



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Terri L. Snyder, Professor, and Chair Department of American Studies

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2 June 2022

Dear Sheryl and Jessica,

Thank you for your thoughtful and thorough summary and evaluation of the American Studies Program Performance Review. I am pleased that you recognized the many strengths of our department. We pursue excellence in the classroom, develop innovative courses, and participate in experimental curriculum initiatives. We have superior, meaningful, and challenging undergraduate and graduate programs and maintain a high-quality and expansive profile in GE. Our record of scholarly and creative activity is outstanding. We are committed to social justice programming.

In all of these respects, American Studies has a clear sense of its department’s mission and value. In the pages below, I respond to the more particular points of your evaluation.

Student Recruitment, Retention, Graduation, and Post-Completion

I am proud to have chaired this amazing and admirable department. We have a top-notch faculty whose teaching and scholarship has led us to create a wide-ranging curriculum for GE audiences, majors and minors, and master’s students. On all these levels, our classes reflect scholarly trends and equitable pedagogies, and our BA and MA programs support many first-generation and underrepresented students in pursuing their university and career aspirations. That is all to the good.

And yet in the face of this knowledge – and all the labor by many people that has gone into producing this fine department – it is frustrating to witness the numbers of our majors and double majors steadily decline. The decline began in AY 2018-2019 and, as you note, the pandemic furthered eroded those numbers. Anecdotally, in the first months of Covid I spoke to several students who were on track to declare the double major but who were frankly too anxious about the uncertainty all around them to do so. We regained our footing as virtual instructors during spring 2020 through spring 2021. Yet we have not engaged in face-to-face recruitment since early 2020, as we have no way to compensate faculty for this time-intensive labor, which is beyond the normal range of their service. During Covid and since, we turned to mass recruiting via TitanNet but that, too, has not significantly altered our decline in majors and double majors. Our enrollments for the past 5 years are reflected in the table below.

Semester	Majors	Double Majors
Spring 2019	82	71
Spring 2020	73	43
Spring 2021	59	48
Spring 2022	46	34

Source: HSS Spring 2022 Census Report, 4.

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These enrollment trends in our undergraduate major and minor raise two connected issues for the department to consider and act upon in the future: 1) What is the ideal number of undergraduate majors, double majors, and minors for American Studies, and what number would allow us to sustain the distinct qualities of an American Studies degree? 2) How do we become less of a “found” major and more of a major chosen by first-year and transfer students? We clearly have a great program, but we need to make it more visible and relevant to prospective majors.

We have some promising plans for achieving this goal. Some of these are easy fixes, while others will require more structural and substantive changes. In the immediate future, the department is developing roadmaps for students who plan to become elementary school educators. We are also in discussion with HUSR to create pathways for their students to double major in American Studies. In these and other ways, we will adopt a strategy of targeted recruitment aimed at particular courses or populations (as we already do with COMM students).

In addition, in terms of outreach, we will consider whether it might be useful to employ majors as paid peer advisors to make presentations to undeclared majors or even perhaps in area high schools and community colleges. More substantively, at our retreat on May 23, we began a conversation about curriculum changes, and plan to continue this conversation in the fall. The following are some questions that we will address in the coming year. Does our curriculum come across to students as additive rather than holistic and how might we create a program that is more integrated? Do we need to refine or eliminate the “theme v. discipline” approaches and thereby streamline the catalog description of (and hopefully student access to) the major? We might also retitle our courses and recast course descriptions, especially for the 101 and 301. Similarly, we are rethinking the structure of the major and considering a larger range of final projects for our culminating capstone seminar, AMST 401. On a related note, regarding the 401, we are grateful for the Dean’s support in trying to gain an exception so that we can offer this class in summer sessions. Doing so would greatly benefit our majors, minors, and graduate students.

In contrast to the undergraduate major, enrollments in the MA program have been stable over the past five years. More importantly, the number of MA students may be a good fit for the service expectations of our faculty. The graduate advisor directs MA orientations, advises, and oversees study plans and all aspects of completion memos; they also serve on comparatively more comprehensive exams and thesis committees than other faculty. Tenure-stream faculty also serve on comprehensive exam and thesis committees and informally mentor graduate students, often as a significant part of their service workload. We will take up the issue of adding a possible final project as an alternative to the exam or thesis next year, when we discuss the revision of the MA reading lists. As for the lengthening time to degree in the graduate program cited in your letter, we see no cause for alarm and view this as a product of the pandemic. As always, we will continue to be mindful of graduation rates.

Faculty. At our retreat on May 23, we discussed revisions to our governing documents, including our DPS, and decided upon and drafted revisions to our existing AMST Collegial Governance Guidelines. We also opened a discussion of the role of lecturers in governance. In all cases we did so with an eye to creating equity in governance and reducing burn-out in service commitments. We

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have firm next steps in place that will allow us to complete and refine these revisions over the summer and into next fall. In addition, we agree with the Deans' assessment that adjusting course caps downward would be another possible way to ease faculty workload. Even with these kinds of adjustments, however, it is important to recognize that service burn-out is amplified in departments with small numbers of tenure-stream faculty. This structural source of inequity in departments deserves more recognition and consideration from the upper levels of administration.

Staff. We look forward to continuing to work with the administration to improve the working conditions, job descriptions, and office environment of our staff.

Space. Thank you for advocating for the repair of faculty offices. We look forward to having this work finished soon, and, in the future, we will ask the Dean's office for support when Facilities is nonresponsive to our requests.

Many thanks again, Jessica and Sheryl, for this collegial and considerate response and for assisting American Studies in reviewing its present state and rethinking its future role at CSUF.

My best to both of you,

Terri L. Snyder, Ph.D.
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