

# Integrating Classroom and Community with Undergraduate Civically Engaged Research

Sam Schmitt, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA*

Isaac D. Mehlhaff, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA*

Emily Cottle Ommundsen, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA*

## ABSTRACT

In addition to interest in undergraduate research, political science increasingly recognizes the value of civically engaged research for various educational, professional, and civic outcomes. With limited time and steep tradeoffs, instructors must find ways to cleverly combine undergraduate research experiences with the broader normative civic-education responsibilities of political science and higher education. This article presents a course design that allows instructors to leverage their classroom for both civic education and undergraduate research without the need for previously developed community partnerships that are common to most engaged research and learning. Our approach brings together undergraduate research and community engagement through course design.


As instructors, we make decisions about course design to improve student outcomes along multiple, often competing axes. Undergraduate research experience often is understood as a formative path to graduate study. However, not all undergraduate students will pursue graduate studies, and fewer will become academic political scientists. However, all students will become members of a community and (it is hoped) play a role in making life better for all. Accordingly, American Political Science Association (APSA) presidents Elinor Ostrom (1996), Robert Putnam (2003), Rogers Smith (2020), John Ishiyama (et al. 2021), and Janet Box-Steffensmeier (2022) have argued that political science education should advance student knowledge *and* improve civic abilities. Fortunately, research and civic engagement can work together (Berger 2015).


Political science increasingly recognizes the value of undergraduate civically engaged research (UCER) for various educational, professional, and civic outcomes (Sydnor, Commins, and


Reyna 2021). With steep tradeoffs, instructors must find ways to cleverly combine undergraduate research experiences with the broader normative civic-education responsibilities of political science and higher education (Daniels, Shreve, and Spector 2021; Levine 2022a). This article presents a course design that allows instructors to leverage their classroom as a space for both civic education and undergraduate research without the need for previously developed community partnerships that are common to most engaged research and learning.

Civically engaged research (CER) is defined in at least three ways, ranging from thin to thick normative and practical commitments. Blanchard and Furco (2021) identified a thin understanding of CER as almost anything that makes a difference in community life and builds capacity for change. A middle position views CER as explicitly committed to improving communities, capacity, and democracy (Campus Compact 2020).<sup>1</sup> A third and more substantial approach was offered by Bullock and Hess (2021, 716) “as the systematic and rigorous production of knowledge through reciprocal partnerships with people beyond the academy that contributes to the improved governance of social and political problems” (see also Blanchard and Furco 2021, 19).

Alternatively, civically engaged learning (CEL) is understood as “an evidence-based pedagogy that...emphasizes building civic skills, knowledge, experience, and a sense of efficacy to develop citizens who regularly and productively participate in their

Sam Schmitt  is a PhD candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He can be reached at [sschmit@live.unc.edu](mailto:sschmit@live.unc.edu).

Isaac D. Mehlhaff  is a PhD candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He can be reached at [mehlhaff@live.unc.edu](mailto:mehlhaff@live.unc.edu).

Emily Cottle Ommundsen  is a PhD candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She can be reached at [ommundsen@unc.edu](mailto:ommundsen@unc.edu).

communities” (McCartney 2017, 5). These experiences also may connect with other important outcomes, such as improving voter turnout (Holbein and Hillygus 2020). As Sydnor, Commins, and Reyna (2021) pointed out, UCER can be leveraged to make progress in each of these areas: undergraduate research, CEL, and youth involvement.

*This article presents a course design that allows instructors to leverage their classroom as a space for both civic education and undergraduate research without the need for previously developed community partnerships that are common to most engaged research and learning.*

However, virtually every case of CER relies on preexisting community partnerships (Berger 2015; Sydnor, Commins, and Reyna 2021). Developing new partnerships requires substantial time and energy beyond what most instructors and potential community partners can give. Other pedagogical approaches may be less time and resource intensive but lack similar positive outcomes for student engagement and civic learning. We provide a solution to this dilemma.

This article presents an alternative pedagogical approach to UCER that does not rely on preexisting relationships but instead begins the process of moving toward fully reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationships. We begin with the premise that students are already part of the university and related communities and, therefore, are situated to ask the important civic question: “What should we do?” (Levine 2022a). This civic approach positions students as both agents and burgeoning scholars. Students exercise agency by selecting topics of

members. Our approach is liminal, situated between traditional classroom teaching and fully developed forms of community-engaged scholarship (Blanchard and Furco 2021; Bullock and Hess 2021). This in-betweenness is exactly the point. It allows instructors and students to move toward fully fledged CER and CEL, despite the lack of established relationships.

Furthermore, this course uses a meta-structure in which students form their own groups, draft rules for their group, and execute the project together, thereby solving a collective-action problem of group work connected to an issue that they all share. This means that students are doubly involved in the learning process: research and the challenge of carrying it out are connected to the learning outcomes related to the course content, research production, and youth involvement—all without the structure of an extant relationship. Because these interactions can be challenging, it also teaches the lesson that partnerships solve crucial recurrent coordination problems even if they are not a precondition for research or action.

Confidential student evaluations have indicated that the course is highly effective in achieving various goals for CER, CEL, and youth involvement in politics. This course is a type of “proof of concept” that we encourage other instructors to test and adapt in different contexts.

*This course is a type of “proof of concept” that we encourage other instructors to test and adapt in different contexts.*

study that interest them and that connect to a “live issue” in their community. In this article as well as in the curriculum, agency is understood as affirming one’s subjective existence through concrete action in the world (Krause 2015, 21–57). The overall approach may be open to multiple understandings of agency, but the civic question (i.e., “What should we do?”) motivates and orients the students’ projects, leading to engaged research.

After forming groups to work on a semester-long project related to their topic, students conduct independent and coordinated research, contact and interact with potential community partners, and present their findings in a public forum. This pedagogical approach addresses the lack of extant relationships, provides a substantive undergraduate research experience, and lays the groundwork for future collaborative work. Because students ask, “What should we do?” they act as first movers but are not necessarily “in charge” of a typical one-directional research process (i.e., knowledge production in the university delivered to the community). Instead, students form their research questions—and potential solutions—in conversation with community

## COURSE STRUCTURE

In the Spring 2022 semester, 43 students at a large public university enrolled in the lower-level course titled, “Everyday Political Theory.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to the semester-long group research project (60%), students were evaluated through intellectual journal entries (10%), two midterm exams (5% each), participation (5%), and a final exam (15%) (Schmitt, Mehlhaff, and Ommundsen 2023). This may seem formidable for a lower-level course; however, all assignments, readings, and assessments worked together to advance the semester-long group research project by separating tasks into manageable parts, cultivating student understanding of the fundamental course material, and devoting class meetings to the project.

The projects consisted of three parts. In the first part (January–late February), students learned five “perspectives” on politics that they were expected to apply in everyday life (hence, “Everyday Political Theory”): citizenship, collective action, deliberation, freedom, and equal opportunity. They then self-selected into teams, chose a shared topic, and wrote individual papers from each of their chosen perspectives on their shared

---

topic (see the online appendix, [supplement C](#)). Students were required to choose a problem connected in some way to the campus or the town for which they had a real relationship to the issue. For example, one group chose to write about the campus food bank. Students in that group wrote individual papers on food insecurity and citizenship, the collective-action problem of running the food bank, and so on.<sup>3</sup> They received extensive comments on their papers as well as advice on how their group might progress collectively to the next phase of their project. Other projects ranged from mental health services for LGBTQ+ students to gentrification near campus to vaccination rates among Evangelical Christians in the county.

In the second part of the projects (late February–late March), the students wrote a group paper on their collectively chosen topic, bringing together their perspectives with feedback from a relevant member of the community and consultation with a graduate student (see the online appendix, [supplement D](#)). The two graduate-student consultants assisted the instructor in providing detailed feedback to each group throughout the semester, including advice on how to contact and correspond with relevant community members, synthesize the information they obtained from stakeholders, and structure their arguments. With nine unique projects, each of the two graduate students and the instructor devoted specific attention to three groups, which lightened the instructor's workload. This aspect of the course design is not essential, but we found that it increased the amount of attention and feedback that each group received.

After meeting with a graduate-student consultant, the group that was interested in food insecurity connected with the food bank's executive board to learn about their challenges, ask questions related to their perspectives, and receive feedback on its project. In this way, the students established initial connections with an organization on campus and in the community. In most cases, communication was limited to a single discussion, followed by an invitation to attend a public poster presentation. However, these initial contacts established a point of connection for future collaboration in CER, with either the same students in different courses or new students in the course. Crucially, these relationships did not require cultivation in advance to benefit both parties.

After speaking with a member of the relevant community group, team members drafted a group paper in an attempt to answer the question, "What should we do?" regarding the agreed-on local problem (Levine 2022a). Their research question was always practically grounded in the issue studied. For the food bank, students synthesized their independent research on food insecurity across perspectives and details of the local food bank to arrive at several interwoven responses, grounded in the facts of the case and constrained by the goals of their community partner. Rather than trying to "solve" the problem of food insecurity, their research goals were to gain the relevant knowledge, build relationships, and grow in their personal commitments to make improvements while also analyzing the institutional elements of the problem in need of reform. Students received extensive feedback on the group paper in an effort to refine their approach, outline tradeoffs or normative pitfalls, and streamline their thinking.

In the third part of the projects (late March–late April), students condensed their group paper into a poster presentation

(see the online appendix, [supplement E](#)). Presentations were given at the end of the semester in a public forum where friends, faculty, and members of the community attended, asked questions, and offered feedback. These presentations enabled the students to make their research reciprocal, offer insights on improved governance, raise awareness, and develop partnerships in a manner that reflected the preliminary nature of these relationships (Udani and Dobbs 2021; see also the online appendix, [supplement F](#)).

The group research project was highly demanding, both intellectually and practically. Students had to form a team, arrive at a topic, divide responsibilities, conduct independent research from different perspectives, meld those perspectives, and deliver a final research product accessible for community members. Crucially, this research experience mimics the iterative and constructive technique used in undergraduate research (Ayoub 2022) while also developing an engaged research relationship with the community. Although they were guided by the instructor, students conducted self-directed CER that connected directly to a problem in their community and the course content. Whereas none of the students "solved" their problem, they learned a great deal about a local issue and considered potential improvements. In some cases, their projects were exceptionally insightful.

#### THE GROUP RESEARCH PROJECT AS CEL, RESEARCH EXPERIENCE, AND PARTNERSHIP BUILDING

Although most students will not advance to graduate work, all of them must ask the question, "What should we do?" This fundamentally civic question is appropriate for curricula because higher-education institutions aspire to train good citizens, necessitating the development of various civic skills.<sup>4</sup> For our course, this meant applying the five perspectives of citizenship, deliberation, collective action, equal opportunity, and freedom.

Similar to the framework used by Levine (2022a) and the Tufts University College of Civic Life (Levine 2022b), these perspectives equip students to ask, "What should we do?" about a given problem through different lenses. Looking through the lens of citizenship, for example, might lead to reflections on the rights and responsibilities of membership and the ways in which some individuals are denied citizenship status or full membership to see what "we" means. The deliberative lens focused on resolving conflicts related to values through mutual understanding and decision making, and the collective-action perspective provided insight on institutional design and the division of cooperation into multiple interrelated parts. The equal-opportunity perspective helped students to think about the value of opportunity and its relationship to social norms and structure. Discussing freedom led them to reflect on the enabling conditions for agency. In summary, membership, values (e.g., freedom), institutions, and their interrelated properties unified the course focus on the civic question.

Bringing these perspectives to bear on a local problem meant asking, "What should we do?" given the values of students, the community members, and the interplay of normative and positive frameworks for shared life. That is, civic skills are exercised in a particular context with particular people. Therefore, the focus is on local knowledge and connections outside of the

classroom, collective and incremental over unilateral and definitive action, and the recognition of complex social problems. Students had to wrestle with and ask initial questions, learn more, ask again, reframe the question, and so on.

In this way, a course designed on the assumption that most students will not attend graduate school nevertheless includes a significant research experience. The task of preparing students for graduate education and the knowledge economy through research does not preclude civic engagement—they go together. In addition to the course evaluations, the students' final projects were evidence of their assimilation of this multi-perspectival approach to civic-skills acquisition and research (see the online appendix, supplement F).<sup>5</sup>

The course design also serves to develop new relationships with campus and community partners for future research. Making connections with potential stakeholders in the community is an essential aspect of community organizing and civic action. Delivering ready-made connections to students presents an unrealistic expectation of civic action and creates a status-quo bias (i.e., working only with extant relationships), potentially undercutting student agency. The students' diverse projects were driven by their experiences and interests in unpredictable ways, but they nevertheless established contact with community partners, received feedback, and invited them to attend their presentations. Although not full-fledged CER or CEL, the project enabled students and community members to connect, reason, and reflect.

#### STUDENT COURSE EVALUATIONS

To assess whether this approach achieved the desired learning outcomes, we used anonymous data from university-sanctioned and -implemented course evaluations that we conducted at the end of the semester, after all components of the group project had been completed. To tailor this evaluation to key learning outcomes from the course, we included a series of free-response items that captured the effects of the course on the students' approach to community involvement, approach to leadership, knowledge of the university and surrounding community, optimism about their ability to make positive changes in their community, and approach to the study of political science. Of the 43 students in the course, 28 completed the evaluation—a response rate of 65%. Because participation in the group project was a compulsory component, our results naturally lacked a control group; therefore, we were unable to make comparisons using a content-only approach. Furthermore, as with any course evaluations, the results may be subject to selection effects and personal biases. Nevertheless, we view the student evaluations, along with project deliverables, as informative of the effectiveness of this course design and research project.

Overall, the results suggest that the course—and the research component in particular—had a strong impact on students' community involvement and their perceptions of civic engagement. Of the total students, 96% expressed that the course led them to rethink their approach to community involvement. The outcomes mentioned most often were their intention to play a more active role in various community organizations with which they interacted, the realization that progress can be incremental and need not involve high-profile changes, and the recognition that community is a collective effort not controlled by any one person. This

latter finding aligns with the students' approach to leadership: 77% indicated positive changes in this area. Reflecting the idea that community participation requires a collective effort, they emphasized that they perceived leadership as multilateral organizing rather than unilateral problem solving, and they learned that non-leaders can still be actively involved in key organizational decisions.

All of the evaluations indicated an increased knowledge of the community and an especially heightened awareness of the inner workings of the organizations that the students studied. More important for their continued community engagement was their understanding that change often is slow but nevertheless they can have a positive impact on the university and surrounding community. One way this can be achieved is by separating seemingly entrenched problems into manageable parts. This was a central theme mentioned by 73% of the students, who stated that they were more optimistic about their ability to make changes in their community as a result of the course.

Finally, as Ishiyama et al. (2021) pointed out, demonstrating how political science advances the understanding and resolution of real-world problems is a crucial outcome in the reform of political science education. Combining this element with substantial research experience enabled students to see the potential impact of research in their community—doing good, engaged research can make a difference: 77% indicated that the course changed their approach to the study of political science. In their evaluations, almost all of the students wrote about the value of applying abstract concepts to concrete problems and political actions, especially in the political theory subfield. They expressed that they finally understood how institutions worked, despite initially learning about them in their introductory courses. Additionally, they indicated that the UCER project made political science accessible and practical, and it taught them how to assess political behaviors and institutions rather than merely learning facts about them.<sup>6</sup>

#### DISCUSSION

Allowing students to generate ideas, create a plan, and initiate a relationship with outside organizations created space for UCER in a course that reflected their own interests, laid the groundwork for future collaboration, and prepared them as citizens and researchers. Crucially, none of these methods or outcomes relied on preexisting partnerships with outside organizations—however, they did establish relationships that students and instructors could return to for future collaboration.

Instructors should adapt the group project and course design to enable their students to attain significant research experience and civic engagement. This was a demanding course for students, and their success did not result from a single assignment at the end of the semester. Instead, the course was oriented toward completing the project across several months. Although this implies significant instructor work, the project front-loaded the amount of grading as individual papers progressed to group work. Organizing students in groups also reduced the number of community connections needed. However, group work is not only a logistical strength of the course—it also is reflective of the emphasis on collective action for change.

We also stress that, as instructors, we did not know how the course would conclude. Enabling students to develop connections

---

with community organizations and campus offices of their own choosing means that instructors lack control over every element of the course. We view this as beneficial. It also means that instructors should guide students in the practicalities of communication with outside groups and prepare them for the reality that not all potential participants in a collective-action situation will be interested or able to interact. Some students never heard back from their identified community partner; others were in frequent con-

mitted to training good citizens, interacting with students fulfills institutional goals. Moreover, student standing and interest in the on-campus civic question is indisputable. The “we” in “what should we do” about on-campus issues is more likely to include students than many off-campus issues. For these reasons, this liminal approach is especially justifiable in the on-campus case.<sup>7</sup> We encourage instructors to experiment with the approach, testing its viability as a bridge between traditional, inwardly

*Allowing students to generate ideas, create a plan, and initiate a relationship with outside organizations created space for UCER in a course that reflected their own interests, laid the groundwork for future collaboration, and prepared them as citizens and researchers. Crucially, none of these methods or outcomes relied on preexisting partnerships with outside organizations; however, they did establish relationships that students and instructors could return to for future collaboration.*

tact. Not all group members were equally cooperative. Ultimately, this is consistent with the meta-structure of the course and learning outcomes: making a change is difficult not only because the world is complex but also because it requires cooperation.

Finally, the approach is situated between unengaged classroom approaches on the one hand and fully engaged civic learning and research on the other. Our approach did not fully cultivate relationships with the community and achieve the attendant obligations of reciprocity; therefore, is it better to entirely forgo engagement? Should instructors pursue CER and CEL “all the way” or not at all?

We defend our liminal approach with three reasons. First, similar to other types of relationships, partnerships gradually grow and generate obligations of reciprocity; acquaintances do not have the same obligations as best friends. This does not mean that students have no obligations; rather, the obligation to fulfill some best practices (e.g., payment of community partners) is not generated from one informal conversation. As Bullock and Hess (2021, 718) noted the hallmark of research masquerading as CER is that it limits reciprocity. In our view, communicating research output to community partners in the public poster session fulfills the reciprocal obligations, given the preliminary exchange between the students and the burgeoning community partners. This communication is neither the end of nor a limit on reciprocal obligations, but it may serve as the beginning of something more substantial.

Second, keeping engagement minimal with an intention of increased partnership in the future accounts for the constraints of time, attention, and resources on community organizations. Not all engagement will develop into a lasting partnership because it may be too costly for community stakeholders. Our approach does not entail expending significant resources for either party, whether or not they choose to engage.

Third—and perhaps most important for future iterations of the course—because of the unique student connection to campus, those projects that focus on cooperation with an on-campus entity are easier to justify than off-campus partners. Given the proximity, incentives, and extant preferences for intra-campus cooperation, on-campus partnerships may be more likely to persist and thrive. Furthermore, because institutions of higher learning are explicitly

focused models of pedagogy and more developed models of CER and CEL.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Peter Levine and Sarah Treul for their helpful comments on this article. We also thank the UNC Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Program for hosting the culminating public lecture and student presentations, and the UNC Program for Public Discourse for enabling graduate-student consultants to assist throughout the semester. Sam Schmitt also is grateful to the Institute for Humane Studies for its support that enabled an earlier draft of this article to be presented at the 2022 APSA Annual Meeting (Grant No. IHS016565).

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YBRQVJ>.

#### SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000392>.

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

---

#### NOTES

1. See Blanchard and Furco (2021) for a complete discussion of the various types of engaged scholarship.
2. See the online appendix, supplement B, for the abridged syllabus and supplements C through E for materials related to the group project.
3. This approach shares some features with Druckman (2015) but differs in that it represents an approach to CER.
4. We do not claim that our approach completely covers civic skills or that it is the only reasonable way to move toward more substantive UCER.
5. It is difficult to capture the quality of these poster presentations. In making brief comments and taking attendee questions, students not only spelled out the importance of a particular issue. They also were able to explain the value of addressing it in a specific way reflective of various values and to acknowledge tradeoffs of their approach focusing on practical application.

6. The online appendix, [supplement G](#), lists standard course-evaluation items and compares results to department averages.
7. This has mixed effects: on-campus partnerships mitigate ethical complications but make the university–community relationship weaker than it would be if interacting with off-campus partners. This is a further consideration for adaptations of the course.

## REFERENCES

- Ayoub, Phillip M. 2022. "Reverse Research Design: Research Design in the Undergraduate Classroom." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 55 (2): 424–28.
- Berger, Ben. 2015. "Experience and (Civic) Education." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48 (1): 61–64.
- Blanchard, Lynn, and Andrew Furco. 2021. *Faculty Engaged Scholarship: Setting Standards and Building Conceptual Clarity*. The Academy of Community Engagement Scholarship. <https://doi.org/10.17615/oxj1-c495>.
- Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M. 2022. "Engaged Pluralism: The Importance of Commitment." *Perspectives on Politics* 20 (1): 9–21.
- Bullock, Graham, and Douglas R. Hess. 2021. "Defining Civically Engaged Research as Scholarship in Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (4): 716–20.
- Campus Compact. 2020. "Mission & Vision." Accessed March 6, 2023. <https://compact.org/who-we-are/mission-and-vision>.
- Daniels, Ronald J., Grant Shreve, and Phillip Spector. 2021. *What Universities Owe Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Druckman, James N. 2015. "Merging Research and Undergraduate Teaching in Political Behavior Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48 (1): 53–57.
- Holbein, John B., and Sunshine D. Hillygus. 2020. *Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ishiyama, John, Marijke Breuning, Cameron G. Thies, Renee Van Vechten, and Sherri L. Wallace. 2021. "Rethinking the Undergraduate Political Science Major: An Introduction to the Symposium." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (2): 353–57.
- Krause, Sharon. 2015. *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Levine, Peter. 2022a. *What Should We Do? A Theory of Civic Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Levine, Peter. 2022b. "Learning Map." *Civic Theory and Practice Website*. Accessed March 8, 2023. <https://sites.tufts.edu/civictudies>.
- McCartney, Alison Rios Millett. 2017. "Introduction." In *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*, ed. Elizabeth C. Matto, Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association. <https://web.apsanet.org/teachingcivicengagement/about/teaching-civic-engagement-across-the-disciplines>.
- Ostrom, Elinor. 1996. "Civic Education for the Next Century: A Task Force to Initiate Professional Activity." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 29 (4): 755.
- Putnam, Robert. 2003. "The Public Role of Political Science: Presidential Address." *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (2): 249–55.
- Schmitt, Sam, Isaac D. Mehlhaff, and Emily Cottle Ommundsen. 2023. "Replication Data for 'Integrating Classroom and Community with Undergraduate Civically Engaged Research.'" *PS: Political Science & Politics*. DOI: 10.7910/DVN/YBRQVJDOL.
- Smith, Rogers. 2020. "What Good Can Political Science Do? From Pluralism to Partnerships." *Perspectives on Politics* 18 (1): 10–26.
- Sydnor, Emily, Margaret M. Commins, and Veronica Reyna. 2021. "Empowering and Engaging Students Through Civically Engaged Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (4): 730–33.
- Udani, Adriano, and Kirstie Lynn Dobbs. 2021. "The Praxis of Partnership in Civically Engaged Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (4): 725–29.