

**Inspiring Students with a Town Hall Meeting Program:
A Quasi-Experimental Study**

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Abstract

This paper analyzes an original survey of student participants in a “Town Hall Meeting” (THM) learning project, integrated into the Introduction to American Politics course at CSU Fullerton. The THM program aims at improving student academic outcomes and dispositions toward civic engagement. Implications of the study for political science educators, the field of public opinion, and future research are discussed. In particular, we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a quasi-experimental design, whereby we are able to control for instructor effects but are unable to randomly assign students to treatment (THM) and control (non-THM) conditions.

Introduction

“As a democracy, the United States depends on a knowledgeable, public-spirited, and engaged population. Education plays a fundamental role in building civic vitality, and in the twenty-first century, higher education has a distinctive role to play in the renewal of US democracy...two-year and four-year colleges and universities offer an intellectual and public commons where it is possible not only to theorize about what education for democratic citizenship might require in a diverse society, but also to rehearse that citizenship daily in the fertile, roiling context of pedagogic inquiry and hands-on experiences.”

~The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. 2012. *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

The term civic engagement has become commonplace in mission statements of colleges and universities across the country. Upon invitation from the U.S. Department of Education, Global Perspective Institute, Inc. (GPI) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) formed a National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement to assess the state of education for democracy in higher education. In 2012, their report, *A Crucible Moment*, was a national call to action challenging higher educational institutions to prioritize and re-imagine their commitments to an old idea—civic education.

This renewed attention to civic education is in part an effort to counter the slow post-war decline in social capital and civic engagement (Putnam 2000, Skocpol 2003). It also responds to declining levels of voter participation and civic knowledge more generally (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). In the last decade, a number of organizations

have embraced civic education approaches of varying types: Campus Compact, a consortium of more than one-thousand universities and colleges; the American Democracy Project (ADP); the AAC&U's Core Commitments program; and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' Civic Indicators Project are just a few of the more prominent ones (Flanagan and Levine 2010).

Political science has been at the forefront of the development of higher education programs focused on civic engagement. For example, in 2013, the American Political Science Association (APSA) published *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, and recently in 2017, APSA published *Teaching Civic Engagement: Across the Disciplines*. These two edited volumes gather the work of political scientists and, most recently, scholars in related disciplines exploring a broad array of approaches for connecting students to public affairs in meaningful ways that leave lasting impressions. These books represent only a portion of the most recent culmination of a two-decade focus of the APSA on civic engagement, launched by the APSA's President Elinor Ostrom in 1996. In her presidential address that year, Ostrom launched a new APSA Task Force on Civic Education for the 21st Century (Task Force 1997). Since then there has been an explosion of activity in creating new ways to engage students in public affairs, through innovations in service learning and other pedagogies incorporated in political science courses and in broader campus initiatives (McCartney, Bennion and Simpson 2013, Preface). Despite the variety of approaches, a unifying theme is that political science, as a discipline, should take a leadership role in shaping new efforts to engage students in public affairs.

We argue that the introductory courses in American politics provide one of the most applicable conduits for these efforts. What could be more central to the mission of renewing attention to civic engagement in higher education than the involvement of political science faculty teaching introductory courses in American politics to millions of young people every year? At California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), several political science faculty teaching introductory American government courses have incorporated a Town Hall Meeting (THM) program as a conscious effort to make civic engagement a priority in their political science instruction. This program at CSUF was modeled after a similar program undertaken at California State University, Chico (CSUC) since 2007 and which was incorporated into CSUC's introductory American politics courses since 2009 (See Swiencicki et al. 2011). Previous research on both the CSUC and CSUF THM projects show that incorporating a THM component into the Introduction to American Politics course can have positive effects on academic performance, and less potent but still significant impacts on political motivation, political efficacy, and interest in continued civic engagement (Ertle & Weber 2010; Spitzer& Etheridge 2015; Spitzer, Weber, & Bhatia 2015).

This preliminary research on the THM, while exhibiting promising effects, has been inadequate in identifying how exactly this particular pedagogical innovation may produce heightened levels of academic engagement, political efficacy, and political interest. The preliminary research, more specifically, has several limitations. First, the observational nature of the survey research can confound instructor effects, leading to difficulties in distinguishing between the impact of the THM program and instructor effectiveness. Moreover, much of the large-scale survey research documenting civic outcomes for college students falls short of isolating a possible causal mechanism for producing the widely celebrated outcomes, and instead simply highlights interesting correlations among key variables of interest. In other words, we may have been able to identify a relationship between this exciting pedagogical innovation and some desired outcomes, including heightened political interest among students, but we have yet to understand how and why that occurs.

In an effort to address the shortcomings in the previous research, we conducted a quasi-experimental study of CSUF's Town Hall Meeting program in the spring of 2017. This paper presents the preliminary results of that study, and specifically addresses the relevance that collaborative academic engagement and classroom community can have as a possible mechanism for future civic outcomes such as internal political efficacy, political discussion and interest, and dispositions toward future political activity. First, we describe the Town Hall Meeting program at California State University, Fullerton: the focus of our research. Second, we outline our argument that students' collaborative academic engagement and sense of classroom community is, we believe, the mechanism for effects on future civic outcomes. Third, we present the quantitative survey results from our study conducted in spring 2017. Finally, we discuss suggestions for future research and ways to improve upon the THM program, along with the relevance of the findings for civic engagement programs in general.

The Town Hall Meeting (THM) at California State University, Fullerton

In the spring of 2017, three POSC 100 instructors at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) offered course sections with a THM program. They coordinated their efforts so that the culminating THM public event involved over 600 students, working together in breakout sessions and joining all together for a final mass meeting and keynote panel. The core components of the program include:

- Small-group learning communities in each class section;
- Research, writing and preparation for group presentations on policy issues throughout the semester;

- A large THM event involving over 600 students, 30 faculty/graduate student moderators; and 30 local leaders (elected and appointed government leaders; non-profit leaders; faith-based leaders)
- Student group presentations of policy analysis and proposed solutions to other students, faculty and local leaders at breakout sessions during the large THM event;

At the beginning of the semester students in each of 3 different Introduction to American Politics course sections – each with about 200 students - were broken into learning communities of approximately 7 students and assigned general research topic areas. Research topics are salient public policy issues, and have included immigration reform, economic inequality, education, gun-control, fiscal problems, the environment, and various international conflicts. Student learning communities then focus in on a narrower aspect of their selected issue area and research that issue throughout the semester. Different faculty have adapted the project to fit their area of expertise and some have included local political issues such as District vs. At Large elections and pension reform.

Throughout the semester the groups study their given topics as they move through the course curriculum, while the instructor uses in-class opportunities to drive home the correlation between their study of government and politics, and their selected THM issues. At the conclusion of the semester, students present their research in a variety of ways – some instructors require papers while others opt for in-class presentations coupled with a creative work product. In all instances, students are required to participate in the culminating, university-wide Town Hall Meeting, where they are divided up and present their research to other students, faculty and community stakeholders in multiple, simultaneous small breakout sessions.

The THM project, then, offers students a civic educational intervention that focuses on three proven dimensions of effective civic education: knowledge, skills and collective action. The POSC 100 curriculum is modified to illustrate the connections between traditional American government course instruction and students' efforts to explore prominent public affairs issues. More importantly for the purpose of the research analyzed here, students are encouraged to work collaboratively in teams throughout the project. Students in the THM program develop basic research skills for learning about their selected issue; discuss the political and policy dimensions of their issue with students who are often from different racial/ethnic backgrounds; present their team's work to their peers, faculty and local government and/or non-profit leaders; and produce and participate in a large-scale community event for the university.

Creating Social Capital in the Classroom

In some ways, the entirety of the THM program is geared to producing a kind of mock-up of the social capital that undergirds a robust democracy. In other words, while a classroom intervention cannot create social capital on its own, it can replicate some of the essential elements that produce social capital, in an effort to encourage ongoing engagement in the years to come. The centerpiece of this effort is to create connections between peers, and to encourage students to call upon those networks collaboratively.

In his seminal contribution on the subject, Putnam (2000) articulated the relationship between social capital and civic engagement. Putnam argued that when societies are rich in social networks, that democratic engagement is more robust and meaningful. For Putnam, the central features of meaningful social networks are trust, reciprocity, communication/information sharing, and social connection. Drive-by participation, whereby someone fills out a petition on-line, or answers a quick poll on social media, doesn't create the kind of connections that Putnam argues are at the heart of robust social capital. In fact, it is the decline of organizations and institutions that facilitate more habitual face-to-face interactions that Putnam finds reduces civic engagement. Skocpol (2003) and other scholars of civic engagement reiterate these findings, lamenting a recent, late-20th century decline in the social infrastructure that seemed to support greater levels of civic engagement in earlier decades. At the same time that social capital declined, moreover, it seems also apparent from other research that similar concerning trends have occurred in other essential characteristics of a democratic citizenry. Levels of political trust have plummeted, partisan polarization has widened into a chasm, and levels of economic inequality have reached their highest levels in a century (Hetherington 2006; Bartels, 2008; Abramowitz 2010). Although it is difficult to know whether declining levels of social capital have contributed to these other civic challenges or, conversely, decreasing trust and rising levels of inequality and polarization have contributed to declines in social capital, there is no question that these negative civic outcomes have been increasingly pronounced during the same time period.

Civic education efforts have not focused, however, on increasing social capital. Rather, they have focused on increasing political knowledge and, more recently, involving students in civic activity. This naturally flows from the observations of political scientists that education is the most important variable shaping political participation and political knowledge. In numerous studies, education levels are correlated with voting turnout, political knowledge, and democratic attitudes and opinions (Nie et al., 1996; Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). As Hillygus (2005) argues, however, the mechanism by which education affects

political engagement is unclear: all we know for sure is that education is the central variable explaining differences in participation and political knowledge. She finds that higher levels of education provide individuals with greater capacity to navigate complex political and policy environments, but does not find strong effects for civic education influencing individual motivation for participation.

Niemi and Junn (1998) find that civic education can in fact increase political engagement, but also observe that it varies in effectiveness. If one's objective with civic education programs is to foster greater engagement, then students require: 1) the capacity to understand the issues and processes involved in public affairs; 2) the necessary skills for civic involvement; and 3) the motivation to engage politically. Educational interventions that provide students with an introduction to government institutions, political processes, and public policies address the first pre-condition – understanding. Programs that teach students how to engage politically are essential to addressing the second. These programs should teach students a mix of strategies and skills: how to organize in groups, research issues of concern, develop their own positions, discuss and present their views with/to others, discuss issues with others that hold differing views, and identify political actions and processes where they can advance their views meaningfully, i.e. voting, letter writing, attendance at public meetings, joining advocacy/interest groups; etc.

We argue that the first two are less important than the third pre-condition – motivation for political engagement. Often, civic engagement scholars argue that this motivation is closely related to levels of political efficacy (Beaumont 2010). Addressing the first two requirements is relatively straightforward. Students require effective instruction on government and the political process. For the second requirement, service learning and other kinds of active programs are effective, where students can acquire the menu of skills that citizens can draw upon in engaging politically.

For the third requirement – motivation and political efficacy – the challenges are greater. One's political efficacy, closely associated with motivation to be politically active, is acquired as part of the process of political socialization, along with other more rooted aspects of political identity such as partisanship and ideological disposition (Verba et al 1995). Therefore, students enter college with either a well-developed sense of political efficacy or lower levels, and for students with lower-levels this predisposition is difficult to dislodge with a single intervention. As Beaumont (2010) found, a student's initial political efficacy, prior to the educational intervention she studied, was the strongest predictor of a student's political efficacy after they experienced the studied educational intervention. In other words, students who are unlikely to feel empowered, and who are therefore less motivated to participate politically, are

very difficult to reach with classic civic education models focused on increasing knowledge and skills.

According to research on civics education in higher education, there are identifiable practices that address each of these pre-conditions for expanded political engagement. Beaumont (2013), in a study of 21 political courses and programs with nearly 1,000 undergraduate participants in the 2000-2001 academic year, utilized a pretest and posttest survey to test for four types of educational interventions on the development of students' political efficacy:

- a) placing students in a context of a politically active group or community;
- b) providing opportunities for students to acquire and practice political skills;
- c) offering opportunities for engaging in political discourse; and
- d) placing students in a diverse learning community, where they will engage with students from different racial/ethnic, religious and class backgrounds (Beaumont 2013, 50-52).

Her research found that programs that provide opportunities for students to acquire and practice political skills have the strongest impact in raising internal political efficacy among students. These programs typically involve students in active engagement, often through allied community-based programs, Programs that offer opportunities for engaging in political discourse, which situate students in a diverse learning community, and which connect students directly to community groups and/or government are also effective in elevating political efficacy. The situating of students within networks approximating social capital seems to provide the strongest impact on raising political efficacy.

These practices are further underlined by the report of the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Student Engagement (2012), which put forward a framework for higher education civic learning based on intensive meetings with over 150 education leaders. Their resulting framework for civic education emphasizes three categories for these programs to focus upon: knowledge, skills, values and collective action. Again, what the National Task Force framework emphasizes are three increasingly sophisticated levels of civic educational goals: level 1 - teaching basic knowledge of government and the political system; level 2 - advancing students' political skills; and level 3 - creating opportunities for engagement.

When we combine Beaumont's (2013) research findings with this framework, it suggests that an effective civic education intervention would address more than simply giving students a basic understanding of government and politics, but would provide opportunities for them to actively engage in political discussion and action, preferably in connection with community groups

and/or government. In other words, social networks – the core feature of social capital – is what undergirds youth political engagement.

We argue that classroom-based civic education is hard-pressed to produce social capital for young voters. Instead, social capital, which is predicated on bonds of trust and reciprocity, must be established over time. The THM project is embedded within a General Education required course on American Government, a course which addresses level one of the National Task Force's framework for civic educational goals – teaching basic knowledge of government and the political system. This, in and of itself, does not encourage or create social capital formation. However, the collaborative aspects of the program, taking place within the context of small learning communities embedded in the larger course, does simulate social capital formation.

Moreover, as research on learning communities and on “communities of practice” suggests, it is when learning takes place in a shared effort aimed at a common objective that longer-term effects are established (West and Williams 2017; Benzie, Mavers, Somekh and Coheurnour, 2005). This research, drawn from educational psychology, has been overlooked by political scientists focusing on civic engagement and higher education. But while political scientists emphasize improving students' internal political efficacy, or their sense of personal or social responsibility (Hurtado, Ruiz and Whang, 2012), less attention has been paid to the process of social capital formation that can occur in intentional learning communities.

The THM program, therefore, creates small learning communities within the context of the class, and links these communities to an intentional process that culminates in the large THM event, where students are empowered to present their ideas in meaningful interaction with public leadership.

Quasi-Experiment Overview

Our proposal is, therefore, that by creating collaborative opportunity through small learning communities of practice over the semester, the THM program will improve over the traditional civic education programs in motivating political activity. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a quasi-experiment involving a survey of students in a THM Introduction to American Politics course and students in another Intro to American Politics section without the THM.

Participants

Participants in the survey were students in two sections of an introductory American politics course taught in the spring of 2017 – POSC 100. This course, as noted above, is required for all students to graduate, and therefore the students in each section of POSC 100 in this quasi-experiment represented a variety of majors across the campus. One section of the course was taught with the Town Hall program (described in detail above) and another section of the course was taught by the same instructor (and co-author) but without the Town Hall program. The courses were taught in the same exact room, one from 9am – 9:50 am Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays; the other from 10 am – 10:50 am on the same days.

Students in each class section had the exact same curriculum other than the THM: same texts, same exams, same lectures, same on-line materials, etc. Students in the non-THM course wrote a 2-page paper on one of the same three policy areas that students in the THM course wrote about as part of their team research project.

The survey was administered late in the semester, just after the Town Hall “public event” in the THM section. To maintain comparability in responses, students in the section without the THM program were administered the survey at the same time during the semester. Survey respondents from both course sections are predominately women (55.5%) and mostly freshman (34.9%) and sophomores (42.4%). Most of the respondents are nonwhite--49.5% Hispanic and 30.3% Asian. Over one-third are first generation college students (36.4%), and a majority received Pell grants (53.8%)

Table 1 provides a demographic comparison between the students that completed the survey in the THM section and the students who completed the survey in the section without the THM. Analysis reveals that there are *no statistically significant* differences between the demographics of two groups, which supports that these are comparable groups, despite the absence of a strict randomized experimental design.¹ Furthermore, the survey response rates for the THM section and the section without Town Hall were the same—83.2% and 82.6%, respectively. During the 2017 spring semester, 214 students were enrolled in the Town Hall section and 201 students were enrolled in the comparison section without the Town Hall program.

¹ Chi Square analyses all revealed $p > .05$. A $p \leq .05$ is needed for statistical significance. Since there is an absence of random assignment between participants and nonparticipants, it is necessary for us to recognize the possibility of selection bias in the results. However, we are convinced that students ability to pre-select themselves into a THM course or not is limited due to numerous factors, along with the fact that our comparison group does not vary significantly from the participant group.

Table 1. Demographics

	Town Hall	No Town Hall
Female	57.9%	53.0%
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian	0.6%	0.0%
Asian	30.5%	30.2%
Black	1.3%	1.2%
Hispanic	47.4%	51.5%
Multi-racial	6.5%	4.7%
Pacific Islander	0.0%	1.2%
White	13.6%	11.2%
Class Level		
Freshman	33.1%	36.5%
Sophomore	41.0%	43.8%
Junior	16.9%	12.9%
Senior	9.0%	6.7%
First Generation	65.8%	65.7%
Received Pell Grant	55.4%	52.2%
Mean High School GPA	3.54	3.59
Mean Campus GPA	2.98	3.01
<i>Smallest n</i>	151	166

The THM program organized students into 30 teams, with 7 members in each team. Each team was responsible for producing a team research brief, with each member of the team contributing a 2-3 page paper as part of that brief. In addition, each member of the team had a specific role – speaker (2 people), research coordinator, creative project coordinator (2 people), secretary, and group leader. Most of the THM work was done outside of scheduled class, but four sessions during the semester were set aside for supervised and guided THM teamwork. Students were provided with specific instructions related to their individual contribution to the team research brief, and for their individual team role.

The groups in each of the three participating POSC 100 sections worked on one of three different issue areas – the environment; immigration; and the economy/fiscal policy. At the culminating Town Hall Meeting event, towards the end of the semester, student groups for all three participating POSC 100 course sections were joined by 30 government or non-profit leaders, and 30 faculty moderators. All participants heard from a local state legislator as a keynote address, and then went into 30 different simultaneous breakout sessions, lasting one hour. In each breakout session, there were three student teams – one from each of the POSC 100 sections. Teams focused on similar issues were placed in the same session along with a local leader as a discussant, and a faculty member or graduate student as the moderator. Student teams each presented to the other students, local leader and moderator in their breakout session, and discussions followed each presentation. Table 2 provides examples of discussants and moderators who were part of the Spring 2017 Town Hall.

Table 2. Examples of local leaders – discussants - and faculty moderators

Mayor Pro Tem – Tustin
CEO for The American Muslim Women’s Empowerment Council
Director, Fresh Beginnings Ministries (Program for the Homeless)
Community Development Director – Brea
Sergeant - Brea Police Department
Council Member – Fullerton
CSU Assistant Vice Chancellor, Academic Research and Resources
Mayor Pro Tem - Yorba Linda
Resource Archivist - Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum
Director, Project Hope Alliance
Chief of Police, Brea
Senior Vice President and General Counsel - FSB Core Strategy (former Mayor of Tustin)
District Coordinator - Office Assemblywoman Sharon Quirk-Silva
CSU Fullerton, Interim Director of Academic Technology
Police Officer - City of Brea
Detective - City of Brea
Regional Director, Anti-Defamation League - Long Beach & Orange County
CSU Fullerton, Project Rebound Program Coordinator
Mayor - City of La Habra
City Manager - City of Laguna Beach
Executive Director, Olive Tree Initiative (OTI) - UCI
Government Affairs Director - La Habra
Council Member - Yorba Linda
Faculty members/Graduate Students from CSU Fullerton’s Departments of: Political Science, Public Administration, Criminal Justice, American Studies, History, and Geography

Methods & Preliminary Results

This study of the CSUF THM program has a mixed methods quasi-experimental research design that includes the following: 1) a quantitative survey (Appendix B) measuring students on their academic engagement, civic attitudes, and psychological and social well-being, and 2) a series of qualitative student written “reflection” assignments administered throughout the semester. The California State University, Fullerton’s Internal Review Board has approved this research on the THM program. We limit our analyses in this paper to the quantitative survey results, as our qualitative analyses are forthcoming.

Quantitative Survey

As aforementioned, we surveyed students in the week immediately following the Town Hall Meeting public event. Specifically, we surveyed students in a morning section of Introduction to American Politics (POSC 100) who participated in the THM program and, for comparison, students in a morning section of POSC 100 taught by the same instructor who were not participating. Students received extra credit for filling out this survey in both course sections. Also aforementioned, the response rates for both the THM and non-THM sections are the same. The survey (Appendix B) involves a variety of questions about students’ academic engagement, civic and political attitudes, and their social and psychological well-being.

Preliminary Results

To measure how well the THM created the elements of social capital, we focused on the students’ sense of community in the classroom. This was measured through a series of items in the survey replicated from previously published measures (Rovai 2002) and created by averaging scores across these items (see Appendix A). Table 3 reveals that students in the THM section exhibited a significantly higher sense of classroom community than students who were in the section without the THM.

Program	Mean	Standard Deviation	n
Town Hall	56.4	20.5	163
No Town Hall	48.4	22.7	157

*Statistically significant difference in means ($t = 3.3, p = .001$)

Related to feeling connected to others in the class, students were asked how often in the current semester that they *informally* collaborated with each other. Despite the fact that students were not *required* work together outside of

class in either the THM section or the sections without the THM, a robust and significantly higher percentage of students in the Town Hall section reported working together *informally* outside the class, as Table 4 indicates.

Table 4. Worked with another student informally outside of class % Often or very often (this semester)	
Town Hall Meeting**	66.2% (90)
No Town Hall Meeting	47.0% (55)

**Difference is significant at the $p \leq .01$ level [Chi-Square=9.44, $p=.002$].

Internal political efficacy was measured through a series of items in the survey replicated from previously published measures and created by averaging scores across these items (see Appendix A). Unlike sense of community in the classroom, Table 5 reveals that there is no statistically significant difference for internal political efficacy.

Table 5: Internal Political Efficacy Scale Mean Score Comparisons			
Program	Mean	Standard Deviation	n
Town Hall	32.8	9.6	172
No Town Hall	32.6	9.5	165

Similarly, students' political discussion and interest was measured through a series of items in the survey replicated from previously published measures, and a summary scale was created by averaging scores across these items (see Appendix A). As with internal political efficacy, Table 6 reveals that there is no statistically significant difference between the course sections in levels of political discussion and interest.

Table 6: Political Discussion/Interest Scale Mean Score Comparisons			
Program	Mean	Standard Deviation	n
Town Hall	32.1	13.25	177
No Town Hall	32.1	11.64	166

The third civic outcome we explore is students' dispositions toward future political activity. Table 7 summarizes the results of students' likelihood of future political activity measured in a scale that averages across replicated items on the survey (see Appendix A). As with efficacy, discussion, and interest, there is no statistically significant difference for future political activity.

Program	Mean	Standard Deviation	n
Town Hall	57.7	22.2	171
No Town Hall	57.7	21.9	164

Discussion of Results

Despite the lack of direct effects of the THM program on political efficacy, discussion/interest, and dispositions toward future activity, we argue that the prominent effect on classroom community and collaborative engagement suggests that the THM program did produce the elements of social capital that have been identified as key contributors to civic engagement. We posit that increased efficacy and political interest may not yet be realized within the time constraints of the study and the survey administration immediately after the THM public event, or alternatively that these quantitative measures may not adequately measure the shift in students' attitudes toward civic life, something that future analysis of our qualitative data may help address.

Moreover, much of the documented effects in the civic engagement literature involve large-scale observational surveys, administered at later points in time—even upon students' graduation. While such surveys have their advantages in terms of external validity, they tend to lack internal validity and the ability to isolate the mechanisms behind these documented civic outcomes.

More importantly, the quasi-experimental design of the study presented here provides leverage on isolating the possible effect of a civic engagement program from the effect of an introductory American government course *itself*, along with controlling for an instructor effect. As noted above, effective civic education works on multiple dimensions: increasing students' capacity to understand the issues and processes involved in public affairs; providing students with the necessary skills for civic involvement; and providing students with the motivation to engage politically. The traditional American Politics course addresses the first level: providing students with political knowledge, and it also provides some of the skills necessary for civic involvement. But while the regular course can in some ways motivate students to engage politically, we argue that the THM significantly advances this aspect of civic education in providing students with a direct experience of collaborative, networked, intentional social capital.

Further analysis shows that the sense of classroom community and collaborative engagement are significantly related to all three civic outcomes (Table 8). Efficacy, discussion/interest, and disposition toward future political activity are all significantly and positively correlated with the Sense of Classroom Community Scale (Appendix A). Furthermore, informal collaboration with others outside the classroom (often or very often) is also significantly related to all three civic outcomes. Since our analysis above at the outset revealed that students in the THM program exhibit significantly higher collaboration and sense of classroom community, the findings in Table 8 suggest that there is potential for the THM program in terms of developing the social capital that is necessary for increasing levels of civic engagement, even if they are not immediately observed in terms of direct effects.

Table 8: Classroom Community and Collaboration's Effect on Civic Outcomes

Outcome	Classroom Community (Pearson's Correlation)	Collaboration (Mean Difference)	Smallest n
Internal Political Efficacy	$r = .274^{**}$	+2.80**	317
Political Discussion/Interest	$r = .330^{**}$	+4.83**	320
Future Political Activity	$r = .405^{**}$	+6.96**	319

**Significant at $p \leq 0.01$.

Implications and Conclusion

Overall, our research indicates that students who go through the THM program are more likely to participate in a collaborative learning community that mirrors the intentionality and dynamism involved in “communities of practice.” Traditional instruction in civics – a regular Introduction to American Politics course – provides students with the individual knowledge and some of the individual skills necessary to become involved in the political process. But having knowledge and skills may improve political efficacy, but still not lead to increased levels of civic engagement. We argue that increasing civic engagement among young people requires more than an individually focused education, but rather requires that students experience community and collaboration that can improve their willingness to be part of social networks in the future. These are at the heart of what Putnam and other scholars of civic engagement see as the fulcrum for democratic participation: social capital. While the results of this experience may not be directly evident in this experiment, it is clear that collaboration and increased sense of community in the classroom was significantly related to all of the other more traditional levels of civic engagement.

Future research will look at the qualitative data we collected as part of this quasi-experiment. Students were asked to answer a series of open-ended questions twice in the semester, in both the THM and non-THM POSC 100 sections. The first time the questionnaire was offered was in the first month of the semester. The second time was just before the THM culminating event. As noted above, the detailed quantitative survey was conducted after the THM event. Students were asked the following questions:

1. Do you feel like you can participate meaningfully in politics, at the local, state and/or national level? Explain why or why not.
2. Do you feel like our elected leaders are focused on what is important to their voters? Why or why not?
3. Are you finding the material in this course interesting so far? Do you feel it is useful to you in some way?
4. Have you found yourself thinking and/or talking about government and politics more than you had before you started this course? If so, when and how? If not, why do you think you aren't?
5. Are you more interested now in getting involved in public affairs – at either the local, state or national levels – than you were when you started this class? Explain why or why not.

Answers to questions 1 and 2 will help us make nuanced assessments about students' political efficacy, over the course of the semester, in both the THM and non-THM courses. Answers to questions 4 and 5 will allow us to see if there are significant differences in levels of political engagement over the semester for THM and non-THM students. The impact of the THM project experience can be therefore more directly assessed through the qualitative data that we have yet to analyze.

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Appendix A—Survey Scales

Table 9: Classroom Community Scale
<i>Please indicate the level to which you agree with the following statements (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree):</i>
1. I feel connected to others in this course.
2. I feel confident that others will support me.
3. I feel that members of this course depend on me.
4. I trust others in this course.
5. I feel that I can rely on others in this course.
6. I feel isolated in this course.

*The Classroom Community scale is modeled after the scaling methodology utilized by NSSE for their Engagement Indicators and is scored on a 60-point scale. To produce a score, the response set for each item is converted to a 60-point scale (e.g., Strongly Disagree = 0, Disagree = 20, Agree = 40, Strongly Agree = 60), and the rescaled items are averaged. Thus a score of zero means a student responded at the bottom of the scale for every item, while a score of 60 indicates responses at the top of the scale on every item. The “Neither Agree nor Disagree” response category is dropped from the analysis. Items in the scale are replicated from Rovai 2002.

Table 10: Internal Political Efficacy Scale
<i>Indicate the level to which you agree with the following statements (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree):</i>
1. I know more about politics than most people of my age.
2. When political issues or problems are being discussed, I usually have something to say.
3. I am able to understand most political issues easily.
4. Sometimes, politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.
5. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

*The Internal Political Efficacy Scale is modeled after the scaling methodology utilized by NSSE for their Engagement Indicators and is scored on a 60-point scale. To produce a score, the response set for each item is converted to a 60-point scale (e.g., Not Important = 0; Somewhat Important = 20; Very Important = 40; Essential = 60 & Strongly Disagree = 0, Disagree = 20, Agree = 40, Strongly Agree = 60), and the rescaled items are averaged. Thus a score of zero means a student responded at the bottom of the scale for every item, while a score of 60 indicates responses at the top of the scale on every item. The “Neither Agree nor Disagree” response category is dropped from the analysis.

Table 11: Political Discussion/Interest Scale
<i>Please indicate the importance to you of each of the following (Essential, Very Important, Somewhat Important, or Not Important):</i>
1. Keeping up to date with political affairs.
<i>Indicate the level to which you agree with the following statements (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree):</i>
2. I am interested in national politics and national affairs.
3. I am interested in local community politics and local community affairs.
4. I am interested in international politics and international affairs.
5. I discuss national political and national affairs with my friends.

6. I discuss local community politics and local community affairs with my friends.

7. I discuss international politics and international affairs with my friends.

*The Political/Civic Engagement scale is modeled after the scaling methodology utilized by NSSE for their Engagement Indicators and is scored on a 60-point scale. To produce a score, the response set for each item is converted to a 60-point scale (e.g., Not Important = 0; Somewhat Important = 20; Very Important = 40; Essential = 60 & Strongly Disagree = 0, Disagree = 20, Agree = 40, Strongly Agree = 60), and the rescaled items are averaged. Thus a score of zero means a student responded at the bottom of the scale for every item, while a score of 60 indicates responses at the top of the scale on every item. The "Neither Agree nor Disagree" response category is dropped from the analysis. Item 1 is replicated from the Higher Educational Research Institute's College Freshman Survey and items 2 through 7 are replicated from Verba et al., the American Citizen Participation Study (1990), study no. 6635 archived at the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research: <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu>.

Table 12: Future Political/Civic Activity Scale

When you think about your life in the future in both college and after college, how likely is it that you (extremely likely, moderately likely, slightly likely, slightly unlikely, moderately unlikely, extremely unlikely):

1. Vote in an election.

2. Contact or visit someone in government who represents your community.

3. Become involved in my community.

4. Contact a newspaper, radio, or TV talk show to express your opinion on an issue.

5. Sign an e-mail or written petition.

6. Engage in an online political discussion.

7. Use social media (facebook, Instagram, etc.) to influence the views of your friends or family in an election.

8. Use social media to influence the views of your friends or family on a public affairs issue.

*The Future Political/Civic Activity scale is modeled after the scaling methodology utilized by NSSE for their Engagement Indicators and is scored on a 60-point scale. To produce a score, the response set for each item is converted to a 100-point scale (e.g., extremely unlikely = 0, moderately unlikely = 20, slightly unlikely = 40, slightly likely = 60, moderately likely = 80, and extremely likely = 100), and the rescaled items are averaged. Thus a score of zero means a student responded at the bottom of the scale for every item, while a score of 100 indicates responses at the top of the scale on every item. The "Neither Agree nor Disagree" response category is dropped from the analysis.

Appendix B
Town Hall Meeting Quasi-Experiment Survey Questions, Spring 2017

I. Please enter your student id number. We are asking this so that you may receive credit for completing this and for connecting demographic information for research purposes. Your confidentiality will be strictly maintained.

II. Please re-enter your student id number—(to ensure a correct number is collected).

During the current school year, about how often have you done the following? (Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never)

1. Combined ideas from different courses when completing assignments.
2. Connected your learning to societal problems or issues.
3. Included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in course discussions or assignments.
4. Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue.
5. Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective.
6. Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept.
7. Connected ideas from your courses to your prior experiences or knowledge.
8. Identified key information from reading assignments.
9. Reviewed your notes after class.
10. Summarized what you learned in class or from course materials.

Please indicate how often this semester you (Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never):

11. Came to class prepared
12. Participated actively in class
13. Came to class with questions about the material
14. Felt bored in class
15. Felt the time you spent in class was worthwhile
16. Looked forward to going to class
17. Worked with another student informally outside of class [e.g. – studied together – worked on assignments – proofread other's work]

18. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in life?

- a. Can Trust
- b. Cannot Trust
- c. Depends

19. Overall, how much impact do you think people like you have in making your community a better place to live?

- a. A Big Impact,
- b. A Moderate Impact
- c. A Small Impact
- d. No Impact at All

For each of the following, indicate whether you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat and disagree strongly:

- 20. I *discuss* local community politics and local community affairs (outside my classes).
- 21. I *discuss* national politics and affairs (outside my classes).
- 22. I *discuss* international politics and international affairs with my friends (outside my classes).

For each of the following, indicate whether you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat and disagree strongly:

- 23. I know more about politics than most people of my age.
- 24. When political issues or problems are being discussed, I usually have something to say.
- 25. I am able to understand most political issues easily.
- 26. I am interested in politics.
- 27. The powerful leaders in government care very little about the opinions of people.
- 28. In this country, a few individuals have a lot of political power while the rest of the people have very little power.

For each of the following, indicate whether you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat and disagree strongly:

- 29. Sometimes, politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on
- 30. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.
- 31. Public officials don't care much what people like me think.
- 32. People like me don't have any say about what the government does.

Please indicate the importance to you of each of the following (Essential, Very Important, Somewhat Important, or Not Important):

- 33. Keeping up to date with political affairs.
- 34. Becoming a community leader.

- 35. Improving my understanding of other cultures and countries.
- 36. Helping others who are in difficulty
- 37. Helping to promote racial understanding

Select the response that best represents your ability to do the following (Visually ordered Seven-point scale whereby endpoints are labeled 1 = Poor and 7 = Excellent):

38. Contribute to the well-being of your community.

39. Did you vote in the election in November 2016?

- a. Yes, I voted
- b. No, I chose not to vote
- c. No, I was not eligible to vote