How Does Taking a Canadian Studies Course Influence How American Students Think About Canada?

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Abstract This article discusses what American students think and know about Canada before and after taking a Canadian Studies course. I have taught a multidisciplinary course (Introduction to Canadian Studies) to undergraduates every semester for the past ten years at a large public university in the United States. The course is offered in both a classroom and an online format. The article details my goals for the course, how I approach particular topics, and how students react to new information about Canada. Using student assignments and results from a survey of students who have taken Introduction to Canadian Studies, the article considers how the course influences students’ views of Canada. I find that Canadian Studies courses do increase students’ knowledge and interest in Canada and can make a positive contribution to the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Canada. Unfortunately, cuts to funding for Canadian Studies have made it increasingly difficult to offer Canadian Studies courses and academic programming in the United States. Such cuts also have made studying Canada a less attractive option for younger scholars.

This article reflects upon a multidisciplinary course on Canadian Studies that I teach at a public university in Ohio (Bowling Green State University). In this article I consider the knowledge and opinions that students have about Canada prior to taking the course and how the course affects those views. Although my experiences are limited to this single university, as I discuss below, I do think that my students are broadly representative of many American university students when it comes to how they think (or do not think) about Canada. The article details my goals for the course, how I approach particular topics, and how students react to new information about Canada. I argue that Canadian Studies courses do increase students’ knowledge and interest in Canada and can make a positive contribution to the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Canada. I conclude by discussing how Canadian Studies in the U.S. has been threatened by the disappearance of funding sources in recent years.

Canadian Studies at Bowling Green State University (BGSU)

The BGSU Canadian Studies program is a legacy of the Canadian Studies Center, which closed its doors in 2009. The program includes a Canadian Studies minor and many scholars in different disciplines teach or have taught Canadian-focused courses in history, political science, literature (both English and French), film, cultural anthropology, communications, geography, environmental studies, and business. In addition, BGSU has a nationally-ranked hockey program and curling ice on campus. Students in the program have also gone on to summer parliamentary internships in Ottawa as well as professor-led trips to Quebec City and on a Great Lakes tour. At one time, there was a full-time Canadian Studies faculty member and as many as 14 sections of the introductory undergraduate course, Introduction to Canadian Studies (CAST2010), in which over 400 students enrolled per academic year.
The BGSU Canadian Studies Center had a strong business component—for example, it hosted an annual Canada-U.S. business dinner designed to facilitate cross-border networking among businesspeople. The economic connection between Canada and the U.S. was the rationale behind the funding from the Ohio state government. Canada is far and away Ohio’s largest foreign trading partner, and the northwest Ohio region is highly dependent on the automobile industry that straddles the border. If the Center’s staff or faculty were asked to justify why it is important to study Canada, the economic links between the two countries was the default response.

The loss of two major sources of funding (a line-item in the Ohio budget and the Canadian government’s Understanding Canada program) and the closure of the Center were major setbacks to the program. With the exception of two donor-funded events, BGSU no longer brings many Canadian scholars and artists to campus, and even the funded events have been scaled back because of the absence of paid staff to manage them. The full-time faculty position in Canadian Studies was eliminated, and the program’s director is now a full-time faculty member with myriad other responsibilities. On the positive side, Introduction to Canadian Studies was approved as part of BGSU’s revised General Education curriculum, and student demand remains high. In 2014-15, BGSU offered five sections of CAST 2010, enrolling approximately 200 students.

CAST 2010 is a multidisciplinary course designed to introduce BGSU students to as many facets of the study of Canada as possible in a one-semester course. I began teaching CAST 2010 in the classroom in 2005 and began teaching the course online in 2007. I have taught at least one section every semester since, including summer semesters. The course has evolved considerably over time, and I have benefited greatly from the support of the Canadian government and the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States (ACSUS). In 2008, I received a Faculty Enrichment Grant from the Canadian Embassy to create video modules primarily for my online course. I traveled to various parts of Canada and interviewed public figures (such as politicians) and others with specialized knowledge of subjects covered in CAST 2010 (such as museum curators), and I use edited versions of these interviews in my courses. In addition, I traveled to the Arctic on a study tour sponsored by ACSUS in 2009, which included visits to Aboriginal communities and hydroelectric and mining facilities in the far north of Quebec.

Data

Most of this article is based on my experiences teaching CAST 2010. I have tried to supplement my impressions with some data. In 2015, I created a short survey which I distributed to former students who had taken the course in the past three academic years. The survey asks questions about my students’ travels to Canada, why they took CAST 2010, and their opinions of Canada both before and after the course. Unfortunately, the response rate on the survey was quite low (around 15%), and most questions had approximately 30 responses. Although the students who chose to respond to the survey may not be representative of the larger population of students who took the course, the survey’s results confirmed the impressions that I have based on teaching the course and talking informally with current and former students.

The other source of data comes from a discussion question that I frequently ask near the end of the online course. The question requires students to advise a friend who has received a job offer in Canada whether or not to move and to identify pros and cons of living in Canada versus living in the United States. The purpose of this question is to generate discussion among the online students regarding how the course has influenced their views of Canada. It also offers me one last chance before the final exam to correct any inaccurate views that students have about Canada. The question was not designed to be part of a study, but I do believe it is a useful source of data.

Students

BGSU is unusual for having a Canadian Studies program; however, BGSU students are in
many ways very representative of college students in the United States. BGSU is a large public university with only moderately selective admissions policies. The vast majority of students are from Ohio (over 80% of undergraduates), but this includes students from rural areas, small towns, suburbs, and large cities. The racial and ethnic breakdown of BGSU students is very similar to those of the state as a whole. There are relatively few non-traditional students on main campus; however, I do tend to have more non-traditional students in online sections. The average BGSU student is slightly more liberal than is the average Ohioan. (For example, Barack Obama averaged 65%-70% in the precincts with large student populations in the 2012 election.) On the other hand, the campus is not especially politically active, and there are many conservative students on campus. Though our geographical proximity to Canada might have some influence regarding attitudes toward Canada among BGSU students, both my experiences and the data show that most BGSU students know very little about Canada and have no strong opinions about Canada.

Why do students take Introduction to Canadian Studies at BGSU? In the survey, 72% of the former students reported that they wanted to learn about Canada, but 83% acknowledged that one reason was that the course fulfilled a requirement. Surprisingly, those students who had visited Canada were not any more likely than those who had not to cite wanting to learn about Canada as a reason to take the course. The fact that the course is offered online was cited as a reason by 52% of the respondents and 31% admitted that the perception that the course would be easy was a factor.

Most students come to the course with very little knowledge of Canada. BGSU is less than 90 minutes from the Ambassador Bridge border crossing, but many students have never been to Canada, and very few are frequent visitors. In the survey, 71% reported having visited Canada, but 41% of those had only visited once, and only 13% had visited more than five times. Furthermore, only 22% mentioned visiting anywhere outside of Ontario. The most common specific destinations mentioned were Niagara Falls and Toronto.

Most BGSU students tend not to think of Canada at all and tend to assume that Canada and the U.S. are more or less alike in an institutional and ideological sense. For example, students are surprised by the vast differences between the political systems of the two countries and the degree to which Canadians reject the individualist worldview that is dominant in the United States. On the other hand, students do think that Canadians differ from Americans and have a somewhat different lifestyle than do Americans. Students often view Canadians as friendly, polite people who like Americans. Many seem to see Canada as a type of idealized 1950s place, where everyone is nice and there is no crime (and little ethnic diversity), but where the music and fashion are a bit outdated. In a word, many think that Canada is boring. When asked how much they knew about Canada before taking a Canadian Studies course, most students responded very little (33%) or some (40%).

Overview of CAST 2010

When I teach CAST 2010, aside from enhancing my students’ knowledge of Canada, I have two broad goals: First, I want to convince students that Canada is important and that studying Canada is worthwhile. Second, I want to dispel the idea that Canada is just like the United States. Most of this article considers how I teach about Canada in the light of these two objectives.

The content of my course is probably similar to the content of most of the multidisciplinary Introduction to Canadian Studies courses taught in the U.S. I use the textbook, Canadian Studies in the New Millennium, 2nd edition, which is an edited book that includes chapters written by scholars from many of the major Canadian Studies programs in the U.S. My course is certainly similar to other CAST 2010 courses taught by different professors at BGSU. Aside from some very flexible General Education Learning Outcomes, there is no standardized content for CAST 2010 courses at BGSU, but the instructors have always shared syllabi and structure the course similarly. The course covers geography, history, politics, economics and trade, multiculturalism, First Nations’ issues, bilingualism and Quebec, art, literature, popular culture, and sports. My
background in political science and expertise on nationalism influences the emphasis placed on various aspects of the course, and because of my research interests I cover some topics, such as popular music, that others might not.

For most of the first part of the course, I portray Canada favourably and emphasize differences between Canada and the U.S. I also allow some of my pro-Canada biases to influence parts of the course. For example, I am an unapologetic advocate for parliamentary democracy and universal health care. As the course progresses, however, it tends to become more critical of Canada and Canadians. This is particularly true when I cover multiculturalism, First Nations’, and national unity issues. Here I highlight the gaps between how Canadians portray themselves and reality. These efforts to deconstruct Canadian ‘myths,’ however, can only begin once students have some basic understanding of these ‘myths.’ This is probably the largest difference between an introductory Canadian Studies course in the United States (or anywhere outside of Canada) and upper-level courses or Canadian Studies courses in Canada, where basic knowledge of Canada is assumed and a critical approach can be taken from the outset. The rest of this section discusses the knowledge and opinions of students regarding those topics covered in the course, how I teach those topics, and how students react.

Identity

The course begins with a discussion of Canadian identity that strongly emphasizes (and perhaps exaggerates) the differences between Canadians and Americans. The goal of this section is to begin building the argument that Canada is different from the United States and to introduce themes that will recur throughout the course.

Students are assigned a reading from Michael Adams’ book, Fire and Ice, which makes a case using survey data that Canadians and Americans have very different values and those values are becoming more different over time. Adams (2003, 91) contrasts the “kinder, gentler balance of freedom and equality” that has created a “tolerant, egalitarian” society in Canada to the more traditional, conformist, and materialist United States. I also confront students with some examples of aggressive Canadian patriotism and anti-Americanism. For example, I show a scene from the documentary Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows, showing wrestler Bret Hart in an arena filled with cheering, flag-waving Canadians, describing the U.S. as a place “riddled with racial prejudice and hatred,” where people “shoot each other and kill each other on every street corner.” Although students understand that Hart himself is playing a role that should not be taken seriously, the fact that the audience is so eager to play along indicates that he has struck a chord that resonates with them. I also show two other videos: the famous “I am Canadian” Molson commercial from 2000, in which “Joe” makes fun of American ignorance regarding Canada before declaring Canada to be “the best part of North America”; and the video of the song “Oh… Canada” from the Canadian rapper, Classified. The video and rap manage to straddle a careful line between self-mockery (“our national mascot’s a damn beaver”) and genuine patriotism.

Though BGSU students express surprise to learn that Canadians often have negative opinions of the U.S., they do see the humour in Canadian anti-Americanism and do not take it very seriously. As there is little self-conscious angst over open displays of patriotism on the U.S. side of the border, BGSU students usually view flag-waving pride as something that is both normal and positive and do not really understand why Canadian displays of patriotism are often tempered with ironic distance.

Geography

The next part of the course is designed to provide some basic factual information to situate Canada in space and time: geography and history. BGSU students generally have almost no knowledge of Canadian geography. Considering that Canada is rarely mentioned on the news or studied in school, the fact that few are aware that Canada has “provinces,” and even fewer can name more than one or two is unfortunate but understandable. On the other hand, I was shocked to find that most BGSU students cannot identify the Great Lakes on a map—despite living less than 30 miles from Lake Erie. The first quiz is a map quiz.
on provinces and the Great Lakes, and students tend
to do very well on the map quiz. Hopefully, they
retain this information.

BGSU students usually underestimate the
geographical size of Canada, believing that Canada
is smaller than the United States. The first
assignment in the course is to plan a road trip across
Canada from Charlottetown, P.E.I. to Victoria, B.C.
and back (without leaving Canada). The purpose of
the assignment is both to familiarize students with
the enormous size of Canada and to have them find
some interesting places to visit. Many students have
difficulty believing that this trip cannot reasonably
be done in a few days, and I have had to repeatedly
add new requirements to force them to treat this as
a vacation instead of racing across Canada like
Smokey and the Bandit. In the open-ended question
on the survey, one student did write that the most
surprising thing that he or she learned about Canada
in the course was "how truly inaccessible parts of
Canada are and what it would take to drive across …
[and] finding out some cities are accessible only
by plane."

This assignment is also designed to set the
stage for the discussion of Canada’s history in the
next section of the course. One major theme of that
section is that many differences between Canada
and the U.S. can be explained by geography and
climate. For example, conflict with Aboriginal
peoples was greater in the United States because
colonists wanted to settle arable land, whereas early
Canadian exploration was motivated more by
fishing and the beaver trade—activities requiring
fewer permanent settlements and opening more
opportunities for cooperation with Aboriginal
peoples. Likewise, Western expansion occurred
much more gradually in Canada than in the United
States because of the geographic barrier of the
Canadian Shield. Lastly, Sir John A. MacDonald’s
challenge of linking eastern and western Canada
with a railroad that did not enter the United States
is only apparent when one has a sense of the size of
Canada and the immensity of the Canadian Rockies.
By planning a car trip across Canada, students get a
sense of these geographical challenges. In fact, even
in 2016, it is impossible to drive across Canada
without traversing a two-lane bridge over Northern
Ontario’s Nipigon River that had to be closed for
repairs for several days in January 2016 (CBC
News).

History and Foreign Policy

The course continues with a discussion of
Canadian history that again emphasizes the major
disconnect between Canadian and American
versions of our common history. American students
tend to be unaware that there were more than 13
colonies prior the Revolutionary War and that
BGSU sits on land that was, for a time, part of
Quebec.

Views of the War of 1812 illustrate this
disconnect. The 200th anniversary of this conflict
received little public attention in Northwest Ohio,
despite the fact that major battle sites like Fort
Meigs and Put-in-Bay are located in the region.
Students just assume that the U.S. “won” this
conflict—even though they are unsure of who the
U.S. was fighting. I challenge this assumption by
showing the class an amusing YouTube video of the
song “The War of 1812” by Three Dead Trolls in a
Baggie, which celebrates how we (Canada) burned
downed the White House while “Americans ran and
cried like a bunch of little babies.” Of course, as
poorly informed and inaccurate as is the American
view of the War of 1812, it is perhaps closer to the
truth than is the Canadian view of the conflict as a
major victory for “Canada”—which did not exist as
an independent country during the conflict.
Nevertheless, discussing this period does reveal
major differences in how history is viewed in the
two countries and hopefully impresses upon the
U.S. students the extent to which Canadians
perceive(d) the U.S. as a threat. On the open-ended
question of the survey, a student wrote that he or she
thought that "the history behind how Canada
became a country … was much more similar to
America's story than what I actually learned about
happening."

A section of the course on the Underground
Railroad highlights a period of history when
Canada’s moral superiority to the U.S. is difficult to
refute. As the Underground Railroad is an important
part of Ohio’s history, it is a familiar topic to
students, but the fact that slaves escaped to Canada
is a peripheral aspect of how students view this
history that I bring to the center. I use a video interview that I conducted with curators of the Buxton Museum in Southern Ontario during this part of the course. It makes a very powerful impression on students to see a man put on an iron collar (a device used to prevent slaves from escaping while they worked) and to see the orderly settlement of North Buxton. Though not a primary focus of this section of the course, some of Canada’s flaws are also on display. The settlement was tolerated (but not welcomed) by its white neighbours, and most of the escaped slaves chose to return to the U.S. after the Civil War.

Moving toward the present, students often view Canada as little more than an irrelevant bystander when it comes to international affairs. They are usually unaware of Canada’s role in the two World Wars and in the recent conflict in Afghanistan. The assistance that Canadians provided to stranded U.S. travelers in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 is completely absent from their collective memories of the event. On the positive side, I have not heard students repeat the fallacy that the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks entered the U.S. from Canada, and there is no indication that students perceive any type of threat from Canada.

Politics and Policy

The section in the course on politics and public policy includes many comparisons with the United States, and Canada is usually portrayed favourably. I contrast the efficiency of the parliamentary system to the gridlock of the U.S. system. For example, the recurring threats of government shutdowns in the United States simply do not occur in Canada because the failure to pass a budget in Canada would be considered a vote of “no confidence” and would trigger new elections. I show video of Question Period in class, and many students find it both entertaining and informative—though they often tend to be shocked by the heckling and what they often characterize as “unprofessional” behaviour. Despite my best efforts, I do not think that many students come away sharing my view of the superiority of the parliamentary system. They express nearly universal distaste for political parties and prefer to see politicians as individual actors who should always follow their consciences. They dislike the idea of party discipline and the fact that Canadians do not directly vote for the prime minister.

When discussing Canadian policies, I also tend to emphasize differences. Students often dismiss the idea that gun restrictions in Canada explain the dramatically lower murder rates north of the border and grasp for alternative explanations when presented with data. Ohio is a state that allows those with concealed carry licenses to legally carry firearms (though they remain forbidden on campus), and the idea that armed citizens deter crime is widely believed.

More generally, many BGSU students think of “good government” as an oxymoron, and even those with a positive view of the role of government (myself included) have a deeply ingrained distrust of authority. When I ask students how they react to seeing a police car in the rear view mirror, nearly all admit to experiencing a visceral physical reaction: their hearts race and foreheads begin to sweat. This reaction is often accompanied by paranoia and even anger that they are being “followed.” This occurs even when there is no objective indication that the police officer has any interest in us. A Canadian colleague has assured me that she does not have this reaction. I also point out that the Mountie, a Canadian icon, is actually a police officer.

Although I do not ignore the problems with Canada’s institutions (such as the confusion that prevailed during the coalition “crisis” of 2008-2009) and policies (such as Canada’s exploitation of the Alberta oil sands and failure to slow its growing carbon emissions), the overarching message of this part of the course is that Canada has a more efficient political system that produces more sensible policies than does the U.S. system and is based on a sense of trust that does not exist in the U.S.

Health Care

The most detailed discussion of specific Canadian policies in the course focuses on health care. Students are intrigued by Canada’s health care
Despite the role that discussions of the Canadian health care system had during the debates over Obamacare, most students have neither knowledge nor opinions regarding Canada’s system prior to taking the course.

Many BGSU students do have direct knowledge of the U.S. health care system, and, in many cases, the opinions they express regarding Canadian health care have more to do with their views on health care in the U.S. than what they learn in class. Most classes have at least one student with a horror story about a family member who was denied coverage or frustrating fights with private insurers. On the other hand, there are also frequently students who share positive stories of the great care that they (or a family member) received in the U.S., and the idea that U.S. health care is the best in the world is frequently expressed. Regarding the Canadian system, the students form opinions based more on ideology than on facts. More liberal students embrace the idea of universal access and seem indifferent to the costs, whereas conservative students focus on the costs and frequently express the opinion that no one should feel entitled to health care.

On the survey, many students mentioned health care as something they remembered from the course. Similarly, in responses to the discussion question, the availability of universal health care is the most frequently mentioned reason to move to Canada, but the flip side of this is that high taxes are among the most frequently mentioned reasons not to move to Canada.

### Trade

As mentioned above, Northwest Ohio is highly integrated into the cross-border economy. Automakers (there is a Jeep plant in Toledo) and auto parts makers are among the region’s top employers, and thousands more are employed in trade and transportation industries (United States Department of Labor). Nevertheless, most BGSU students are completely unaware of the volume of Canada-U.S. trade. Even at the end of the course, after being repeatedly told otherwise, many continue to believe that most U.S. trade is with China and answer a question about U.S.-Canada trade incorrectly on the final exam. Again, I would attribute this to the relative invisibility of Canada in the news media. The fact that major auto manufacturers operate on both sides of the border is rarely mentioned when the fortunes of the Big 3 “American” manufacturers (General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler) are discussed. Problems with the North American Free Trade Agreement are always framed in terms of potential job losses to Mexico, and students often do not know that Canada is a party to this agreement.

Similarly, even with the debate over the Keystone XL pipeline (which is something that most students have heard about), the fact that Canada is a major oil supplier to the U.S. surprises them. The Keystone XL pipeline has been a proxy for a much larger debate regarding jobs versus environmental protection in American politics, which is often fought out over issues like fracking and offshore drilling, and the fact that enormous quantities of oil from Canada’s oil sands are already being transported to the U.S. via pipelines, rail, and tanker trucks is peripheral to this debate. Support or opposition to the pipeline has little to do with the details of the proposed project itself; rather, it is an expression of one’s more general outlook on energy and the environment.

The prospect of a new border crossing between Detroit and Windsor is another much-discussed issue in the region. The course includes video of an interview with Windsor Member of Parliament Brian Masse that includes a long discussion about the current state of border crossings, the tradeoffs between security and trade, and the political obstacles to a new crossing in the United States. As of this writing, it appears that a new bridge will be built. Though students view this possibility positively, the fact that many do not have passports and have no plans to travel to Canada anyway makes them less enthusiastic about this than are those of us who frequently traverse the border.

Several students mentioned trade and economic interdependence as a reason to study Canada on the open-ended question on the survey. For example, one student wrote: "We do a lot of trading with Canada, and I don't think people realize
how much we depend on our relationship with our neighbors to the North."

**Multiculturalism**

The tone of the course becomes more critical when we cover multicultural policies in Canada, as I draw attention to the gap between rhetoric and reality. Students are assigned Lawrence Hill’s essay, “The Question,” which addresses racial privilege in Canada. In this short essay, Hill (a biracial Canadian) recounts the experiences of non-white Canadians who are repeatedly asked by white Canadians, “Where are you from?” Hill claims that he has personally been asked this question (or something similar) over 15,000 times in 34 years, and he interprets it as a thinly-veiled reminder that, in the eyes of many Canadians, he is an outsider who does not belong.

Most students acknowledge that they might be tempted to ask similar questions to those with unfamiliar backgrounds, and this prompts an interesting discussion regarding how non-whites in the U.S. or Canada might interpret a question that the mostly white BGSU students see as innocent curiosity. The discussion is also meant to challenge the official Canadian narrative of multiculturalism. Regardless of how laudable Canada’s official discourse and policies may be, many individual Canadians still have racialized views on Canadian identity. Unfortunately, this point is often lost on students, and they often conclude that Canadians are nosy rather than racially biased.

**First Nations**

In the section of the course on First Nations peoples, students read the short story “Borders” by Thomas King. This fictional, but highly plausible, story recounts the experiences of a Blackfoot family trapped between the U.S. and Canadian border because the mother refuses to self-identify as “Canadian” when asked by the guards at the border. The theme is that borders are imposed upon First Nations peoples who were here long before Canada or the United States existed. Most students express some sympathy for the woman in the story, and some also agree that her refusal to self-identify as Canadian is justified. On the other hand, they frequently excuse the guards’ inflexibility on the grounds that they were just following rules.

Though my intention is to stress the similarities between Canada and the United States from the perspective of First Nations peoples, students lack basic knowledge of the history of Aboriginal peoples in the United States. Upon learning of Canada’s sorry history, some conclude that the experience of Aboriginal peoples in the United States must compare favourably to Canada’s treatment of its Aboriginal peoples. Part of this ignorance may be explained by the relative invisibility of Native peoples in Ohio. Though we are surrounded by towns with Indian names, there are no reserves in Ohio. (In fact, the nearest reserve to BGSU is Walpole Island in Southern Ontario.) They also have an individualistic and ahistorical perspective on the issue. Arguing that they cannot be held responsible for the actions of their ancestors, nearly all BGSU students categorically reject any responsibility for the treatment of Native Americans even when shown that they live on Native lands according to the Royal Proclamation of 1763. They believe that Natives should be treated as equals but do not merit special treatment or reparations.

**Quebec**

Most of my academic research has been focused on nationalism in Quebec. When discussing the history of French Canadians and the politics of language and nationalism in Quebec in class, my perspective is sympathetic toward francophone Quebecers. I characterize Quebec’s language laws as legitimate tools to ensure the future of French, and I criticize the rest of Canada for its unwillingness to accept Quebec’s distinctiveness and the widespread hostility toward special status for Quebec. Though I try to present arguments for and against secession in a balanced way, I defend the legitimacy of pursuing secession through democratic means.

In this case, my personal biases seem to have no effect. Few students have any ability to see the world from a francophone Quebecer’s
perspective. BGSU students have no sympathy for Quebec's language laws or for the legitimacy of secession, and nothing that I say in class changes these views. Undoubtedly, they have been socialized to see freedom of speech as a nearly absolute right and see secession through the lens of the U.S. Civil War. Most arrive at BGSU after 13 years of beginning every school day repeating that the U.S. is “indivisible, one nation under God” in public schools. Students tend to view secession as absurd, and many think that it should not be allowed in any circumstance—even after a hypothetical referendum with a 90% Yes vote.

The opposition to Quebec, however, is not entirely ideological. There is also considerable latent antipathy toward France that is projected on Quebec, as well as some persistent negative (mis)perceptions of Quebec and French Canadians. Anecdotally, most BGSU students have had no actual interactions with French Canadians, and few have traveled to Quebec. Some may be influenced by harshly negative views expressed by Canadians regarding Quebecers in the parts of Canada they have visited and from some of the Canadians on campus. I usually have a Canadian student in my Canadian Studies course about every other semester, and some have expressed such views. I have also heard my students repeat hostile views regarding Quebec that they claim to have heard from a Canadian roommate, teammate, or friend.14

There are exceptions, and occasionally a student, usually a French major, expresses real fondness toward Quebec. On the other hand, students with some French language education often believe that Quebec French is an inferior patois and is incomprehensible to “real” French speakers. Perhaps this is a common trope in French classes in the U.S.? Students often cite the need for French as a reason not to move to Canada, despite being told that most Canadians do not speak French themselves and that English is the dominant language everywhere outside of Quebec.

Canadian Art, Literature, and Popular Culture

The last part of the course focuses on Canadian culture and includes discussions of art, literature, popular culture, and sports. Time permitting, the last week considers some cultural markers of Canadianness, such as differences between Canadian and American English (“washroom” instead of “bathroom,” the proper use of “eh?”) and an introduction to some uniquely Canadian icons like Tim Hortons, Terry Fox, and the Canadarm.

The sections on art and literature present a thematic unity that is easy to exaggerate. Students read Margaret Atwood’s short story "Death by Landscape" and see lots of First Nations art and landscape paintings from the Group of Seven and others. Following Atwood, the theme of survival is stressed—both survival in a hostile environment and cultural survival in the face of the threat of Americanization (in the case of English Canada) or Anglicization (in the case of French Canada).

Though my goal is to contrast Canadian and American views of the environment, the stories and art set in nature reinforce stereotypes of Canada that I try to dispel in other parts of the course. At the end of the course, students often continue to believe that most Canadians live in small towns or in the wilderness—despite being told otherwise. Upon reflection, this is part of the course that should be supplemented with other readings that depict urban realities in contemporary Canada.

Students also perceive Canada to be extremely cold even though most Canadians live in places with climates that are more similar to the climate of Bowling Green, Ohio than to the climate of the Arctic. (Toronto is less than 2 degrees of latitude north of Bowling Green.) Cold weather is the most frequently cited reason why students advise their friend against moving to Canada in the online discussion.

As it is a research interest of mine, the section on Canadian popular music and television includes extensive discussion of Canadian Content (CanCon) requirements for radio and broadcast television. In addition to presenting the requirements, I have students consult the latest music charts and television ratings. These inevitably show that familiar U.S. music and programs are also very popular in Canada and that only a handful of unfamiliar Canadian songs and
television programs make the charts. From my perspective, this information leads to two somewhat contradictory conclusions: 1) the economic viability of those who produce Canadian popular cultural products depends upon policies that ensure that there will be a Canadian market for Canadian popular culture when American culture is so pervasive, and 2) the CanCon regulations have, at best, a modest effect.

Most students, however, find CanCon regulations to be ineffective and intrusive. Some seem offended by the very modest restrictions on U.S. popular culture. CanCon regulations are even occasionally mentioned as a reason not to move to Canada—even though I assure students that if they were to listen to Canadian radio for a few hours, the only difference they might notice is that (depending on their preferences in music) they might hear more Bryan Adams, Shania Twain, or Drake than they are accustomed to. They also tend to equate these restrictions with censorship—again, even though there is more censorship in the U.S. than in Canada when it comes to profanity on the radio and on broadcast television.

Conclusions

What is the impact of CAST 2010 on students’ knowledge of Canada and attitudes toward Canada? Does the course change their attitudes toward Canada and convince them that studying Canada is worthwhile? Do I succeed in convincing them that Canada is not just like the United States?

The course improved the students’ (self-perceived) knowledge of Canada. Among the former students, only 3% confessed to knowing "very little" about Canada today, and the percentage of those claiming to know "quite a bit" about Canada increased from 23% before the course to 60% after the course. It could be modesty, it could be my failures as a teacher, or it could be an increased awareness of Canada's complexity, but only 6% believed that they know "a great deal" about Canada after taking the course.15

The data from the survey shows that BGSU students leave the class with a generally positive view of Canada that is richer and more nuanced than the generally positive but largely indifferent view of Canada they bring to the course. On the survey of former students, 90% expressed a positive or very positive view of Canada, and 60% claimed that the course caused them to have a view of Canada that was more positive than before they took the course. The results were less conclusive on the question of whether taking a Canadian Studies course led the former students to pay more attention to Canada—60% responded "Yes," and 40% responded "No."

In the discussion board assignment, most students advise their friend not to move to Canada. The reasons they most commonly cite are the climate, high taxes, and the need for French. There is also a general predisposition against risk and a wariness about living in an unfamiliar environment. Most students remain convinced that the U.S. is the greatest country in the world, and it would be foolish to leave even only to go next door. The students who do advise moving are often ideologically liberal and cite universal health care and have a greater sense of adventure, such as students who enjoy outdoor activities.

The course does succeed in partially dispelling the perception that Canada is more or less just like the U.S. When asked if the course led them to view Canada and the U.S. as more similar or more different than they thought before taking the course, 63% responded "more different," 20% responded "more similar," and 17% reported no change. When asked on the survey about the most surprising thing that they learned about Canada in the course, the results were all over the map, but differences between Canada and the U.S. (such as government and health care) were frequently cited.

The most encouraging part of the survey was the results of the question asking students “What is the most important reason why Americans should study Canada?” There were quite a few responses sharing the theme that it is important to know your neighbour and that there is a lot that we can learn from each other. One of my favourite responses demonstrated a real openness to communication: “It’s also cool when you find out someone is from Canada, and you can actually hold a conversation with them about their culture.”
The survey and reflecting upon the course in the process of writing this article have also led me to reconsider parts of the course. There are parts of the course that I have treated as separate subjects (trade and Canada’s policies regarding popular culture) that should be linked more closely. The short stories I assign in the literature section ought to be supplemented with more contemporary stories so as not to reinforce outdated stereotypes of Canada. Parts of the course that rely primarily on the textbook, which is informative but dry, could be supplemented with more provocative readings that promote better discussions.

It remains to be seen whether the election of the new Liberal Party government in Canada and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will spark some new interest among students in the study of Canada. The positive media attention that the new prime minister has received in the U.S. is unprecedented in my memory, but it does seem that the coverage of Trudeau has been both ephemeral and superficial. The prime minister’s hair and his ability to hold a yoga pose receives more attention than does the Canadian government’s new attitude toward climate change agreements and its willingness to resettle Syrian refugees. Only some conflict or perceived threat is likely to focus sustained attention on Canada in the U.S. media. On the other hand, the change in government may revive some academic interest in Canada—particularly if Canada’s government begins to implement policy changes on issues that are salient in the U.S., such as the legalization of marijuana, carbon pricing, and assisted suicide. There is also some hope among academics in the U.S. that some of the changes discussed below regarding Canadian government support for research on Canada will be reversed.

**Understanding Canada**

CAST 2010 does make some progress on my goals for the students, and it remains a very popular course at BGSU. Nevertheless, the medium-term survival of Canadian Studies at BGSU is in doubt, and the long-term vibrancy of Canadian Studies in the United States is threatened. The course and the program at BGSU was a major beneficiary of the Understanding Canada program, and it fulfills the mission of that program which was, “to have a positive influence on the promotion of Canada’s interests in the world [and]... to develop a greater knowledge and understanding of Canada, its values and its culture among scholars and other influential groups abroad.”

The demise of Understanding Canada contributes to a general feeling of gloom in the U.S. Canadian Studies community. It is increasingly difficult to attract young scholars to the study of Canada. I benefited from several grants from the Understanding Canada program, but the most important was a relatively modest grant for my dissertation research. The availability of the grant was a factor in my decision to study Canada, and the fact that I received a grant probably added to my marketability on the academic job market. I also quickly became part of a network of scholars that included both helpful senior scholars and a cohort of U.S.-based Canadianists in a similar stage of our careers. With the program gone, it becomes increasingly difficult for younger scholars to build such a network. Without new generations of Canadianists, Canadian Studies programs and courses will disappear and there will be less “knowledge and understanding of Canada” and “its values and culture” in the United States and elsewhere. Both Canadians and non-Canadians will be worse off as a consequence.
1 I can only speculate on the reasons for the termination of the Center’s funding by the state of Ohio: tough budgetary times in a recession, a lack of interest at the highest levels of the BGSU Administration, and a vacuum in leadership in the Center itself as the result of a failed director search. One thing is clear, however: the Canada-Ohio economic relationship remains as important as ever to the Northwest Ohio region.

2 I have now taught CAST 2010 approximately 30 times. In the article, I do not make any attempt to distinguish the in-class course from the online version. The content is nearly identical, but the nature of the discussions and some assignments are very different. I also teach a course in Canadian Government and Politics approximately every other year. Though this article does not specifically discuss that course, some of my impressions from teaching that course inform certain parts of this article.

3 The entire survey is printed in Appendix A.

4 The low response rate to the survey is disappointing, but not surprising. I was unable to offer any incentive to take the survey. I purposely chose not to send the survey to students who were taking the class during the Spring 2015 semester for two reasons. First, I did not want anyone to have the impression that participation in the survey was not voluntary. Second, I am primarily interested in which aspects of the course made a long-term impression on the students’ views of Canada.

5 The entire question is printed in Appendix A.

6 Approximately 20% of BGSU undergraduates self-identify as members of racial or ethnic minorities. Only around 7% of BGSU undergraduates are over the age of 25. A little over 2% of BGSU undergraduates are international students.

7 Despite our proximity to Canada, crossing the border is not easy. Since 2009, passports or similar “secure documents” have been required at the border, and fewer than half of Americans hold passports. Many BGSU students do not have passports, and long delays at the bridge are common.

8 I have no first-hand knowledge of how Canadian Studies courses are taught in Canada, but it is quite apparent that much of the Canadian Studies scholarship within Canada can be characterized as using critical theory approaches.

9 Adams can be criticized for a very selective interpretation of his own data. Interestingly, in a more recent article, Adams and Lake (2012) argue that the values of the two countries are converging as younger Americans have begun to embrace more “Canadian” values.

10 I sometimes show a clip from an interview that I conducted with former Speaker Peter Milliken in which he defends heckling and even claims that it makes speeches in the House of Commons better because it “gets the speaker going” and “gives them something to respond to.” Of course, I am aware that Question Period, generally, and heckling, specifically, are not viewed favourably by many Canadians. I also show a clip from an interview with Michael Chong, a Member of Parliament who is very critical of Question Period as it is practiced.

11 After the 2008 election returned a Conservative minority government, a coalition of opposition parties (the Liberals and the NDP with the support of the Bloc Québécois) threatened to vote ‘no confidence’ in the Conservative government with the intention of forming a new coalition government without an intervening election. The plan was only thwarted when Prime Minister Harper convinced the Governor General to prorogue (or temporarily suspend) Parliament and mobilized public opinion against the coalition. The “coalition crisis” has been the subject of much scholarly debate regarding the appropriateness of the Governor General’s decision and whether Canadians truly understand their own system of government (Russell and Sossin 2009).


13 The owner of the Ambassador Bridge, Matty Maroun, has done everything in his power to block construction of a competing crossing through both legal and political channels. With the defeat of an anti-bridge referendum in Michigan in 2012, he seems to have exhausted his options. The new crossing will be funded entirely by the governments of Canada and Ontario.

14 In most years, there are approximately 40 Canadian students at BGSU in a student body of around 20,000—many of whom are here to play intercollegiate hockey or golf.

15 This data is obviously less than perfect as the former students were asked about how much they knew about Canada after taking the course rather than being asked both before and after. Nevertheless, it matches the findings of McCormick and Chapelle (2011) who compare American students who had completed a Canadian Studies course to a control group of students who did not and found that the Canadian Studies students were able to correctly answer nearly twice as many questions on a test of basic knowledge about Canada.
APPENDIX A

This survey will be used as part of a research project on Canadian studies in the U.S. Your participation is entirely voluntary. By participating, you consent to have your answers included as part of the study. The survey is anonymous.

1. Have you ever visited Canada? Yes/No
2. If yes, approximately how many times?
3. If yes, where in Canada have you visited?
4. How much do you think you knew about Canada before taking a Canadian Studies course?
   Very little/Some but not much/Quite a bit/A great deal
5. How much do you think you know about Canada today?
   Very little/Some but not much/Quite a bit/A great deal
6. Which best describes your opinion of Canada and/or Canadians?
   Very negative/Negative/Indifferent/Positive/Very Positive
7. Has taking a Canadian Studies course changed your opinion of Canada and/or Canadians? If yes, has your opinion become more favorable or less favorable?
   Less favorable/The same (no change)/More favorable
8. Has taking the course changed your opinion regarding whether Canada and the United States are similar or different? If yes, do you now believe that Canada and the United States are more similar or more different than you did prior to taking the course?
   More similar/No change/More different
9. What is the most surprising thing that you learned about Canada in this course?
10. What is the most important reason why Americans should study Canada?
11. Why did you take a Canadian Studies course at BGSU (click all that apply)?
   It fulfilled a requirement/It was an online course/I thought it would be relatively easy/
   I wanted to learn more about Canada

Discussion Question 6 (Online CAST 2010 Spring 2015)

Suppose you have a friend who has been offered a job in Canada, and she is considering a move. Based on what you have learned in this class, what would you tell her about the pros and cons of becoming a permanent resident of Canada? What would be the 3 best things about living in Canada (as opposed to living in the U.S.)? What would be the 3 worst things? [When answering these questions focus on aspects of Canadian and U.S. society, public policies, culture, etc. Do not discuss the difficulties of being away from family or other personal concerns.] If your friend had two similar job offers - one in Canada and one in the U.S. - which one would you advise her to take and why?
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“I am Canadian.” Molson commercial. 2000. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRI-A3vakVg]


Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie, “The War of 1812” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7jLFZhprU4]