

PRP Course Description: Bridging Divides in Texas

Instructor: Becca North, PhD

Client: Depends on funding

Number of Students: 12 - 18

Ideal for: Students interested in healing the divided nation, going upstream to reveal causes and consequences of inequities, using innovative approaches to work toward transformational change in society, and/or learning to use quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis in a policy context

Travel: Travel for students (in pairs) to towns/cities across Texas where 5% or less of the adult population has a Bachelor's degree for interviews

Skills: Fluency in Spanish required for two of the students; basic knowledge of quantitative research methods required for six

Background and Motivation

When Rev. William Barber II—Protestant minister, political activist, and co-chair of the Poor People's campaign—spoke on NPR's "All Things Considered" on November 13th of last year to share observations about the midterm elections, he highlighted the 80-plus million people in the country who are poor and low wealth and shared that about 26 or 27 million of them did not vote. In discussing why, he said: "the No. 1 reason, according to our research, that they don't vote is they say, nobody talks to us." At the heart of this research project is a bet that centering the voices of people who often are not heard will add meaningful value to society and illuminate the path forward to transformational change.

In the wake of the death of civil rights leader Robert Moses in July of 2021, it was reported that sometimes, while fighting for voting and education rights, he would rise to a podium in front of a crowd of people and remain silent for a significant period of time as a way to communicate that, as a leader, he was there to listen, not just to speak. The power of listening to inform and fuel transformative leadership and also to connect and heal is at the foundation of this project.

This innovative research project cuts across academic disciplines in its scope and approach to address an urgent problem cutting across all aspects of our lives, and threatening our democracy: the painfully divided state of our country.

Brief Overview of Project

This project aims, at a broad level, to foster healing in the country by cultivating conversation across divides, starting in Texas. In recent months, many leaders and writers have referred to the need to tend to the soul of the nation, referencing the deep divides, wounds, and antagonism that are ripping the fabric of the country. According to many metrics, one of the sharpest divides is between people with and without a college degree. This project, more specifically, aims to elevate voices of people who often are overlooked and unheard: people without a Bachelor's degree. They represent 2/3 of the adult population, but their voices are not represented in national dialogue. They are underrepresented in polls and academic

research. Further, data that do exist on their views, lived experiences, and feelings often lack depth and substance. On the whole, people in this large segment of the population are not flourishing. They are struggling, and suffering.

This project will investigate the question: What is on the hearts and minds of people in Texas without a college degree? The voices of people without a college degree are worthy of listening to, and for our country to heal, they need to be heard. This project aims to elevate their voices in the national conversation—fostering communication, understanding, empathy, and healing across divides.

The research plan is to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals from towns and cities across Texas where an extremely low percentage of the adult population has a Bachelor's degree. We will hear what is on their hearts and minds, including what they hope for and fear, what frustrates them and weighs on them, and what they value and want most deeply. We would sample from the 137 towns and cities in Texas where 5% or less of the adult population has a Bachelor's degree. To represent all areas of the state, we plan to divide these places by region (e.g., North, Central, South) and then randomly select a subset from each region. After conducting interviews, we would transcribe them and conduct linguistic analysis on transcripts—using qualitative and quantitative text analysis—to gain insight into what is on people's hearts and minds. **The PRP would be a pilot project involving towns/cities in one region of Texas (or more than one region depending on funding).**

The project outputs would be the scientific findings from linguistic analysis showing overall patterns and the personal stories revealing individual truths. The plan would be to communicate findings in a range of ways to maximize impact and outreach of the findings: 1) an academic research article, 2) a long-form magazine article in a publication with broad reach (ultimately, possibly a book), and 3) policy memos to and meetings with political leaders at various levels connected with the Texas towns and cities in the sample. **The course would focus on collecting data, analyzing data, writing-up findings, drafting a literature review, and contacting relevant elected officials and communicating with them about our work through meetings and memos.**

The research team integrates the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and public policy, and would be led by myself. Consultants would include Dr. Michael Hirsch, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences/Professor of Sociology at Huston-Tillotson University, an HBCU in Austin, and Dr. Gordon Abner, Assistant Professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs.

Though there are many places across the U.S. that would be excellent candidates for this project, and that ultimately we would love to include in a subsequent project, we want to start in Texas. Of the forty U.S. counties with the lowest percentage of people with a Bachelor's degree, five are here in Texas. When these counties are ranked from lowest to highest, three Texas counties are in the "top ten" (i.e., they have the lowest percentage of people with a

college degree). **There is an opportunity here to jumpstart healing in the country by listening more deeply to the voices of Texans.**

Brief Overview of Student Work in PRP

The PRP would focus on planning, including setting up interviews and organizing the research team into groups that focus on particular parts of the project, and learning the methods of the research—including quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis. Another significant component would be reading relevant research (see list of Course Materials). The plan is for data collection to begin in the second half of the semester. As interviews are conducted, transcribing and translating will begin. Once those steps are concluded, data analysis will begin. By the end of the semester, students and I will have laid the foundation for an academic article in a peer-reviewed journal, identified political leaders at various levels connected with the Texas towns and cities in the sample to contact, contacted those leaders and started meeting with some of these elected officials to share preliminary findings based on our work.

Course Materials

Bartels, L. (2016). *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age, 2nd Ed.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Berry, J. A., Cepuran, C., & Garcia-Rios, S. (2022). Relative group discrimination and vote choice among Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Whites. *Politics, Groups, and Identities, 10*, 410-429.

Bishop, B. (2008). *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Bowes, S. M., Costello, T. H., & Tasimi, A. (2023). The conspiratorial mind: A meta-analytic review of motivational and personological correlates. *Psychological Bulletin, 149*, 259-293.

Case, A., Deaton A. (2020). *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cohn, Nate. September 8, 2021. "How Educational Differences Are Widening America's Political Rift." *The New York Times*.

Cramer, K. J. (2016). *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Graham, C. (2017). *Happiness for All?: Unequal Hopes and Lives in Pursuit of the American Dream.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hochschild, A. R. (2018). *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right.* New York, NY: The New Press.

Jennings, Jay & Bhandari, Emily E. "2018 Texas Civic Health Index." *Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life*.

Kanno-Youngs, Zolan. May 15, 2023. "No Degree? No Problem. Biden Tries to Bridge the 'Diploma Divide.'" *The New York Times*.

Lemann, Nicholas. July 26, 2021. "Bob Moses's Pioneering Fight For Voting and Education Rights." *The New Yorker*.

Mounk, Yascha. October 4, 2023. "Nothing Defines America's Social Divide Like a College Education." *The Atlantic*.

Nordgren, L., Schonthal, D. (2021). *The Human Element: Overcoming the Resistance That Awaits New Ideas.* New York, NY: Wiley.