

Undergraduate Research: A Graduate Student's Experience in Creating a Panel from a Class

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In the past year, I taught an upper division comparative politics course on Nonviolent Social Movements that culminated in some of the students presenting their research at the International Studies Association Midwest conference in St. Louis. While undergraduate students presenting papers at a local conference is not exceptional, the fact that I am a graduate student makes the coordination of this panel particularly unique. There is an extensive literature on the values of involving undergraduates in research (Gregerman 1999; Tinto 1998; Nikolova Eddins et al. 1997; Astin 1984), though little in political science (one notable exception is Ishayama 2002) and none that provides a map for actually implementing the task. Rather, most of the literature focuses on larger department or college-wide programs to encourage undergraduate research (Gregerman 2000). My experience reinforces the value of undergraduate research, even when the instructor is still working on a dissertation. In this paper, I discuss this experience through the lens of the broader issues encountered in the development of my course and the research assignment as well as a practical accounting of the submission, preparation, and delivery of our presentation.

Loyola University Chicago, like many other Ph.D.-granting universities, conducts a year-long seminar to prepare graduate students to become teachers. Traditionally, much of the preparation for an academic position is in terms of research, but many universities are now acknowledging that teaching skills must also be taught during the graduate career (Dolan, Kropf, O'Conner, and Ezra 1997). At Loyola, the selection process

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for participating in this seminar involves designing a course. Because I had already begun working on my dissertation on velvet revolutions (those with little or no violence), I sought to integrate an upper-division comparative politics course with my research. While I had discussions with several professors about engaging students in active learning, I knew nothing about the vast literature (outside of political science) related to undergraduate research. This understanding came after the course was completed while in preparation for our panel presentation. I designed my course so that each student would conduct a case study similar to those in my dissertation. This was a win-win situation: they would get to participate in cutting-edge research (what a dissertation, by definition, should be) and I would have the opportunity to gain a broader perspective from other cases as well as sharpen my theoretical elements. The course evaluations reflected at least one aspect of the students' "win" side of the equation: in the general comments section, over 25% of the evaluations remarked about the level of interest the instructor showed in the topic, using descriptions such as "inspiring" and "refreshing." In the early stages of planning the course, I dreamt that some of the students would present their cases at a conference with me, helping illuminate the importance of studying velvet revolutions to the wider academic community.

Issues in Undergraduate Research

My conception of undergraduate research was not in line with what Halstead calls "traditional undergraduate research," where "a student collaborates with a faculty mentor on an ongoing long-term project, usually initiated by the faculty member. The project is expected to be funded by traditional external funding agencies and to result in publication in a peer-reviewed scientific journal" (1997, 1390). Rather, my conception of undergraduate research reflects the differences between undergraduate research in the "hard" sciences and in the social sciences and humani-

ties, and is therefore much broader than Halstead's definition. It is very different from using students as lab technicians or research assistants. In the social sciences and humanities, students can be given a focused research project and then freed to independently answer the question of the project. To focus their research, I encountered a number of broad issues that are likely to be addressed in any social science course with research as its end result. These issues included: beginning research in light of theory, defining key concepts, reviewing the relevant literature to discover avenues for new research, the concept of "crucial cases," generating a research question and a testable hypothesis, and analyzing an historical case. I will discuss each broadly, using my course as an example of their application.

The course, *Nonviolent Revolutionary Movements*, provided a theoretical background for students to engage in research in the field of nonviolence and revolutions. It provided the theoretical literature review so that the class began their research on a level theoretical playing field. Because I wanted the students' limited research time to be as focused as possible, we covered the major theories of revolution and nonviolence in class and through the course readings. We analyzed the classic approaches to revolution, reading Marx, Weber, Huntington, Tilly, and Skocpol (all in Goldstone 1994). Then we turned to the classic theoretical work on nonviolent action by Gene Sharp (1973).

To sharpen the focus of any research project, careful attention must be paid in laying out the key concepts of the work (Dogan 1990, 26). To this end, while reviewing the theoretical literature we discussed the way different scholars defined the phenomena they studied. In the case of revolution, differences in definition have a profound effect on what is legitimate as a case study. Comparing Tilly's inclusive definition with that of Skocpol's focus on social revolution served to highlight the importance of defining the scope of one's research. I encouraged the use of a broader definition (building on Tilly's work) so that as many possible

cases of recent revolution could be analyzed. However, in the directions for the research assignment, I required that students first define revolution to clarify their subject of analysis—allowing for alternate definitions. Forcing the students to first define the scope of their research helped to focus what they were analyzing. Some students used definitions closer to Huntington and Skocpol's when analyzing their case, depending on the type of argument they wanted to make about that case.

Another concept that I included in this review of the theoretical work was that of a literature review. More than just stating what scholars have said about revolution or nonviolence, with each work I stressed what they were not saying, what was omitted. This gave us possibilities for advancing theories—to explore the gaps in the literature. In this way we could read the works critically, but also glean insights into developing new theories. Mirroring my dissertation, I emphasized the structural orientation of so much of the revolution literature as well as the fact that most of the cases studied were violent. This literature review led to the need to analyze the process of nonviolent aspects of revolution. In addition to addressing the gap in the revolution literature, recent events suggest that velvet revolutions have occurred. This fact led to a discussion about historical events necessitating theoretical development. Thus, we investigated two such events that clearly showed nonviolent action played a significant role in revolution.

Crucial cases are useful for clarifying and developing a theory to explain larger processes or more cases (Eckstein 1992, 156). In terms of velvet revolution, the presentation of a crucial case can serve exactly this purpose before the students test a hypothesis on more troublesome cases. In class I presented two velvet revolutions: India's independence movement from England and Czechoslovakia's toppling of Communism.

During this section of the course, the students read first-hand accounts of those most responsible for the nonviolent change—Mohandas Gandhi in India (*Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*) and Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia (*Open Letters—Selected Writings 1965–1990*). These crucial cases reinforced the inadequacies of the revolution literature from the literature review and suggested that nonviolent action can be very important in creating change.

The next conceptual issue that we encountered was the crucial task of posing a research question and hypothesis. In class, to get students thinking in terms of the scientific method, before posing my question and hypothesis, we did an exercise where they generated hypotheses (as well as how to test them) about why fire came out of a lighter. Next came the application of this type of inquiry (the scientific method) to revolutions: how to generate questions and testable hypotheses. Unlike our class exercise about the origins of the lighter's flame, we could not take two identical societies, randomly select one to have a revolution, and manipulate variables to test a hypothesis. So we discussed ways to test hypotheses in a social science. The question generated from the study of the crucial cases was: does nonviolent action play a significant role in all revolutions? My hypothesis was yes, or, stated more formally, nonviolent action is vital in beginning any revolution.

Discussion of testing this hypothesis led to the last major conceptual element: the case study and case selection. Many of the theoretical works that we read combined the development of theories of revolution with the analysis of a particular case. Scholars are not interested just in understanding a particular case or in creating a detached theory, but in creating a theory to explain events in history and ensuring that it appropriately fits those events (Walt 1996, 2–3). The selection of the

students' cases was constrained by a list of recent potential revolutions (some violent and some nonviolent) that I compiled in my own research (see Table 1). I also included the year(s) of the revolution to help focus their research. Because of the class size (20), each student had their own case study.

The research assignment was to analyze the process of revolution in their case to suggest whether nonviolence led to revolution. They were to focus on the events that preceded the change of government. Were these predominantly violent or nonviolent? What role did each type of action have in shaping the revolution? Given this process tracing, they were to decide whether or not nonviolence was crucial to their revolution. This would suggest whether nonviolence is required for revolution, in general. From this, they could make suggestions about whether their case was unique and why, or whether it was similar to other cases, and why. By posing the research question and defining how the analysis was to be conducted, I brought the students into the world of revolution scholars. Rather than simply reading theories and case histories, I asked the students to evaluate the scholars whose theories they read—to create new ideas using new cases. Their research was limited in terms of the question and their case, but was open ended in terms of how they explained their results given their case.

The Panel Presentation Experience

Having discussed the elements of the course and research in general, I will now give a brief accounting of the steps taken to move several students from a research paper for a class to a panel presentation. When the students turned in their papers, instead of a final exam, each gave a brief presentation on their findings. They took turns discussing their cases, grouped by different regions of the world. In their evaluations, a number of students commented that this was one of the more meaningful aspects of the class because they were able to see how their case study compared with others. Throughout the course, I mentioned that I would like to try and work the paper into a format that could be presented as a panel at the International Studies Association Midwest conference. At the end of the class, I asked if anyone was interested in pursuing the development of their research paper. To my delight, a number of students volunteered.

Table 1
Potential Revolutions for Case Study with Approximate Dates

Albania (1989)	East Timor (2000)	Philippines (1986)
Algeria (1991–95)	Grenada (1979)	Poland (1989)
Baltic States (1991)	Haiti (1985)	Romania (1989)
Benin (1990–91)	Hungary (1989)	Soviet Union (1991)
Bolivia (1977–82)	Iran (1979)	South Africa (1994)
Bulgaria (1989)	Madagascar (1991–93)	Sudan (1985)
Czechoslovakia (1989)	Mali (1989–92)	Yugoslavia (2001)
East Germany (1989)	Nicaragua (1979)	

During the summer, I found six students who were interested and asked each to write an abstract for their paper to submit as a proposal. I collected these and sent them along with an abstract of this paper to the ISA Midwest conference organizer. Given the fact that students have limited time and energy, we decided not to make revisions until we were accepted to the conference. In August, when we received the preliminary program, we began working on revising the papers and ensuring that the students were registered for the conference. To this end, I spoke with the department chair about finding financial assistance to help defray the students' costs—I was covered through existing funds for graduate students. The department agreed to cover the cost of the registration, lodging, and even some money for gas (we planned to drive from Chicago to the conference in St. Louis).

I asked the students to resubmit their papers to me and gave substantial comments and editorial suggestions. In this re-editing, I was much more critical of the papers than when they were submitted for class. We met in early October to go over these revisions and make sure that we were all on the right track. At this meeting, they brought their papers and read each other's work for further comments and questions. I wanted them to see what the other students were working on and to give them a better perspective of how different events unfolded in different situations. They also read and commented on a draft of this paper. The meeting was also important for addressing logistical matters such as carpooling to the conference and arranging for hotel accommodations. At this point, one of the students decided that she would not be able to attend because of a conflicting engagement. Three of the other students also expressed the possibility of a conflict, as they were all active in various student organizations and a large demonstration was planned for the same weekend in Milwaukee. They eventually chose to participate in the conference, to my relief. This illustrates one of the difficulties of undergraduate research of this type. Because it was not part of a class assignment, the panel presentation was just one more extracurricular activity in a crowded field.

We met a week before the conference to practice our panel presentation. I arranged for a few professors and graduate students from our department to attend and ask questions as if they were attending our panel. This was

important for the students to practice giving their presentation as well as to see what types of comments and questions may come from an audience. At this practice session, we learned that the students needed to give more of the historical background for their case. They assumed that professors knew the revolutionary history of their particular case. While the practice session helped build the confidence of some of the students, several were extremely nervous about presenting to professors who they knew and would likely have as teachers in the future (the students at the time of the conference were: one sophomore, one junior, and three seniors). It was at this point that another student decided not to participate in the panel because he felt that he had not made enough progress on revisions to his paper and because he needed to study for upcoming exams (that brought our panel to four students and myself).

The week before the conference the students gave me their final drafts so that I could copy extras for the paper table. We finalized our hotel arrangements; with just four, they would share a room. The first week of November arrived and we headed for St. Louis. One of the students rode in my car, two came later that night together, and the fourth came with a friend. Some attended the plenary session as well as sessions the next morning with me, though they expressed some boredom and confusion at these. I never realized how many of the jokes at keynote events are not funny to non-political scientists. Before our panel, we met to make sure everyone was prepared (and had arrived safely).

I would like to say that our panel was overflowing, but that is rarely (if ever) the case at the regional conferences that I have attended. At one point, the audience size matched that of our panel, my personal benchmark for success. I ran the panel as a typical presentation, and then opened it up for a broader discussion about undergraduate research. The consensus of the students' responses during the panel seemed to be that they enjoyed pursuing a topic that they were interested in, but the time commitments of current classes, jobs, organizations, and personal life severely limited their ability to develop their work as much as they would have liked. I also found that facilitating the panel was considerably more administrative work than I had envisioned—from registration, lodging, transportation, and funding, to the individual attention of allaying

fears, encouraging confidence, and editing papers.

Given these hurdles, when I do this again (and I am planning on doing it again), I will try to participate in a conference closer to home. Most of the difficulties I experienced revolved around the logistics of getting to and from the conference. I will also try to better match the conference with the class. Most of the other panels were unappealing to these students who, though my class was a political science course, were more interested in peace studies or the activist rather than the academic side of politics. Something like a Peace Studies Association conference would probably have been more interesting to them. Finally, I will try to do a better job of walking the fine line between pushing them to do more with their paper and yet not scaring them away with the prospect of too much work. The idea of educating professors is intimidating to students and it was difficult for me to balance encouraging comments such as "don't worry, they won't make you look like a fool," with those like, "this paragraph is unclear."

While it was a considerable amount of work, I believe that the experience was well worth the effort. It helped me get a better perspective on some revolutions that I had not researched as thoroughly as the case studies for my dissertation. Because my research is on velvet revolutions, it was valuable for me to see students analyze violent revolutions with the same research question. Personally, it also allowed me to interact with students who were really interested in my area of research. More importantly, I believe that the students have grown from the experience. Most of them have expressed interest in graduate school. The opportunity to sample some of what happens in graduate work is valuable in shaping that decision (Peppas 1981). Further, few undergraduates have the opportunity to participate in a political science conference, where many new ideas are first tested. They also had the opportunity to further develop and refine a piece of writing beyond the requirements of a class. As Ishayama summarizes, a number of studies have shown that undergraduate research benefits students in a variety of ways: (1) gaining experience and learn about the research process by working on an unsolved, open-ended research problem; (2) increasing their disciplinary knowledge and their understanding of how that knowledge may be applied; (3) defining and refining their research and career interests; (4) learn about the world of

academia and graduate school life; (5) are provided with a forum for collegial interaction with a faculty

member" (2002, 382). I believe that my students' experience reflected all of these benefits. Finally, if nothing else,

they were able to visit St. Louis and walk around the Gateway Arch for a few hours before heading home.

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