

SUPPORTING EDUCATION THROUGH THE GROWTH OF THE ECU SCHOOL OF
HOSPITALITY LEADERSHIP FOOD & WINE FESTIVAL

By

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Abstract

The ECU School of Hospitality Leadership Food and Wine Festival is an annual event designed to provide invaluable hands-on learning experience for students, while also celebrating culinary flavors and fostering community engagement. Since the first event in 2023, the festival has grown steadily, both in scale and impact, becoming a cornerstone event for the hospitality department. This project was developed as a part of the School of Hospitality Leadership to emphasize multi-discipline collaboration with event planning, marketing, management, and execution. The primary focus of this project is the festival's ability to sustain and expand the SHL scholarship fund, which supports our students pursuing their degrees in hospitality management. The 2025 festival, which happened on March 28th, showcased the continued growth of the event, enhancing the attendee experience. This paper will examine the evolution of the festival, beginning with its background and purpose to provide context for its development. It will then discuss the planning and execution strategies that have contributed to its success, followed by an analysis of supporting data and outcomes from past events. The paper will explore the festival's growth and its broader impact, concluding with a look at future opportunities for continued expansion and improvement.

Moreover, this project will examine the festival's impact on education, as it serves as a department-wide project for SHL students. By actively participating in the festival students can apply the knowledge they have learned in the classroom and develop crucial skills in leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving. These opportunities not only enhance the student's understanding of hospitality concepts but also prepare them to enter the competitive industry. The ECU School of Hospitality Leadership Food and Wine Festival is more than just an event; it is a platform that bridges education and industry, providing students with hands-on experience.

As the festival continues to grow, its dual focus on education and fundraising ensures that it continues to be a transformative event for students and a celebrated tradition throughout the SHL department and university as a whole. This paper will showcase how the festival serves as a model for innovative, student-led initiatives that combine education, community involvement, and philanthropy, while also exploring its long-term impact on the growth and success of the School of Hospitality Leadership and its students.

Background and purpose

The ECU School of Hospitality Leadership Annual Food & Wine Festival began in 2023 with the idea of providing a unique, fun experience for the adults in Eastern North Carolina. Additionally, the original leadership committee wanted to implement a department-wide fundraiser that would generate funds for the ECU SHL scholarship fund. The leadership committee wanted to follow other hospitality programs across the country that use similar fundraising techniques through galas and food and wine based events. The festival quickly gained popularity, attracting food and wine enthusiasts, hospitality professionals, and community members eager to explore the diverse flavors of the region.

This event combines hands-on learning with community engagement and scholarship support. All students within the School of Hospitality Leadership are given opportunities to participate in the event through applications of practical knowledge covering topics such as planning, marketing, vendor coordination, menu creation, and logistics of large-scale events. Numerous teachers within the department include the festival within their curriculum through assignments and projects, including proposed floor plans, emergency plans, decoration proposals, and SWOT analysis. Unlike traditional classroom learning, this festival immerses

students in the complexities of organizing and executing a large-scale event. This allows them to develop crucial skills needed to enter the hospitality industry. Furthermore, the festival provides leadership opportunities to students through our volunteer-based leadership committee. This committee provides further immersion throughout the planning process and allows students to take on key roles in decision-making, problem-solving, and team management. By working closely with faculty mentors and industry professionals, committee members gain firsthand experience in overseeing various aspects of event execution, from budgeting and sponsorship outreach to guest experience and operational logistics. This leadership structure ensures that students go beyond applying their classroom knowledge, promoting essential soft skills development such as communication, adaptability, and time management. All of which are highly valued qualities within the hospitality industry.

The purpose of this event goes beyond serving as an educational platform, as it also fosters strong connections between the SHL, local businesses, and the surrounding community by showcasing industry collaboration. By bringing together a diverse range of vendors, sponsors, and hospitality professionals, the festival serves as a bridge between academia and the real-world hospitality industry. Vendors and sponsors are given the opportunity to gain exposure to new audiences through brand awareness and direct engagement, while attendees enjoy a curated selection of food and wine experiences. The event's ticket sales contribute directly to the School of Hospitality Leadership scholarship fund, which provides financial assistance to students pursuing degrees in hospitality management. By alleviating financial barriers, these scholarships enable students to focus on their education, gain valuable industry experience, and pursue professional growth opportunities. Since its inception, the festival has expanded in scale, with increasing attendance, vendor participation, and fundraising success. This continued growth

highlights the festival's significance within the university and the broader community, reinforcing its role as a cornerstone event for both education and industry collaboration.

Planning and Execution

The planning and execution of the ECU SHL Food and Wine Festival requires a highly coordinated effort, involving multiple phases of preparation that span several months. The process begins with acquiring wine sponsors from local wineries and distributors. Learning how to communicate with these industry professionals in an appropriate and engaging way is crucial to this step of the process. This phase requires extensive research of prospective organizations to draw a connection between them and the festival to highlight the benefits they will receive by participating and driving interest. Simultaneously, the venue, festival goals, and theme must be established, requiring a high level of project management and organization skills. Previously, the festival has been held in the Golden Corral Culinary Center and the Darden Dining Room located in the Rivers Building on ECU Main Campus. Upon review of guest feedback, this venue held significant drawbacks to our event's potential and as a result, we elected to relocate this year. Our new venue is the Grand Ballroom of the Health Science Campus Student Center and we believe this will greatly enhance the elegance of the festival and allow us to expand our capacity.

As the planning process continues, securing food vendors and additional sponsors becomes a top priority. Since all the ticket sales go towards the scholarship fund, it is essential to obtain additional sponsors to cover the event's expenses for beverage staffing, venue reservation, and decorations. Effective communication and negotiation skills are essential during this stage, as students must present the festival as a valuable marketing opportunity to organizations while

ensuring sponsors align with the festival's mission and vision. When preparing for the launch of ticket sales, the team considered how we have marketed tickets in the past through numerous outlets. After careful consideration, we decided that implementing an early bird special would be a great way to create urgency and buzz amongst potential attendees. During this phase, the marketing and promotional strategy begins to take shape. Our marketing strategy has previously held a three-pronged approach with email marketing, social media campaigns, and physical flyers. This strategy continued this year with the addition of a WNCT "Eastern Lifestyle" segment. This decision was motivated by wanting to expand our reach into the Greenville Community. Throughout our marketing process, maintaining brand consistency is a key focus by ensuring all promotional materials align with the festival's theme and target audience.

As the festival date approaches, operational logistics come into play. Finalizing ticket procedures, organizing staff and volunteer roles, and implementing contingency plans for potential challenges are all part of this phase. Detailed event schedules, load-in times, emergency preparedness plans, and attendee flow management must be carefully planned. Additionally, the design element of the festival begins with the finalization of the floor plan, decorations, and event schedule just weeks before the event. Ultimately, the festival's success depends on the seamless coordination of all these elements. By navigating the complexities of planning, marketing, and execution, students gain invaluable hands-on experience in event management while contributing to an event that supports their education, local businesses, and the broader community.

Supporting Data & Past Events

Over the years, the ECU School of Hospitality Leadership Food & Wine Festival has seen remarkable growth in both scope and reputation, evolving into a signature event. This event not only delights attendees but also provides invaluable experiential learning opportunities for students. According to the 2024 performance evaluation survey, guests continue to rate the event highly, with an average satisfaction score of 4.71 out of 5. Feedback consistently highlights the excellence in food and wine selections as well as the professionalism of our hospitality students who volunteer during the event. The praise of our students is an element that directly reflects The SHL's commitment to applied learning. As supported by Boon, Sulaiman, and Razali, experiential learning is a critical component of hospitality education. This type of hands-on learning fosters the development of essential soft skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Events like the ECU SHL Food and Wine Festival allow students to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world application.

The festival's mission to support the School of Hospitality Leadership Scholarship Fund has resonated strongly with attendees in the past, with this being cited as a main reason for attendance. This result directly aligns with research from Stanford University, which emphasizes the transformative impact scholarships have on student success, particularly in reducing financial barriers and increasing degree attainment and career readiness. By linking community engagement with educational advancement, the festival represents a powerful example of mission-driven event planning that creates both immediate and lasting impacts. However, as the festival has expanded, so have the expectations our attendees have. Attendee feedback has helped the leadership team identify areas for growth, including the need for a larger venue, improved crowd flow, and a more cohesive integration of food and wine pairings. These insights are procured through a thoughtfully crafted post-event survey that includes both open-ended and

Likert scale questions. The survey we create and distribute each year directly follows Status.net guidelines on effective event evaluation. Acting with courage and integrity, the leadership team responded proactively by relocating the event to the Grand Ballroom, allowing for a more spacious and elevated guest experience.

In response to evolving attendee demographics, the festival's marketing strategy has also undergone a shift. Historically, our attendees have been ECU-affiliated guests. Our outreach efforts expanded in 2025 to engage a broader segment of the local community. According to Guha, festival marketing that includes sponsorships, immersive experiences, and strategic branding can significantly boost visibility and audience connection. Our new addition of the Undaunted Sponsorship Level has proven to be very effective in increasing our visibility with 6 of our 12 sponsors choosing to participate at this level. These high-level sponsors allowed us to increase our marketing efforts and elevate the festival experience for our guests. Moreover, a growing number of attendees have expressed interest in exclusive experiences. These suggestions reflect a broader trend in the hospitality industry. Eventbrite published an article about festival research and found that millennials are the dominant demographic at food and wine events. This demographic highly values exclusive and VIP experiences, and 40% of surveyed millennials indicated that they would be willing to pay more for these experiences. This reinforces the viability for the ECU SHL Food and Wine Festival to offer tiered ticket options to guests that could further increase appeal and revenue streams.

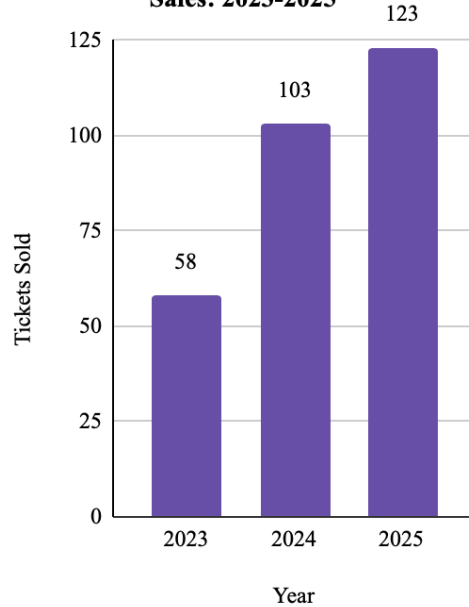
Finally, it is important to note that the ECU SHL Food and Wine Festival is a part of a larger national movement. As Mitchell outlines, food and wine based events and festivals have become a key part of American culinary culture. These events significantly boost tourism and local economies. With this in mind, this festival is not only an academic exercise or community

event but also a meaningful contributor to Eastern North Carolina's cultural and economic landscape. By continuously analyzing post-event data, integrating academic research, and responding to feedback with strategic action, the SHL ensures that each year's festival builds on the success of the last. The result is a festival that not only celebrates hospitality but also actively supports the next generation of leaders in the field.

Festival Growth and Impact

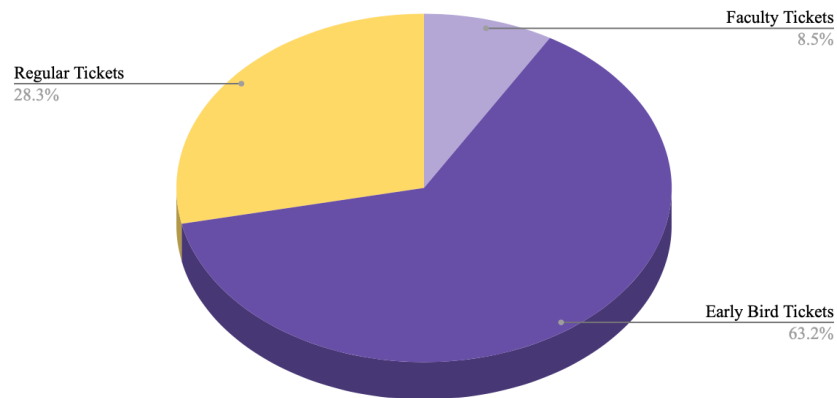
Since its launch in 2023, the ECU School of Hospitality Leadership Food and Wine Festival has experienced notable growth in attendance, fundraising, and student engagement, evolving into one of the most anticipated events for the SHL department. Ticket sales have steadily increased each year, reflecting growing interest across both campus and the broader Greenville community. In its first year, the festival welcomed a modest crowd of 54, primarily consisting of ECU faculty, staff, family, and friends. By 2024, attendance increased to 103 attendees and continued to rise to 123 in 2025. Based on previous years, we expect our attendance to continue this upward trend and increase over the next few years. These numbers not only demonstrate the success of strategic marketing efforts but also affirm the event's rising reputation as a premier local experience.

ECU SHL Food & Wine Festival Ticket Sales: 2023-2025



Ticket Sales Distribution: 2025 ECU SHL Food & Wine Festival

Purchased Tickets Only



Demographic and survey data from 2025 underscore the festival’s expanding appeal. This year’s post-event survey revealed that 55.6% of responses came from first-time guests, a significant shift indicating outreach beyond the traditional ECU network. While the festival still deeply resonates with those affiliated with the university, 15.4% of respondents reported no ECU

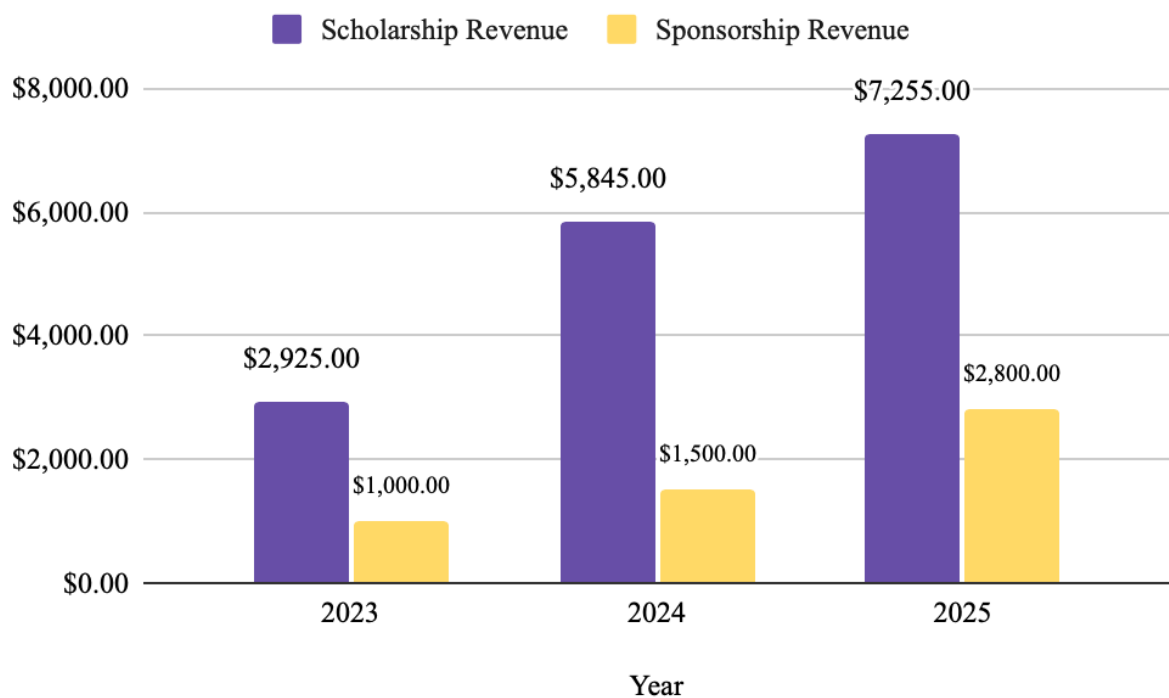
affiliation at all. The remaining respondents were 38.5% ECU employees and 23.1% were alumni. Income data from the survey displays that this event is attracting guests with strong discretionary spending power, with 42.9% of respondents reporting their annual household income as falling between \$100,000 and \$149,000. Furthermore, 19% reported annual incomes of over \$150,000, aligning with Eventbrite's previously mentioned research stating that festival attendees are willing to spend more for exclusive experiences.

Financially, the festival continues to strengthen its impact on the SHL scholarship fund. In 2023, the event raised \$3,425 in ticket sales, which increased to \$5,845 in 2024. Our 2025 event has surpassed both years with ticket sales bringing in \$7,255 for the scholarship fund. These growing contributions reflect the success of a mission-driven event model, where proceeds support hospitality students in their pursuit of higher education. This philanthropic impact is not lost on attendees as 88.9% of survey respondents cited supporting the School of Hospitality Leadership as a primary reason for their attendance, reinforcing the community's investment in student success.

The 2025 festival also highlighted increasing sponsor participation, which has allowed for a more dynamic guest experience. In 2023 sponsorship revenue was \$1,000 and rose to \$1,500 in 2024. This year's festival experienced a large increase in sponsorship revenue as this year also brought increased expenses, with revenue being \$2,800. As a direct result of new and returning partners, the event continues to feature new menus annually, receiving praise from attendees for the variety and quality of food and wine. The post-event survey reported high satisfaction rates across several key metrics. Staff friendliness received a near-perfect score of 4.88 out of 5, and 96.3% of respondents said that they would recommend the event to others.

These metrics mirror larger trends in the hospitality industry, where personal connection, quality, and ambiance drive guest loyalty and growth.

ECU SHL Food & Wine Festival Impact Breakdown: Scholarship & Sponsorship Revenues 2023-2025



The impact of student leadership and experience is equally if not more important than the financial outcomes of this annual event. This remains at the heart of the SHL Food and Wine Festival mission as students involved in planning, logistics, service, and sponsorship relations gain valuable real-world experience that prepares them for future roles in the hospitality industry. In 2025, 41 student volunteers contributed to the success of the event, gaining hands-on experience in service operations, guest engagement, and event coordination. Additionally, seven students served on the Food and Wine Festival Leadership Committee, taking on elevated responsibilities in areas such as vendor relations, marketing, culinary planning, and sponsorship outreach. These roles provided deeper insight into the complexities of event production and

allowed committee members to develop leadership, time-management, and decision-making skills in a professional setting. This aligns with the findings from Sebby and Brown and Boon et al, who state that experiential learning fosters a deeper understanding of coursework and stronger skill development in hospitality education. Survey respondents frequently commented on the professionalism and warmth of student staff, describing these interactions as one of the highlights of their evening. Comments such as, “All the students were well informed and very polite and helpful,” and “They were friendly but also professional,” point to the value of student involvement in shaping the guest experience.

Despite the event’s success, feedback has also revealed constructive criticism and suggestions for future improvement. While guests praised the ambiance and layout of the new venue, some noted issues with overcrowding, room temperature, and long lines at popular food stations. This suggests the need for increased staffing, better flow, and possibly a larger venue in future years. Several respondents also expressed interest in more educational components, such as guided tastings, food and wine pairing explanations, and behind-the-scenes stories about student involvement. Additionally, there were calls for more diverse dietary options and expanded seating, highlighting a growing expectation for inclusive and comfortable event design.

These insights, along with structured feedback collected through both qualitative and quantitative methods, enable the leadership committee to make strategic adjustments each year. As status.net emphasizes, thoughtfully designed post-event surveys are crucial in revealing what guests value and what could be enhanced. The ECU SHL Food and Wine Festival exemplifies how data-driven planning, experiential education, and community partnership can come together to produce an event that is both meaningful and memorable. In just three short years, the festival

has built a strong foundation of support, cultivated a loyal and growing audience, and raised thousands of dollars for scholarships. All while simultaneously preparing the next generation of hospitality leaders. With continued improvements, strategic growth, and a focus on excellence, the ECU SHL Food and Wine Festival is poised to become a premier event not only for the university but for all of Eastern North Carolina.

Impact and future growth

The sustained growth and success of the ECU SHL Food and Wine Festival demonstrates its value as an educational initiative, a community-driven event, and a financial supporter of hospitality students. The increasing attendance numbers and scholarship contributions highlight the festival's ability to engage the local community while fostering student development. As an experiential learning opportunity, the festival equips students with real-world event planning skills that extend beyond the classroom, preparing them for leadership roles in the hospitality industry. By managing logistics, coordinating with vendors, and handling on-site operations, students gain firsthand experience in problem-solving, teamwork, and decision-making. All of which are skills crucial for their professional growth. The festival has also strengthened the SHL's relationships with local businesses, creating mutually beneficial partnerships that enhance industry engagement and networking opportunities.

Looking ahead, there are several strategies for expanding the festival's reach and impact. Increasing marketing efforts through digital advertising, strategic partnerships, and collaborations with local businesses could attract a larger and more diverse audience. Social media engagement, particularly through interactive content such as behind-the-scenes planning and preparation videos, could enhance visibility and anticipation for the event. Additionally,

offering exclusive experiences could elevate the festival's prestige and appeal to a wider demographic. Firstly, the addition of a wine-tasting class about how to properly taste wine and identify different notes would allow guests to gain more out of their experience and provide an engaging event before the festival. Furthermore, a chef demonstration or cooking class would appeal to guests who want to learn more about the culinary arts and how to pair wines with food dishes. Both of these additions would increase the attractiveness of our event to wine and food enthusiasts and create excitement leading up to the actual event.

Sustainability initiatives could also play a role in the festival's future development. Sustainability has been on the rise within the hospitality industry for the past decade and has become an influencing factor for attendance and success. With the hospitality industry placing greater emphasis on eco-friendly practices, integrating sustainable initiatives into the festival's operations not only aligns with industry trends but also enhances the event's reputation and appeal. Implementing eco-friendly practices, such as reducing waste, sourcing sustainable food and beverage options, utilizing compostable disposables, and encouraging reusable materials would align the festival with modern trends and increase its appeal to environmentally conscious consumers.

Finally, continued student involvement and leadership development should remain a priority, ensuring that the festival maintains its educational mission. Expanding leadership opportunities for students within the planning committee and integrating more interdisciplinary collaboration, such as involving marketing, business, nutrition, and design students, could further enrich the learning experience. This would also integrate other departments within ECU and provide experiential learning opportunities for them as well. As the festival evolves, its commitment to student education, industry collaboration, and community engagement will drive

its continued success, positioning it as a flagship event for ECU and a model for hospitality education programs nationwide.

Recognition and Contributors

The continued success of the ECU SHL Food and Wine Festival would not be possible without the dedication and collaborative efforts of faculty, students, sponsors, and attendees. At the heart of the festival is the support and guidance provided by the School of Hospitality Leadership faculty and staff, who play an essential role in mentoring students and overseeing every phase of the event. Their commitment ensures that students receive meaningful, hands-on experience in critical areas such as event management, sponsorship coordination, logistics, and marketing. All of which are skills that will serve them well in their professional hospitality careers. A heartfelt thank you goes out to our exceptional student leadership committee and 41 student volunteers, whose hard work, dedication, and enthusiasm brought the 2025 festival to life. From managing vendor communication and coordinating day-of logistics to designing marketing campaigns and managing guests' experiences, these students showcased professionalism, initiative, and strong problem-solving abilities. Their teamwork was instrumental in delivering a seamless, high-quality event and reflects the very best of ECU's values, including leadership, innovation, and service.

We are equally grateful to our generous sponsors and partners, whose support makes this event not only possible but extraordinary. Their contributions, ranging from wine and food donations to financial backing and on-site engagement, elevate the guest experience and allow for creative and diverse culinary offerings year after year. With their partnerships, we can cover necessary event expenses and ensure that 100% of all ticket sales go toward the SHL scholarship

fund. This model strengthens the long-term impact of the festival by providing much-needed financial assistance to students pursuing degrees in hospitality management. Finally, we extend our sincere appreciation to our attendees, many of whom return each year and bring new guests with them. Their enthusiasm and support energize the event and create a celebratory atmosphere that reflects the spirit of Pirate Nation. As the festival continues to grow in reach and reputation, it remains an example of the power of community, education, and shared experiences. Together, we are building something more than a festival. We are creating a legacy of support, opportunity, and excellence for the next generation of hospitality leaders.

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