

Teaching Public Opinion Through Civically-Engaged Research

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Why a civically-engaged classroom?

- Personal interest as a “Integrative Learning Fellow” at Southwestern and a participant in APSA’s 2019 Institute for Civically Engaged Research
- Effects of experiential learning, particularly for first-generation student and students from underrepresented groups
 - Community Engaged Learning:
 - Increases long-term civic participation, interest in politics and specific political knowledge (Jenkins 2008, Gorham 2005)
 - Improved efficacy and identity (Hildreth 2006)
 - Undergraduate Research Experiences:
 - Increase self-efficacy, builds connections with faculty and mentors (AAC&U 2014, Chemers et al 2011)
 - develop professional skills in data collection and analysis, information literacy & communication (Lopatto 2010)
 - Civically Engaged Research puts them together to create a sense of civic empowerment and perseverance that manifests in political habits and college success (Sydnor, Commins & Reyna 2021)

A top-down view of a drafting table with various tools and a technical drawing. The drawing features a central rectangular area with a dashed circular path and several smaller rectangular sections containing circular patterns. Tools include a pair of compasses on the left, a black pen with its cap off on the right, and two markers (orange and green) at the top. A large orange shape is in the top-left corner, and a pink shape with purple dots is in the bottom-right corner.

The Project

Learning Objective: Collaborate with Georgetown community organizations to collect and analyze opinion data

Fall 2022

One community partner

Research Questions:

1. What does the Georgetown community know about the politics and process of school board elections and meetings?
2. What are their expectations of schools in meeting their needs and the needs of their children?
3. What would motivate them to (keep) turn(ing) out to vote in school board elections?

Spring 2024

Collection of community partners

Research Questions:

1. How do nonprofit employees in the Austin area feel about their compensation?
2. What explains nonprofit employees' commitment to their jobs?

Learning Objective: Write a Research Paper in Political Science

Fall 2022:

Final project was a team-based “choose your own adventure” of ways to convey the results publicly:

- Traditional paper
- Podcast
- Infographic
- Presentation

Spring 2024:

Scaffolded assignments designed for students to learn the parts of a traditional political science research paper

- Literature review
- Revised literature review and methodology
- Data analysis
- Final research product

Structure of the Semester

Month 1:

- public opinion definition & measurement
- First meeting with the community partners: neighborhood context, their goals for the project, and general networking!

Month 2:

- substantive reading in the field that would allow students to craft a literature review
- in-class work on survey instrument
- students submit literature review
- second meeting with community partners: discussion of survey instrument and approval

Month 3:

- Topics in the field you want to cover but are maybe less related to your project
 - Submit IRB, field study
- Students submit revised literature review and methods section
- Teach data analysis & practice in class

Final week of class:

- Final meeting with community partners: report results and celebrate end of the semester!



Decide how flexible you want to be with the relevance of your community-based research question to politics



Devote more time in class to working on the project than you think you'll need



If your students don't have strong data analysis/statistical skills and you want to provide clear take-aways/reports for the community partner, you'll have to do some additional work yourself.



It's a lot of work! But it got easier the second time around, and it's so fun to see the students develop relationships with the community members and see the applicability of the skills they're learning.

What have I learned from doing this twice?

Students' Reactions



"Being able to communicate with people within our research throughout semester help me have **a real-life connection to the research** that we were doing and the data that we were connecting. **It felt more personal.** Not just finding research and information online."



"I appreciated that we got to work with real, collected data in this course. **Out of all my data science minor courses, no other course had allowed us to work with raw data we collected ourselves**, so this experience solidified my minor more than any other data science course did."



"I really enjoyed creating our project, our survey, with our community partners. **I feel like it helped me connect the readings to actual concepts in real life** that will be valuable to me moving forward."



"I did not like the subject matter whatsoever. I think **the topic should be true to the major and study political issues.** Studying nonprofit employees was not what I expected when I signed up for the class and didn't seem like an appropriate topic."

*Questions?
Feedback?*

