

Merging Undergraduate Teaching, Graduate Training, and Producing Research: Lessons from Three Collaborative Experiments

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ABSTRACT

Teaching undergraduate students, mentoring graduate students, and generating publishable research are distinct tasks for many political scientists. This article highlights lessons for merging these activities through experiences from an initiative that sparked a series of collaborative-research projects focused on opinions about crime and punishment in the United States. This article describes three collaborative projects conducted between 2015 and 2017 to demonstrate how to merge undergraduate teaching, graduate training, and producing research. By participating in these projects, students learned about social-scientific research through hands-on experiences designing experiments, collecting and analyzing original data, and reporting empirical findings to a public audience. This approach is an effective way to engage students and generate research that can advance professional goals.

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Teaching undergraduate students, mentoring graduate students, and generating publishable research are distinct tasks for many political scientists. This article highlights lessons for merging these activities through experiences from an initiative that sparked a series of collaborative-research projects focused on opinions about crime and punishment in the United States. This article describes three collaborative projects conducted between 2015 and 2017 to demonstrate how to merge undergraduate teaching, graduate training, and producing research. It provides information about how (1) undergraduate students learned about social-scientific research through hands-on experiences designing experiments, collecting and analyzing original data, and presenting the findings to a public audience; (2) graduate students

were mentored through co-teaching undergraduate students about research methods alongside faculty and peers, and gained valuable experience collecting, analyzing, and reporting results from experimental studies; and (3) this approach can generate knowledge and advance career goals by resulting in working papers that serve as the basis for conference presentations and potentially coauthored journal articles.

ZOUKIS RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE

Our department established an initiative in Spring 2015 with the mission to promote research into all aspects of mandatory sentencing and the politics of crime and punishment. As a first step toward accomplishing our mission, we established an annual Summer Institute that involved recruiting select undergraduate and graduate students to convene for three days. Each morning, they listened to panels of speakers discuss contemporary issues associated with crime, punishment, and justice-reform efforts. The speakers included judges, lawyers, journalists, government officials, and leaders of nonprofit organizations. Student attendees also participated in a collaborative-research project each afternoon that involved working in small teams led by one or two graduate students and faculty to collect, analyze, and report the findings of each study to a public audience.

Graduate students either volunteered or were invited to participate as team leaders to lead the research project; learn how to effectively mentor undergraduate students in conducting an original research study (i.e., coordinating and implementing a survey of pedestrians near campus); and gain experience working with faculty to collect, analyze, and report results from an experiment.

2015 Summer Institute

Through on-campus advertising that highlighted the opportunity to network with distinguished speakers recounting their experiences with aspects of the criminal-justice system and political-reform efforts, we recruited 20 undergraduate students to attend our inaugural three-day Summer Institute, held June 2–4, 2015. Interested undergraduates completed an application and provided a statement about why they wanted to attend the Institute. As part of their experience, selected undergraduate students participated in a collaborative-research study each afternoon. Graduate students either volunteered or were invited to participate as team leaders to lead the research project; learn how to effectively mentor undergraduate students in conducting an original research study (i.e., coordinating and implementing a survey of pedestrians near campus); and gain experience working with faculty to collect, analyze, and report results from an experiment. This approach is a useful way to advise graduate students and facilitate the production of research (Druckman, Howat, and Mullinix 2017).

Before the Institute commenced, we designed a 2x2 factorial experiment embedded in a paper survey to study factors that might shift opinions about punishments for a hypothetical property and sex crime, including varying information about the race of the perpetrator and whether a mandatory minimum sentence was explicitly stated for the crime. We were interested in the effect of the race manipulation and—holding race constant—whether

stating a mandatory minimum sentence would increase or decrease a recommended sentence length for each type of crime. We divided the participants into four teams each led by two graduate students. On the first afternoon, we reviewed the research design with attendees and discussed preliminary expectations and key points of comparison across the experimental conditions (details are available in the online supplementary appendix). From this discussion, undergraduate students learned how experiments rely on random assignment of units to treatment and control groups in order to isolate the causal effect of a specific intervention on a dependent variable. They also learned how to measure social-scientific constructs of interest (e.g., support for the use of mandatory minimum sentences) in the context of a survey questionnaire.

We concluded the initial meeting by training undergraduate and graduate students how to approach pedestrians near campus to ask if they would complete a “class survey” that would take less than five minutes. Each team was tasked with conducting an “on-the-street” survey to test the hypotheses we generated collectively about how the experimental treatments might affect support for the use of mandatory minimum sentences and perceptions about the severity of punishment for a specific crime. Faculty and graduate-student leaders accompanied the teams

with clipboards, pencils, and different versions of the survey (randomized within each team) to collect data in different areas surrounding a large urban campus. We reconvened after two hours, compiled the completed surveys, and made plans to enter the “raw data” into an Excel spreadsheet for data analysis the following afternoon.

At the beginning of the second afternoon of the Summer Institute, graduate students divided the undergraduates into small teams to complete specific tasks to aid in completion of a final presentation on the third afternoon. One team was tasked with motivating the importance of the research question and communicating the hypotheses that we developed. Another team developed a table with descriptive statistics to report demographic and political characteristics of the pedestrian sample from the approximate 200 completed surveys. A third team focused on conducting statistical tests to compare differences in the key dependent variables of our study across experimental conditions. Graduate students gained experience by analyzing data alongside faculty and by teaching undergraduate students how to undertake this task for the first time. The activity required that they carefully explain each step in the process—for example, how to create new variables, transform or recode them to prepare for the necessary analyses, and compute statistics to assess relationships between variables—and how researchers can use this information to evaluate a hypothesis test. Graduate students also mentored undergraduate students on how to create tables and figures to best communicate the findings to a public audience.

On the third afternoon of the Summer Institute, the teams worked together to create a cohesive and professional PowerPoint presentation. It was delivered by the undergraduate attendees at the Institute; graduate students had served as their “coaches” when they rehearsed the presentation. The findings indicated that perceptions that a perpetrator was black (rather than white) played a significant role in increasing the severity of recommended punishment, but only when a mandatory minimum sentence was explicit. One lesson learned from the first Summer Institute was that in a short amount of time (i.e., three afternoons from 1:00 to 4:00), a large team of (well-organized) researchers can conduct an experiment in the context of a survey, enter the raw data into a spreadsheet, analyze the data to evaluate hypothesis tests, create tables and graphs that communicate the findings, and deliver a final presentation to share what was learned. Moreover, we accomplished the initial goal of teaching undergraduate students about research through a hands-on experience in conducting an experiment. Additionally, we achieved the goals of graduate-student mentorship through the activities they engaged in with peers, undergraduates, and faculty. They also produced a detailed presentation related to what we learned about how different types of information affect public opinion regarding mandatory minimum sentencing.

Guidance for Faculty: Assigning Student Tasks

- Undergraduate students were assigned to collect the pedestrian-survey data to maximize sample size on the first day. They gained firsthand experience approaching and recruiting participants for a social-science research study.

The project engaged undergraduate students and taught them how an experiment can be designed to test a hypothesis about the effect (i.e., on opinions) that results from experiencing the exhibit that they constructed to raise public awareness about this issue.

- Undergraduate students were tasked with developing a final research presentation, which required coordination across graduate-led research teams. Students gained experience developing and delivering a specific component of a research presentation and observed peers as they reported the results and conclusions from the hypothesis tests.
- Graduate students gained experience mentoring undergraduate-student researchers and teaching them about specific aspects of the social-scientific research process. They also witnessed the benefits of collaborative teamwork and how causal hypotheses can be tested with original data in a relatively short amount of time.
- A key lesson for faculty was that much can be accomplished in three afternoons. However, more time is necessary to engage students in the research design phase of a social-scientific study—for instance, developing experimental treatments and a survey questionnaire—in addition to data collection, analysis, and reporting the results.

2016 Social Justice Seminar

Our department created a new semester-long course in Spring 2016 to aid in recruiting students and planning for the collaborative research that would be the focus of the second annual

Summer Institute. For logistical reasons and to involve students at an earlier research phase, we needed to collaborate throughout the spring semester to design and pre-collect data for the focus of the research project: a study on attitudes toward solitary confinement. We purchased the plans and raw materials to construct a replica of a solitary-confinement cell from the Richard Ross Institute.¹ The exhibit, “Juvenile-In-Justice,” consisted of an 8x8 plywood solitary-confinement cell with photographs of juveniles serving time in solitary confinement affixed to the exterior and an audio recording streaming within the cell’s interior of juveniles recounting their experiences of being placed in solitary confinement. The exhibit was constructed during a month-long period before the midpoint of the semester by a team of 8 to 10 undergraduate students.² Early in the semester, we assigned readings that focused on factors that explain public opinion about crime and punishment in the United States (Enns 2016). We agreed with Elman, Kapiszewski, and Kirilova (2015, 39, emphasis added) that “simply carrying out a research task, isolated from the research design and epistemological justification which motivated it, [does not] teach students much about how to do social science.” We collectively generated hypotheses through class discussions about how experiencing the solitary-confinement-cell exhibit, even briefly, might decrease support for this practice relative to a control group. The project engaged undergraduate students and taught them how an experiment can be designed to test a hypothesis about the effect (i.e., on opinions) that results from experiencing the exhibit that they constructed to raise public awareness about this issue.

We acquired Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to randomly assign participants to complete a paper survey that assessed opinions about the use of solitary confinement for juveniles and adults in the United States either in a classroom or after spending a brief time in the solitary-confinement-cell exhibit (the complete survey is in the online supplementary appendix). In return for extra credit, we recruited 200 individuals from our department’s human-subject pool to participate in an experiment designed to assess the impact of experiencing the cell replica on support for the use of solitary confinement. Participants preregistered for one of several advertised times to come to campus for the study. A team of undergraduate students, led by a graduate student, was responsible for collecting the data and conducting the study. On arrival, each participant drew a bingo ball to determine whether they were randomly assigned to complete the survey in a nearby classroom or in the solitary-confinement cell. Participants who drew an odd number were taken in groups of five and six to the isolation cell, where a student researcher asked them to sit in silence while a timer was set for five minutes. Participants then completed a paper survey before exiting the cell. The data-collection teams were responsible for collecting signed IRB consent forms, escorting participants to the classroom or solitary-confinement cell, collecting the completed survey questionnaires, and entering

numerical codes for each item into a spreadsheet. Through these activities, undergraduate students learned how to conduct an in-person experimental study that involved randomly assigning human subjects to a control and treatment group to test a hypothesis. Graduate students were mentored by working closely with faculty to coordinate all aspects of the data-collection effort, including planning the data-collection activities, creating a survey questionnaire, and training undergraduate students needed to accomplish these tasks assigned to this team.

2016 Summer Institute

We conducted the solitary-confinement experiment described previously in the spring seminar. For logistical reasons, it would have been impossible to construct a cell replica and collect, analyze, and report the results from an experiment during three afternoons. We again recruited 20 undergraduate students and eight graduate students to attend the 2016 Summer Institute. More than half of the undergraduate attendees were previously enrolled in the spring seminar, during which the solitary-confinement cell was constructed and data was pre-collected. The Institute again featured panels of experts each morning who discussed issues related to crime, punishment, and justice-reform efforts. Richard Ross, the artist and author who designed the solitary-confinement exhibit, was the invited keynote speaker on the first morning. The afternoon collaborative-research effort focused on producing a presentation that highlighted the importance of this issue and reported the findings from the data collected during the solitary-confinement experiment.

On the first afternoon, we divided students into small teams led by one or two graduate students. Each team entered the solitary-confinement exhibit together to experience the experimental treatment firsthand. Subsequently, we held a collective discussion to review hypotheses generated about how experiencing the exhibit might influence responses on the survey, which measured support for or opposition to the use of solitary confinement for juveniles and adults on 7-point Likert scales. Graduate students worked with undergraduate students in small teams to develop a presentation that described the importance of the issue, the experimental study we had conducted, and the results to a public audience on the third afternoon. Similar to the 2015 Summer Institute, teams worked independently to advance specific tasks, including creating a table with descriptive statistics of the sample and developing tables and figures to clearly present the effects of the experimental treatment on the key dependent variables. The experiment was successful insofar as it generated treatment effects in line with our expectations. That is, relative to individuals randomly assigned to a control group, those who completed the survey after briefly experiencing the solitary-confinement exhibit were significantly less supportive of the practice for both juveniles and adults. At the end of the Summer Institute, graduate students and faculty met to discuss how best to move forward with these results and whether there was interest in preparing a conference presentation and/or a working paper to advance the goal of generating a peer-reviewed publication from this study.

We learned several lessons from the 2016 Summer Institute that helped guide our learning objectives and structure moving forward. Most important, much can be accomplished in three afternoons in terms of data analysis (assuming the data is pre-collected and already available in a file that can be accessed by all teams); reporting findings; and presenting basic results

in a presentation. However, developing a more comprehensive, “submission-ready” working paper takes more time and is an iterative process. Although we were advancing the Zoukis Research Collaborative mission of training undergraduate students, mentoring graduate students in teaching and research, and raising interest and concern about crime, punishment, and social justice, it was clear that three afternoon sessions is not adequate time to develop a “finished product” that could serve as the basis for a working paper or coauthored publication. Consequently, our department extended the third annual Summer Institute (i.e., for 2017) from a three-day event to a full week and offered it as a three-credit-hour course for undergraduate students who attended Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. (the course syllabus and learning objective are in the online supplementary appendix). In addition, graduate students met with faculty before the Institute commenced to develop learning objectives for each team to produce a “white paper” that reported the results from the data previously collected or that we had collected for a new study in 2017.

Guidance for Faculty: Delegating Responsibilities

- A team of undergraduate students who planned to attend the Summer Institute and who were enrolled in the spring seminar constructed the solitary-confinement cell (i.e., the experimental treatment), assisted with the survey questionnaire design, and collected the data (i.e., implemented the experiment) before the Summer Institute commenced.
- Undergraduate students who attended the three-day Summer Institute were tasked with entering the solitary-confinement cell and discussing expectations about how spending time there might influence participants’ responses on the survey questionnaire. This involved repetition for some participants (i.e., students who enrolled in both the spring seminar and Summer Institute course) about the motivation for the study and specific hypotheses that would be tested in the experiment.
- Undergraduate students again gained experience developing and delivering a specific component of a research presentation highlighting the issue of solitary confinement, and they observed peers as they reported the results and conclusions from the hypothesis tests.
- Graduate students leading the research teams gained experience mentoring undergraduate-student researchers and teaching them about specific aspects of the social-scientific research process. They also learned the value of coordinating and implementing undergraduate-student research projects over time and across courses.
- Pre-collecting data for the Summer Institute allowed much-needed additional time for data analysis and the development of a cohesive final research presentation.
- Undergraduate students can be involved in earlier phases of the research design if faculty has the capacity to offer a course (e.g., the Summer Institute) that builds on a related full-semester course.
- Additional time is necessary if a goal is to produce a written report that would be the basis of a collaborative publication from the Summer Institute.

2017 Summer Institute

Thirty undergraduate students and eight graduate students attended the 2017 Summer Institute. We again divided all students into

one of three teams led by two graduate students, each with six to eight undergraduate students. Graduate students presented the research designs from the 2015 and 2016 Summer Institutes and a new study. This new study, conducted in Spring 2017, was a unique framing experiment focused on how different information shapes support for the death penalty. To explore the determinants of support for these policies, we conducted a two-part experiment that recruited a sample of undergraduate participants from the department's human-subject pool. It was important to pre-collect these data to allow sufficient time for undergraduate students to learn about the experiment, analyze the data with their team, and prepare a final presentation. Part 1 of the "death-penalty experiment" was designed to examine the impact of homicide-victim identity (e.g., child, woman, or elderly person) on support for the death penalty. Part 2 replicated the design from an experiment that varied the presence of an innocence or racial-fairness frame to evaluate its impact on support for the death penalty (i.e., replicating Peffley and Hurwitz 2007).

Whereas in the past, each team had worked on different parts of the same project, undergraduate students who attended the 2017 Summer Institute engaged in all tasks associated with their team's research presentation. Although this was advantageous and sensible in previous years, the accumulation of data and expertise made it possible for each graduate-student team to train undergraduates in all aspects of developing a research paper from one of the associated studies. Graduate students improved their ability to communicate essential research skills to undergraduate students—including how to identify and conduct a systematic literature review, develop a theory, measure (i.e., quantify) latent variables such as an attitude or opinion, analyze and report on patterns in data, evaluate the results from a hypothesis test, and collaborate with peers to produce a short research paper and presentation. In so doing, these students applied and enhanced their methodological toolkit. Cahill et al. (2015, 373) explained that methods-training courses in political science graduate programs focus "primarily on building proficiency in selected quantitative or qualitative analytic tools rather than fostering a comprehensive understanding of the research process itself." Graduate students thus had the opportunity to apply analytical tools they learned in methods courses and to share their knowledge with undergraduates at the Summer Institute.

Collaborative research projects, such as those described in this article, can enhance research productivity. Graduate students who participated in the research projects collaborated closely with faculty and peers to produce research papers (included in the online supplementary appendix) that report results from each of the experiments previously described.

Collaborative research projects, such as those described in this article, can enhance research productivity. Graduate students who participated in the research projects collaborated closely with faculty and peers to produce research papers (included in the online supplementary appendix) that report results from each of the experiments previously described. As these white papers evolve to coauthored "working papers," the students will gain experience presenting the results to peers at professional conferences and learning firsthand about the peer-review process. A future

goal is to publish the results from each study and further contribute to graduate students' knowledge by engaging with them in the submission-preparation and manuscript-review process.

Guidance for Faculty: Collaborative Assessment and Lessons Learned

- Undergraduate students chose a research team to join based on graduate students presenting each research-project option on the first morning. The teams then subdivided work to develop a research presentation surrounding a particular topic and to generate a short paper highlighting key results from an analysis (or reanalysis) of original data that had been collected in the previous three years.
- Undergraduate students were tasked with developing a final research presentation and writing a white paper, which required coordination within these teams during the course of the week to accomplish both tasks. Students gained experience creating and delivering a specific component of a research presentation as well as contributing to a written report describing the findings from an original social-scientific study.
- Graduate students gained experience mentoring undergraduate student researchers in all aspects of developing a research presentation and the written components of a research report.
- Graduate students developed mini-syllabi with required readings for members of their team and a specific timeline of daily goals.
- Faculty learned the value of extending the Summer Institute by two additional days (i.e., five days rather than three), as well as the value of offering the Institute as a three-credit-hour course for undergraduate students. This aided in student recruitment and provided a tangible incentive for attendance and active participation.

CONCLUSION

Through collaborative research such as the projects described in this article, teaching undergraduate students, training graduate students, and producing research can be integrative and complementary activities. A central purpose of a liberal-arts education is to teach students how to solve problems and ask questions. Social scientists can promote these goals in the classroom through

project-based learning, which allows students "to apply the basic scientific method of asking questions, generating theories and hypotheses, collecting data, and analyzing results" (Druckman 2015, 35; Russell, Hancock, and McCullough 2007). Participation in research makes learning more concrete and "when students design an experimental intervention...the concepts become tangible, practical, and meaningful. Thus, the lesson about statistical inference is more likely to stick over the long term" (Herrick, Matthias, and Nielson 2015, 49).

Undergraduate students offered uniformly positive evaluations of their experiences in anonymous exit surveys and course evaluations. Many described how the experiences had changed their perspective on the criminal-justice system, and they regularly expressed their enjoyment of the authentic research experience and collaborative teamwork to learn how actual research is conducted by *doing it* (Feldman, Divoll, and Rogan-Klyve 2013). Moreover, some students who participated in the Summer Institute decided to pursue graduate degrees, with one returning to the Institute to work as a graduate-student team leader.

The results echo the work of others who demonstrated that collaborative-research experiences can be a high-impact pedagogical practice that increases student learning outcomes such as critical thinking, logic, written- and oral-communication skills, problem solving, and interpretation of evidence—not only for the physical sciences but for the social sciences as well (Knoll 2016). Herrick, Matthias, and Nielson (2015, 48; emphasis in the original) stated: “Professors are at their best when they are teaching their students how to do research by practicing it together...designing and executing research makes learning *tangible* and *concrete*...reinforces the key lessons from conceptual learning through repeated, deliberate practice, [and] *motivates* learning by engaging the core human drive of curiosity....”

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518000914>

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NOTES

1. See the art exhibit available at www.juvenile-in-justice.com/exhibitions.
2. See the supplementary appendix for a photograph of the front exterior of the solitary-confinement-cell replica the students constructed.

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