

ON-CAMPUS POLLING PLACE AT WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

Original story by Yael Bromberg and Andrew Goodman Campus Champions Amanda Hanson and Lane Perry

Updates to the story by Sterling Bland, based on an interview with Andrew Goodman Campus Champion Lane Perry on March 22, 2022

CASE STUDY

Western Carolina University (WCU) is located in Cullowhee, North Carolina, a rural town in Jackson County. In 2016, WCU triumphantly earned a one-stop early voting site in their University Center, where students can both complete their registration and vote, in time for the general election in November. At the time of the surge in efforts to obtain this early voting site, there were 9,000 students impacted by the lack of accessibility to voting in Cullowhee. Furthermore, WCU students make up 25 percent of Jackson County voters, and when registered, even vote at a percentage higher than the general population of the state of North Carolina.¹

The lack of accessible voting on campus severely impacted student voters registered on campus. Students without a car were forced to travel a mile and a half along a busy highway with no sidewalks and without access to public transportation.² Not only that, but onerous voter identification requirements³ forced students who did not bring compliant ID to head back to campus, leaving them highly unlikely to walk all the way back to the far-away polling location to vote. When student advocates began to speak out about the problem, Andrew Goodman Campus Champion Lane Perry knew he had to amplify their voices. As he put it, “an institution can ask you to do something, a supervisor can ask you to do something, but you’ll never do anything with as much enthusiasm and fervor until a student asks you to do something.”

¹ “WCU Ambassadors Successfully Advocate for Polling Place On Campus.” *News* (blog). The Andrew Goodman Foundation, July 13, 2016. <https://andrewgoodman.org/news-list/wcu-ambassadors-successfullyadvocate-polling-place-campus/>.

² Eldridge, Davin. “Mountain College Students Get On-Campus Voting, Turnout In Record Numbers.” BPR, August 3, 2016. <https://www.bpr.org/post/mountain-college-students-get-campus-voting-turnout-recordnumbers#stream/0>.

³ “Bringing the Ballot to Western Carolina University.” *News* (blog). The Andrew Goodman Foundation, December 6, 2016. <https://andrewgoodman.org/news-list/bringing-ballot-wcu/>.

Upon recognizing the barriers to voting and suppression tactics that WCU students face on Election Day, the Andrew Goodman Campus Team, in collaboration with the other members of the Democracy Coalition,⁴ sought to bring an early voting site to campus. Before approaching the Jackson County Board of Elections, the team worked to build a campus coalition and record of community support. Key partnerships included the WCU student body, WCU administration, and the local board of elections, in a concerted effort for bi-partisan support both at the state and campus level. Andrew Goodman Ambassadors chose to lay aside any partisan leanings, giving up opportunities to invest in political campaigns and instead choosing to neutralize their politics to increase student civic engagement. The results were remarkable.

By engaging with these key partners, the team managed to acquire 1,000 signatures for their petition from students, faculty, staff, and community members, and lobbied to get the support of campus administrators. The initiative also gained support from North Carolina State Senator Tom Apodaca, an alumnus of WCU, and North Carolina State Representative Joe Sam Queen.⁵ After obtaining the support of the greater WCU community, the Andrew Goodman Campus Team prepared for their presentation to the BOE by researching election law and statutes, establishing promises of financial backing from the County Manager and County Commissioners, gathering bipartisan congressional letters of support, preparing a bipartisan team of students to lead the presentation, observing BOE meetings, and finally securing a place on the BOE calendar.

When the team reached the BOE, they proposed to the majority-Republican BOE that the University Center was the perfect location to host the early voting site. The building satisfied all of the requirements for parking, room accommodations, and Americans with Disabilities Act provisions.⁶ In addition to presenting the proposed location, the team highlighted the bipartisan support they received from the campus community and local political leaders. After listening to the team's presentation, the BOE spent a month deliberating and ultimately awarded the early voting site to the WCU campus.

Former WCU Andrew Goodman Ambassador Joanna Woodson was thrilled to learn that her team's efforts were successful and holds that "bipartisanship was the key to our success. By reaching across all aisles from our nonpartisan standpoint, our effort was able to focus on the process of civic engagement, instead of the ill-perceived focus on end product." Furthermore, Woodson states, "this process showed me that building relationships and connecting all departments, organizations, students, and people can really make a difference."⁷ This work was not accomplished by students alone, but by a community of people giving a good faith effort to eliminate obstacles to their success. Even before the on-campus location was available, students were bused back and forth to a one-stop voting location, at which a few were unable to

⁴ The Democracy Coalition was comprised of major campus stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, staff, Andrew Goodman Ambassadors, and Campus Vote Project Democracy Fellows.

⁵ *WCU Ambassadors Successfully Advocate*, *supra* footnote 1.

⁶ The checklist of requirements for polling places compliant with the ADA can be found at <https://www.ada.gov/votingchecklist.htm>.

⁷ This quote was first published in AGF's School Spotlight on Western Carolina University. The article is available upon request.

simultaneously register to vote on site because, surprisingly, they “didn’t have utility bills.” Fortunately, Lane Perry, Andrew Goodman Campus Champion and shuttle driver at the time, was prepared. He had sent workers at the voting site a massive excel spreadsheet beforehand — logging students residency in on-campus dorms — and luckily was able to source the information in real time when the voting site’s computer failed to function with Microsoft Excel.

It is the sedimentation of this perseverance that has led to the sustained success of the early voting site today. According to the 2016 National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement⁸, the percentage of WCU students who voted early increased by 12.6 percent from 2012, with 71 percent of students voting early. With this expanded availability of early voting on-campus, the usage of in-person Election Day voting decreased by 12.3 percent, with 19.9 percent of students voting in person on Election Day. Additionally, 570 students were registered to vote during the early voting period at the early voting site.

And the work continues to expand WCU’s culture, fulfilling its mission to foster active citizenship among students. According to WCU’s 2018 NSLVE data, the voting rate in 2018 (31 percent) was double that of 2014 — despite a 25 percent increase in student population during the same period. Based on preliminary data regarding the 2018 midterm election, Western Carolina University was highlighted as the primary contributor to increasing the youth vote in Jackson County to nearly 30 percent. And in 2020, the voter registration rate was 91.2 percent, a ten percentage point increase from that in 2018.⁹ At this point, a majority of that impact is being attributed to the on-campus polling location and its accessibility, including its role as a one-stop voting site which additionally allows for voter registration. A WCU student said it best: “until I moved to WCU, I hardly ever heard about elections outside the presidential election. Students at WCU have taken it upon themselves to inform every student of upcoming elections and sign as many people up as they can to vote. The point in this is for our democracy to not be relegated to a set of increasing or decreasing percentage rates, but for it to remain an integral part of our culture and what it means to be a U.S. citizen, what it means to be a North Carolinian, or what it means to be a Catamount. It means that you serve, you inform yourself, you vote, and you believe in a democracy that is bigger than you, but better because of you.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

⁸ All-In Campus Democracy Challenge: Western Carolina University, <https://allinchallenge.org/campuses/western-carolina-university/?msckid=377e9a38b7fe11ecaa3d9691f7bf7697>

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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](#).