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ABSTRACT

There is a growing movement in academia that focuses on increased efforts at undergraduate research. Historically, this movement has been driven by faculty in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and has only recently become a focus for social sciences in general and political science in particular. For students to be successful at conducting undergraduate research, they should be exposed to it as soon as they are ready. This requires exposing students to undergraduate research in the freshmen and sophomore years. There is no reason this exposure should be limited to four-year institutions. To that end, a new journal has been created for students in political science and other social science courses at two-year colleges so they can be recognized for their undergraduate research. *The Social Science Text and Academic Research (STAR) Journal* is a peer/faculty-reviewed journal limited to students at two-year colleges.

KEYWORDS

High impact practices; mentorship; publication; two-year colleges; undergraduate research

Consider the following list of high impact practices from the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2017):

- First-Year Experiences
- Common Intellectual Experiences
- Learning Communities
- Writing-Intensive Courses
- Collaborative Assignments and Projects
- Undergraduate Research
- Diversity/Global Learning (e.g., study abroad)
- Service Learning, Community-Based Learning
- Internships
- Capstone Courses and Projects

Any of these practices can be incorporated into political science courses. Not all, though, would be appropriate at every level. It would be logically impossible, for example, to introduce a first-year experiences course in any year other than a student's first year. It would be equally illogical to teach a capstone course in a student's first year and, while not impossible, it would be difficult and perhaps ill-advised to introduce internships too early in a student's academic career. All of the others could fairly easily be taught, with appropriate adaptations, at any level of a student's education from his/her first year up to, and perhaps including, his/her doctoral thesis.

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To date, most research regarding undergraduate research is about four-year universities and most undergraduate research also takes place at four-year institutions. Undergraduate research at two-year colleges, though real, is underappreciated and understudied. This article will argue for the importance of starting undergraduate research when students are still within their first two-years of college in general and when they are at two-year colleges in particular. This article will also give an illustration of what quality undergraduate research might look like at two-year colleges. Finally, it will provide information about a new journal that faculty at two-year colleges can use to motivate students and reward them for their efforts while, at the same time, exposing students to virtually every aspect of the research process.

Although undergraduate research has a long history, it has only been fairly recently that it has been formalized and organized as it is now. In 1978 the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) formed and in 2000 merged with the National Council on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) which was formed in 1987. Since then, CUR's membership and influence have continued to grow. Today, CUR has members in more than 900 colleges and universities throughout the United States (CUR 2017).

A quick look at the history of undergraduate research in the United States easily shows that the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields were generally early adopters of undergraduate research. The first undergraduate research program in the United States was at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Despite its early growth in the STEM fields, though, there is a growing body of literature that shows how undergraduate research can be useful and beneficial in non-STEM fields (Stanford et al. 2015). Stanford et al. (2015), for example, followed 900 students and 300 faculty members spread across STEM and non-STEM fields and found similar gains in retention and learning gains. Stanford's study reviewed 12 years worth of data at one, four-year institution. By focusing on one institution, they were able to control for variables such as differences in demographics and faculty training.

There are at least two reasons political science programs have fallen behind their natural science counterparts in terms of offering students opportunities to conduct undergraduate research. One reason is that many/most political science faculty do not have a lot of experience themselves doing what one may perceive as hands-on field research. A second answer is that the natural sciences tend to follow an apprentice-mode, or mentor-student mode, of learning that does not have a long history in political science departments (Rand 2016). Most political science faculty are probably more comfortable with the sage on the stage mode of teaching than the guide on the side mode. For many/most political science faculty, their only exposure to a political science mentor was the chair of their doctoral dissertation.

Regarding hands-on research, studying campaigns, branches of the government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or concepts such as justice and freedom, for example, are things political science postgraduate programs generally study from afar; they tend to be sources of theoretical or statistical exploration rather than hands-on experiences. Political science college and university faculty, then, tend to be poorly trained at conducting the type of hands-on field research their natural science counterparts are comfortable conducting and teaching. The exception, here, may be that those faculty whose studies used qualitative research methods as opposed to theoretical inquiry or quantitative research methods. Faculty with significant, quantitative research experience may be quite

comfortable guiding students through internships, study abroad, and service/community learning projects, for example.

By no means, though, does this give political science faculty an excuse to not have their undergraduate students conducting undergraduate research. It merely means that political science faculty may have to get out of their comfort zones or find ways to provide their students with hands-on opportunities to learn what the faculty are comfortable teaching. Internships, study abroad, and service-learning/community-learning projects may be the ideal methods for getting political science undergraduates “into the field” and may be excellent ways to expose students to undergraduate research. Most high-impact practices are not mutually exclusive. Faculty members who are comfortable having their students do these types of high-impact practices will better serve their students if they help their students realize that these activities are part of the research spectrum. Students should be encouraged to write about, and even publish, their field research—be it an internship, study abroad, or service-learning/community-learning project.

It may be far more difficult to get student hands-on experiences with theoretical or quantitative research. Here is where college and university political science faculty may have to model the natural sciences apprentice-mode of teaching. They may have to be willing to work more closely with students on assignments/projects where, historically, a close collaboration has not been done. They will have to trust that undergraduates have the skills needed to conduct such theoretical or statistical research. This trust, actually, may be the hardest part for college and university faculty who do not want to set their students up for failure. No matter how much faculty may be willing to work with students (or even mentor/apprentice them), the final project of the undergraduate research ultimately has to be the responsibility of their students.

Achieving research skills takes time and practice; it takes trial and error. This is why the sooner faculty can expose undergraduates to research, the better. A good undergraduate research program will not wait until students are juniors and seniors; it will expose them to undergraduate research as freshmen and sophomores. At many/most four-year institutions the ability to form mentorships with students at the freshmen and sophomore levels, though, may be limited due to larger than average class sizes. This is one advantage two-year colleges often have over their four-year counterparts.

An effort at developing these skills within the first two years is beginning to take place in a handful of community colleges across the nation. Just as graduate and undergraduate research takes many different forms, the diversity of our community colleges are excellent places to teach the diversity of research skills needed for later, more advanced, undergraduate (and graduate and postgraduate and postdoctoral) research.

Diversity of research methods is ensured given the diversity of interest and skill of both two-year college faculty and students. Two-year college faculty are more likely than their four-year counterparts to have to be generalists, rather than specialists, where they teach courses in American politics, political theory, international relations/global politics, and comparative politics. Two-year college faculty, then, are likely to have a broad range of knowledge regarding different research methods that they bring to their teaching. Likewise, students at two-year colleges are likely gaining their first exposure to the diversity of the political science field has to offer. They have not likely picked what may (or may not) become an emphasis for themselves.

When it comes to the diversity of quality teaching of undergraduate research, two-year college faculty working with students can focus on, for example, the quality of research

methods or the quality of content (or both). To determine if a submission to the *STAR Journal* is of a high enough quantity to pass the peer-review process, editors are encouraged to recognize there are different ways to expose students to quality, undergraduate research—especially early in a student’s academic career. An assignment that requires students to write a research paper and gives students very little flexibility regarding topics or sources in order to ensure *quality of content* is given equal consideration to a research assignment where students have more flexibility regarding topic or sources as long as the *quality of the research methods* is of the highest quality.

Some faculty may focus on quality of content and other faculty may focus on the quality of research methods. The more exposure to both within the first two years of a student’s academic career will help them build the skill sets they need to conduct research in later years that is both high in quality in terms of content *and* method.

Beyond the advantage of smaller introductory class sizes, two-year college faculty generally face more obstacles to incorporating undergraduate research into their courses than their four-year counterparts. For example, two-year college faculty generally carry larger teaching loads. Their student body, being generally more academically diverse, are likely to have more students with less exposure to research methodology and more students who may not be “college ready.” Faculty who are hired to “teach-first” are not likely to prioritize their own research. Colleges with higher adjunct-to-full time faculty may find it difficult to commit to undergraduate research programs. Students at two-year colleges are more likely to have diverse abilities, interests, and motivations. While these obstacles are real, they can all be overcome with either institutional or individual commitments.

In an effort to help overcome obstacles related to student interests and motivation, Anoka-Ramsey Community College has created a new journal specifically for political science and other social science students at two-year institutions so they can be recognized for their undergraduate research. The *STAR Journal* was launched at star-journal.org in 2017 as a venue to recognize outstanding undergraduate research in political science and other social sciences.

STAR Journal accepts a diverse range of undergraduate research methods and encourages diverse forms of pedagogy. Submissions can be based on theoretical, qualitative, or quantitative, research. While the quality of submissions published is ensured through a peer-reviewed process, the understanding is that this is possibly, if not probably, the students’ first exposure to undergraduate research.

STAR Journal not only encourages exposing students to undergraduate research early in their careers, it exposes them to the peer-review process early on as well. The members of the editorial board are encouraged to not only review submissions themselves, but have their students help with the process. This can be done in a number of ways. They may have specific students they work with who they want to pull into the process. To this end, they may provide students with the anonymous manuscript and the same rubric they use to grade submissions. Other faculty may take a submission and the preapproved rubric and create a class assignment where entire classes review submitted manuscripts. A third option could be for faculty-editors who are teaching research methods courses—which are growing in popularity at two-year colleges—to incorporate the review process with the course as part of an assignment. This is just a partial list of potential ways faculty-reviewers can draw students into the peer review process and help them build the skills necessary for their own future research.

Political science departments at two-year colleges should expand the exposure they provide students to undergraduate research. This will give students an earlier opportunity to learn and develop the skills they will need for further academic research. *STAR Journal*, which plans to publish its first edition forthcoming, gives faculty an opportunity to help motivate students to get excited about undergraduate research, gives students a chance to be recognized for their research, and helps expose students to the peer-review process.

Notes on contributor

Matthew Schuster is a professor of political science at Anoka-Ramsey Community College with campuses in Coon Rapids and Cambridge, Minnesota. His main areas of interest are political theory, environmental politics, and contemporary political issues.

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