Union Helps Student Groups Coordinate on Civic Engagement

Note: As the November 3 election approaches, the Carolina Union encourages students to visit this resource page [1] for information on how to get registered and vote.

Civic issues and politics have been a passion for Carolina senior Lawton Ives since he first stepped on campus. In his time at Carolina, he has served in student government, held a leadership role at Carolina’s Institute of Politics, and volunteered in Triangle-area elementary schools to teach civics and history.

So Ives was a natural fit for the role of student coordinator for civic engagement when the Carolina Union’s office of Student Life & Leadership was looking to fill that position in the spring as the 2020 election cycle was starting.

The coordinator is charged with building connections between student organizations to tie together their efforts to help students engage in civic and political life. SLL Director Dr. Bobby Kunstman said the position was created to build the necessary bridges between student groups.

“There are a lot of student organizations doing quality work at UNC in regards to civic engagement,” Dr. Kunstman said. “But because they were working independently of each other, there was a lot of overlap in the work they were doing. This was a great opportunity to bring the groups to the table to help the identify ways they can begin to collaborate on this important work together.”

Through weekly sessions with organizations such as NC PIRG, the Civic Engagement Action Coalition and the Center for Public Service, Ives’ work has helped political engagement in tangible ways. He has helped extend the reach of a text bot that helps UNC students get important voting information, and his working group has contacted professors of large lecture classes about sharing voting registration information with students.

“We’re trying to make the Carolina community stronger around civic and political involvement rather than building an individual organization or individual effort,” Ives said. “It’s easy for groups to get caught up in their own programming, but this is an area where we’ll be at our best if we understand how our efforts can fit in with other
things that are happening here with other students or professional staff.

In the leadup to this November’s election, there are four pillars to Ives’ work:

- Sharing information on how, where and when to vote
- Sharing information about who is on the ballot, especially in local elections
- Sharing ideas for civic engagement opportunities after this election
- Sharing ideas for civic engagement upon graduation

Ives also hosts a regular podcast as part of SLL’s HeelTalks series where he interviews guests about civic engagement topics. His guests have ranged from a former North Carolina Supreme Court Justice to a college student running a socially-conscious business.

“These are people with very different paths, but they have found their own niche of how to contribute or give back,” Ives said. “I hope it helps people decide where they want to go in their own path and find their own ways to get involved.”

As the days count down to the November 3 elections, Ives hopes his work will help students understand all the ways they can stay involved after casting a ballot.

“There are so many things you can do, and I want my work to be bigger than the particular day where people vote,” Ives said. “We can all think about particular local issues that affect us, and there are so many ways for UNC students to get involved whether it is service on a local commission or serving a cause you care about. There are many ways we can give back.”