

American Studies at Princeton University

A statement by President Christopher L. Eisgruber and Dean of the College Jill S. Dolan

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Academic initiatives at Princeton University need two critical ingredients if they are to succeed. One is a vital academic project: a problem, puzzle, or field of study that is important and enduring enough to demand a new or renewed scholarly focus. The other is a group of faculty on campus that shares a common vision for the project and is prepared to work together to realize it. The most exciting initiatives, like the one outlined in the report of the Task Force on American Studies, contain a large helping of both ingredients.

Princeton has a long, successful history of teaching and scholarship in American studies. The Program in American Civilization, as it was known when it was established in 1942, was Princeton's first undergraduate certificate program and one of the first programs in American studies on any American university campus. The current Program in American Studies (AMS) draws faculty participation from across the humanities and social sciences, and maintains high levels of student interest in—and satisfaction with—its courses and certificate program. In addition, AMS-sponsored lectures, conferences, and workshops engage a wide swath of the campus community.

The report of the Task Force on American Studies argues that now is the time to build on this successful model to create something vibrant and new. Specifically, it proposes to expand the current program into the Collaborative Center for the Study of America, with dedicated faculty lines, postdoc and visiting faculty programs, collaborative research projects, a graduate certificate program, an undergraduate concentration, and enhanced funding, space, and administrative staff. It describes the importance of this project for Princeton students as follows:

“Students need intellectual frameworks and conversational spaces where they can explore the issues and controversies that inevitably accompany living in this America ... in the 21st century. Our core goal for the Collaborative Center for the Study of America is to offer such a space.”

The report also articulates the importance of the project for the academy:

“[The] proposed Collaborative Center speaks to a general crisis in the humanities and social sciences—the breakdown of generalist knowledge. We take seriously a problem that has been almost abandoned by the traditional disciplines: how to describe, how to “know” America holistically ...”

Furthermore, it explains how the proposed Center will contribute to the University's teaching and research missions:

“[Students] will learn and see modeled how scholars and intellectuals of good will, committed to diverse methodologies and political and cultural identities, can work

together towards larger conceptualizations and reconstructions that offer innovative solutions to contemporary problems ... [T]hey will see how integrative communities can be created and sustained, while acknowledging differences.”

In addition, the report lists 35 Princeton faculty members drawn from over a dozen departments and programs who share a common vision for the Center and will work together to realize it.

We thank the task force for this ambitious proposal. It offers a compelling vision of American Studies as a multi- and interdisciplinary approach to “the study of America in the world and the world in America.” In this memo, we respond to the report by identifying the recommendations on which we will take immediate action, those that need additional development and fundraising, and those that strike us, at least at this stage, to be of lower priority.

Although the recommendations from the task force form an integrated whole, they can be divided into those that focus on faculty, curriculum, research, and space and administration (drawing, in part, on the organizational chart presented in Appendix C to the report). We consider each of these sets of recommendations in turn. Of course, the success of any academic endeavor depends on the energy and engagement of the faculty and, for that reason, we begin with the recommendation that American Studies make faculty appointments.

Faculty appointments

The task force recommends that American Studies be authorized to appoint faculty jointly with other departments and programs and to make a limited number of full-time appointments. Indeed, the report cites the current inability to make faculty appointments in AMS as the most significant constraint on what the program can accomplish. As the report notes:

“The burden of our present situation is that the talented faculty who wish to participate in our program are all over burdened. Their talents are recognized by the departments that hired them, who need them to teach their departmental courses. As a result, their teaching service to American Studies is unpredictable and, through no fault of their own, unreliable. This means we have no way to plan for the long term. Without a new institutional structure, we cannot meet the needs that we have detailed in the early pages of this strategic plan.”

We find this argument persuasive. Effective immediately, we will phase in faculty appointments in American studies, beginning with joint appointments of a core set of current Princeton faculty. The provost and dean of the faculty will work with the current leadership of the AMS program to identify these faculty (presumably a subset of those included in Appendix B of the task force report) and negotiate with their departments and programs to facilitate moving a portion of their FTEs to American Studies.

In addition, searches in progress for new faculty hires in Asian American studies and Latino/a studies are likely to yield candidates who would be appropriate for joint appointments in

American Studies. We will provide AMS with the FTE resources to make those joint appointments.

Beyond this core group of faculty, additional appointments, both joint and fully in AMS, will be contingent on fundraising. We will immediately begin to seek gifts from donors with an interest in funding professorships in this field.

Curriculum

Undergraduate certificate program and concentration. The task force recommends the creation of an undergraduate concentration in American studies. The task force also recommends that both the proposed new American studies concentration and the certificate program should include four thematic tracks: (1) race, ethnicity, migration; (2) arts, letters, culture; (3) law, policy, science; and (4) gender, sexuality, disability, intersectionality.

In addition, the report proposes that students pursuing either a concentration or a certificate in AMS should have the option of earning their degree with an emphasis in one of two initial areas of specialization: Asian American/Diasporic studies and Latinx studies. Courses in each area of specialization will be drawn from across the four thematic tracks.

These are exciting, well-thought-out proposals that draw on the historic strengths of American studies at Princeton. They address critical areas of student interest while maintaining the focus, rigor, and breadth that are the hallmarks of the AMS program. The only thing standing in the way of their implementation is the availability of faculty members to teach the courses and advise the students; presumably authorizing AMS to make faculty appointments will ultimately remedy that deficit.

We endorse these recommendations wholeheartedly in principle, recognizing that the faculty has ultimate authority over new and revised academic programs. The dean of the college stands ready to work with the current leadership of the AMS program to formalize these proposals and take them through the approval process as soon as the faculty resources are available.

Graduate certificate program. The task force recommends the creation of a graduate certificate program in American studies under the auspices of the new Collaborative Center for the Study of America. Although this item appears in the list of recommendations, there is little elaboration of it in the report itself. The goals of the graduate certificate program and its dependence on graduate course offerings on the one hand and the research opportunities afforded by the Center on the other will need to be specified in more detail before we can evaluate the merits of this recommendation. It may be appropriate for the faculty to give further thought to the possibilities for graduate programming after other program elements are in place.

Research

Creation of the Collaborative Center for the Study of America. The task force recommends replacing the current Program in American Studies with the Collaborative Center

for the Study of America. At Princeton, the terms “center” and “program” are invoked more or less interchangeably to describe interdisciplinary research units. Programs and centers do not differ in their ability to make faculty, research, and teaching appointments; offer courses and degree programs; sponsor scholarly events; or administer funds to support research (all determined on a unit-by-unit basis).

To the extent that one can discern a distinction between the two terms, it lies in the tendency of programs to be organized around interdisciplinary curricula (especially undergraduate certificate programs), whereas most centers are organized around interdisciplinary research. We take the proposal for a new name to be consistent with this pattern: the name signals the establishment of a new and vigorous set of research initiatives in addition to the expansion of the American studies curriculum.

We find this rationale to be a compelling justification for seeking donor support that would augment our research capacity in American Studies and justify a change to its name. As we detail below, the research initiatives outlined in the task force report are timely, innovative, and distinctive. They are beautifully integrated with the AMS curricular programs and, at the same time, will fundamentally change the character of the unit. We therefore support the creation of the Collaborative Center for the Study of America as soon as we have obtained a gift to name either the Collaboratory (described below) or the Center itself.

AMS Collaboratory. The task force recommends the creation of the American Studies Collaboratory, a research environment in which faculty and graduate students will have an opportunity to join collaborative working groups that explore how American identity and citizenship are constituted. Visiting faculty, postdocs, and advanced undergraduates will also participate. As the task force report describes:

“The emphasis will be on a non-hierarchical collaboration between faculty and graduate students; on experimentation with methods and dialogue; on the meeting of theory and practice In addition to enhancing individuals’ research, these working groups will foster ideas and relationships for future team-teaching. Emerging from these engagements will be edited volumes, art projects, performances, activist engagements, and much more.”

The topics and themes explored by the working groups will change over time, depending on the interests of the faculty and student participants. A short list of illustrative topics offered in the task force report includes property, surplus, memory, and sports and American culture.

We find this to be an innovative and promising model of a collaborative research environment, one that deftly solves many of the problems that beset similar efforts. Indeed, it is reminiscent of the highly successful Davis Center for Historical Studies of the Department of History, which was named after Shelby Cullom Davis ’30. Like the Davis Center, the American Studies Collaboratory will draw on the collaborative energies of senior and junior Princeton faculty, augmented by a cadre of short- and long-term visiting faculty, to explore themes that change every year or two. Like the Davis Center, it will produce collaborative intellectual

products that include conferences and edited volumes as well as collaborative teaching initiatives.

The AMS Collaboratory places a stronger emphasis on the participation of Princeton faculty and students than the Davis Center does, which we view as a strength of the Collaboratory model. We fully endorse the AMS Collaboratory and will seek gifts to support it. An ongoing research collaborative of this sort will require a significant endowment to make it vibrant and sustainable over the long run.

Senior scholars in residence. The task force recommends the creation of a Senior Scholars in Residence program, through which prominent faculty at other universities will participate in the University's AMS programs and curriculum for a year or less. The report does not offer much detail about this recommendation, perhaps because the value of such a program would seem to be self-evident. Most research centers on campus include visiting faculty programs that provide a continual influx of new ideas, perspectives, and energy. Examples include the Davis Center Fellows program and the Laurance S. Rockefeller Visiting Faculty Fellows program of the University Center for Human Values. We endorse this recommendation, contingent on our ability to raise the funds that would make such a program possible.

Postdocs. The task force also recommends the allocation of resources for two to three postdocs in "fields of need" on an ongoing basis. These postdocs would serve as a flexible resource for the Center; they could help lead and administer the working groups and also teach, precept, and advise as needed. We recognize the value of postdocs for research and teaching programs and also appreciate that postdocs are an increasingly important part of the academic pipeline in the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, Princeton has a number of relevant postdoc programs already in place, including the highly successful Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts and a program to support postdocs in fields that we hope will help to diversify the larger professoriate. American Studies has capitalized on these existing programs to bring in excellent postdocs, including two currently on campus. We believe that AMS will continue to benefit from these broader postdoc programs and therefore place a lower priority on allocating separate resources for postdocs within the American Studies unit.

Administrative support and space

Finally, the task force recommends that the University provide sufficient administrative support and attractive physical space for the Program/Center as it grows. We fully endorse this recommendation. American Studies is slated to move to a new location later this academic year; this will likely be temporary until a space survey of the humanities and social science neighborhoods is complete.

We will aim to create a more permanent home for American Studies when the Center and Collaboratory are established or soon thereafter (our ability to renovate suitable space will depend on fundraising). Regarding administrative support, the provost's office will conduct periodic assessments of the administrative needs of American Studies as the unit develops and will adjust its administrative allowance and staffing authority accordingly.

Conclusion

We thank the Task Force on American Studies for a thoughtful and stimulating report. In this moment of polarized politics and frayed public discourse, its vision of “a new kind of scholarly community, one founded on collaboration across differences” is refreshing and timely. We look forward to working with the American Studies faculty to realize this vision.