

ON-CAMPUS POLLING PLACE AT UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

Original campus story by Yael Bromberg

Updates to the story by Emma Strother, based on an interview with Andrew Goodman Ambassadors Caroline Leonard and Katelyn Winstead and Andrew Goodman Campus Champion William Teer, March 22, 2022

CASE STUDY

The University of Mississippi (UM) is the state’s largest university, and in recent years has become a model for other colleges and universities in its “deliberate, thoughtful, and measured” response in coming to grips with difficult aspects of its Confederate past.¹

Yet, UM’s main campus contains no centrally located polling place. Moreover, students are assigned to multiple off-campus polling sites far from campus, and in a confusing manner that causes them to vote in directions opposite from their dorms. Students living in the Residential College South dorm must travel six miles round trip to vote at an off-campus polling station east of campus. Whereas students living just 100 yards northeast of that dorm in Luckyday Residential College, which serves diverse first-generation students predominantly of color, must travel west of campus eight miles roundtrip. Luckyday’s assigned polling station is problematic because it is in rural terrain with lack of availability to public transportation, and with inadequate parking space for those wishing to drive. It also has a reputation for its long wait lines. UM students must cross paths to vote in the opposite directions from their dorms, and must travel a substantial distance to vote despite the size and stature of the campus.

These two dorms illustrate a larger pattern. Students residing in the predominantly white Delta Delta Delta and Alpha Delta Pi Sororities are assigned to a polling station east of campus, approximately six and three miles roundtrip, respectively — even though the sororities are

¹ Timothy Ryback, What Ole Miss Can Teach Universities About Grappling With Our Pasts, *The Atlantic* (Sept. 19, 2017), available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/09/what-ole-miss-can-teach-universities-about-grappling-with-their-pasts/540324/>. See also Final Report, Chancellor’s Advisory Committee on History and Contextualization (June 16, 2017), available at: <http://context.olemiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/07/ChancellorAdvisoryCommitteeFinalReport.pdf>.

located to the west of Luckyday, whose students are sent west for an eight-mile round trip. Similarly, students in the freshman honors dorm Pitman Hall must travel east to vote, approximately three miles roundtrip, even though the dorm is situated west of Luckyday.

This crisscrossed patchwork resulting from multiple polling station assignments dispersed among various voting districts can only sow voter confusion about where and for whom one is to vote. Moreover, the multiple miles that students are required to travel off campus only serves to suppress their engagement, and is irrational given UM's size and position.

Making matters worse, Mississippi is among the 22 states in the nation that fully reject provisional ballots cast in the wrong precinct. Thus, if a student voter attempts to vote in a more convenient precinct although they are not assigned to it, their provisional ballot will be completely disregarded, even for state and federal races.²

UM Andrew Goodman Ambassadors Caroline Leonard and Katelyn Winstead know first-hand that young people can lose hope when they don't have access to the polls. In the last election, Katelyn spoke to a biomedical engineering major who chose not to vote because "as a liberal, my vote doesn't count in Mississippi." At the same time, Caroline and Katelyn are more driven than ever to secure voting rights on their campus. As Katelyn shared, "you may not think that it's important, but it really is. The only way we can make change — sustainable change that will last — is through our vote."

The Andrew Goodman Campus Team has grown from three to six students in 2022, and the team is planning to host a Voting Summit this year to increase awareness and support for youth civic empowerment at UM. They continue to lobby the administration and local election officials for an Election Day holiday and a polling location on campus. UM lawyers have discouraged students asking for Election Day off, arguing that they would need to forfeit another holiday in exchange. Local election officials actively resist a campus polling location.

In recent years, UM has endeavored to reconcile its divisive racial and political history by developing a methodical plan to increase the diversity of students, faculty, and administrators, and to confront its historical legacy as an opportunity for education. While these culture and pedagogy shifts are critical, history reveals that equality is impossible without unfettered access to the ballot.

In 2021, UM Andrew Goodman Ambassador Caroline Leonard published an article tracing the history of voting and voter suppression through systemic racism and resistance led by Black American voting and civil rights advocates in Mississippi. From the 14th and 15th Amendments, Jim Crow, and anti-Black racism within the suffragette movement, to the Civil Rights Movement,

² See Miss. Code Ann. § 23- 15-571, -- 73; State of Miss., Office of the Att'y Gen., Op. No. 1999-0697 (Dec. 22, 1999) (explaining that affidavit ballots cast in the wrong precincts are "improperly cast and should not be counted"), *relying on Wilbourn v. Hobson*, 608 So.2d 1187, 188 (Miss. 1992). *But see* Miss. Cod. Ann. § 23- 15-13 (certain individuals may be eligible to vote by affidavit ballot in a new precinct or ward, having changed ward or precinct residency within thirty days of election).

Freedom Summer, and Voting Rights Act, Caroline analyzes this history to make the case for anti-racist voter empowerment in the future.

The ramifications of this history continue to deeply impact the University of Mississippi. Andrew Goodman Campus Champion William Teer described the “wounds” of racism on campus as “fresh and raw.” He shared, “there are just as many voices advocating for anti-racism education as we have voices that say ‘let the past be in the past,’ while supporting Confederate monuments.” The Lyceum, UM’s main administrative building and the first building constructed on campus in 1848 has kept bullet holes intact and on display from white supremacist gun violence directed at James Meredith when he became the first Black student to enroll in 1962, as a reminder of the danger of these divisions.

When student advocates protested the Confederate statue located in the center of campus in 2020, they received death threats. However, the proposal to remove the statue from the campus center was eventually approved unanimously, by student government and other university organizations including staff and faculty councils, across party lines and racial groups.³ The statue now sits in a cemetery on the periphery of campus, despite Mississippi state laws that prohibit moving Confederate statues — and as William reflected, “what started with conversations among students led to a state-wide initiative of making Confederate statues less prominent that ultimately created some positive change.”

In this context, what motivates the UM Andrew Goodman Campus Team to continue the fight for voting rights? Katelyn sees a “new moral standard” among the rising generation of campus advocates. “Words that our parents said fifty years ago are not acceptable now,” she shared. “We have so many people, working so hard, just trying to make a difference. Just because there are those really outspoken people trying to prevent change doesn’t mean we’re not working really hard to create change.”

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](#).

³ Student Senators who wrote the original resolution to relocate the Confederate statue in 2019: John Chappell, Katie Dames, Jarvis Benson, Charlotte Armistead, Arielle Hudson, Leah Davis, Tyler Yarborough, and Dalton Hull.