

Empowering and Engaging Students Through Civically Engaged Research

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American Political Science Association (APSA) President Robert Putnam posed a simple question in his 2002 presidential address: “What is the job of political science?” (Putnam 2003). Almost 20 years later, another APSA president, Rogers M. Smith, carried on the charge, arguing that “significant immersion in, and...respectful partnerships with social groups, organizations, and governmental bodies” can help political science contribute to a better path for global politics (Smith 2020). Underlying these calls for greater public involvement is the question of what role the discipline plays in civic education: How can we use our training in systematic scientific inquiry to equip and empower students to contribute to democracy?

We argue that incorporating civically engaged research (CER)—the “systematic and rigorous production of knowledge that directly engages current civic problems in a reciprocal partnership with individuals and/or organizations who are directly affected by those problems” (see Bullock and Hess in this symposium)—into the classroom is an effective avenue through which students gain necessary experience working in their community. Incorporating CER into class projects empowers students as citizens while simultaneously making societal contributions that improve democratic governance. By collaborating to solve a community-identified problem, students increase their autonomy, civic identity, and skill in democratic participation. Because projects include various moving parts, all students can nurture their existing gifts or learn new skills. In this way, CER facilitates not only diversity and inclusion efforts central to higher education but also the individual and institutional partnerships that political science deems vital to democracy.

ADVANTAGES OF COURSE-BASED CIVICALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH

Civic engagement and undergraduate research have been identified as “high-impact” practices for students because of their ability to increase student performance on measures such as persistence (Kuh 2008). Students who complete community-based learning courses report greater long-term civic participation, an ability to listen to and deliberate on a range of issues, and the acquisition of specific political knowledge (Gorham 2005; Lee et al. 2019). Undergraduate research experiences help students—particularly first-generation and

those from marginalized backgrounds—to gain confidence in their skills as social scientists, increase their self-efficacy, and build connections with faculty mentors who ultimately will help them succeed in college (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2014; Chemers et al. 2011). CER is a direct response to our discipline’s desire to teach in more powerful and relevant ways.

Our call to political science faculty to incorporate CER into their courses draws on traditions of participatory research in other fields (for a review, see Bullock and Hess in this symposium) and of civically engaged learning (CEL) in political science pedagogy. Civic-engagement education is “an evidence-based pedagogy that includes civic learning and emphasizes building civic skills, knowledge, experience, and a sense of efficacy to develop citizens who regularly and productively participate in their communities throughout their lives” (McCartney 2017, 5). CER overlaps with CEL—that is, participating students gain similar civic skills—while also enhancing the quality of civic engagement through its focus on the research process. This emphasis on the “organized, rigorous production of knowledge” (see the Introduction to this symposium) is less prominent in CEL work. Bennion and Laughlin (2018) compiled an overview of all civic-education articles in the *Journal of Political Science Education* from 2005 to 2016; of the 51 articles they identified, only three included a research project based on the needs of a community organization. In the concluding chapter of APSA’s *Teaching Civic Engagement*, there are two mentions of community-engaged research (Simpson 2013).

Civic education grounded in experiences and applied learning can increase political engagement down the line. As Holbein and Hillygus (2020, 149) explained, “[w]hen students are challenged to work in their communities—to go beyond the dry, rote presentation of facts and knowledge about government and politics—they develop the practical skills and experiences needed to engage in politics.” CER combines the applied and experiential learning known to increase participation with a detailed, process-oriented approach to investigation and systematic inquiry. Not only do student CER participants feel empowered and invested; they also understand the narrow, specific ways in which proposals must be developed to ultimately become policy.

In their treatise on the threats facing American democracy, Mettler and Lieberman (2020, 12) emphasized that “[b]eing

part of a democracy requires participating over and over again in the quest to promote one's values, interests, or ideas—and actually being permitted to do so.” For much of American history, people of color have been disenfranchised and denied a voice in the policies and governance enacted on their behalf (Katznelson 2005; Massey 2007). As a result, Black people in particular feel a distinct sense of resignation and hopelessness

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about a political system that has failed to include them (Phoenix 2019). Political science must be at the forefront of efforts to improve diversity and inclusion not only in the classroom but also in our democracy. Incorporating CER into the classroom is one way to empower and engage students who have been not only underserved academically but also made to feel unwelcome in American civic and political life. In the case studies that follow, we describe the ways in which course-based CER develops democratic skills and experiences, especially for underserved groups.¹

START WITH PARTNERSHIPS

A fundamental best practice of CER is that the research agenda is a product of the expressed needs of a community (Warren 2018). Researchers collaborate *with* community partners to determine the most relevant research questions. Whereas CEL focuses on partnerships with nonprofit service organizations to provide “goods” to under-resourced communities (e.g., tutoring and support for voter registration), CER in political science benefits from partners whose work will help students engage directly with democratic governance. We describe two such projects.

The Census Project

In the summer of 2018, Houston's Office of Innovation approached the third author's community college to develop new outreach strategies to decrease the 2020 Census undercount. Interested professors were put into contact with the Houston Language Bank (HLB), which had worked on Census outreach before. HLB provided access to city school districts and surrounding communities, as well as data and support for

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students' ideas and outreach strategies. The author incorporated this CER into an introductory American government course, in which students investigated the research question: Does Census education and mobilization of students in South-west Houston increase response rates for low-response-rate communities?

The Immigrant Integration Project

In the spring of 2019, the second author and a colleague at their small, private, masters-level university developed an “advanced research participation” course focusing on an immigrant integration project (IIP) in Charlotte, North Carolina. Students partnered with Charlotte's Office of Equity, Mobility, and Immigrant Integration to support its goal of making the

community more welcoming to foreign-born people, a critical governance issue for “new immigrant gateways.” Students attended a meeting of the Charlotte International Cabinet—one of several community advisory boards for the city government—and engaged with community leaders from various private and nonprofit organizations that sought to influence local policies. The city's Director of Immigrant Integration highlighted two areas where student support was needed: (1) organizing and disseminating information about immigrant-serving organizations in the city (i.e., the “mapping” project); and (2) learning more about public opinion on the question of the Immigration and Nationality Section 287(g) program, a partnership between federal immigration enforcement and local law enforcement that was causing considerable conflict in the city (i.e., the “survey” project). The mapping project focused on the research question: What is the best tool to facilitate two-way communication between the city government and immigrant-serving organizations? The research question for the survey project was: “How do members of the Charlotte community view immigrants and immigration?”

EMPHASIZE EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING

By emphasizing a rigorous, research-based approach to addressing community problems, course-based CER enables students to experience the importance of evidence-based decision making. They develop valuable and wide-ranging research skills that are transferable to other academic and professional settings. In our projects, these skills included the use and implementation of mapping tools, survey design and administration, and system-modeling approaches.

Students on the IIP mapping team and in the Census Project used mapping technology to pinpoint the location of necessary communities and resources for their projects. Faced with a static Excel spreadsheet full of data about immigrant-serving organizations, the IIP mapping students developed a set of priorities for the updated database and decided to

develop a dynamic, interactive map of organizations' locations in the Geographic Information System (GIS) as the new platform.

Whereas the map was the final product for the IIP students, it was the starting point for Census Project students' targeted efforts. The class turned to the Census Response Outreach Area Mapper (ROAM) online tool to discover which areas and demographics in Houston have the lowest Census response rates. Based on the ROAM exercise, students chose a representative area of Houston and decided on the best way to speak with community members, given time and financial limitations. Students crafted survey questions to discover community members' attitudes and concerns about participating in the Census and to gauge levels of knowledge about how the Census affects their life on a daily basis. Students then began correlating survey results, political geography, and demographics of low-response-rate areas in the city. Similarly, students in the IIP survey project designed questionnaires to assess residents' attitudes toward immigration generally and the policy under city scrutiny specifically.

Students in the Census Project also embraced basic complex adaptive systems (CAS) modeling to theorize about

science provided students the means to be present at the policy-making table as well. They began to understand how to address wicked problems through democratic processes: they can attend public meetings, contact their representatives, and advocate for specific evidence-based policy at the local level. Students in the Census Project were able to see their ideas become part of the city's Census campaign. CER enables students to discover a role in the democratic process and recognize that they have skills that contribute to policy innovation in their communities.

EMPOWER ALL STUDENTS TO DO DEMOCRACY

CER fosters a strong sense of personal and civic empowerment and it challenges traditional assumptions about who can create knowledge, bringing in a diverse set of decision makers, methods of discovery, and processes for dissemination (Reynolds 2009). The students who conducted CER in our courses expressed an enhanced sense of their own ability to contribute to addressing community challenges—what could be called a sense of “civic empowerment.”

CER is beneficial not only for supporting traditionally quieter or silenced students (Levinson 2010) but also for

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interacting demographics and resulting political behaviors. Thinking from a CAS perspective and systematically working through dynamic variables leading to Census nonresponse assisted students not only in seeing why and how Houston has a history of low response rates but also in developing better informed mobilization options. Results from this initial research supported the students' next step of formulating mobilization strategies to increase Census response rates, focusing on students in high school and the community college.

Overall, both projects taught students that evidence-based decision making can be challenging but is essential when approaching “wicked” problems and “smart” governance. From the surveys, students recognized similarities with political science theories of intersectionality, political participation, mobilization, and minoritized populations. Learning new programs such as GIS and ROAM was challenging, as was navigating an iterative process with busy city-government staff. However, students developed useful civic knowledge, including an understanding of the structure of city government; a better ability to discern among public, private, and collaborative approaches to city problems; and firsthand knowledge about the role of citizens in determining and advancing community goals.

The research process in political science resembles the policy-making process, both of which are driven ideally by systematic thinking. Students learned from their work with partners the importance of apolitical, community-led problem solving. Applying methods and skills particular to political

recovering cognitive bandwidth of historically under-resourced and marginalized students (Verschelden 2017). For example, in the Census Project, some students were drawn to website design, public speaking, or social media meme creation; others viewed their organization skills or cultural and language knowledge as essential to project success. In this supportive environment, students gained confidence to venture out of their comfort zone and try new responsibilities. In their feedback about the course, students reported feeling empowered to make a political difference in their communities *because* they were in control of the project. These latter effects are important given that the community college is a Hispanic-serving institution and 90% of the class was composed of students of color, DACA students, and international students of color. These student populations traditionally are underserved not only in academia but also in their own democracy.

Within the IIP, the mapping-project students expressed a particularly strong sense that their work made them feel like an important part of the Charlotte community. Throughout the process, students learned firsthand about the various ways in which private citizens and organizations work on their own and with the city to provide services to the foreign-born population, and they felt empowered by the openness of city officials to working collaboratively with college students to address a pressing community need. In doing so, students began to see themselves as essential community members, with particular skills and knowledge that could be used to make the community more livable. It is interesting that the students working on the more traditional survey project did

not express the same sense of increased empowerment or belonging. They enjoyed learning about city residents' views on immigrants, but the project felt more like a typical class project.

CONCLUSION

As an approach to political science, CER provides an opportunity to apply academic skills to real questions of governance, democratic inclusion, and representation that communities are grappling with every day. We predict that students become better democratic citizens when they participate in CER. They gain agency and voice. They feel a sense of civic empowerment and perseverance that will manifest in their political habits and an understanding of evidence-based decision making that will help them succeed in college and beyond.

Integrating CER into a course is not an easy or quick task (see Udani and Dobbs in this symposium on the challenges of CER); therefore, it is important to note that there are professional benefits to faculty in addition to the positive outcomes for students and for democracy writ large. A workable CER project can provide a foundation on which to build one's own research, from literature review to research design and data collection. Many universities recognize the value of active-learning approaches that propel students into the local community, rewarding faculty in tenure and promotion decisions. Supportive institutions, such as those highlighted here, can offer a range of benefits to faculty interested in developing CER courses: course releases, time, and financial support to facilitate course development; physical space for meetings with community partners; the equipment, software, and hardware necessary to execute a project; and summer internships for students who want to continue the work after the course is completed. We encourage faculty who are interested in incorporating CER into their courses to visit our APSA Educate page, where we include our syllabi and other materials that might be useful for those just beginning the process.

CER is particularly valuable in the political science classroom because "for most of us, the primary impact that we personally will have on public life is through the deeds of our students" (Putnam 2003, 251). Through CER, we can better equip our students with the skills to do democracy—not only in the short term through their class projects but also as advocates, elected officials, and policy makers after college. ■

NOTE

1. For more information on the courses and research projects highlighted, see our contributions to APSA Educate.

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