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An Applied Learning Experience Field Research and Reporting at the 2012 National Party Conventions

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Abstract

Scholarship in teaching and learning demonstrates how academic understanding may be best achieved, and values of civic engagement best inculcated, when class materials are delivered within a experiential context. The goal for instructors, therefore, is to develop pedagogic techniques and teaching platforms that enhance learning by doing by directly engaging students with educational content. Courses that focus on American political processes provide especially fruitful opportunities for such applied learning experiences. In this paper, we discuss and assess experiential learning as facilitated in a pair of undergraduate courses taught at a southern state university that focused on the study of American politics at national party conventions. As a primary requirement in “Political Party Conventions Field Study” and “Reporting at the Party Conventions,” political science and communication students, and four supervising faculty, traveled to the 2012 Democratic National Convention and Republican National Convention where they produced political research using field observation and survey methodologies and professional-style news reporting. Survey data collected before and after the convention indicate that students engaged in such experiential learning projects develop a more substantive understanding of the subject matter under study, enhanced motivation for learning, and greater feelings of academic achievement and citizenship.

Keywords

experiential learning, American politics, citizenship, research, communication

Introduction

Research demonstrates how academic understanding may be best achieved, and values of civic engagement best inculcated, when class materials are delivered within a rich, experiential context (Kolb et al. 2001; Cantor 1997; Kolb and Kolb 2005; Hickcox 2002; Wright 2000). The goal for instructors, therefore, is to develop pedagogic techniques and teaching platforms that enhance learning by doing by directly engaging students with educational content. Courses that focus on American political processes provide especially fruitful opportunities for such applied learning experiences (Markus et al. 1993; Freyss 2006; Berry and Robinson 2012).

In this paper, we discuss and assess experiential learning as facilitated in a pair of undergraduate courses taught at a southern state university that focused on the study of American politics at national party conventions. As a primary requirement in "Political Party Conventions Field Study" and "Reporting at the Party Conventions," political science and communication students, and four supervising faculty, traveled to the 2012 Democratic National Convention (DNC) and Republican National Convention (RNC) where they produced political research and engaged in professional-style news reporting.

As such, our principle research question is focused on the degree to which experiential learning within dedicated college courses in political science and journalism taught at large scale political events, such a national party conventions, impacts students' political values and attitudes, perceptions of politics and the media, and self-reported learning. Data indicate that, through the "art of discovery" guided by student learning outcomes and structured by course requirements, and immersion in the field, students developed a more substantive understanding of the subject matter under study, enhanced motivation for learning, and greater feelings of academic achievement and citizenship.

Literature Review

According to Cantor (1997), experiential education refers to “learning activities that engage the learner directly in the phenomena being studied” (1). Instructors often employ such pedagogical approaches in higher education courses in the form of “short term” field trip excursions where students briefly participate in or observe relevant events or activities (Scarce 1997; Wright 2000). Such experiential teaching methods are also reflected in service learning projects that involve more extensive and longer commitments in the field (Markus, Howard, and King 1993; Moely, McFarland, et al. 2002).

In “Getting More Out of Less,” Mary Wright (2000) discusses several benefits of the experiential learning paradigm. In particular, it affords substantive advantages as an effective tool for helping students make connections to subject matter that may not be achieved in a traditional classroom setting and methodological advantages as a vehicle that allows for the application of conceptual and observational skills in an active learning environment. Moreover, experiential techniques accommodate multiple learning styles by merging abstract, concrete, reflective and active approaches. Berry and Robinson (2012) summarize advantages of the experiential learning approach in higher education courses, noting the “consensus that experiential learning assignments generate class excitement, stimulate student interest, build political research skills, and help students master concepts and facts more completely” (501).

College courses that focus on American politics and public policy are especially well-positioned to serve as venues for applied learning experiences. Markus et al. (1993) administered an experiment which integrated community service with classroom instruction in a course on “Contemporary Political Issues” in order to encourage volunteerism alongside more conventional classroom learning. Students who engaged in service learning were more likely to report they had performed up to their potential in the course and also expressed greater awareness of social problems. Moely et al. (2002) developed a similar service learning experience and assessed students’ self-

reported attitudes regarding their interpersonal, problem-solving, and leadership skills, and their plans for future civic action before and after the course. Students who performed service-learning showed a more significant increase than did those who did not.

Freyss (2006) describes a slightly different approach -- service learning course component which placed students with "experts" in political advocacy as an effort to advance "citizenship education." In the end, "students accepted the service learning challenge because they could see how political and governmental actions could help their own communities as well as the public in general" (143). Berry and Robinson (2012) present a discussion of a course which involved students in exit poll design, administration, and analysis which, they argue, served as the "perfect learning tool" since it "provide(d) student with cooperate (rather than competitive) learning experience; help(ed) students better connect theory, methodology and course substance; and allow(ed) students to move outside of the classroom... (501)." The authors also highlight several challenges often associated with innovative, experiential learning course exercises.

Experiential Context

The Courses

During late summer 2012, two undergraduate courses taught at a southeastern state university provided students with an extraordinary up-close view of the American political process, focusing on the study of national party conventions *at* the national party conventions. As a primary requirement in "Political Party Conventions Field Study" and "Reporting at the Party Conventions," nineteen political science and communication students and four supervising faculty traveled to the 2012 Democratic National Convention in Charlotte and the Republican National Convention in Tampa, where they produced political research and professional-style reporting.

This experiential learning initiative reflects a collaborative effort on the part of faculty from the departments of Political Science and International Affairs and Communication. The fact

that, in 2012, both national party conventions were being held in locations less than one day's drive from campus offered the possibility of designing courses that could effectively convert the convention halls and meeting rooms into active classroom learning environments. While national party conventions are fundamental to the American democratic system, rarely have college courses been structured around extensive experiential learning there.¹ As such, discussion and evaluation of these educational offerings is especially warranted, from both practical and theoretical perspectives.

The two special topics courses described in detail below unfolded over three phases.² First, a month prior to the conventions, students and faculty convened for an initial orientation meeting during which time faculty introduced the courses, discussed requirements and guidelines, and established travel plans and expectations. At this meeting, students also learned about field research and reporting techniques and routines and heard "real world" perspectives on conventions from party officials and members of the media. Second, during convention week³, students directly engaged with convention proceedings and various actors, including members of the media and party delegations. They implemented pre-approved research projects, filed news reports, and performed other course-related tasks including blogging and tweeting. After returning from the convention, political science students produced and presented research papers and communication students shared field news reporting experiences in a public, campus forum.

Political Party Conventions Field Study

The political science course, "Political Party Conventions Field Study," focused on the nature and processes of American politics as specifically represented at national party conventions. Nine students, political science or international affairs majors, were selected via a competitive application process based on GPA, faculty referral, and submission of an essay themed on "why you believe you are well suited for this opportunity." Course objectives included the following:

- respectfully observe the American political process in practice

- systematically conduct participant observations in the field
- demonstrate the ability to conduct interviews in the field
- accurately describe and thoughtfully reflect on daily field experiences
- demonstrate the ability to analyze qualitative (and/or quantitative) data
- produce and present high quality research paper relevant to the topic of political party conventions

The primary course requirement charged students to develop and implement original research projects based on data collected at the 2012 party conventions. Each student was assigned to research in one of three general topic areas: the delegate experience, political communication, and social-political activism. Data were collected from convention participants, including delegates, party leaders, and activists. Of the five projects, four were carried out by two-person research teams. One student who attended the DNC was paired with another who went to the RNC. This allowed for interesting comparative case study research designs and was also beneficial in encouraging collaborative learning and cross-party collegiality among students.⁴ This research project assignment afforded students with the opportunity to initiate and implement original research designs from start to finish, including the following steps, each directly carried out by students under faculty supervision.

Pre-Convention

1. Research proposal submitted for approval and feedback
2. Research design, including detail-oriented data collection instruments and sampling strategies, submitted for approval and feedback
3. Research ethics training and Institutional Review Board approval

At Convention

4. Data collection at the party conventions in the form of survey research, qualitative interviewing, document analysis, and field observation

Post-Convention

5. Code, process, and analyze data after returning to campus
6. Working research project drafts submitted for review
7. Final research paper submitted
8. Presentation of research at campus "2012 elections" forum

The "field research" requirement ensured the class would be as much about social science research as it would be about American politics and the conventions. Research Methods was listed as a prerequisite course and enrollment was based, to some degree, on ability to apply sound methodological techniques. We assigned a textbook on qualitative field research methodology and dedicated considerable time before, during, and after the conventions to help students navigate the hurdles relating to the implementation of original political science research.

In addition to the research projects, students were required to reflect on and share daily experiences on a class blog and on twitter. These online entries developed into an engaging, interactive public diary and now serve as historical records of the collective classes' experiences.⁵

Reporting at the Political Conventions

In order to enroll in "Reporting at the Political Conventions," students completed an application indicating their grade point average and interest in political journalism, and also submitted a writing sample. News Reporting and Writing, the introductory journalism course in the department, served as a prerequisite. Course objectives included the following:

- Propose and produce original political stories at the Democratic and Republican national conventions that are not duplicated by other news outlets
- Upload this content to the university's news website
- Demonstrate competency in reporting and writing political stories on hourly and daily deadlines
- Use Associated Press writing style in each story
- Record photos and videos to accompany their stories

- Interview members of the Georgia Republic and Democratic Party delegations and other political leaders on a daily basis
- Objective reporting

Of course, the students were primarily expected to practice journalism. They wrote two feature news stories, three breaking news stories, produced a question/answer video interview with a delegate, wrote or produced one story of their choosing, maintained a personal journal, and blogged daily. There were daily deadlines for each student to finish the news articles or videos. For news production, students used laptops, video cameras, and smart phone devices. Each news story assignment was edited and graded on the spot by the supervising communication professor who managed the equivalent of an on-site news operation. At the start of the day, supervising faculty facilitated a news production meeting in order to assign stories and remained in constant contact with the students in an effort to respond to news story opportunities as they unfolded. Upon returning to campus, the students participated in a public forum and displayed their news articles on posters.

The Conventions

The students' participation in convention activities was facilitated by the state party committees. As guests of the Georgia Democratic and Republican parties, students were basically embedded with the delegates and had access to them at numerous functions as invited guests. Students also had access to the delegation buses which took them to and from the convention arena each night and provided them another avenue of access to party officials for research and reporting purposes. The communication students set up a camp of sorts on benches in the hallway of the delegation hotel near the elevators during the hours after the breakfast meetings and before the bus left for the convention in the afternoon – there they would work on their stories, meet delegates for pre-arranged interviews and collar passing delegates for impromptu interviews. One of the highlights for the communication students was being recognized at the final Republican delegate meeting for their commitment

and work ethic while at the convention. One of the students filed a news report about a delegate meeting that featured the U.S. Speaker of the House John Boehner, which was subsequently used by a prominent political reporter who had not been given access to the meeting.

The daily routine included attending breakfasts sponsored by the state party where the students observed the party conduct convention-related business and listened to party leaders speak. These breakfasts also served as premium experiential-learning opportunities for students to interview and survey delegates and activists. For example, the Democratic delegation hotel also hosted delegates from Minnesota, Maine, South Dakota, and overseas, some of whom would become participants in student research projects and news stories. After the breakfasts, students and faculty traveled to the Charlotte Convention Center where they gained an intimate, up-close perspective on the national Democratic Party convention, in terms of the organization, leadership, supporters, interaction with the general public, activists, and media. They attended numerous party functions, forums, and caucuses, included the Black Caucus, Hispanic Caucus, Women's Caucus, Rural Caucus, and the Gay Lesbian Transgender Caucus. At these meetings, delegates, mayors, governors, and members of the U.S. Congress gathered and spoke. Several communication students also landed interviews and political science students administered interviews and surveys with these party activists.

At many of these events, student researchers and journalists interviewed state delegates, political leaders, and activists. Delegates were told by party leaders that they would be approached by the students for news interviews and they were quite cooperative. Other than a small handful of political science students who expressed occasional difficulties in finding willing survey participants, response rates were high. However, the experiences of the students at the DNC differed from those at the RNC. By and large, it was easier to recruit participants for class purposes in Charlotte due to more access opportunities to delegates from Georgia and other states at the daily breakfasts and caucus meetings.

Methodology

In order to assess the quality and impact of the conventions courses, a two-wave survey was developed by supervising faculty and administered to the students that included a battery of closed-ended and open-ended questions to gauge their political efficacy,⁶ perceived level of understanding of course content, and attitudes about public and media access before and after the convention experience. The pre-convention questionnaire⁷ was administered to students as they arrived at the orientation meeting and the post-convention questionnaire was administered immediately when they returned to campus from Tampa or Charlotte. This longitudinal survey data collection approach helped ensure the validity of our findings. Internal validity, in our study, refers to correctness of the principle question of whether the convention experience itself produced a causal impact on the students regarding key variables.⁸ Since there was minimal lag time between the pre-test measurement and students departure on the one hand and students return and post-test measurement on the other hand, threats to validity were diminished. In addition, students were presented with a consent form which made clear that their results would be kept confidential and they could be free to candidly express their attitudes. The response rate fell two students short of 100 percent,⁹ leaving sixteen useable cases (seven political science students and nine communication students).

Once the questionnaires were completed, they were coded and input for descriptive data analysis. In addition to longitudinal analyses of overall scores, averages, and qualitative responses, our focus was chiefly on comparisons between students who attended the two conventions and enrolled in the two courses. Results are presented below. While students performed political research and practiced political journalism at the conventions, their efforts and products were not directly employed in order to assess experiential learning for the purposes of this particular study.

Results

Student Attitudes and Perceptions of Understanding

As indicated in Table 1 (see Appendix A), students showed no longitudinal variation in attitudinal measures relating to political efficacy and interest in politics generally. Their self-reported interest in politics and public policy, understanding of important political issues facing the country, and whether they consider themselves to be well qualified to participate in politics was virtually unchanged after the convention as compared to before. These results are not entirely unexpected since there was minimal room for improvement on these measures as most students were already extremely interested in and understanding of politics before the course.

<INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>

On the other hand, students revealed substantial post-convention increases when asked to assess their overall understanding of political conventions, including the nomination of candidates (2.4 - 2.9), the role of state party organizations (2.1 - 2.7), and why delegates attend the convention (2.3 - 2.9) and how they are selected (2.1 - 2.4). These results suggest a boost in student confidence regarding their understanding of the course content as delivered. The results relating to student perceptions of public and media access were mixed. While their views of public access increased slightly after the convention (1.6 - 1.8), attitudes on media access actually declined in the post-convention measurement (2.7 - 2.4). As discussed below, this result was largely produced by the attendees of the Republican Convention.

Table 2 segments student responses based on whether they were enrolled in the communication or political science course. On the first two items, relating to interest in public policy and understanding of political issues, students showed little to no change. However, when asked whether they consider themselves to be well qualified, the political science students increased dramatically after the convention (4.3 - 4.9), whereas, the communication students decline by a roughly equal amount (4.4 - 3.8). The divergent results on political efficacy were likely produced by the contrasting course requirements and

motivational tendencies of students pursuing these two majors. While the communication students were responsible for writing news articles on convention business and are primarily interested in journalism careers, political science students were polling delegates and activists and were, for the most part, already aspiring political professionals.

<INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE>

On self-reported level of understanding of convention processes, party organizations, and delegates' roles, both sets of students showed significant increases after the convention. This finding represents the students' positive self-assessment of "content learning" in the two courses. Across the board, both groups of students indicated that they learned a lot. Communication students' perceptions did not change in their ratings of public access but the political science students reported higher levels after the convention than initially expected (1.4 - 2.0). In an interesting note, both sets of students declined on the media access score, with communication majors showing the most significant drop (2.7 - 2.3). Again, this was largely the product of the RNC experience.

Table 3 separates out student ratings based on whether they went to Charlotte or Tampa. While students did encounter somewhat different learning experiences at the Democratic National Convention as compared to the Republican National Convention, data reveal little to no change in the first block of items, i.e. those relating to political efficacy, regardless of which "convention classroom" was attended. Likewise, regarding the second block items, i.e. those relating to the students' perceived understanding of "course content," both groups' scores increased to virtually identical levels. Perceptions varied greatly, however, on the question of public and media access to convention activities. Ratings of public access increased among attendees of the DNC (1.4 - 2.0) while ratings of media access declined among those who traveled to the RNC (2.7 - 2.1).

<INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE>

Student Reflections on the Courses and Learning Experiences

To supplement the quantitative measures, students were asked a series of open-ended questions which probed their initial

expectations about actual experiences in the course. Generally speaking, responses reflected the goals of experiential education and are a direct reflection of the "learning by doing" pedagogical approach. When asked what they believed were the advantages to a course taught at the political conventions, the overall theme was the "hands on" experience. Comments by political science students included "experience trumps textbooks" and "being entrenched in the convention itself provided another level of education and experience that being in a classroom cannot match." Communication students provided remarks such as "this course was the best prep for the job possible" and "theory can only go so far. Experience is valuable." The students also discussed the unique opportunity to see American politics in action and learn through their interaction with delegates and other party activists. One student, in particular, mentioned "Interpersonal skills are developed as a result of surveying and interviewing so many powerful people...I made some great connections."

The communication and political science students had similar types of answers when asked about the challenges associated with the courses. They reflected on the practical hurdles often associated with the real world practice of political science and journalism. Several communication students expressed frustration with same day news story deadlines and prioritizing which news events to report on. One student noted that "since we had to be outgoing and get stories by deadline, there was not 'I'll do it later'." Political science students also discussed the difficulties and hard work involved with gathering data required while still trying to take in the "overall convention experience."

Finally, students were asked to identify three words or phrases that represented their convention-learning expectations and experiences. The two groups of students touched on several common themes including their excitement at witnessing historic events first-hand, meeting powerful people, and observing the process and party organizations in action. They also noted enhanced feelings of course-content understanding, patriotism, and sheer exhaustion after the conventions concluded.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper describes and assesses experiential learning in two undergraduate courses taught at a southern state university during the Fall 2012 semester which provided students with extraordinary first-hand exposure to an important, yet not well understood, part of the American political process -- national party conventions. Data on student attitudes and perceptions collected prior to and after the conventions demonstrate that experiential learning was especially effective in achieving course objectives and empowering students and instructors. Student responses also revealed enhanced attitudes of political efficacy and civic engagement, which is not surprising given their direct exposure to this fundamental exercise in American democracy.

Self-reported understanding of course content knowledge increased for political science and communication students who attended the Democratic National Convention and those who traveled to the Republican National Convention. However, ratings of public and media access differed based on whether they went to Charlotte or Tampa. The increase in perceived access at the DNC was most likely a reflection of the party organizers' effort to produce "the most open and accessible in history."¹⁰ Meanwhile, at the RNC, the communication students were surprised on more than one occasion to find themselves the only "media" in the room because the state party had banned the professional news media but were allowing the students to stay because they were "guests" of the delegation and not considered members of the news media. In one case, a major newspaper quoted from the student's story on the meeting. This experience would explain the drop in scores for media access among communication students at the RNC.

All of the students reported fulfilling, exciting educational experiences. For many of them it was their first time attending an organized national political party event. For students in political science, it was an opportunity to systematically investigate, and answer, original research questions while directly interacting with leaders and activists, many of whom they knew through the media, and mostly all they agree with politically. The communication students gained valuable

experience seeking out and interviewing political officials and party activists, for news stories. They were also able to obtain press credentials so they could attend "media row," presenting a first-hand exposure to professional journalists at work. Students also remarked, with appreciation, that their learning experiences were only possible through the access granted by the Georgia Democratic and Republican parties.

Challenges

From the instructors' perspectives, teaching first time courses such as these is quite challenging. Initially, we encountered some difficulty gaining access to and support from those within the political parties who could help accommodate the day-to-day events at the conventions. The Democratic and Republican Parties had different requirements for admitting the students to the official events. Final approval for the students did not happen until early August 2012. Also, communication between faculty and party leaders was sometimes uneven which created some scheduling challenges. In Tampa, Hurricane Isaac posed an additional problem for faculty. The students' safety was of primary concern rather than the assignments they had to work on. Luckily, Isaac postponed only one day of the festivities and the students were never in harm's way.

Other challenges for faculty were more logistical, including finding hotels that were within university budget and transporting students to the proper locations for party meetings. Tampa and Charlotte are different size cities. In Charlotte, the students stayed in a hotel 30 minutes from the Georgia Democratic Party breakfasts and 15 minutes from downtown. The professors had to keep the students on schedule in order to attend the breakfasts and meet the delegates as pre-arranged times. The schedule for four days was an early wake-up time around 6 a.m. and late returns to the hotel at night at 9-10 p.m. In Charlotte, the political science and communication students traveled as one group to all the events; whereas, in Tampa they traveled separately.

In Tampa, on the other hand, the students' hotel was about 25 minutes away from the Georgia Republican Party's hotel. The communication students and the political science

students kept different schedules so they generally drove separately to the delegation hotel in the mornings and stayed until the buses left to go to the convention. Then those who weren't going to the convention would go to dinner and then back to the hotel until time to pick up those who went to the convention. For the communication students, the time back at the hotel was used to finish stories and, for the instructor, it was time to edit, grade and post stories filed that day. The students who actually went to the convention were given until mid-afternoon the next day to file their stories about the convention events, mainly because they were not allowed to bring their laptops into the convention hall so they couldn't write during convention party business. They would return from the convention between midnight and 2 a.m., and the group would leave the next morning between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. for the delegation hotel, so sleep was at a premium.

While these were difficult logistical challenges to overcome, the experiential nature of this opportunity pushed the faculty to ensure a successful learning experience for the students. The students had a unique opportunity to meet and interview state and national party leaders of both political parties. Both political conventions yielded an opportunity for all the students to network professionally and to have an educational experience that will be a highlight of their collegiate experience.

Faculty and administrators from the university strongly supported this program as a learning tool for students and as a means of providing real world experience that employers find increasingly valuable. In addition, political science students found the personal contact with convention delegates and political party officials helpful from a career-networking standpoint. For the communication students, these two conventions were an opportunity to conduct professional news interviews with state and national political leaders. One student used this experience to help her earn an internship with the Atlanta Journal Constitution and another used it to help land a position as a communication specialist for a state legislator.

Template For Future Courses

As Bennion (2013) notes, "SoTL scholars move beyond assessment designed to answer questions about their own courses, program, or university by attempting to answer larger questions about effective approaches to student learning" (441). With the successful implementation of the project in 2012, there is great potential for other universities and colleges to replicate this project at state levels. While cooperation with and access to state political party organizations is vital, once that is achieved instructors can use this template to recreate a similar experience for their students.

In many states the two main political parties also hold county level organizing activities. They are an additional way for students to learn about state-level party political processes. As seen during the 2012 Republican and Democratic national conventions, political science students can conduct surveys with party leaders at state and local events. Journalism students can write and produce news stories with the same activists.

The authors realize that the opportunity to attend both national conventions was a unique and directly related to where the 2012 conventions were held. Both the Tampa and Charlotte locations were within driving distance from the campus. Yet, with the successful completion of the project, the authors can proceed with replication of the learning projects at the state and county levels with the professional relationships built with both political parties. They believe a working model now exists to enhance students' experiential education in the field of political science and political journalism. In turn, students will be exposed to translating what they learn in their political science and journalism textbooks into real world application, continuing the experiential learning paradigm.

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Appendix A: Tables

Table 1: Survey Results, Overall

	Overall	
	Pre	Post
Interest in politics and public policy	2.8 (.45)	2.9 (.34)
Understand important political issues facing country	4.6 (.63)	4.6 (.50)
Consider myself to well qualified to participate in politics	4.4 (.62)	4.3 (.86)
Understand the process of nominating candidates	2.4 (.62)	2.9 (.34)
Understand role of state political party organizations	2.1 (.72)	2.7 (.60)
Understand why delegates attend party conventions	2.3 (.70)	2.9 (.34)
Understand how delegates are selected	2.1 (.77)	2.4 (.62)
General public access to convention activities	1.6 (.63)	1.8 (.91)
Media access to convention activities	2.7 (.48)	2.4 (.51)
(N)	16	16

Notes: Entries on first row are average scores on 3-point scale with 1 being not very interested and 3 being extremely interested. Entries on second and third row are average scores on 5-point scale with 1 being disagree strongly and 5 being agree strongly. Entries on fourth through seventh row are average scores on 3-point scale with 1 being understand a little and 3 being understand a great deal. Entries on eighth and ninth rows are average scores on 3-point scale with 1 being minimal access and 3 being much access. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 2: Student Survey Results, by Course

	Reporting at the Convention (COM)		Political Party Conventions: Field Study (POLS)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Interest in politics and public policy	2.7 (.50)	2.8 (.44)	2.9 (.38)	3.0 (.00)
Understand important political issues facing country	4.3 (.71)	4.4 (.53)	4.9 (.38)	4.9 (.38)
Consider myself to well qualified to participate in politics	4.4 (.53)	3.8 (.83)	4.3 (.76)	4.9 (.38)
Understand the process of nominating candidates	2.3 (.71)	2.8 (.44)	2.4 (.53)	3.0 (.00)
Understand role of state political party organizations	2.1 (.78)	2.6 (.73)	2.1 (.69)	2.9 (.38)
Understand why delegates attend party conventions	2.3 (.71)	2.8 (.44)	2.3 (.76)	3.0 (.00)
Understand how delegates are selected	2.0 (.20)	2.1 (.69)	2.1 (.69)	2.4 (.62)
General public access to convention activities	1.7 (.71)	1.7 (.87)	1.4 (.53)	2.0 (1.0)
Media access to convention activities	2.7 (.50)	2.3 (.46)	2.7 (.49)	2.6 (.53)
(N)	9	9	7	7

Table 3: Student Survey Results, by Convention

	Democratic National Convention		Republican National Convention	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Interest in politics and public policy	3.0 (.00)	3.0 (.00)	2.6 (.53)	2.8 (.44)
Understand important political issues facing country	4.6 (.79)	4.6 (.53)	4.6 (.53)	4.7 (.50)
Consider myself to well qualified to participate in	4.4 (.79)	4.4 (.53)	4.3 (.50)	4.1 (1.1)

politics				
Understand the process of nominating candidates	2.3 (.49)	2.9 (.78)	2.4 (.73)	2.9 (.33)
Understand role of state political party organizations	2.0 (.58)	2.6 (.53)	2.2 (.83)	2.8 (.67)
Understand why delegates attend party conventions	2.3 (.76)	2.9 (.38)	2.3 (.71)	2.9 (.33)
Understand how delegates are selected	2.1 (.69)	2.4 (.53)	2.0 (.87)	2.3 (.62)
General public access to convention activities	1.4 (.53)	2.0 (.82)	1.7 (.71)	1.7 (1.0)
Media access to convention activities	2.7 (.49)	2.7 (.49)	2.7 (.50)	2.1 (.35)
(N)	7	7	9	9

Notes: In each of the tables above, entries on first row are average scores on 3-point scale with 1 being not very interested and 3 being extremely interested. Entries on second and third row are average scores on 5-point scale with 1 being disagree strongly and 5 being agree strongly. Entries on fourth through seventh row are average scores on 3-point scale with 1 being understand a little and 3 being understand a great deal. Entries on eighth and ninth rows are average scores on 3-point scale with 1 being minimal access and 3 being much access. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Appendix B: Student Survey

Please mark the most appropriate answer. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential.

1. What is your gender?

Male Female

2. What is your age group?

18-21 22-25 26-30 31 and over

3. What is your academic standing?

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate Student

4. What is your academic major?

Communication Political Science International Affairs Other

5. What is your academic concentration? _____

6. Which convention will you be attending?

Democratic Republican

7. Briefly describe why you chose to register for this course, in particular?

8. What do you expect will be some advantages associated with a course on political conventions taught from a “hands on” field experience perspective as opposed to one taught in a traditional classroom setting?

9. What do you expect could be some challenges associated with a course on political conventions taught from a “hands on” field experience perspective as opposed one taught in a traditional classroom setting?

10. In the space below, identify at least three words or phrases that come to mind when you think of political party conventions.

11. Typically speaking, how interested are you in politics and public policy?
 Extremely interested Somewhat interested Not very interested

12. Indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with this statement: I think I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.
 Agree strongly Agree somewhat Neutral Disagree somewhat Disagree strongly

13. Indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with this statement: I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics.
 Agree strongly Agree somewhat Neutral Disagree somewhat Disagree strongly

14. To what degree do you understand the process of nominating presidential candidates?
 Understand a great deal Understand some Understand little

15. To what degree do you understand the role of state political party organizations in nominating presidential candidates?
 Understand a great deal Understand some Understand little

16. To what degree do you understand why delegates attend national party conventions?
 Understand a great deal Understand some Understand little

17. To what degree do you understand how delegates are selected to attend national party conventions?
 Understand a great deal Understand some Understand little

18. Based on your understanding, about how much direct access does the general public have to activities at a national party convention?

Much access Some access Minimal access

19. Based on your understanding, about how much direct access do the media have to the activities at a national party convention?

Much access Some access Minimal access

20. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

Strong Democrat

Weak Democrat

Independent Democrat

Independent Independent

Independent Republican

Weak Republican

Strong Republican

¹ Of course, college students regularly serve as interns and student journalists at the party conventions. Other colleges and Universities, such as Winthrop University, have also structured courses around convention politics and activities. To our knowledge, however, no other courses have facilitated learning at both party conventions for the duration of the proceedings.

² Course syllabi are available upon request.

³ Each student went to either the Democratic National Convention or the Republican National Convention based on their expressed preferences.

⁴ The political science students were mostly interested, active partisans.

⁵ Please see blog at <http://partyconventions2012.blogspot.com/>

⁶ This study adopts measures on “internal political efficacy” from the National Election Study, such as established in Craig and Maggionto (1982) and Craig, Niemi, and Silver (1990).

⁷ Please see Appendix B for the complete pre-convention survey. The post-convention was virtually identical, only with questions posed in past tense such as “What were some of the advantages associated with a course...”

⁸ For a review of methodological quality issues, including those regarding internal validity, see Farrington (2003).

⁹ These two cases were eliminated from the dataset because the students did not return post-convention surveys.

¹⁰ See <http://www.carolinalive.com/news/photos.aspx?id=796581#.UTzQ5TdvdGE>