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Developing Citizenship through Honors

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INTRODUCTION

For decades, research has shown that higher levels of education correspond to increased interest in politics and civic engagement. Despite the vast amount of scholarly attention, why this link exists is still disputed. One theory about the connection is the civic education hypothesis, which claims that the causal link between education and civic engagement depends not only on the amount of education a person receives but also on the type of curriculum studied. For example, Hillygus argues that "some courses are more likely than others to develop the skills fundamental to political participation" (31). Similarly, Condon argues that the development of verbal skills is crucial to engaging in public affairs.

Although every honors college functions uniquely within its institution, the University of Alabama (UA) Honors College has an explicit goal of

developing "agents of social change." At the heart of the honors experience are three-hour, interdisciplinary, honors seminars for no more than fifteen students. To graduate with honors, UA students must complete no fewer than six hours of seminar credit, but often students complete more. In contrast to the traditional academic lecture, the skills developed in a seminar are uniquely suited for the development and application of citizenship behaviors. In particular, UA honors seminars stress discussion, reflection, writing, and debate, providing students the opportunity to practice each behavior in a controlled environment. Through the seminar experience, honors students are expected to engage the skill sets that produce interest and competence in public affairs more frequently than non-honors students.

Our research suggests that the UA Honors College contributes to the development of skills that are necessary to participate in political discourse but that are underdeveloped in some academic tracks. To test the civic education hypothesis, we use data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) administered at UA over a two-year period. We hypothesize that an honors curriculum will lead to increased levels of interest in political life. To conduct our analysis, we focus on the NSSE question: "To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas: Voting in local, state, or national elections?" We use this question as a proxy measure for student interest in politics and find tentative support for our hypothesis that completion of the UA honors curriculum corresponds with greater interest in politics.

BACKGROUND AND RELATED LITERATURE

One of the most enduring findings in political behavior research is the connection between education and political participation (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman; Condon; Hillygus; Sondheimer and Green; Wolfinger and Rosenstone). Although alternative theories have been proposed (Luskin; Nie et al.), the most recent research on the link between higher education and political participation suggests that the civic education hypothesis does help to explain the causal link between higher education and political behavior.

The essence of the civic education hypothesis is that the type of education a person receives is a causal mechanism for explaining increased interest in politics. Additional years of schooling can provide citizens with the skills needed for political engagement beyond the general requirements of literacy and understanding of democratic principles, but not all educational endeavors are helpful in cultivating civic skills. For example, many STEM students

at large public universities are not able to participate in small, seminar-style courses. Additionally, the required general education courses for all students pursuing an undergraduate degree are often in larger classes where discussion-style learning is less likely. While reading and writing proficiency allow individuals to engage democratic processes at a baseline level, competence in making political decisions and participating in political processes requires developing the classic skills associated with politics: language, rhetoric, public speaking, debate, and critical thinking.

Similarly, there is no reason to think that every educational experience will lead to increased interest in civic engagement. For example, most undergraduates are required to complete at least a standard level of mathematics. Math courses rarely involve discussion or conceptualizing social issues, and very rarely if ever do math instructors connect the development of mathematical skills to political discourse. Social science, humanities, and related seminar courses, however, can and often do impart the civic skills that, the civic education hypothesis posits, enable political participation and lead to increased involvement in politics and civic life.

Research on honors education has also acknowledged the importance of learning that correlates with interest in politics. For example, Andrews points out that many honors courses cultivate the same skills as humanities courses, focusing on sustained reading, interdisciplinary reflection, and the "universal problems of human experience" (8). Similarly, Schneider calls for an honors education that challenges students to think critically about worldviews, personal values, and citizenship. Carnicom questions whether an honors education innovates or preserves, pushes boundaries or works to maintain the valuable tools that have been used throughout history for the production of civically engaged graduates. Dooley, in response to Carnicom, stresses the values of traditional education within an honors classroom, readying students for citizenry rather than training for specific professional tracks. Finally, Klos, Eskine, and Pashkevich show the statistical relationship between honors education and social justice. In summary, the civic education hypothesis, which suggests that higher education has the ability to impart the skills necessary to participate in a democratic society, is a recurring theme in literature on honors education.

DATA AND METHODS

In support of the civic education hypothesis, we propose that an honors education at UA corresponds to increased interest in voting. To test our

hypothesis, we use NSSE data from the University of Alabama administered during the 2010–2011 and 2011–12 academic years.

Data from the NSSE were accessed through the UA Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. Since the full dataset was not available, we requested variables related to the number of assigned readings and reflections and thus relate to the civic engagement hypothesis. We also requested general demographic information about respondents. The NSSE includes responses from both first-year and graduating students, but we only use senior respondents in our analysis since many freshmen would not have completed their honors seminar requirements at the time of the survey. We exclude respondents with missing responses, for a total of 1,887 respondents.

The decision to include upperclassmen and not freshman responses in the analysis is based on the specifics of completing an honors curriculum at UA, where incoming freshmen have complete autonomy to enroll or not to enroll in honors courses during their first year. The general recommendation from UA's honors academic advisors is to enroll in one honors course per semester, either an honors seminar or an honors elective course. Since the decision to enroll in honors courses is made by each individual student, some students opt to take departmental honors courses, which satisfy honors requirements but are mostly lecture courses, and some choose to complete honors seminars. Our argument is that seminar courses are likely to contribute to an honors student's interest in participating in politics, but we do not believe that honors electives have the same effect. For example, an elective honors lecture course in accounting is likely to be more enriching than a non-honors version of the course but is not likely to build political skills in the same way that a seminar does. For freshmen who have completed honors seminars before the assessment, we would anticipate seeing an increased effect of their education on interest in politics. For those who have not completed UH seminars before the assessment, we would not expect to see an increased interest in politics. Unfortunately, in our dataset we have no way of knowing whether freshman respondents have completed honors seminars at the time of the survey or not, so estimates of the impact of an honors curriculum on voting are not likely to provide valid inferences.

On the other hand, upperclassmen completing the NSSE are likely to have completed required UH seminars. Retention in the UA Honors College requires students to maintain above a 3.3 GPA and to complete honors requirements at a rate equal to that of their general curriculum. Students who fall below a 3.3 GPA must be able to attain that requirement by the end of the

subsequent semester, so any senior honors respondent is likely to graduate with honors and thus has completed the necessary honors seminar requirements. In short, we feel that upperclassmen are likely to provide valid data about the civic engagement hypothesis since they have completed the courses that are theoretically consistent with the civic engagement hypothesis.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is each respondent's answer to the NSSE question "To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas: Voting in local, state, or national elections?" We estimate an ordered probit model since our NSSE response variable is an ordered Likert response. Responses were placed on a 1–4 scale and used as a proxy measure for student interest in politics:

1 = Very Much

2 = Quite a bit

3 = Some

4 = Very little

Ordered logistic regressions model the relationship between a set of predictors and the tendency to be in each ordered category, and more appropriately they model ordinal data when compared to an ordinary least-squares model (Fullerton and Xu). All analysis is conducted in R using the dpylr (Wickham and Francois) and polr packages.

Key Independent Variables

We are primarily interested in two variables: a measure of honors status and an index of measures related to language and verbal skills development. Our index variable is constructed by aggregating and averaging four different NSSE responses related to respondents' self-reported number of reading and writing assignments. The civic engagement hypothesis suggests that the causal link between higher education and increased political participation lies in the completion of coursework stressing verbal skills. We thus include four embedded questions in our index: "During the current school year, about how much reading and writing have you done? 'Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings,' 'Number of written

papers or reports of 20 pages or more,' 'Number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages,' 'Number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages.'" Each response is ordered on a 1–5 scale.

1 = None

2 = 1–4

3 = 5–10

4 = 11–20

5 = More than 20

Since our dependent variable was ordered with more positive educational outcomes on the low response end, we reordered each response for consistency with lower values corresponding to more reading and writing assigned/completed. Since all questions are on the same scale, the distance between consecutive levels is kept constant, so we take a simple average of the four responses. We expect that our index measure will be negatively related to our outcome variable because lower-valued responses correspond with an increased likelihood of verbal skills development.

We also include a measure for whether the respondent is an honors student. Since honors seminars are likely to confer the skills necessary for engagement in politics, we anticipate that our honors variable will negatively correlate with our output variable.

Other Independent Variables

We also include measures from the Office of Institutional Research on whether students self-report as a racial minority, whether they are a STEM major, and their sex. Many studies have noted the unique challenges in higher education related to minority students (Johnston, Pizzolato, and Kanny; Museus and Park; Watson), so we include a measure for whether the institution identifies each student in a minority group. For our analysis, all non-white students are coded as a minority student, with minority = 1 and non-minority = 0. Consistent with the civic engagement hypothesis, STEM students are likely to complete fewer writing assignments overall, a fact that is likely to affect responses to questions on voting behavior. Students in STEM majors were identified with a dummy variable, where STEM students = 1 and non-STEM majors = 0. A full list of the majors we classified as STEM can be found in Appendix A. Lastly, we include a dummy variable from the institution on

respondents' sex, where male = 1 and female = 0, since studies have shown differences in likelihood of political participation based on gender (Hooghe and Stolle; Malin, Tirri, and Liauw).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents model results from both OLS and ordered logistic regressions. Column 1 presents the standard OLS model, and column 2 reflects the fully specified ordered logistic model. Results suggest that both our index measure and honors status are related to our voting measure. Both key variables are significant and negatively related to voting in each model. Since voting is ordered so that lower values reflect greater interest in voting, a negative relationship indicates that students who engage in a curriculum with more opportunities to develop civic skills are more likely to respond that

Table 1. OLS and Ordinal Regression Results

	Dependent Variable: Gncitizn	
	OLS (1)	Ordered Logistic (2)
Index3	-0.153***	-0.262***
	(0.042)	(0.074)
HONORS1	-0.222***	-0.367***
	(0.049)	(0.087)
Minority1	-0.163**	-0.304**
	(0.070)	(0.125)
STEM1	-0.053	-0.082
	(0.050)	(0.087)
STSEXM	0.081	0.160*
	(0.051)	(0.089)
Constant	2.872***	
	(0.151)	
Observations	1,887	1,887
R2	0.022	
Adjusted R2	0.020	
Res. Std. Error	1.030 (df = 1881)	
F Statistic	8.600*** (df = 5; 1881)	

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

their institution has contributed to their interest in voting. This finding lends support for the civic engagement hypothesis within the context of an honors education. Specifically, it suggests that students in the UA Honors College are more likely to respond that their education has contributed to their interest in voting. Similarly, our findings suggest that the amount of reading and writing in their curriculum positively correlates with students' perception that their education has had an impact on their interest in voting. More precise interpretations of our key independent variables can be found in Appendix B.

Both minority status and sex are also statistically significant in the model. The sign for minority is negative, suggesting that minority students are more likely to report an increased interest in voting as a result of their educational experience, holding all of the other variables in the model constant. Male respondents, on the other hand, report less interest in voting as a result of their education, holding constant the other predictors in the model. Several different explanations might account for this finding, one being the amount of effort put forth by different social groups. Possibly women and minorities commit more fully to the educational exercises of a seminar-style course. For example, Kinzie et al. find that women devote more time to constructive educational activities whereas college men tend to spend more time in leisure. Compared to a traditional lecture-style course, a seminar is in many ways more demanding, particularly in outside-of-class preparations for discussion, writing, and debate. In this case, more effort might translate into more learning, which in turn enhances perceptions of increased political knowledge. On the other hand, men might simply overestimate their knowledge of political affairs to begin with, thus seeing little growth in their learning. This explanation would track with several studies in the political behavior literature, which show a perceived gender gap in political knowledge due to risk-aversion more than actual differences in knowledge (Lizotte and Sidman; Mondak and Anderson). The most pessimistic explanation is that this finding results from a true political knowledge gap for women and minorities, giving both groups a greater propensity for growth in perceived learning in this area. Of the possible interpretations, we withhold any speculation about which is most accurate.

Lastly, STEM is positive but not significantly related to our outcome measure, which tracks directionally with the civic engagement hypothesis but cannot be interpreted further due to statistical insignificance.

CONCLUSIONS

In the political behavior literature, explaining the causal link between higher education and increased interest/engagement in politics has begun to coalesce around the civic education hypothesis. Similarly, a long list of publications on honors education has organized itself around the virtues of an honors education for the development of civic skills. Our research applies the civic education hypothesis within the context of an honors education, finding further, albeit cautious, support for the theory.

Several of our findings make noteworthy contributions to the honors education literature. First, it appears that an honors education, given the correct structure and mission, has the ability to contribute to the development of civic skills. Both the scholarly literature and more mainstream media currently debate the merits of an education that focuses on the STEM fields, on one hand, and an education that focuses on the principles of a classical education, on the other. On one side of the debate, policymakers, employers, and administrators extol the benefits of a STEM education, e.g., technological innovation, expansion of research, and the financial payoffs of a labor force with robust science and mathematics skills. On the other side, classical theories of higher education argue that a college degree is about more than the development of a professional skill set on the way to a career; it is about the development of each individual's ability to function as a citizen in a democratic society. An honors education provides a unique opportunity for higher education institutions to satisfy both sides of the debate, proving sufficient rigor for STEM students while also grounding students in the classical purposes of higher education.

Our research also suggests an approach that helps honors faculty and administrators understand the value of their work to the education of students. Assessment of learning is often complex, painstaking work, but our research suggests that, in the right context, an honors education can have easily measured effects on a student's educational development. Even though our model demonstrates little variance in our outcome measure, we would not expect a model predicting voting behavior to be robust. Thousands of different factors might affect a student's interest in making a voting decision, and we do not expect the number of assignments related to the development of reading and writing or the fact of participation in an honors program to be a major contributor to a student's voting decision. We do, though, show that a modest link exists between being an honors student and having an interest

in voting. Our research shows that honors students, all else held constant, are more likely to perceive that their institution has affected their interest in voting. We believe that this finding adds meaningfully to the research on potential impacts of an honors education.

One final note is the possibility that students who enroll in the UA Honors College might be more likely than honors students elsewhere to report an increased interest in politics and to respond that their education has had an impact on their voting. For instance, since the UA Honors College is explicit about its goal of developing agents of positive social change, students who find this goal compelling might be the ones who opt to complete the honors curriculum. This kind of explanation has been proposed (Herrnstein and Murray; Luskin) and tested (Hillygus) as the political meritocracy hypothesis, which argues that the correlation between increased education and political participation is facilitated not by education level but by general intelligence. In other words, the individuals who are likely to pursue more education are the same individuals who are likely to be politically participatory because they are more intelligent in general. Hillygus, however, has tested both the political meritocracy hypothesis and the civic education hypothesis, finding the latter a better explanatory theory for the link between education and political and civic participation. Specifically, Hillygus finds that the type of curriculum completed is significant for predicting civic engagement and voting even when controlling for general measures of intelligence. To test the political meritocracy hypothesis in the UA Honors College, we would need access to measures of general political interest prior to completing an honors curriculum as well as a variable indicating honors status. As we expand our research, we hope that we can measure general political interest in conjunction with the completion of an honors curriculum so that more precise inferences can be obtained.

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APPENDIX A

List of Major Codes

Note: 1=STEM, 0=Other.

Major Code	Major	Class
AAST	African American Studies	0
AC	Accounting	1
ADV	Advertising	0
AE	Aerospace Engineering	1
AE	Aerospace Engineering	1
AEM	Aerospace Engineer & Mechanics	1
AMS	American Studies	0
ANT	Anthropology	0
APMA	Applied Mathematics	1
APR	Advertising Public Relations	0
APST	Applied Statistics	1
ARCE	Architectural Engineering	1
ARH	Art History	0
ART	Art	0
AT	Apparel And Textiles	0
ATHT	Athletic Training	1
BA	Book Arts	0
BUAD	Business Administration	1
BY	Biology	1
CCE	Construction Engineering	1
CD	Communicative Disorders	0
CE	Civil Engineering	1
CECM	Coun Educ-Clinical Mental Hlth	0
CECO	Coun Educ-Community	0
CERG	Coun Educ-Rehab Counseling	0
CESC	Counselor Ed School Couns	0
CH	Chemistry	1
CHE	Chemical Engineering	1
CIS	Communication & Info Sciences	0

CJ	Criminal Justice	0
COED	Counselor Education	0
COM	Communication Studies	0
COMP	Composition	0
CRW	Creative Writing	0
CS	Computer Science	1
CSGR	Computer Science (GR)	1
CSM	Consumer Sciences	0
CSMG	Consumer Sciences (GR)	0
CTED	Continuing Education	0
CTID	Cloth Textiles Interior Design	0
DN	Dance	0
EAEM	Educ Admin Elem Middle School	0
EASE	Educ Admin Secondary School	0
EC	Economics (CB)	1
ECAS	Economics (AS)	0
ECED	Early Childhood Education	0
ECHS	Early Childhood Education	0
EDAD	Educational Administration	0
EDLE	Educational Leadership	0
EDPR	Educ Psychology-Research	0
EDPY	Educational Psychology	0
EDR	Educational Research	0
EDSG	Educ Psychology: General Educ	0
EDSP	Educ Psychology: School Psych	0
EDSY	Educ Psychology: School Psych	0
EE	Electrical Engineering	1
EH	English	0
EHSL	English As Second Language	0
ELED	Elementary Education	0
ELFR	Sec Ed French N-12	0
ELGN	Sec Ed German N-12	0
ELLT	Sec Ed Latin N-12	0
ELSP	Sec Ed Spanish N-12	0

EORN	Nursing-Educ Opportunity RN	0
ES	Environmental Science	0
ESM	Engr Science & Mechanics	1
EVEG	Environmental Engineering	1
FI	Finance	1
FIN	Finance	1
FLLT	Foreign Languages & Literature	0
FN	Food and Nutrition (FN)	0
GB	General Business	1
GEHS	Gen Studies Human Envir Sci	0
GEO	Geology	1
GHS	General Health Studies	0
GN	German	1
GY	Geography	1
HDFS	Human Development Family Stdy	0
HDVG	Human Development Family Stdy	0
HEA	Higher Education Administratn	0
HEPM	Health Education and Promotion	0
HLST	Health Studies	0
HPES	Human Perf Exercise Science	1
HPPE	Hupf: Physical Education	1
HUN	Human Nutrition	1
HUPD	Human Performance	0
HUPF	Human Performance	0
HY	History	0
IDGR	Interdisciplinary	0
IDHS	Interdisciplinary Studies	0
IDNW	Interdisciplinary	0
IDXD	Interdisciplinary	0
INLE	Instructional Leadership	0
INST	International Studies	0
INTD	Interior Design	0
JN	Journalism	0
JS	Juridical Science	0

LAC	Lower Division AC	1
LAW	Law	0
LBIS	Library & Information Studies	0
LEC	Lower Division EC	1
LFIN	Lower Division Finance	1
LGB	Lower Division GB	1
LLW	Law (LLM)	0
LMGT	Lower Division Management	1
LMIS	Lower Division MIS	1
LMKT	Lower Division Marketing	1
LOM	Lower Division OM	1
MA	Mathematics	1
MAP	Multiple Abilities Program	0
MBY	Microbiology	1
ME	Mechanical Engineering	1
MED	Medicine	1
MGMT	Management	1
MGT	Management	1
MIS	Management Information Systems	1
MKT	Marketing	1
MS	Marine Science	1
MSBG	Marine Science Biology	1
MSBY	Marine Science/Biology	1
MSCG	Marine Science Chemistry	1
MSCH	Marine Science/Chemistry	1
MSGE	Marine Science/Geology	1
MSGG	Marine Science Geology	1
MTE	Metallurgical & Materials Engr	1
MTLS	Materials Science	1
MTMT	Materials Metallurgical Engr	1
MUEI	Music Education/Instrumental	0
MUS	Music	0
MUTH	Music Theory	0
MUTY	Music Therapy	0

MUVC	Music Education/Vocal-Choral	0
NDC	Non-Degree Student Certificate	0
NDS	Non-Degree Student	0
NUR	Nursing	1
NURM	Nursing	1
NURP	Nursing	1
OM	Operations Management	1
PERF	Performance	0
PH	Physics	1
PHL	Philosophy	0
PLSD	Pre-Law Studies-AS	0
PMST	Pre-Majors Studies (AS)	0
PRCJ	Pre-Criminal Justice	0
PRDN	Pre-Dental	1
PRIS	Pre-Interdisciplinary Studies	0
PRMD	Pre-Medical	0
PROP	Pre-Optometry	1
PROT	Pre-Occup Therapy	1
PRPH	Pre-Pharmacy	1
PRPT	Pre-Physical Therapy	1
PSC	Political Science	0
PUAD	Public Administration	0
PUHE	Public Health	0
PURL	Public Relations	0
PY	Psychology	0
REL	Religious Studies	0
RHM	Restaurant & Hospitality Mgt	1
ROFR	Romance Languages: French	0
ROML	Romance Languages	0
ROSP	Romance Languages: Spanish	0
SB	Shelton Bridge Student	0
SCPY	School Psychology	0
SEED	Secondary Education	0
SEEE	Special Educ-Early Childhood	0

SEFR	Second Educ-French	0
SEGN	Second Educ-German	0
SELA	Second Educ-Language Arts	0
SELT	Second Educ-Latin	0
SEMA	Second Educ-Mathematics	0
SESI	Secondary Educ/Science	0
SESP	Second Educ-Spanish	0
SESS	Second Educ-Social Science	0
SHLP	Speech Language Pathology	0
SP	Spanish	0
SPCO	Collaborative Educ Prog (SPE)	0
SPE	Special Education	0
SW	Social Work	0
TAX	Taxation	1
TCF	Telecommunication And Film	0
TH	Theatre	0
TXAC	Tax Accounting	1
UDAS	Undesignated Arts & Sciences	0
UDCB	Undesignated Commerce Business	1
UDCM	Undesignated Communication	0
UDED	Undesignated Education	0
UDEG	Undesignated Engineering	1
UDEL	Undesignated Arts & Sci.—ELI	0
UDHS	Undesignated Human Envir Scien	0
WS	Women Studies	0

APPENDIX B

Interpretations of Key Independent Variables

Standard interpretation of the ordinal logistic coefficients is that for a one-unit increase in the predictor, the outcome changes by its regression coefficient in the ordered log odds scale holding constant the other variables in the model. In our model, we expect a 0.222 increase in the log odds of responding that education has increased interest in voting for honors students, holding all other variables in the model constant. Similarly, for a one-unit increase in our index variable, we expect a 0.262 increase in the log odds of responding that education has increased interest in voting.