

**California State University, Fullerton**  
**Program Performance Review**  
**Department of American Studies**  
**External Review Report -Spring 2022**

**Review Team Members**

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**The Review Process**

This report is based on the review team's study of the American Studies Dept. Performance Review self-report and supplemental materials, followed up with a site visit that took place on March 7, 2022. During the on-campus visit, the review team met with Dr. Sheryl Fontaine, Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Jessica Stern, Associate Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and Dr. Terri Snyder, Chair of American Studies. In addition, the reviewers had opportunities to meet with the department office staff, full-time and part-time faculty, as well as American Studies students.

The report that follows is divided into three sections. The first provides an overview of the successes and accomplishments found by the review team. Challenges and opportunities are then discussed. Recommendations then address these challenges.

**Strengths**

The Department of American Studies is truly a model of excellence, both within the College of H&SS and the CSU system. During the period under review, the department has had many significant accomplishments, including the following:

- American Studies (AMS) offers an exemplary, interdisciplinary curriculum which promotes an understanding of American culture over time and is committed to diversity, equity, inclusion and student success. The department offers an impressive array of courses taught by faculty experts in a variety of disciplines.

- The American Studies curriculum is far reaching and challenging. Their classes consider spatial politics, specific American regions, migrant and immigrant lives, cultural approaches to science and technology, media, theories of the field, as well as the intersectionalities of race, sexualities, and gender. All majors share a core of four classes, building from an introduction to the field and culminating in a research seminar. Majors enjoy great flexibility in their choice of electives and may take as many as 12 units from another department. One of the key strengths of AMST is offering a well-rounded education to students pursuing diverse careers.
- Very few students are familiar with American Studies when they begin their studies at Cal State, Fullerton, pressing (AMS) faculty to actively recruit majors and minors. The department has been remarkably successful in convincing students enrolled in their introductory courses, which satisfy a General Education requirement, to declare American Studies as a major or minor. This success reflects the commitment of the faculty to coordinated recruitment and the contagious quality of their teaching. That many of these students in GE classes choose AMS as their second major further demonstrates the power of the American Studies pitch.
- Collegiality and collaboration were a common theme in all meetings with faculty, staff and students. The Department's members communicate readily, excitedly, and respectfully with one another, creating a shared sense of mission and willingness to serve. This camaraderie was evident in the rapport among tenured and tenure-track faculty as well as among lecturers.
- American Studies students feel a deep connection to both the faculty and the subjects they teach. They commend the expertise, depth of knowledge, and enthusiasm that faculty members share with the students. In turn, the faculty praise their students for their commitment to their subject matter, academic success, and concerns for social justice.
- AMS has structures and organizations in place which promote a strong sense of belonging and strengthen critical thinking and writing skills among students. The American Studies Student Association is an active group which sponsors guest lectures, hosts student-faculty gatherings, and publishes the best papers produced by graduate and undergraduate students in its journal, *The American Papers*.
- Despite the density of service responsibilities and teaching commitments in this high achieving department, its members are innovative and productive scholars. Interrogating topics ranging from the prison-industrial complex, redlining, hair, transnational adoption, monsters, and death in slavery, to global unemployment, nightclubs, robots, the development of modern social science, and Marxism's impact on American sexual

beliefs, the faculty reflect and define new directions in American Studies. Their deployment of digital mapping and intersectionality highlight their methodological creativity and rigor as well.

### **Challenges**

These admirable achievements during this 7-year review period are accompanied by the following challenges, which deserve close attention.

- **Some** of the major challenges to the Department are related to the successes of the dept. Because the faculty are research active, innovative teachers and committed to service at multiple scales (Dept., College, University, community and to the profession), the tenured faculty warn of burnout. Because they are committed to outreach as necessary to a “found” major like American Studies, faculty go to over twenty classes in American studies each semester to recruit. This example is but one illustration of where the high engagement of faculty leads to both a sense of overwork, and under-recognition for their efforts at their full range of student-centered activities (including supervising the Internship students as an overload class). In other words, their “overachieving” excellence and collegiality create a highly impactful faculty but they sense that this excellence is under-appreciated.
- Junior faculty do feel well-protected in their research pursuits, in large part, due to the Chair. Good morale on behalf of junior faculty are, however, a result of a particularly attentive and effective Chair (who has worked hard to include lecturers in the Dept.). With personnel changes, morale may also decline. While lecturers appreciate the efforts of inclusion by the Chair, they also felt distant from the department faculty in general. This distance is both physical (upstairs/ downstairs), and as in terms of respect or recognition for their work. Morale *amongst* the lecturers is high, however. Staff also feel constrained by impersonal and insecure treatment around their work conditions, and have no clear pathway for advancement.
- The number of AMST majors declined from 87 in 2019 to a low of 51 in Spring 2021. It is impossible to draw conclusions about this decline, in part because of COVID. Because of remote teaching, fewer students were exposed to the traditional high-touch experiences of in-person teaching. Most of the majors come into the major through General Education. The pathway is generally “come for GE, stay for the major” due to the across-the-board excellent teaching in the dept. Students do not distinguish between lecturers and faculty as excellent teachers. GE changes, thus, are a persistent source of fear and anxiety complicating alternative means of recruitment and discouraging curricular reflections and possible revisions.

- Major structure and curriculum are in large part, an artifact of institutional history, dovetailing with a reticence to change the curriculum because of the technical and bureaucratic burdens involved in such approvals from the College and University. American studies majors can use either only AMS classes, or include other departments (it is not clear how many majors follow which option). For those that include other departments, they use a “a "theme approach" or a "disciplines approach." The distinction between the themes vs. discipline approach is not clear to faculty, and, not surprisingly, largely irrelevant to students. One possibility to add clarity and coherence would be to create Advising Tracks under the Thematic Emphasis, that should be clearly credited on B.A. diplomas. The difference between two survey classes, “Introduction to American Studies” and “American Character” is murky (similar to a confusingly named “Introduction to American Cultural Studies”). Faculty did not confidently articulate the rationale and titling for the four required courses: 201, 301, 350, 401T. Moreover, recently revised, curricular pay incentives for summer classes discourage faculty from teaching lower-enrollment, core classes such as 401T. This creates curricular bottlenecks, delays graduation, and undermines student success.
- The larger issue is the undergraduate curriculum needs a department-wide conversation, especially given the addition of four new Assistant Professors. For example, 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). That unspoken history dominance may, for instance, shape assumptions around the culminating senior research seminar, one of the four required courses, and the M.A. exam reading lists. Rather than a traditional research paper, perhaps more creative final projects (like a podcast), might be a route to show competence in the major, that also produces a legible product for employment.
- Although AMST has usually met or come close to meeting its targets during the review period, this was primarily achieved by the College lowering the target. AMST has made persistent efforts to increase its FTES, including by developing new GE courses, but its decreased number of majors continues to be a challenge. 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. Taking into account the lecturers, American Studies has experienced a cut of the equivalent of two full positions from 2019-2021. Their SFR (Student Faculty Ratio) has fluctuated from a high of 29.5 (one of the highest in the College of HSS) to a low of 27, which remains one of the highest, relative to other departments in HSS.
- There is a general lack of visibility of the major, including website, and social media presence.

- There are loose governing principles. The department works because the faculty are collegial, but the dangers are clear. They are in the process of refining governing documents, which would help prevent problems in the future.
- American Studies lacks a dedicated conference room and separate student lounge. This lack of space contributes to the lack of connection and clear identity.
- Support for travel and research by tenured faculty can be improved. In a number of recent cases, faculty who secured impressive national grants were at risk of forgoing those grants because the college/university does not automatically support faculty research by covering the difference between the size of the grant and faculty member's salary.

### **Opportunities & Recommendations**

We recommend the following to address the challenges and opportunities outlined above:

**Additional support for faculty and lecturers.** American Studies Department faculty and lecturers teach some of the highest FTES in the college and engage in high-impact and high-engagement practices with undergraduate and graduate students (internship program, student research, student journal, symposia, etc.) while simultaneously maintaining rigorous research agendas. The department is highly effective but at the cost of overwork and burnout. A clear solution is additional support from the College and University:

- a. Reduce FTES—faculty identified that they routinely meet or exceed targets set by the College. This means that they teach higher FTES than most other departments in the College. To build and strengthen the major, they need smaller classes.
- b. Internship program—internships are highly effective and considered a high-impact practice, particularly for first-generation students in the humanities and social sciences. The Department would like to expand the current internship program but cannot do so without a MOU or guarantee from the College that the internship course will count as part of a faculty member's teaching load each semester. Support will allow the Department to grow the program.
- c. Curriculum revision—additional recommendations around how the Department's curriculum could be revised are outlined below. To implement these changes, the Department needs resources over the course of 2-3 years to give faculty the time required to conduct a review of current classes and program requirements, to prepare and write program revision proposals, and to shepherd them through the College and University curriculum committees.

d. Recruitment—the Department wants and needs to increase the number of majors in American Studies as part of their strategy to stabilize enrollment, particularly considering the unsteady future of GE requirements. Raising the visibility of the Department and increasing enrollments requires time and energy. Reassigned time to faculty could support increased recruitment efforts, updates of the website, increased visibility on social media, coordinating current majors to help recruit new majors, coordinating with high schools and community colleges with high rates of CSUF enrollment/transfers to introduce the field of American Studies and the major, and partnering with other programs such as Ethnic Studies at CSUF to develop degree paths for double majors.

e. Funds to better integrate lecturers into the department—both tenure-line faculty and lecturers acknowledged a divide between the two groups (while also crediting chair Terri Synder with working to address this). Allocating funds to pay lecturers for participation in things such as departmental meetings and retreats could help to bridge this divide and better integrate lecturers into the department as a whole.

f. Increasing research support for faculty and reinstating research and professional development funds for lecturers—lecturers noted that they have active research agendas and in the past enjoyed opportunities to receive or apply for support. Reinstatement of these resources would not only increase their research output but would also help them stay at the cutting edge of the field and integrate new disciplinary approaches into their teaching. It would also improve morale and sense of belonging in the department. Tenure-line faculty regularly win large external fellowships and grants but not necessarily large enough to match salaries. They need access to “top off” funds from the College or University to make taking them financially feasible.

**Growth of the major.** American Studies has seen a decline in the number of majors in the department, in some part due to COVID but more significantly due to changes in the GE structure across the CSU system. To ensure the Department’s stability, sustainability, and healthy growth in the future, it needs to dedicate resources and time to recruitment efforts suggested above.

**Curriculum revision.** While the content of American Studies courses reflects cutting-edge changes in the field, the Department needs to revisit the structure of the major and the ways in which it frames and describes courses to bring it in line with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century state of the field. These revisions should address the following:

a. Revisit and possibly eliminate the “themes vs. disciplines” approach with the undergraduate major. This change might also help to streamline both advising as well as degree completion.

b. Reconsider the “Introduction to American Studies” (AMST 201) and “American Character” (AMST 301) courses. While faculty explained the different ways these two classes are taught, the rationale and logic behind the two classes are not evident in the course or degree descriptions. The title of AMST 301 could also be revised to better reflect the current state of American Studies as a discipline. The Department also needs to review and update course titles and descriptions across course offerings.

c. The most recent curricula revisions also appear to be additive rather than holistic. The Department has added a number of new and innovative courses but it is unclear how these classes reshape the program as a whole and there should be a department-wide conversation about the design of the program.

d. Curriculum revision can also help to address the fact that the Department is largely dominated by cultural historians and help direct attention to more interdisciplinary fields and theories key to American Studies, including gender, ethnic, and media studies. This conversation should include diversifying requirements for culminating projects as well as hiring priorities for future tenure-line positions.

f. To promote student success and streamline time-to-degree for majors, faculty need support for teaching one of the four required courses, AMST 401T, over the summer session.

**Codify governing principles.** Faculty across the Department identify it as a supportive place, with protections and resources for junior faculty and collegial conversations about workloads and service expectations and duties. Many of these practices were put into place under the current chair. The Department should consider codifying practices into policies to ensure that they continue.

**Space and maintenance.** Faculty across the Department vocalized the need for a dedicated conference room. A larger space would benefit not just faculty, it would also increase areas where majors and graduate students can study, mingle, and build a sense of community. Lecturers also need additional office space so that they do not have to share offices. Lecturer offices are also in need of immediate repair. Lecturers identified issues such as non-functioning HVAC and leaky windows. Both are unacceptable, the former in particular due to COVID.

**Address staff needs.** Staff forcefully called for two things. First, increased opportunities for professional development and growth—they would welcome the opportunity to do more programmatic work such as outreach and recruitment but this needs to be supported with an analyst, rather than coordinator, position. Second, greater flexibility in work hours and location (greater ability to work from home).

### **Summary**

The American Studies Department at California State University, Fullerton is outstanding. Excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service define the faculty, which provides exemplary instruction, support, guidance, and a strong sense of community to a dedicated and very appreciative group of students. All members of the faculty and staff demonstrate a high degree of collegiality, care, and respect.

Kudos to the American Studies department for weathering changes beyond its control while still offering CSUF students an American Studies education that is broad, deep, and of exceptional quality.