

# N.C. Open Government Coalition sheds light on public record issues through Sunshine Day

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News Editor

Even though the vast majority of North Carolina residents think government transparency is the solution to corruption, only 7 percent think the government is easily accessible, according to a recent Elon Poll.

Government transparency and accessibility are what the Sunshine Center, part of the N.C. Open Government Coalition, is working to improve through education and outreach.

The Center, run out of Elon University, hosted its fourth annual Sunshine Day March 17 in Salisbury to celebrate and work to protect citizens' rights to access information.

The day was successful, with about 100 attendees, according to Brooke Barnett, assistant to the president and associate professor of communications.

"These laws are for anyone seeking information about the government," she said. "Sunshine Week is a week to acknowledge those laws."

Sunshine Day was open to the public and consisted of panels of journalists, public officials, attorneys, professors and others who discussed topics including FERPA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, and access to local government documents.

Tom Ross, the new president of the University of North Carolina system, delivered the keynote speech. Ross spoke about many of the challenges the system faces with regard to publicly accessible information.

"The government's only going to be as responsive as people insist that it be," said Steve Riley, vice president and president-elect of the Sunshine Center and a senior editor at The News & Observer. "(It's important) not just for TV, newspapers and radio stations, but for the people to understand that it's their access that's important and when an informed public demands it, it's more important than the news media."

The Elon Poll found that nearly half of respondents had never attempted to access government records, and a poll from 2009 found that 63 percent of respondents were not aware of the sunshine laws, which protect access to these documents.

It's important to know these laws are not just for the media, Barnett said, giving the example that citizens participating in a neighborhood watch could use police records to keep track of crime in their area in order to determine solutions.

One of the panels discussed the results of a records audit

done by Campbell University to determine accessibility of county government records.

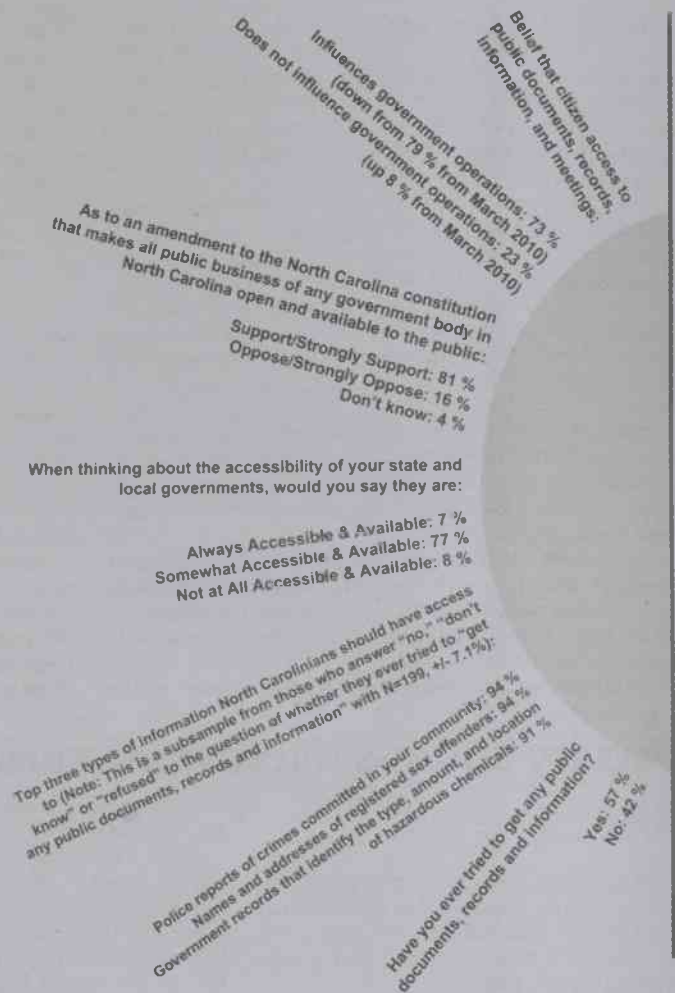
What was interesting, Riley said, was the inconsistency demonstrated by the counties. Some requests for information were met with total cooperation, while others faced questions about why the information was needed, which is illegal, or not answered at all.

"We demand public records all the time and we'll keep demanding them," Riley said. "But if average citizens are saying 'no way, you should give this up,' people support that. Citizens have to be persistent, number one. They can't just take no for an answer and walk away."

The motivation behind keeping certain public records hidden from the public is varied, Riley said. Often, officials responsible for providing copies of the information are unaware that they need to give it up, a problem the Sunshine Center works to amend.

But occasionally, people attempt to cover things up. Riley said persistence is the first defense measure against stubbornness, but lawyers are often necessary for larger cases.

"In some cases, if they know you're not going to sue them, they'll just keep saying no," he said.



LUKE LOVETT | Graphics Editor

# Domestic study program in Elon's future

Melissa Kansky  
Assistant News Editor

Elon University is looking to develop a signature domestic study away program to support the institution's commitment to diversity, as indicated in The Elon Commitment.

Domestic study away programs will generate engaged academic experiences away from the campus and the classroom, said Brooke Barnett, assistant to the president.

Students do not need to travel far to experience diversity, she said. An urban experience in Greensboro would still contain educational value unattainable in the classroom.

"While every experience is valuable, the one on the ground is of particular value," said Connie Book, associate provost for Academic Affairs.

Such programs are not a foreign concept to Elon students and faculty. Summer programs in New York and Los Angeles support The Elon Commitment's diversity goals, Book said.

"They engage students with different populations," she said. "Those students have to take a class together and complete an internship and both of those experiences in heavy urban populations introduce them to ways of life that are unique and supplement classroom experiences."

Other examples of preexisting domestic study away programs include a Winter Term course in Hawaii and a Teaching Fellows civil rights history tour. Book also referred to a 10-day trip to New Orleans she led during Winter Term to show the academic value of a domestic program.

During the 10-day period, students examined the role of emergency radio during Hurricane Katrina and had the opportunity to interview radio listeners and emergency fire personnel regarding the importance of radio.

"When you're on the ground experiencing something, it is transformative," she said. "I could not have lectured that." Although participation in existing programs indicates student interest, Barnett

said the development of a signature domestic study away program is in its infancy.

"We are hoping to create something that will have multiple lengths and distances away as well as diversity within the groups," she said.

A full menu of options costing between a few hundred and a couple of thousand dollars is expected to be developed, Book said.

Cost would depend on number of credit hours, location, duration and activities associated with the experience.

"We are hoping to create something that will have multiple lengths and distances away as well as diversity within the groups," Barnett said.

While new travel opportunities focus on domestic diversity issues, Barnett said she does not intend for the development of a domestic study away program to replace study abroad experiences.

Book said she does not believe domestic study away options will decrease the number of students

## Goals in The Elon Commitment's objective to increase diversity:

- Double need-based financial aid
- Triple international enrollment
- Create some signature domestic study away program
- Ensure 100 percent access to study abroad
- Construct the Multi-Faith Center

studying abroad. Students still study abroad despite participation in the New York program, she said.

"It's something we hope people will do in addition to study abroad," Barnett said. "Because people don't study abroad in their first year we hope people will do this in their first year."

Book said she wants to engage students in all years. Participation in current domestic travel programs is across the board and she said she expects level of interest to continue.

Details concerning destinations, course topics, costs and duration have yet to be determined.

# Elon woman found guilty in hit-and-run

Anna Johnson  
Editor-in-Chief



Robin Ragsdale of Elon was found guilty of a felony hit-and-run.

An Elon woman arrested and charged with hitting and leaving an Elon University student last semester was found guilty for a felony hit-and-run.

Robsn Stanfield Ragsdale, of 500 James Toney Drive, was found guilty of a felony hit-and-run and of violating her 2008 parole. She is scheduled to serve a total of 21 months in prison and will have her license revoked for two years, according to court documents.

Ragsdale hit freshman Toorialey

Fazly as he rode his bicycle to his 8 a.m. class Sept. 15. He was airlifted to Duke Medical Center and sustained three cracked vertebrae. Ragsdale was ordered to pay \$2,800 toward Fazly's medical bills.

In 2007, Ragsdale, under the name Robin Michelle Stanfield, was found guilty in a July accident that left four people dead. Pedestrians were attending to a broken-down car on University Drive near East Haggard Avenue when Ragsdale's car ran off the road and hit the stopped car.

Michael King, 43, of Swepsonville, and Mildred Isley, 57, Freddie Coulter, 55, and his wife, Sandra Coulter, 51, all of Graham, were killed in the accident. Larry Isley Jr., of Graham, was the only survivor.

Ragsdale has two pending cases including a misdemeanor resisting a public officer and misdemeanor for simple assault. She is scheduled to appear in court May 12.



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