

Alamance County navigates ongoing statewide drought

More than half of NC is experiencing extreme drought conditions

Evan Cooper
Elon News Network

With much of North Carolina having faced drought conditions for several months, Audrey Thompson, a farmer at T5-Farms, said the drought has added extra steps to work on the farm.

“The main thing that it affects is our timing of getting things in the ground when they need to be, because in order to work ground up we need it to be a certain level of moisture,” Thompson said. “It’s also keeping water to all of our animals, like the pigs always have mud to be in. It adds a little bit.”

Alamance County, along with most of the state, is in extreme drought conditions. These conditions mean long water shortages, damages to agriculture and fire risks. According to the National Integrated Drought Information System, as of May 1, 54.8% of the state is in an extreme drought or worse. Counties in these conditions are advised to limit their water use, and check their local water supply system to find any restrictions that are in place.

Drought conditions started in September 2025, though North Carolina did not see a majority of severe drought

conditions until Jan 13, 2026. The Global Drought Information System estimates 9.5 million North Carolina residents are in areas of drought, with this March being the 5th driest March since 1895 with only 1.85 inches of precipitation.

Exceptional drought conditions emerged in part of the southern Piedmont for the first time since March 2008. Union County has implemented Stage 1 water restrictions because of exceptional drought conditions. These restrictions include limiting sprinkler usage to certain times and requiring plumbing issues to be fixed within 48 hours.

Raleigh is under Stage 1 water restrictions, Charlotte will be under water restrictions effective May 15. North Carolina is still under a burn ban while drought conditions persist. Alamance County has not issued restrictions as of May 1, but according to the North Carolina

Drought Management Advisory Council residents are advised to eliminate nonessential uses of water, such as filling swimming pools.

Alamance County farmers are having to quickly adapt to the worsening conditions. Goat farmer Charlie Ross said his farm is using more water than expected.



Audrey Thompson from T5-Farms reorganizes the sugar snap peas display after a customer purchases a container at the April 30 Town of Elon Farmer’s Market.

EVAN COOPER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

See DROUGHT | pg. 2

HealthEU building on track for fall 2026 opening



Slattery Center construction on May 3.

KATRINA HOLTZ | PHOTO EDITOR



The bricks on the walls of the Slattery Center on May 3.

KATRINA HOLTZ | PHOTO EDITOR

First phase almost complete

Abigail Hines
Elon News Network

The new HealthEU building, recently named the Slattery Center, has reached its tallest point as it nears its anticipated grand opening in fall 2026. On the north side of the building, facing the Colonnades Neighborhood, workers have begun laying the traditional Elon red brick on the structure’s outer walls. The south side has a finished structure, but no exterior walls have been added as of May 5.

According to chief facilities officer Brad Moore the building is on track to open in the fall, but an official opening date has not yet been announced. After the roof is completed, Moore said they’ll have a better estimate of when the opening will be, as the weather will no longer impact building progress.

Moore said the building will not be open by the beginning of August, as it will take time to train staff and ensure they have a good understanding of how the building works.

“They’ll start with a permanent roof on the north side and then bring that across to the south side,” Moore said. “Once they get to that point, we call that ‘dried in,’ that frees them up to really continue to work no matter what the weather is doing on the outside of the building.”

Moore described completing the structure as the first phase, which he said is nearly 100% done. The next milestone is getting to that “dried in” state, which includes the roof and the exterior walls of the building. Moore said the roof should be complete in the next few months.

The next milestone will be plumbing and electric, and Moore said those are both well underway.

Posters and flyers have been put up around the Koury Center advertising the

HealthEU center, listing additions like the rock climbing wall and brand-new equipment for the fitness center.

With certain amenities and facilities moving from the Koury Center to the Slattery Center, Moore said they have not made an official decision as to who and what will move into Koury.

“We have spent the last several months meeting with various campus partners about their needs and how they would fit into the spaces that are being vacated out of Koury,” Moore said. “We’re working right now to sort of fine-tune that list and see how many of those people we can actually fit into the building.”

Director of HealthEU Anu Räisänen said new student jobs will be developed as the building expands the HealthEU initiative. She said those roles will help showcase the programming to the greater student community.

“Their job is to connect all students with the Elon health and well-being resources,” Räisänen said. “Part of that team’s work is also connecting students with the building. So, making sure that students on campus know what’s in the building, they feel comfortable coming to the building. They can give feedback if we need.”

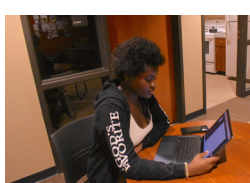
Looking forward to the opening of the Slattery Center, Räisänen said there are no official plans for what the grand opening will look like, but she expects it to be a day or weeklong event.

“All those things are possible once we know what that exact date is going to be and how it lands on the semester, because we also want to be mindful of what else is going on on campus at that time, because we have big events in the fall,” Räisänen said. “What I envision happening is really having a series of events for the fall with first students, faculty and staff, really to introduce them to different parts of the building.”



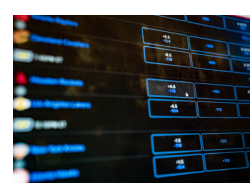
Teachers march in Raleigh, demand increased funding

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Students consider campus culture at HBCUs, PWIs

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NC crosses 2 year mark of sports betting

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THE PENDULUM

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Drought impacts water levels, lack of growth

DROUGHT | from cover

“Goats can get a lot of their moisture needs when they forage, but with the lack of rain there’s a lack of growth, and there’s not as much forage,” said Ross. “We’ve had to give hay longer into the spring than we normally would have, because there would normally be more regrowth formed to graze.”

Nolan Carter, the Haw River Trail Coordinator for Alamance Parks, said as the Haw River’s levels have decreased, he’s seen parts of the river become more challenging for paddlers.

“Historically speaking, spring is a great paddle season, so that’s when a lot of people get out on the water river sections,” Carter

said. “I think the biggest impact is some of those options aren’t really out there right now, unless you want to walk your boat through pretty good size sections, it just doesn’t create a great experience.”

Scott Stevens, director of landscaping for Elon University, was unavailable for an interview but wrote in a statement that the university has safeguards in place for drought conditions.

“If and when there are restrictions this will only affect a small portion of the campus landscape and we will follow the County’s guidance,” Stevens wrote. “Water stewardship begins many months and years in advance of a drought or drought conditions.”

Water usage on campus is not limited to landscaping.

Elon University publishes water usage for Founders Hall and Innovation Hall, as well as Schar Hall and Steers Pavilion. According to the report, Founders and Innovation used 9,086 gallons of water from April 4 to May 2. This is an increase of almost 15% from the previous 30 day period. Schar and Steers also saw an almost 15% increase in water usage during that time frame, with 39,272 liters of total water usage.

The worst recorded drought in North Carolina was in 2007, where two thirds of the state was in exceptional drought conditions at the peak. While less of the state is in exceptional drought conditions now, the North Carolina State Climate Office reports that overall deficits are similar to what they were in 2007.

Klaus Albertin, chair of the North Carolina Drought Management Advisory Council, said his team has been monitoring rainfall, ground water, stream flow and reservoir levels over the last six months. He said while many levels have raised concerns, the cooler weather has lessened the damage.

“This one started last September, and so even though the rainfall deficits are pretty similar, the impacts up to now are nowhere near the same,” Albertin said. “Winter time, there’s not much demand, a lot of the ecosystems are dormant, not much evaporation. So impacts have been pretty manageable.”

According to WRAL News, the drought is expected to continue through July in Alamance County, while western North Carolina may see some improvement in conditions. With most of North Carolina being six inches behind average rainfalls, the drought will likely continue until rainfall becomes more consistent. For Alamance County, ending the drought would require nine inches of rain in one month.

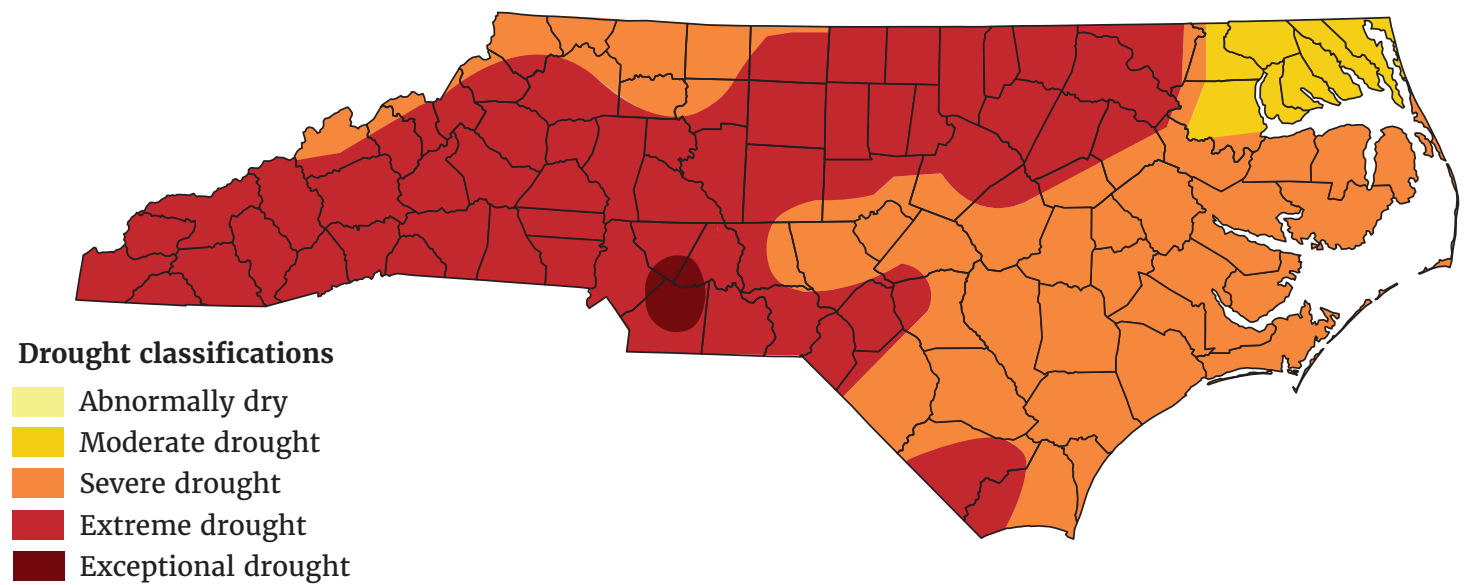


EVAN COOPER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jamie Wright from CJ Chevon farm talks with customers about their goats at the April 30 Town of Elon Farmer's Market.

Drought conditions across North Carolina

The map below reflects North Carolina drought condition as of April 28. Alamance County is one of 61 counties in the state experiencing extreme drought conditions.

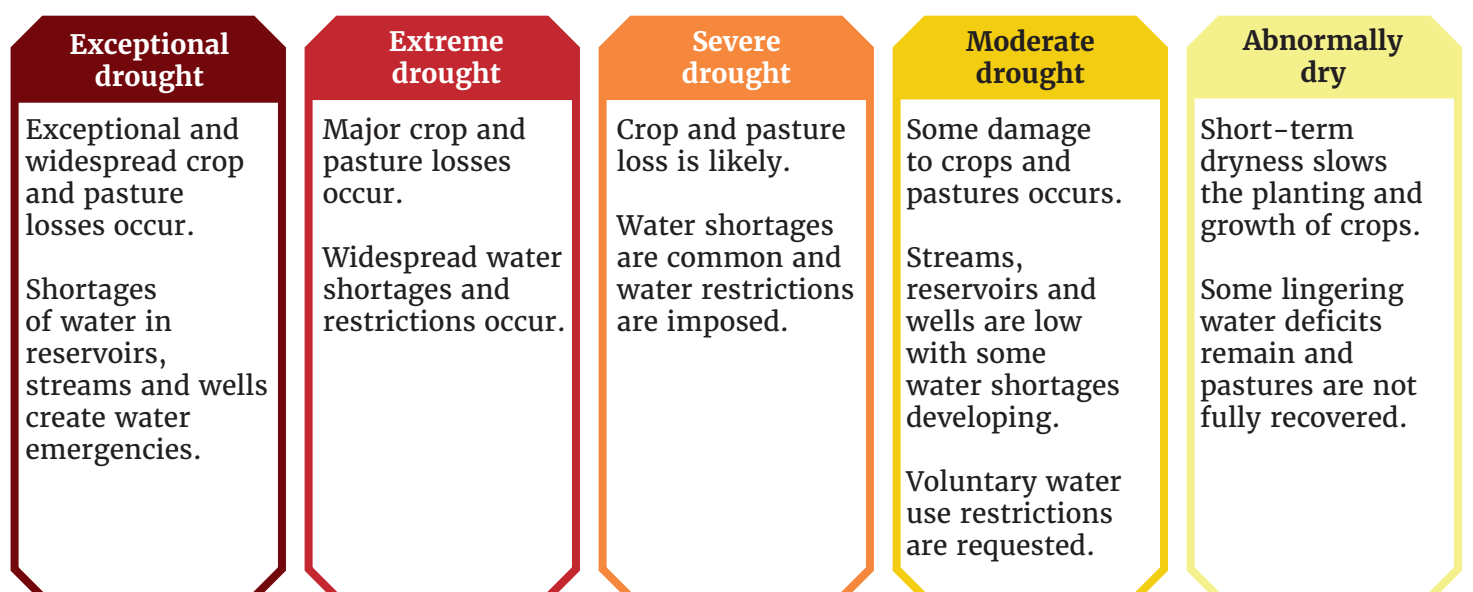


DATA VISUALIZATION BY MEGAN WALSH

Data from the North Carolina Drought Management Advisory Council.

What drought classifications mean

The North Carolina Drought Management Advisory Council uses five different classifications to describe droughts and recommend appropriate water restrictions.



Data from the North Carolina Drought Management Advisory Council.

DATA VISUALIZATION BY MILES HAYFORD

CORRECTIONS

The article “Spring musical creates ‘historical fantasia’ in the April 22 edition of The Pendulum listed an incorrect production schedule. The show had four performances from May 1 to May 3.

The article “Men’s, women’s tennis sweep championship weekend” from the April 29 edition of The Pendulum incorrectly referred to the CAA, which stands for Coastal Athletic Association.

In the April 29 edition of The Pendulum, the article “New majors at Elon gain momentum” incorrectly stated that students can minor in digital content management at Elon. It is only available as a major.



ETHAN WU | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Seniors Amalie Keefe, left, controls Q — the quadruped robot — as Jacob Karty watches during Maker Takeover on April 29 in Moseley Center. Q is the subject of research aimed at determining whether robotic dogs can become service animals. More than 40 student-led projects were displayed during the event, including motorized phoenix wings and 3D-printed drones.



ALI ELSHEIKH | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

An actor dressed as fairy interacts with attendees at the Burlington Carousel Festival on May 3 at Burlington City Park.



ETHAN WU | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Maker Takeover attendees create their own crafts April 29 in the Moseley Student Center at the annual event hosted by Elon's Maker Hub.



KATE GRAY | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Executive director of CrossRoads Sexual Assault Response & Resource Center Meredith Peffley and board members Mtende Roll and James Kirkpatrick talk in the Denim Day program for dinner April 29. The event, which over 200 people attended, was a fundraiser for CrossRoads. CrossRoads serves sexual assault survivors in nearby counties with confidential counseling. According to CrossRoads, wearing denim on Denim Day is a symbol of protest against victim-blaming and raises awareness. Peffley said she wants the organization to continue to grow. "We're going to get bigger," Peffley said. "We're excited because I think the more we do it, it becomes an annual event, and the bigger we get."

KATRINA HOLTZ | PHOTO EDITOR

A student paints an attendee's face during the annual Strawberry Festival on May 1 at the Elon Community Garden. Community members were able to enjoy lemonade, ice cream and live music. "The Strawberry Festival is one of those great events that is held every spring," junior Elisabeth Holmes said. "We enjoy the community and everybody who is coming and seeing the garden and getting to share what we have done in the past."



KATRINA HOLTZ | PHOTO EDITOR

Students make shapes and animals out of balloons during the annual Strawberry Festival on May 1 at the Elon Community Garden.

NC treasurer's office announces Implementation of AI



North Carolina Department of the State Treasurer Building on May 3 in Raleigh.

KATRINA HOLTZ | PHOTO EDITOR

North Carolina Treasurer's Office aims to improve efficiency, productivity

Alice Morrissey
Elon News Network

The North Carolina Treasurer's Department announced it will integrate artificial intelligence into its daily operations.

The department wrote that the decision comes after an AI pilot program from spring 2025. The team held weekly calls with engineers at its partner, OpenAI, to troubleshoot and develop the program. The pilot program ran for 12 weeks and the team saw a 10% increase in productivity, according to analysis conducted at North Carolina Central University.

"We have a moral obligation to the taxpayer to use their money wisely. That means improving the efficiency of everything we do as state government," North Carolina treasurer Brad Briner wrote in the April 13 press release.

Throughout the department, staff tested AI products such as Copilot, GitHub and other generative AI tools to create an AI sandbox meant to assist with various day-to-day operations. The team now has more than 150 licenses for products such as OpenAI and chatbot software. Employees of the Treasurer's Office have also completed several training programs to better use AI as a resource.

In an interview with Elon News Network, Eric Naisbitt, head of staff at

the North Carolina Treasurer's Office, said the unclaimed property division is a prime example of how AI has improved productivity.

The unclaimed property division is responsible for safeguarding money and assets that have been lost or forgotten by their rightful owners and ensuring they are available to be reclaimed. Items such as dormant bank accounts, uncashed checks, insurance payouts and utility deposits are identified daily. Naisbitt said identifying CFOs, billing managers and other contacts to help reconnect property previously took significant time. Now, with the implementation of AI, those searches can be done almost instantaneously.

"For local governments they really want to do the analytical work, they don't want to do emails, they don't want to do phone calls, they don't want to do scheduling," Naisbitt said. "It's interesting seeing how different groups use the tool differently and maximize their productivity based on what they want to be doing at work and what they don't want to be doing."

According to the press release, security is also a major aspect of the department's AI policy. No personal or private data will be input into the AI sandbox. The department is also required to complete ethical use training before receiving



ENN FILE PHOTO

access to the AI tools, according to Naisbitt.

"More importantly is our current iteration is a model in which the information isn't going into the larger algorithm to learn on itself," Naisbitt said, meaning the information being input by the treasury into its AI system is not feeding into larger generative AI models, helping prevent sensitive information from being exposed.

The security of their system was a top priority for the department according to Lawrence Koffa, the IT Chief Information Officer for the NC Treasurer's Office.

"It's my team's responsibility to make sure private and personal information never leaks from our department. Safety and security are paramount," Koffa said in the press release.

Although the treasurer's office expects to see more AI implemented in government agencies in the future, Naisbitt said he wants to ensure AI is not used as a replacement for human labor.

"We've hired and we have a group of really good staff on hand. And we want them to get better at their jobs," Naisbitt said. "This is not a way to replace the human element of this, but rather enhance the human element of this."

Lee Rainie, Elon University's director of the Imagining the Digital Future Center said he believes the addition of AI practices into the treasurer's office is just a small piece of the puzzle that is becoming AI's relationships with government, especially because of the tenuous relationship many Americans have with government.

"There are benefits at stake. There are policies at stake. There are general issues about trust," Rainie said. "One of the big stories of the modern era is that people have lost trust in government at every level of government."

He said that by implementing AI into daily processes the government can find an opportunity to gain public trust by improving the quality of their work but they also must prioritize preserving public faith by protecting the private and personal information they have.

"You're a citizen, right? And you pay taxes. You vote. You have a stake in the policies that are being created by government agencies because they're supposed to act in the public good," Rainie said. "So there are ways in which the sort of, very fundamental elements of being a citizen are implicated in these relationships."

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Public school funding discussions

NC teacher pay decreased since 2024-25 school year

NC ranks No. 46 nationally in teacher salary

Evan Cooper
Elon News Network

As North Carolina remains the only state without a budget, it is also the only state where teacher salaries have decreased since last year.

According to a report by the National Education Association, North Carolina's average teacher salaries decreased by 0.58% in the last year. The national average salary increased by almost 3%.

According to the report, North Carolina ranks 46th in the nation for average teacher salaries in the 2025-26 school year, down from 43rd last year. The average salary in NC is \$59,971, behind the national average of \$76,552. Adjusted for inflation, North Carolina teachers are making almost 10% less than they were 10 years ago according to the NEA.

Emily-Lynn Adkins, Alamance-Burlington School System's chief communications officer, was not available for an interview, but sent a statement to Elon News Network saying that cost increases for state benefits contributed to the decrease in teacher salary.

"Since there has not been a state budget, state salaries have remained the same," Adkins wrote. "However, with the new, higher cost of state health plan benefits, staff are seeing a decrease in take home pay."

Low teacher salaries across the state makes it harder for districts to fill positions in classrooms. According to WRAL News, more than 6,700 North Carolina teaching positions were not filled by a qualified person on the 40th day of the 2025-26 school year. This accounts for 7.4% of all teaching positions in North Carolina.

With North Carolina state legislators back in session in Raleigh, teacher pay is a top priority when discussing a state budget. North Carolina was unable to pass a budget in the previous sessions, stalled by divisions between House and Senate plans. Leaders in both parties agree that teacher salary raises are needed, but were unable to decide how much to increase salaries.

House Republicans proposed an average raise of 8.7% over two years for teachers, while Senate Republicans proposed an average 3.3% raise over two years, citing long-term cost concerns. The Senate plan would

supplement teachers with one-time bonuses.

Representative Dennis Riddell serves as a member on the Education K-12 committee, and said that he sided with the House Republicans' plan because he said he's talked to many Alamance County teachers who hope for increased funding and safety in schools.

"I've made my voice already clear to our appropriators that hold the line on education not to fold," Riddell said. "I would be very disappointed if we ended up with just a 3% increase for teachers over the budget, that would not be satisfactory."

Gov. Josh Stein proposed a plan that would increase pay for teachers with master's degrees, increase compensation for veteran teachers and school leaders, and give an average 6% raise in teacher salary.

The previous state budget was passed in 2023 and gave teachers an average raise of 7% over two years. North Carolina passes a budget biennially, appropriating funds for the next two years.

Amanda Fratrik, senior director of the office of school business at the NC Department of Public Instruction, said that along with not having a budget, North Carolina public schools are facing the expiration of federal funds given out during COVID.

"Everyone knew that those funds were non-recurring funds, but there were districts that used the funds for recurring money," Fratrik said. "I think that hopefully something will happen that will help them out."

Another issue with school funding is school voucher programs. School voucher programs allocate state funds to allow parents to send their kid to the school of their choice, including private schools. North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarships program functions as a voucher program. According to the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority, the Opportunity Scholarships program provides over \$14 million in funds to over 2,000 students in Alamance County.

In North Carolina, public school funds are given out based on enrollment numbers per school. Critics of the Opportunity Scholarships program argue the program will decrease funding for public schools if students transfer to a private school. Representative Riddell said that he believes the program gives more choice to parents.

"Most parents choose public schools in Alamance County and across the state, but for those that want to choose something different, I think they should not be penalized and have to pay twice for education," Riddell said.



ELISSA LEKA | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A teacher and mother in the rally raises her sign during opening speeches outside the legislative building May 1.

Educators march to push lawmakers to fund public education, pass budget

ABSS, additional school systems closed ahead of the march

Emma Perman & Elissa Leka
Elon News Network

The North Carolina Association of Educators held a "Kids Over Corporations" rally in Raleigh, bringing together representatives from 18 school districts across the state, including Alamance County.

Ahead of the May 1 rally, the Alamance-Burlington School System released a statement announcing May 1 as an optional teacher workday.

"ABSS has a significant number of staff who plan to attend, and we are facing a shortage of substitute teachers and bus drivers for that day," the statement said. "We have worked to expand our substitute pool and planned to utilize central office staff to support coverage in the schools. However, as of today, there are nearly 500 staff absences and over 250 unfilled substitute positions. We have determined that we will not be able to provide adequate supervision or reliable transportation with the staffing levels available."

Lexi Levine, a senior at Elon University and student teacher in the Alamance-Burlington School System attended the rally to support her students. She said working in a nearby Burlington school has shown her how much state-level decisions impact local classrooms.

"How am I supposed to get these kids to feel valued and feel like their education is valued if budgets aren't being passed to value their education?" Levine said.

ABSS was not the only school system that expected a teacher shortage during the rally. Wake County Public Schools, Durham Public Schools, Chatham County Schools, Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, Asheville City Schools, Guilford County Schools and other districts across the state also had modified

schedules for May 1.

Attendees said they came to advocate for increased funding for public schools and to push lawmakers to pass a long-delayed state budget.

The state has been operating without a new budget for months as House and Senate leaders remain divided over spending priorities, leaving schools without updated funding. In a letter from Gov. Josh Stein to the North Carolina House of Representatives, he wrote that teachers and other state employees are struggling to pay bills as the lack of budget means little funding for the schools.

NCAE Vice President Bryan Proffitt moderated and emceed the event. Proffitt was a former classroom teacher and now serves in a full-time leadership role with the organization, advocating for educators across the state. He said that this is not just a day off from work.

"Part of our job description is to advocate for our kids and to advocate for public schools," Proffitt said. "There's nobody who works harder for our kids than public school educators."

The rally began with speeches at the main stage on Halifax Mall, followed by a march through downtown Raleigh.

Vice President of Alamance-Burlington Association of Educators Tabitha Boswell moderated a county informational session that occurred after the march. The ABAE is an advocacy group for teachers in ABSS and is an affiliate of the NCAE.

"The lack of leadership and the lack of public school funding in North Carolina is unacceptable," said Tabitha Boswell, vice president of Alamance-Burlington Association of Educators, during an interview with Elon News Network. "They should be embarrassed."

The demonstration comes at a politically charged time, with elections approaching and education funding as a key issue for voters. Boswell said voters have the power to hold lawmakers accountable for decisions around public education.



ELISSA LEKA | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Games, music and dancing filled the fields outside the legislative building as teachers and community members prepared for the march May 1.

continue as NC still lacks budget



ELISSA LEKA | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Attendees raise their t-shirts during Petey Pablo's, "Raise Up," on May 1.



ELISSA LEKA | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

During opening speeches, event coordinators organized interpreters for Spanish-speaking attendees at the rally outside the legislative building.

"I really hope people take the frustration to the polls in November," Boswell said.

Several public figures attended the rally. Rockingham County Sheriff Sam Page, who is running for state Senate in North Carolina's District 26 after defeating Phil Berger in the primary, spoke with attendees. Richard Ojeda, a Democratic candidate running for U.S. Congress in Alamance County was also present.

“THERE'S NOBODY WHO WORKS HARDER FOR OUR KIDS THAN PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATORS.”

BRYAN PROFFITT
NCAE VICE PRESIDENT

"It's about the children and the future of our state of North Carolina and our country," Page said in an interview with Elon News Network. "So the better we can educate our kids, the broader our future."

Page also emphasized the importance of passing a state budget on time and

increasing teacher pay. Many educators at the rally said funding shortages directly affect their classrooms, with some teachers paying out of pocket for supplies.

Teach North Carolina said teachers in North Carolina have a starting salary of \$41,000, and an average of \$58,292 overall.

"We pay doctors and lawyers millions of dollars, but you can't create a doctor or lawyer without a teacher," Ojeda said in an interview with Elon News Network. "But we pay teachers poverty wages and school service personnel practically nothing."

The rally also comes amid ongoing debates about school vouchers and funding priorities in North Carolina. Several speakers, including Proffitt, criticized the expansion of private school voucher programs, arguing that public funds are being diverted away from already underfunded public schools.

The event concluded with closing remarks and a performance by Petey Pablo. Organizers urged continued action beyond the rally. Boswell said she plans to continue contacting legislators and organizing at the local level, including upcoming meetings of the Alamance-Burlington Association of Educators.

"Do your job," Boswell said in an interview with Elon News Network, referencing the House of Representatives. "I'll do mine. You do yours. Pass a budget."

North Carolina Association of Educators hold 'Kids Over Corporations' march to ask legislatures to consider several demands

This list shows demands listed on the North Carolina Association of Educators' website.

- Invest at least \$20,000 per student by 2030 — the highest funding in the Southeast
- Fund modern facilities, free school meals, and more health professionals in schools
- Recruit and retain quality public school teachers and staff with affordable healthcare, better retirement benefits, and a raise of at least 25% for all school employees
- End corporate tax breaks and redirect that money to public schools and healthcare
- Eliminate private school vouchers
- Fix our tax system so the wealthy finally pay what they owe
- Pass fair maps, protect voting rights, and restore checks and balances in state government
- Lift the ban on collective bargaining for public school workers
- Protect the constitutional rights of all and reject the use of fear, violence and intimidation to divide our communities



ELISSA LEKA | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

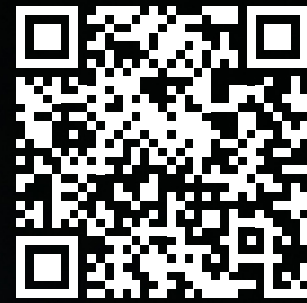
Sheriff Sam Page, primary election winner who is running for state senate, attends the rally in support of increased funds to public schools May 1. "It's about the children and the future of our state of North Carolina and our country," Page said in an interview with ENN. "So the better we can educate our kids, the broader our future."

Energizing entrepreneurship

Students launch energy drink business



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EMMA PERMAN | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Yapa co-founder and Elon student Juan Daniel Chiriboga answers questions regarding his energy drink during Elon News Network Tonight on May 4.



Alice Morrissey
Elon News Network

Two Elon seniors, Juan Daniel Chiriboga and Bernardo Vargas, founded a new brand of energy drink called Yapa. A key ingredient in the all-natural drink is Guayusa, a holly species native to the upper Amazon rainforest, primarily from Ecuador's Napo province.

Daniel Chiriboga sat down with Elon News Network's Alice Morrissey to talk about how the brand came to be.

What was your process in creating and designing these drinks?

We started with Bernardo Vargas, my friend and co-founder. A year and a half ago we both went to the Ecuadorian Amazon. I am from Ecuador, and he came with me. He tried Guayusa, which is a plant in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

When we came back, we were thinking about doing a business idea and then we realized that the energy drink industry was missing something healthy, something that had added benefits. And we decided that Guayusa was the right product for it. Then we started formulation, so we formulated in LA. We found the ingredients that we needed and then we found a facility where we could co-pack and, finally, we are here with production.

These first cans arrived three days ago and we're very excited to finally have our product here.

What made you take on this project now as a senior with graduation coming up?

I'm an entrepreneurship student, so I always knew I wanted to do something. And Bernie, he's a comms major, but he also knew he also wanted to do something. So it was perfect for us and we decided to start now because, first of all, we saw the trend and we thought it was the right moment. But we also saw the university as a form of support for us because of the networks we have, because of the teachers we have.

We can talk to teachers, we



EMMA PERMAN | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Senior Juan Daniel Chiriboga talks about his energy drink brand, Yapa. The drinks are made with Guayusa and are available for preorder online at yapabrands.com.

have mentors, we talked to a lot of teachers including Sean McMahon, Dr. Kennedy, a lot of teachers in the business school, Dean Ajjan — so many people who have helped us in this process and they've made this possible.

We wouldn't have been able to do that without the support of the school and those mentors and friends.

What do you want your message to customers to be?

I think they need to understand that we are a truly transparent brand. All the ingredients in the can you can read, there's only six ingredients. We've added prebiotics, we've added electrolytes. It's only 25 calories, one gram total of sugar, no added sugars.

So we want to be that transparent ingredient, that transparent brand that makes customers not only have energy but also feel good and know that what they're drinking is actually good for them.



EMMA PERMAN | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Senior Juan Daniel Chiriboga shows the different flavors of Yapa. There are currently two flavors: lemon, ginger and tumeric and hibiscus, berries and mint.

Students weigh HBCUs, PWIs in college decisions

Campus culture, resources shape college decisions

Elissa Leka
Elon News Network

When sophomore Peyton Shaw was in high school, she applied to both historically Black colleges or universities and predominantly white institutions before choosing to attend Elon University. She looked at multiple HBCUs, including North Carolina A&T State University, Shaw University and Kennesaw State University.

"I was mainly trying to get away from Georgia because I didn't want to go to all the same schools that people in my high school were going to," Shaw said.

Shaw said she got in for NC A&T spring admissions, but ended up coming to Elon for its exercise science and kinesiology programs, as well as a connection through her church.

Many high school students across the country have been weighing similar options as college decision deadlines ramp up. For some students, that decision carries more weight than ever as the political landscape shifts and conversations around race and belonging continue on college campuses, according to Abdul-Malik Harrison, assistant director of the Center for Race, Ethnicity and Diversity Education.

"A lot of students have made the decision to go the HBCU route to be more in tune with their community, because they are seeing on the outside that their community is



ELISSA LEKA | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Sophomore Peyton Shaw shows her Elon University acceptance letter.

being diminished," Harrison said. "Their history is being diminished."

When he first applied to university, Harrison said he didn't give much thought to going to an HBCU. He ended up attending Elon University, where he graduated in 2021. Part of that decision was because of its familiarity; he spent K-12 attending PWIs.

"You stick with the devil that you know, or whatever evil you're more familiar with," Harrison said. "That's the one that you can navigate."

That perspective has somewhat shifted since he moved into his current role. Harrison said admissions personnel and students he knows through family friends say the current political and social climate is deterring some students from PWIs.

Harrison also said there are stereotypes in the Black community that can affect whether students apply to HBCUs at all.

"Unfortunately, in the Black

community, the prevailing stereotype of HBCUs, or the narrative with HBCUs, is you don't get that much money for financial aid. They don't put that much money into the upkeep of campus. The coursework and stuff like that isn't as rigorous as predominantly white institutes," Harrison said.

Financially, attending HBCUs can be more difficult. In a 2024 Pew Research article, it stated that HBCUs were given "\$12.6 billion less in state funding than other land-grant institutions between 1987 and 2020."

"Funding for HBCUs are somewhat under attack," Harrison said.

Harrison only applied to one HBCU, Morehouse University, but ultimately chose Elon after being offered a full-ride scholarship.

"But that just goes to show again, if I would have applied to an HBCU, I don't think that the odds of getting this full-ride scholarship would have been high," Harrison said.

Shaw said when she was looking at schools, she noticed some graduation rates were low. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education created a cumulative list in May 2025 of HBCU schools and their respective graduation rates, the highest being Howard University at 69%. They reported NC A&T's at 55%.

For Shaw, the social dynamic also deterred her. She said she thought it would take an extra work ethic for her to be able to do well academically at an HBCU.

"I will say, there's a lot of parties that go on," Shaw said. "So if you go to an HBCU, you need to be very

academic oriented, so you don't get distracted by other things. I mean, a few people that I know went to HBCUs, and then they did not finish."

For Black students who do choose a PWI, the question of belonging doesn't end at enrollment. Harrison said that community values are critical to a student of color who wants to feel welcomed, and greek life can be a major part of that. The National Pan-Hellenic Council is a historically African American society that contains nine sororities and fraternities, known as the "Divine Nine." At Elon, there are 8 Divine Nine organizations.

The issue of belonging, Harrison said, is especially prominent for Black men on campus, who are a minority within a minority at Elon. With fewer peers who share their background, Harrison said the need to find a community is heightened. Harrison said he's seen students feel like without the NPHC or football team, Black men on campus do not feel, or are not perceived as, successful.

Shaw is a member of an NPHC sorority herself and said her chapter holds multiple community events on campus, including yoga, workshops on finance and business, as well as workshops on mental health.

"The whole point is for us to showcase who we are but also bring it out towards other people so that they feel included on campus," Shaw said.

Around 40% of students at Elon participate in greek life, according to Elon's undergraduate admissions page. When Harrison was at Elon,

he said, it felt like everybody was part of greek life.

"I didn't want to be a part of something and still feel left out," Harrison said. "I wanted to be a part of something where I felt comfortable and where I would be supported by people who look like me, and I could also help support communities of people who look like me."

But Harrison, now viewing greek life through a staff lens, also recognizes its limits. He said he worries students treat their NPHC as their only place to belong.

"People are falling into the trap of making greek life or making the experiences and the friends that they have in greek life the end all be," Harrison said.

Harrison has been working with student coordinators at CREDE to find ways to reconnect Elon's Black community beyond greek life, by creating spaces where students can explore Black identity openly at a PWI without having to choose between fitting in and being themselves.

"Blackness is not a monolith," Harrison said. "Blackness is a spectrum so wide and vast that there's still Black parts of Black identity still being discovered today. I request that students would be okay with that and accept all those who fall within the African diaspora."

Both Shaw and Harrison said all students should be a part of that discovery and one another on campus.

"We all belong to the community of the human race on this Earth," Harrison said.

NC program helps people with disabilities find jobs, independence

Program offers home modifications, trainings

Anjolina Fantaroni
Elon News Network

A common misconception may be that people with disabilities are unable to work or receive a job. However, a division of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services is helping change that perspective.

Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities is a department that looks to help people overcome disability-related barriers while having a job or living on their own.

The department works with people of all disabilities, but there is a separate division for the visually impaired called the Division of Services for the Blind.

According to Kenny Gibbs, assistant division director for EIPD, there are two sides to the department: rehabilitation and independent living services. Independent living services is typically for individuals with more severe disabilities where work is not always an obvious option.

"They often come to us because they just want to better access their homes and better access to communities," Gibbs said.

To make communities more inclusive, EIPD works to provide accessibility modifiers such as ramps and home modifications.

According to the North Carolina Department of Commerce, cognitive difficulties such as trouble remembering, concentrating or making decisions are the most common type of disability among the working-age population, affecting

nearly 329,000 individuals.

EIPD, on average, serves about 30,000 individuals per year, according to Gibbs. To receive a modification, such as a ramp, a referral needs to be received, he said.

"It could be by one of our support staff or the actual rehab counselor themselves," Gibbs said. "The person then makes us aware of what their needs are, and oftentimes it's based on what they've heard about, what we can do, and then we're able to uncover other things that may help them be more independent."

The modification could initially start as a ramp, but from the original planning stages, move into a bigger project to help make someone more independent. If a larger project is needed, a rehabilitation engineer is brought into the process.

"Obviously, there's a financial eligibility on that side as well that we have to look at to determine if they qualify financially for that particular service," Gibbs said.

Under the NC DHHS, EIPD works alongside North Carolina's Assistive Technology Program. The program is a state and federally funded program that provides assistive technology services to people of all ages and abilities in North Carolina.

Gibbs said that an evaluation is done first to make sure the technology is the right fit for the individual.

"With all types of other access to all kinds of technologies, it has really helped the disability community into discovering new possibilities," Gibbs said.

EIPD has centers across the state where individuals can go in and sample different assistive technologies, according to Gibbs. In some centers, 3D printers are

available for individuals to sample and test the technologies.

"It's just a number of different things that are available through assistive technology, even smart homes devices so far, software that are voice activated allow a person to turn on and off various devices in their home," Gibbs said.

Alma Taylor, an assistant director of EIPD, said that alongside the rehabilitation engineers, there are also rehabilitation counselors. Both jobs can make referrals for correct assistive modifications.

"They would do that for us if we make that referral, if it's some or assistive technologies, it can make them more available and able to do their jobs," Taylor said.

When Gibbs was a unit manager, he was involved in a case with a client who was a paraplegic but had a desire to be a nurse. The department utilized assistive technology, did an evaluation and purchased a sit-stand chair. This individual was the first paraplegic to ever complete a nursing program in the state of North Carolina.

"It was all through the assistive technology that we're able to provide to that individual and that chair, which allowed her to perform our various nursing functions and pass a nursing board as a result of that," Gibbs said.

That person is now a fully functioning nurse and living independently.

EIPD consists of employment placement specialists, along with state specialists who partner with employers, including the state government, to promote hiring for people of all disabilities.

Taylor said EIPD assists in matching people to the best job with training, marketing,

skills and information.

"We involve the consumer to know what their rights are in applying for jobs, and again, supporting them to apply for jobs that they are qualified to do, and then make those applications and making those contacts as supported as possible through the employment piece," Taylor said.

According to Taylor, EIPD's roles are to provide internships and sometimes on-the-job-training and exposure to ensure that employers get the best candidates for their open positions.

"Whatever services we can provide to support that up and including job assistance, helping with applications, job coaching on the job, or any kind of assistance through that mutual partnership and collaboration with us and the employers," Taylor said.

Gibbs said that no job in the workforce would be impossible for an individual with a disability.

"We even have programs where we try to dispel myths and things called our Windmills program that we offer to an employer, where no pressure to hire anything, we just want you to know a little bit about what we do," Gibbs said. "We want you to better understand disability."

Many employers turn into EIPD, according to Gibbs, particularly as the job market tightens, and employers deal with jobs with high turnover. Gibbs said that research states that individuals with disabilities hang on to jobs longer.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office evaluated retention rates of people with disabilities and

found that using 2011-2017 data, the data showed that the retention rates of people with disabilities and people without disabilities were similar two years after hiring.

According to the NC DOC, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage of employed people with disabilities rose, reaching a high of 42%.

Gibbs said that some jobs work for individuals with disabilities, and other times, jobs don't work.

"We never force anybody to hire a person just because they have a disability, because that's not what you want," Gibbs said. You want a person to get a job based on what their skill sets and their abilities demonstrate that they're capable of doing, despite the limitations."

Gibbs said that EIPD, for a long time, was considered one of the best-kept secrets in North Carolina, because North Carolinians didn't know about the department.

"We're a tax-based program that's provided and there to serve individuals with various types of disabilities as well as the employment community and helping them with their recruitment and retention needs," Gibbs said.



ILLUSTRATION BY
AMELIA METZ

Transfer Tracker

Elon adds 4 new members to men's basketball



GRAPHIC BY KATHAN GANDHI

Five players have transferred to Elon ahead of the 2026-27 season. From left, graduate Cam Thrower, junior Marko Šarenac, sophomore Korbin Dixon, freshman Josh Dalton and freshman Raúl Villar. Photos courtesy of respective players.

Counteracts loss of 3 contributing players from 2025-26 roster

Kathan Gandhi
Elon News Network

After an inconsistent 14-18 season, Elon men's basketball is undergoing a roster reset heading into the 2026-27 campaign.

For the second straight offseason, the transfer portal has dramatically altered the Phoenix roster. A year after losing nine scholarship players, Elon is again navigating turnover, with four departures and four additions signaling another roster transition heading into the next season.

That change begins with the loss of experience.

These departures include junior Isaac Harrell — the longest-tenured scholarship player on Elon's roster. Harrell's exit marks the end of a three-year presence within the program and means Elon is losing four of five of its starters from last season. Harrell will continue his career at Tarleton State University in Tarleton, Texas, with two years of athletic eligibility remaining.

Sharpshooter redshirt sophomore Ned Hull also leaves Elon after carving out a consistent role this past season. Hull, known for his perimeter shooting, is transferring to the Virginia Tech Hokies men's basketball. In 2025-26, Hull averaged 4.5 points per game and shot 36% from three-point range, the third-best percentage on the team.

DeMarco Johnson, a freshman guard who emerged as Elon's primary ball-handler off the bench, is transferring to Marshall University. Johnson originally had multiple Power 4 scholarship offers coming out of high school, including the University of Illinois and St. John's University. Johnson provided key minutes in relief, particularly in backcourt rotations.

Sophomore Trey O'Neil rounds out the outgoing group after missing the entire 2025-26 season due to injury, leaving his role largely unrealized during his time in maroon and gold. O'Neil appeared in 12 games in his freshman year, scoring a career high of 8 points. He will now play for Rollins College.

The loss of four transfers is the third most in the program's history since the

portal's creation in 2018.

Countering those departures, Elon has brought in four transfers with varying levels of experience.

Freshman guard Raúl Villar arrives from the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. The Barcelona native was the captain of Spain's under-18 team in the 2025 basketball World Cup, delivering the game-winning assist for a championship over France. In his freshman year at Charlotte, Villar averaged 3.3 points in roughly 11 minutes per game.

Cam Thrower transfers in from the University of Pennsylvania as a graduate student. The guard helped lead Penn to a March Madness birth last season, scoring 14 points in the first round against the University of Illinois.

Freshman Josh Dalton, originally from Concord, North Carolina, is coming to Elon after spending his first collegiate season at Loyola Marymount University. The 6-10 forward only started playing basketball five years ago at the start of high school, relying on his athleticism and ability to stretch the floor. He scored a season-high 14 points against Saint Mary's

University, an eventual March Madness team.

Two players are also transferring to Elon from the Division II level.

That includes sophomore guard Korbin Dixon, transferring from Emory & Henry University. Dixon averaged roughly 18 points per game in his sophomore campaign, shooting 50% from the field and 34% from the 3-point line.

Dixon continues a pattern for Elon, who has brought in three guards from the Division II level over the past few seasons, including Ja'Juan Carr from last season's roster.

Elon also welcomes junior Marko Šarenac, who is making his third collegiate stop. The forward originally played at Weber State University, before transferring to Barry University at the Division II level last year. He now brings his post and perimeter skills to the Phoenix.

The incoming transfers join a core that includes sophomore Bryson Cokley and senior Randall Pettus II, both of whom transferred into the program last season and are expected to play key roles moving forward.



GRAPHIC BY KATHAN GANDHI

Elon lost four players in the transfer portal: junior Isaac Harrell, sophomore Trey O'Neil, freshman DeMarco Johnson and redshirt sophomore Ned Hull. O'Neil's photo courtesy of Elon Athletics. Remaining photos by ENN staff photographer Lilly Molina.

Betting boom hits North Carolina campuses, reshapes sports culture

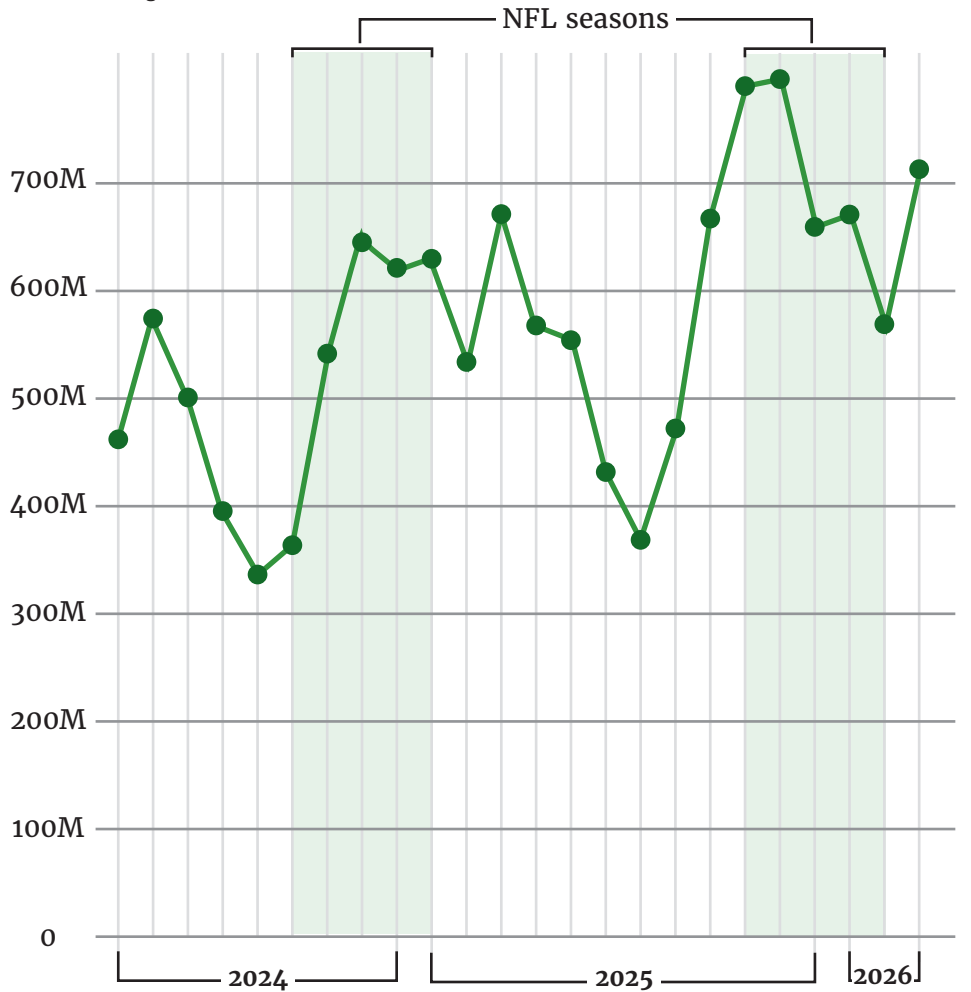


KATHAN GANDHI | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A digital sportsbook interface displays NBA betting lines and odds, reflecting the rise of sports gambling in North Carolina after it was legalized in March 2024.

Money wagered on sports in NC each month

Sports gambling was legalized in North Carolina in March 2024. This graph shows how many millions of dollars were wagered each month from March 2024 to March 2026.



DATA VISUALIZATION BY SARAH T. MOORE AND KATHAN GANDHI

Data from the North Carolina Department of Revenue.

mean for sports in 2030?”

The amount of sports betting in North Carolina has also raised questions about the numerous advertisements from betting sites. Rosa Li, who works for the department of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, expressed worry about the consequences that gambling advertisements could have on college students.

“It may make people think it’s harmless fun that everyone is partaking in, which could drive them to try it out,” Li said in an email. “They do not share the risks of developing gambling habits, disorders, or the associated harms of losing money while gambling.”

Bockino, who is also the director of Elon’s media analytics program, said the advertisement situation is a mess. 5WPR, a public relations agency based in New York, found that the sports gambling industry spent \$3.9 billion on marketing in 2025

— a metric that’s continuing to increase as advertising strategies become more sophisticated. Bockino said it’s a problem for people when companies geo-target fans by placing different logistics depending on the state they live in.

“When you have a commercial during an NFL game airing on Fox, and it says in North Carolina, you’re allowed to do this, but in Virginia, you’re allowed to do this, it gets real complex,” Bockino said.

He said the perception of advertisements is mostly negative. A 2025 study by the University of Bristol found that sports fans are exposed to gambling ads every 13 seconds when watching games, which Bockino said is leading to frustration with how different advertisements are frequently shown. As a result, Bockino said sports leagues may evaluate how they are going to target people without irritating them at the same time.

“I think people believe it’s too much in your face,” Bockino said. “There’s too many mentions of it, and so I think teams and leagues are going to pull back a little bit on that because this initial rush is finally subsiding a little bit. They’ll need to know how to correctly target people who want sports betting information without pissing off people who don’t want that information.”

Although Bockino said sports betting does present more negatives than positives, he doesn’t think outlawing it will change anything. He believes that now because it’s legalized in states such as North Carolina, there’s no point in preventing it.

“There’s probably more bad stuff that happens than good stuff, but kind of cat’s out of the bag at this point,” Bockino said. “To pretend it doesn’t exist by making it illegal is silly.”

Editor’s note: For resources, the North Carolina Problem Gambling Program runs provides a hotline at 877-718-5543. More information about the program and its resources are available online at morethanagame.nc.gov/.

Professors share thoughts on betting 2 years after legalization

Benjamin Berfield
Elon News Network

North Carolina has collected over \$250 million from sports betting since it was legalized in the state, according to the North Carolina Department of Revenue. Sports betting allows people to wager money on different outcomes for sporting events, whether it’s the final score or an individual player’s performance.

Now that North Carolina legalized it, the state can charge licensed betting operators such as DraftKings and FanDuel. In the last two years, sportsbooks reported more than \$700 million in paid wagering revenue. That includes an 18% tax on gross revenue from betting companies.

The surge in sports betting has also created more conversation among students at colleges within the state. The popularity of betting among students, in particular, is nothing new for some professors. Elon sport management professor, David Bockino, is especially aware of the impact of sports betting.

Bockino said he always heard students talk about betting before 2024, but added that conversations have certainly increased after North Carolina legalized it. He said there’s more people who care about betting than before.

Since North Carolina legalized sports betting in March 2024, people in the state have quickly embraced the new market.

“I’ve been talking about sports betting in the classroom since I got to Elon, but there’s probably more talk about it,” Bockino said. “Five to ten years ago, people probably didn’t care that much about it, and now there’s a whole group of people who only care about their bets.”

With his upcoming book “Over/Under” set to cover the evolution of sports betting, Bockino said that while North Carolina may not have the influence compared to major betting cities, such as New York, Chicago and Las Vegas, there are many reasons for people in the state to frequently place bets.

The state’s emerging market, along with its balance of college and professional sports teams, provides plenty of incentives for bettors, Bockino said.

“I don’t think anything really different about how North Carolina stands out,” Bockino said. “We’re a college basketball

hotbed, so I’m sure people were betting on March Madness here, on a higher degree than someone in Long Island. We’re also a big market and we have a handful of professional sports teams.”

He said he centers class discussions around sports betting since its emergence has led to more jobs within the sports industry.

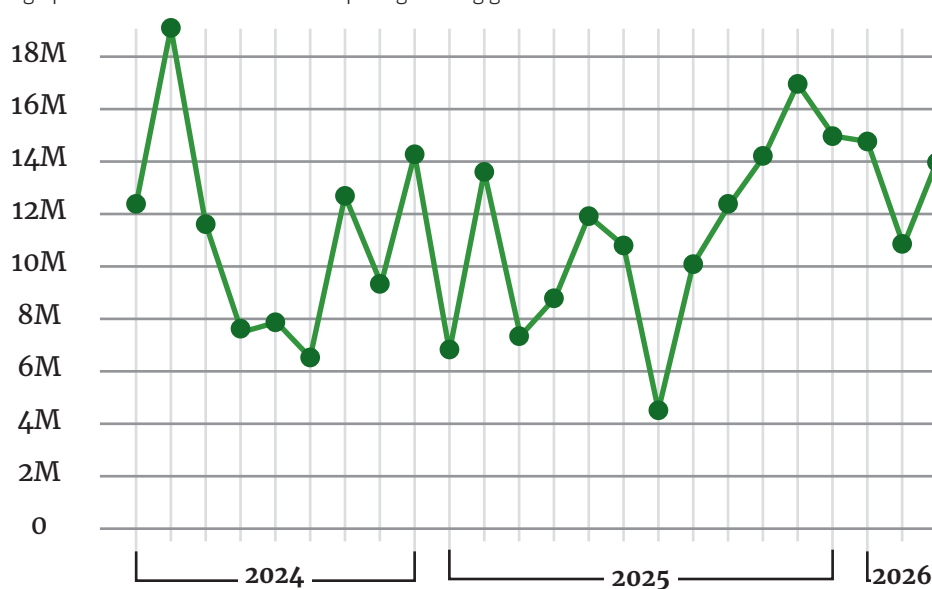
“If you work in sports production, you need to know how to put betting information on the screen,” Bockino said. “If you work in marketing, you got to work with DraftKings and FanDuel to integrate their brands into broadcasts and social media. It’s just really become an essential, integral component to the entire sport industry overall, and as a sport management department, we’ve sort of put it into the curriculum.”

Bockino said one of the long-term results he’s most curious about is how sports betting influences fans’ loyalty toward teams. Rather than rooting for certain teams to win, Bockino said he thinks there may be more fans who are only rooting for their bets to succeed.

“That’s something that we need to talk about, because it was an entire generation growing up where if they don’t have these deep-seated regional loyalties to teams, they’re going to be rooting for their parlays,” Bockino said. “If we start to lose actual loyalties to teams, what does that

NC sports gambling tax revenue March 2024-26

This graph shows how much tax revenue sports gambling generated each month from March 2024 to 2026.



DATA VISUALIZATION BY SARAH T. MOORE AND KATHAN GANDHI

Data from the North Carolina Department of Revenue.

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