

AMCS External Review
Sonoma State University
David M. Katzman
The University of Kansas
March 18, 2015

AMCS offers an important contribution to the mission of Sonoma State University. Its courses, essential to liberal arts education, taught by an energetic, accomplished, and diverse core faculty, prepare students for a twenty-first century multicultural California and the United States. In recent years, as the number of majors has declined, it has made its major contribution through faculty participation in general education courses. While this is important, it has left faculty and students feeling adrift given the limited opportunity for junior/senior seminars, the inability of majors to form a student community, and the lack of cohesion within the university of the vast array of courses, disciplinary and interdisciplinary, that focus on race, ethnicity, gender, and the context of American culture.

To address this problem, AMCS has instituted a new curricula for majors, built around “pathways,” or tracks and curricular paths for majors. It is a well-thought-out plan to increase the number of majors, to expand the number of upper-class courses, and provide greater intellectual opportunities for students in arts and humanities. The pathways build on existing strengths of the faculty and student interest, though with a few additions it would represent an American culture or studies rather than ethnic studies approach.

The problem for the American Multicultural Studies department is not just one of curricula. The departmental name--American Multicultural Studies—is so unusual that it conveys little meaning to undergraduates, especially with the presence of other ethnic studies departments. Its purpose, inherent in a department that evolved from African-American studies, is lost in its current configuration, even though the intent of approaching Black studies or an emphasis on people of color within a larger context is widely accepted today. The lack of close curricular cooperation and collaboration among departments dealing with American culture is not only an obstacle faced by AMSC but also becomes a barrier to students understanding broadly American culture. Further obstacles to the success of the revised curriculum are found in the national decline in enrollment in African-American and ethnic courses, the over reliance on adjunct faculty, and the increasing focus of students and their parents on vocational education (narrowly conceived).

I do not believe that the new curricula, focusing on “pathways” or individual tracts for potential majors, will solve the problem of declining majors nor allow the department to fulfill its potential for contributing to junior/senior and liberal arts education. That does not diminish my admiration for the revised curricula. It is imaginative and thoughtful, though with a few additions—popular culture, visual culture, music, religion, racial and ethnic politics, and the economy of race and

ethnicity—would really encompass a full American studies approach, one that would better fulfill the mission of the department and serve the university.

Indeed, one suggestion for future directions of the department that arose out of interviews with the provost, dean, chairperson, faculty, and students was a repositioning of the department under the heading of American studies or American culture. I was surprised that everyone I spoke to mentioned this as a natural and inevitable solution. This would place the department's mission and goals within a more appropriate umbrella, tie it to a more relevant context, allow for closer collaboration with other departments (rather than any departmental merger), and allow the department and faculty to enhance their contribution to general education and junior/senior curriculum. This would also allow faculty teaching about American studies or culture in other departments an opportunity to participate. Given current and future restraints on budget and faculty lines, the key here would be collaboration rather than new hires (other than replacements.) I believe that additional hires are necessary, but unlikely given existing college resources.

Intellectually, broadening the role of AMCS to American studies or culture is a natural one given the artificiality of separating American culture from American racial and/or ethnic culture and other components. I assume that understanding American culture and its components is essential to liberal arts education in the twenty-first century. Over time it strengthens the vocational prospects of students as well as preparing them for roles as citizens in the American republic. At the same time it would continue the important role AMCS has played in attracting a diverse faculty and student body to Sonoma State.

Thus this external review diverges from the self-study in offering an alternative to the new AMCS pathways-based curriculum. The department, I believe, would be more relevant and successful within an American studies or American culture framework. Reforming as an American studies or culture department would strengthen the role of the department within the university, and suggests an alternative path to enhancing its contribution to the university's mission.

Over all, I am impressed with the department. It has strong leadership under Professor Mike Ezra, and his work and that of Professor Christina Baker are bringing attention to Sonoma State University beyond the state and region. Further strengths lie in its curricula and its role within liberal arts and general education. On paper, it makes for a well-thought-out and comprehensive curriculum. It takes advantage of the faculty strengths and its ability, through extensive use of adjunct faculty, to offer relevant and quality courses. The new curriculum is expansive in going beyond a limited definition of multicultural studies—adding Hemispheric Studies, Film Studies, Critical Race, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Jewish Studies, Literature and Art to the predictable pathways in Africana Studies, Comparative Ethnic Studies, Native American Studies, and Multicultural Education. Yet it is not bold enough. It takes a step in recognizing that multicultural studies cannot be separated out from American studies or American culture, yet does not complete the

process. Again it offers new and appropriate directions in incorporating the courses of other departments in its pathways, but without having some influence over those course offerings, it cannot fulfill its goals and potential; it remains a patch-work solution.

At the same time, I perceive there are other limitations to the success of the new curriculum. The name of the department is ambiguous, given the presence of other ethnic departments. Among U.S. universities, I know of only one other similarly named department—at Minnesota State University, Moorhead. I interviewed a few students, and all found the name confusing, and thought it an obstacle to choosing it as a major. The one major I interviewed was a transfer student. As a department that evolved from African American studies, it faces declining national enrollment in such courses and programs, as well as some resistance to such courses by white students. With fewer and fewer majors, the department—which already attracts a significant number of minority students to its courses--become less and less attractive to new majors, and leaves faculty unfulfilled. One of the attractions of such programs in the past has been that majors have tended to create their own subculture, which not only fulfilled their needs but also served to attract additional minority students to the department and university. In turn this has also been important in recruiting and retaining minority faculty. More majors also strengthens the curricula and value of the degree, as faculty offer more upper division courses, including seminars, and play a greater role in mentoring students. Currently the balance between regular faculty and adjuncts is too weighted towards the latter. This is an obstacle to more majors in the area. A wider mission for AMCS would potentially involve more faculty-taught courses without necessarily new hiring, since it would enhance and open up more regular faculty courses taught by other departments. (One of the strengths of the new curriculum--its pathways--is in requiring non-AMCS courses).

At its best, the new curricula moves toward a broader approach, studying racial and ethnic culture within the context of American culture and society. The best solution, however, is not just to offer additional pathways, but instead to recognize that with the addition of a few new pathways—popular culture, visual culture, music, religion, the politics of race and ethnicity, the economics of race and ethnicity, the changing American family—it would complete a transformation of the role of AMCS from its present ambiguous role to being an American studies or culture department. Given existing resources, adequately providing for or staffing all the new pathways or tracks is problematic. An umbrella American studies or culture department, in collaboration with other departments, would more easily fulfill that mission.

As I previously noted, there seemed to be no dissent among administrators, faculty, and students that this would be a welcome and beneficial transformation for the department, the college, and the university. It would bring the department, its mission and learning goals, more into the mainstream of the university. It does that now with its role within general education, but the diminishing number of majors prevents it from fulfilling that role among upper-class students.

There are a number of models for American studies departments, ranging from departments defined by a disciplinary commitment or identity—offering by themselves nearly all courses defined as American studies—to interdisciplinary departments, merely coordinating courses offered by other departments and administering a degree program—to departments combining both elements. The strength of the existing AMCS structure is that it already combines the last model—having both its own faculty as well as coordinating its program with other departments by enabling students to fill tracks or pathways with courses from elsewhere. I suggest that the university, college, and liberal arts education would be better served, as well as the subjects and missions of AMCS, by expanding into an American studies department. Faculty offering courses in the area would become affiliates of the American studies department, with some representation within the departmental structure. Over time, some courses would be cross listed—some relevant courses, for example, in film, literature, political science, and economics, but not all courses dealing with American culture would need to be cross listed. Playing a central role as the umbrella home of the study of American culture would not only enhance the intellectual cohesiveness of the department but also allow more students to find a home there, thus increasing the number of majors. In attracting more majors, the department would make a greater contribution to the university's mission. It would remove the current ambiguity about the purpose and mission of the department, strengthen liberal arts education, and better prepare students to live and work both in twenty-first-century California.

Finally I would not recommend immediate implementation of my recommendations, even though I perceive general agreement. After all, my critique has arisen from my conversations on campus. I believe a gradual approach would be a better path, which in turn would give the new curricula a chance to be tested to see whether or not it works. At the same time I recommend beginning the process of redefining the department's mission more broadly as it expands its vision to make American studies and American culture its mission. This would represent, I believe, a path to fulfilling rather than altering its mission.

Additional comments:

=**Curriculum.** The new curriculum offers a coherent approach to understanding race and ethnicity and its context within U.S. culture and society. For an undergraduate department with 2.5 core faculty lines, and with one faculty member in the early retirement program, it is more comprehensive than any similarly sized department with which I am familiar. The self-study lays out clearly stated goals consistent with the department's mission, and it builds on its existing strength in its comprehensiveness, transcending issues of race and ethnicity to place it in a larger context. That strength, however, reveals a major weakness: given existing resources, it cannot, by itself, fully provide that larger context for students; only an American studies or culture department could do that. Utilizing more broadly the resources of the college and university is required to adequately fulfill that broader mission.

=**Diversity.** A major strength of the department is its diversity in students and faculty; it makes a major contribution to difference at Sonoma State. While on campus I visited an AMCS class with 28 students in attendance. By visual recognition (an admittedly inaccurate measure), 16 students were people of color. At one point they broke into groups to discuss issues of science and race; all students participated and groups were mostly integrated. I found this heartening after spending two days on campus.

=**Assessment:** The current plans for assessment are inadequate. Given the implementation of a new curriculum, this is not a major flaw at this time. Nonetheless, I recommend the creation of a formal program of assessing curriculum and faculty. Given the small number of majors currently, an exit interview with each graduating major in the spring would be appropriate. I also recommend, consistent with the union contract, peer review of all faculty at least once every three years, regardless of rank. Unless a major problem arose in the peer review, no report would be made to the department chairperson; instead it would serve as a collaborative effort to review and improve instruction.