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Teaching the Town Hall: Incorporating Experiential Learning in a Large Introductory Lecture Course

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ABSTRACT: Experiential learning has been shown to help cultivate habits of effective democratic citizens, but it is often seen as infeasible for large classes. This need not be the case. In this paper, we describe a group project designed to introduce students in a 70-person Introduction to Politics course to the basic political processes of local government. In addition to guidance on how to implement the project, we also discuss survey data from students in the class to compare pre- and post-tests for each semester as well as comparing post-tests across two semesters. We explore how students who were enrolled in the course responded to the experiential learning component of the course on three separate dimensions: cognitive development, community awareness, and self-understanding. Ultimately, students reported that they felt civically engaged because they worked directly with community partners who they felt benefited from their involvement (community awareness) and they developed their skills for teamwork and collaboration (self-understanding). Our evaluation suggests that this group-level experiential learning project in a large course can be an effective tool for political science education as well as student development, and that implementing these kinds of experiential learning interventions can improve with each iteration of the project. Additionally, in light of student feedback, we provide suggestions on how other faculty members teaching large courses could incorporate this project into their own pedagogical practice.

Introduction

In recent years, evidence has shown a troubling decline in the levels of civic engagement among American adults (*Annenberg Public Policy Center* 2011; National Center for Education Statistics 2011; Fry 2016; Gao 2014). Recognizing the important role of education in cultivating the habits of effective democratic citizens, institutions of higher education have begun reinvesting in civic education programming in order to reverse this trend (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools 2011; Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement for the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education 2014). As a discipline which takes civics as an object of study, political science is well-suited to meaningfully contribute to this project. But as class sizes surge and faculty across institutions are increasingly burdened with growing expectations for research and service, the question of how to effectively and efficiently incorporate civic learning in political science courses poses a difficult challenge.

In this article, we draw from our experiences incorporating an experiential learning project into a large, introductory-level political science course to explain one strategy for using experiential learning to increase students' civic engagement even in classroom conditions that are less-than-ideal. The effectiveness of experiential learning projects is well-documented, but instructors may often wonder how to incorporate these time-intensive pedagogical strategies into large lecture courses without the help of teaching assistants. By breaking down the assignment into three key components, breaking the students into small groups, and allowing time in class to work together, this experiential learning project was designed to improve students' *cognitive development, community awareness,* and *self-understanding,* dimensions that have previously been recognized as important by scholars of experiential civic education (Gelmon et al. 2001).

Importantly, while student responses to participation in this project were mixed, we introduced a number of changes between the first (Fall 2016) and second (Spring 2017) iterations of the project which led to improvements in student learning outcomes. This evaluation of the project not only suggest an initial design for large-class experiential learning, but also indicates that instructors can use small changes to improve student learning outcomes each time they run the project.

Experiential Learning in Political Science

Experiential learning is not uncommon in political science education. Building on a long tradition of active and experiential learning (Dewey 1916), experiential civic education has gained prominence in recent years through the work of national organizations like Campus Compact and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project—organizations with the goal of sharing research and best practices for experiential learning processes aimed at developing communities and improving students' civic capacities (Bennion and Laughlin 2018). In addition to increasing the visibility of civic education as a pedagogical goal of higher education, however, these groups—and scholars with a similar investment in the work of civic education—have begun to more rigorously evaluate the aims, outcomes, and methods of incorporating experiential learning projects into course curricula.

In their foundational work for Campus Compact, for example, Gelmon et al. (2001) outline three dimensions along which experiential learning impacts students' civic learning. When successful, they argue, experiential learning should contribute to students' 1) *cognitive development*, by building new communication skills and improving their understanding of course material, 2) *community awareness*, by highlighting connections between students and their communities and improving their attitudes about working with community partners, and 3) *self-*

understanding, facilitating feelings of ownership over the course material, building teamwork and collaboration skills, and facilitating a recognition of their personal strengths and weaknesses.

And there is some evidence that experiential learning does have a positive impact on students' development along these three dimensions. Scholars have found that practical experiences outside the classroom improve students' *cognitive development*, by developing key skills like information literacy and critical thinking (Baumann 2012; Guilfoile and Delander 2014). Additionally, experiential learning opportunities can contribute to students' *community awareness* by increasing their commitment to community and civic participation (Kahne and Sporte 2010; Lee et al. 2018). Finally, evidence also supports that *self-understanding* is gained through experiential learning, by extending and deepening students' confidence and familiarity with civic situations and working with others, as well as fostering the development of students' civic identities (Youniss 2011). One result of experiential learning, then, is that students who participate in high-quality experiential learning activities come to see themselves as "co-creators of democracy" (Boyte 2004, 5).

Due to these positive outcomes, the incorporation of experiential learning into course (McDonald 2013; Sylvester 2013; McHugh and Mayer 2013; Suarez 2017) and extracurricular events (Abernathy and Forestal 2019) has become increasingly prevalent and sophisticated. Yet despite these encouraging findings, the research addressing mechanisms of implementation for experiential learning opportunities in political science coursework has, to date, largely been limited to courses with smaller enrollments of under 35 students (Jenkins 2011; Elder, Seligsohn, and Hofrenning 2007; van Assendelft 2008; Smith 2006; Jenkins 2013; Hellwege 2018). More and more, however, instructors and departments alike are coming under pressure to increase course enrollments, particularly in introductory classes that are well-positioned to both recruit

new majors and act as "service" courses for university general education requirements (Berrett 2012). This poses a new challenge for instructors wishing to balance the competing demands of using time-intensive, yet effective, pedagogical strategies with the practical needs of their home institutions.

Experiential Learning in *Introduction to Politics*: The Town Hall Project

As one strategy for navigating the challenges involved with achieving civic learning outcomes in large courses, we introduced an experiential learning component into a large, introductory political science course; the project was intentionally designed to balance the pedagogical demands of experiential learning with the single instructor's limited time and resources. The goal of the project was to augment students' in-class course content by introducing students to the practical dimensions of political life. In this "town hall project," students were organized into groups and assigned a local New Jersey town to study. By the end of the semester, each student was required to 1) attend a town meeting in their assigned town, 2) write a short (1,000-1,500 word) blog post reflecting research into a self-assigned dimension of the town's political life, and 3) present their findings as part of a group oral presentation. By assigning students to small groups of five, breaking down the project into three distinct, small-stakes components, and providing students with step-by-step instructions on the first day of the semester, the town hall experiential learning project achieved some of the desired pedagogical benefits of experiential learning without becoming too burdensome for either the students or the instructor.

Introduction to Politics is a large, 70-person lecture course taught at a mid-size regional university in New Jersey.[1] As an introductory-level course, *Introduction to Politics* serves mostly non-majors.[2] For many students, the course is their first introduction to the discipline of political science; for some, it will be their only engagement with the discipline at all. As such, the course is designed to not only develop student's basic political knowledge and skills, but also to pique their interest in being active and engaged citizens.

Because of the large class size and the fact that most students in *Introduction to Politics* are from majors outside political science, the addition of an experiential learning project to the course was intended to achieve several different goals that would otherwise be difficult within a traditionally formatted lecture class of this size. Most significantly, through their research into important local issues and institutions, their direct observation of political processes on a local level, and their collaborative work within assigned groups, the goal was that students would cultivate the *cognitive development*, *community awareness,* and *self-understanding* required of active and engaged citizens (Gelmon et al. 2001).

As a way of incorporating an experiential learning assignment that introduced students to practical political experiences but was not overwhelming for a single instructor to manage without teaching assistants, the assignment was designed as a group project and broken down into five discrete steps. On the first day of the semester, students were given a four-page

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[1] The institution is predominantly white (68%) and 59% of students are women. While over 90% of students are enrolled full-time, only 37% of students live in on-campus housing and the majority of students commute to campus. Most students, 72%, are originally from the surrounding counties.

[2] In Fall 2016, social work (29.6%) and criminal justice (25%) majors comprised over half the class; only 20% of the course were political science majors, the rest of the class included students from history, business, literature, philosophy, psychology, and undecided majors. In Spring 2017, the proportion of political science majors (16%) decreased, though criminal justice (19.6%) and social work (10.6%) majors were still among the most popular in the class; the rest of the class included students from psychology (9%) and business (9%), as well as communications, economics, environmental science, health science, literature, philosophy, and undecided.

instruction sheet (for instruction sheet, see Appendix A) that included all five steps of the project, as well as detailed explanations of each step and relevant due dates:

- *Step 1: Students Submit A List of Preferences and Instructor Assigns Groups.* All students were offered a chance to submit their preferences (using a Google Form administered via the course management system, Blackboard) for town assignments out of a list of 14 cities and towns around the university. The link to the Google Form was open during the first week of class, though students were reminded that preferences were not a guarantee of assignment. Any students who did not submit preferences were assigned to a group randomly by the instructor. The result was 14 groups of five students apiece.

- *Step 2: Students Divide Responsibility Among Group Members.* Once created, each group was responsible for a single presentation and research product composed of five distinct sections (Identify key issues facing the town; Describe the history of the town; Describe the political culture of the town; Describe the government structure of the town; Make recommendations for the identified issues). Each member of the group was responsible for individually writing one of these sections to be posted online as a blog post—though all students were required to attend a town hall meeting, take notes, and share with their groupmates to get a fuller picture of the town's politics. By the end of Week 3, students were responsible for dividing these sections among the group members and reporting their agreed-upon role assignments to the instructor via Blackboard.

- *Step 3: Students Research Town Context and Issues Facing the Town.* Each group was responsible for identifying key issues facing the town, as well as researching

the town's history, political culture, and structure of governance. Students were

encouraged to read local newspapers, watch local TV coverage, and to read

through past town meeting minutes to find this information. They were also

required to attend a town meeting and incorporate information from that

experience as well.[3] Based on this research, students chose an issue (or two) and

traced how it had been addressed by the local government officials—or if it had

been addressed at all. Using this information, each group then made

recommendations as to how they believed the town should best address those

issues.

- o *Step 4: Students Create Blog Posts that Feature the Results of Their Research.*

  Once the research was conducted, each group created a final product to

  disseminate their work. This consisted of a series of blog posts—one per

  student—that correspond with each distinct section of the project (listed above).

  Each student's blog post was required to be 1,000-1,500 words and include at

  least one image (for a group total of 5,000-7,500 words and five photos, though

  blog posts were turned in and graded individually). These blog posts were due in

  Week 10.

- o *Step 5: In-Class Presentations*. During the last two weeks of class (Weeks 12-14),

  each group reported the results of their work to their peers in 12-15 minute in-

  class presentations that covered all the assigned sections of the project. With only

  2-3 presentations scheduled per class meeting, these class sessions were also an

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[3] In order to get full credit for attending the meeting, students were required to submit a photo of themselves (often 'selfies') at the meeting as well as their notes from the meeting. The photos students submitted were not only fun to see, but also often included local elected officials interacting with students—to the surprise and delight of the instructor.

opportunity to engage students in reflection about their experiences in the towns, as well as a way for students to engage in cross-group discussions about similarities and differences that arise when comparing group findings.[4]

Altogether, the experiential learning project accounted for 15% of *Introduction to Politics* students' overall course grade.[5] Each of the three sections—the town hall meeting attendance (graded on completion), the blog post, and the presentation—were afforded equal weight. This division ensured that each section of the project was relatively "low stakes" but nevertheless developed different capacities like notetaking, writing, and oral presentation skills. Due to the nature of these assignments, however, the additional grading burden to the instructor was kept relatively light.

After first introducing the project in Fall 2016, we retained it the following semester (Spring 2017) with a few small changes to the way the project was implemented. In the Fall 2016 semester, due to a miscommunication between the instructor and students, most students were assigned to study towns that they ranked lower in their initial preference submission; in Spring

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[4] Though we found these in-class presentations an effective way to generate informed and engaged discussions of the local political issues facing our region of New Jersey, instructors who may not want to devote the in-class time to presentations may choose to substitute alternative presentation assignments. In Spring 2019, for example, we replaced the in-class presentations with pre-recorded video presentations (of 10-12 minutes) that the students recorded and uploaded to Blackboard. Students were then instructed to watch their peers' videos and respond via an online discussion forum designed to facilitate the same cross-group comparisons that the in-class discussions generated. While these discussions were often quite interesting, our impression was that they were less effective than traditional face-to-face, synchronous discussions due to the asynchronous nature of the online forum and the resulting lack of direct instructor facilitation of the online discussions.

[5] Students' overall course grade was comprised of the following: 60% exams that tested students' knowledge of course concepts (three exams at 20% each), 25% from weekly quizzes that tested students' knowledge of current events (13 quizzes at 1.9% each, with two extra credit opportunities), and the 15% group project. The decision to allocate only 15% of the course grade to the town hall project was made using the best practices suggested by our institution's Office of Service-Learning. Because the overwhelming majority of students at our institution are commuters, who often work full-time jobs and have family obligations in addition to their responsibilities as full-time students, the 15% allocation was intended to make the project weighty but not so weighty to prevent students from passing the course if they failed to complete the project but were otherwise engaged with course content. Given the time-intensive nature of the project, however, instructors may well choose to increase its point value relative to the rest of the course assignments.

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2017, by contrast, most students were assigned towns they preferred—the result was that many students in the spring were investigating their hometowns or neighboring cities. Likewise, in Spring 2017 there were four in-class "working days" built into the course schedule that were not available to the Fall 2016 class; in addition, in Spring 2017 students were asked to conduct two peer evaluations of their group members over the course of the semester (for group evaluation forms, see Appendix B). As we discuss in more detail below, the project was more successful on its second iteration, likely due to these structural changes, as well as the instructor's familiarity with the project and what to expect from it.

A Preliminary Evaluation of the Town Hall Project

The *Introduction to Politics* town hall project was designed as a way to improve students' understanding of—and appreciation for—the reality of political life by connecting the course material to a first-hand experience of local town politics. By requiring students to not only research issues facing local communities, but also to attend a local town meeting, we intended the town hall project to impact all three dimensions that Gelmon et al. (2001) outline. By closely engaging with the local politics of their assigned town, we anticipated that students would develop a more robust awareness of their community (a change in students' *community awareness*). And by experiencing "real-world" politics in the town meeting, we hoped that students would come to appreciate and understand the practical relevance of the course content (a *cognitive development*). Finally, by working in groups, we envisioned students would develop a sense of ownership over the course material—a change in their *self-understanding*.

In order to evaluate the town hall project, we used a pre- and post-test survey adapted by our campus's Office of Service-Learning from Gelmon et al.'s (2001) Campus Compact

handbook.[6] The data collection was comprised of 23 questions that students answered about themselves and the course, using the on-line course management software Blackboard. There were 5 demographic questions asked only on the pre-test (race/ethnicity, gender, age, class-level, employment status). The other 18 items on both the pre- and post-tests evaluated the experiential learning project and the course based on the three dimensions from Gelmon et al.: *cognitive development, community awareness,* and *self-understanding*. These 18 evaluative items were posed as statements and students were requested to respond on a 5-point Likert Scale of: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree. The pre-test measured their expectations for the course goals while the post-test measured their actual experience. For example, the pre-test posed to students "I feel that the community work I will do through this course will be a benefit to the community" while the post-test said "I feel that the community work I did through this course benefited the community."[7]

The student responses to the *Introduction to Politics* experiential learning project help to identify not only which parts of the project were successful, but also areas for improvement. In general, at the end of each semester students reported, through higher point estimates in the post-tests, that the town hall project helped them "to see how the subject matter I learned can be used in everyday life"—an indicator of students' *cognitive development.* Yet in the Fall 2016 semester, the first iteration of the project, student responses also indicated that they could not see how the town hall project benefitted the community, nor did they think it helped them understand

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[6] Data was collected through the Office of Service Learning at the University under Institutional Review Board Approval number 2017.086. This particular study was found to be exempt from Institutional Review Board Approval because the data the authors received from the Office of Service Learning was deidentified for individual students and identifiable only by the course semesters. The deidentified data set is available on an author's personal website [web address to be added after blind review].

[7] Table 1 provides a summary of the student respondent demographics as well as the time spent on the experiential learning project in both semesters. Table 2 summarizes the complete findings of these tests.

their strengths and weaknesses—suggesting that the project was not effectively cultivating *community awareness* or *self-understanding*. In response to this feedback, however, the instructor made several small changes to the town hall project for its second, Spring 2017 iteration designed to more intentionally develop students' *community awareness* and *self-understanding*. We discuss these changes in turn.

Community Connection (community awareness). One change we made to the project for the Spring 2017 semester was in the way students were assigned to the towns they studied. In Fall 2016, due to a miscommunication between the instructor and students, more students were assigned to towns they ranked low in their initial preferences. The result was that students were often studying towns they had no real interest in. In Spring 2017, by contrast, students were more likely to have been assigned to towns they ranked as preferred. Likely as a result of this change, more students in Spring 2017 reported that they could see the community benefit of the project; because they were engaging with their hometowns or towns with which they had a personal connection, students likely had greater levels of investment before the project began, and were able to draw on personal experiences for context. Thus, as other faculty implement this project, they would do well to create student buy-in through connecting them to communities with which they may already be familiar.

Teamwork and Collaboration (self-understanding). In addition to changes that improved students' *community awareness*, the instructor also made changes that improved students' development of *self-understanding*, especially with regard to teamwork and collaboration. In Fall 2016, the instructor provided no in-class workdays; the project was completed entirely during students' time outside of class. By contrast, in the Spring 2017 semester, students had more opportunities to work with their groups during class time as the instructor built four full session

"working days" into the class schedule. [8] Additionally, in the Spring 2017 semester the instructor introduced two opportunities for students to evaluate one another's performance as group members: a midterm evaluation halfway through the semester (before the blog post and presentation were due) and a final evaluation after the group had completed their in-class presentation. These two changes—dedicated working days and opportunities for group evaluation—were intended to increase the salience of the group dimension of the town hall project and stress the importance of working collaboratively with one's group members. And student responses in Spring 2017 suggest this was successful: more students in Spring 2017 reported that they agreed "The other students in this class played an important role in my learning."

These results should be encouraging for instructors wishing to introduce experiential learning into their classrooms. Even with small changes to the implementation of the town hall project—like aligning students' preferences with their assigned towns, building in groupwork days, and adding group evaluations—we saw improvements in student learning outcomes across semesters, suggesting the possibility of improving the project's outcomes without intensive redesign. Moreover, these changes did not require more time or resources from the instructor. Indeed, the group evaluations were checked for completion, and the instructor was not physically present for two of the four built-in "groupwork" days of the semester, indicating that faculty-facilitated sessions were not necessary for students to see the value of the group element. Rather, the mere opportunity to have time dedicated to working together that did not require additional

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[8] Two of the in-class working days were scheduled for days when the instructor was traveling for conferences. The other two were added to scheduled 'exam review' days as a way to ensure that students made use of that class time in the absence of a traditional lecture; the fact that the presence of the instructor was not necessary for students to collaborate effectively, however, indicates strategies for making effective use of unavoidable instructor absences.

meetings out of the class period, as well as mechanisms of accountability via the peer evaluations, were enough to incentivize students to better collaborate.

Areas of improvement. As we can see, by making small changes to the *Introduction to Politics* project, we were able to improve student learning outcomes on two of the three dimensions we measured between semesters, increasing students' sense of their impact on the community (a change in students' *community awareness*) and facilitating teamwork and collaboration skills (a change in students' *self-understanding*). And yet, the evaluations also indicate that there is still more work to be done to improve the project's *cognitive development* outcomes. In particular, for both semesters fewer students felt their work in the experiential learning project enhanced their understanding of the course material. Likewise, fewer students felt they had the opportunity to discuss their project's relationship to the course content. Thus, while students in both semesters were able to see the relevance of the project, there are clearly changes required to improve the *cognitive development* outcomes of the town hall project—in particular, to clarify the connection between the experiential learning project and course content.

As a result, we plan to use the results above to make significant changes to the structure of the course for future iterations. In particular, we plan to revise certain lectures, and rearrange the order of readings in the course, to better reflect the trajectory of the experiential learning project. Additionally, we plan to incorporate students' town hall observations more directly into in-class discussions throughout the semester, rather than just during the presentations at the end of the course. These changes should therefore create more organic spaces for structured, in-class discussions that invite students to draw comparisons between the "textbook" course content and their own "real-world" experiences with politics. We further discuss these changes, and other implications of the town hall project, in the Conclusion.

Nevertheless, even this preliminary evaluation of the town hall project should be encouraging. Recall that this assignment did not demand intensive engagement with the community; students were required to attend only one town hall meeting over the course of the semester. Given the project's low intensity, it is encouraging that the assignment was nevertheless able to demonstrate the ways that politics is part of students' everyday life, even though they could not see its connection to the academic materials presented during the course. Indeed, the fact that students might think of politics as something that affects them and their communities, particularly as most students are *not* political science majors, is itself a major achievement.

Conclusion

Given the importance of creating opportunities for civic education available to all students, as well as increasing concerns over faculty time and class size, political scientists should start to think creatively about how to achieve civic learning outcomes in large introductory lecture courses. In this article, we have discussed one such strategy: a group project that required students to attend a town hall meeting, do independent research on their assigned town, and present that information to their peers in the form of both a written blog and an in-class oral presentation. Though we did not see much improvement within each semester for the same students along the three measured dimensions, we did see improvement across semesters, indicating the success of specific changes the instructor introduced between the two iterations of the town hall project. With these outcomes, we draw four conclusions for those interested in introducing this or similar experiential learning projects in their own large lecture courses.

First, successful experiential learning, even in a large lecture course, is an iterative process; as instructors run them more and more often, and figure out what to expect, they will be

better able to convey important information and draw out connections between students'

experiences both in- and outside of the classroom. In Fall 2016, the first semester this project

was introduced to the course, the *Introduction to Politics* instructor spent more time developing

the project and less time thinking about how the project would fit into the course schedule or

how students would interpret it. As a result, it is unsurprising that fewer students saw the

community connections or the collaboration and teamwork benefits of the town hall projects.

These aspects, while clear to the instructor, were not made salient to the Fall 2016 students.

By contrast, students in the Spring 2017 semester, during which the instructor was more

intentional about explaining the motivation and goals of the project, as well as highlighting its

collaborative dimensions—including group evaluations and dedicated in-class time for group

work—understood themselves to be impacting the community (*community awareness*) and felt

that their peers were valuable resources for completing the project (*self-understanding*).

Instructors who are interested in introducing experiential learning projects—particularly group

projects, which are useful in maintaining a manageable amount of grading for a single

instructor—should therefore be sure to intentionally emphasize those aspects of the experiential

learning project they would like students to focus on in a metacognitive fashion (McGuire &

McGuire 2015).

Second, instructors interested in successfully incorporating experiential learning

pedagogies into their large introductory lecture course should make use of assessment practices

in order to help tailor class projects to better meet student needs and ensure learning outcomes. It

is clear from our preliminary evaluation data that there are a number of areas in which the

project's goals are still not being met—in particular, despite changes to the project between the

two semesters, students nevertheless indicated that the instructor could have done much more to

build on their experiences with independent research and attendance at the town halls and make clearer connections with course content, in order to facilitate students' *cognitive development*. These connections, while again clear to the instructor, were not made salient to the students—in either semester. As a result, we plan to revise the course structure and content to make these connections more explicit for students. This aligns with the literature that tells us effective experiential learning requires structured course assignments that give context and meaning to students' experiences and that emphasize the civic outcomes and importance (Guilfoile and Delander 2014; Schamber and Mahoney 2008).

Third, in addition to clearly communicating expectations and intentions with students, successful experiential learning in large lecture courses requires the intentional incorporation of quick student "buy-in" for the project. Students in the Spring 2017 semester were assigned towns that more closely aligned with their preferences; the result was that the majority of students were investigating their hometowns or other towns they were already familiar with prior to the project's start. This greatly improved the *community awareness* outcomes by quickly facilitating their connection to the community. This kind of personal link to their object of study meant that students were often already interested in the town—they approached the assignment already having a context for, and investment in, the issues that were being addressed by the councils; for many students, the revelation of decision-making structures and processes for their hometowns was both surprising and, for some, infuriating. Those interested in using similar experiential learning projects should therefore consider how they might take similar shortcuts to facilitate student "buy-in." The result of such choices increases the likelihood of a more impactful experience in terms of *community awareness* and community impact.

Finally, while the results of this study are promising for those interested in bringing the benefits of experiential learning to students in large introductory lecture courses, there is much more work to be done in determining the best practices for these kinds of endeavors. While our experiences suggest that the small changes made to the town hall project between semesters improved learning outcomes, these changes might be studied in a more rigorous way that isolates their specific effects. Likewise, scholars interested in political science pedagogy should invest more energy in exploring differences in, for example, in-class versus out-of-class activities, types of out-of-class experiences, and course content and structure, as well as kinds of experiential learning opportunities that might be able to achieve similar pedagogical results without much addition burden on instructors. By making use of existing resources in this way, we can more effectively prepare the next generation of active and engaged citizens.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

		Fall 2016 (N=60)	**Spring 2017** (N=65)
Race/Ethnicity			
	African/American	5	2
	Asian/Asian American	0	1
	Caucasian/White	42	51
	Hispanic	9	8
	I choose not to answer	2	3
	Other	2	0
Gender			
	Female	32	27
	Male	28	37
	I choose not to answer	0	1
Age			
	Under 25	53	59
	25-34	6	4
	35-44	1	0
	I choose not to answer	0	2
Class			
	Freshman	4	23
	Sophomore	25	23
	Junior	15	10
	Senior	15	9
	Graduate student	1	0
Employment Status			
	I do not have a job	21	24
	1-10 hrs/wk	10	17
	11-20 hrs/wk	14	11
	21-30 hrs/wk	9	7
	31-40 hrs/wk	5	4
	41+ hrs/wk	1	2
Average Reported Hours Spent on Project		9.06	13.65

Demographics Reported in Pre-test Only; Average Hours Reported in Post-Test Only

Table 2: Averages (Standard Deviations) and Two-Tailed, Heteroscedastic T-Tests

Post-Test Wording	Fall 2016 Pre-Test	Fall 2016 Post-Test	Fall T-Test	Spring 2017 Pre-Test	Spring 2017 Post-Test	Spring T-Test	Fall to Spring T-Test
Cognitive Development							
The community participation aspect of this course helped me to see how the **subject matter I learned can be used in everyday life**	3.75 (1.04)	3.89 (0.95)	*0.70*	3.81 (0.99)	3.93 (1.04)	*0.62*	*0.23*
The community work I did helped me to **better understand the lectures and readings** in this course	3.47 (1.08)	3.45 (1.11)	*0.06*	3.75 (0.98)	3.63 (1.12)	*0.51*	*0.75*
The idea of combining work in the community with university course work **should be practiced in more courses** at this university	3.42 (1.11)	3.40 (1.14)	*0.09*	3.52 (1.02)	3.67 (1.23)	*0.75*	*1.11*
The work I performed in the community enhanced my ability to **communicate in a "real world" setting**	3.80 (0.94)	3.50 (1.02)	*1.51*	3.90 (0.93)	3.52 (1.00)	*1.94*	*0.11*
The community aspect of this course helped me to develop my **problem-solving skills**	3.59 (0.93)	3.21 (1.12)	*1.81*	3.63 (0.98)	3.46 (1.05)	*0.89*	*1.05*
The syllabus provided for this course outlined the objectives of the community work in relation to the course objectives	3.73 (0.84)	3.95 (1.03)	*1.17*	4.08 (0.76)	3.91 (1.04)	*0.92*	*0.20*
Community Awareness							
I was already **volunteering in the community** before taking this course	2.95 (1.36)	2.52 (1.36)	*1.59*	3.20 (1.16)	2.76 (1.46)	*1.64*	*0.80*
I probably **won't volunteer or participate in the community** after this course	2.39 (1.05)	2.66 (1.16)	*1.22*	2.48 (1.19)	2.76 (1.19)	*1.15*	*0.39*
I feel that the community work I did through this course **benefited the community**	3.43 (1.06)	2.68 (1.07)	***3.61***	3.44 (1.12)	3.13 (1.05)	*1.36*	***2.00****
I was able to **work directly with a community partner** through this course	3.47 (0.95)	2.95 (1.06)	***2.58****	3.48 (0.97)	3.43 (1.07)	*0.06*	***2.14****
I felt a **personal responsibility to meet the needs of the community partner** of this course	3.65 (0.94)	3.14 (1.13)	***2.45****	3.52 (0.90)	3.33 (1.21)	*0.79*	*0.75*
My **interactions with the community partner enhanced my learning** in this course	3.53 (0.99)	3.30 (1.05)	*1.13*	3.61 (0.93)	3.49 (1.24)	*0.44*	*0.80*
Self-Understanding							
Doing work in the community helped me to **become aware of my personal strengths and weaknesses**	3.73 (0.99)	3.27 (1.09)	***2.24***	3.70 (1.00)	3.30 (1.13)	*1.80*	*0.14*
The community work in this course assisted me in **clarifying my career plans.**	3.09 (1.03)	2.98 (1.09)	*0.51*	3.52 (1.00)	3.15 (1.21)	*1.64*	*0.72*
The community work I performed in this class enhanced **my relationship with the faculty member**	3.33 (1.02)	3.05 (1.31)	*1.22*	3.41 (1.00)	3.02 (1.28)	*1.58*	*0.08*

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The community work involved in this course **made me more aware of my own biases and prejudices**	3.37 (1.08)	3.02 (1.13)	*1.59*	3.51 (1.02)	3.13 (1.02)	*1.96*	*0.47*
The **other students in this class** played an important role in my learning	3.27 (1.06)	3.07 (1.09)	*0.93*	3.44 (1.01)	3.72 (1.05)	*1.41*	***2.87****
I had the opportunity in this course to **periodically discuss my community work and its relationship to the course content**	3.87 (0.77)	3.57 (0.93)	*1.75*	3.89 (0.88)	3.74 (1.02)	0.74	0.83

5-point Likert Scale of: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

Two-Tailed, Heteroscedastic (Unequal Variance) T-Tests: * $P \leq 0.05$ level; ** $P \leq 0.01$ level; *** $P \leq 0.001$ level

<u>Service-Learning Group Project</u>

POLS 1100 is a designated Service-Learning course. In order to fulfill the service requirement for this course, all students will participate in group project in which they investigate the history, political culture, government structure, and key issues facing a local New Jersey town.

Why study these cities?

This course is meant to introduce students to the study of politics; while in class we will largely be discussing politics on the state, national, and international levels, local politics are no less important. After all, as former Speaker Tip O'Neill was fond of saying, "all politics is local." Despite this, most citizens are not engaged in—or, in some cases, even aware of—politics at the local level. By studying local politics, however, we can come to better understand politics in general.

There are 565 municipalities in the state of New Jersey, ranging from boroughs to villages. While we cannot study them all, the fourteen listed below represent the wide variety of towns that one can find in this state. They are geographically and demographically quite diverse, from the larger and more urban city of Camden to the smaller coastal borough of Beach Haven. Though they may seem worlds apart, over the course of this project we will come to understand not only what separates them but also what they hold in common; as you will find, there are issues that are near-universal—that every town must deal with, to some extent—while others are unique to the history and culture of the specific locality. Through your own investigations, as well as by listening to the work of your peers, you will come to more deeply understand not only Southern New Jersey, but also the processes of politics more generally.

Goals of the project

By the end of this project, you will have a better understanding of the political process at a local level. Having gone through the work of reading up on important issues and deciphering the political process in your assigned town, you will also develop the skills and knowledge necessary to be active and citizens in your own municipalities.

More specifically, the goals of this project are:

- **Gain factual knowledge** about the political history, culture, and processes of local New Jersey politics.
- **Learn to apply the theories, debates, and arguments** we discuss in class to the local politics of your assigned town.
- **Learn how to find and use resources** for answering questions or solving problems. You will be reading newspapers, attending meetings, and researching the history of your town and the issues it faces.
- **Develop your skills expressing yourself** orally and in writing. You will be responsible for writing blog posts and presenting your findings to the class and community partners.

Project grade

Your final grade on the project will be determined by the following:
- **Attend a town hall meeting (33%):** all students will attend a town hall meeting *of their assigned town* and take notes on what they observe. Students will submit their notes, as well as a selfie from the meeting, as proof of their attendance.
- **Blog post (33%):** groups will create a project that disseminates their work to the community. Each student will be responsible for writing a blog post (1,000-1,500 words) that summarizes their research and recommendations. Each group must also submit one (1) photograph to accompany their posts (but more are encouraged!)
- **Presentation (33%):** Students will present their projects as a group to their peers, as well as invited community members, during the last week of class.
- **Reflection & additional assignments (1%):** Students are responsible for completing the five (5) Service-Learning assignments by the appropriate due dates. Students are also responsible for submitting peer evaluations for their fellow group members (this will be used to adjust your final group project grade accordingly).

Project Outline

STEP ONE: select a city and receive team assignment (due January 20)

All students will submit their preferences for city assignments. Fill out Google form (link available on Blackboard). Link will open on January 18 after class, and will close on **January 20 at 8pm**. Any students who do not submit preferences will be assigned randomly. Preferences are not a guarantee. The list of cities is:

Absecon	Hammonton
Atlantic City	Lakewood
Beach Haven	Lindenwold
Brigantine	Margate City
Camden	Pleasantville
Collingswood	Toms River
Galloway	Woodbury

STEP TWO: Divide responsibilities (due February 3)

Each group is responsible for a single presentation and research product composed of five distinct sections. Each member of the team will be responsible for writing at least one of these sections to be posted online as a blog post—though all students will attend a town hall meeting, take notes, and share with their teammates to get a fuller picture of the town's politics.

Though you will likely work together to help with the research for all these sections, each student must have an assigned section to take primary responsibility for writing. Divide these duties among your group members; each student will upload a list of assigned responsibilities to Dr. Forestal by **February 3 at 8pm via Blackboard**.

1. Identify key issues facing the town
   a. What are local issues that the town is facing?
   b. Who is raising these issues? What are their positions on the issue?
   c. Who is being affected?
   d. Read local news coverage
   e. Take notes at town meeting
2. Describe the history of the town
   a. Are there any recurring issues the town is facing?
   b. Have there been any major population shifts or trends in recent years?
   c. Have there been any recent upheavals or major events?
3. Describe the political culture of the town
   a. What are the town's major parties?
   b. What are the historical voting patterns for the town?
   c. Are there any prominent interest groups (social organizations, neighborhood associations, etc.?)
4. Describe government structure
   a. Who are the official decision-makers?
   b. Who are the informal decision-makers?
   c. What is the role of citizens in the government?
   d. How do elected officials get into office?
5. Make recommendations for the issues you identify
   a. Did the council address these issues to your satisfaction? Why or why not?
   b. What actions might you take to see your recommendations implemented?

STEP THREE: Submit Service-Learning assignments #1-3 (Assignment #1 due February 13; Assignments #2 and 3 due March 10)

As part of the Service-Learning course, students must complete Assignments 1-3, which will be available in the Service-Learning Blackboard course. Assignment #3 is a project planning worksheet that will summarize your learning objectives, research plan, and individual roles and responsibilities from Steps 1 and 2. Groups will work together to complete the worksheet, but *each student* must submit a copy individually via Blackboard.

You will have time in class on February 8, March 24, and April 7 to work on this assignment; in addition, there are Service-Learning workshops on February 16 and March 7 to help you work through the assignment.

STEP FOUR: Research context and issues facing the town (mid-term evaluations due April 7)

Each team is responsible for identifying key issues facing the town, as well as researching the town's history, political culture, and structure of governance. Using this information, each group will make recommendations as to how they believe the town should best address those issues.

How do you figure out what issues are important to a town? There are many ways of doing this: read local newspapers—both recent issues and past issues, watch local TV coverage, read through past town meeting

minutes, and attend a town meeting. *The Press of Atlantic City*, NJ.com, and shorenewstoday.com (a collection of local papers for Southern New Jersey) are all good places to start looking. Based on this research, choose an issue (or two) and trace how it has been addressed by the local government officials—or if it has been addressed at all (often, as we will see, inaction is as significant as action!).

In addition to current issues facing the town, you will be responsible for giving a history of the town as well as its political culture and processes of governance. Local news sources will again be useful in this, but you should also make use of the resources in Stockton University's Library to investigate the history of the town.

In order to ensure that all group members are contributing equally (and in a timely fashion), there will be a mid-term peer-evaluation due **April 7 via Blackboard**. At this time, students will have the ability to grade their peers' performances as members of the group. A final evaluation will be due after the presentations on **May 5 via Blackboard**.

NOTE: In addition to this more traditional research, each student will attend one town hall meeting of their assigned municipality. Students will be required to submit a selfie and notes of the session to Dr. Forestal by the end of the semester (**due April 28**).

STEP FIVE: Create blog posts that feature the results of your research (due April 14)

Once the research has been conducted, each group will create a project that disseminates their work. This will consist of a series of blog posts that correspond with each distinct section of the project (listed above). Posts must be 1,000-1,500 words and should include answers to some or all of the questions listed above. In addition to the traditional writing, you may choose to augment your post with YouTube videos, infographics, a letter to the editor/elected official, and so on. At least one image should be included with your group's post (a photo of the town hall meeting—if it's allowed—would be a great addition).

All posts must be submitted to Blackboard (via Turnitin) by **April 14 at 8pm**. Dr. Forestal will then upload the posts to the course blog.

STEP SIX: Reflection and wrap-up (due April 24)

All students are responsible for completing Service-Learning Assignments #4 and #5, which will be available in the Service-Learning Blackboard course. These serve as final reflections on your experience. They must be turned in by **April 24 via Blackboard**.

STEP SEVEN: Presentations (due April 17-26)

During the last two weeks of class, each group will present the results of their work to their peers, as well as invited members of the communities we are studying. Each presentation will be no more than 12 minutes long and should cover all of the assigned sections of the project. Keep in mind that you are researching and making recommendations for how these towns should address key issues; we are inviting community members to listen to your presentations as a way of sharing what you have found with them.

Presentation dates will be randomly assigned by Dr. Forestal; however, all groups should be prepared to present by April 17.

APPENDIX B
Midterm Peer Evaluation Form[1]

Your name _____

Write the name of each of your group members in a separate column. For each person, indicate the extent to which you agree with the statement on the left, using a scale of A-F. Assign them a

Evaluation Criteria	Group member:	Group member:	Group member:	Group member:
Is responsive over email and in group discussion.				
Contributes to group presentation.				
Prepares work in a quality manner.				
Demonstrates a cooperative and supportive attitude.				
Contributes significantly to the success of the presentation.				
TOTALS				

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[1] This peer evaluation form is adapted from a form created by the Carnegie Mellon University Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation, available (with other sample group project tools) here: https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/index.html

Feedback on team dynamics:

1. How effectively is your group working?

2. Are the behaviors of any of your team members particularly valuable or detrimental to the team? Explain.

3. Do you feel confident that all aspects of your group project will be completed in a timely fashion? Explain.

Final Peer Evaluation Form[2]

Your name _____

Write the name of each of your group members in a separate column. For each person, indicate the extent to which you agree with the statement on the left, using a scale of A-F. Assign them a

Evaluation Criteria	Group member:	Group member:	Group member:	Group member:
Was responsive over email and in group discussion.				
Contributed to group presentation.				
Prepares work in a quality manner.				
Demonstrates a cooperative and supportive attitude.				
Contributes significantly to the success of the presentation.				
TOTALS				

Feedback on team dynamics:

1. How effectively did your group work?

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[2] This peer evaluation form is adapted from a form created by the Carnegie Mellon University Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation, available (with other sample group project tools) here: https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/index.html

2. Were the behaviors of any of your team members particularly valuable or detrimental to the team? Explain.

3. What did you particularly like or dislike about this project?

4. What (if anything) do you wish we would have discussed in the classroom to help you make the most of the project?