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Principles of American Government (POL 151) City as Classroom Project Report

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City-as-Classroom Project:
POL 151: Principles of American Government



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Course Description

POL 151 provides an overview of the principles, institutions, and decision-making processes of the American government. It focuses on the foundations of American constitutional order and the development of powers to the executive, legislative and judicial branches. It addresses a range of actors from federal government agencies to lobbies, interest groups and the media, who contribute to public policy in the United States. The central focus of this course will be on the institutions, principles and practices of American government, though it will also touch upon contemporary debates in American politics. Thematic topics are approached in a critical and analytical way, seeking to understand the trade-offs inherent in democratic choice.

This is an introductory level class, often with freshman, and counts for the University core curriculum. As a result, it had a number of non-majors in the class. In fall 2012, I taught two sections of this class, and opened the City-as-Classroom experience to both of them. I had 33 passports and tokens, and gave these out on an as-needed basis (i.e., I did not supply passports to freshmen who already had them, or tokens to those who lived in Center City).

Project Description

The City-as-Classroom component of this course was relatively straightforward. On October 6, I proposed to lead a group of students to the Constitution Center, at 5th and Arch, and see the multi-media exhibit “Freedom Rising” and go through the exhibit together. Students unable to make the joint visit were permitted to go on their own before the end of the semester.

Students were expected to write a brief reflection paper (2 pages) connecting some of the themes and debates covered in the POL 151 class with things that they saw and experienced during their visit to the Constitution Center. This format was designed to leave it open so that students could reflect on what struck them, working on the assumption that each student would find something slightly different compelling. The paper should explicitly tie the themes of the course to what the student saw and discuss impressions that they had of the course material after the visit or how the course material made them see the exhibits at the Constitution Center in a different light. The key dimension of this assignment is to connect the visit with the material in the course in a way that they found creative and interesting.

This assignment counted as up to 15 points added to their cumulative quiz grade for the semester. In this sense, it was extra-credit. The quiz grade constituted 10% of their final grade.

Outcomes

The experience did not work as well as I would have liked. I opened the opportunity to go to the Constitution Center to all 33 students, but made allowance for those who could not attend on that Saturday morning due to work or other commitments. Twenty-two students signed up for the event, and each was given a Passport (if they were not already freshman who had them) and subway tokens. I arranged to meet these 22 students at 10am on Saturday morning and kept a list to check attendance. To my surprise, only 6 students turned up, and only one of the missing students emailed to apologize, citing illness. The positive part of the experience was that the students who did turn up enjoyed it a lot and told me, after our 2.5 hour visit, that they really got something out of it and found it worthwhile. In that respect, it was a good experience for those who turned up, but I was disappointed by the overall attendance.

When I returned to class on Tuesday, I told those students who did not turn up that I was not impressed with their non-attendance, and expected the assignment to be completed on their own time.

When all was said and done, only 19 students (out of 66 students across both sections) submitted their essays for extra credit. Not all of the six who came down did so, and several students who took passports and tokens failed to complete it, despite my warning that it would affect their participation grade if they did not submit it.

Student Feedback

The students who wrote the reports generally reported positive impressions of the Constitution Center. Many of them were particularly interested in the artifacts of slavery that the Center had, and some of the original documents and personal effects of the Founding Fathers. A number of them said that it brought the entire experience to life for them.

Only one student was critical of the Constitution Center. This student found that the multi-media exhibit “Freedom Rising” was almost too patriotic, and that the Center concentrated more on multi-media glitz than on providing intellectual content. It was the one dissenting take of all of the essays received, but it was useful and I appreciated the candor.

Lessons Learned

Obviously, this experience was not ideal, as I would have liked more participation than I received, and I was disappointed that we made an appointment for 22 students to take a tour with the Constitution Center and had so few students attend. I drew a few lessons learned.

- I am not convinced that freshman students who are non-majors will take advantage of City-as-Classroom experiences. Many of them are only taking the course for credit and only saw this out-of-class experience as an extra hassle, rather than opportunity.
- The fact that the assignment was extra-credit, rather than required, probably did not encourage many of the students to make it a priority. That said, I am reluctant to make participation in an off-campus event on weekends a requirement of the course. One possibility was that I did not give them enough points to incentivize them, but I also found that the students who needed the points were the least likely to do the assignment.
- I thought that the reflection essay – a format I generally dislike – worked reasonably well in this instance, but there was a stark variation in quality between them, and I am not sure how much the students ‘took in’ the value of the assignment.
- In the future, I have decided to include the City-as-Classroom opportunity as an extra-credit assignment, possibly worth more points, but given the number of students who failed to show up and failed to take advantage of the Passports and tokens available I am not going to organize group visits or request funds for this. I will treat this as an entirely on their own optional experience, but one for which I will grant extra-credit points.