

**2013 Professional Development Grant Final Report**

**A Natural Disaster of Civic Proportions:  
A Comparative Study of Two Southern Universities**

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annual meeting Friday, August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

## **Restatement of Research Problem**

With ATU professional development grant funding, I was able to a) hire a student worker in the Spring and again in the Fall 2013 to do data entry of pre- and post-test affective and cognitive assessments of ATU students taking POLS 2003-American Government, as well as b) present the initial findings from the Spring 2013 semester at the 109<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. This funding has enabled me to gain insight and begin to answer the following questions:

1. What is the civic literacy of ATU students as they enter the general education course on American Government? What affect does a one semester, American Government course have on the civic literacy of ATU students?
2. What is the typical level of political engagement of ATU students as they enter American Government? What effect, positive or negative, does one semester of American Government have on the likely future engagement of ATU students?
3. What level of interest do ATU students show for politics? How does taking a one semester course on American Government affect the level of interest ATU students show for politics?

Essentially, the goal is to measure what impact and amount of change a one semester course on American Government in college typically can have on a student's civic literacy, civic engagement, and civic interest.

## **Review of the Professional Enhancement Project**

Through the professional development grant, I was able to attend the 109<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA). This is the national conference for political scientists. This is typically the single largest political science conference in the US (and often world), it draws an international crowd, and had over 1,000 panels and meetings in 2013 making it the ideal environment for networking, learning the latest going on in the field of political science, and generally allowing for engagement in the discipline.

For this conference, I had submitted a panel proposal for a proposed edited volume on civic education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that I am assembling. The panel was accepted and I served as chair and presented two papers (one as solo author and one as co-author on it (see [http://www.apsanet.org/mtgs/program\\_2013/program.cfm?event=1594958](http://www.apsanet.org/mtgs/program_2013/program.cfm?event=1594958)).

Through attendance at this conference, I was able to accomplish three important goals. First, it created a deadline for the panelists to produce a draft of their proposed chapter manuscripts for the edited volume. I now have drafts of 8 of the over 20 proposed chapter manuscripts as a result. Second, it gave me the opportunity to market the proposed volume to a wide audience of political scientists and leading publishers in the discipline. In fact, our panel was well attended (25-30 audience members) and that I was able to find a respected publisher (Lexington Books, a subsidiary of Rowman & Littlefield) that has sense offered me a book contract for it. Third, I was able to solicit additional manuscript proposals for the edited volume. In fact, I have two additional manuscripts as a result of the panel and my presentation at APSA in August.

At the conference, I was also able to participation in a Working Group on Young People's Politics. This enabled me to network with an international group of scholars (many are from Europe) interested in civic engagement, as well as meet Peter Levine—a leading scholar in the field and director of the most prominent organization dealing with civic education and engagement, CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement). Needless to say, what I accomplished in the professional development activity exceeded my expectations. I confidently conclude this was a highly successful professional development activity.

## Summary of Findings

While I am still working with a co-author to draft the manuscript for the edited volume to do the comparative analysis between ATU students and those at Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas, I do have preliminary findings on ATU students for the Spring and Fall 2013. With the professional development grant funds, I was able to hire two advanced ATU political science majors, one to do the data entry for 60 hours in the Spring and another to do 60 more hours in the Fall. Combined, they entered the data from a pre- and post-test on political literacy and engagement for 350 ATU students taking American Government during the Spring and Fall 2013. Below are the data results for the 227 ATU students who completed both the pre- and post-test. Table 1 provides a summary of the change in civic literacy from pre- to post-test assessment, while Table 2 shows a summary of the change in affective measures.

<b>Question</b>	<b>Pre-Test</b>	<b>Post-Test</b>	<b>Change (+/-)</b>
What do the stars on the U.S. flag represent?	94.71%	96.48%	+1.77
What do the stripes on the U.S. flag represent?	70.04%	74.89%	+4.85
How many states are in the United States?	87.67%	92.95%	+5.28
Who did the U.S. fight in the Revolutionary War?	65.2%	73.57%	+8.37
Who is the current President of the U.S.?	98.68%	99.56%	+0.88
Who is the current Vice President of the U.S.?	64.76%	74.01%	+9.25
Who elects the President of the United States?	51.98%	68.72%	+16.74
What is the highest law of the land?	48.02%	40.97%	-7.05
What do we call a change to the U.S. Constitution?	58.59%	71.37%	+12.78
How many changes to the U.S. Constitution are there?	11.01%	19.82%	+8.81
What are the 3 branches of government?	47.14%	73.57%	+26.43
	(1.99)	(2.58)	(+.59)
• Executive	59.74%	83.70%	+23.96
• Judicial	76.21%	90.75%	+14.54
• Legislative	65.2%	83.70%	+18.5
Who makes the laws governing the U.S.?	57.71%	71.37%	+13.66
How many U.S. Senators are there in Congress?	42.73%	61.67%	+18.94
Who are your currently elected Senators?	3.52%	8.81%	+5.29
• Could name one senator	(11.01%)	(28.19%)	(+17.18)
How many members are there in the U. S. House of Representatives?	1.32%	16.3%	+14.98
Who is your current representative to the U.S. House?	6.17%	14.1%	+7.93

What is the responsibility of the U.S. Supreme Court?	28.63%	40.87%	+12.24
What is the Bill of Rights?	34.08%	51.1%	+17.02
Who is the current Governor of your state?	44.49%	54.19%	+9.7
Who is your current local mayor, city manager?	25.98%	26.9%	+9.2
Who becomes president if pres. & VP die in office?	25.99%	53.74%	+27.75
Who is the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court?	6.61%	24.23%	+17.62
Who is the current Speaker of the U.S. House of Rep.?	9.25%	25.99%	+16.74
Who is the current Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate?	3.52%	8.81%	+5.29
What is the minimum voting age in the U.S.?	93.93%	96.48%	+2.55
What are the 5 rights in the First amendment?	.88%	12.78%	+11.9
	(1.34)	(2.41)	(+1.07)
• Name freedom of speech	56.83%	77.97%	+21.14
• Name freedom of press	24.67%	52.86%	+28.19
• Name freedom of religion	31.28%	58.15%	+26.87
• Name freedom of petition	8.37%	19.82%	+11.45
• Name freedom of assembly	13.66%	33.48%	+19.82
Citizenship score (33 possible correct answers)	13.83	17.93	+4.1
	(41.91%)	(54.33%)	(+10.13)
Score out of 26 (counts 3 multi-part questions as worth only 1 point each)	10.83	13.53	+2.7
	(41.65%)	(52.04%)	(10.39)
Number of Answers left completely blank	13.62	9.39	-4.23

From the above table, one can begin to answer the first research question. Based on these two semesters of results, it is apparent that the civic literacy of our ATU students is disturbingly low entering the course, which is consistent with more general studies of American civic literacy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Niemi 2012; ISI 2006, 2007-2008, 2008-2009). Then, the numbers show that one semester of college American Government has a significant impact on the average ATU student's civic literacy. In general, it raises their cognitive score on a civics exam by over a letter grade (plus 10.13 percentage points on the citizenship score or plus 10.39 percentage points on the score out of 26 questions). While this is a significant improvement, unfortunately it is still not a passing score. On average, ATU students move from scoring a 41% on the exam to in the low to mid 50s. In a more positive light, it should be noted that students improved on all questions except one. "What is the highest law of the land?" is the only question that showed a loss of knowledge from pre- to post-test. The change in scores ranged from -7.05

to +28.19. In particular, the number of students who could a) name all three branches of government (47.14% to 73.57%) , b) name all five rights in the first amendment (.88% to 12.78%), and identify current political officials increased significantly.

<b>Table 2: Affective Measures</b>			
<b>Question</b>	<b>Pre-Test</b>	<b>Post-Test</b>	<b>Change (+/-)</b>
Voted?	49.34%	48.46%	-.7
Volunteered for a campaign?	5.73%	5.73%	0
Volunteered in the community?	58.15%	62.56%	+4.41
Engaged in a protest?	.88%	3.52%	+2.64
Contacted a public official?	16.74%	18.5%	+1.76
Contributed money to a political campaign?	3.08%	4.41%	+1.33
Attended a local board meeting?	15.86%	20.26%	+4.4
Signed a petition?	48.02%	62.11%	+14.09
Likelihood of voting (1-5)?	1.42	1.31	-.11
Likelihood of volunteering for a political campaign (1-5)?	3.54	3.43	-.11
Likelihood of engaging in a political protest (1-5)?	1.75	1.60	-.15
Likelihood of volunteering in the community (1-5)?	3.47	3.34	-.04
Likelihood of contacting public officials?	2.78	2.67	-.11
Likelihood of contributing to a political campaign?	3.59	3.54	-.05
Likelihood of attending a local board meeting?	3.07	2.80	-.27
Likelihood of signing a petition?	2.11	1.87	-.24
How would you rate your interest in politics (1-5)	2.34	2.42	+.08
How much do you read the newspaper or watch the news (TV or on the Internet) (1-5)?	2.41	2.42	+.01
How often do you watch TV shows on politics (1-5)?	3.21	3.19	-.02
How often do you engage in a discussion about politics with friends (1-5)?	3.17	3.15	-.02
How often do you write an online message about politics (1-5)?	4.21	4.22	+.01
How often do you visit a political website (1-5)?	3.82	3.83	+.01
How effective do you think participatory politics (writing, protests, writing public officials, etc.) is in achieving policy change (1-5)?	2.19	2.07	-.12

From table 2, it is possible to provide some initial answers to questions 2 and 3 of the research project. Like the cognitive assessment, we see that the civic engagement and political beliefs and values are troublingly low but again on par with those typically found in youth and

the public generally. While the story of change in cognitive knowledge is positive and significant, the story of changes in the affective experiences, behavior and beliefs of ATU students is generally one of no significant change. Other than the +14.09 percentage points gain in signing a petition, the distribution in changes are small ranging from -.27 to +4.4. Interestingly, while many ATU students showed an increase in experience various types of civic engagement while in the class (engaged in protest, contacted public official, contributed money to a campaign, attended a local board meeting, or signed a petition), they collectively reported a slight decrease in likelihood of engaging in many of these activities in the future. Still, the declines in these likelihood questions are so MINIMAL, they generally suggest no change. Overall, the story seems to be that a one semester course in American Government does seem to introduce students to more types of political engagement than they typically have previously experienced, but it is not clear that it produces any long term increased likelihood that students will engage in the future.

When we combine data over more semesters at both schools and run regression analysis of the results, we will have more definitive findings. However, this gives an initial glimpse at the data collected and recorded using the funds provided through the professional development grant.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

To conclude, the attendance of the 109<sup>th</sup> APSA annual meeting was a highly productive professional development activity as it will lead to my first edited volume publication. Also, it helped me to add a new component to the assessment of ATU students, as the measure no investigates affective political behaviors and values while continuing to gather data on cognitive knowledge. Initially, the data suggests the real impact of a semester of American Government is

in the students' political literacy, but not their likelihood of civic engagement in the future. If the goal is to simply increase civic literacy, the way American Government is currently being taught at ATU seems to be successful. If the goal is also civic engagement, then the data suggests the pedagogical approach to American Government currently practice by ATU professors may need to be rethought to also encourage civic engagement.

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