



# Promoting Original Research: Designing a Course to Produce Quality Undergraduate Political Science Research in the Community College Setting

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## ABSTRACT

Addressing honors education and undergraduate research at the community college level is a question that is becoming more prevalent in the teaching landscape. Undergraduate research is encouraged as literature supports the role it plays in developing engaged students who are interested in the field of political science and academia in general. Applying this concept to the community college level requires shifting in understanding regarding the types of students that are mentored and the expectations assigned to the research. Upper-level students have the advantage of more years in school and a connection to the discipline by majoring in the field; expanding on this approach at the community college level requires a shift by the professor or mentor to meet academic standards. This reflective essay recounts the implementation of mandatory original methodology research in a general education state government course within a community college honors program. Experience working with students at this level in political science has revealed a need to be flexible and challenging regarding curriculum and level of methods training if community college undergraduate research in the discipline is to be successful.

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## Introduction

As a political science professor at a 2-year college, the opportunity for undergraduate mentoring regarding research is limited. There has been a push for undergraduate involvement in research in political science in recent years. Undergraduate research is defined by the Council on Undergraduate Research (2017) as an inquiry conducted by an undergraduate student making original research contributions to their chosen discipline. If done properly, the integration of undergraduate research in the curriculum of a course can enhance the student's connection to the material and create a holistic experience that utilizes application and expands on the active learning push in higher education (Scott 2015). In political science, this comes as a process of mentoring students that have the potential for study at the graduate level to increase the knowledge of empirical design and methodology to create original research. These mentoring relationships develop a student's critical thinking abilities, builds relationships with mentors,

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increases retention, and creates an early relationship with methodology (Council on Undergraduate Research 2017).

At the 2-year level, there is considerable concern about identifying students who can meet the research demands of the advanced research curriculum that includes a project that is considered to be original research using either a quantitative or qualitative methodology. Questions abound regarding the preparation of students at the 2-year college level to conduct or participate in this type of curriculum (Cejda and Hensel 2009). In an attempt to address this potential gap in preparedness, the requirement of undergraduate research and the standards that accompany are fluid from campus to campus; but the standards of empirical design and the necessary qualifications to provide the instruction does not shift despite the level of the institution or mission of the college. While there is a challenge to create this opportunity, students benefit from being exposed to political science, or social science research, early in their academic career (Schuster 2018).

In my current position, I designed an honors political science course in state government, a mandatory course in Texas that incorporates original research into its mandatory curriculum. The honors program within the system is designed to challenge selected students on their ability to function within a course that incorporates an honors project. Within the system, these projects are designed to be original research conducted by the student. Those choosing a quantitative methodology must complete the human subjects/institutional review board process, create an instrument to collect data, and conduct an empirically sound analysis. Those choosing the qualitative route must meet submit an IRB application if their methods require it. Students conducting a qualitative project must meet the standards of either a critical review of the literature, use group or individual interview methodology, or conduct a case study that meets the requirements set forth by the field. Honors programs at community colleges are boosted by a reputation of being springboards to transfer and attracting higher quality students (Outcalt 1999). Expanding the curriculum to include higher order analysis, these methodology-based projects are open to development by the student with the professor serving as a mentor and guide in the design.

During my preparation for the course, my concern was balancing the needs of the course and meeting student learning objectives with equipping students to meet the honors-mandated empirical project. The design of my normal course involves a critical review of the textbook and applicable and balancing assessments between multiple choice or essay exams and three significant writing projects. Entering this honors course, my concerns centered on two major issues: (1) designing a course and assessments that met the academic needs of the material while also helping students to progress in the area of research; (2) designing a curriculum that provides students at the 2-year level with an appropriate methodological foundation for conducting and writing a quality honors project. Addressing these issues in addition to the consistent issues such as gaps in writing skills and study created a challenge regarding creating a quality honors course.

This essay is a reflection on how the course progressed and potential changes to make the class more effective moving forward. My initial approach was to rely on the previous training of the students regarding basic study skills as well as writing.

**Table 1.** Honors project grade breakdown.

Letter Grade Breakdown	Students
A	0
B	3
C	4
D	2
F	2
Average numeric grade	62%

As honors students, I assumed that the students in the course met the required writing level to accomplish a project of the empirical level. As a political science professor, I chose to focus on the material and introduce a basic methodological approach to the students that struck a balance between strict statistics and empirical theory.

The first four weeks of the course focused on methodology. Using an appropriate text that outlined the basics of methods, students were introduced to theory-testing and building as well as the basic functions and types of qualitative and quantitative research. To assess these concepts, the student completed a group research design project that required them to employ the theories to design a quantitative research project and methodology approach. These basic concepts were used through the remainder of the course within the material to highlight their applicability. Friday sessions were held on an optional basis to cover specific methodology tests and how to employ SPSS to analyze data. Students were assessed with a midterm and final, a Senate simulation project, as well as the honors project being a major portion (20%) of the grade. In addition to basic formatting and structure, specific requirements of the honors project were:

- Fourteen to 20 pages in length
- Following APA formatting guidelines and structure
- Include a minimum of 12 peer-reviewed sources
- Include a thorough methodology section using an approach approved by the professor
- Include any data collection tools (i.e., survey) or transcripts (i.e., interview, focus groups)

This course design was met with mixed results. Students in the course that were motivated and gravitated toward the methodology produced work that is quality for a student at their level of academia. Eleven students completed the honors project. Six students chose to conduct a quantitative project, all using an original survey approved through the IRB process. Five chose a qualitative approach in the area of contextual analysis. The grade breakdown is listed in the Table below and shows an even distribution of grades. Students were provided a rubric for grading early in the semester to guide their understanding of how the project would be assessed [Table 1](#).

Three students were selected to present their findings during the college's honors day. One of those students progressed to present their findings at a regional honors conference.

In an exit discussion with the professor, a majority of the students felt overwhelmed by the depth and demands of the course. Students specifically pointed to the balance of course material and empirical and methods portion; which they felt pulled focus from

their honors project. Students reported feeling pressured to carry an excess burden to carry out a quantitative project and struggled due to the level of work required outside the normal course material to produce a quality paper. In the same discussion, a student suggested that if the honors project was going to be designed to meet these requirements that it should factor more into the grade to prompt students to focus on it. Overall, the discussion prompted three students to report they were discouraged from embarking on research of this type in future political science courses.

The reaction of the students shows the issues regarding undergraduate research, especially when implemented so early in education. While there is a reasonable expectation of the standard of work, students resisted the empirical requirements that were necessary for the course to achieve the honors project standards. Those requirements centered on students creating original research that necessitated an IRB process, data collection, analysis, and written results. Students in the course performed adequately grade-wise, but the level of research failed to rise to the expectation of the course and program and students were turned off to political science or expressed concern about the course.

## Question

How do professors in honors programs at the 2-year level balance the demands of teaching and mentoring quality undergraduate research while also addressing the shortcomings of students at the 2-year level? Upon reflection, I have come to four approaches to improve an honors political science course that requires quasi-independent research.

## Response

### *Push student's methodology threshold*

Attempting to lessen or soften the blow of research methodology is a path to being unsuccessful when quality honors or undergraduate research is the goal. Students must be challenged to understand basic quantitative methods and analysis if they are to accomplish the goal of producing a good project under these requirements. Introducing basic methodology at this level will be the way I address the issue. While students are not able to handle heavy quantitative analysis due to a lack of training, political science professors must take an active approach in providing the content needed to accomplish quality research in the areas of theory and concept that provide useful frames for hands-on learning of this material (Kilburn 2014). Moving forward, I will break the material approach down to include statistics training for students but limit the options for the methodologies to those that students can handle with this level of training. Ascertain what methods are appropriate and needed for the types of projects chosen by the student will be important. Also, designing a course outline that devotes enough time to teach both the basics of empirical design and these basic quantitative skills is a challenge. My approach will be to devote half of the face-to-face time in the course of these methods.

***Understand that assuming a level of writing or ability is not productive; enter with an open mind***

Moving forward, the assumption that students are well-trained in writing or analysis will have to give way to an active approach to training students to write. As a political science professor mentoring students in social science research, there must be a focus on building students writing skills that lead to quality social science work. Most students are trained at this level to write from a humanities point of view; which can hinder empirical work. Shifting their writing skills to a social science approach will require an approach to teaching writing and analysis skills that may not be appropriate in most programs until the junior level. However, with the expectation of quality undergraduate research in honors colleges at the 2-year level, there must be a link and approach to that level of training.

***Open the opportunity for interdisciplinary research that expands the understanding of political science***

Incorporating undergraduate research at the community college level is a search in finding a way to connect students to methods they are very new to and, in the case of political science courses not inherently connected to academically. Helping students understand the methodological approach in political science research into their potential or chosen field of study can create buy-in to the project (Owens and Murkowski 2009). Moving forward, finding these connections through learning about the student's approach to education and expressing these overlaps in political science will be a focus of my approach in the honors course to enhance the research product. Moving to an interdisciplinary approach requires a push of my research agenda beyond the comforts of my fields of inquiry or expertise, a challenge in the interdisciplinary approach as mentors must be the drivers of information in the project (Davis, Mahatmya, Garner, and Jones 2015). Expanding my willingness to engage in fields outside political science can help students engage in the project, which could aid them in staying in their chosen field and continuing to explore research opportunities.

***Accept that the material will take a timely and measured backseat and account for the change***

While political science professors are attached to their material and meeting student learning objectives is a requirement, the needs of students in these courses are different. Utilizing technology to make up for lost time in the classroom can be unavoidable to meet the mandate of quality undergraduate research at this level of political science coursework. Learning management systems allow for professors to integrate technology into curriculum and can act as a supplement for face-to-face courses. A potential remedy to the congestion of material created by the added research mandate is to shift material, in this case, course-based, online to open time for more face-to-face concentration on methodology during class.

Creating hybrid learning environments is challenging at the 2-year level. Studies on student success show that online courses have significantly lower success rates than

face-to-face courses (Hart, Friedmann, and Hill 2017). Also, there is an issue of workload creating an unreachable mandate on students. Because of these concerns, the hybrid approach is not a first-choice approach, especially in a case where the methodology is shifted to the online arena which could confuse students when removed from face-to-face instruction. Incorporating online learning for course material is a potential solution among an engaged student population at a college pushing for more online avenues to learning. However, the pitfalls of student success noted above are still relevant. This approach is an attempt to balance time assuming that the workload, as it is done in this course, demands it. That attempt to balance time may also have a negative ramification regarding the professor, and student workload which will rise beyond those associated only with the mandates of the course as both sets of material must be covered, but because of the demands placed on a hybrid approach. If taken, my approach will require being selective regarding the material presented and modalities used in an attempt to guide students to better meet the research mandate of the Honors College and course.

## Conclusion

Undergraduate research is a burgeoning area of focus for political science due to its appeal and ability to create interest in the discipline and potential to improve the quality of students, the teaching opportunities it presents, at a community college level. Professors are routinely writing papers with students and bringing these students into grant projects and analysis. Student-focused undergraduate research, however, is still developing and the approach and balance between methodology expectations and ability can create issues for students meeting the standard expected of them in courses such as the honors course that is the subject of this reflective essay. By challenging students methodologically and focusing a larger portion of the course on statistics while taking a more proactive and hybrid approach to developing writing skills and content delivery political science professors can better help students meet the research mandates placed upon them and produce quality research.

## Notes on contributor

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