

UMBC's DEPARTMENT OF AMERICAN STUDIES
ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW 2016/17
UNDERGRADUATE COUNCIL REPORT

The Department of American Studies (AMST) offers a B.S. as well as a minor in American studies, Public History and a newly established minor in Asian American Studies. Also available is a dual major/certificate program for students seeking teaching certification in early childhood, elementary, and secondary education. Many AMST courses serve Media Communication Studies majors, whose interdisciplinary program relies heavily on courses taught in other departments.

The number of majors in AMST has declined between 2010 and 2014 and has since leveled to 26 majors. It was noted in the Dean's report the department also supports Gender and Women's Studies, Media and Communications, Interdisciplinary Studies, Judaic Studies, the Public History minor and MA degree and the LLC Ph.D. program. Many of their 400-level seminars are combined with 600-level offering that graduate students take (LLC, the English department's Master of Arts in Texts, Technologies, and Literature degree, and the Public History graduate program). At the time of the review there were 5 tenured or tenure-track faculty members, one full-time lecturer, and one visiting assistant professor not on the tenure-track. Two of the full time tenured faculty are emeritus status.

A. STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

The Department is "dedicated and committed to ensuring students that American Studies (AMST) serves as a center for innovative, interdisciplinary teaching and research. The department offers their students an opportunity to study cultural history in the context of the present, to have intellectually challenging experiences, to improve analytical and critical skills, to learn how to express ideas through clear and effective writing, and to apply these skills to diverse, real-world experiences." The department's model includes a core of interdisciplinary courses that provides shared experience in cultural study, combined with special curricular emphasis areas and themes, where students may pursue independent study through course work, seminars, and internships. AMST reported in their last APR that previous assessment procedures are cumbersome and difficult to analyze and identified the need to revise their current strategies to include stronger, direct measures of student learning to better assess outcomes, which the Dean reflected in his report.

B. STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE; PROGRAM MODIFICATIONS; PROGRAM CHANGES

The reviewers highly praise American Studies as an asset for UMBC due to the department's commitment to social justice as an organizing curricular framework and to community engagement. They pointed out that the department has functions as an incubator of interdisciplinary teaching and research, which has spun off three new programs: Africana Studies, Gender and Women's Studies and most recently, Media and Communication Studies. The reviewers added that AMST has clear interdisciplinary strengths in three areas: 1) transnationalism, 2) ethnic studies, and 3) tourism, heritage, and community studies. However, the reviewers pointed out that AMST has been a victim of its own success by

generating the three programs that have split off from AMST curricular efforts. The reviewers made a strong case for recommending CHASS and the university to provide more institutional support for the department to continue to take the lead in interdisciplinary scholarship and collaboration.

C. UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

Majors in American Studies are required to take 36-credit hours for the major that provides students with a core curriculum in theories and methods of American Studies (15 credits) and equal exposure to key themes in the discipline: 1) U.S. Social Structures: American Regions, Institutions, and Communities 2) Global America: The U.S. in the World, The World in the U.S. and 3) American Signs: U. S. Literary, Visual, and Material Culture (18 credits). In addition, all students must complete three credits in an applied experience (internships, student teaching, study abroad, and applied research courses). The reviewers reported that American Studies has a robust assessment plan that requires direct and indirect assessment tools with which the department hopes to ensure student proficiency and make pedagogical adjustments when necessary. The reviewers recommend a “more systematic, institutionally-supported programmatic integration with other departments,” which the Dean is interested in facilitating, as well as supporting for these advancements in American Studies’ curricular development. The Dean found the proposed “Applied Humanities” in the department’s APR to be an exceptional idea warranting further research as it touches upon a much broader teaching and scholarship drawn from multiple departments across the college.

D. RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNDERGRADUATES

The American Studies department offers students one-on-one opportunities for applied research, access to community-based projects in the Baltimore region, and a critical exploration of place, community and identity through local and global lens. American Studies faculty continue to support undergraduate research by mentoring students through the Undergraduate Research Award (URA) that includes students presenting their research at the Undergraduate Research Creative Achievement Day. Students engage in applied research as part of the Preserving Places, Mill Stories and Baltimore Traces projects that come out of faculty research and scholarship initiatives. AMST offers major research and scholarship opportunities that are provided by The Orser Center for the Study of Place, Community, and Culture. The Orser Center was founded in 2010 by AMST and focuses on how the local region has been affected by global trends in fleeing manufacturing and reflects new patterns of immigration and place making. The Orser Center continues to be instrumental in sponsoring programing initiatives that enhance undergraduate research opportunities and demonstrate a strong example of interdisciplinary collaboration.

E. UNDERGRADUATE ADVISEMENT

Five of the six full-time faculty members advise undergraduate AMST majors, with each faculty member advising 5-10 majors. (The chair does not act as an adviser.) The department also offers resources that highlight course offerings, as well as workshops on careers and graduate

education. To improve advising across CAHSS, Dean Casper plans to hire a new advising/recruitment specialist to improve advising of undecided students who may ultimately major in AMST and other CAHSS-based majors.

F. COUNCIL OF MAJORS; UNDERGRADUATE HONORS; AWARDS; RECOGNITION

The AMST faculty works with the Council of Majors to offer career workshops and social events. The department has suspended their honors courses, AMST 496/496, due to low enrollment and logistical challenges. However, they continue to offer students the opportunity to complete independent research projects as part of AMST 497. Student research has been recognized and presented in many forums, including the Chesapeake American Studies Association, public radio, and URCAD.

G. FACULTY DEVELOPMENT; TEACHING QUALITY

Grants from various university sources have allowed the development of new courses that engage students in field work, service learning, and other experiences beyond the classroom. These “applied-learning pedagogies” have been the subject of presentations at national meetings, as well as university-wide retreats. The department has Mentoring Guidelines in place to encourage faculty development. New hires are assigned a teaching mentor for their first three years, and all faculty receive annual teaching evaluations from the chair. The APR self-study cites SCEQ scores above the university average as evidence of teaching quality, highlighting high scores on questions about acquisition of new knowledge, overall effectiveness of teaching, and encouragement of fair and open discussion.

H. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS; SUMMARY EVALUATION

The reports from the dean and the external reviewers highlight the department’s strengths in community engagement, teaching, and interdisciplinary endeavors. The AMST faculty provide significant service to the university, serving on many university committees and teaching large numbers of non-majors in GEP courses. The department has faced a number of challenges, including interdisciplinary redundancy, faculty/staff turnover, and recruitment and promotion of majors. The number of American Studies majors has declined as programs that emerged within American Studies have developed into independent departments and majors. The external reviewers and the dean agree that new programs in American Studies should draw from multiple departments in a collaborative manner, rather than “creating further academic silos” or leading to the creation of other new departments that could draw students away from American Studies. Given the high turnover in the department in recent years, the external reviewers make a number of recommendations for retaining or hiring faculty. The dean describes these recommendations as “problematic” because they are not consistent with university hiring policies, “premature,” or “beyond the purview of the APR process.” The AMST faculty, external reviewers, and the dean agree that recruitment of new majors is a top priority, although the external reviewers and the

dean point out that “the success of the American Studies Department cannot be judged solely or even predominantly by the number of majors.” The reviewers offer a number of recommendations that the dean supports, including using a data-driven approach to target potential majors, avoiding duplication of the AMST major in the INDS major, and providing additional resources to encourage transfer students to major in AMST.