

FAQS: Applying to American Studies Graduate Programs

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How should I prepare for graduate work in American Studies?

An undergraduate degree in American Studies is probably the best preparation for graduate study since it builds the foundation for the interdisciplinary research and analysis required to complete a Master's or Ph.D. degree. But many undergraduates don't have the opportunity to major in American Studies and others discover an interdisciplinary approach only later in their undergraduate studies. Students who major in more traditional disciplines -- literature, history, the social sciences, even the natural sciences -- often have the opportunity to take courses outside their major as electives which can improve their interdisciplinary range and strengthen their application to American Studies graduate programs. Students who come to American Studies from the social or natural sciences, or from a humanities field with a non-Americanist focus, can bring fresh perspectives and useful skills. These students find it useful to gain a background in U.S. history on their own (or as a part-time student in a graduate program where they can take one course) before starting graduate-level work in American Studies.

What is the best American Studies graduate program for me?

You should weigh factors such as faculty, professional goals, quality of program, funding opportunities, and geography in choosing where to apply. Applicants should first research American Studies programs to determine which programs have faculty who work specifically in the areas of research that most interest them. In the course of this research, an applicant should try to contact faculty members who share his/her research interests to find out if they currently advise graduate students and to ask more specific questions about their department. Applicants need to find programs that best suit their intellectual interests and this is best determined through direct communication with faculty. While it is crucial to enter a program where you have identified a mentor with whom to work, you shouldn't plan your entire course of graduate study around one

faculty member, as faculty do not always stay at one university throughout their career. Therefore, students should find a program in which there are several faculty members with whom they could potentially study. If applicants are geographically restricted in where they can apply, they will need to determine which programs in their area have faculty available to mentor their work, communicating with faculty to see how flexible they can be in advising students outside their specific research areas. Many department websites have lists of current students and their research interests. Contacting students who are currently enrolled, or recent graduates, is an excellent way to gauge the suitability of the program for your individual interests. Faculty and departmental representatives will be able to provide you with contact information.

Applicants should also consider which programs best suit their professional goals. For example, some American Studies programs are strong in placing their graduate students in jobs in public history or archival work, while other programs are known for helping students find tenure-track teaching jobs and/or others focus on an activist, engaged scholarship. Some programs have special strength in African American studies, whereas others have a concentration of specialists on the Asia-Pacific region and so forth.

The amount and types of funding available for graduate students has a major impact on the time to completion of the degree as well as to the range of teaching and research experiences one will gain while in graduate school. It is important to find out what kind of funding (e.g. teaching assistantships, research assistantships, fellowships, tuition waivers) are available in the program of one's interest. We think teaching experience is important preparation for all graduate students, no matter their career plans, but too much teaching takes time away from research and writing.

Most graduate programs designate one faculty member to advise graduate students and/or speak with prospective students. You can find this person's contact information on the website or by phoning or emailing the department office. You should be in touch with this faculty member as well to insure that your interests can be served by the program, to receive suggestions on your application, and to understand the available financial aid and how to apply for it.

Do I need a Masters degree in American Studies before applying to a doctoral program?

Many applicants apply to doctoral study directly from undergraduate work — especially if they have already earned a B.A. degree in American Studies. Nevertheless, if a student applies without much previous background in interdisciplinary study, it can be useful to start with a Master's program to explore the field of American Studies before making the commitment to doctoral study. Earning an M.A. in American Studies may also be useful to enhance one's application for, and acceptance into, doctoral programs.

What makes an effective personal statement?

Applicants should describe the academic and other relevant backgrounds that have prepared them for graduate-level work in American Studies. A strong personal statement in an American Studies application offers a concise description of the applicants' research interests and goals with a particular emphasis on why the interdisciplinary approach of American Studies is the most effective way to pursue those interests and goals. In addition, applicants should make a clear case for why the particular program they are applying to best suits their goals. You should avoid digressions into personal biography, unless there is an appropriate intellectual reason to do so. For instance, a formative experience might be a helpful introduction to your interests, but anecdotal material must have a clear purpose such as helping explain one's intellectual development. Applicants to doctoral programs need not have a dissertation topic drafted for a personal statement, but they should be able to lucidly describe their general interests and specific fields/subfields, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, scholars, or books that have influenced their intellectual development and interest in American Studies.

What kind of writing sample should I submit?

An effective writing sample for American Studies would be a research paper (15-20 pages in length) that had both a clear argument and provided evidence of the applicant's ability to do primary and secondary research. Papers that incorporate an interdisciplinary approach to research would also be helpful, but are not required. Depending on the work you have done, and want to do, a shorter piece of writing aimed at a more general audience might also be appropriate.

Who should write my letters of recommendation?

Recommendations from faculty with whom you have taken a class and who know you personally are most helpful. In general, letters from employers or friends are not as effective because they often don't adequately assess an applicant's abilities as a researcher or writer.

How important are the GRE scores?

Many programs require applicants to submit their GRE scores and how the scores are weighed in the overall application varies from program to program. Higher scores are certainly better than lower scores; however, in general American Studies programs do not see the GRE scores as the most important factor in the application package. The personal statement, writing sample, recommendation letters, and previous academic records read together can go a long way in making up for lower GRE scores.

For international students, many programs see TOEFL scores as a replacement for GRE scores. Good TOEFL scores not only increase the chances of admission but the language ability they measure is also necessary for actually doing graduate work in American Studies.

What kind of jobs do graduate students in American Studies get after graduation?

Graduate students in American Studies can go into a variety of fields, but most are interested in teaching jobs or museum work. They can also be competitive for jobs at historical societies, archives, state and federal humanities and cultural resource agencies as well as community cultural development organizations.