

**California State University, Fullerton**  
**Program Performance Review: Department of American Studies**  
**External Review Report**

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**Review Team Members**

Dr. Edward J. Blum is Professor of History at San Diego State University. He has served as the chair of the Religion and American Culture caucus for the American Studies Association and as the vice president and treasurer of the California American Studies Association.

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**The Review Process**

This report is based on a site visit on Tuesday, March 10, 2015. During this visit, the reviewers met with Dr. Sheryl Fontaine, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences (H&SS), Dr. Lynn Sargeant, Associate Dean of H&SS, Dr. Leila Zenderland, Chair of American Studies, tenured, junior, and adjunct faculty members of the department, and graduate and undergraduate American Studies students. The reviewers also attended a meeting of Susie Woo's class, AMST 324: American Immigrant Cultures. In addition, the team reviewed the department's preliminary self-study in preparation for the visit.

The report that follows is divided into three sections: the first section provides an overview of the Department of American Studies and its regional and national reputation. In the second section, we provide a list of our commendations for the program and in the third section, we provide a list of our recommendations.

**Overview and Reputation**

The CSUF American Studies Department continues to be a national leader in this interdisciplinary field. Indeed, according to the most recent survey of American Studies departments and programs, the Fullerton department represents what American Studies academic units nationwide aspire to become: a mature department with its own faculty lines, hiring schedules, academic curricula, and firmly established community practices.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The report is available through the American Studies Association web site:  
[http://www.theasa.net/publications/page/appendix\\_d\\_the\\_asa\\_survey\\_of\\_departments\\_and\\_programs\\_2007\\_findings\\_and\\_pro/](http://www.theasa.net/publications/page/appendix_d_the_asa_survey_of_departments_and_programs_2007_findings_and_pro/).

According to Simon Bronner, lead author of this 2007 report commissioned by the American Studies Association, for the first time in the institutional life of the field, American Studies is represented by more departments than programs. Fullerton is the benchmark. The Bronner survey found that the most growth and curricular innovation in American Studies occurred at the M. A. level. Fullerton continues to be a leader in post-baccalaureate education, as the success of department graduates attests. This department has made the most of its opportunities to develop a diverse American Studies curriculum that welcomes international scholars and students, thus anticipating and exemplifying the outward-turning nature of the field. Finally, it should be noted that the department has been a leader at the regional as well as the national level, hosting regional American Studies meetings while, at the same time, receiving recognition at the national level.

### **Commendations**

As the previous section makes clear, the Department of American Studies is truly a model of excellence, both within the College of H&SS and on a national scale. During the period under review, the department has had a number of significant accomplishments, including the following:

- Collegiality and a caring community shined through in meetings with faculty, lecturers, graduate students, and undergraduates. All of these constituents spoke about the department as a warm, welcoming community that offers numerous opportunities to be involved, such as the bi-annual research symposium, book parties for faculty who publish monographs, and the newly established writing group for lecturers and junior faculty. This degree of community and collegiality is remarkable given that CSUF is considered to be a commuter campus; students commute and maintain jobs, and most lecturers are teaching part time and often have obligations on multiple campuses. Despite these challenges, though, the department fosters and maintains a high level of engagement across its constituencies.
- Nearly all of the faculty have published significant research—both articles and books—with top-tier university presses, and several of these publications have won awards. The department recently enjoyed the incredibly rare honor of having two of their faculty members (Dr. Leila Zenderland and Dr. Terry Snyder) win highly prestigious year-long research fellowships, the most competitive grant (success rate under 10%) offered by the National Endowment for the Humanities. In addition to receiving grants and awards for their scholarship, members of the American Studies faculty have also received local, regional, and national honors for their teaching and their community engagement.
- The department offers an impressive array of classes, including a number of newly created courses that support the transnational turn within the broader discipline. These courses, such as those in food ways, in disability studies, and in technology, showcase new and exciting fields within American Studies. The department is clearly committed to hiring excellent teachers who can develop and maintain a cutting-edge curriculum. The review team had the privilege of

observing one of the department's junior faculty members, Dr. Susie Woo, teach a session of her AMST 324 course and it was outstanding. She provided an excellent balance of discussion and lecture, and did a fantastic job of making connections to previous and future classes, and to other courses that the students had (or were) taking. Equally impressively, her students were also making these connections through their comments and questions. The faculty are providing a rich, stimulating curriculum and learning environment for their students. The undergraduate and graduate students are articulate, incisive, passionate, and engaged. They clearly love their classes and feel a strong sense of belonging to a vibrant community of scholars. Data gathered from assessment and alumni surveys (see Self-Study) is a further testament to the department's commitment to and realization of student success.

### **Recommendations**

The American Studies Department has functioned at the highest level with limited resources of time, space, and discretionary support. Our recommendations take into account the needs that the department has identified in its self-study. Past performance and sensible planning makes us confident in saying that this fine department has earned a judicious increase of support.

- **Course release time for an “internship coordinator” (with close ties to college and university internship/experiential learning coordinators).** The surrounding community is rich with opportunities for this field but development of these connections, the articulation of the necessary agreements, and the pedagogy surrounding these experiential elements requires the attention of a designated position.
- **Course release time for an “outreach coordinator” who would connect to area high schools, alumni, and the broader community (with close ties to college and university outreach coordinators).** This person could also organize materials and workshops to help American Studies majors explore options for what they can do with their degrees. This coordinator could harness the considerable enthusiasm of current American Studies majors, who would be the best candidates for local high school visits.
- **More office space for lecturers (one or two additional offices).** The Committee observed an informal class of four or five students that completely filled an office designated for six lecturers.
- **Permanent conference room for classes, discussion, meetings, and informal conversations (a lounge).** Currently the department shares facilities and cannot offer a designated space to the remarkable community that is forced to meet in cramped individual offices and hallways, or off campus.
- **A third option for the final project of the MA degree.** Currently the department offers an examination based on a reading list or a thesis. Only about 20% of current MA students choose the thesis option. The proposed third option would aim to increase the number of students engaged in sustained writing by

- allowing for a combination of written work in the 50-70 page range, digital projects, and/or documentation of work based on field experiences – in effect, a portfolio approach.
- **A regularly updated MA comprehensive exam list that includes a greater percentage of texts authored in the last decade.** The current list makes an admirable attempt to cover the broad categories of this interdisciplinary field. Regular editing sessions should also pay attention to the chronological development of its scholarship.
  - **Reduction of student-faculty ratios through the hiring of 1 or 2 tenure-track faculty members in the next 2-4 years.** The department has shown its ability to hire impressively and selectively and maintains its goals of excellent teaching and research despite overwhelming numbers of students. We encourage the College to allow the department to plan and maintain a multi-year plan that fulfills its priorities for the future.
  - **Greater access to databases through the library.** As the library evolves into a digital resource center the needs of this broadly-defined interdisciplinary field should be represented.
  - **Monetary compensation for graders/teaching associates.** As it is, graders/teaching associates actually pay to labor for the class through their enrollment for a course in university-level instruction. At other similar colleges and universities, graders/teaching associates are paid for this labor. Payment for their labor should not preclude the pedagogy seminar, though; high-quality graduate instruction should include a serious pedagogical training component, in addition to monetary compensation.
  - **Establishment of international exchanges.** Given the reputation of the department and its track record in attracting Fulbright and other international students such arrangements would be easy to make. However, the department should partner with other CSUF entities to increase the flow of Fullerton students that would be required to sustain a vibrant 1:1 exchange.

### **Summary**

The American Studies Department at California State University, Fullerton, is an exceptional department. Marked by high accomplishments and robust energy in teaching, scholarship, and service, the department and its members also demonstrate a high degree of collegiality and care. At each level of academic life, they excel. The department is a model. To grow and improve, they could use release time from courses and more physical space. Overall, this is an exceptional department; it would serve the interests of the College of H&SS and the University to offer the department the support it deserves and, thus, to continue to promote its excellence.