

Students' Ability to Critically Analyze Cultural Documents and Expressive Forms

College of Humanities and Social Sciences – American Studies BA

Step 1: Student Learning Outcome

Students will interpret and analyze critically a range of cultural documents and expressive forms.

Step 2: Methods and Measures

Direct: Capstone projects in AMST 401 will be used, which are required of all American Studies minors and majors, usually in the final year of study. Although topics of each seminar vary, all AMST 401T courses ask students to design and conduct original research projects, to critically analyze primary and secondary materials, and organize their materials into an original, well-argued, well-evidenced research paper intended to demonstrate students' mastery of course material as well as their ability to conduct original research and critically examine aspects of U.S. life within their appropriate cultural and historical context.

A rubric was created by a committee to assess students' ability to critically analyze primary and secondary documents using a Likert scale: 3 = Outstanding, 2 = Acceptable, 1 = Weak, and 0 = No evidence of critical analysis.

Indirect: An exit survey of graduating students and AMST 401 instructor memos will be used.

Step 3: Criteria for Success

Direct: 75% of students are rated “acceptable” or “outstanding” on the rubric criteria.

Indirect: 75% of surveyed students respond to specific survey questions that align to the outcome with “Greatly Improved” or “Somewhat Improved” for every survey question.

Step 4: Results

Direct: Overall, of the 45 students, 18 (40%) of them showed superb mastery of the critical analysis SLO, earning the highest possible score of 3 out of 3 points. Another 15 (33%) of essays were in the “acceptable” range (score of 2 points). Finally, 12 (27%) earned 1 point, falling into the “weak” category. No student received a score of 0, demonstrating no evidence of critical analysis in their essay. In total, 73% of students achieved an overall rating of “acceptable” or “outstanding,” thus falling short of the minimum criteria for success. This is a dip from the last time the program assessed this SLO in AY18-19 when 80% of student essays were rated “acceptable” or “outstanding.” The assessment committee views this outcome as an opportunity for our department to discuss the goals and criteria for final projects across all sections of the capstone course, while addressing the negative impact of the pandemic upon

student learning as well as the new challenges of AI in essay writing. All 45 essays collected for the purposes of assessing SLO 4 demonstrate some ability to interpret and analyze critically a range of cultural documents and expressive forms. Based on Direct Assessment, the committee concluded that 73% of American Studies minors and majors, by the time they have reached their third or fourth year of study and enrolled in AMST 401T, have an acceptable or outstanding grasp of the outcome.

Indirect: Two forms of indirect assessment were used to assess the outcome. First, a memo was requested from faculty members who taught AMST 401T during AY23-24 and from whom the assignments were collected. In these memos, faculty were asked to reflect upon the critical analysis strengths and weaknesses of the cohort.

Additionally, the department conducted an exit survey of recent graduates in Summer 2024 in which students were asked to rate the Department's effectiveness in several criteria, including critical thinking. According to Department guidelines, the outcome is adequately achieved if 75% of surveyed students respond to survey questions with "Greatly Improved" or "Somewhat Improved." In the most recent survey, a full 100% of students selected these two responses for questions relevant to the outcome, thus far exceeding the criteria for success (75%). Given the overwhelmingly positive response to these survey questions, the committee concluded that, in terms of indirect assessment, the department is more than adequately achieving the objectives of the outcome.

Step 5: Improvement Actions

To further improve student performance and to close the loop on the assessment of the learning outcome, the committee resolved to share this report with all T/TT faculty and to discuss ways to more consistently and overtly incorporate opportunities for critical analysis in the final assignments for AMST 401T. Other instructors will also be advised to consciously build this component of the outcome into their curriculum and assignments as well to effectively prepare students in this area before they reach the capstone course AMST 401T.

The low response rate to the department's Exit Survey of graduating students is a caveat to the conclusions drawn from the resulting data. The committee suggests administering the exit survey at the end of the 401T course instead of during the summer following graduation when it is more difficult to reach students.