

## **Learning-by-doing: Teaching Qualitative Methods in DC**

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**Abstract:** Learning-by-doing presents an opportunity for political science departments to instruct undergraduate students in social science research methods. Conducting these trainings as short-term, high impact programs have the potential to make research and research methods accessible and appealing to students. Building these opportunities around major political events transforms these opportunities for learning further still. Rooted in these considerations, we designed and implemented the Qualitative Methods and the 2017 Presidential Inauguration Research Program at Purdue University. The program was a condensed qualitative research methods training experience that incorporated field work, conducted in spring 2017. This article offers lessons for innovating on undergraduate methods training.

**Keywords:** High Impact, Methods, Qualitative, Undergraduate, Civic Engagement

## Introduction

Learning-by-doing presents an opportunity for political science departments to instruct undergraduate students in social science research methods. Conducting these trainings as short-term, high impact programs have the potential to make research and research methods accessible and appealing to students. Building these opportunities around major political events transforms these opportunities for learning further still. Rooted in these considerations, we designed and implemented the Qualitative Methods and the 2017 Presidential Inauguration Research Program at Purdue University. The program was a condensed qualitative research methods training experience that incorporated field work, conducted in spring 2017. This article offers lessons for innovating on undergraduate methods training.

In academia, high impact learning practices are advocated as integral for student success (AAC&U 2015; Kuh 2008). Among the characteristics of these practices, central, is the feature of hands-on learning. These hands-on experiences come in a number of forms, including simulations, study abroad, internships, and research. As suggested by the types of hands-on experiences, learning can take place in or outside of the classroom, can be long or short-term, and can involve a range of costs—monetary or time. Many studies show an array of student learning outcomes achieved through these high impact programs from high levels of engagement and retention rates to deep levels of learning that foster a more nuanced understanding of skills honed or knowledge acquired (Brownell and Swaner 2010 and 2009; Finley 2011; Kilgo et al. 2015; Kuh 2008; Provencher and Kassel 2017). The latter of which the Gallup-Purdue 2014 poll identifies as correlated with student success after graduation in the job market and in post-graduates' social lives. The promise of high impact practices is attractive and in the area of undergraduate methods training, offers as a superb opportunity for transformative education.

Undergraduate research falls in the category of high impact learning. The importance of undergraduate research training is impressed by the ubiquity of research methods courses in social science curricula.<sup>1</sup> Pedagogically, such training fosters students' ability to problem solve across various issues by educating them in the tools of scientific inquiry (Druckman 2015). By engaging in research experientially, students develop analytical, problem solving, and communication skills. Learning research through practice is an effective means for teaching students about the process of conducting original research (Knoll 2016). Often though, these active learning research opportunities are few and/or many social science programs rely on the traditional lecture approach to teaching undergraduates about research. Various factors account for this, most significantly, the time commitment required of faculty to guide students in hands-on research experiences (Knoll 2016). Moreover, the emphasis of political science undergraduate research methods courses tends to be on quantitative research methods; qualitative research methods instruction at the undergraduate level in political science programs is uncommon (Elman et al. 2015).<sup>2</sup>

The Qualitative Methods and the 2017 Presidential Inauguration Research Program (QMPIR) addresses these multiple areas of teaching and learning. It brings together experiential learning, social science methods training, hands-on research, and civic engagement, jointly advancing desirable student learning outcomes. It is a short-term, high impact, qualitative research program that instructs students on the fundamentals of qualitative research, immerses students in the field, and supports students in the dissemination of their research. It is a means for diversifying

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<sup>1</sup> The authors conducted a rough survey of undergraduate political science programs at research one universities in the United States and found, from the sample of 120 universities, more than 92 percent have at least one research methods course and nearly 70 percent require it.

<sup>2</sup> The dearth of qualitative methods courses is also present in graduate level political science programs (Emmons and Moravcsik 2019). From the authors' survey, of the 87 universities with clearly identifiable emphases for their research methods courses (as described online), less than 18 percent have specific courses focusing on qualitative methods or those focusing on both qualitative and quantitative methods.

and enhancing undergraduate methods courses. Programs such as this also fulfill the student-<sup>3</sup> or institutionally-generated demand for active learning opportunities. By timing the experience with major political events, local or national, opportunities for engendering or cultivating civic engagement are ripe.

## **Learning Objectives**

The undergraduate research methods curriculum in the Department of Political Science at Purdue University offers the standard fare found at most colleges and universities. It stresses critical thinking, logic and reasoning, and basic evidence analysis and interpretation as student learning outcomes (SLOs). The instruction of this course regularly takes the traditional approach with lectures and computer-based statistical exercises, in the instruction of quantitative methods. However, the department strives to innovate on approaches to undergraduate education. As part of this initiative, the department supported the formulation and funding of our program.

In keeping with the existing departmental student learning outcomes, the SLOs fundamental to the QMPIR program were for students to

- Develop analytical thinking.
- Understand the methodologies of social science, specifically, grounded theory as an interpretivist mode of inquiry.
- Be introduced to qualitative methods, particularly interviews and participant observation.
- Develop knowledge of and comfort with the techniques for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting interview and participant observation data.

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<sup>3</sup> The early idea for this initiative came from undergraduate students in Pi Sigma Alpha, the political science honors society. Students wanted an opportunity to study the 2016 presidential campaign and elections. After bringing the idea to us, we saw this an opportunity to build in methods training while attending the 2017 presidential inauguration.

- Develop confidence to engage in the research process.
- Hone communication skills, primarily public speaking and writing.
- Foster civic engagement.

A further objective tied to the program was accessibility. We view accessibility to encompass both student and faculty's ability to participate in the program. By condensing the timeframe and making the program non-credit bearing, students and faculty had shortened time commitments to the program and reduced student cost.

### **How: Design/Logistics**

The Qualitative Methods and the 2017 Presidential Inauguration Research Program was a collaboration with the Department of Political Science and the Brian Lamb School of Communication. It comprised three major components: instructional workshops, fieldwork, and presentations. Altogether, the three components serve the SLOs of the program. The timing of the presidential inauguration presented an ideal opportunity to connect the main learning goals of the program to a significant exercise of democracy in the United States. The program was designed as an extra-curricular activity; however, students had the option to register for a one credit, independent study course for participation in and completion of the program. The format of the program was to teach students by allowing them to do research. The backbone of the program was a research project that investigated the question of a culture war within the American electorate.

The research was premised on Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope's work and queried their findings in the wake of the 2016 presidential campaign. The authors argue in their book (2010) that Americans are not deeply divided in their fundamental political views. However, the 2016 presidential election witnessed some of the most contentious articulation of politics – indeed, Vice

President Biden noted that “This has been a very tough election. It’s been ugly. It’s been divisive. It’s been coarse. It’s been dispiriting.” The overarching research question was: is there a culture war playing out?

### *Application and Enrolment*

The program received strong student interest. Students applied to the program using an online application, which was open to all students (freshmen through senior, majors and minors) in the Department of Political Science and the Brian Lamb School of Communication. Completion of political science courses prior to the program was not a requirement. However, students in the applicant pool had at least one college-level political science course on their transcripts. In political science alone, we received over 30 applications for 10 spots. Combining students from both academic units, 18 students were selected for participation. The number of students was capped because of two pressing factors: logistics and funding. In a concerted effort to make the program accessible to all students, all travel-related, accommodations, flight, and ground transportation costs were covered for students and the two faculty program directors. This funding was made possible through support from the two academic units, grants from Pi Sigma Alpha national office, the Purdue Honors College, the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, and crowdfunding.

### *Workshops: Pre and Post-Trip*

In addition to the composition of the program, the sequencing was as important. The fieldwork in Washington, DC, was bookended by instructional workshops. The purpose of the workshops was two-fold: to address technical objectives—social science methods training—but also to actively engage the students in undergraduate research. To that end, the workshops were designed to teach

students the basics of qualitative research and include student input in the development of the framework for the research project. Elman et al. (2015, 40) show that it is important for students to understand “the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the type research being conducted.” The structure of the workshops was to facilitate just that.

The first two workshops were conducted before departure to Washington, during the first two weeks of the spring semester. The focus of these workshops was theory and design. The first was dedicated to the theoretical underpinnings of the research and development of the research question for the project. This involved discussion of Fiorina, Abrams and Pope—their book, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (3rd edition), was assigned over the winter break. Workshop Two focused on understanding the interpretivist method and the approach to and practical construction of questions for semi-structured interviews. Students also learned approaches to participant observation. To better manage the students and to allow the opportunity for them to “personalize” the research, we divided the students into four research teams of four or five. In these smaller groups, students crafted unique interview instruments and observational protocols, which they used in the field. By working together in these smaller groups, students explored different aspects of the topic.

Upon return to campus after fieldwork, we conducted two more workshops. They built on the work begun in the first two, instructing students in analysis of the primary data they collected. Students were guided through the process of coding and data triangulation. Students were also encouraged to consider presentation or publication outlets for their work. Presenting at the departmental brownbag in March was mandatory. Some students also presented their work at the

campus-wide Undergraduate Research Symposium. Others submitted articles to special sections of the *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research*.<sup>4</sup>

### *Fieldwork: Four Days in DC*

Working with administrative support, we put together an agenda consisting of a 4-day trip to Washington, DC, the weekend of the 2017 presidential inauguration. During the four days, students met with elected officials, staffers, and media executives and attended the inauguration, marches, and political forums. The mix of activities exposed students to a range of political actors (elites and masses) and political points of view in a variety of settings. Each day, we met with students to review plans and students were required to reflect on and process the data they collected through blog posts. Students engaged in participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

We arrived in DC, early morning on the Thursday before the inauguration. We used this day to engage with the elites with whom we set up meetings beforehand. Ahead of the visit, we contacted the offices of the US senators for Indiana, Senator Joe Donnelly and Senator Todd Young. Both senators invited us to their offices during “constituency meet-and-greet hours.” At these events, students interacted with the senators and their staff. The students asked questions relating to the research, particularly regarding their perception of the political climate in the United States since the presidential campaigns and the election of the president. On the first day as well, we visited CSPAN studios and met with founder and former CEO, Brian Lamb. Mr. Lamb spoke with the students from the perspective of the media and their coverage of politics in the United States. The day ended with a meeting with a staffer for Senator Bernie Sanders.

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<sup>4</sup> These articles were published in volume 7 of the fall 2017 issue of the journal.



The following day was the inauguration. Although attempting to secure tickets for the inauguration well in advance of the visit, we were unsuccessful. However, while at Senator Donnelly's constituent meet-and-greet, we received two tickets—uncollected by other constituents. Out of the 18 students, two observed the inauguration in the ticketed area because of serendipity. On inauguration day, we tasked students with paying attention to clothing, paraphernalia, chants, comments, cheers, boos, and the composition and size of crowds they encountered at and on their way to/from the National Mall and surrounding area. In other words, students were to observe all of the facets of political participation in which the public engaged. Students also interviewed persons. Recognizing that those who attend presidential inaugurations are politically active and more likely ideologically similar to the newly minted president, we saw the "Anti-Inauguration" forum as a counterpoint—a venue that added some variation to respondents and forms of political participation. We all attended the "Anti-Inauguration" that evening where progressive views on the presidency and the state of American politics were presented.

Day three entailed attending the Women's March. The march presented yet another research opportunity for students to engage in the data collection process. On the final day, Sunday, we encouraged students to interact with the environment and persons in locations further away from the heart of the US federal institutions: Bethesda (the location of the hotel), U street (a commercial and residential neighborhood undergoing gentrification in Washington). Sunday's activities were abbreviated however; by 5:00PM we were on our flight back to Indiana.

## Measuring Impact

The QMPIR program was the first of its kind in the Department of Political Science. To assess the impact, we administered anonymous pre- and post-test student evaluations using a Qualtrics questionnaire. Students completed the pre-test survey at the beginning of the first workshop, answering questions relating to their past involvement with research, their level of comfort with various aspects of the research process, efficacy, and civic engagement. The post-test was taken on the day of the students' departmental presentations—the finale of the program. On both tests, the questions were the same except for two questions added to the post-test. With the addition of an open-ended question, students could self-report on their development based on the program.

Eighteen students, largely political science and/or communications majors, participated in the program. Women overwhelmingly outnumbered men,<sup>5</sup> though the group reflected diversity across ethnicity and classification, as shown in Table 1. More than 50 percent (10) of the students reported having some sort of extra-curricular research experience either independently or with faculty. All students were registered to vote and voted, except one, in the last election.

With respect to learning objectives related to research knowledge and skills, in the pre- and post-test, students were asked,

Indicate the level of comfort you would feel with the following.

(Very Comfortable, Somewhat Uncomfortable, Neither Comfortable Nor Uncomfortable, Somewhat Comfortable, Very Comfortable)

- a. Explaining the difference between quantitative and qualitative methodologies to a classmate.
- b. Working independently on research.
- c. Asking questions to people you don't know.
- d. Asking questions to public officials.
- e. Immersing yourself in an environment and observing people's behavior in this environment.
- f. Estimating an OLS regression model.
- g. Conducting a survey.

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<sup>5</sup> Even in the applicant pool, women outnumbered men.

Using ttests to analyze differences before and after the pedagogical intervention, results indicate minimal changes after participating in the program and no statistical significance. Crosstabulations by period, show small changes in the number of students moving along the continuum toward greater comfort in these areas in some cases and less comfort in others. For example, in the area of speaking to strangers, 12 students reported feeling very comfortable with this task and no students were uncomfortable before the program (see Table 2). However, after the program, the former went down by two and two students indicated discomfort. By and large, the group of participants already had exposure to research, which we posit may account for the little movement (and lack of statistical significance in ttests) in their reported comfort level with various aspects of research pre- and post-the QMPIR program. In instances where more students reported higher levels of discomfort, we infer that they might have over-estimated their confidence until actually having to execute the skill. Put differently, there was a gap between their “imagined” comfort and actual comfort when faced with implementation in real-life situations, in which the interviews in the program forced the students to engage.

Written comments by the students in response to the question “How has this research experience (the Research Workshops and Inauguration Field Research) impacted your qualitative research skills?” suggest a positive developmental impact of the program. Commonly, students identified developing a sense of confidence and comfort with qualitative methods and research in general. An illustration of this is,

This research experience has allowed me to become more comfortable in pursuing qualitative research. I had the guidance of mentors but also the independence to work on research, which was a good balance for a first time experience. Now when I pursue other research opportunities, I have more faith in my skills and abilities because I have now had research experience (Student Participant March 2017).

Students also frequently identified the knowledge of how to conduct interviews, construct questions, and analyze data collected as transformative lessons. For example,

Having never done research, I would [sic] say this research trip had a monumental effect. Actually conducting the research in real time and talking to subjects directly is a priceless experience [sic]. Quantifying the topics of discussion in order to categorize themes is important. I have already used this method in other venues (Student Participant March 2017).

With respect to civic engagement, we had a group of students who came to the program already politically participating—all reporting that they were registered to vote and all but one voted in the 2016 presidential elections. On questions regarding civic efficacy, we did find that there was a statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-test answers to the question

Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.  
(Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree)  
b. Through political activities, I can apply knowledge in ways that solve "real life" problems.<sup>6</sup>

The mean difference was small but suggests that students became a bit more cynical in their view in this area. The post-test was completed two months after return from the field, when the entire research process concluded.

### *Successes and Challenges*

The program had many successes. From exciting students about the research process to breaking ground on an innovative approach to undergraduate learning in our department to gaining recognition from the Purdue University administration and the wider community for program.<sup>7</sup> More than being introduced to or honing a research skill, students in the program completed the

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<sup>6</sup> Question adopted from the Tisch College National Civic and Political Engagement of Young People Survey.

<sup>7</sup> We received several media inquiries for interviews with the faculty and the students. Media outlets included the Purdue student newspaper, the local (West Lafayette) newspaper and network affiliates, and news (print and television) outlets in Indianapolis and other parts of the state.

entire research process by disseminating their work to the public at research symposia and in an undergraduate publication outlet.

The program also had its challenges. Foremost was the length of time scheduled for the workshops. They were one hour long but should have been at least doubled. Each workshop ended before enough was accomplished with hands-on work in class. Students therefore had to do much of the practical work outside of class. The conservative time allotment resulted from the difficulty of scheduling a common time when all could meet. A longer timeline for scheduling might overcome this challenge.

Another challenge was sufficiently debriefing after each day's activities in the field. Integrated in the itinerary was instruction in the field via daily debriefs. Days were long, which made conducting debriefs without impinging on dinner a challenge. Alternatively, we met each morning to set the tone and expectations for the day and preview events of the previous. Adding to this challenge too was space to accommodate such conversations with the large group. A conference room was unavailable for our use at our hotel. The work-around was securing a few seats in the lobby of the hotel. Making sure to lodge in a hotel with a conference room will facilitate the ease of gathering, at least in the context of space. Some daily reflection and processing of the data while still fresh did occur through student blogs. However, the exchange between the students and faculty was lost through this medium. Rather than only blog posts, a more interactive online exercise in which students can respond to each other and faculty could give real-time feedback would be beneficial. An electronic discussion board might suffice.

Keeping students committed to the purpose of the fieldwork and the subsequent training was also a challenge. While the vast majority maintained a high level of focus and interest in the research and methods training, there were instances wherein the allure of the presidential

inauguration and the related events pre-dominated the attention, rather than research tasks, of a small minority of students—thus, while propitious for studying US democracy and political participation—major political events can also be distractions to the aims of the program.

Finally, the program was costly. Departmental support removed this burden from students and made the program more accessible and inclusive. Although the program can operate on a funding model that relies on students' paying a program fee, if a goal is accessibility for a diverse group of students across income levels, as was ours, scholarships or grants are necessary.

## **Conclusion**

High impact learning produces favorable short and long-term student learning outcomes. Undergraduate research is an effective type of high impact learning practice. Research training is a component of a quality social science education. The Qualitative Methods and the 2017 Presidential Inauguration research program combines these facets into a short-term, effective, hands-on learning experience for undergraduate students.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Makeup of Student Group**

<b>Characteristics</b>	
<b>Classification</b>	4 Freshman 4 Sophomores 5 Juniors 5 Seniors
<b>Major</b>	7 Political Science 3 Communications 5 Double major: Political Science + Communications 2 Other
<b>Methods course taken</b>	7 Course in political science 5 Course in other department 6 No methods course
<b>Ethnicity</b>	12 White (67%) 3 Black (17%) 2 Latinx (11%) 1 Asian (5%)
<b>Gender</b>	3 Male 15 Female
<b>Independent Research/Research with faculty</b>	10
<b>Registered to vote</b>	18



**Table 2: Changes in Student Comfort Levels with Research Methods**

	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>
<b>Distinguishing Qual from Quant Methodologies</b>		
Very uncomfortable	0	2
Uncomfortable	2	1
Neither	4	1
Comfortable	3	6
Very comfortable	9	8
<b>Independent Research</b>		
Very uncomfortable	0	1
Uncomfortable	3	1
Neither	3	5
Comfortable	6	6
Very comfortable	6	5
<b>Speaking to Strangers</b>		
Very uncomfortable	0	0
Uncomfortable	0	2
Neither	0	0
Comfortable	6	6
Very comfortable	12	10
<b>Speaking with Public Officials</b>		
Very uncomfortable	0	1
Uncomfortable	1	0
Neither	0	1
Comfortable	9	9
Very comfortable	8	7
<b>Participant Observation</b>		
Very uncomfortable	1	1
Uncomfortable	1	1
Neither	0	0
Comfortable	7	7
Very comfortable	9	9