

Institutions of Engagement: Political Participation in College Yearbooks

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Abstract

College campuses are an important location for young people to fight for their interests. Throughout the years, major events on campuses such as protests about Vietnam, Civil Rights and local issues like complaining about the food in the cafeteria, have been covered by student journalists and archived in college yearbooks. Yearbooks are most often student run and independent from the campus administration providing an example of students telling the story of students. Therefore, as our students explore these books, they will observe events occurring in familiar locations making it easier to relate and connect with the individuals involved. In this paper I describe a lesson where students use college yearbooks as a hands-on tool to help them understand the more complex history of student civic engagement. Beyond a lesson on civic engagement, students will also learn more about their institution as they observe changes and continuities over time. Exploring yearbooks also provides students with experience exploring archives and analyzing qualitative data. Yearbooks are often housed in the library making this a great opportunity to collaborate with the library and introduce students to library resources. College campuses remain an important location for political activism and this lesson provides historical contexts for students to see the role of young people in our political system.

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i. Introduction

College campuses have long been a location of political participation. Whether frustrated with national politics, administrative decisions or for countless other reasons, students have used protests, sit-ins, petitions and occasionally riots to get their message across. Students have important and unique policy demands, making campuses valuable political spaces in our society. Young people are frequently criticized for their apathy and lack of participation in the political sphere, but this history of student activism tells a different story. In this paper I describe a lesson that uses college yearbooks as archival data for students to explore this past activism on their campuses.

College yearbooks are most frequently student run and independent from the university administration. The editors of the 1975 Georgetown yearbook, *Ye Domesday Booke*, aptly describe their role on the campus as:

“*Ye Domesday Booke* is unquestionably the only campus publication worth printing. Staffed by level-headed, hard hitting journalists, the book is an incisive inquiry into institutional incompetence, and an exciting expose of educational error-mongering. Through its pages run the threads which, wove together, form the tapestry of Georgetown life. Ever in the students’ eye, and its finger always on the students’ pulse the yearbook makes itself a regular nuisance hanging all over the student body.”

These books provide students with a hands-on tool to go back in time and learn from student peers, even though they are from different cohorts and generations.

Political participation and Civic Engagement are important topics in the political science curriculum (Colby et al. 2010). While we frequently focus on voting, a metric where young people struggle (Wattenberg 2012), it is important to explore a myriad of participation approaches and opportunities. Youth voter turnout might be low, but young people are embracing alternative

methods of participation such as protest, petitions, and boycotts (Dalton 2015). Documented in the pages of the yearbooks are historical examples of these types of participation. Each generation has their own issues that define their politics and activism (Jennings 2002, Mannheim 1952, Rouse and Ross 2018), and this activity exposes students to the history of these different movements, using a setting that is familiar and relevant to them (Belet 2018, Finney and Pyke 2008).

Today's college students continue the tradition of on-campus activism (Barnhardt 2014, Broadhurst 2014). Through this assignment, students will learn lessons to apply to their own activism. They will examine the traditions, methods, and culture that have remained and what has changed over time. Many of the yearbooks at universities start in the late 1800s providing students with several time periods and issue contexts to explore.

This lesson is designed to address three major concepts. The first is related to learning about participation and civic engagement through the lens of previous generations of young people. Secondly, this lesson is designed to help students better understand their campus and its traditions. This connection is associated with an increased community attachment and belongingness at the university, a trait closely tied to student retention (Tinto 1972). Finally, this exercise is an active-learning application of qualitative data analysis. Students explore archival data asking similar questions as scholars might. This also provides an opportunity for collaboration with library resources where these books are often physically or digitally stored. In the rest of this paper, I expand on these three goals and provide a sample lesson plan for executing this assignment in a political science class.

ii. Participation and Civic Engagement

The low participation rates of young people are a concern that civics education has hoped to address (Colby et al. 2010). Political science education has provided several approaches to

engage students in their communities and building skills to help make them productive citizens (Bennion and Laughlin 2018). This lesson continues this tradition by focusing on specific political actions of young people throughout history. Students will gain a better understanding of student activism through analyzing a student created document from previous generations of students at their institution.

One of the main types of participation both scholars and the media focus on is voter turnout. This is a category where young people lag older cohorts. A lack of resources may also explain disparities in other forms of electoral participation such as campaign contributions (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995). However, broader definitions of political participation may introduce students to other opportunities for fighting their policy demands and concerns. These other types of participation, such as protest, petitions, and boycotts, have been important tools for young people (Dalton 2015).

College campuses have a history of being important locations of civic engagement and political participation. Over time the issues and approaches have varied but studying these incidents can make students think about the role young people can play in our politics. Universities provide students with social networks, common spaces and languages, and a frequent enemy to unite around in university administration² (Flacks 1971). The 1960s and 1970s are the most prominent examples of this type of activism. Civil Rights and the Vietnam War were highly salient issues throughout the country, bringing young people together to protest (Phillips 1985). Students, many directly affected by these issues, fought for change and a more just society. However, students are not a homogenous group and conflict between students existed on campuses around

² Other common enemies might rival colleges, campus dining quality, and of course parking enforcement

these issues. Many students supported the war and/or resisted the integration of their campuses. This conflict is often present in the yearbooks.

Many of these movements were interconnected. Activists learned valuable lessons from witnessing and participating in the Civil Rights movement. Universities found themselves entangled in the foreign conflict as poor grades could lead to a student being drafted (Schrecker 2021). Concerns about research on weapons and other involvement in the military conflict, also angered students and encouraged further activism. In many instances, students turned their concerns and frustrations into action. College yearbooks from these times capture some of these moments. Students protested, occupied buildings, participated in sit-ins and learned about the issues through teach-ins. These are all examples of what political participation can look like, and the evidence is stored in the yearbooks.

Political activism on college campuses was not just a thing of the '60s and '70s. This is a strength of yearbooks as an archive of these moments as students can explore several decades of students and the issues that drove them. Books from during WWII present a less confrontational student body and demonstrate the important role universities played in the Home Front and for preparing students to fight overseas. Anti-apartheid and anti-sweat shop movements also later found their voice on college campuses. Finally, students can observe the clothing, music, and art that students from that time were experiencing as these expressions have played an important role in how people connect to the political world around them.

Many schools have stopped publishing an annual yearbook. However, student activism has not stopped. In recent years we have seen important movements arise on college campuses throughout the country. Students have spoken out against racism, pushed for their school to divest from fossil fuels, and grad students have fought for better wages and support often through

unionization. Students will likely be aware of these contemporary movements on their campus, but less aware of the historical context associated with these movements and universities as a location of action. Exploring these histories in a context they are familiar with helps them to identify the continuities and changes that have occurred over the long histories of our institutions. There is a long history of student activism, and they represent the current chapter (Biddix 2014).

iii. Campus Connection

Students have a variety of reasons for choosing the schools they attend. While some might be familiar with the history and traditions, others may know very little. This activity gives students time to explore this history by looking at how previous students viewed and experienced the institution during their time. This is student-centered work where students learn from their “peers,” even if these peers graduated decades ago.

Strengthening this connection is useful for helping to build a sense of belongingness amongst students (Siegel 2011, Tinto 1973). Integration to university is a challenge due to the number of conflicting pressures students face (Kuh et al. 2008, Pascarella and Terenzini 1983). External factors such as the cost of tuition or internal pressures like their perceived academic ability, all impact whether they think the university is the place for them (Tinto 1973, Tinto 2007). Freshman orientation programs that introduce students to the university’s procedures and traditions have helped with this transition boosting retention and GPA (Mayhew et al. 2011).

This assignment with college yearbooks serves a similar purpose as these orientation programs. Developing a sense of belongingness in students does not need to be limited to student affairs. Pedagogy and curriculum can play an important role in the development of this trait (Cohen and Viola 2022). As students browse through the books from multiple decades, they will see old buildings, clothing trends that have gone out of style and back in again, and organizations that still

play a prominent role at the institution. They will also see major changes and things they do not understand. Analyzing these instances can help students integrate into the campus community by helping them understand the traditions and history. Siegel (2011) argues that “students are more likely to persist and be successful in college if they feel connected to the institution and feel supported in their curricular and co-curricular endeavors. They are also more likely to persist if they understand the institutional culture and feel engaged in the campus community.” Understanding the history through the eyes of past students can create that connection.

However, we must be careful in this assignment, as some students may not see people that look like them in past yearbooks, hindering the development of belongingness that is one of the lesson’s goals (Hurtado and Carter 1997, Walton and Cohen 2007). Many universities, especially in early yearbooks we might explore, were overwhelmingly or exclusively white, male dominated institutions. On top of that, student media has been found to focus on whiteness at a university, further excluding people from marginalized groups (Stewart 2019). Many books will include racist images such as blackface or even group pictures of the campus KKK. After the Virginia governor was found wearing blackface in his college yearbook, USA today conducted a study of 900 yearbooks and found many instances of blatant racism (Murphy 2019).³ Students should be warned about this before the assignment as these visuals may be triggering. I also recommend the professor encourages students to not just view the sources, but to interrogate the moments, thinking through what they see and contemplating the implications of what or who may be missing. Pushing for schools to reflect on and apologize for their racist pasts has become a common form of student activism, so, although triggering, it may be useful material to help students think through the complicated histories of their institution.

³ If this becomes a major concern specific pages could be used rather than exploring full books. It may also be advisable for the faculty member to examine the books available for students to make sure they are appropriate

iv. Archival Data

The final goal of this activity is to give students experience working with qualitative data. Yearbooks are archives that serve as a record of the academic year. This is an active learning approach that provides students with hands-on experience using the skills of a political scientist (Greene 1989). The content of the lesson is important for helping students contextualize the political participation of young people. By stressing the methods we use, we can provide our students with valuable tools for future research projects.

Learning by doing is an important technique for teaching political science methods (Duncan and Brown 2021, Elman et al. 2015). In this case students have an opportunity to explore an important archive of their institution. Through their experience, they will think through questions about how to handle the materials, store the data, and interpret what they find. We often think about questions of political participation through a quantitative lens, such as how many people voted or the number of protesters, but this qualitative approach provides benefits for understanding the significance of these moments on campus.

College yearbooks are frequently located in the campus libraries, and many have been digitally archived. This provides an opportunity for faculty to collaborate with the campus librarians. The librarians can provide additional insight into the research process and the history of the archives. This also gives students experience working with the library, one of many important resources on campus that can help contribute to a student's academic success (Turner and Thompson 2014).

Many college campuses have stopped publishing yearbooks. This might lead to an important question amongst students about how their actions and moments are now remembered. Social media provides an important method for young people to share their actions, but how will

this be different for scholars in the future as they try to write about the student activism of today. What are we losing, if anything, by these books not being published? New technologies make the need less pressing, but the centralized and editorialized approach taken by the yearbook makes it easier to look back in time at how our institutions have developed.

v. Lesson Plan

There are several approaches a professor might take to teaching this lesson. The main consideration is how much time is available. I taught this lesson in a course that dedicated a lot of time to political participation especially amongst young people so I could spend significant time on the project. However, I think this assignment could be useful in classes such as an intro to American politics course where time is precious. In these cases, taking more of an asynchronous approach may be beneficial and could still work well. In this section, I propose a potential lesson plan that includes an historical overview, exploring the yearbooks, assessment, and potential discussion questions.

Part 1: Historic overview

Most students enter the class with little prior knowledge of historic student activism. What they possess is likely related to the major events such as the Vietnam War. Therefore, before students explore yearbooks, time should be spent teaching about this history. The professor can lecture, going through some of the historical moments and events that might drive this type of action. While the '60s and '70s appear to be the most relevant examples, expanding into other decades will provide students with useful guidance as they start exploring. Old news reports could be inserted into lectures to provide engaging visuals of these events.

One major event I discussed, beyond the key issues of the times, was the passing of the 26th amendment. Ratified in 1971, this amendment lowered the national voting age from 21 to 18.

All of a sudden, millions of college students were enfranchised, at a time when many youth related issues were salient and divisive. This shock to electoral politics represents an interesting moment to consider how the newly enfranchised voters embraced this right or view their opportunity in the political system.

This section of the lesson could also be asynchronous. There are several good readings that might help students understand the content. Students could read the 1962 Port Huron Statement that served as the manifesto for Students for a Democratic Society. Here they will be exposed to how people of a similar age are internalizing the national and international events of their time. Although this was before Vietnam became a salient issue, students will find familiar issues such as the economy, technology, and the military industrial complex that are still relevant today.

The purpose of this part of the lesson is to provide some guidance for students as they analyze yearbooks on their own or in groups. Highlighting major events will help them identify the books they may find interesting. It also helps them make connections to the visuals they find in the book. Not all pictures are nicely captioned, so a basic understanding of the history will bring out the significance of these moments.

Part 2: Yearbook exploration

In this assignment students will be asked to explore multiple yearbooks to identify examples of student political participation. They should be paying special attention to the issues, approaches, and goals of the activism they see. Students should also explore other parts of the book to get a feel for the times. As they go, they should take pictures or screenshots of information that they think is relevant for their reflection or interesting to share with the class.

Yearbooks are often found in the main campus library reference section so the teacher should collaborate with one of the librarians to identify a space or a way to transport the books to

the classroom for a day. Alternatively, many yearbooks are now digitally archived, most often on the library website. This option may be useful if the class is large or there are specific yearbooks students should prioritize.

Students should be encouraged to explore and be curious about the activities they are seeing. If there is enough time, students should look through multiple books. While the focus should be on finding examples that represent political participation, students are likely to be drawn in by other things such as hairstyles, clothing, and the familiar buildings. This process may help students make the connections between the continuities and changes over time. If students are engaged in this type of reflection, it suggests engagement and curiosity, they will eventually find more relevant material.

Yearbooks are mostly pictures, so students can skim through them at a fast rate. However, they should read some of the text as they go. This text will provide additional context and often provides important commentary about the moments. In my experience I have found the writing to be brief, especially in older yearbooks, but also thoughtful, witty, and often scathing toward the administration.

The assignment could be either individual or collaborative. An advantage of having students work in small groups is there are more people that find something relevant or relatable. Perhaps someone in the group is involved in the same club or organization as the one pictured, this experience could provide additional context for others in the group. A collaborative approach may also encourage additional and spontaneous reflection throughout the class time. A similar option would be to take occasional breaks to discuss what that they have found.

I recommend dedicating enough time for students to look through multiple books. Each decade feels different as styles and issues change. Seeing these differences will help them

understand the full picture and give them more chances to find something that sparks their curiosity.

Alternatively, this assignment could happen outside of the classroom. If students are shown how to collect the resources, they can explore the books in their own time. This could be a good option if there is not enough time to spend in class. Students can still produce thoughtful reflections and find important and interesting content. However, doing this in class may produce better discussions and deeper thoughts about the material as students can better reflect on their findings.

Connecting students to their own campus is an important goal of this lesson, but students could also explore the yearbooks of other campuses. If a student is interested in the occupation of buildings, then perhaps a yearbook from Columbia University could be a more useful archival source for them. Students might also want to find a yearbook from a school or time when a parent or other relative was attending. This could be a good option for schools that do not have archived yearbooks.

Part 3: Assessment and reflection

After exploring the yearbooks students should be given time, likely outside of class, to reflect on what they encountered. Political participation and civic engagement are the key topics of the assignment, so reflections should consider examples of these in action. Students should think through the issues and the approaches they observed throughout the books. As this political participation is only going to be part of what they witness, students should also consider the continuity and changes they observe on their campus, explaining what it means to be a student on this campus. Encourage students to take pictures of the books, or screenshots of digital versions to include in their reflections, making sure to take notes of page numbers and years. These images will help draw the attention of other students.

Students can do these reflections in a number of ways, but online message boards such as those found on Canvas, can be a great location. The ability to be able to see the reflections of other students will expose them to more content and help them see things from a different perspective. Students can comment on posts they find interesting with thoughts or questions about the content. Alternatively, students might submit a short reflection paper or a presentation about their experience.

Once students have had time for their own reflection and to consider the thoughts of their peers, a class discussion could help deepen the learning. These questions could also be included in the assessment section for students to answer.

Discussion Questions:

1. What issues did students care about?
2. How did students engage in political participation and/or civic engagement?
3. What has stayed the same on campus?
4. What has changed on campus?
5. What lessons can contemporary student activists learn from the past examples?
6. Was there anything that made you proud to be a student at this university?
7. Was there anything that disappointed you about the university's past?
8. What are we losing when these books stop being published?

vi. Conclusion

College yearbooks provide students with an opportunity to learn about student activism through a familiar lens. Students see the actions of previous generations and the issues that defined their activism. Young people are often criticized for their political apathy, but yearbooks can show

examples of activism in the past that demonstrate that students have a voice they can share to make a difference in our political system.

This assignment also encourages students to learn more about their university, hopefully strengthening their connection to the institution. This goal could have further implications for students as institutional commitment is strongly correlated with retention (Tinto 2007). Students will be exposed to both positive and negative aspects of the university's past and so should be encouraged to interrogate how this impacts today's university experience.

Finally, this assignment gives students hands-on experience working with archival data. Students can strengthen their qualitative analysis skills and gain experience working in the library and potentially meeting librarians who could become valuable resources for their academic career. Yearbooks are not the only archived student record that could be used. Student newspapers are still prominent on campuses and often have some major articles or issues from the past archived. Ultimately, the use of student media provides a different perspective than more professional sources might. Students should think through what this means for the sources they are observing. It may not give them a complete picture of an historic event, but it presents it from an angle that is relevant and familiar to them.

This lesson was very successful when I used it in class. I hope to be able to teach it again to a bigger class, my initial attempt only had seven students. When I do this, I plan on including a survey to see if some of these broad learning goals have been met. I believe that this lesson can serve students beyond the classroom, so I hope to find evidence to support this claim.

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