

HOW TO POSITION AMERICAN STUDIES

as vital to your institution of higher education

An ASA White Paper

Today's universities increasingly face pressure from Boards of Trustees as well as state and federal government imperatives to prepare students for the workforce, often with an emphasis on career-readiness and/or the STEM fields. Likewise, students and their parents seek majors that will provide them with the tools for future financial security. At the same time states and national governments are decreasing allocations for institutions for higher education, including higher education. As institutions of higher education—whether public or private, US-based or not—face restructuring and new areas of accountability to address budget cuts and tuition freezes, it is imperative that American Studies programs position themselves as key contributors to the missions of their institutions. Central to these efforts is the ability to articulate the inherent alignments between American Studies and key discourses nationally and globally regarding the value, purpose and outcomes of higher education.

Several initiatives, including the AAC&U's *Liberal Education and America's Promise* (LEAP) project, The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, the Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile (which address undergraduate and graduate outcomes), the Tuning Project (begun in Europe, now global in reach), the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, the Council of Europe's report *Reimagining Democratic Societies: A New Era of Personal And Social Responsibility* and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' *Heart of the Matter* report specifically identify institutions of higher education as sites to prepare the next generation to participate in civil society, and to apply their training to questions of global security, sustainability, and social issues. *

These converging expectations for undergraduate (and, increasingly graduate) student training will have an impact on how universities allocate resources at all levels. More than simply technical knowledge, universities must equip students to think critically, to understand complexity, to live and work in intercultural contexts, and be able to collaborate broadly in identifying new approaches to problem-solving at the local, national and global levels. To be successful, American Studies programs must engage these broader higher education discussions.

For the majority of universities within the United States the AAC&U LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes are increasingly seen as the “gold standard” for developing program, course and department-level contributions to undergraduate education. At the same time the work of AAC&U has links to and has been informed by work being done in Europe for some time and in other parts of the world more recently. These including “knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world”; “intellectual and practical skills” like critical thinking, analysis,




written and verbal communication, and problem solving; “personal and social responsibility” that demands local and global knowledge and engagement, involvement with diverse communities and exposure to real-world challenges; and finally “integrative learning” across different areas of study (Dey, et al. 21). To aid faculty and higher education leaders in the work of demonstrating impact and purpose, the AAC&U—through a process involving thousands of faculty members—has also developed a comprehensive set of VALUE Rubrics which offer roadmaps for articulating and assessing key learning outcomes for students. Finally, AAC&U has identified a set of High Impact Practices (HIPs) which are proven to have educational benefits. Among the HIPs are some activities and approaches in which American Studies programs are traditionally strong: Writing-Intensive Courses; Collaborative Assignments; Diversity & Global Learning; Service-Learning & Community-Based Learning; Capstone Courses and Projects

American Studies, because it critically engages dominant discourses and social issues, is already a leader in the area of civic engagement and democratic practices. However, American Studies programs and the American Studies Association must be more proactive in articulating how American Studies as a field emphasizes HIPs, and how its students demonstrate the skills, knowledge and approaches AAC&U espouses in its VALUE rubrics, particularly those for Civic Engagement, Inquiry and Analysis, Integrative Learning, Creative and Critical Thinking, Intercultural Knowledge and Competency, Lifelong Learning, and Global Learning.

We encourage all programs and departments to explore and further develop how their curriculum contributes to the development of these skills and to clearly articulate these values, experiences and outcomes when presenting their program to students, parents, and the university administration.

In what follows, we provide examples of how a program might align itself or its courses with a variety of LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and then assess outcomes using some of

the VALUE rubrics. These examples are drawn from two disparate program types: a graduate American Studies program and an interdisciplinary undergraduate major in a strongly related field at a R1 institution, and an undergraduate American Studies concentration and minor at a regional public institution. Here we focus on assessing in the areas of Civic Engagement, Intercultural Knowledge and Competency, Inquiry and Analysis, Ethical Reasoning, Global Learning, Written/Oral Communication and Integrative Learning. Each of these VALUE rubrics also reflects the current discourse about necessary learning outcomes in higher education in the United States (e.g., the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, American Academy of the Arts & Sciences, and Tuning USA). 

“[I]t is imperative that American Studies programs position themselves as key contributors to the missions of their institutions. Central to these efforts is the ability to articulate the inherent alignments between American Studies and key discourses nationally and globally regarding the value, purpose and outcomes of higher education.”

—Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello and Karen J. Leong

TABLE 1 | HOW TO POSITION AMERICAN STUDIES

SAMPLE PROGRAM or COURSE GOAL	AAC&U Essential Learning Outcome Alignment	VALUE RUBRIC to assess student skills/knowledge
<i>Learn about the system of whiteness, its development throughout U.S. history. Understand forms of systemic privilege based on race, gender, class, and sexuality</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry and Analysis • Intercultural knowledge and competence • Integrative Learning • Civic Engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical Thinking: Existing knowledge, research and values • Intercultural Knowledge and Competence: Cultural self-awareness • Integrative Learning: Connections to experience • Civic Engagement: Diversity of Communities and cultures
<i>Be able to discuss different interpretations about racial difference: racial formations; eugenics; colonial frameworks of civilization; and whiteness as property</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercultural knowledge and competence • Ethical Reasoning • Integrative Learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercultural Knowledge and Competence: Knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks • Ethical Reasoning: Understanding different ethical perspectives/concepts and Ethical issue recognition • Creative Thinking: Embracing contradictions • Integrative Learning: Connections to discipline
<i>Be able to discuss (in written and verbal forms) the ways in which cultural products and cultural production have both shaped and reflected conflicting ideas about “American” identity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry and Analysis • Critical and Creative Thinking • Written and Oral Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry and Analysis: Existing knowledge, research and views; Analysis • Critical Thinking: Influence of context and assumptions; Explanation of issues; and Evidence • Creative Thinking: Embracing contradictions • Oral Communication: Organization, Language, and Supporting material • Written Communication: Content development, and Sources and evidence
<i>Understand how the United States has understood itself and how the United States has been seen by other nations and peoples through the circulation of U.S. popular culture</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercultural Knowledge and Competence • Global Learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercultural Knowledge and Competence: Knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks • Creative Thinking: Embracing contradictions • Global Learning: Perspective Taking; Cultural diversity; Global Systems
<i>Integrate methods and sources from a range of academic disciplines in support of an original scholarly argument.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrative Learning • Inquiry and Analysis • Critical and Creative Thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrative Learning: Transfer, Connections to discipline • Inquiry and Analysis (all outcomes) • Critical Thinking (all outcomes) • Information Literacy (all outcomes)

Useful Websites, Resources, References

AAC&U

- About LEAP: <https://www.aacu.org/leap>
- Essential Learning Outcomes: <https://www.aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes>
- Value Rubrics (for download): <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics>

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences; Humanities Indicators; Report *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive and Secure Nation* (2013).

See: <http://www.humanitiescommission.org>

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Council of Europe: *Reimagining Democratic Societies: A New Era of Personal And Social Responsibility* (2013).

See: <https://book.coe.int/usd/en/higher-education-and-research/5058-reimagining-democratic-societies-a-new-era-of-personal-and-social-responsibility-council-of-europe-higher-education-series-no-18.html>

LUMINA FOUNDATION

Lumina Foundation: *Degree Qualifications Profile* (Tuning USA). See: <http://degreeprofile.org>

THE NATIONAL TASK FORCE ON CIVIC LEARNING AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future* (2012).

See: https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/crucible/Crucible_508F.pdf

THE PRESIDENT'S HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY SERVICE HONOR ROLL

President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Role

See: <http://www.nationalservice.gov/special-initiatives/honor-roll>

TUNING PROJECT

Tuning Europe: <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/home.html>. Other global regions can be found on site.

There has been much work done outside of the US to articulate and align the work of higher education and the needs of civil society. Notably this has been the work of the Council of Europe (CoE) and the associated Tuning Project begun in 2000 as part of the Bologna Process. There has been substantial collaboration between the work in Europe and the work of AAC&U in the US. In addition, to date the "Tuning" work of identifying and aligning outcomes of higher education has and is being done in many regions of the globe. Recently, the DQP work of the Lumina Foundation in the U.S. has been linked to the Tuning Project. For American Studies programs, one of the major challenges of the Tuning work both in and outside of the US, is that "American Studies" does not yet exist as an identified Subject Area in the Tuning schematic. Within a US context, there is potential to begin this work.

For more on this topic, see the white papers on "[The Nature and Meaning of Research...](#)" and "[Some thoughts on creating goals and outcomes...](#)"

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About the 2015 ASA White Paper Series

The ASA National Committee, in response to a proposal put forward by the Committee on Departments, Programs, and Centers, established a Task Force to coordinate advocacy efforts for ASA institutional members. Launched in 2014, the Task Force set about to produce, among other resources, a white paper series that addressed key questions and concerns that confront chairs and directors of American Studies. Authored by chairs, directors and coordinators at a range of institutional types, the 2015 ASA White Papers aim to create, understand, articulate, position, and sustain American Studies within the current landscape of higher education in the U.S. and globally.

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About the American Studies Association

Consisting of over 5000 members and supporting scholars, teachers, administrators, writers, critical thinkers and activists from the U.S. and around the world, the American Studies Association is the oldest and largest association devoted to the interdisciplinary study of U.S. culture and history in a global context. In pursuit of these goals, the ASA has evolved into one of the leading scholarly organizations known for taking action in the worlds of politics and policy to create and defend conditions for open debate and the pursuit of meaningful, engaged scholarship, and teaching.

Contact the ASA

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