

Judithanne Scourfield McLauchlan, Ph.D.

Learning Citizenship by Doing: Evaluating the Effects of a Required Political Campaign

with Susan Collier, Ph.D.

jascourfield@yahoo.com

Biography:

Assistant Professor, Political Science
Founding Director, Center for Civic Engagement
Campus Pre-Law Advisor

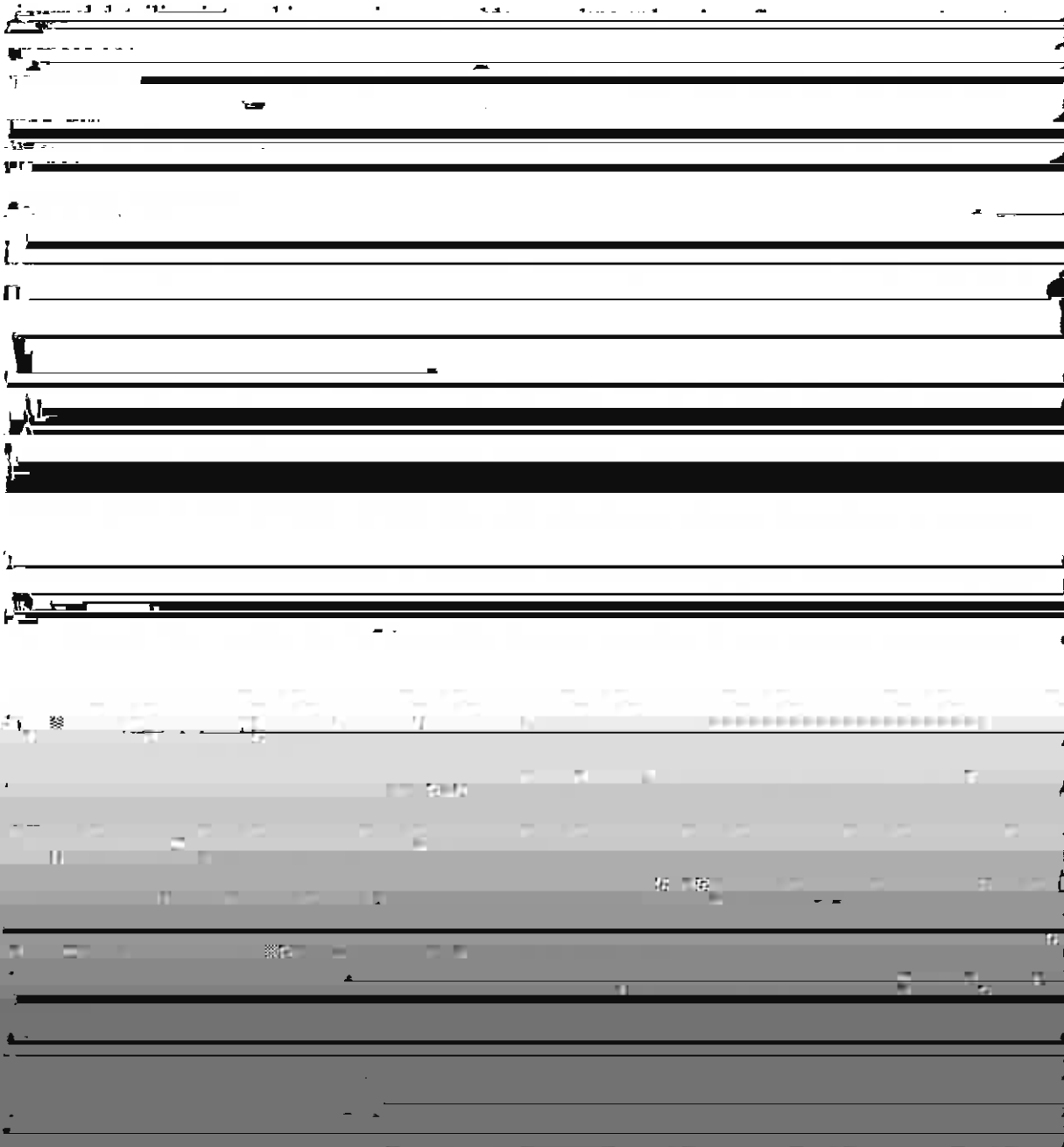
University of South Florida St. Petersburg
College of Arts & Sciences, DAV 258
140 Seventh Avenue South
St. Petersburg, FL 33708

813-495-4956

Dr. Scourfield McLauchlan is an Assistant Professor of Political Science, Founding Director of the Center for Civic Engagement and campus Pre-Law Advisor at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg where she teaches courses in American Government and Public Law.

When I first received the news that we would have to volunteer twenty-five hours on a political campaign, I was immediately filled with dread. Politics was something I just didn't care for.

The internship component was worth twenty percent of students' final course grade. The requirements included the following: work twenty-five hours on a political campaign, keep a



The selection of a campaign was itself a learning process. Students were compelled to think about their party identification and about their political values. As one student pondered in

her journal, "Was I a Democrat? Was I a Republican?" Another remarked, "If not for this internship assignment I wouldn't have given a second thought about who was running for what

I administered surveys in class before and after the internships in an attempt to measure the

students' attitudes towards campaigns, politicians, elections, and American politics. The results

Overall, the Pre-Internship Survey results painted a grim picture of what the students

thought about American government and politics. Students displayed little confidence in the

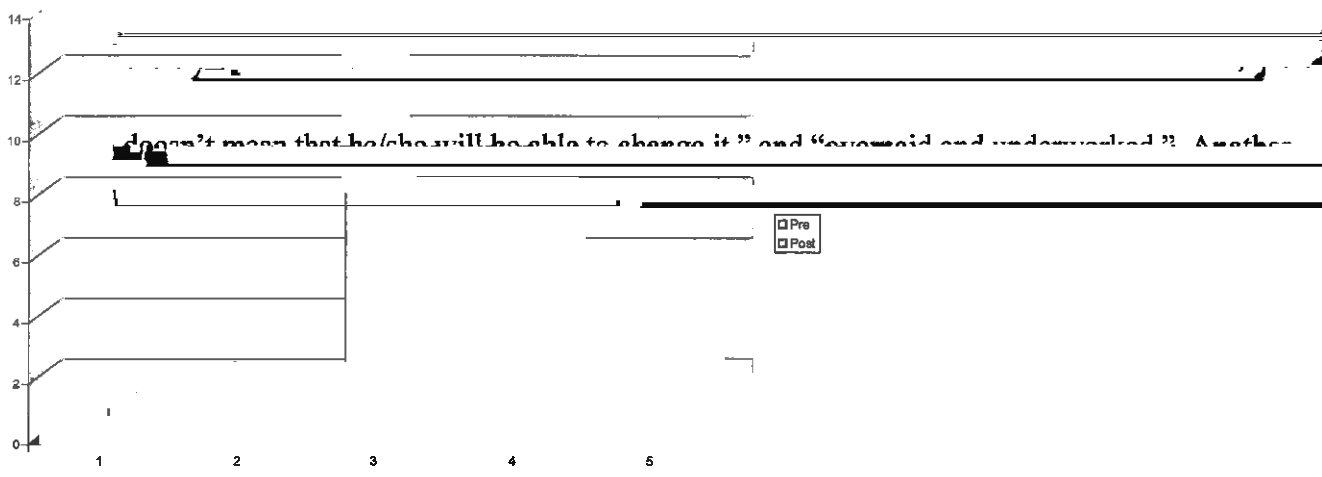
political system and very little confidence that participation in campaigns—or even voting—

would make any difference at all. After reading through the students' surveys and compiling the

results, I doubted that twenty-five hours of work on a campaign would make a difference.

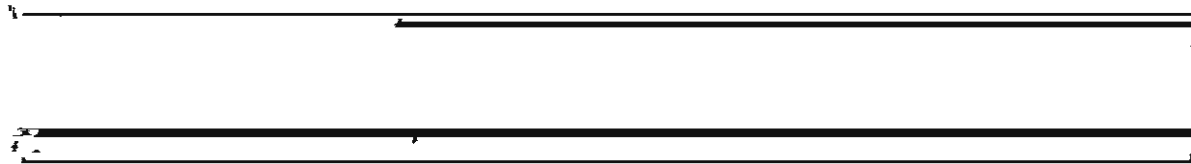
“corrupted by lobbies and corporate interests,” “very removed from the general population, not

[REDACTED]



doesn't mean that he/she will be able to change it" and "exposed and underworked". Another

During the Fall 2004 semester, twice as many students responded "yes" to the question



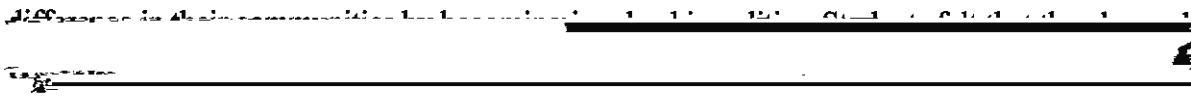
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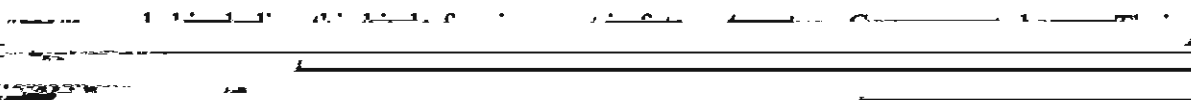
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In the short answer section, students explained that they learned that they could make



candidate's success."

Students also expressed a change in attitude regarding whether the internship assignment was a worthwhile endeavor. Despite their initial skepticism about this assignment, all students



It surpassed my expectations. I learned so much and met so many people.

I thought it would be boring – but – the internship was one of the best things I have done since I have been in college.

I expected to learn what goes on behind-the-scenes and to get a feel for what my candidate stood for. Yes [it met my expectations], I had an enjoyable time and got a great deal out of the experience and learned how a campaign works.

Students also talked specifically about what they learned from their internship: campaign tactics, voter contact activities, and different methods of fundraising (charitable contributions, etc.).

etc.”

Excerpts from Students' Internship Journals and Papers

The Pre- and Post-Internship surveys were anonymous. Students also were required to keep a journal of their internship experiences as well as to write a paper about what they learned

about campaigns and elections as a result of their campaign work.

Early in their journals, students expressed trepidation about the internship. One student remarked that “This is the first campaign that I had ever been involved with, as well as my first time voting, so to me the entire experience was like walking into some odd dream. . .”

After the initial entries, I read about the various candidate events that the students attended. Students planned and attended rallies and fundraising events. They went to lunch with campaign staff and used those opportunities to learn more about life on the campaign trail. Students indicated that they had increased access to the candidates due to their internship experience (e.g., “In line” tickets to events when they were attendees)

No.	Description of the work done
1	[Redacted]
2	[Redacted]
3	[Redacted]
4	[Redacted]
5	[Redacted]
6	[Redacted]
7	[Redacted]
8	[Redacted]
9	[Redacted]
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29	[Redacted]
30	[Redacted]
31	[Redacted]
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33	[Redacted]
34	[Redacted]
35	[Redacted]
36	[Redacted]
37	[Redacted]

about politics and how it worked, but now I actually understand what is going on . . . I would say this was a great learning experience for me.”

Students were generally more positive about politics, politicians and campaigns in their

post-internship reflection pieces. One student explained “I came to this with a pessimistic outlook on politicians and government as a whole. I came out with a new willingness to talk about politics.”

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Despite the overwhelmingly negative response to the Pre-Internship Survey question “Do you think you can make a difference in changing the direction of this country by becoming involved in the campaign?” many students reported that they believed they did make a difference by becoming involved in the election:

I think we all learned something from this election about the strength each and every one of our voices holds. . . . I learned a great deal about how the whole

[REDACTED]

understand just how important it was for me and people my age to get out and vote. I am proud of the support and effort that I put into this election year.

I learned that one person really can make a difference. When I think of all the

[REDACTED]

Working on this campaign has affected my life in ways I never imagined. I am now more driven than ever to get involved and make a difference. I have come out of this experience with a tremendous amount of respect for those who work on campaigns and for those who run for office. The dedication and commitment is

enough to be a small part of that family. It was with a heavy heart that I said goodbye to the campaign and all the staff. I have come away from this with new friends, contacts, and a knowledge I had never expected.

is to become involved in a campaign itself. . . . That is more meaningful and memorable than any textbook or article could be.

something to blow off as unimportant. Luckily I found this out at 19-years-old, during the first election I could legally vote in. . . . I would suggest that everyone under the age of 25 should participate in something like this. My guess would

was a requirement to graduate – not because they had any interest in American government, and certainly not because they wanted to work on a campaign.

American government, politicians, politics, campaigns, and elections. While youth cynicism and

more active participants in class discussions. They followed current events, paid more attention to the news, and brought up relevant issues during lectures. Our discussions were much more robust, and students once too shy to participate later found the confidence to speak up. After being trained to go door-to-door and to call complete strangers, suddenly the classroom was not as intimidating.

I conclude with a student quotation that encapsulates why I believe that incorporating a campaign internship in *American Government* can have a profound effect on the students' civic education:

This experience was very influential to me. I feel like this internship and the course has opened a new chapter in my life. I am not saying this will be a new career path. I am saying that every election going forward, I will take more seriously and try to get involved in any way that I can. I think my understanding of American Government has definitely increased. It was a great learning

experience. I wish more of my classes were like this one. It was great having the opportunity to be involved in an experience like this.

Incorporating an internship within core Political Science courses can have a dramatic influence on students' educational experience. As this example demonstrates, students became