



Judd A. and Marjorie Weinberg
College of Arts and Sciences

NORTHWESTERN

American Studies

Awag once said that culture is anything that people do and monkeys don't. Although this definition of culture is overwhelming in its breadth, it suggests that those who study culture confront a wide variety of human experience. The objective of the American Studies Program is to examine the concepts, habits, skills, art, technology, and institutions of the American people.

The program's approach involves an interdisciplinary synthesis. It provides students with the opportunity to blend offerings from faculty throughout the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences and the University in order to formulate and answer large questions about the nature of American cultural life in historical and contemporary terms. The curriculum integrates anthropology, art, communications, economics, history, law, literature, political science, and sociology to discover how Americans order their world.

Since its inception in 1974, the program has drawn upon the expertise and guidance of experienced faculty while allowing students the freedom to shape their course of study. In this way, the American studies major in Weinberg College successfully combines the advantages of a small individualized program with the broad resources of a leading university.

“The American Studies Program truly fosters an academic community of students and professors that has been the highlight of my academic life during my time at Northwestern.”

Jennifer Manne, WCAS 05

Its distinctive qualities are intellectually challenging seminars, a flexible curriculum designed by each student, a close working relationship between students and faculty, a strong focus on writing, and an opportunity for every senior to do a yearlong independent research project.

Requirements of the Major The major consists of a core group of seminars open only to majors and a special concentration designed by each student with the help of a faculty adviser. The core curriculum is based on a belief in the importance of the past in dealing with issues in the present. It involves a broad investigation into the concept of culture and a specific focus on the themes of community and tradition in American life.

In addition to required courses, the program also offers a small number of electives open to all undergraduates, with preference given to majors. These are usually small classes on special topics, such as “1968: A Documentary Study, War and Popular Culture,” “Jefferson’s Presidency, The City in American Modernism,” “The Concept of ‘Race’ in American History,” and “Chicago History and Culture.”

Majors enroll in an exclusive seminar every quarter through the end of junior year. Frequently, the seminars are linked by a common theme. Majors remain together in the seminar for the academic year while the faculty change each quarter, enabling students to view significant issues from different perspectives. Past topics have included Poverty and the Welfare State, The Idea of Community, The Nature of Dissent, The Relation between High and Popular Culture, The Constitution, and Identity in American Life.

“Because the program promotes ingenuity and individuality, American studies has given me the opportunity to work with some of the most intelligent and active people on campus. Let me say that we are the most fun, too.”

Lindsay Shadrick, WCAS 05

These seminars have an intensity all their own, generating energetic discussions and intriguing writing assignments. They develop sophisticated skills of analysis and expression that serve students exceptionally well in whatever interests they choose to pursue, at Northwestern and after graduation.

Concentrations Students decide on a particular interdisciplinary concentration within American studies. Concentrations can focus on a specific period, subject area (for example, law or language), special topic (revolution, power, religion, gender, race), or general field of inquiry (social thought and social action, art and society). In this way, students formulate a course of study that fits their academic goals. Students meet regularly and work closely with a faculty adviser, who assists them in defining and fulfilling their concentration and who approves their course selection.

Senior Projects In their senior year, majors participate in the senior project seminar, an independent study on a topic of their choice, which typically emerges from their area of concentration. While doing a senior project, students work with a faculty project adviser and meet regularly throughout the year with other seniors and program faculty to discuss their work.

Majors have often seen the senior project as the high point of their education. With modest financial assistance from the program, many students have traveled to libraries and other resource centers throughout the country to do their research. Topics have ranged from hobo songs and Johnny Appleseed to understanding government inefficiency. A few of the projects have been published.

Special Offerings Over the years, the program has invited distinguished visitors and has organized conferences in coordination with particular course offerings. Prizewinning authors Frances FitzGerald, Art Spiegelman, Taylor Branch, and Dave Eggers, among others, have visited the campus and have participated in seminars.

Course and conference topics have included *The Crisis of the Modern Presidency*, *The Media and the Electoral Process*, and *Anglo-American Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. The program has helped organize a series of forums on *Politics and the Intelligentsia: The State of the University Today*.

The thematic seminars, the senior project, the electives, visitors, conferences, and the careful advising system together create a rare and exciting intellectual community among students and faculty that goes beyond the classroom and is one of the distinguishing hallmarks of the program.

Leading Scholars Who Teach The American studies teaching staff is selected from the University faculty as a whole and is noteworthy for its breadth and its dedication to undergraduate education. Over the years, the program has drawn some 60 instructors from 10 different humanities and social science departments in the College, as well as from the University's schools of law, music, journalism, education, and speech. Program faculty are regularly elected to the faculty honor roll of best teachers on campus, and several have received prestigious College teaching prizes.

Extraordinary Resources Materials for American studies at Northwestern are remarkably rich. Majors take advantage of one of the largest private university libraries in the country. The Northwestern library maintains a special collections department with a wide array of materials related to American studies. These collections go beyond normal library holdings and offer a unique opportunity for in-depth research.

Northwestern's proximity to Chicago allows students to utilize the special holdings of such institutions as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Chicago Historical Society, the Terra Museum of American Art, and the Newberry Library. The city itself is a resource, beckoning students interested in American architecture, music, and modern American theater.

Admission to the Program Because of the structure and intensity of the major, the program is and will remain relatively small — there are currently under 40 majors — and admission is by application.

Only students in Weinberg College are eligible to apply, in the spring quarter of their freshman or sophomore year. The application process includes an essay and an interview. Majors are chosen on the basis of their overall academic record, their interest in American studies, and the likelihood that they will contribute to and benefit from a curriculum that emphasizes small classes, active discussion, and intellectual independence. Recent interest in the program has been very strong; there have been more than three applicants for each opening over the last few years.

After Northwestern American studies alumni are an impressive group. A high percentage of majors earn honors and election to Phi Beta Kappa. Majors have consistently won distinguished and highly competitive graduate awards and fellowships and have been admitted to leading graduate institutions including Berkeley, Brown, Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Georgetown, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, MIT, Michigan, NYU, Northwestern, Stanford, UCLA, and Yale.

Approximately one-quarter of program alumni have gone on to law school. About 10 percent have attended business school, while a slightly larger number have chosen graduate school in history or American studies. Others have earned advanced degrees in international affairs, urban planning, journalism, social work, and medicine.

For additional information

If you have any questions, please contact

Program Director
American Studies Program
Northwestern University
University Hall, Room 20
1897 Sheridan Road
Evanston, Illinois 60208-2245
Phone: (847) 491-3525
E-mail: amst@northwestern.edu
Web: www.northwestern.edu/amstp

“American Studies provides a way to use all the resources of the University. It opens up the opportunity to study what you are interested in and shape your own curriculum.”

Tyler Jaeckel, WCAS 06

Program alumni are employed in law, business (from investment banking to market research), consulting, journalism, higher education, community planning, social work, and in the arts as creators, producers, and performers. Several have served in the Peace Corps and Teach for America.

The program has a remarkably high approval rating from its alumni. They credit it not only with giving them a valuable body of knowledge, but also with providing them with essential training in reading, thinking, discussing, and writing. American studies graduates appreciate the way the program prepared them to understand questions and issues comprehensively, as they actually arise in life.

Northwestern University is an equal opportunity, affirmative action educator and employer. Northwestern University reserves the right to change without notice any statement in this publication concerning, but not limited to, rules, policies, tuition, fees, curricula, and courses.

© 2005 Northwestern University. All rights reserved.