

ON-CAMPUS POLLING PLACE AT UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA-UPSTATE

Original story by Yael Bromberg

Updates to the story by Emma Strother, based on an interview with Andrew Goodman Campus Champion Dr. Allison Ellis, March 29, 2022

CASE STUDY

The Upstate Campus of the University of South Carolina (USC-Upstate) is the fastest growing college in the state.¹ It is ranked by U.S. News as one of the Best Regional Colleges in the South² and is a part of the University of South Carolina system, the largest higher learning institution in the state.

USC-Upstate is largely a commuter campus, with many students living in the surrounding areas. These students are often registered to vote in their home districts and busy with classes on campus on Election Day. Requesting an absentee ballot to vote near campus is a cumbersome process. It is impossible to request an absentee ballot in South Carolina online; instead, voters must sign documentation in person at the Supervisor of Elections Office.

The Supervisor of Elections Office is located five miles away from campus. For one year, USC-Upstate ran a free shuttle to the Supervisor of Elections Office. However, it was discontinued the next year due to lack of use. If a student lives on campus and is registered to vote at their campus address, their polling location is roughly one mile from campus. The difficulties that USC-Upstate students face in requesting absentee ballots and in voting are particularly problematic given the role that South Carolina plays in national races. The fourth state in the country to participate in the presidential primaries, the state receives a tremendous amount of attention in election cycles. Presidential campaigns regularly tour and court the state's voters, including the student base.³

¹ Employment at Upstate – Upstate University of South Carolina, <https://www.uscupstate.edu/employment/> (last visited Apr 23, 2019).

² 2019 Best Southern Colleges - US News Rankings, <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/regional-colleges-south> (last visited Mar 27, 2019).

³ For example, during the 2016 presidential election, two leading campaigns visited Upstate to pursue the student vote: former President Bill Clinton on behalf of Candidate Hillary Clinton, and scholar Cornel West on behalf of Candidate Bernie Sanders.

Despite these challenges, USC-Upstate students care deeply about the democratic process and have gained important victories for voting rights on campus. Many USC-Upstate students are first-generation college students and/or first-generation Americans. Andrew Goodman Campus Champion Dr. Allison Ellis shared, “many of our students are the first people in their families to vote, and they’re driven by this opportunity to participate.”

Andrew Goodman Ambassadors at USC-Upstate have brought together a constellation of student groups on campus to promote voting and election education, including local chapters of the NAACP and The Divine Nine. Leading up to the 2020 presidential election, these groups collaborated on a video about voter registration, absentee ballots, and why voting matters. They showed the video in a “University 101” class that all first-year students take to help them navigate the transition to college. “The message from the students was clear,” said Dr. Ellis. “If you want to have influence in your community and the world, you need to vote. Otherwise, you’re letting other people decide what happens.”

Today, USC-Upstate remains without an on-campus polling location. Students still cannot use their USC-Upstate ID cards as required voter identification at the polls. Administrative turnover during the last few years has prevented strong relationships from forming between the university and local election officials. The USC-Upstate Chancellor has changed three times in just over two years, and the campus has experienced similar turnover of the Senior Vice Chancellor. Dr. Ellis cited these logistical factors as the main barrier to student voter enfranchisement.

Yet student voting advocates continue to promote civic engagement on campus. Data from the Tufts University National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement suggests that turnout increased by 10% at USC-Upstate from 2016 to 2020. Andrew Goodman Ambassadors remain hopeful. “Georgia gives South Carolina hope,” Dr. Ellis shared. “Georgia had a legacy of being one-sided, and then look what happened there in 2020...This is not about Democrats vs. Republicans. It’s just about a competitive race. Competition gets voters excited for the future, it shows them concrete evidence that their vote matters, and it drives turnout.”

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](#).