

# **TEACHING UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH METHODS WITHOUT A RESEARCH METHODS COURSE**

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# Challenges Discussed in Last Year's "Teaching Research Methods" Track:

- Unprepared and unmotivated students
- Uncertainty about optimal teaching approaches
- Growing culture of assessment
- *Variable integration of the methods course into the curricula of specific departments*

(from Moderator Kim Hill's notes of our discussion)

# Purpose of Presentation

- To address this last challenge:

*Variable integration of the methods course into the curricula of specific departments*

# Background

## *University of St. Thomas*

- Liberal arts, comprehensive regional university
- 5,500 undergraduate students

# Background

## *Political Science Department*

- Four full-time faculty, covering the subfields of American politics, Judicial politics, Political Theory, and International/Comparative politics
- 130 majors and minors
- Many more of our majors attend law school than graduate school

# Overview of Curriculum

- POLS 105: Politics and Govt in Comparative Perspective
- POLS 205: Intro to American Public Policy Process
- POLS 225: Intro to World Politics
- POLS 275: Intro to Political Thought
- Four 300-level courses in at least two subfields
- One 400-level seminar in one of the subfields
- One elective course
- (And as of 2008, POLS 101: American Government)

# Research Methods?

- Basic data analysis covered in introductory course, with small-scale research paper (varies by professor)
- Primarily taught within American Politics subfield
  - Intro to American Public Policy Process (required)
  - American Political Behavior
  - Women and Politics
  - Seminar in American Politics (required)

# Introduction to American Public Policy Process

- Develop hypotheses, run bivariate and multivariate analyses in SPSS
- Interpret public opinion polls (basics of sampling, margins of error)
- Learn to become critical consumers of statistics used in public policy debates (Best)
- Problem-based learning (enhances critical-thinking and research abilities)

# American Political Behavior

- Students conduct collaborative research project in groups
- Each group conducts its own focus group of UST students (same topic, same questioning route)

# American Political Behavior: Class Research Project

Project consists of *individual work ...*

- Developing hypotheses
- Literature review assignment
- Writing potential focus group questions
- Development of survey questions after analysis of transcript
- Writing research paper

# American Political Behavior: Class Research Project

*...and group work*

- Conducting focus group
- Transcribing
- Presenting transcript to rest of class

# Women and Politics

- Less integration of research methods, as many non-majors take this course
- Students conduct intensive interviews with a woman involved in politics, analyze their transcript of the interview, and write a paper
- Brief coverage of qualitative research techniques and analysis

# Seminar in American Politics

- Seminar = capstone course, with a particular focus (Mass Media and Politics)
- Students use Lexis-Nexis to conduct a content analysis of newspaper coverage of a particular event or issue (primary data analysis)
- Students write research papers analyzing print media coverage of their topic

# Seminar in American Politics: Research Paper

- Format = journal article
- Draft of paper required but not graded
- Draft returned one week later, as part of an individual conference to discuss paper (one month prior to due date)
- Abstracts circulated among students
- Conference presentations during last class session, with discussion of papers as part of presentation grade

# Strategies and Challenges

- + Research methods integrated into course material
- Certain conceptual shortcuts due to time constraints

# Strategies and Challenges

- + Reinforcement of concepts and skills throughout courses
- Students who take one course or courses out of recommended sequencing do not benefit

# Strategies and Challenges

- + Consistency of methods covered, as I am the sole instructor of these four courses
- Approach to data analysis and research paper varies in intro course

# Strategies and Challenges

- + Many students have written excellent research papers in *American Political Behavior* and *Seminar in American Politics*, and have presented their work at regional and state conferences
- Other students suffer from senioritis and do not write excellent papers (timing)

# Thoughts on Assessment

- Course evaluations
- Specific project evaluations
  - Problem-based learning in American Public Policy Process
  - Class research project in American Political Behavior
- As part of departmental assessment
  - At least 90 % of seminar papers will receive a grade of C or better
  - At least 20 % of seminar papers will be suitable for submission as writing sample for graduate school
  - Quiz on interpreting public opinion polls at end of American Public Policy Process

# Plans for Assessment

- Incorporate more peer-evaluations, peer review of research papers
- “Forward-looking assessment” (Fink, 2003)  
*What do I want students to be able to do with the knowledge acquired in this class?*
- Need to improve tracking of students after graduation (anecdotal evidence of importance of research methods)