

Teaching Research Methods Through Residential Learning Communities

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Abstract: Learning communities have been implemented in colleges and universities across the country in an effort to enhance the learning experience for undergraduate students. Scholars have noted the potential for these communities to help students build skills outside of the classroom as well as improve their performance inside the classroom. In this paper, we investigate the potential for learning communities to improve students' attitudes toward the oft-dreaded subject of research methods. In the fall 2022 and fall 2023 semesters, we conducted two large-scale research projects on college students' voting behavior in which students in a residential learning community participated as undergraduate study assistants. In addition, we surveyed students who had participated in various forms of research across three years of the learning community. We find that experiential exposure to social science has a moderate and positive effect on students' interest and propensity to study research methods.

Introduction

Political science undergraduate students often enter college with a healthy level of excitement for learning about and engaging with politics. The most engaged students often find ways to harness their passion through a variety of extracurricular activities, such as internships in the political world, politically minded clubs like college Democrats and Republicans, or participation in non-partisan organizations that seek to get out the vote come election time. Within the classroom, these students seek out courses where they feel they can learn the ins and outs of politics and government in preparation for careers in those arenas. Such students may find great intellectual benefits from the opportunity to critically engage with course materials in the classroom through discussion-based courses where they can engage with fellow students that share their interests. In this sense, students of political science are very keen to engage in the “political” side of the field.

It is the “science” side of political science in which undergraduate students tend to display a great deal of apprehension and, in many cases, an outright lack of interest. Although a course in the basics of social science research methods is standard practice across political science undergraduate programs, most students come into these programs with little understanding of what these courses entail or how research methods will provide any tangible benefit for their employment prospects post-graduation. In fact, research has shown that students tend to avoid taking methods courses or postpone them if they are a program requirement due to a general fear of the subject (Slocum-Schaffer and Bohrer 2021). This reality poses a problem for methodology instructors that scholars have addressed through a variety of tools outside of the traditional classroom lecture paradigm. These tools include, but are not limited to, games and role-playing, providing students with examples of exceptional work from previous students, and

incorporating data visualization as a key component of research methods pedagogy (Kollars and Rosen 2017; Murphy 2015; Rom 2015). These examples represent just a fraction of the innovations that scholars have incorporated in their classrooms to change students' negative attitudes toward research methods.

In this paper, we add to this literature by suggesting another venue in which students can be introduced to social science research methods outside of the classroom: the residential learning community (RLC). In the past several decades, colleges and universities have incorporated RLCs into their curricula as a means by which to provide students with an immersive learning experience that bridges the divide between the academic and extracurricular aspects of the college experience (Hurtado et al. n.d.). In doing so, institutions of higher learning seek to improve student outcomes by facilitating more meaningful relationships with fellow students and even faculty members. RLCs generally achieve these goals by having students engage in a variety of shared activities both within and outside the classroom. These can include living in the same dorm, taking the same courses, and participating in field trips to locations of interest to the political science student. As part of the movement in higher education to shift from passive modes of instruction to active modes of student engagement, scholars have often discussed the potential for RLCs to improve students' academic careers (Thies 2005).

Building on this literature, we argue that RLCs can also serve as an opportunity to improve students' perceptions of research methods. To do so, we draw from our own experiences conducting research projects in which students in an RLC acted as undergraduate research assistants. Through an experimental research design, we sought to test a variety of voter turnout messaging strategies to see which, if any, were effective at increasing undergraduates' turnout at a large public university in the 2022 midterm elections and the 2023 local elections in our home

state. Throughout the course of these projects, the undergraduate research assistants were exposed to the basic principles of social science research methods and were given the opportunity to engage with those methods through active participation outside of the classroom. After the projects were completed, we surveyed RLC students across multiple years to determine whether participation in these projects changed students' attitudes toward research methods in comparison to students who did not participate.

In the following sections, we present our case for the potential of RLCs as a tool to increase students' interest in research methods. First, we describe the existing literature on RLCs to highlight the potential for these institutions to incorporate research methods learning opportunities. Then, we describe the projects we carried out at our home institution as well as the role that RLC students played throughout the research process. Through a survey, we then compare the level of interest in research methods between RLC students who participated in the research projects and those who opted not to participate. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate the potential for projects like these to provide students with a positive experience with research methods that will set them on a path to success in their academic careers. We find that students who started out uninterested in research methods were generally unaffected by participation in these projects. However, students who demonstrated an interest in research methods were provided with a head start on learning these skills that was beneficial to them as they continued their college careers. For that reason, we see great potential for programs like these to improve student outcomes in the often-fraught area of methodological training.

Why Learning Communities?

As mentioned previously, the rise of learning communities in higher education is one facet of a larger movement toward the incorporation of alternative modes of teaching that can

address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. For many students, obtaining a college degree is a daunting endeavor. In addition to the new level of difficulty in class, many students are thrust into a new social situation divorced from their existing social ties and networks of support. Research has demonstrated that peer relationships among college students are positively associated with several measures of their academic success (Goguen, Hiester, and Nordstrom 2010). For students to thrive academically, colleges and universities must create institutions that provide students with the opportunity to build networks with both their peers and with faculty members. The purpose of RLCs is to assist students in building these networks and set them on the path toward academic success. For this reason, we see the learning community as a valuable tool that political science departments should utilize to minimize students' apprehensions over studying research methods.

In the broadest sense, learning communities have been defined as “groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning” (Cross 1998, 4). In the context of higher education, learning communities generally entail a group of students living together in the same dorm during the academic year. These students are generally connected by a common major or a shared interest within that major. Examples of learning community themes within political science include American politics, international relations, and pre-law. Throughout the year, students will engage in a variety of academic and extracurricular activities designed to foster a sense of community and collaboration. In many RLCs, students will take an introductory course together. Outside of the classroom, faculty may organize field trips to locations relevant to the students' field of interest. RLCs can also host workshops that teach students how to navigate aspects of the college experience they would not have otherwise learned about in the classroom. Learning communities can vary in their level of involvement with students, but they all share the

common goal of providing students with a more immersive educational experience that cannot be achieved through classroom instruction alone.

As mentioned previously, the inclusion of learning communities in colleges and universities represents a pedagogical shift in higher education that “abandons traditional passive modes of information delivery in favor of a variety of active approaches tailored to the needs of students” (Thies 2005, 130). Instructors across academic disciplines have recognized that focusing solely on classroom outcomes neglects the fact that student success is also a product of students’ larger support systems in their university community. RLCs are designed to create these systems for students in several ways. First, and arguably most importantly, RLCs exist to promote peer-to-peer relationships among students with shared academic interests. The importance of strong peer relationships among college students for their educational success has been well documented. In the first semester of college, making close friends is positively correlated with successfully adjusting to the new environment of a college campus (Swenson, Nordstrom, and Hiester 2008). RLCs help students forge these relationships by placing them in contact with like-minded peers. In doing so, RLCs provide students with the opportunity to engage in a collaborative learning experience. As the education system has moved away from a focus on simply imparting knowledge to giving students the tools needed to apply that knowledge, scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of active learning and collaboration among students in achieving these outcomes (Fisher, Frey, and Almarode 2020). When students learn in isolation, they are less likely to engage critically with the material and consider alternative perspectives. RLCs have been shown to be effective at encouraging students to build these relationships (Smith 2018). By working with their peers in projects outside of the

classroom, students can build the critical thinking and teamwork skills necessary for success in all aspects of their academic careers.

In addition to helping to form stronger connections between students, RLCs also have the potential to break down barriers between students and faculty in the university. Positive relationships between students and faculty members are a key predictor of student success in college (Rugutt and Chemosit 2009). Students who feel that they have a positive relationship with their professors are more likely to get higher grades and feel more confident in their ability to do well in their classes (Micari and Pazos 2012). Building these relationships can be a difficult endeavor, but one of the goals of RLCs is to do just that by providing opportunities for engagement between students and faculty outside of the classroom. Beyond academic success, students who engage in activities with their professors outside of the classroom are more likely to thrive in all aspects of the college experience (Zeller 2017). The inclusion of RLCs on college campuses allows students the chance to interact with faculty in ways they would not have been able to otherwise. Through events like field trips, academic workshops, or election watch parties, students in RLCs are given ample opportunities to interact with and build relationships with faculty members, which in turn increases students' investment in succeeding in their classes.

In summary, RLCs exist to build networks between students and faculty, foster greater collaboration among students, and reframe students' perceptions of how to obtain and produce knowledge. For these reasons, we see the RLC as an opportunity for political science departments to break the negative stigma that surrounds research methods in the eyes of many students. If students are given the opportunity to engage with research methods outside of the classroom and in collaboration with both their peers and faculty members, they will be more likely to succeed in their methodology coursework. In the following sections, we describe our

experience with conducting research projects where RLC students participated in both the planning and implementation of said projects. We hope that our experience can serve as a model for other institutions looking to incorporate opportunities for students to engage with research methods into their RLC curricula.

Incorporating Research Projects into RLC Curricula

In the fall 2022 and fall 2023 semesters, we conducted research projects investigating the effect of varying “get out the vote” (GOTV) stimuli at encouraging college students to vote.¹ The primary goal of these projects was to use an experimental research design to test several means of increasing voter turnout in a demographic group that traditionally votes at a lower rate than the electorate as a whole. The secondary goal was to provide students in a first-year RLC with the opportunity to gain hands-on experience with the planning and implementation of a large-scale research project. In this section, we detail the research projects as well as the role that the RLC students played in carrying out the research.

The first project, conducted in fall 2022, tested the effect of various modes of GOTV messaging on college students’ voting behavior through a survey field experiment. Members of the undergraduate student population were recruited to take part in the study by RLC students who acted as study assistants (SAs). The subjects were then asked to complete the survey that measured their likelihood of voting in the upcoming election as well as several demographic characteristics. Then, subjects were randomly divided into two treatments groups and a control group. Subjects in the first treatment group were contacted by an SA and were given the opportunity to have an in-person meeting where the SA would provide information on voting and

¹ Our university is located in a state where local elections take place in odd-numbered years. The 2022 project was conducted during the national midterm election, and the 2023 project was conducted during our state’s local legislative election.

voting registration. The second group received the same information through an email from our study team. The control group received no additional contact. After the election, we surveyed the study participants again to determine whether they voted and to assess the effect of each treatment on voting behavior. While this project proved to be an educational experience for the undergraduate SAs, we were ultimately unable to make inferences on the effect of the treatments due to a small sample size and attrition in participation from the pre- and post-election surveys (Victor, Bynion, and Jardina 2023).

The second project, carried in the fall 2023 semester, asked the same research question as the 2022 project, but we approached the question in a different way in response to the lessons learned from the previous experiment. To obtain a larger sample size, we reached out directly to all professors in the university teaching a course that semester. If a professor opted their class into the project, the students of those classes would then receive an email asking them to participate by reading an informed consent form and providing their name and basic demographic information. In this project, the subjects did not receive any other requests to complete a survey other than the initial consent form. Then, we randomized each class into two treatment groups and a control. In the first group, the undergraduate SAs conducted class visits in which they gave 5-minute partisan-neutral presentations on the importance of voting and how to register to vote. The second group of classes received an email with the same information. The control group received no further contact. Much like the first project, the goal of this project was to test the effectiveness of different modes of communication in encouraging students to vote. To avoid respondent attrition, we purchased our state's voter file from the local department of elections. We then matched the data collected from the project to the voter file and found a

positive and statistically significant effect from the class visits on students' propensity to vote (Bynion and Victor 2024; Victor and Bynion 2024).

In both of these research projects, the RLC students who volunteered as SAs were exposed to nearly every aspect of the research process. At the start of each semester, the students were required to attend a training session where they learned the basic principles of causal inference and the importance of randomization for drawing inferences in an experimental research design. The students also completed the university-mandated human subjects training course which is required for any researcher conducting research involving human subjects. We also emphasized the importance of avoiding the appearance of partisan bias when conducting the one-on-one meetings and class visits, as doing so would compromise the goal of increasing turnout for all students regardless of their partisanship. These projects gave RLC students the opportunity to engage with social science research outside of the classroom in advance of having to learn about it in the classroom. By learning research best practices and ethics, the students were able to work through the difficulties of creating and executing a sound research design. Finally, we were able to provide students with a hands-on example of using research methods to gain a deeper understanding of a topic many of them were already passionate about. We believe that incorporating projects that actively involve students into the roster of events for an RLC can positively impact students' experience with and attitudes toward research methods as they progress through their college careers.

To test this claim, we surveyed students who participated in the RLC across three academic years. The inaugural year of this RLC was 2021, but it did not include a research project like those conducted in 2022 and 2023. This provides an opportunity to compare attitudes toward research methods between students who participated in a research project and those who

did not. We asked students how interested they are in social science research methods, and we also asked if their experience in the RLC affected their attitudes toward research methods. We also asked if and when they plan to take GOVT 300, the required research methods course for all government majors. We hypothesize that students who participated in one of the research projects will be more likely to have a high interest in research methods and will take GOVT 300 sooner than those who did not participate in any project.

Results

In total, 80 students responded to our survey. 19 of these respondents were enrolled in the RLC in 2021 (no research project), 27 in 2022 (the first research project), and 34 in 2023 (the second research project). Altogether, 29 of the 80 respondents had volunteered as study assistants in one of the two research projects.

We used two measures to gauge participants' level of interest in research methods—one quantitative and one qualitative. The quantitative measure was gathered using a survey question that asked students, "In general, how interested would you say you are in learning about social science research methods?"² We used a fixed ordinal scale for responses to this question: Not at all interested, Ambivalent, Somewhat interested, and Highly interested. Treating these responses as a numeric scale of low to high where "Not at all interested" is 1 and "Highly interested" is 4, we calculate the mean of this variable across all 80 respondents (mean = 2.9, sd = 0.8). Then we estimate a t-test of the mean of this measure among those who served as Study Assistants and those who did not. The results are reported in Table 1 and show that while Study Assistants have a higher mean score on this scale, the difference between the groups is not statistically significant.

² To avoid indicating the true intent of the survey, we also asked respondents their level of interest in internships, study abroad, international politics, and democratic theory.

1 T-test of discrete quantitative self-interest score across study assistants and non-assistants

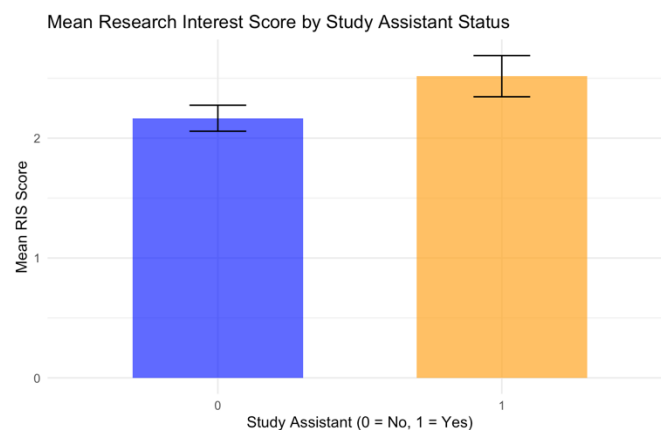
	MEAN DISCRETE RANK	T-SCORE	DF	P-VALUE
STUDY ASSISTANTS = 0	2.88	- 0.45	60	0.653
STUDY ASSISTANTS = 1	2.97			

Next, to more concretely assess the relationship between RLC participation and interest in studying social science research methods, we used an open-ended, qualitative question on the survey in which students were given space to express their attitudes about studying research methods. We asked, “How did your experiences in [RLC name] affect your level of interest in social science research methods? What experiences, if any, were most impactful?” This was an open-ended question where students could write as much or as little as they wanted. To quantify these responses, each co-author independently coded each response as 1 (no effect or negative effect), 2 (moderate effect), or 3 (positive effect). We averaged the scores applied by each researcher and called the result the Research Interest Score (RIS). Across all 80 respondents, the mean of the Research Interest Score is 2.29 and the standard deviation is 0.45. We calculated the mean RIS for students who were Study Assistants and those who were not and calculated a t-test across these groups. The results are in Table 2 and show that Student Assistants have a slightly higher, and statistically significant, Research Interest Score compared to students who did not serve as Study Assistants.

2 T-test of qualitative mean Research Interest Score across study assistants and non-assistants

	MEAN RIS	T-SCORE	DF	P-VALUE
STUDY ASSISTANTS = 0	2.16	- 3.38	50	0.001
STUDY ASSISTANTS = 1	2.52			

We represent this finding in the following visualization. The graph shows that Study Assistants have a slightly higher mean Research Interest Score than non-Study Assistants. We do not, however, wish to overstate this finding. While both the discrete quantitative and qualitative measures of research interest were higher among Study Assistants than non-Study Assistants, the differences are small. The difference was statistically significant in the index derived from the qualitative score and insignificant in the discrete scores. Altogether, this is a small-N study, despite covering three-years' worth of RLC student participants.



Because the small sample size of our survey limits our ability to make sweeping causal claims, we also examined the open-ended responses on how students' experience in the RLC affected their interest in research methods to uncover a fuller picture of our students' takeaways from their experience participating in experimental research. For several students, these projects made them more aware of what college level research entails, which helped to prepare them for writing their own research papers. One student who participated in the first voter turnout project said the following:

[RLC name] gave me a better idea of what research actually is. In High School, research to me was finding articles on Google. But through [RLC name] and its associated courses, I got to develop an appreciation for research and an interest in uncovering research questions relevant to my academic/professional interests. I also took GOVT319, the Voter Turnout

Experiment course, which gave me a substantial amount of base knowledge for research and R Studio that has been invaluable to me in navigating through GOVT300.

Like many college freshmen, this student began their studies with a conception of writing research papers that did not incorporate the scientific method. By providing them with a tangible example of a research project that answered a clearly defined research question with a methodology tailored to answer that question in a manner that attempts to exclude other explanations, we demonstrated the importance of a rigorous methodology in answering questions of interest. By doing so early and outside of the classroom, we believe that we helped these students start their college careers ahead of the curve and equipped with the tools to excel in research when they reach classes that require those skills.

For some students, participation in these projects made the research process less daunting in their minds. When asked how the RLC affected their interest in research methods, one student said the following: “Most impactful: election study. Made research seem accessible.” Another student shared that “I definitely became more interested, because I don’t think I quite understood how social science research was conducted before [participating in the RLC].”

Accessibility is a key reason for implementing projects like these. When students are shown the importance of methodology in answering questions about topics they are already passionate about (for example, student voting), they will be more likely to take an interest in research methods. As a supplement to classroom teaching, RLC-led research projects can be used as tools to increase interest and give students practical experience with research tools and practices. Relatedly, they can also be useful in showing students how gaining research skills can aid them in college and in their future careers. One student from the first project found it to be helpful in that regard:

The voter turnout experiment during my freshman year was excellent! I was very lucky to have been part of it and it opened me up to statistical research and analysis, and introduced me to the use of coding software like R which I have since used in multiple other classes. Being involved in the experiment was something I've been able to talk about in interviews, in classes, and have been able to use the survey skills I gained in other areas of my college career. Besides that, the multiple speakers and workshops organized at [RLC] have also been very impactful.

In this instance, not only did the student learn new skills early in their college career, but they were able to take those skills and use them to advance their career goals well before graduation. Without the opportunity to participate in this project, they may not have gained these skills until later into their college careers. In other words, participation in projects like these gives students a competitive edge when the time comes to enter the job market and/or apply for graduate school.

Not every student indicated that this experience increased their interest in research methods. Several students wrote that the projects did not do much to increase their interest. In fact, one student indicated being in the RLC helped them realize their interests may lie elsewhere, saying that “It was definitely interesting! However, it helped me realize that I am not quite interested in Government and Politics, but more so the legal aspect.” In this instance, the student’s experience with political science helped them realize that they may want to pursue a different career path. In this sense, participation in extracurricular research projects can also be useful for students looking to clarify their academic and/or career goals. We recognize that many of our students may be looking for careers where social science research methods would not be particularly useful. When students are given the chance to engage with these methods early in their college careers, this experience can also have the effect of showing them that other paths may be better suited to their capabilities and interests. Therefore, we see the inclusion of research projects in RLC curricula as useful in different ways for different students. For students who show an interest in research methods, these projects give them the chance to develop research

skills early in their careers and apply them in their coursework and beyond into the job market. For those whose interests lie elsewhere, these projects allow them to discover that fact quickly and dedicate their time in college to pursuits that are better suited to their goals. The results presented here demonstrate the potential for these projects to set students on the path to success from the start of their college careers.

Discussion

We cannot rule out the strong possibility that students who opted to voluntarily participate in the voting projects were more interested in research methods not because of the RLC activity but because these students were already inclined toward research or high impact academic activities. Participating in the RLC may provide such students an outlet for their interests rather than generating novel interest in research methods. However, anecdotally, the students who participated in the voter project in 2022 and went on to take the formal research methods course the following year, appeared to be significantly better prepared than the typical student in that class. While we do not have a systematic account of this effect, years of teaching research methods to resistant students gave me the reference point to sense that things shifted after the RLC was offering this content. We have spoken with students who expressed that the RLC voter projects put them on a path to data oriented political science in ways they did not expect and now greatly appreciate.

Running an RLC that gives first-year students experiential opportunities to set up their college careers for success is rewarding, but costly. The department that hosts the RLC invests considerable resources for these programs. There is a full-time professional staff member who helps to administer the RLCs and interface with the residential life staff, plus other part-time staff who do logistics, purchasing, planning, and advertising for the programs. The faculty

director is compensated for time spent on the RLC with a stipend and course release, which means non-RLC students pay a cost in the form of course opportunity costs. Students who participate report strongly positive feedback about their experiences, particularly for building community and strong relationships among their cohort and with faculty. But such programs can only be successful with the resources and support of administrative units that seek to support RLC needs.

For colleges and universities who can bear those costs, we highly recommend incorporating RLCs into their undergraduate programs. From our experience, they are effective at building a sense of community among students and faculty that is essential for ensuring student success. However, they can also provide tangible benefits for the departments and universities that implement them. When students feel a greater sense of connection to their fellow students, they are likely to share that same feeling for their school at large. If students see improved academic outcomes as a result of being part of a community like-minded peers in college, they are likely to view their institution more favorably, a feeling they might carry with them long after graduation. By fostering a sense of school pride and loyalty, learning communities have the potential for long-term payoff in terms of alumni support for the university. Additionally, the academic improvements that learning communities provide can serve to bolster the reputations of the departments that incorporate them into their programs. In our experience, RLC students are better prepared and more excited to learn as a result of their time spent interacting with other students and faculty outside of the classroom. This observation is why we decided to incorporate research projects into our RLC program, and the results have been rewarding for both the students and faculty involved.

Conclusion

In summary, residential learning communities have been shown to be effective at improving a variety of student outcomes. Here, we add to this literature by sharing our experience teaching students about research methods by involving them in research projects outside of the classroom. In doing so, we provided students with exposure and training on the basics of methods, which gave them a head start when it came time to encounter such topics in the classroom. Moreover, students were shown how a sound methodology can be used to answer questions on topics that they are passionate about, which served to demystify the topic of methodology in many students' minds. While we are limited in our ability to make a sweeping causal claim, our student survey found that many RLC students benefitted from their participation in these research projects. Therefore, we believe that institutions of higher education can improve student outcomes by incorporating RLCs into their undergraduate programs. Individual departments should weigh the relative costs and benefits of doing so, but we have found that learning communities build a strong community among students that aids them in succeeding in their academic pursuits. For that reason, we see great potential for these communities to help students excel in traditionally difficult subject areas like research methods.

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