

Department of American Studies Program Performance Review
College of Humanities and Social Sciences, CSUF

Response to External Reviewers Report
11 April 2022

We thank the reviewers for their time and effort in visiting American Studies in early March, evaluating our department, and formulating the External Review Report. We are pleased that they noted the exceptional quality of our department culture, the excellence of our teaching, research, and service, and the ethic of collegiality, care, and respect that extends to all parts of the CSUF American Studies community of students, faculty, and staff. In the pages below, we would like to respond to the substantive points raised by their review as well as reiterate some of the pressing issues identified in our self-study and discussed on the day of the review.

Before turning to our response, however, we hope to correct several items in the report. The first two are fine-grained, easily misunderstood detailed errors that, nonetheless, need to be corrected for the record. The third raises a more substantive issue about our research and curriculum; and the fourth addresses the graduate program, which is missing in the External Reviewers Report. Finally, we also would like to refine the characterization of the chair's role.

The first issue concerns the the statement that American Studies “has usually met or come close to meeting its targets during the review period” (4). This is true (and we've also exceeded target in the review period), but not for the reason given in the second part of the sentence: that is, that meeting target “was primarily achieved by the College lowering the target” (4).

A few lines later the reviewers correctly note that American Studies' allocation was cut at the beginning of the Spring 2021 semester by the equivalent of two full positions. This was done as part of an HSS-wide redistribution of resources in which funds were removed from larger departments and redistributed to smaller departments to nurture those departments, provide a 3-3 load to all HSS faculty, and allow chairs of small departments an additional course release. Just to clarify, then, a reduction in our target was the consequence of a reduction of our FTEF (Full Time Equivalent Faculty), not a consequence of our not having met target.

Second, the reviewers write that the “number of full-time faculty has declined during this review period. This shift has resulted in a noticeable drop in the proportion of AMST course sections taught by full-time faculty from the prior review period” (4).

We realize that with this statement the reviewers are bolstering the case that the department needs to hire more tenure-track faculty, and we appreciate and agree with their support. However, in Fall 2014, the date of our last review, we had 12 tenure-stream faculty who taught 25% of our classes, while in Fall 2021, we had 11.5 tenure-stream faculty who taught 33% of our classes. As the numbers demonstrate, we have experienced no noticeable drop in the proportion of AMST course sections taught by tenure stream faculty; in fact, the percentage has actually increased. At the same time, our tenure density is 60%, so we do look forward to hiring tenure-track colleagues in the next few years.

Third, the reviewers noted (4) that “the department is dominated by cultural historians, with less attention to other fields and theories, and/or those trained in American Studies or other interdisciplinary studies (Gender and Ethnic and/or Media Studies).”

This statement does not accurately represent the teaching and research agendas of our faculty and the field of American Studies. Among our current tenure-stream faculty, four (Abnet, Battan, Fingal, Gonzaba) hold advanced degrees in History, while the other eight (Golub, Kanosky, Lane, Lewinnek, Rowe, Snyder, Woo, and Zenderland) earned interdisciplinary PhDs in American Studies, African American Studies, and American Civilization. Regardless of degree, however, all faculty are highly interdisciplinary in their research and teaching, and each cohort of hires in the review period has brought to the department exciting new methodological approaches and fields of study.

In their research and teaching, American Studies faculty draw on theoretical and methodological approaches rooted in the disciplines of American studies; anthropology, ethnography, and oral history; Asian American studies; Black studies; borderlands and environmental studies; the creative arts; cultural history; digital humanities; digital, social media, and technology studies; disability studies; feminist, gender, queer, and sexualities studies; material and popular culture studies; transnational, hemispheric, and global frameworks; urban and regional studies; and work and leisure studies.

This brief list as well as the extensive discussions of faculty teaching and research in the PPR Self-Study contradict the review’s statement (7) that American Studies needs to “direct attention to more interdisciplinary fields and theories key to American Studies, including gender, ethnic, and media studies.” Clearly this is something that we already do. The review similarly finds fault with the “dominance of cultural historians” (4,7). However, while we value cultural history, it is only one of many approaches reflected by our curriculum and research. Moreover, the study of history and culture remains central to the field of American Studies’ mission and values as reflected in our discipline’s professional organization (see “We Are” and “We Value” <https://www.theasa.net>).

Fourth, despite extensive coverage of our MA Program in the PPR Self-Study and discussion about the program with the reviewers during the campus visit, the report makes no mention of the MA program. In the Self-Study, we articulated the need to review the MA program reading lists and reconsider our completion options for the MA -- we currently offer an exam or thesis, and we’re considering adding a project as a third option. In addition, during the PPR review visit, we articulated our need for a permanent source of funding for Graduate Assistants. Working as a GA provides our MA students with experience in teaching and research and thereby better prepares them for careers in teaching, enhances their viability on the job market, and their readiness for Ph.D. programs. In addition, a permanent source of GA funding would amplify our recruitment of potential grad students. Since this material did not make it into the external review report, it is appropriate to include it here.

Finally, we want to acknowledge that the reviewers credited the current department chair for initiating practices that, in many cases, have long been carried out by the American Studies department chairs. In "Additional Support for Faculty and Lecturers," for instance, the review attributes practices and policies to the current chair that were instituted by the previous chairs, Leila Zenderland, Elaine Lewinnek, and Jesse Battan. Although the current chair, like any other, has instituted new approaches, in many areas, they have followed the processes taken by previous

generations of American Studies chairs that are, in effect, part of our fabric of department governance.

Challenges. The reviewers have outlined the challenges facing American Studies thoughtfully and carefully. Below we respond to the most pressing of the issues they raise.

Burnout. The reviewers note that one of the major challenges faced by the Department is possible faculty burnout. While the faculty feels appreciated for their efforts, structural support in the form of course releases or additional pay, for example, would facilitate their ability to recruit new majors and grow the internship program. University and College-level support would also allow faculty to expand DEI efforts, like the CSUF-King Reading Partnership and Forum gatherings.

At the same time, department-generated assigned time is a limited resource, and we need to find other ways of countering burnout. One strategy would be more intentional in balancing and alternating service assignments. Obviously, there are constraints in this model, as some service activities can only be undertaken by tenured faculty. As an example, even though the DPC is elected, we should be mindful of years such as the current one (three tenure-track reviews, ten lecturer reviews of 3-6 years, and eight range elevation reviews) and consciously reduce their service in other areas. We have begun a conversation about our governing documents, one aim of which is to have an open discussion about service and decide upon strategies for making service obligations equitable and transparent. Finding ways to address real and perceived imbalances in service is a critical task.

GE. The reviewers correctly surmise that because of American Studies' large GE footprint, changes to GE often potentially disrupt our funding base and are the cause of frequent concern. As the coming changes to GE produced by California Assembly Bill (AB) 928 become clearer, it will be essential to plan for their impact on our department funding, size, and faculty.

Curriculum Revision. (a-d) The review suggests several helpful ways of thinking about revising our curriculum. In an effort to address these and other ongoing changes, we have scheduled a day-long retreat May to have, as the reviewers describe it, a "department-wide" discussion of potential revisions to our undergraduate curriculum.

(f) The reviewers note that the department needs support for teaching our capstone seminar (AMST 401T) in the summer at full funding for faculty. Doing so will, as the reviewers point out, streamline time-to-degree for undergraduate majors. Graduate students also want to finish quickly and the summer 401 provides them with the opportunity to accelerate time-to-degree. We have had discussions about this issue with Associate Dean Jessica Stern and hope to get AMST 401T on the exception list of summer classes that don't have to enroll about 13 to be offered at full pay for the faculty.

Governing Principles. The reviewers note that our department works because the faculty are collegial, but they also still articulate the need for clear governing documents. We have initiated a conversation about our governing documents to create greater transparency and equity, and we will discuss this further, with the aim of making decisions about those documents, at our May 2022 retreat.

Social Media Presence. The reviewers noted a "general lack of visibility" for the major on the website and social media. At many universities, regular maintenance and updates of sites and social

media outreach are handled by staff; at present at CSUF this is outside of the purview of department staff. However, if CSUF is serious about the importance of departments' web and social media presence, then one possible way forward is to re-conceptualize staff positions to include social media work. This might be a form of advancement for current staff, giving them more responsibility and salary; or, alternatively, the university might provide resources to the department to hire a social media/website specialist on a part-time basis. The current system of relying on faculty to maintain websites and social media presence is not sustainable because of the excessive time commitment.

Space. American Studies has several space issues.

1) We have access to a small conference room that also serves as a student lounge, study area, and library. We share this mixed-use space with the Department of Religious Studies. Given its multiple functions, competing constituencies, small size, and lack of computer and AV equipment, this room is neither a viable space for presentations, meetings, and interviewing job candidates nor a dedicated place where students, lecturers, and tenure-stream faculty can come together.

2) At present, our lecturers occupy offices on the second floor of GH; the American Studies office is on the third floor of GH; and the tenure-stream faculty offices are on the fourth floor of GH.

These spatial arrangements contribute to a lack of connection between all faculty and staff. Ideally, we would have all staff, lecturer, and tenure-stream offices on the same floor but given that most of the fourth-floor offices are occupied by tenure-stream English faculty, expansion into their space is unlikely, unless that entire department decides to move.

In addition, the lecturers report that at least some of their second-floor offices have water leaks, poorly functioning HVAC systems, and broken bookcases; repairing these problems or finding new space for the faculty in these offices is an immediate priority. In addition, we have a persistent leak in a fourth-floor faculty office that has never been repaired successfully, and this too, is an immediate priority. We have contacted Facilities several times, but nothing has been successfully repaired.

For the faculty in problematic offices, however unintentionally, the lack of action to fix essential systems and provide a welcome working environment conveys a distinct lack of care on the part of the university for the faculty and their well-being. This needs to be rectified as soon as possible.

Opportunities & Recommendations

Additional Support for Faculty and Lecturers.

a) We can reduce FTES by reducing GE class size and thereby lessen the burden on all faculty. We have lowered the enrollment caps on AMST 201 from 58 to 50 per section. At some point, eventually we might consider lowering caps for our other classes.

b) The Department needs College or University support to grow the current internship program so that it will count towards a faculty member's teaching load each semester. The same is true of independent studies (AMST 499, 599); MA exam and thesis supervision (AMST 598, 599), and our teaching tutorial (AMST 596). As part of our drive toward equity and transparency, we need to find a way to balance these instructional activities among all faculty.

c) and d) See “Curriculum Revision,” above. For long-term efforts in curriculum reform and recruitment, we might consider applying for university support in the form of EATC and FEID grants as well as obtaining funding for student ambassadors to do outreach and recruitment. We might also profit from reaching out to CSUF Outreach to see if they can partner with us in recruitment. We are in the process of developing road maps for double majors with AMST and HUSR and working with the Center for Careers in Teaching to provide an American Studies major plan for students who want to become elementary school teachers. Activities like these may attract students from these populations into the major.

e) In order to foster the integration of lecturers, faculty will continue to include lecturers in social events and explore creating new opportunities for collaboration. Funds to support this integration will be critical. Lecturers who would like to participate in Department activities beyond their extensive teaching commitments should be offered stipends for their time and effort. Perhaps, for instance, we could have a lecturer serve on a department committee or attend meetings as a representative of the lecturers.

Most importantly, before taking any action, we need to ask lecturers what they want and how they would like to be included in department governance. Perhaps in the future we should host a meeting to hear their ideas or design an anonymous survey for them to voice their concerns and preferences.

Another way to include lecturers is to support their professional development. We have been able to pay for lecturers to attend conferences to present their work and hope to continue doing so in the future. Currently, the department pays lecturers stipends (\$1000) to take QM training so they can qualify to teach Course Match sections of our classes.

In the past, we also provided professional development funds for the lecturers by allowing them to order \$200 worth of books. This was discontinued in AY 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 because campus was closed due to COVID; mail was not delivered to the office and, per university policy, books could not be mailed to personal addresses. As of this writing, we lack an ASC II who is typically responsible for making book orders. In the future it would make better sense to resume support for professional development for lecturers via a direct stipend rather than a series of individual book orders.

f) We agree with the review’s assessment that the university needs to provide increased research support and professional development for all faculty. We urge the university to provide a “top off” fund to ease the burden on HSS when faculty win prestigious national research awards from, for instance, the NEH, ACLS, and Mellon Foundation. In many cases, the maximum award these agencies provide for faculty in HSS fields often falls short of the real costs of replacing a faculty for a year’s leave, and this results in inequities for HSS faculty as well for the College itself. The university should make it a priority to establish a fund to supplement research awards in order to alleviate this burden that falls disproportionately on HSS and its faculty.

Growth of the Major. Curriculum Revision, Codify Governing Principles, Space and Maintenance are all addressed above.

Staff Needs. We fully support our staff request for increased opportunities for professional development and growth. Given our staff interest in and our need for assistance in social media and website visibility, outreach, recruitment, and advising, it would be advantageous if our staff could move into these areas if they see a good fit with their skills. However, this needs to be supported with a revision of the current ASA and ASC positions or the addition of a new, departmentally focused outreach position. Second, we support the staff call for greater flexibility in work hours and telecommuting.

Once again, we thank the PPR External Report Reviewers for their candid evaluation of our program and their efforts in articulating the strengths of American Studies and the challenges that we face.