

Skateboarders work toward approval of skate park

Skate park could break ground late summer, early fall

Fiona McAllister
Elon News Network

For three hours, skateboarders took to the pavement of Beth Schmidt Park — setting up ramps and rails to get some tricks in on a rainy Sunday. But they are all waiting for one thing: a skate park.

It has been years in the making, but chairman of the Elon Skate Coalition Scott Ingalls said they hope to break ground on the skatepark this year — either late summer or early fall.

“Currently, we have the money for the skatepark,” Ingalls said. “We now have to acquire a little bit more money for the land development.”

At the March 11 town council meeting, Recreation and Parks Director Kim Brown asked the town council to approve the addition of the Elon skatepark project to the parking regulation.

“We have shrunk down the design of the skate park, so it is a little cheaper,” Brown said.

Ingalls said that donations help the skate committee and overall funding of the skatepark.

“Hit your grandmas and your grandpas, your uncles and aunties up,” Ingalls said. “Anybody. We would love the support.”

In the meantime, Ingalls said that the skatepark committee has had events, such as the Parking Lot Jam and “Go Skate Day.” These activities give skateboarders a chance to practice and show support for the skateboarding community.

“We set it up to bring people in, show

the support, show we have a community here, and that we’re trying to grow that community, especially with a skate park,” Ingalls said. “That helps establish and grow a community of skateboarders from generation to generation.”

Local skateboarder and member of the Elon Skate Coalition Paul Stansberry said he got into skateboarding four or five years ago. 17-year-old Stansberry said that he came to the Parking Lot Jam to show support for the Elon Skate Coalition.

“My favorite part about skating is probably the people I’ve met,” Stansberry said. “All of my closest friends I’ve met through skateboarding.”

Local skateboarder and member of the Elon Skate Coalition Collin Flowers said he will do whatever he can to help get a skate park in Elon. Flowers said that financially he is not able to do much, but showing support helps immensely.

“We need a skate park, that’s pretty much it,” Flowers said.

Flowers said skateboarding has changed him as a person. He described loving the feeling of the wind as he rides, and said that feeling every crack in the pavement underneath his board is unlike anything else.

“It’s helped me be more persistent and really try to do things,” Flowers said. “It’s helped me meet a lot of cool people. All of the friends that I have today are through skateboarding.”

Accompanying Flowers at the Parking Lot Jam was his dog Petey. Though Petey is no expert skateboarder, he was running alongside Flowers while he was skateboarding and doing tricks. Flowers said Petey does not like to skateboard just yet, but he’s been trying to get him more into the sport.



Enil Ferguson attempts skateboarding trick on ramp during Parking Lot Jam on March 15 at Beth Schmidt Park.

KATRINA HOLTZ | PHOTO EDITOR

Nonprofits cover ABSS school lunch debt

SAFE Alamance, United Way receive donations, covers \$21,400

Anjolina Fantaroni
Elon News Network

The total cost of lunch debt across public schools nationwide is \$194 million, according to a 2025 report from the Education Data Initiative. North Carolina accumulates \$243,639,200 of lunch debt a year.

However, the lunch debt from the Alamance-Burlington School System will not be a part of that number anymore —

because as of right now, it has none.

The lunch debt in ABSS has been paid off, according to Sherea Burnett, president of United Way of Alamance County.

ABSS has 28 Community Eligibility Provision schools, which is a program that allows low-income area schools to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students without requiring applications for free and reduced-price meals. Eight ABSS schools are not part of CEP, but still provide breakfast to students for \$2 and lunch for \$3.10.

In those schools, students can rack up lunch debt — the unpaid balance from school meals owed by families to a district.

In a previous interview with Elon News Network, Amanda Gantt, school nutrition manager for Western Alamance Middle School, said students with lunch debt over \$30 do not get to participate in extracurricular activities, such as school dances.

Burnett said while learning more about school lunch debt from a previous Elon News Network article about ABSS lunch debt, the United Way partnered with Southern Alamance Family Empowerment, a local nonprofit that supports food insecurity, and found a way to get involved.

“Both of us, within minutes of each other, emailed the school nutrition staff to try to get an estimate of what the amount was that was owed to cover school lunch debt,” Burnett said. “And we did that because we were trying to figure out how big of a number it was.”

The overall outstanding ABSS lunch debt was \$21,400 as of Jan. 31, 2026.

Much of the existing debt has been paid by a \$15,000 donation from a used bookstore and record store in Mebane, McKAY’s. A Georgia-based nonprofit All for Lunch has committed to paying the rest.

“It became just us having the conversation and then going back to our networks, working within those groups and then coming back to the table and seeing what we could do to not only close the loop with the school system and pay off the debt, but to also better educate the community about what resources are available,” Burnett said.

Promotions and advertising director for McKAY’s, Rachel Poe, said the store is always looking for ways to support the local community and give back. She said McKAY’s tries to evaluate where the need is at the greatest time, and there are many people struggling to put food on the table.



State works to increase mental health support

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Sociologist discusses social impact of technology

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Cheer team enters new era of competition

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ANJOLINA FANTARONI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A student at Elon Elementary School waits for a school lunch, which consists of pizza on Nov. 3, 2025.

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THE PENDULUM

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ANJOLINA FANTARONI

Executive Director of Elon News Network

SARAH T. MOORE

Managing Editor of The Pendulum

FIONA MCALLISTER

Broadcast News Director

KATRINA HOLTZ

Photo Editor

MILES HAYFORD

News Editor

TRISTA PANAGAKOS

Politics Editor

KATHAN GANDHI

Sports Editor

NOLAN WILLIAMS

Audience Engagement Manager

MACKENZIE CRUZ

Producer of ENN On Air

MEGAN WALSH

Special Events Coordinator

ABIGAIL HINES

Video Production Manager

Monika Jurevicius and Alex Nettles contributed to the copy editing of this edition. Amelia Metz contributed to the design of this edition.

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CONTROLLED CHAOS

MILES HAYFORD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A burned car lies outside the Elon Fire Department's training tower. The car is used for trainings that involve vehicle fire scenarios.

Elon Fire Department's training facility develops skills through live scenarios

Full-time fire fighters are required to log 240 training hours each year

Miles Hayford
Elon News Network

Right behind the parking lot of the Station at Mill Point, stands a nondescript four-story tower branded by burn marks. That tower helps breed excellence and consistency in the Elon Fire Department's ranks.

The fire department's training facility behind Mill Point is a Class A burn building, meaning it is designed for live fire-training using burned organic materials such as wooden pallets, but not fuel. Division Chief Brandon Waddell oversees the department's training program and said it helps simulate situations that they would face.

"No incident is the same," Waddell said. "It gives the guys — the scenarios we create, the trainings that are developed amongst the crews — that sense of urgency, that uncontrollable chaos. We create that type of scenario, and then we also add in the elements of the smoke, the heat, zero visibility that we may encounter."

The main attraction of the training facility is the four-story tower which has a variety of access points for rope rescue scenarios. It also has dummies inside for other types of search and rescue scenarios. The department often simulates live burning scenarios through an actual fire going on inside the tower, including some training with fires on the third floor to give firefighters insight into the approach of a high-rise building fire. The facility also has a couple of vehicles to simulate situations where a person is stuck in a burning car.

Waddell said when they stage a live fire, they have a burn instructor inside to oversee the fire, as well as a safety officer. Additionally, all building exits are unlocked for safety.



MILES HAYFORD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A four story-tower stands inside the Elon Fire Department's training facility that is used for live burning scenarios.

Waddell said a water hydrant is also available 50 feet away from the building during drills.

"They'll have to pull lines off the truck, approach a structure, enter the structure, conduct the drill, isolate any hazards and extinguish the fire," Waddell said. "They'll have to do so again at live time, at live speed."

The facility's presence in a residential area of the town isn't lost on them, however. Waddell said the department alerts the community when they plan to put on a big training session that might attract a lot of eyes. He said they put out notifications on social media and notify police and the town hall ahead of time. But he said the department has gotten calls before from community members where they need to push out information that they are just training.

Training sessions are a vital part of firefighter's work at the fire department, Waddell said. Members of the volunteer fire department staff attend training sessions

at the facility every Tuesday night for three hours. Ray Pruitt, assistant chief of the volunteer staff, said it helps these volunteers become more efficient.

"We want to practice and make mistakes on the training ground, so we won't make mistakes on the real scene," Pruitt said. "That's the whole purpose behind this training."

Pruitt said it helps the volunteers work on their skills and improve. He said since the first training of the year, he's seen a lot of improvement from some of the new volunteers.

"Since the first of the year, we started at the very beginning with some new candidates, and here we are in March, and we're starting to do some firefighting, search and rescue type stuff," Pruitt said.

Waddell said full-time firefighters are required to get 240 hours of training each year. But he said they typically do more than that as the 24-full time members in 2025 recorded over 12,000 hours of training. Training sessions are typically focused around the needs of the firefighters. Waddell said these experienced firefighters still learn from these training sessions because of how firefighting is always changing.

"This is one of those professions where you can never stop learning," Waddell said. "The guys have to be reminded of what can happen and what the potentials are, so we can quickly isolate and mitigate situations."

Waddell said they use the training facility to test out new equipment and adapt changing aspects of the job like the emergence of electric vehicle fires or different types of buildings. Waddell said training continuously as conditions change is important, along with making sure it's as realistic to a real situation as they can.

"We get it as close as we can to to have them prepared for what's to come in the real world," Waddell said.



MILES HAYFORD | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The inside of the Elon Fire Department's training tower, which includes dummies that are used for some scenarios such as search and rescue situations.



ALEXANDER SIEGEL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dr. Kelly Leggett speaks to attendees of the WEWeekend Conference during the "Women's Health Panel" in Turner Theatre on March 13 and 14. "The great thing about this event is everybody that is in this room is committed to women, and is a very approachable audience," co-chair of the Women of Elon committee Michelle Wideman '00 said.



ABBY GRAVELY | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Elon University cheerleaders support the women's basketball team as it tips off against Hampton University in the 2026 Coastal Athletic Association Women's Basketball Tournament on March 12. Learn more about the cheer team on page 8.



ABBY GRAVELY | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Graduate forward Quinzia Fulmore poses as she is introduced before Elon's game against Hampton University in their first game of the 2026 Coastal Athletic Association Women's Basketball Tournament. The Phoenix survived their first match March 12 — a back-and-forth battle to defeat the Hampton Pirates 67-62. On March 13, Elon fell 68-53 to No. 3 seed Drexel University.



KATRINA HOLTZ | PHOTO EDITOR

A skateboarder performs a trick on rail during a Parking Lot Jam event March 15 at Beth Schmidt Park. Learn more about local skateboarders on page 1.



ALEXANDER SIEGEL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Elon University senior midfielder/forward Martin Kozak dribbles the ball alongside two players from Barton College during their March 13 exhibition game at Rhodes Stadium.



Students wait in the lunch line at Harvey R. Newlin Elementary School and watch cafeteria workers prepare lunch wraps and nachos Nov. 14, 2025.

ANJOLINA FANTARONI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Nonprofits collaborate to minimize effects of school lunch debt

ABSS | from cover

“When we made the donation to United Way, we asked that they use it for food-based assistance, because we know a lot of people are struggling to put meals on the table right now,” Poe said. “United Way applied that towards school lunch debt, which we were so happy to hear because it’s a good cause.”

Executive Director of SAFE Alamance, Tiffanie Jackson, said she knew about school lunch debt, but was unaware of how much it impacted students.

“It’s not just a local or regional issue; it’s a national issue,” Jackson said.

Jackson said lunch debt is an issue because kids aren’t getting the nutrition they need — and kids who live in households with financial stress understand it better than anyone.



I DON’T WANT ANY CHILD TO BE HUNGRY.

SHEREÁ BURNETT
UNITED WAY OF ALAMANCE COUNTY
PRESIDENT

“They hear their guardians and mom and dad talking about these issues in the house, and they take that in, especially younger kids,” Jackson said. “Rather than go through the line, they may feel like, ‘Maybe I shouldn’t do that, because mom and dad are stressed out.’”

According to the School Nutrition Association, nearly one in five children in America live in households without consistent access to adequate food.

SAFE Alamance has continued raising donations even after the full debt was paid, because lunch debt accumulates at about \$3,500 a month in Alamance County, according to SAFE Alamance.

“We’re going to have an ongoing fundraising campaign throughout the school year and next year and on and on,”



A student at Harvey R. Newlin Elementary School eats a fruit cup Nov. 14, 2025.

ANJOLINA FANTARONI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jackson said. “All for Lunch is partnering with us for that to continue making sure that lunch debt gets paid.”

Burnett said what the United Way and SAFE realized was that many people would likely qualify for free and reduced breakfast and lunch, but they have not filled out the paperwork to get it because of concerns about their immigration statuses.

Jackson said SAFE wants to get to the root issues of school lunch debt as well, and knows that there is a misunderstanding about what it means to apply for free and reduced lunch — it won’t compromise citizenship or put a family in front of the Department of Social Services, according to Jackson.

“Here at SAFE, because we have a proper

intake process to help connect people to the resources to get them past the barriers that brought them to us in the first place, we’re going to start including the applications for free and reduced lunch,” Jackson said.

Burnett said she feels like the decisions of adults should not affect children in a way that limits access to human rights, such as food and the ability to eat.

“The fact that we are in a country where there are people that have so much — they have so much in excess and then we have kids who may be making the decision not to eat simply because they don’t want to be embarrassed by the fact that their family doesn’t have a few dollars to cover the cost of their school lunch, that to me is heartbreaking,” Burnett said.

Burnett said she and Jackson spoke about how people should think about the ramifications of the decisions they’re making. Burnett also said children can develop issues with food, such as not focusing in school, developing eating disorders and receiving falling grades — all because of school lunch debt.

“I don’t want any child to be hungry. I don’t want any child to struggle in school because they are hungry, but I also don’t want them to be punished because of the decisions of adults and those adults might be their parents or guardians, or it might be elected officials,” Burnett said.

Visit AllForLunch.org to learn more about or donate towards accumulating ABSS school lunch debt.

Closing the mental health gap

Public Service Leadership Program aims to increase mental health support across NC

State health department partners with 25 higher education institutions to grow social work field

Monika Jurevicius
Elon News Network

In North Carolina, the demand for social workers in the state is growing as substance use and mental health service needs increase. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services launched the Public Service Leadership Program, a collaboration between the NCDHHS and 25 higher education institutions in the Social Work Coalition on NC Work Development, to help with that demand.

Alongside the announcement of the new program on March 2, the NCDHHS released its first “State of North Carolina’s Mental Health and Substance Use Services Workforce Report” supported by UNC’s Behavior Health Workforce Research Center and Sheps Health Workforce NC. It states that one in five adults in North Carolina face a mental health challenge and 16% of the adult population is impacted by substance use. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, School of Social Work’s Dean Ramona Denby-Brinson noticed the rift in needing to gain people in the field, which she took up the project with her team.

UNC Chapel Hill’s Associate Dean for Community Engagement and Outreach at the School of Social Work, Kathy Colville, has been a social worker for over 20 years, working at various organizations within the state including the Alamance County Health Department. When she first stepped into her role at Chapel Hill, the program was just being mentioned around the school.

“We have a huge workforce gap,” Colville said. “We have 25 programs, but we could be graduating more students. We need more of our students that do graduate with bachelors of social work and master of social work degrees to go into public service jobs. The

behavioral health workforce shortage – 97 of our 100 counties are considered in a shortage.”

NCDHHS Director of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Use Services Kelly Crosbie noted that many people who have mental health or substance abuse struggles qualify for Medicaid and disability benefits, but don’t receive the care they need because of stigma or not having the resources in their area. She said some of the biggest demographic users for telehealth were young adult patients who struggled with those needs.

Higher education and online degree discovery platform Research.com states that the average cost for a master’s in social work in North Carolina costs around \$10,000 to \$15,000 per year. In December 2025, the NCDHHS launched the Licensed Workforce Loan Repayment Program, a \$20 million initiative to recruit and retain license professionals in mental health, substance abuse, intellectual and development disability and traumatic brain services in rural, underserved communities. Eligible providers may apply for up to \$50,000 in educational loan repayment.

“Social work education – even if you’re in state, even if you get some help along the way – it can be a pretty intense financial commitment,” Colville said. “The loan repayment program is intended to help with the very clear reality that very few social work jobs are really high paying jobs, especially when you’re new to the profession. The loans are real. That’s always a really important component of making a social work education accessible.”

Starting in the fall of 2026, Elon University will offer a Master’s in Mental Health Counseling, following the university’s efforts in experiential learning among all students.

In January 2026, Gov. Josh Stein visited the Alamance Behavioral Center to emphasize the need for mental health services around the state. In the report produced by the state, they used data from the North Carolina Board of



MONIKA JUREVICIUS | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

On March 6, yard signs with black balloons tied and names written on them stand outside of the Greensboro Cultural Center to commemorate Black Balloon Day, a day of remembrance for those who have died from drug overdose.

Licenses Clinical Mental Health Counselors to show there are 4.94 clinical mental health counselors in Alamance County per 10,000 people, while Gates County has none at all.

“We are working with a broad population, not just people who might have criminal issues with mental health, but also people who are having depression, anxiety, people who are coping the best they can with issues and they might just need some extra help,” Elon University accreditation coordinator and associate professor of clinical mental health counseling Susan Wasik said. “There are so many different ways that our students and our profession help serve the population and families throughout the area and lots of different things.”

According to NCDHHS, 17.4% of North Carolina adults were found to need substance use treatment, while 78.5% did not receive treatment. Among 10.3% of youth (12 to 17-years-old) that needed substance use treatment, 57.3% did not receive services.

Guilford County Drug and Injury Prevention Manager Amanda Clark helped host Black Balloon Day, a day of remembrance for those who have passed away from drug overdose. Working with both the Guilford County Law Enforcement Assisted Division and nonprofits such as Guilford County Solution to the Opioid Problem, the Guilford County Health Department works with community organizations and social workers to get resources out to people impacted by substance abuse. Clark said stigma is a leading

factor as to if patients receive the treatment they need or not.

“Every overdose death is 100% preventable,” Amanda Clark. “Stigma is something that prevents a lot of people from seeking help when they need it. It prevents a lot of people from telling others what’s going on, something they may be struggling with. This helps reduce the stigma around substance use and around overdose.”

As a service worker, Colville said the biggest thing students and practitioners need to remember to practice is resilience, one of the key work values in the field of social work. She believes that the new program, based out of UNC, Chapel Hill, will help the state achieve its goals for increasing the needs for mental health services in the state, but that it still needs time to build.

“We need resources, like everything else, to be able to educate students,” Colville said. “We need the ability to have classroom space and to be able to hire faculty and all of that. Those are real needs for growth. I feel really confident that we’ll get there, but we’re just getting started right now.”

For resources, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration provides a 24/7, confidential hotline for those suffering mental and/or substance abuse at 1-800-662-4357. GCSTOP operates various clinics and programs throughout the week. For medical emergencies and/or help with concerns for suicide or mental health crises, contact 911 or 988.

Primary elections bring changes to NC statehouse

Incumbents lawmakers in both parties lost their primary elections

Trista Panagakos
Elon News Network

The North Carolina primary elections have altered what the statehouse may look like in November.

Professor of Political Science at University of North Carolina, Wilmington, Aaron King said incumbents usually have an advantage when running for office because of name recognition, a record of accomplishments and organization. King said challengers are able to campaign as an outsider against an incumbent and explain to voters how the incumbent is failing them.

“I think overall, there’s an increase in the political landscape of some voters who are not happy with the status quo and they’re not happy with the people that are currently in office,” King said.

Eight incumbent state lawmakers lost their primaries March 3, three Democrats and five Republicans. The results of the competitive District 26 Republican state senate race are still unclear, with incumbent Phil Berger trailing competitor Sam Page by 23 votes. Berger called for a recount.

Compared to 2024, when only one incumbent state legislator lost in the North Carolina primary, and 2022 when seven incumbent state legislators lost, the 2026 primary is unique because of the Democrats who lost.

The Republican Party previously had a supermajority in the state legislature but in 2024, Democrats broke that supermajority

Representatives votes to override vetoes

Listed below are bills where at least one of the three incumbent lawmakers voted to override Gov. Stein’s veto in the 2025-26 legislative session.

Bill	Topic	Chamber	Carla Cunningham	Nasif Majeed	Shelly Willingham
HB 193	Firearm Law Revisions	House	No (uphold veto)	No (uphold veto)	Yes (override)
HB 318	Criminal Illegal Alien Enforcement Act	House	Yes	No	No
HB 402	Regulatory reform / REINS-style bill	House	Yes	No	Yes
HB 549	Expand State Auditor powers	House	No	No	Yes
HB 805	Prevent Sexual Exploitation / school policy provisions	House	No	Yes	No
SB 266	Power Reduction Bill Act (energy policy)	House vote on Senate bill	Yes	Yes	Yes

DATA VISUALIZATION BY TRISTA PANAGAKOS

Data from the North Carolina General Assembly.

which gave them the numbers necessary to support Gov. Josh Stein’s vetoes. The three Democrat State House incumbents who lost — Carla Cunningham, Nasif Majeed and Shelly Willingham — have crossed party lines to vote with Republicans to override Stein’s vetoes.

Cunningham, Majeed and Willingham have voted with the Republican majority 84%, 70% and 83% of the time, respectively.

In the 2025-26 legislative session Majeed voted with Republicans to override Stein’s veto of House Bill 805, which officially recognizes two sexes. Cunningham voted with Republicans to override the veto of House Bill 318, which requires North Carolina sheriffs to work more closely with Immigration and

Customs Enforcement. All three politicians joined Republicans to override Stein’s veto of Senate Bill 266, which would eliminate the state’s goal to cut carbon emissions.

Professor of Political Science at North Carolina State University Steven Greene said voters are voting for candidates loyal to their party.

“If these were incumbents who had voted to uphold Josh Stein’s vetoes, we wouldn’t be having this conversation,” Greene said. “It wasn’t about them being incumbents, it was about them being incumbents who were not loyal to their party.”

Patricia Smith defeated Willingham in the Democratic primary election and faces off against Republican Brent Roberson in

the general election in November. She was active in the community while campaigning. Smith said she did radio and newspaper advertisements and attended different community events and plans to do the same for the general election.

Smith said if she is elected to the state legislature in November, she would be a team player to address the issues affecting North Carolina.

“I’m going in as a Democrat and I’m going to vote as a Democrat,” Smith said. “I’m not going to sway. I’m not going to bend and I’m not going to change sides.”

On the Republican side, if Berger were to lose his race, Greene said there would be a major reshuffling within North Carolina politics.

Berger was endorsed by President Donald Trump and his loss could signal the power of Trump’s endorsement weakening. According to Ballotpedia, from 2018-2025 Trump endorsed 684 candidates in primary elections, with an average success rate of 85%. Greene said Trump is strategic about who he endorses, but the Berger race shows there may be limits to his endorsement.

King said politicians are hesitant to endorse because they do not want to throw their support behind a candidate who may lose.

“Historically, many politicians have been hesitant to put their thumb on the scale in primary elections because you also don’t want to put your name out there, and then back the wrong candidate,” King said.

Looking to the November elections, Greene said the results of the primary election would encourage legislators to have more party loyalty.

Elon University staff member pursues chaplaincy

Assistant director of first-generation student support services works toward Master of Divinity degree

Ruby Burckle
Elon News Network

Kenneth Brown Jr., assistant director of first-generation student support services at Elon University, is continuing his journey toward becoming a chaplain. Though Brown can't pinpoint the specific moment he decided to become a chaplain, he said the discovery of this passion was more like pulling the strings from various areas of his life together as he explored what made him "come alive."

Rev. Kirstin Boswell, Elon's university chaplain and dean of multifaith engagement, said a chaplain is someone who supports people in their faith and spiritual journeys, within an institutional setting.

"We are helping people to figure out their pathway forward, and how we can support that from the wisdom that we've learned from the world's great religious, spiritual, and ethical traditions," Boswell said.

Brown announced via LinkedIn that he had accepted an offer to the hybrid Master of Divinity program at Duke University Divinity School.

Chaplains are commonly found in hospitals, higher education institutions, prisons, the military and even in National Parks.

Additionally, though the word chaplain has its roots in the Protestant faith, there are chaplains within every religious community.

Brown described his emotions when ideating over pursuing chaplaincy as feelings of lightness and joy, and a sense that he could be in that role forever, without getting tired of it.

"I was thinking about those moments of connecting with students, talking with

students, and also thinking about my own spiritual evolution," Brown said.

In his current role, Brown works to support and provide guidance for first-generation students at Elon. He said he knows firsthand how transformative college and being a young adult in general can be, as people learn more about themselves and the world around them. Brown said for some people, this transformative period can include a shift in their faith.

"I want to help young people navigate that tension and that journey," Brown said.

Brown is a Christian, and grew up in the historic Black church and the United Methodist Church. He said faith was a non-negotiable for him and his siblings, and they found themselves in church on most Sundays and many weekdays.

Despite some of the hardships he faced growing up in a low-income family of 10 in Green Springs, North Carolina, Brown said his parents' faith gave them a sense of optimism that things would get better.

"I tend to believe that we, as humans, always imagine the worst case scenario," Brown said. "But if we always imagine the worst case scenario to happen, then we also have to imagine the best case scenario to happen as well, and that is just formed by my faith."

When applying for divinity school, Brown said it was very similar to any other college application, but slightly more personal due to its connection to his personal faith.

Brown said he relied on his faith during the application process and often prayed for God to make it clear whether this path was right for him. He said when he received an acceptance and full tuition scholarship from Duke, it felt like his prayers were being answered.

"It's like, 'You are listening, you are hearing these words I'm putting up to you,'" Brown said.

Besides his full tuition scholarship, Brown also chose Duke because of its



KATRINA HOLTZ | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Assistant Director of First-Generation Student Support Services Kenneth Brown Jr. talks with student worker about plans for future events on March 13 in McCoy Commons.

proximity to Elon and Mebane, where he lives. In addition, Duke Divinity is a Methodist seminary, which will be logistically helpful for Brown as he figures out whether he wants to be ordained in the United Methodist Church.

Having already received her Master of Divinity from The University of Chicago Divinity School, Boswell gave insight into the types of courses taught through these programs.

While in divinity school, Boswell took courses ranging from ministry, general and specialized religious studies, ethics, sociology, anthropology, human development, and studied three languages.

"As a chaplain you encounter everything across the entire spectrum of the human experience," Boswell said. "The things that I've learned, both at divinity school and also just through my own personal journey over the years, those things tend to pop up as meaningful background reflection all the time."

While Brown is excited to begin his masters of divinity program, he also never expected he would be a student again

and said he thinks that academically, the program will challenge him to think differently about faith and religion in general.

"Typically when people read the Bible or their particular religious texts, it's for personal edification," Brown said. "But here you're reading these texts and objectively analyzing it."

Brown will continue to work at Elon while pursuing his masters of divinity, thanks to the hybrid nature of the program he is enrolled in.

He said there are a lot of parallels between the work he does at Elon and the work he would be doing as a chaplain. Both require listening to people, being there through their ups and downs, and helping them figure out where life is taking them. As a chaplain and with his divinity degree, Brown said he hopes to continue to build community and provide support for people through the hardships of life.

"I want to be a part of the number that inspires people to not give up yet," Brown said.

Sociologist warns students about AI's social impact

Zeynep Tufekci urges students to think critically about AI, its impact on education in society

Mia Torres
Elon News Network



KATRINA HOLTZ | PHOTO EDITOR
Techno-sociologist and professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University Zeynep Tufekci gives the Baird Lecture, part of the Elon University Speaker Series, on March 12 in McCrary Theatre.

GROWING UP IN TURKEY with only one television channel and limited access to books, Zeynep Tufekci remembers a childhood with restricted information and American TV shows like "Little House on the Prairie" and the soap opera, "Dallas".

Tufekci delivered the Baird Lecture on March 12 in McCrary Theatre at Elon University about how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence are reshaping society and democracy.

As a techno-sociologist and columnist who studies the relationship between technology and society, Tufekci told the audience that rapid technological change often arrives faster than societies are prepared to handle it.

"What we find is that, once the technology is unleashed, the things come all at once," Tufekci said during the lecture. "It's not like, here's the good part, here's the bad part and let me just use the good part."

Her interest in technology began early. While studying computer programming in college, Tufekci worked for International Business Machines Corporation, a major American multinational technology company specializing in computer software and artificial intelligence.

Through a company network, she was able to get early access to AI and communicate with programmers around the world to ask technical questions. Because communication was text-based, users didn't know her identity or age online.

"Someone from Japan would just answer the question," Tufekci said. "They didn't know I was a teenager or a young woman."

That experience led her to shift from computer programming to sociology, with a focus on how technology shapes social and political systems.

During the lecture, Tufekci compared the rise of artificial intelligence to earlier

technological advancements, including the invention of the printing press. While technologies can expand access to knowledge, she said they can also make it difficult for societies to adjust to the changes.

Generative artificial intelligence tools can produce essays and written work within seconds, which raises questions about how teachers can ensure students still learn the important things.

"But the thing you got wasn't the essay itself," Tufekci said. "It was trying to grapple with ideas."

In an interview with Elon News Network, Tufekci compared relying on AI too early in the learning process to training for a marathon while wearing rollerblades.

"You might reach the finish line faster," Tufekci told Elon News Network. "But you're not building the muscles you need to run."

Rena Zito, associate professor of sociology and interim chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Elon, said Tufekci's work stands out because it focuses less on whether technology is good or bad and more on how social systems shape its impact.

Zito said Tufekci approaches artificial intelligence through a broader sociological lens.

"She brings a really unique sociological perspective," Zito said. "A lot of people think the question is just about putting these tools in the right hands, good actors instead of bad actors. But she argues that the bigger issue is how systems and social structures operate."

Zito said focusing on the surrounding environment is important to understanding how technologies influence life.

"We cannot understand the human condition anymore without understanding the technological condition," Zito said. "So much of our lives now exist online, and those environments are shaped by algorithms

designed to influence how we behave."

Zito said these types of discussions are important for college students who will graduate into a world surrounded by rapidly advancing technologies.

"The world that students are going to graduate into is going to be shaped by technologies that are advancing at an incredible speed," Zito said. "Being able to navigate misinformation and understand how these systems work is going to be essential to living in a healthy civil society."

Charles Sneed said he had previously encountered Tufekci's work through reading and was interested in hearing her speak.

"It sounded like she was one of those people who makes things understandable," Sneed said. "With all the confusion and chaos that we're swimming in these days, she does make things clearer."

Steven House, former executive vice president and provost at Elon, also attended the lecture. He said conversations about technology and society reflect the purpose of a liberal arts education.

"This is at the heart of the liberal arts," House said. "You have to ask the questions, and you have to understand the repercussions of the answers."

During the speech Tufekci said that societies have historically adapted to disruptive technologies through policies and social changes.

"So I think this is doable," Tufekci said. "We just have to create the right incentives."

When talking with ENN, she encouraged students to approach artificial intelligence with curiosity and skepticism, while continuing to question how the technology shapes public life.

"What you do will shape the world I live in as well," Tufekci said. "This generation will be at the forefront of figuring out how we live with these technologies."

You should be keeping up with the partisans

I went to Elon College Republicans and Democrats meetings, so you don't have to



Pat Probst
Columnist

Why hate some politicians when you can learn to hate them all? This is the half-ironic question that ricocheted in my mind as circumstances dictated that the story I'd been working on for a few would have to take a new angle. My original plan had been to attend an Elon College Republicans meeting and get a sense of how the Grand Old Party's future representatives were handling the latest release of the Epstein Files, along with the various other misgivings of the current administration.

This plan was stifled by the meeting getting canceled, leaving me with no event to attend and nothing to talk about. As though he divined my predicament, a fellow columnist reached out and said he would be giving a talk at the upcoming Elon College Democrats meeting. This made me think: Why talk about one side when I can talk about both? After all, contributing to the extreme partisanship of today seemed in bad taste. That and the recent NC party-line primaries this month pose a lot of questions.

I'll admit it: The current political landscape in America has hardened my sensibilities and dashed my hopes and dreams as much as anyone else who keeps their eyes on the ticker these days.

According to the Pew Center, party lines are practically split right down the middle as of 2023, with a survey finding 49% of respondents being or leaning Democrat, 48% being or leaning Republican, and three percent reporting no lean or no answer.

I imagine the three percent unaffiliated has since shrunk or disappeared.

That said, the half-alive optimist in me wanted to believe that by the end of this column I'd feel like a little bit less of a cynic. Let me make this abundantly clear, however: A centrist, I am not. My only other desire from this column was to determine if we really all hate each other as much as the media and heads of state would have you believe.

If not to make everyone find any kind of agreement, I hope to at least open a dialogue, and failing that, to let one side know that the other has some desire to return to speaking terms. But is a College Democrats or Republicans meeting really the place to look for non-partisan hope? Perhaps not, but where else would you have me start?

The College Democrats meeting: Harsh lighting and harsher realities... a moment of respite? A foot in the door of dialogue...

Attendance was much more sparse than I had predicted; I hadn't expected the meeting to be bursting at the seams, but this felt like an unusually low headcount.

When I sat down, I grimaced internally at the lighting. Lambert Academic Village takes on an uncanny quality by night and the fluorescents provide a sterile look to its rooms. As it turned out, two of the people sitting next to me for the duration of the meeting were members of the College Republicans, although they both self-identified as Independents with a conservative streak. They weren't exactly forthcoming about their affiliation at first, with the person beside me saying simply that he was "not a Democrat." After the meeting had concluded, one of the two, Diego Diaz, actually remarked on how nervous he was to be there at first. That alone, to me, speaks volumes on how American politics are in such a state right now that members of opposing parties or views feel uneasy while simply being in each other's presence.

The meeting proceeded into special elections for various positions within the College Democrats, including positions such as director at large and political director. Various members were allowed to make their case for why they should be elected for whatever position they were vying for. The interim Political Director Miles Prenda, who is running for the full time position, chipped in before the other candidates spoke, emphasizing opting for a more democratic approach over simply appointing members for the span of a semester. Of the points made during each individual candidate's speeches, one of the most common was how they were from Alamance County, highlighting their political activity in the area thus far and their hope to continue it. Local politics

was one of the major themes of today, with the College Democrats President Noah Mallion emphasizing their immediate impact on the local populous, including students.

"We're all here for one reason, because we care about where we live, and we care about the people who live there," Mallion said at the meeting.

The majority of the meeting followed this pattern, with various voices expressing a desire to grow the organization and its activist efforts in and around campus. Shortly after the meeting's close, I pulled aside a few key figures in the College Democrats apparatus.

Prenda sat down with me for a few minutes to iron out the details of what he, and by that ticket the organization, is planning. I made a comment on how many of the official position names in the College Democrats sort of blend together and he chuckled and concurred. Earlier in the meeting, Prenda had said that "the campus is asleep," piquing my interest on what he and the others had in mind for waking it up.

Prenda explained he and the others are aiming to see meetings that discuss current events, plan to organize and to highlight opportunities within their political sphere.

"We have a duty to ensure that we are holding candidates in this county accountable [for] what they are planning to do for young people," Prenda said.

A few individuals stayed behind to talk. Some Democrat stragglers spoke with Lance Nelkin of the College Republicans. Nelkin, a lanky and bearded man, explained his presence by saying he wanted to hear what the College Democrats had to say.

The two College Republicans likely felt encouraged to stay behind after Mallion expressed his desire to hold a mediated debate with the College Republicans in the future to the concurrence of his peers. The current state of politics found its way into the discussion, however, with Mallion and a few others stating they didn't want to deal with any "crazies from either side."

The conversation got underway with Mallion explaining his basest desires as a Democrat to Diaz. According to Mallion, much of the issues facing America today boil down to a matter of community, and our goals on either side of the aisle are to take care of our own, although we have differing ideas on how exactly to do this.

Mallion called himself "a Democrat based in fact," remarking on how he will listen to anyone provided they can back up their claims with evidence. Diaz responded with approval. He laughed and said he "liked this kind of Democrat," and that he "wished they were all like this."

Incredible. The very last thing I expected to see were members of the College Republicans at a College Democrats meeting, much less for them to engage with each other, civil or otherwise.

When I asked Mallion and Diaz about their opinions on the inflammatory politics in our political landscape, they both expressed their exhaustion with the practice. Mallion used the term "clickbait politics," which I think sums up online discourse in two words better than most major media outlets could in an entire segment or article. They are the practitioners in question, after all.

All of this being said, my observations at the College Democrats meeting led me to believe there is a desire for civil discourse. This belief will be tested against whatever occurs at the College Republicans meeting I'll be attending, but if what I have seen so far is any indicator, I'm deciding now to let the optimist in me take the wheel, if only momentarily.

The College Republicans meeting: Business marches on... here lies optimism? Unease between the aisles...

I made a beeline for the back as soon as I walked in, but my attempt to fly under the radar was in vain as I was immediately greeted by the College Republicans' president, Peyton Brinn. I said a quick "hello" before planting it in the back row and opening my laptop.

This meeting was taking place in Richard W. Sankey Hall, the business school at Elon and a building where I look and feel categorically out of place. The same oppressive lighting as other buildings, the same half-comfortable plastic chairs and lack of life signs as the room the College Democrats meeting took place in.

There's something visceral about politics on this level. We're so used to seeing the proceedings on a screen that when they unfold in front of you it's hard to put into words.

The opening minutes crawled as usual: events, opportunities with local candidates and representatives, similar organizations looking to charter or grow. All bog-standard in the world of collegiate politics.

It only started to get interesting when Brinn opened up the floor to meeting participants, first for members to contribute ideas to the College Republican cause for the semester then to get a sense of why everyone was here to begin with. Nelkin, who attended the College Democrats meeting on behalf of the Republicans, spoke up and expressed the Dem's desire for a debate, and how organizations' joint attempt at setting one up the prior semester was hindered by "miscommunication." This was met with a decidedly lukewarm response.

"Little ironic," Brinn said.

This jarred me, especially seeing how willing the leaders of the College Democrats were to get a dialogue going in comparison. I felt the optimism born from the last meeting start to shrink.

I wasn't expecting a unanimous and enthusiastic response from the College Republicans when presented with an opportunity of communication, but I suppose part of their hesitance was a result of the failed debate attempt last semester. For those unfamiliar, there was an attempt at organizing a debate between the two clubs, but it seems to have fallen through at the last minute after an extended planning period. I dug into the reasons for this and the consensus appears to be miscommunication between the then party leaders.

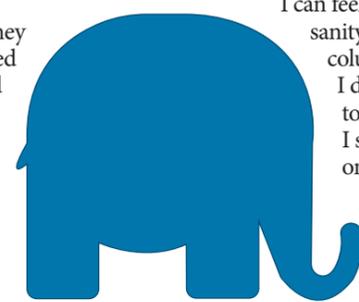
The College Republicans definitely feel as though they are on the back foot as of late, if their individual reasons for joining the club are anything to go off of. Gillian Pritchard said she felt very alone as a Republican at Elon and she wanted to show Democrats, "Hey, we're human too."

I sat back with Pritchard and a few other women of the College Republicans after the meeting and asked her to expand on this sentiment.

"Growing up in a very democratic town I lost friendships due to being a Republican... nice to have a safe space," Pritchard said.

Later on: A wretched retrospective... hope yet for America? Party lines in the sand...

It's been about a month since I took this quixotic approach to politics upon myself, and



I can feel my grip on both my sanity and the point of this column slipping the longer I drag it out. In an attempt to curb my own cynicism, I sought out both parties on campus in hopes they'd be on speaking terms. My findings tell me that it's up in the air right now, but survey says they could be.

There is some willingness to communicate from either side that, if handled with enough care, may yet spread to most of each organizations' constituents.

Though yet to be formally organized, the forthcoming debate could potentially be the first step on this long road, provided either side does not chase after the fabled "gotcha moment" modern political theatrics seem so fond of.

I feel as though politics and optimism in this country mix about as well as oil and water. Either side has reduced the other into a monolith to be feared and reviled.

Modern politics rails against nuance, unwilling to admit it is the glue that binds this nation.

The very moment we resign to black and white thinking, a problem will rise from the gray, and it will not discriminate. So don't pigeonhole yourself or others, learn to look at the larger argument with an interrogative lens and don't let anyone make conclusions for you.

It should be your responsibility alone to form your opinion, especially in a country where politics are often nature over nurture.

I'll admit outright that there were some things said that I vehemently disagreed with, but refusing to even hear someone is a surefire way to further galvanize them against you. Like them or not, when you look across that party line, there's someone staring right back at you, and they're human too.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MEGAN WALSH

Elon's cheer team builds community, connection

Cheer team participates in Game Day cheer competition

Alannah Klingsporn
Elon News Network

Beyond the sidelines, Elon University's cheer team is embracing a new chapter, not just as athletes, but as competitors entering Game Day cheer competitions for the first time in program history. Elon's cheer team recently participated in the College Classic Competition hosted by Dance Team Union, which provides both virtual and in-person competitive opportunities for collegiate cheer and dance programs. Elon cheer entered the virtual competition in the Spirit Showdown Gameday Division and placed first.

Assistant cheer coach Marcus Thompson said he sees passion through the team, especially as they connect with prospective students.

"A lot of our current members, they're excited to talk about not only Elon cheer, but just the university, and to give them as much information as possible and make sure that they're also going to be successful at Elon during their time here, if they decide to come here so and also when they go interact with the community," Thompson said.

In addition to representing the Elon Phoenix on the mat and on the field, the team also has a strong stake in philanthropy in the community according to head coach Susan Turner who is both a cheer alum and Elon University alum who graduated in 1987. Turner said that the team volunteers in the community by visiting soup kitchens and volunteering for Rise Against Hunger and Relay for Life.

"Last year, we went to Miss Kim's Dance Center and actually did a cheer clinic with the special populations children," Turner said. "These are children that are on crutches or in wheelchairs and we were able to teach them some chants."

Community is a big aspect for the cheer team. Sophomore Charlotte Moody said it was the positivity she saw when she attended a Phoenix Friday, which is an opportunity for admitted students and families to experience and look at life as an Elon student, that drew her into joining the team in the first place.

"I went to a clinic on a Phoenix Friday, and the girls were just so awesome," Moody said. "I had gone to other cheerleading clinics at other colleges and universities, and I just didn't feel the same



ALEXANDER SIEGEL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Elon University sophomore cheerleader Lily Neglia "flying" while practicing for their performance for the CAA Women's Basketball Tournament.

welcome bond. Everybody, you could tell, was joking with each other and liked each other, and it wasn't a super competitive environment."

For senior and team co-captain Charlotte Todd, the strong academics and close-knit community were what drew her to Elon and the cheer team.

Senior and co-captain Lily Cohen said joining the team felt like home and that she wished more people knew how hard the team worked.

"We're a really strong group of athletes, and we work just as hard as any other athlete, athletic team here on campus, so I wish we got more recognition for that," Cohen said.

This year would be the first in the program's history where the team will compete with a team made of freshmen and sophomores, while the D.C. Championship group is made of juniors and seniors. Thompson said after the first competition he has high hopes for this newly formed competition team.

"We definitely chose the right

competition for us, because we've always been a game day team more of a show team, and with that competition, it just showed our strengths even more and enhanced it even more so now that we had that game day experience," Thompson said. "We knew that we had to specify a couple things just to be able to score well in the competition, we're going to be able to take that lesson and be able to use a lot of those tools that we use for this competition."

Cohen said she has seen the team's skillset grow over her four years.

Todd said while this is her last season as a cheerleader, she will continue to cheer for the team in upcoming competitions. Todd said the team has gotten more skillful over the past few seasons.

"They're starting to compete now, which is something that we never did, which is pretty cool to watch, and I'm proud, proud to cheer them on next year, while not being the one competing," Todd said.

In addition to being cheerleaders, the program is in its second year of having their athletes on scholarships.

Academic scholarships for dance and cheer come directly from admissions, and Elon University President Connie Book first awarded them in 2023. They're available only to first-year students, who can apply after making the team. As long as a student continues to earn a spot on the team each year and maintains at least a 3.0 GPA, the scholarship is renewed annually throughout their time at Elon University.

Thompson said these scholarships have brought in more interest for incoming freshmen, especially from cheer combines, which is a showcase event for cheerleaders — usually in high school or junior college to display skills such as tumbling, jumping and stunting in front of multiple college coaches and recruiters at once. Thompson said the program has gotten over 400 prospective student-athletes this year.

Moody said since they don't get a big audience at games, she wishes more people will come to understand the work that goes beyond the glitter and cheers. Moody emphasized that many of the cheerleaders come from different backgrounds like gymnastics and diving who are tumbling and building pyramids.

"I wish that more people just understood, we're not just shaking our pom poms," Moody said "I think it's a big misconception that all we do is yell and dance."



ALEXANDER SIEGEL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Members of the Elon University Cheer Team performing during a tailgate in support of The Phoenix Football team.

Club sports receive funding from university, donors

Club sports captain prepare to pitch annual budgets

Emily Stabell
Elon News Network

Director of Campus Recreation Cam Adams hears proposals from club sports captains on why their teams should get a certain amount of funding, usually based on their spending during the season prior.

"They're given a pot of money every year, and we have the clubs come in and present on why they should be given a certain amount of money," Adams wrote in an email. "It's good professional development for them. In terms of the money, it's not an equal split. Things cost more for some clubs."

Adams said despite overall budget cuts, club sports allocation actually saw an increase in funding this year.

"The reason was that we have added more clubs and participants in that time frame, therefore an increase was needed for continued support," Adams wrote.

Club sports teams are preparing to present their expected costs to Adams and the athletics office in April.

Club hockey captain senior Wells Masterson said even with funding from the university, the team gets more than 95% of its budget from fundraising and member dues. Masterson estimates that the club spends \$60,000 to \$80,000 a year.

"Most of the funding is just completely on our shoulders, and it's our job to do it," Masterson said. "It's a lot of money, but we find ways to cover it most years. But school funding would definitely be a lot more helpful."

Club baseball's fundraiser chair junior Justin Helberg said when they do get money from the university, it doesn't last long.



MOST OF THE FUNDING IS JUST COMPLETELY ON OUR SHOULDERS, AND IT'S OUR JOB TO DO IT.

WELLS MASTERSON
CLUB HOCKEY CAPTAIN



KATHAN GANDHI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Captain Wells Masterson stands guard during the Feb. 6 game against Carolina University at the Orange County SportsPlex.

"With how expensive hotels and equipment and baseballs are and stuff like that, it's just we have to do a lot of our own separate fundraising to be able to pay for a season," Helberg said.

As a fairly new club, fencing received no funding this year, according to captain and sophomore Blair Berenson.

"As for the spending aspect, that is \$0. They don't really give much funding to first year

club sports to ensure that there is interest, and it can sustain," Berenson said.

Many of the clubs try to earn some money through GoFundMe campaigns or profit shares with local restaurants.

Soon, Club Baseball plans to hold a fundraiser in partnership with the Burlington Animal Services, where they will host a live stream with the dogs, and players will shave their heads every time a donation goal is met.