

Reciprocity, Incentives, and Off-Ramps: Faculty–Undergraduate Collaboration and Comparative Politics Research

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ABSTRACT

What are the opportunities and challenges of faculty–undergraduate collaborative scholarship that involves student participation at every stage of the research process? Drawing on interviews with comparative politics faculty members and undergraduate students, this article discusses the themes of reciprocity, incentives, and “off-ramps.” First, we find that an unequal division of labor can give way to a more reciprocal work dynamic as long-term projects unfold. Second, we consider the use of incremental incentives to sustain student motivation. Third, we propose the creation of off-ramps to allow an undergraduate to gracefully exit a project early. Grounded in these themes, we argue that—with a few guardrails—faculty members and undergraduate students can benefit from long-term collaborative research projects, including those that involve fieldwork or that seek to publish peer-reviewed articles.


In 2016, Paul and I were finishing the first draft of our submission to *Latin American Perspectives*. Every time I thought we were ready to submit, Paul would flag a spot to improve the writing or where we needed a citation. Finding sources to substantiate evidence from our fieldwork brought back fond memories of our six weeks conducting interviews in Mexico City and Lima. I enjoyed how our fast-paced work required me to put opposing perspectives in conversation, such as when we had back-to-back interviews with a liberal economist and a Marxist sociologist. Through engaging in this work, I felt prepared to dive into a PhD in political science.


—Julia Smith Coyoli

Among the many forms of faculty–undergraduate collaborations and publications—book reviews, opinion editorials, conference papers—this article focuses on work coauthored by professors and budding researchers that involves both collaborators in all stages of the research project, aims for peer-reviewed publication, and may involve fieldwork. We refer to these collaborations as long term. Whereas some faculty–undergraduate

writing can be accomplished in an academic year, or even a semester, longer projects that include research design, data collection and analysis, and peer review can be a challenging fit for students whose academic commitments reboot every semester.

Providing undergraduate students with the opportunity to conduct research increasingly is considered pedagogically important. However, although Dotterer (2002), Moreno-Black and Homchampa (2008), and Miller (2014) summarized the benefits that undergraduates gain from participating in research, there is little work on multiyear collaborations. The type of collaboration described in this article has two distinctive elements. First, many projects involve collaboration in only some stages of the research process, whether that is a faculty member helping an undergraduate design and collect data but not participating as coauthors (Miller 2014, 229–31) or a student initiating a project that a professor later joins as a coauthor (Reitmaier Koehler et al. 2015, 134). We were unable to find any academic literature that describes faculty–undergraduate collaborations that covered the entire research process or that discusses the distinct challenges and benefits of such a comprehensive collaboration.¹ Second, many faculty–undergraduate collaborations occur in the hard sciences, where the lab setting is aligned with this type of research (Ahmad and Al-Thani 2022). However, the fieldwork component of some political science research presents challenges to collaboration

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that rarely have been explored (however, see Caulkins 1999 and Moreno-Black and Homchampa 2008).

Drawing on interviews with faculty members and undergraduate students who collaborated on comparative politics research, we explored the challenges of long-term collaborations and identified three themes. First, when inviting undergraduates to join a longer-term project, consider whether “off-ramps” can be created so that students can exit the project as their interests and commitments evolve. Second, consider whether a role in all stages of the project should be offered to undergraduate collaborators “up front” or whether incentives can be spread out, providing milestones to earn through demonstrated commitment and contributions. Third, despite the inequalities between faculty members and undergraduate scholars, faculty can foster a reciprocal relationship using mentorship and each partner’s skills.

To explore these themes, we draw on interviews with faculty members and undergraduate collaborators who have coauthored publications on politics in Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, as well as reflections from our own experiences. The article begins with a description of our methodology, which is followed by four sections: (1) project formulation; (2) data collection and analysis; (3) writing, revision, and publication; and (4) professional mentorship. We conclude with a discussion of lessons learned.

METHODOLOGY

Our analysis draws on evidence from both interviews and personal reflections. We interviewed scholars of comparative politics at selective liberal arts colleges² in the United States, as well as their undergraduate collaborators. We expected this sample to include faculty members who were likely to have participated in long-term collaborations, possibly involving fieldwork, for three reasons. First, fieldwork is a common practice among comparativists. Second, scholars at these colleges often face high publication expectations but lack easy access to graduate-student collaborators. Third, selective liberal arts colleges have institutional structures and support to encourage faculty members to mentor undergraduates, potentially creating a favorable environment for collaboration (Eagan et al. 2011).

Even in this most likely sample, we found that few faculty members have coauthored peer-reviewed publications with undergraduates. We identified 142 comparativists at the 48 colleges in our sample. Based on their online CVs, only 14 had published peer-reviewed studies or conducted fieldwork with an undergraduate collaborator. We identified only three faculty members whose projects involved both elements.

We drew our potential interviewees from this list of 14 professors and their undergraduate collaborators. Ultimately, we interviewed six professors and five of their undergraduate collaborators, resulting in a sample of 13 total long-term collaborations. Each interview lasted 20 to 60 minutes during which we asked participants to discuss the origins of the collaboration, how they divided tasks, their experiences during fieldwork, data collection and analysis, and what they considered the benefits and challenges of such a collaboration.

Finally, we reflected on our own experiences: Paul, an associate professor of political science, has coauthored publications with seven undergraduate and former undergraduate students, and Julia—currently a PhD candidate—collaborated with Paul in

the years prior to her graduate work. Paul teaches at a liberal arts college that values faculty–student collaboration—faculty members in his home department have coauthored 80 publications with undergraduates in the past 20 years (Macalester College 2022). Paul’s collaborations with students include field research in five countries, presentations at eight conferences, and coauthorship of two peer-reviewed articles (e.g., Dosh and Kligerman 2010), as well as seven other scholarly articles. In our work together, we conducted field research in Mexico and Peru, presented two conference papers, wrote a three-article series (in English and Spanish) about mayoral elections (e.g., Dosh, Smith, and Rodríguez Medina 2014), and published a peer-reviewed article (Dosh and Coyoli 2019).

PROJECT FORMULATION

For the first stage of research collaborations, our interviewees described three paths through which project formulation occurs: *faculty-driven*, *student-driven*, and *reciprocal collaborations*. Faculty-driven collaborations were the most common among our interviewees (nine collaborations). The undergraduate often began by working as a research assistant, whether hired on the premise that good work would be rewarded with coauthorship or given that role from the beginning of the project. In faculty-driven collaborations, the professor sets the research agenda, question, and methods. Student interests may be considered when determining their fit for a project, but they do not shape the initial contours of the research. For example, one scholar hired two undergraduates to code and analyze data from interviews already conducted with immigrants from Eastern Europe; however, the caliber of their contributions ultimately earned them coauthorship on a peer-reviewed publication. Interviewees also discussed how undergraduates support the research at this stage by conducting library research or by asking questions that identify gaps in the research question, design, or theoretical framework.

Two of the collaborations in our sample were student-driven—one leading to a peer-reviewed encyclopedia entry and the other resulting in a peer-reviewed article in an area-studies journal. Each project began with the student’s independent research as a requirement of a course or a senior thesis. In this path, students bring knowledge of the subject and case and faculty collaborators provide expertise in the expectations surrounding publishing and tasks such as building a more generalizable theory. As one student recalled: “The project started as my undergraduate thesis....[My professor] took me under her wing. Showed me her research ethos....She suggested that I might want to try and publish this....I asked her if she would be interested in collaborating. She had helped me so much with the theoretical foundations of the thesis.”

Finally, two of the collaborations began with a reciprocal path. In this path, the collaborators partner to brainstorm a project that fits a combination of their skills and research interests. Although this path provides equal voice to each collaborator, faculty members and students nevertheless have different roles. Faculty members might deploy their expertise to shape shared topics of interest into viable research questions, as well as to propose methodologies for the project. Julia appreciated this approach, stating: “When Paul proposed working together, I had a voice in the project immediately, and we worked together on the research design. Paul steered us toward using my experiences living in Latin American cities as the genesis for a

new research agenda. Paul's scaffolding allowed me to feel successful from the beginning."

Despite beginning with different degrees of voice for each collaborator, all but one of the collaborations in our sample occurred between coauthors who previously had worked together in the context of a class. Each faculty member we interviewed commented on the care they took in selecting students who had shown themselves as responsible and interested in pursuing rigorous research. In describing how he chose which students to invite onto projects, a professor who has engaged in three long-term collaborations stated: "I already knew the students well and knew that they could accomplish the work. Their classwork had already exceeded the difficulty of what the research project was going to be."

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

With the project scope defined, collaborators advance to data collection and analysis. For most of our interviewees, this process relied on quantitative data and/or secondary sources. Three faculty-member interviewees stated that their undergraduate collaborators were instrumental in conducting quantitative analyses that they could not do alone. One scholar praised their student coauthor this way: "My theoretical frameworks are institutional development, social movements, degree of state intervention, sequencing. It's a very different approach than regression. What [my student collaborator] brought was wonderful because...he could construct the graphs....He brought the ability to numerically present the data in a way that was helpful. He also was willing to use the datasets."

Few faculty-undergraduate collaborations involve fieldwork, yet it presents opportunities—and challenges—that make it worth exploring in more detail. The faculty members who conducted fieldwork with undergraduates described two benefits. First, they discussed how the energy and enthusiasm of younger collaborators kept them engaged, despite the nonstop rhythm of fieldwork. As one professor reflected: "So much...goes down all the time on every trip....There's never anything that doesn't happen in [Central

American country]. [My coauthor] can go with the flow and respond to it quickly."

Second, a fieldwork partner can process information gleaned from the interviews. Reflecting on fieldwork in rural Southeast Asia, a professor recalled recording student reactions in a notebook after each community encounter. Likewise, long car rides home after interviews in remote sites allowed collaborators to process substantive and emotional reactions. Julia explained the way in which she and Paul would write together to process new information: "I observed that writing is essential to clarifying my own thinking. By writing during fieldwork, we identified what was missing, allowing us to quickly pivot and explore new avenues."

However, fieldwork also requires a degree of emotional intelligence that not all potential undergraduate collaborators possess. Interviewees discussed the need to carefully select who they invited to participate. In describing their work in Central America, one professor highlighted that this sensitivity was key to success: "They have always been a great listener and have a real capacity to do research...which is to have your ear tuned to the ground and listen to what people say...they know that peoples' voices matter." The professor also shared that "I've been frustrated with students in the field....Either not smart enough or not engaged enough. Or not sensitive enough. We've taken students to [Latin American city]. But none of them would I take a second time. You need someone who is serious about the research and isn't just going on a field trip. Someone who isn't going to get tired at 5 o'clock."

The fieldwork experience is intense and collaborators have few breaks from one another or time to engage in other activities. Shorter and more frequent trips can alleviate this problem. As Paul stated: "Splitting the time into separate trips kept both of us fresh for nonstop work together and helped to avoid the collaboration fatigue that affected some of my earlier fieldwork."

Finally, undergraduate participation in fieldwork requires funding that many institutions lack. When we asked interviewees whether they had considered fieldwork, a common refrain was that faculty members would have liked to pursue it but that their institution does not have funds to support undergraduates doing this work. One professor commented: "I'm always on a shoestring for going abroad....Never had such largesse that would allow me to bring an undergraduate." In contrast, all three of the professors who involved undergraduates in fieldwork did so with financial support from their home institution.

WRITING, REVISION, AND PUBLICATION

When describing the shift from data collection to collaborative writing, interviewees identified two approaches: *divide and conquer* and *shared voice*. Those who chose to divide and conquer described a process of determining a structure and outline together before working independently on their individual sections and then

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syncing style and language. In contrast, the shared-voice approach relies on frequent communication during writing and a process in which each collaborator is immersed in the entire paper. One benefit of the shared-voice approach is that it allows faculty members to model the process of academic writing. As Julia reflected: "In watching Paul write, I learned a number of important conventions in academic prose; most important, that the introduction—which I had previously all but ignored—was the most crucial section and that it needed to be concise, accurate, and catchy."

Although all of our interviewees engaged in long-term projects, Paul's collaborations that resulted in peer-reviewed publications involved an especially lengthy writing process. In each collaboration, Paul and his coauthor presented preliminary drafts at two academic conferences and also circulated the manuscript for

feedback from other scholars. These additional steps, before peer review, may have made project fatigue more likely.

Incremental incentives can sustain student motivation in the face of fatigue. Rather than committing to all of the “rewards” at the beginning of a project, some can be held in reserve. In addition to using coauthorship as an incentive, faculty members can use campus funds to pay undergraduates during the writing

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stage, nominate a coauthor for academic opportunities, share a recommendation letter with the student, assign the student’s scholarship as part of a course syllabus, or give the student first authorship when writing a series of publications (e.g., Smith and Dosh 2014). Beyond these incentives, regular check-ins can mitigate fatigue.

In some cases, however, project or collaboration fatigue cannot be overcome, particularly when the time frame for the project exceeds initial expectations. In these cases, the student coauthor may need an exit strategy. We propose that identifying off-ramps in advance can ease this process, especially if they are written in a contract that considers possible scenarios. For example, if the student graduates when the work is not yet finished, will they still receive coauthorship if the professor completes the final stretch alone? What if the student’s interests shift, as is common in college? Having a written plan that states expectations regarding communication and commitment enables the student to understand which off-ramps exist and to feel empowered to exercise them. One undergraduate reflected on how these steps might have helped: “Maybe implement a bit more of a conversation about boundaries. Be a little clearer in communicating about that...like a contract....How can we support one another in a way that is productive? That conversation certainly never happened between [us] and I think it could have clarified some instances of miscommunication.”

PROFESSIONAL MENTORSHIP

Every individual that we interviewed cited professional mentorship as a key piece of long-term collaborations. As one undergraduate stated: “A lot of academia is a black box, and the logistics are not clear. In the case with [faculty-member collaborator], it was about publishing and trying to share the project. But it was also about professionalizing and understanding how people do this work and what goes into this kind of career. We talked about the nuts and bolts of the peer-review process. What we might expect to get back, how soon we might hear, etc.”

Undergraduate collaborators discussed learning research skills such as interviewing, connecting evidence to theory, and presenting and networking at conferences. More broadly, this type of mentorship shows undergraduates that they can conduct research and explore whether academia would be a good fit. One student illustrated this point this way: “This kind of experience shows you that it is possible to do this kind of work. If you don’t grow up with parents in academia, or family members who do something like this, you don’t always know what people do besides teaching....For me, I had an interest in

maybe pursuing this path, but I didn’t know what it looked like and if I could do it. And I didn’t know if it would be a good fit.”

When the student is not interested in academia, the collaboration nevertheless can provide a valuable space for mentorship. One professor from a rural liberal arts college observed that students do not have access to internships or spaces for profes-

sional development. Thus, research collaborations provide a space for developing professional skills including public speaking, information gathering, and analysis.

Although students who are not interested in academia can benefit from research, their different long-term goals may present challenges. Specifically, turning the project into an accepted peer-reviewed manuscript may be more important to the professor than to the student, for whom much of the value and learning already has been achieved by that point. For example, after completing fieldwork, one undergraduate collaborator blogged the following: “But to me...it seems as though perhaps the most momentous challenges will not be spoken of at conference presentations or discussed within academic papers. The real challenge, for me, lies in incorporating all that I’ve learned from this voyage...into the rest of my life...fortifying my own sense of community, values, and justice” (Dosh and Kligerman 2008).

Given these unequal motivations, faculty members should anticipate that an unequal division of labor may (re)emerge in the final stages, with the professor doing what is needed to see the manuscript through to publication. It may be useful to view this from a mentorship perspective; that is, as the professor responding to the developmental needs of the student. When a project extends beyond graduation, faculty members also may need to recognize a student’s desire to separate from the institution and their mentors to forge their own path and determine how this may impact the project.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on each stage of the research process, several lessons emerge for faculty members and undergraduate scholars (table 1). During the project-formulation stage, even a reciprocal partnership can embrace the unequal professional knowledge and skills of collaborators by assigning literature-review tasks to the student, with the professor deciding the project scope. This stage also can clarify the student’s level of commitment, paving the way for a written learning contract that articulates student and project goals, establishes expectations, and anticipates challenges (Miller 2014, 232). The process of creating this contract helps the professor to evaluate whether the student is a good fit for a long-term project.

When data collection involves fieldwork, we find that the excitement and energy of young scholars is a great boon and, once they are oriented to the rhythm of the work, mentors can give them more independence and responsibility. However, fieldwork also requires collaborators who can handle the emotional and physical requirements.

Table 1

Lessons for Collaborative Faculty–Student Scholarship

Project Stage	Lessons
Project Formulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty-driven, student-driven, or reciprocal collaborations • Clear division of labor due to unequal professional knowledge and skills • Initial opportunity for students to demonstrate contribution and commitment • Learning contracts can anticipate challenges
Data Collection and Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student commitment and sensitivity are particularly important
Writing, Revision, and Publication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Divide and conquer” or “shared voice” • Incentives and off-ramps can sustain student motivation and prevent project and collaboration fatigue
Professional Mentorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance mentorship of whole student with achievement of professor’s goals

Sustained collaboration provides students with exceptional opportunities to develop skills in project design, evidence collection and analysis, and writing and revision. Participating in fieldwork also gives undergraduate students the opportunity to experience new cultural contexts in depth and can achieve an invaluable synergy between scholarship and teaching.

As writing and revision unfolds, obstacles may emerge. The lengthy time frame of scholarly publication may conflict with the semester-to-semester rhythm of college education, resulting in project or collaboration fatigue. We suggest a strategy of incremental incentives to sustain student motivation, as well as off-ramps to ease the process if a student exits a project early.

In all stages of collaborative research, student mentorship must be balanced with faculty goals regarding scholarship and teaching. Early attention to this balancing act can alleviate stress during later stages, such as when manuscript acceptance proves elusive or the undergraduate’s learning needs no longer align with the publication process. One faculty-member interviewee emphasized the value of finding this balance this way: “It has to be the most rewarding experience of my professional career. I would grab the opportunity because I think undergraduate students are a blank canvas. They are open to learning and understanding.” An undergraduate agreed: “I’m forever indebted to her. I’m confident that without her, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Discussions of faculty–undergraduate collaboration sometimes advocate providing research opportunities to many undergraduates (e.g., Reitmaier Koehler et al. 2015). We doubt that the practice of long-term research projects can be scaled up to serve a large number of students; however, we find it to be a valuable model to serve some undergraduates, regardless of their career plans. Sustained collaboration provides students with exceptional opportunities to develop skills in project design, evidence collection and analysis, and writing and revision. Participating in fieldwork also gives undergraduate students the opportunity to experience new cultural contexts in depth and can achieve an invaluable synergy between scholarship and teaching.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. However, Smart, Haring, and Zogg, et al. (2017) described an initiative to engage masters’ students in research. The authors indicated that the collaboration lasts for the duration of the research, but they did not discuss the specifics of each stage.
2. We examined the first 40 liberal arts colleges ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* (2022) and *Niche* (2023), as well as all of the schools (25) ranked by College Raptor (2022). There was minimal divergence among these lists.

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