

External Review for Department of American Studies at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

Introduction

The committee spent three very full days meeting with the collective constituencies within the department of American Studies—students, faculty, and staff. We also spent time with members of the department at a reception that the department organized. We also spent time with the Dean, the Associate Dean, the Provost and the Associate Provost. We greatly appreciate the thoughtfulness expressed in these meetings.

Overall, our assessment is that the Department of American Studies is an emergent unit within the field of American Studies. The department is made up of faculty who are garnering national attention within that field. It is also clear that the department has achieved great strides in establishing a national reputation and building more of a sense of community within the department. Our report is an attempt to help the department develop its intellectual identity and sense of community even further.

Undergraduates

There appears to be a real sense of dynamism in the undergraduate program. Our conversation with the undergraduate majors in American Studies confirmed this dynamism. The students that we spoke with described the typical American Studies classroom as one characterized by vibrant class discussions that touched on a variety of topics. One student, in fact, said that a “very open atmosphere” defines the American Studies courses. The program offers a diversity of classes from a more traditional AS offering such as AS 285 American Life and Thought and Theory and Methods in American Studies but also classes focused on contemporary issues such as AS182 Introduction to Environmental Science and Technology and Introduction to Gender Studies. However, it is not the mere offering of such curricular diversity that makes this the program’s most successful area but rather the pedagogical execution in the classroom by its professoriate. To judge from our meeting with a small but highly articulate group of undergraduate students, it is clear that they were enormously pleased and stimulated by what they learned in class and they spoke in glowing terms about a number of their teachers.

Students also discussed the means by which they discovered American Studies classes. All of them said that they had never heard of American studies until arriving at the University of New Mexico, a fact that characterizes most college undergraduates who have never had the benefit of American Studies course in their high schools. Several of the students talked about their switch to American Studies as almost a kind of “conversion” experience. One student said that he/she had intended on majoring in history, but after taking a course with Professor Michael Trujillo declared a major in the first semester. In this particular course, the student talked about how the course covered a range of issues such as low-riders and the

punk movement in Britain and combined aspects of history and anthropology. Students felt that because of courses like this one, the department has been especially supportive of students' intellectual interests. They gave us a strong sense of their commitment to the program and feeling that they are being challenged in the best sense in their academic lives. They uniformly reported excellent learning experiences in keeping with the best scholarship in American Studies and strong satisfaction with their education. They are terrific ambassadors for the department, and could be a great resource as the department works to increase undergraduate numbers.

Their only real complaint had to do with course scheduling to better accommodate the work and family schedules of what is clearly a very working class student body. Indeed, UNM and American Studies clearly have a very diverse student body in terms of ethnic, racial and gender, but perhaps most importantly its predominantly working class identity. Given the historical critical mission of AS, this diversity accentuated by class offers a wonderful teaching milieu as opposed to those at more elite institutions such as Notre Dame. However, we should note that we were not privy to undergraduate course evaluations so it is very difficult to judge beyond this small group of students that met with us. The lack of individual interviews with faculty also did not permit us to get a face-to-face sense of their teaching philosophies, methods and their sense of their own students. We also visited only one class, but it was really much more of a panel of visitors reporting on the police crisis in Albuquerque with very little student-professor interaction. Data concerning undergraduate student placement in graduate and professional programs would also have been helpful in judging the overall quality of undergraduate teaching.

Graduates

We met with nineteen graduate students who impressed us with their caliber and commitment to the program. They demonstrated a terrific grasp of the intellectual currents in the field, and excitement over their career paths. They also outlined several concerns that will be detailed below. The graduate students also spoke favorably about the faculty's ability to teach them to analyze and critique the current literature within American Studies. Students also praised the diversity within the program. Indeed, one student said that he/she chose this program because "it's a majority minority program." Students also noted the department's interest in maintaining ties to the communities outside the university as another attraction. Relatedly, another student talked about how he/she was drawn to the level of engagement with activism in local indigenous communities. Another student said that they chose this place over one with better funding because of the intellectual and political work of the faculty. Other students noted that the program treated MA students on the same level with Ph.D. students.

While the students were careful to detail the strengths of the department, they also noted some concerns that they would like the department to address more deliberately. First, they observed that the momentum for the graduate program

seems more geared toward the question of “what is American Studies” rather than the development of the dissertation project. While the virtue of the department, according to them, is that they know and can analyze the latest literature in the field, they were struggling with how to connect that literature to the development of their own dissertation interests. They also noted that mentoring was—in their words—“inconsistent.” When pressed for clarification, they explained that those inconsistencies often break down on gendered lines—with cisgender men getting more consistent mentoring than other students.

There was a general concern among the students about what they deemed unequal dynamics of power between students and professors, referring to instances of sexism, racism and homophobia among students relationships with one another and with interactions between students and professors. Several students said that these issues made staying in the graduate program particularly difficult. Others stated that withdrawal from departmental activities has become a “survival strategy.” In this meeting, we found the students working very hard to establish a balanced tone and presentation about the department, urging us to contextualize their concerns within what they saw as the real richness of the department. Although the students did not directly address this issue, tenure-track job placement for AS PhDs seems to be a vexing problem as well. Much to our surprise, the department keeps no records of their job placements, academic or otherwise, so that we have had to rely on what the department provided in their self-study under Appendix E. “Awards and Accomplishments” and Appendix F, Section 1 “Dissertations,” the former as reported by students themselves. Since some academic tenure-track placement appear in Appendix E, we surmise that yet other students would have reported such placements if they had them. If, for example, any of the department’s PhD students had obtained a tenure-track position at Notre Dame, Minnesota or UI-Chicago, we would imagine that they would have reported it in Appendix E which seems to show that from 2003-2013, the department placed only **three** students in full time tenure track academic positions. They are Monica Torres (New Mexico State, 2003), Robert Teigrob (Ryerson University, 2005) and Jeremy Ricketts (Bethel University, 2012) against what Appendix F, Section 1 shows as **forty-nine** PhDs granted in that span of years. Again, it is possible that some or even many of their PhD students failed to report their placements, but if only in terms of their own self-interest, it behooves the department to do a much better job in carefully tracking the careers of their PhDs.

If however, the disparity between the number of PhDs and the number of tenure-track placements holds to a substantial degree, then a number of contributing factors and outcomes may have to be considered. The graduate program is very large and very underfunded in terms of graduate stipends and assistantships. As a result it seems that many students are holding down non-academic jobs during their graduate careers therefore negatively affecting the time-to-completion of the PhD but also simply the fullness of their learning as well as the quality of supervision that they receive at the dissertation level. Together with the morale issues noted below, one has to reasonably wonder if these students are entering the job market at a disadvantage. But, an additional factor that must be considered is the perceived

scholarly strength and national standing of the program discussed under "Faculty" in this report. For better or worse, the perceived overall stature of the PhD granting program also affects a candidate's job placement. Again, data on students who actually applied for tenure-track positions and their outcomes would be very useful in assessing the strength of the program relative to its national competitors. Today there is much discussion about alternative careers for the PhD in the humanities and social sciences, but for the foreseeable future it seems likely that tenure-track placement will remain the central test of a successful PhD program.

We note with gratification three sets of important changes underway in the graduate program that will more fully align the program with others nationally. First, the graduate exam structure has been revised in a way that ought to streamline progress to degree (which is longer than it needs to be at present, jeopardizing graduate student competitiveness on the academic job market). Second, the department is creating a two-tiered system, with a professional M.A. track and a Ph.D. track. This seems well suited to the needs of graduate students and the department as a whole (though there also may be tensions in this transition, detailed below). Third, the department is moving to a system of fewer admissions with guaranteed multiple-year funding packages. This is also an important revision to conform to trends nationally and to permit the program to compete for the best students for admission (though again, there may be tensions accompanying this change, detailed below). This commitment is also one that is in keeping with developments nationally. The development of a set of strategies to accomplish this goal will be important.

Faculty

We began our meeting with the faculty by asking the following questions: "What is your collective vision for the department? Where has the department come from and where is it going?" We began our meeting with the faculty by asking the following questions: "What is your collective vision for the department? Where has the department come from and where is it going?" The faculty began by stating that southwest, critical indigenous, and colonial studies are the core strengths of the department. In terms of where the faculty is going, they offered that they are attempting to restructure the curriculum to reflect changes in market and the field. The faculty also talked about their interest in developing methods by which they can provide better support for students in the time that they're here, particularly through the use of multi-year packages. To this end, the faculty felt challenged because they have had to negotiate reductions in graduate cohort sizes. There also seems to be interest in gradually growing the MA program as well as providing specific mentoring for students who do not intend to use their MA or Ph.D. degrees to pursue academic employment. It appears to us that the faculty is quite productive, especially given the many demands on their time. The department's faculty has an overall impressive record of scholarly production with publications in impressive venues such as Oxford University Press and the journals, *American Quarterly* and *South Atlantic Quarterly*. We would rank them as an emerging and

still young program with a potentially bright future scholarly profile. However, when compared to the leading programs in American Studies, it cannot be said that UNM's is a yet first tier program. While the new younger faculty may take it to there over time depends, of course, on their productivity which in turn is closely tied to successful external funding and internal research support from the UNM administration. Some universities are "jump-starting" some of their departments to tier one status by naming them "designated departments" and then investing heavily in them including most centrally the allocation of one or more very senior and distinguished (endowed) positions. We do not know if UNM is willing and capable of going in this direction. If it was, it would be playing to one of its strengths. Finally, we would note it would be easier to comment on this overall impression of the department's scholarship had we been afforded the opportunity to meet individually with faculty. CVs can be difficult to read in isolation on this point and others, absent the ability to discuss particular circumstances and research agenda.

Staff

Sandy Rodrigue is an amazing asset to the department. Among other administrative virtues, she has provided real and significant mentorship to the graduate students. Indeed, several graduate students sang her praises. About the graduates students, she said, "Some of the students are the reason that I have stayed." What she has done with the department is nothing short of heroic. She is obviously highly accomplished, deeply committed to every dimension of the department's mission and is especially devoted to and a vital support for graduate students. Losing her would be a catastrophe, and any and all steps ought to be taken to insure her job satisfaction. We note that the department is poorly resourced and under-staffed to a remarkable degree, exacerbated when Rodrigue's workload increased through adding supervisory responsibilities for Women's Studies and Religious Studies even while they report to their own directors. This arrangement created further challenges for her because a half-time staff person in Religious Studies was never replaced. The understaffing situation needs attention. In order for the department to fully achieve itself, university resources have to be invested in increasing staff support.

Program Concerns/Recommendations

Intellectual Visions of the Department: There is strong buy-in by faculty and graduate students of the intellectual vision of the department. We note that the department is in the midst of incorporating many changes, and while we applaud the intellectual direction work is taking, we also believe this is a moment of transition to new ways of thinking about the field and structuring the curriculum that demand careful and sustained attention.

How to Actualize Changing Intellectual Visions: The department has undergone several changes to the faculty since the last APR that are geared towards revitalizing approaches to American Studies, particularly around new foci in Queer and

Sexuality Studies, Feminist Studies, and Critical Indigenous Studies. These newer orientations need to be put into fruitful conversations with the department's long-standing commitment to and strength in Southwest Studies. The faculty has incorporated new faculty and emergent scholars who give every indication that they will grow and be productive. Their work and ideas need to be fostered and included in the department's vision and curriculum in a meaningful way. We recommend the department embark on sustained, robust conversations as a faculty. In particular, we heard conversations about tension between the longer-established area of Southwest Studies and the emergent orientation in Critical Indigenous Studies. On the one hand, some expressed their view that Southwest studies tends to privilege regionalist and masculinist perspectives to the exclusion of other points of view (with the implicit tension around Queer and Sexuality Studies and Feminist Studies in particular), and that Critical Indigenous Studies tends to be conceptualized narrowly, marginalizing points of view emanating from, for example, Mexico. Other lamented the paucity of faculty and available coursework in Asian American Studies, African American Studies, and Popular Culture.

Aspirations Around National Rankings: We applaud the aspirations of the department for national prominence and note that the department is poised to move up the rankings. Attention to integrating the transitions underway will be important to meeting that objective. One concern we would like to note is how the long-standing strength in Southwest Studies is attended to in developing the intellectual vision/mission of the department. We worry that there is a tension in prioritizing a regional vision while aspiring towards a national standing: successful incorporation of newer perspectives will help protect against the danger of becoming thought of as merely a regional program.

Developing a Sense of Collectivity and Integration of Affiliated Faculty on Campus: We recommend that the department take steps to help develop a more coherent sense of the collectivity. This can occur through more programming within the department: regular meetings where faculty share their research with each other, and speakers series, for example. We also suggest that there be more sustained attention to faculty across campus already affiliated with the department as well as an effort to incorporate more of the many possible affiliates across campus. We see unrealized opportunities here that do not require an infusion of resources, including the possibility of expanding the range of courses and potential committee members for graduate students.

Climate and Morale: This brings us to the most significant concern we brought away from our visit. We heard a great deal that concerned us around issues of climate and morale, particularly but not exclusively from graduate students. Some of these concerns clearly stem from tensions around intellectual currents, ideas, approaches, methodologies, and pedagogies, but they also extended to larger issues of incorporating embodied diversity. Some felt that a culture of fear had sprung from these larger tensions that translated into instances of the belittling of ideas, skills, and methodologies, reports of behaviors that silenced points of views. Many

connected climate and morale issues to the tenure of a previous chair, about whom we heard stories about the suppression of grievances and retaliation. Members of the department expressed concerns over the ways in which scholarship around race, feminism, and queer sexualities have been treated in classroom settings. There were also accounts of faculty retaliation against student leaders in the department. Most alarmingly, there were allegations of sexual harassment involving a faculty member towards graduate members of the department. It is incumbent upon the department and university to determine whether there is any substance to these allegations.

Clearly there are climate issues in the department, especially around areas of race, gender, and sexuality. Here are some possible steps that the department might take to address those issues: Try to ensure that every course is taught using an intersectional framework that sees how issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and ethnicity bear upon the given course topic. The professor's pedagogy and readings should reflect this commitment. The faculty expressed an interest in making sure that the department is in line with current trends within the field. This would be a way of achieving that. The department should also work to build its relationship with affiliate faculty outside of American Studies, particularly with women and queer faculty as well as faculty with expertise in feminist and sexuality studies, indigenous studies, race, and ethnicity. This has to be a simultaneous demographic *and* intellectual intervention within and for the department if there is to be a significant change in the climate.

We note that since we were not afforded the opportunity to meet separately with every faculty member, we can only report what was reported to us. Still such reports surfaced with sufficient regularity to trouble us. Many expressed hopes that climate and morale issues seem to be changing, connecting their hope to praise over and faith in the current leadership of the department. It was also noted that there is now a clear grievance process in place: We urge that it be rigorously adhered to in order to insure the protection of aggrieved graduate students and (we imagine) junior faculty (again, we are less able to comment on this because of the structure of the APR, but we caught hints of issues. We had no real opportunity to probe how power dynamics in the department affect junior faculty).

Graduate Student Concerns (Beyond Climate/Morale): Graduate students expressed a strong desire for increased transparency and shared and structured governance in the department, including participation in faculty searches. Such structures strike us as the norm in the field and we recommend careful attention to this desire. Partly this concern emanated directly from stories we heard about the active discouragement of participation in existing structures, particularly the American Studies Graduate Student Association, by faculty members who (they reported) disagreed with initiatives the ASGSA attempted to put forward. We also recommend attention to academic and professionalization concerns expressed by graduate students. They are concerned about attrition in the program (attributed to climate issues), professionalization opportunities, and preparation for successful

participation in the job market. They expressed a strong desire for more opportunities to write research papers within their coursework, mentoring towards publication, and the organization of professionalization workshops across a spectrum of topics. These are all worthy ideas that we recommend attention to.

Placement: It was difficult to get a sense of the track record of the department in terms of placement aside from anecdotal information. We recommend that the department create a system to track graduate student placement (and perhaps undergraduate placement as well) in order to gauge success.

Staffing: Finally, we strongly recommend an increase in staffing for the department, which would make possible such tracking and much more. We heard discussions about the possible expansion to another full time staff member. We see this is vital to the future of the department.

Conclusions

We appreciate the time we were able to spend at the University of New Mexico. We were gratified to see the passion with which everyone involved in American Studies views the department and their deep commitment to its mission across a broad spectrum of platforms. We know that we have identified several challenging areas that need attention, but we firmly believe the department is on a solid foundation that can only serve future excellence. There is widespread satisfaction of and faith in the current leadership, and hopefulness that many of the issues we identify here have been acknowledged and are being addressed. With the institutionalization of structures to attend to and sustain attention to them, even greater success can be attained. We remain,

Respectfully yours,

Roderick Ferguson
University of Illinois at Chicago

José E. Limón,
University of Notre Dame

Jean M. O'Brien
University of Minnesota

