

## Inequality and the American classroom: Experiential strategies for teaching social justice

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- The study explores changes in students' attitudes associated with taking a course on inequality.
- Students were more likely to see their social and economic position accurately after completing the course.
- Experiential, interdisciplinary, and framing strategies show promise in overcoming cognitive dissonance.
- Findings call for further research into these complex issues during this current political climate.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a mixed format, experiential course on changes in Honors students' attitudes about various issues of inequality.

**Methodology:** Students enrolled in the course ( $N = 75$ ), taught during the 2016 Presidential election, were asked about their opinions on a variety of inequality topics using a pre- and post-test survey, with the post-test survey including questions on how perceptions of inequality had changed over the course of the semester.

**Findings and implications:** Results indicate that some students became more self-aware of their position in society and were less sure that people in general, and they themselves in particular, would be responsible for their own success. Importantly, students were less likely to believe that people faced fair and equal opportunities in the labor market and their overall level of support for unions increased during the semester. Most students agreed that the outside speakers, a key component of the course, provided new information on various aspects of inequality and impacted their overall perceptions of inequality. However, students were much less agreed on how they felt both about the future of the country and the future of inequality.

### **Keywords:**

Cognitive dissonance, experiential education, inequality, motivated reasoning, student attitudes

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## 1 Introduction

Teaching challenging issues, such as race, gender, or exclusion, is an enduring struggle, as students are often resistant to understanding or consideration of viewpoints outside their own experiences. In the current political climate, these challenges are even more robust. Political psychologist Lillian Mason (2018) finds that Americans are increasingly *affective* in their polarization. In other words, groups prefer to identify, socialize, live among, and interact with individuals sharing their ideological perspectives and preferences. The complication of these emergent patterns are twofold: first, individuals are less likely to interact or have social contact with individuals who hold a competing political perspective; second, individuals are more likely to conflate ideology and identity, rendering information that does not comport to their previous world view as threatening. This paper examines the challenge and efficacy of using a mixed experiential, active, and more traditional educational model in impacting perspectives and information surrounding inequality in this increasingly polarized environment. As students exist in increasingly polarized environments, the challenges associated with teaching social justice and equity, are anticipated to increase.

Research has shown that students who take diversity courses are changed in meaningful ways, and that these changes can be lasting (although the evidence is not unequivocal, see Engberg, 2004; Linneman, 2019). In addition, research indicates that, during college, students tend to change in the direction of greater tolerance to individual differences (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Furthermore, research on college impact demonstrates that students' interactions with peer and faculty have the greatest impact on changes in values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996). Less is known about the processes through which these changes occur (Zirkel & Cantor, 2004), and whether change is related to characteristics of individual students, course characteristics, or a combination of the two. However, Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora (2001) found that a wide variety of college experiences – environmental, academic, and non-academic – across three years of college influence openness to diversity. This is consistent with other evidence that a college's impact on students, including its influence on attitudes about race and other aspects of diversity, is the result of an accumulation of experiences, rather than any single experience (Hurtado, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This paper presents research examining the changes in Honors Program students' attitudes associated with taking an experiential course utilizing active learning strategies covering various issues of inequality, which also included a weekly speaker series on these topics.

## 2 Teaching inequality

What makes courses on inequality most exciting to teach also makes them most difficult. The issues of advantage and disadvantage, the 'haves' and the 'have nots', power and powerlessness, bias and discrimination addressed in these courses are charged concepts. They often encourage viewing the world as a place of winners and losers, where individuals must decide their views on such matters and identify their place on the social map. Personal identities play a strong role and are often shaped and loyalties formed around race, class, gender, and political affiliation. In



addition, these teaching moments do not happen in a vacuum and are heavily impacted by what is currently taking place in the world (Mildred and Zúñiga, 2004).

In her 1992 article, Nancy Davis discussed three classroom climates – those of resistance (the focus here), paralysis, and rage. While she points out that none of these climates exist in a pure form or arise in all classes, they are frequently encountered. When it comes to the resisting class, some students may deny the existence or importance of inequality or may argue that conditions are improving so rapidly that no intervention is necessary (Davis, 1992). Davis (1992) states that other students may be aware of the basic premise of stratification, but may deny, sometimes adamantly, that race, class, or sex/gender differences result from unnatural access to opportunity or other structural factors. Overall, these students believe that individuals are responsible for their own success, and that deficiencies or differences are not impacted by larger societal issues. With this lens of individualism in place, inequality becomes a legitimate sorting device, separating those who work hard from those who do not (Davis, 1992). In addition, Mildred and Zúñiga (2004) stress that it is important to understand the relationship between the psychological and developmental issues of individual students and their readiness for the challenges that are brought about by a course on diversity issues.

Hedley and Markowitz (2001) note that some students are resistant to information because it is perceived as challenging a norm/other dichotomy in which they are morally invested. Their work has identified dichotomies that exist as morally laden beliefs that present one alternative from a set of alternatives as superior to all others. The ‘superior’ alternative is considered the ‘norm,’ while the remaining alternatives are treated as ‘other’ (Hedley & Markowitz, 2001). Hedley & Markowitz (2001) also caution that students resist, specifically sociological arguments, for various reasons, including personality conflicts with teachers, the effects of everyday stress on emotional dispositions, and genuine intellectual disagreement. Finally, Chizhik and Chizhik (2005) note that preconceptions shape worldview, functionally intercepting information and interpreting it through an already established lens; competing or conflicting information with the already existing framework can be interpreted as blame or guilt inducing information likely to be rejected.

So why are students so resistant? Cognitive dissonance, or the extreme discomfort of holding two thoughts at the same time that are in conflict with one another, was originally developed back in the 1950s by social psychologist Leon Festinger (1957). Festinger and colleagues (1956), in their book *When Prophecy Fails* initially identified the range of obstacles associated with changing convictions and the inability of evidence or logical argument to sway enduring belief. This doubling down in the face of conflicting evidence helps reduce the discomfort of dissonance and is part of a set of behaviors known as “motivated reasoning.”

Motivated reasoning builds on work in neuroscience: reasoning is actually suffused with emotion/affect (Damasio, 1994). Our positive or negative feelings about people, things, and ideas arise more rapidly than our conscious thoughts, and as a result, we push threatening information away and pull friendly information close (Kraft, Lodge & Taber 2015; Redlawsk, Civettini & Emmerson, 2010). Emotions come before reason; our emotional responses can set us on a course of biased thinking, especially on topics we care about. Attempts to persuade can sometimes trigger a backfire effect, where people not only fail to change their minds when confronted with facts, they may hold their wrong views more tenaciously and retain information that continues to fit into their existing world view (Kraft, Lodge & Taber, 2015). The backfire effect is constantly



shaping beliefs and memory, keeping us consistently leaning one way or the other through a process psychologists call biased assimilation (McRaney, 2011), or the tendency to interpret information in a way that supports a desired conclusion.

Furthermore, students often report that they are reluctant to engage in discussions about diversity or multiculturalism (Baxter Magolda, 1997; Grant Haworth, 1997; Levine & Cureton, 1998a). According to Levine and Cureton (1998b), this reluctance has been connected to students' feeling that "diversity has been shoved down their throats" (p. 146) by their parents, high school teachers, and society as a whole, as well as feeling they are not free to express themselves openly and honestly about gender, race/ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Over time, they have come to figure out when and where they can discuss these topics and in which situations they need to take the safe route and not voice the unacceptable (Baxter Magolda, 1997).

### 3 The Study

At this mid-sized public research university (The University), students maintaining a cumulative GPA of 3.4 or higher are eligible to take courses in the Honors Program. The University's Honors Program offers students the opportunity to take courses across disciplines, focusing on innovative topics, small class sizes and outstanding and passionate faculty. The University's Honors Colloquium is the largest public event sponsored by the university, running for more than 50 years, and brings speakers from around the country to engage students, faculty, and the larger community in key events of the day. Each colloquium includes a public lecture series, which is free and open to the public, an honors course in which students examine the topic of the course in a dynamic and interactive way, and a series of related activities. If students wish to fulfill the requirements of the Honors Program, they must take a colloquium course. Those enrolled in the colloquium course during the fall 2016 semester represented the full spectrum of Honors students from across the university. Of the 75 students registered for the course, 58 (77%) were female; 22 (29%) were sophomores, 30 (40%) were juniors, and 23 (31%) were seniors; 15 (20%) were business majors, 20 (27%) were social science majors, 24 (32%) were natural science majors, and 16 (21%) were humanities majors<sup>1</sup>.

The course, titled *Inequality and the American Dream*, offered an overview of income inequality in the United States from a variety of social science perspectives. As a class, students examined the nature, causes and consequences of the continuous growth in income inequality since the mid-1970s. The course focused specifically on the determinants of income and wealth inequality, on the historical, economic, political, and sociological causes and consequences of increased inequality, and on proposals for decreasing inequality. Over the course of the semester, students read articles covering numerous disciplines, participated in class discussions and completed assignments, interacted with individual experts and held question and answer sessions with them, and attended ten public presentations (required for all students) by experts in their fields on issues of immigration, race, poverty and homelessness, gender, the workplace, politics and campaign finance, the democratic process, labor unions, education and student debt, and the criminal justice system.

The course was a mixed format with an emphasis on facilitated student participation utilizing active learning strategies and engagement. Students had the opportunity to prepare interview



questions and engage with expert visitors who also met with the class prior to their large public presentations. On average, eight students per expert were involved in the facilitation of questions during class, with others in the course making contributions depending on the flow of the discussion. Each student participant was invited to a hosted dinner with experts, matching up with those they helped interview earlier in the day, allowing for informal conversation and engagement. They also completed group research projects and presented a poster on an issue related to inequality. Events were held in parallel to the course, including an election night gathering and discussion, a viewing and facilitated discussion of *Wall Street*, and an event titled *Inequality and the Cuban Dream*, a conversation with a visiting scholar. On average, students spent ten-twelve hours per week engaging in class preparation and activities.

In addition, The University's Theatre Department performed *Good People*, the Pulitzer Prize winning play by David Lindsay-Abaire about the divide between working-class people living a hand-to-mouth existence and those who manage to "move up" to a more financially secure life, and also held the *Every 28 Hours* theatre initiative, which helps draw attention to the widely shared and contested statistic that every twenty-eight hours a black person is killed by a vigilante, security guard, or the police in the United States. In sum, the content of the course was dynamic and contemporary, and students were invited to engage in the process of information gathering, with an emphasis on experiential learning through writing and asking questions, and engaging with the experts. Finally, this course took place during the 2016 Presidential Election.

#### 4 Active Learning, Experiential Learning & Inequality

Scholars of experiential education identify incorporation of activities into the classroom environment as a critical component of facilitating change. Loya & Cuevas (2010), for example, find that directly engaging students in contextual understanding in simulations surrounding race supports the illumination of the concept of white and male privilege. Latshaw (2015) notes that simulation and active engagement in the learning process facilitates the connection of larger social forces to individual experiences allowing what Chizhik & Chizhik (2005) identify as the creation of common understanding about a phenomenon that allows shared learning and moving away from focus on who is to blame for structural and other inequalities. The background of students learning about an issue potentially challenging to their world view has been identified in existing research to be both essential to effectively engaging students (Rothschild, 2003) and less important than teaching considering representation of all perspectives (Kandaswamy, 2007). Most importantly, inequality, race, multiculturalism, and gender are abstract concepts that are challenging to those not intimately acquainted with their variance and reality (Nagda, Gurin & Lopez, 2003).

Experiential and/or active education has been utilized as a strategy to decrease abstraction and increase comprehension. With foundations in social and cognitive or developmental psychology (Piaget, 1967; Kolb, 1984), a host of theories exist to explain *why* experiential active education works, often centering on the cyclical process of "experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). These findings are consistent with existing studies of knowledge acquisition that argue that knowledge acquisition combines comprehensive learning (rational, symbolic, cognitive) and apprehensive learning (knowledge gained through experience) (Rainey & Kolb,



1995). Most of these studies identify the contextual value in teaching diversity that experience employs, allowing the application of a previously understood but not lived experience. For example, a range of studies note that active and experiential strategies demonstrating concepts through individual stories, motivated by student inquiry and engagement in the learning process, or occurring as a result of simulation assist in minimizing resistance in understanding concepts (Haddad & Lieberman, 2002; Whitley, 2013; Grauerholz & Settembriand, 2016).

A core element of active and experiential education that is emphasized throughout the literature is the central role of novelty or lack of familiarity in facilitating the learning process by catalyzing growth (Marsh, 2008). Some of these models suggest that information an individual is predisposed to disagree with may be more engaging to learners in experiential formats. For example, experiences that frequently vary and/or are engaging are likely to facilitate the accumulation of “experiential wisdom” (Rathunde, 2010, p. 89). In sum, the literature suggests that learning about positional issues, for example race, inequality, diversity, and gender among others, may be more effective for those endowed with privilege when incorporating experiential formats.

Increasingly, social science courses emphasize outcomes and objectives based on increasing critical thinking, civic and political engagement, and moral reasoning (Breuning, Parker & Ishiyama, 2001). In typical political science courses for example, learning is focused on the mechanics of political action with an emphasis on substantive area coverage, over-relying on non-relatable content areas (Cohen, 1991). This type of emphasis often results in students moving away from relating to material rather than on engaged learning practices. In contrast, focus on large questions that transcend disciplinary focus are more likely to facilitate student engagement (Colander & McGoldrick, 2009). A significant literature identifies experiential education as providing a framework for student engagement in challenging topics such as social and/or environmental justice (Warren et al., 2014). Our course offered a massive departure from existing course formats, offered highly dynamic combinations of reading and personal interactions, and offered personal engagement with an interdisciplinary perspective focused on question and topic areas rather than on disciplinary theories and structures.

A range of critics identify a lack of systematic study linking theory to learning processes as a sharp critique of experiential education as a learning tool. Our examination does not directly engage these learning processes, but we are able to examine student attitudes surrounding inequality in a highly charged political environment with experiential framework infused with comprehensive and apprehensive knowledge acquisition opportunities. It remains challenging to ascertain if experiential methods and individual engagement can effectively overcome barriers to the consideration of information that contradicts individual beliefs. Our study constitutes a ‘least likely case’ for attitudinal change in students for several reasons. The preceding section outlined a lack of consideration of competing information due to a well-established psychological theory: motivated reasoning. Among experts, however, information and the presentation of evidence can constitute an ‘affective tipping point’, where information has to at least *partially be* considered based on a preponderance of evidence (Redlawsk, Civettini, & Emmerson, 2010). A more nuanced conclusion may be possible when these strategies are utilized in experiential contexts.

However, two additional factors complicate consideration of the issue: first and most important is the timing of the course and information. The course took place between September



and December 2016, over the span of the 2016 Presidential election. Issues of race, income, and identity were central to political and partisan associations in the election resulting in a larger socio-cultural context in which issues highlighted in the class comprised mainstream debates. Prior work has established a difference in the efficacy of appeal and argument based on political affiliation; liberals are more likely to be motivated by appeals to equality and social justice, while conservatives find appeals to tradition, strictness, and patriotism to be more persuasive (Graham et al., 2011). In addition, appeals to fear, widely used as identity based mobilizing strategies during the 2016 campaign, are more likely to be associated with conservative support and ideology (Napier et al., 2018). In sum, despite the topic of the course, the structure of information delivery, individual's prior political affiliation, and the sociotropic environment possibly offset advantages in learning and considering new arguments or ideas in an experiential context.

## 5 Methods

### 5.1 Participants and Procedures

Students enrolled in the course during the fall of 2016 were asked to complete pre-test and post-test surveys during class<sup>2</sup>. Students were told that their professors were interested in their opinions about inequality and that their participation was voluntary. In addition, students were assured that, if they did participate, all responses would remain confidential, surveys would be de-identified<sup>3</sup>, and no survey data would be analyzed prior to the end of the course and the assignment of grades. Finally, if students chose to participate, they were asked to complete and hand in an informed consent document<sup>4</sup>. Participation entailed completing a 60-question survey (pre-test) in September (week three of the semester) and a 67-question survey (post-test) in December (last week of the semester), which included the original 60 questions plus an additional seven questions about how their opinions changed over the course. Out of the 75 students enrolled in the course, 64 students participated in the pre- and post-test surveys, for an 85% response rate.

On the pre-test survey, students were first asked to compare themselves to other groups/peers, using a response range of one (*much worse off*) to ten (*much better off*). Next, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a series of questions, using a response range of one (*strongly disagree*) to ten (*strongly agree*). Finally, students were asked to rate a list of circumstances based on how exclusionary they believed them to be using a response range of one (*not excluded at all*) to seven (*highest level of exclusion*); the circumstances involved the economic and personal context of an individual. On the post-test survey, students were asked to answer the above questions again and were given an additional seven questions about the changes in their views and the impact of the speakers (using the one to ten range of strongly disagree to strongly agree)<sup>5</sup>.



## 6 Hypotheses

Based on the literature cited above, we developed a number of hypotheses that can be tested using the change in students' responses between the pre-test survey and post-test survey as well as the additional questions asked in the post-test survey.

*Hypothesis One: Students will become more self-aware of their relative position in society.*

The experiential focus of the class, including class discussions with peers and discussions with the visiting scholars on the scope of both economic and social inequality should allow students to better reflect on their own position in the country and how they compare with others.

*Hypothesis Two: Students will become more aware of the external forces that impact social and economic outcomes.*

As explained above, throughout the course there was an emphasis on the power structures that help determine the distribution of economic, social, and political power. The goal of this was to show that while personal actions, like hard work and education, are important for social and economic outcomes, there are outside forces against which many people struggle.

*Hypothesis Three: Students will become more likely to agree with the idea that employment opportunities are inequitable.*

One of the focuses of the course was on the history of labor opportunities, especially for women and minorities, with an emphasis on both the progress that has been made and the challenges that many people still face. One speaker focused on the particular challenges for low-wage restaurant workers.

*Hypothesis Four: Students will become more aware that organized labor will help decrease inequality.*

Both the history and economic impact of labor unions was explored in some detail with both an historian and an economist from a labor union discussing the benefits that workers have won from being part of organized labor.

*Hypotheses Five: Students who were more likely to change their views on the causes and consequences of inequality were more likely to view inequality as a significant problem in the United States.*

As noted above, many people are reticent to change closely held views. While we expect the same to be true in this data, we expect that those who are more open to changing their views will look at the evidence provided in the class and the experience of the Colloquium and come to the conclusion that inequality is a larger problem than they had previously believed.



## 7 Results

The pre- and post-course surveys had unique (but anonymous) identifiers so that we can compare answers by individual students. In all of the results presented below, the p-value is based on the paired t-test of whether the difference in mean between the two surveys is different from zero. Because means can change for a number of reasons, we also include a box-plot of the pre-test survey and post-test survey answers to see where the movement was in the distribution.

We constructed composite indicators from questions on the same topic in order to create more reliable indicators. These consist of between two and four questions on the same topic grouped together. For example, the composite indicator on personal responsibility groups the two statements “People are responsible for their own prosperity” and “I personally have the ability to change things that are important to me.” In cases where the statements have opposite polarity, the scale of one is inverted. For example, on measuring union support the composite indicator combines “Unions are important to ensuring fair working conditions” and “Unions are to blame for the loss of American jobs” but with the scale of the second question inverted so that a one becomes a ten and a ten becomes a one.

While there was no movement in the question that asked about future employment prospects, there was some movement in how students ranked themselves compared to others. This was especially true for group rankings (Table 1, Column 1 and Figure 1) while somewhat less true for question two about rankings of self and family compared to others (Table 1, Column 2). While most students in the pre-test survey ranked themselves as better off than others, fewer saw themselves as worse off after the course. This provides some support for our first hypothesis that students would become more self-aware of their position in society. While our data does not allow us to measure the accuracy of these self-reflections, most students in the Honors Program at the University are likely better off than those at least in the bottom half of the income distribution.

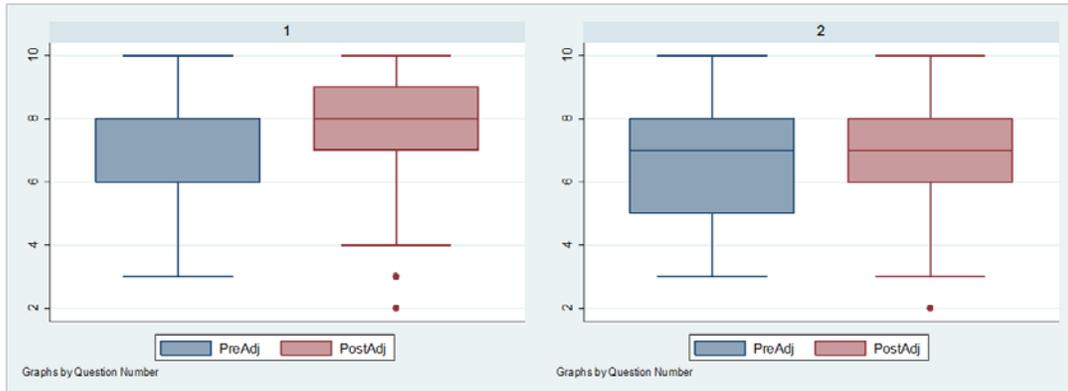
Table 1: Change in View of Self Compared to Others

	<b>Own Group Compared to Others (1)</b>		<b>Self and Family Compared to Others (2)</b>	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev
<b>Pre-test Survey</b>	7.07	0.23	6.48	0.25
<b>Post-test Survey</b>	7.48	0.24	6.83	0.21
<b>Difference</b>	0.41	0.18	0.34	0.17
<b>p-value</b>	0.027		0.051	
<b>N</b>	64		64	

The box plot of the responses in Figure 1 shows that while there was clear movement in most of the distribution about how the people saw their group’s relative placement, the movement in the second question (self and family compared to others) mainly comes from more students seeing themselves as better off than they did in the pre-test survey.



Figure 1: Distribution of Pre &amp; Post View of Self Compared to Others



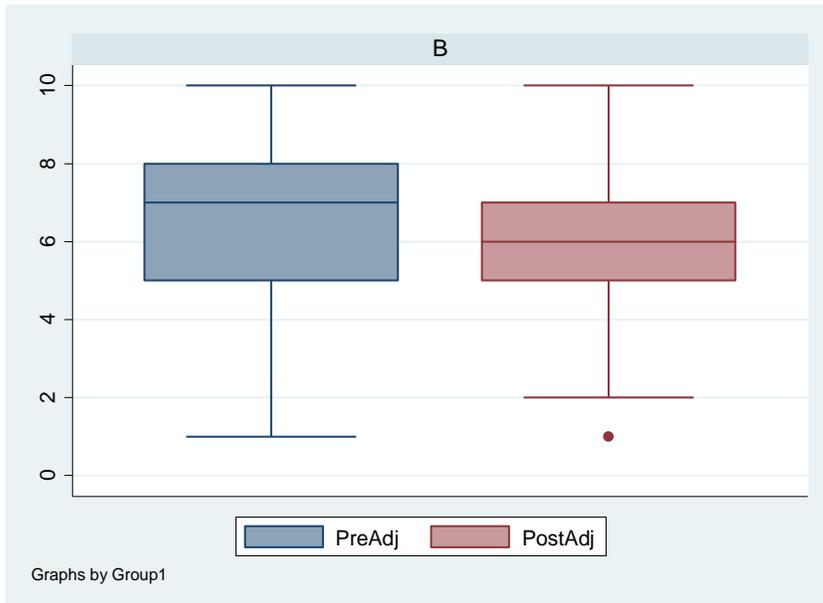
For the following questions, the students were asked to rank their agreement or disagreement with questions from one (Strongly Disagree) to ten (Strongly Agree). The course focused on both distributional issues and fairness issues while also discussing many government policies that either alleviated or exacerbated inequality in the United States. One ethos that many Americans share is that people are mainly responsible for their own success. We constructed a composite indicator reflecting this concept. Two questions represented this idea of personal responsibility concept and were combined in a composite indicator as explained above.

Table 2: Change in Role of Personal Responsibility in Success

	<b>Personal Responsibility (4 &amp; 5)</b>	
	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>Pre-test Survey</b>	6.57	0.180
<b>Post-test Survey</b>	6.16	0.181
<b>Difference</b>	-0.41	0.155
<b>p-value</b>	0.009	
<b>N</b>	128	

This provides some support for hypothesis two that students at the end of the semester were less sure that people in general, and they themselves in particular, would be responsible for their own hard work. Many of the following questions in the survey asked about potential reasons why students might feel that people are less responsible for their own success. In the pre-test survey, students were generally aware of the challenges facing black Americans and women, but there was not much change in those areas between the two surveys<sup>6</sup>. One area of emphasis in the class was anti-poverty programs in the U.S., and students were more likely to say that these programs were not well funded in the post-test survey than in the pre-test survey.

Figure 2: Distribution of Pre &amp; Post Role of Personal Responsibility in Success

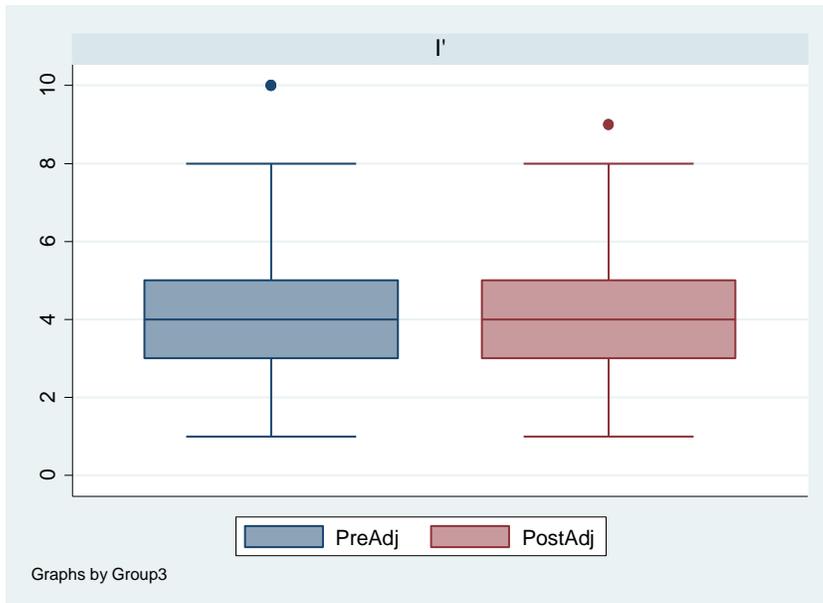


As part of this discussion in class, there was a clear focus on the history of U.S. labor policy and how it has changed since the New Deal. This discussion appears to have resonated with students as the groups of questions about equal opportunity and union activity showed significant movement between the pre-test survey and post-test survey. The equal opportunity questions asked about whether most people can find reasonable employment, whether hiring practices are fair, and if workers have strong recourse if employers are unfair. These results, which support our hypothesis three, are presented in Table 3 and Figure 3. While Figure 3 shows very little change in the distribution, students were less likely to believe that people faced fair and equal opportunities in the labor market.

Table 3: Change in View of Equal Opportunity

	Equal Opportunity (25,26,27)	
	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>Pre-test Survey</b>	4.35	0.132
<b>Post-test Survey</b>	3.92	0.115
<b>Difference</b>	-0.44	0.114
<b>p-value</b>	0.0002	
<b>N</b>	192	

Figure 3: Distribution of Pre &amp; Post View of Equal Opportunity

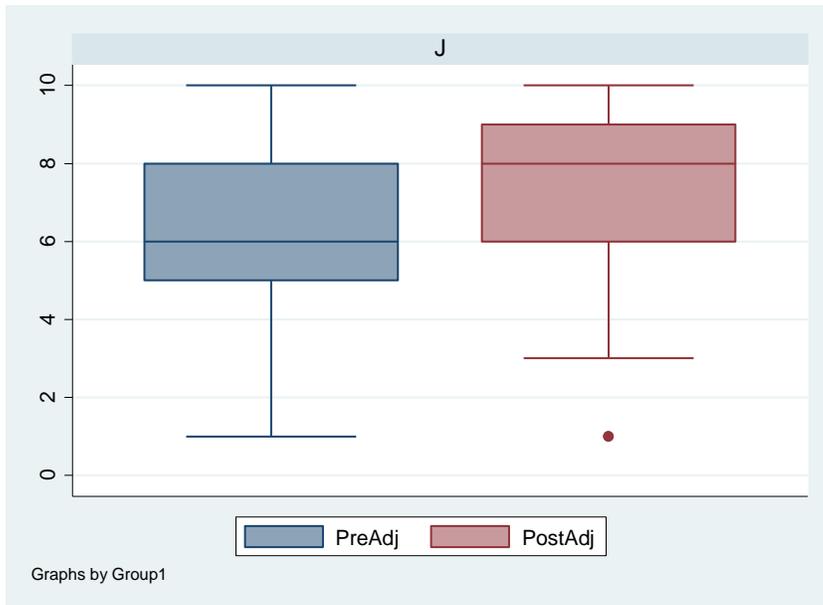


Perhaps due to this increase in the feeling of unfairness in the labor market, there was a large increase for union support among the students over the course of the semester, supporting hypothesis four. One question asked whether unions are important for ensuring fair working conditions while another asked if unions are to blame for the loss of American jobs. In order to pool these two questions, the values of the second were reversed so that higher values represent more disagreement that unions are responsible for American job loss. The pooled results are presented in Table 4 and Figure 4. These differences are the largest and most statistically significant between the pre-test survey and post-test survey and mirrors an increase in union support among the general population (albeit over a longer time frame)<sup>7</sup>.

Table 4: Change in Union Support

	<b>Union Support (28,29*)</b>	
	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>Pre-test Survey</b>	6.31	0.155
<b>Post-test Survey</b>	7.57	0.149
<b>Difference</b>	1.25	0.148
<b>p-value</b>	<0.0001	
<b>N</b>	127	
<b>* Values in reserve order</b>		

Figure 4: Distribution of Pre &amp; Post Union Support



While students were less willing to agree that growth for the top one percent benefits everyone ( $p=0.006$ ), there was only a slight increase in support for income redistribution which was not statistically significant (5.41 to 5.78,  $p = 0.223$ ).

### 7.1 Self-Reported Attitudinal Change

In the post-class survey we asked students a number of additional questions to gauge how their views on inequality and the United States changed over the course of the semester. These results are presented in Table 5. The first three questions asked students to agree (ten) or disagree (one) with statements about the importance of inequality. The median answer for the first two questions about whether views on inequality had changed and whether they feel inequality is more of a problem were both nine. The median answer on whether students felt that inequality was *not* as much a problem was one.

Table 5: Post Survey Views on Inequality and the Future

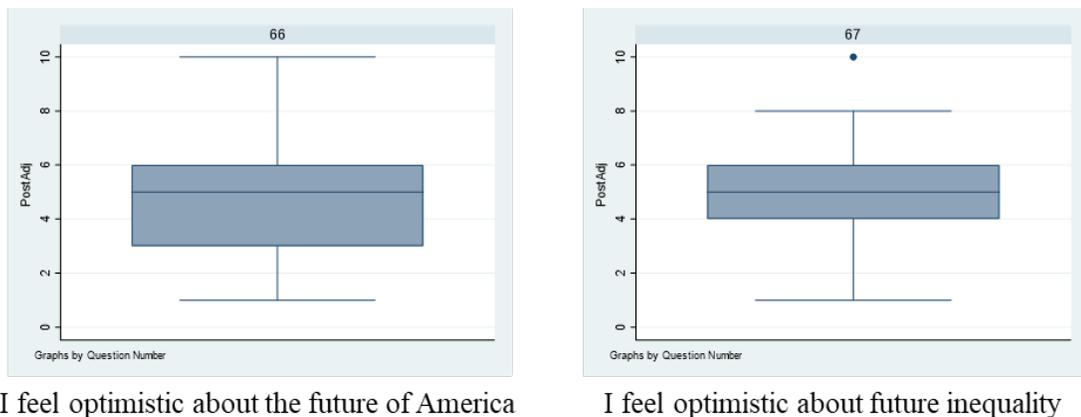
Statement (1=Strongly Disagree, 10=Strongly Agree)	Mean	Std. Dev.
My views on inequality have changed this semester	8.22	1.79
I now feel inequality is more of a problem	8.42	1.98
I now feel inequality is not as much of a problem	1.80	1.32
The speakers had a significant influence on my perceptions of the issues	7.99	2.16
The speakers offered information I had not previously considered	8.46	1.94
I feel optimistic about the future of America	4.52	2.36
I feel optimistic about future inequality	4.65	1.96

$N = 69$



Most students agreed that the outside speakers both provided new information on the various aspects of inequality (median = nine) and had a significant influence on how students perceived the issues (median = eight). On the other hand, students were much less agreed on how they felt both about the future of the country and the future of inequality. Figure 5 shows that while the median response for both statements was a five, showing that students were far from optimistic, there was a fairly wide range of responses, especially about the future of America.

Figure 5: Distribution of Optimism about America and Inequality



One potentially interesting question is whether or not we can see a relationship between the *change* in how students responded to the pre-class and post-class survey questions and how their self-reported views on inequality changed. We look specifically at four questions that were asked in the post-test survey:

1. My views on inequality have changed this semester.
2. I now feel inequality is more of a problem.
3. I feel optimistic about the future of America.
4. I feel optimistic about future inequality.

Specifically, we look at the correlation between changes in how students answered in the post-class survey and pre-class survey and how they ranked the four statements above from one (Strongly Disagree) to ten (Strongly Agree). We show the correlations between the average answer in post-class questions by the groups reported above and the average from the pre-class questions in Table 6.

Table 6: Correlation between changes in composite indicators and post-survey questions about inequality



Correlation Coefficients	Inequality Changed	Views	Inequality More of a Problem	Optimistic About America	Optimistic About Inequality
<b>Δ Personal Responsibility</b>	-0.1143 (0.372)	-0.1145 (0.3718)	<b>0.2433</b> <b>(0.0527)</b>	<b>0.2435</b> <b>(0.0525)</b>	
<b>Δ Equal Opportunity</b>	0.0001 (0.9995)	0.1984 (0.1191)	-0.0762 (0.5493)	-0.0693 (0.5864)	
<b>Δ Union Support</b>	<b>0.3404</b> <b>(0.0063)</b>	<b>0.3008</b> <b>(0.0166)</b>	0.0351 (0.7830)	0.1484 (0.2420)	

p-values in parentheses (N=63)

Those who became more positive about the role of unions in combatting inequality were more likely to say that their views on inequality have changed and that they now view it as more of a problem, supporting hypothesis five. This was not true for those who changed their views on either personal responsibility or equal opportunity. On the other hand, changes in views about unions had little to do with feelings of optimism for either the future of America or the future of inequality. Those students who became more likely to agree (disagree) with the importance of personal responsibility were more likely to agree (disagree) about feeling optimistic about both America and inequality (with p-values just above five percent).

## 8 Discussion & Reflection

Our utilization of an interdisciplinary experiential and active strategy for engaging topics surrounding economic inequality in the United States offers some cautious yet limited optimism for educators engaged in teaching issues of race, gender, and social justice. Consistent with substantive prior work that identifies experiential and active experiential design (e.g. Rothschild, 2003), interdisciplinary frameworks (Kraft et al., 2015), and framing (Graham et al., 2011) as strategies for overcoming resistance to information incompatible with existing world views, our overall findings suggest that students in the course were more likely to see their social and economic position accurately compared to other groups in the United States<sup>8</sup> after completing the course. Further, students overall found the course to be effective, and demonstrated strong support for understanding the historical role of the labor movement in attaining economic well-being, worker's rights, and reducing inequality.

Despite significant focus on race and gender, student views overall on structural barriers to economic opportunities did demonstrate some change but not in a way that suggested significant attitudinal movement on racial or gender-based categories. Similarly, those ascribing economic opportunity to personal responsibility were less likely to support changes in income redistribution or feel as though inequality was as much of a problem, overall. In sum, the broad, non-identity based components of inequality received a higher receptivity from students than issues associated with structural barriers to economic opportunity based on identity or focused on specific groups. Individuals were able to recalibrate their economic position relative to the overall income distribution and reflect on the value of widely accepted employment conditions, benefits, and norms resulting from labor movements and unions (overtime, safe working conditions, minimum wages, job security). However, issues that were more likely to engage identity based in ideology were much less likely to demonstrate significant changes between pre-test and post-test surveys,



particularly with students who continued to identify personal responsibility as an important factor in economic opportunity. We note that these results are consistent with the observation offered earlier in our examination, that individuals are most likely to be surrounded by and interact with others sharing similar background and belief systems. Consequently, a reality of social reinforcement of existing attitudes and beliefs is likely even in the acceptance of updated factual reality regarding inequality.

Our findings, particularly in a polarized and challenging political climate, can provide some strategies for educators teaching issues of social justice. First, while students may find a course to be effective, gains in understanding complex issues of equity continue to be challenging given the current political climate. Experiential and interdisciplinary models may be effective in offering opportunities for engagement and consideration, but attitudinal change that is most proximate to a student's experience is also the most likely and social justice education is likely to be iterative. One potential interpretation of our findings that merits reflection is the reality that the format, including the individual contact and personal reflection in opportunity, may have limited polarization of viewpoints and reflexive rejection of affective or non-conforming information. It is possible that many individuals simply continued to adhere to positions or understanding of income inequality, particularly surrounding identity, that they possessed prior to taking the course. However, attitudinal change in some major areas (such as individual economic position and a positive view of unions between the pre-test and post-test) suggests that individuals were open to considering some new information.

Consistent with other work on experiential formats, it may be that the largest gains in contextual understanding and attitudes surrounding inequality will be realized in understanding basic historical and factual population-wide realities surrounding inequality; this also supports general prior findings surrounding the importance of framing based on ideology (Graham et al., 2011). This does not mean that engaging issues of social justice, exclusion, or privilege are not effective, and instead may simply be a much longer term proposition given the current social and political environment. Choosing an array of experiential and interdisciplinary approaches offers promise in teaching issues of social justice.

In the current polarized era, reflecting on ways to disengage affective responses to information, where students may use prior beliefs to discount contradictory information through either rejection due to cognitive dissonance or motivated reasoning, has tremendous import to teaching fundamental topics in the social sciences. Future work focusing on strategies to circumvent the ideology/identity nexus are likely to be invaluable to engaging topics of social justice in our classrooms. Format, question-based approaches, and framing are all likely to comprise an important part of these future efforts. Additional research for effective strategies of engagement is likely to benefit a host of social science courses and offers a necessary consideration of not just what we teach, but how we teach.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This material was gathered using course rosters. Demographic information was not collected from students via the survey instrument.

<sup>2</sup> Both surveys were administered and collected by a graduate student who was not affiliated with the research.

<sup>3</sup> Students were asked to give the last 4 digits of their student ID numbers so that pre- and post-test survey results could be matched and compared.

<sup>4</sup> This research project was approved by the Institutional Review Board at The University.

<sup>5</sup> Questions used in the analyses can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the mean response to the statement of “Black people in the United States generally have the same economic opportunities as white people” was 2.9 in the pre-test and 2.6 in the post-test while mean responses to “Women have equal opportunity in employment” was 4.4 in the pre-test and 4.3 in the post-test.

<sup>7</sup> “Labor Union Approval Best Since 2003, at 61%” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/217331/labor-union-approval-best-2003.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> We note that students at our mid-sized public institution are more likely to come from college educated, middle income families than low income families. Our student body is majority Caucasian and native English speaking.



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