likely to appear on the ballot as compared to other states.<sup>5</sup> The number of signatures needed for citizens' initiatives on the 2022 ballot is 71,321. Arkansans have used this method in the past to raise the minimum wage and legalize medical marijuana, among other reforms.

In the 2020 presidential election, the Covid-19 pandemic presented unique challenges and opportunities for the UCA on-campus voting site. Social distancing mandates helped the university secure a "bigger and better" site in the university basketball stadium, Lesley shared. To make the move and raise awareness of the new site, dozens of student volunteers staffed a "Path to the Polls" from the centrally located student center and the Andrew Goodman Campus Team hosted an outdoor "Party at the Polls" to celebrate voting while also sharing information

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Institute for Democracy & Higher Education: National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement. (2019). *2014 and 2018 report for University of Central Arkansas*. Medford, MA.

<sup>5</sup> As an example, according to the *2022 Initiatives and Referenda Handbook* from Arkansas State Legislature, "An initiated measure for a state law must contain the signatures of qualified electors in the amount of eight percent (8%) of the total number of votes cast for the office of governor in the last preceding general election." The complete handbook can be found here: [https://www.sos.arkansas.gov/uploads/elections/2021-2022\\_I\\_R\\_Handbook\\_-\\_November\\_2021.pdf](https://www.sos.arkansas.gov/uploads/elections/2021-2022_I_R_Handbook_-_November_2021.pdf).

about building COVID-19 safety protocols with voters. Despite lowered in-person voting rates across the country due to the pandemic, at least 500 people voted at the site, including not just students, faculty, and staff but also alumni and surrounding community members.

In several ways, 2020 provided hope for UCA student voters regardless of political affiliation. According to Lesley, many students from Arkansas were inspired by the close competition in their home districts, starting to believe that “in their generation change can happen, and a political process could become a lot more open than they imagined growing up.” For the Andrew Goodman Campus Team, the next goal is to make an even greater commitment to their campus voting site as poll workers.

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## **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](#).