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The Impact of Dobbs as seen on UNCW's Campus

North Carolina was once seen as a safe haven for those seeking abortion access, but when Senate Bill 20 took effect in July 2023, the state became another one of many with restrictive reproductive health laws.

After the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* verdict - which ended in the Supreme Court with a 5-4 vote in June 2022- effectively overturned *Roe v Wade* and concluded that abortion was not a constitutionally protected right, states were given the power to determine what access to reproductive healthcare would look like. With an ever-changing political landscape and new legislation sweeping through state governments, college students were left with transformed campuses and differing access to healthcare.

In a 2023 study done by Gallup, it was shown that out of currently enrolled college students aged 18-24, 73% said that state laws regarding abortion were at least a somewhat important factor in their decision to remain enrolled at their respective universities. In North Carolina, there is a 12-week abortion ban, and with 17 universities within the UNC school system alone, statewide college campuses, such as UNCW, stand in the midst of change.

After Dobbs, the care Abrons Student Health Center at UNCW was able to provide has remained unchanged. Students can access different forms of contraceptives and birth control, gynecological visits, sexual health visits, and resources for pregnancy, whether to find a provider that will perform an abortion or prenatal care. However, consistent care does not equate to consistent mindsets; attitudes are rapidly shifting.

“For the first time in my career, I've had a provider say will I get arrested or charged for aiding and abetting,” said Katrin Wesner-Harts, director of Abrons Student Health Center. At the annual health conference for the College Health Association, “you could really feel the tenseness

of our colleagues from Florida and Texas and other much more conservative states. But even states that in the past we had not heard as much concern, you can feel that anxiety and tension,” Wesner-Harts said.

Before Senate Bill 20, which made abortion after 12 weeks of gestation illegal in North Carolina with the only exceptions being cases of rape, incest, and life-threatening conditions for the mother or the fetus, the state had been viewed as one of the safer states for those on the search for care.

After the overturning of *Roe v Wade*, “North Carolina was one of the states with the biggest increase in providing abortion care because even with all the restrictions North Carolina had at the time, we were still an island of access,” said Lyanne Walter from Pro-Choice North Carolina.

“Unfortunately, since Senate Bill 20, NC's monster abortion ban, went into effect on July 1, 2023, which was only possible because the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, North Carolina has seen a huge drop in the number of people who are able to access abortion,” Walter said, “thousands of people less were able to access abortions they needed and wanted.”

The ban itself was not the only roadblock put in place for North Carolinians who wanted to terminate a pregnancy. The Senate bill includes a 72-hour rule which mandates that 72 hours before the procedure a woman must meet with their physician and be given all information the state deems necessary for informed consent to be given. This includes the name of the physician performing the termination as well as the local location of the hospital that offers OB-GYN care and where the physician has clinical privileges, medical risks of the procedure as well as the risks of carrying out the pregnancy, the gestational age of the fetus at the time of the abortion, and ultrasound imaging of the fetus as well as listening to the fetal heartbeat.

Any physician found in violation of the law is subject to both discipline by the North Carolina Medical Board and any other pertinent law and pharmacists who disregard Senate Bill 20 would be disciplined by the North Carolina Board of Pharmacy in accordance with the law. The same cannot be said for patients. An individual seeking an abortion cannot be professionally disciplined for pursuing the procedure.

Rules regarding legal action toward a pregnant individual wanting a termination vary from state to state. So what does this mean for college students, who may go to school in a state that differs from their permanent address?

“When the students are coming into our office I don’t even ask them where they live, you know in terms of, you know, where is their home,” said Leigh Fickling, the interim director of Title IX and Clery Compliance at UNCW; “Just as long as they’re enrolled at UNC Wilmington, actively enrolled, then we are able to help support them with those academic accommodations.”

When a student on campus goes to Title IX in regards to a pregnancy they are able to provide academic accommodations on the basis of the pregnancy; whether that be carrying it to term or terminating it. The accommodations include but are not limited to, excused absences from classes, online schooling, having assignments offered in a remote format, the rescheduling of an exam or assignment, or even a leave of absence from the university. All of these are provided on an as-needed basis as each individual student will have a unique set of circumstances.

Reproductive healthcare and other types of support, such as what Title IX provides, have shown to be needed on college campuses. The Centers for Disease Control reported that 56.9% of recorded abortions in 2019 were for women in their 20s with abortion ratios showing that adolescent women aged 19 or younger were the highest; thus highlighting the pertinence of the

subject of abortion access to college students, many of which fall within the aforementioned age range. One way for students to ensure their voice is heard when it comes to topics that directly impact them, such as abortion, is to use their right to vote.

“Voting, especially for reproductive health, is incredibly important,” said Jake Smith, the president of UNCW College Democrats. Smith cites North Carolina state representative Tricia Cothem switching parties, which gave Republicans a supermajority, as an example of why individual votes hold a heavyweight.

“If that had not happened, 300 votes saved us, saved Governor Cooper’s veto,” Smith said. “If Tricia Cothem hadn’t switched parties and betrayed voters we would’ve not had a Republican supermajority. We would still have abortions up to 20 weeks in North Carolina.”