

## External Review Report

### American Multicultural Studies (AMCS)

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Prepared by Maria Joaquina Villaseñor (California State University, Monterey Bay)

#### I. Summary & Process

The American Multicultural Studies (AMCS) major and minor program exists as a product of its rich and storied past, in a dynamic and evolving present, and with great promise for excellence in serving the students of Sonoma State University in the future. As noted in the department's self-study, the department was founded first as a Division of American Ethnic Studies in 1969 "led by Black professors Levell Holmes and Willie Garrett founded a Division of American Ethnic Studies, offering degree programs in Afro-American studies, Mexican-American studies, and Native American studies." This history matters because it is important to acknowledge that the AMCS department, the rich curriculum it offers, and students' experience of their courses is inextricably linked to the history of the student activism for Ethnic Studies of 50 years ago, and the ongoing advocacy and activism of educators who have struggled to maintain the strength of these programs over the years, riding the tumult of various economic and social crises, and the ensuing challenges to higher education that those crises produce.

In its [website description](#), the program notes, "Since it is predicted that the U.S. will be 50 percent non-white in 2050, our goal is to teach you the analytical tools for understanding the United States as a multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual nation and to help you shape your vision of leadership, civic engagement, and professional development for the future." In an increasingly diverse state and country, student learning about issues of ethnicity, culture, race, and the experiences, cultures, and intellectual traditions and contributions of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities is vital. Moreover, it is clear that AMCS is contributing in important ways to the achievement of Sonoma State University's [strategic priorities and core values](#). A [National Education Association \(NEA\) report](#) authored by Dr. Christine Sleeter "The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies: A Research Review" concludes that "There is significant research evidence that well-designed, well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students." Streeter notes that "Ethnic studies curricula have been studied in relationship to three overlapping effects on students: academic engagement, academic achievement, and

personal empowerment.” I mention this research to point out the clear resonance between the curriculum taught by AMCS and SSU’s strategic priorities of “student success”; “academic excellence”; and “leadership cultivation.” Not only the content taught by AMCS faculty, but the faculty-student relationships and classroom communities faculty are building in their program, are clearly contributing to the positive outcomes for their students in the areas outlined above. Moreover, as noted in the department’s self-study, there is clear alignment between the AMCS program learning outcomes (PLOs), the SSU Strategic Plan, and WASC Core Competencies. This alignment clearly benefits students, as well as SSU as a whole.

I appreciate the opportunity to present my observations, findings, issues to consider, and recommendations in this report, bearing the above outlined context in mind and at the conclusion of the following process:

- A review of the AMCS 2022-2023 self-study
- A review of all syllabi for AY 2021-2022
- An SSU campus visit on Thursday, February 9 with the following components
  - A meeting with department chair Dr. Michael Ezra
  - A class observation in Dr. Katherine Lee’s AMCS 210-Introduction to Ethnic Studies course
  - A focus group discussion with five AMCS major or minor students
  - Conversations with Dr. Kim Hester-Williams, Dr. Katherine Lee, and Dr. Patrick Johnson, AMCS faculty
  - Meetings with administrators Dr. Stacey Bosick, Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies and Dr. Ed Beebout, Interim Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities
- A review of the AMCS/SSU websites

AMCS has a number of important assets including their accomplished and dedicated faculty, engaged and committed students, and a rich, varied, and relevant curriculum. As they look to the future of their program, I invite them to consider the summary of strengths and challenges below I identify below, as well as the topics for further consideration and recommendations I share.

## **II. Strengths, Challenges, and Topics for Further Consideration (Findings)**

### **a. Strengths**

#### Student outcomes and curriculum

In reviewing AMCS syllabi and talking with faculty and students, it is clear that student learning and empowerment are at the center of the work of AMCS. Syllabi clearly articulate course learning objectives and/or student learning outcomes, and students talk about having transformative learning experiences in AMCS classes. Faculty note that many AMCS major and minor students are public service oriented, and keen to apply their learning to their professional lives and to civic engagement. Multiple students in the focus group commented that their voices were heard and encouraged in their AMCS classes, and that they think the confidence this gives them, and the critical thinking skills they develop and the content knowledge they gain related to multicultural communities will serve them well in their professional, personal, and civic lives moving forward. One student noted that their AMCS classes have motivated them to pursue student leadership opportunities at SSU, an example of the way student learning in AMCS is broadening student opportunities outside of the classroom, as well!

AMCS features rich and varied course offerings with engaging content that appeals to students and includes both historical and contemporary perspectives on BIPOC communities, cultures, and intellectual traditions, and the histories and social relations out of which those emerge. In reviewing the course syllabi, it is evident that the curricular content in terms of Black/Africana Studies is particularly robust, as embedded in AMCS courses such as AMCS 165A: Race in America and AMCS 260: Arts, Ethnicity, and Culture. Students in the focus group commented on the engaging and, indeed, transformative nature of the curricular content they encountered in AMCS.

#### Enrollment and curricular collaborations

Due to the GE Area F: Ethnic Studies, AMCS benefits from healthy enrollments and a high departmental student-to-faculty ratio (SFR) per the department's self-study. My class observation occurred in a class that appeared to be at capacity with few to no open seats in sight.

While GE has largely afforded these enrollments, the AMCS department has had effective practices of collaborating around enrollments and curriculum by way of cross-listing with the Native American Studies (NAMS), Women and Gender Studies (WGS), and Chicano and Latino Studies (CALS) departments. These cross listings create a seamless, integrated learning experience for students, as attested to by both students and faculty, as well as no doubt add to the fiscal viability of relatively small

programs. One student in the focus group noted that the fact that these departments had cross-listed requirements had a positive impact on their learning, creating a greater amount of flexibility, choice, and efficiency in terms of their degree pathway.

### Faculty

The AMCS faculty are a small, but mighty, group. With just 3 tenure-line faculty with one additional faculty member who teaches in AMCS but actually has a primary appointment in another department, the department contends with managing a sizable GE area with Area F, as well as sustaining and developing its major and minor. Notwithstanding this challenging situation, the faculty are highly dedicated and effective facilitators of student learning. Per both their and their students' reports, they are always thinking about students and student needs, and providing high quality educational experiences for them. The classroom observation I conducted as a part of my external review gave me the opportunity to observe some of the finest teaching I have observed in my approximately 20 years as a higher education professional. Dr. Katherine Lee, an AMCS Assistant Professor and the instructor for the course, facilitated a highly dialogical class that still guided students to the extent that they arrived at clear conclusions that clearly aligned with Dr. Lee's intended learning outcomes related to the content for the day. In addition to providing excellent teaching for their students, the faculty are all top notch scholars with a high degree of scholarly achievement in their respective research areas, influencing their fields through the publication of their own research, but also through editing important journals including impactful and groundbreaking special editions. In sum, the faculty are accomplished in a variety of areas and are impressive in their dedication to their work. Last, but certainly not least, I would highlight as a strength the respectful, effective, collegial way in which AMCS faculty collaborate with each other, something that, as we know, cannot be taken for granted in academic departments. This effective collaboration can no doubt be leveraged as they work together to address the challenges that they face as a department.

### **b. Challenges**

#### Size of major and relationship to GE Area F

AMCS does laudable work in terms of educating the broader SSU community of students, particularly through the offering of courses in GE Area F. However, as illustrated by the narrative and accompanying table in the self-study, the AMCS major itself is small, though it showed an upward trend in enrollment and number of graduates in recent years up until 2021-2022 when there was a decline in enrollments. In its self-study, the department notes that this decline coincided with the pandemic, as well as downward trends in enrollment more generally (that is, more broadly at SSU, and

beyond that, in the state and nation). The small size of the major means that it is difficult for the department to sustain courses that are specifically for students in the major because of small enrollments. One student in the focus group noted their feeling of disappointment every time there is a class cancellation due to low course enrollment. This means that when courses are offered, very few will not have students in them taking the course for GE Area F. This can be challenging for faculty, as well as for students who are in the major, as it means that most courses need to be offered at an introductory, general level. For students in the major, this means there are limitations in terms of how much advanced study they can pursue, in terms of how much depth of knowledge they can gain.

While the GE Area F does provide stable enrollments, another challenge with it is the departmental responsibility involved in providing oversight for that area of the curriculum. Because of the nature of the scholarly area (in a multicultural, multiracial society everyone has a lived experience of race, ethnicity, and culture which can confuse some into thinking that they have adequate expertise in the scholarly area to design and offer curriculum) there is a lot vetting of courses and explaining of the field that falls on AMCS faculty in terms of their faculty peers. With so few tenure-line faculty, this can become a capacity issue, as faculty are tasked with this significant oversight work at the same time that they are sustaining and developing their major, teaching their courses, producing scholarship, and engaging in other service.

#### Student community and professional pathways

Students in the focus group expressed their desire to experience a greater sense of community. Perhaps especially because they cannot count on their courses to provide that as so many students in their courses are not fellow students in the major but GE Area F students, they note that they would like to have more opportunities outside of the classroom to meet, connect and engage with one another. Additionally, students in the focus group expressed a desire for more guidance on how the major prepares them for their professions, as well as more information on volunteer and internship opportunities. This discussion of future professions could perhaps be tied to community building efforts. A stronger and more thriving student community could ultimately also be beneficial in terms of possibly contributing to recruiting and retaining more students in the major and minor. Last, I would note that given where colleges and universities are in relation to the pandemic, it is no surprise that offering students the experience of being in community with each other is currently a challenge. This challenge of the moment is certainly not unique to AMCS right now.

### Small number of tenure line faculty

Undoubtedly, the small number of tenure line faculty is a challenge for AMCS. While there are budgetary constraints currently statewide and at SSU due to downward enrollment trends, nonetheless, that this is a challenge for the department must be noted. Indeed, in order to continue to grow, develop, and thrive, another tenure-track faculty person would be of great advantage if not, essential. The department finds itself in a dilemma because it could benefit from attracting a greater number of majors, but with so few tenure-line faculty, it is quite difficult for the department to engage in significant program development, outreach, and community building with students outside the classroom. In terms of the curriculum and building out curricular offerings, another specialist in Asian American Studies would be of particular benefit if and when a future tenure line is added to the department.

### **c. Topics for further consideration**

The following are a set of topics for further consideration intended to help guide future conversations among AMCS faculty; they are being offered without particular recommendations, as AMCS faculty are in the best position to be able to imagine and assess possibilities for moving forward in these areas should they choose to do so.

#### The American Multicultural Studies nomenclature

The self-study notes that the name “American Multicultural Studies” was adopted in 1989 at a time when AMCS and what is now CALS were created as two separate departments after initially existing as one American Ethnic Studies division. While the term “multicultural” and multiculturalism as such were common when the term was selected and in the decade after, it has become less widely used since that time. In the meantime, the movement to include Ethnic Studies in the K-12 system, as well as require Ethnic Studies across the 23 campuses of the CSU means that “Ethnic Studies” as a term describing the field of study has become more widely visible and, indeed, legible by the public. This is not to advocate for a name change, but simply to encourage AMCS to reflect on their department and degree name, and whether, at this juncture, it still aligns with what they wish to communicate and how they want to be understood.

#### Collaboration with CALS, WGS, and NAMS

Collaborating with CALS and WGS as departments and NAMS as a program seems to be an area where a great deal of important work already occurs in terms of, for example, curricular pathways and cross-listing as discussed earlier. However, reflecting on whether and how these collaborations could be further leveraged and strengthened is a topic that I invite AMCS to consider. For example, in the challenge I outline above with regards to student community and professional pathways, are there ways that

AMCS could collaborate more effectively or frequently in terms of developing a way to provide more community building opportunities for students such as organizing co-curricular events, graduation celebrations, etc.? Given the small tenure-line faculty size of AMCS, working more with these other departments could be of great advantage.

### Curriculum

AMCS courses, by nature of the degree program and published course descriptions are broad in terms of analyzing the cultures, histories, and experiences of different racial and ethnic groups (for example, AMCS 260: Ethnicity in Arts, Culture and Media or AMCS 360: Ethnic Literature). At the same time, students and faculty express interest in having more group specific courses, specifically in Black/Africana Studies and Asian American Studies in the curriculum. Thus, a topic to consider moving forward is whether and how to further develop the aspects of the curriculum that are group specific. Additionally, it would be important to consider whether and how to develop the existing courses to further incorporate more comparative approaches or approaches that emphasize systems, structures, and/or themes rather than focusing on specific groups. How do these two aspects of the curriculum—the group specific and the broad and/or comparative—fit together or complement each other in a way that creates cohesion?

### III. Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered for both AMCS faculty, as well as administrators to consider (implementing some of these recommendations would be more within faculty purview, and some would be appropriate for administrators or other campus partners to implement).

For AMCS faculty:

1. Leverage signature aspects of SSU curriculum such as Second Year Research and Creative Experience (SYRCE), and Humanities Learning Community

In reading course syllabi and talking with students, it is clear that AMCS faculty have participated in these programs by offering courses and other learning experiences. I encourage faculty to consider whether and how they might add to these offerings, or sustain and enrich the offerings they already have in these areas. These experiences are clearly impactful for students and could be effective means for recruiting and retaining students into the AMCS major or minor. At least one of the students I spoke with in the focus group shared that they had become interested in AMCS as a result of their participation in the Humanities Learning Community, and that it was a transformative learning experience.

## 2. Build and/or strengthen the collaboration with Education and potentially other programs

[In 2021](#), Governor Gavin Newsom signed legislation making California the first state in the country to require high school students to take one semester-long Ethnic Studies course. Thus, beginning the 2025-2026 school year, all California high schools will begin offering Ethnic Studies courses. Given this reality, there will be a growing need for high school teachers who are qualified to teach the subject. In light of this reality, it would be worthwhile to explore a collaboration with Education to further develop a teacher training pathway (AMCS does already offer a Multicultural Education Pathway) and/or perhaps even a certificate program. Building this and making it more visible to students could be advantageous in terms of drawing students into the major or minor. Moreover, some of the tenure-track faculty have Education expertise and are well positioned to work on this.

## 3. Identify and/or create opportunities to build community among AMCS students

As discussed above, students shared that their AMCS community is important to them, and they would like more opportunities to connect and build relationships with each other as AMCS majors/minors. However, given the small size of the tenure-line faculty and all the demands on their time between teaching, research, and service, it would be difficult to spend time developing programs or events for students. However, faculty could encourage students to form an AMCS student organization (there seems to be a comparable [student organization](#) in existence for WGS) and/or could reach out to campus partners such as student support services, student life, or [The HUB Cultural Center](#) to see how they might bring their students to campus events, or somehow align themselves strategically with other campus efforts to provide experiences for AMCS students to be in community with each other.

For administration and other campus partners:

### 1. Consider prioritizing overall averages for AMCS FTEs when making decisions about course cancellations as a consistent practice

Overall, it seems that course enrollments for GE Area F courses are robust. At the same time, small courses for majors only have often not been possible to run given low course enrollments. However, a consistent practice of prioritizing overall averages for AMCS FTEs when making decisions of whether to allow a major course to run despite low course enrollment, could help in terms of allowing faculty the opportunity to teach these courses, and to allow students the opportunities to take these courses. As long as



the averages signaled fiscal viability, this approach has the potential to not result in a net loss for the university. At the same time, it would allow the university to demonstrate its commitment to its core values of diversity and social justice in a tangible way that would benefit student learning and student experience directly.

2. Ensure that SSU student recruitment efforts include AMCS as a viable major option, and widely advertise the minor

Smaller major and minor programs are often overlooked or worse, misunderstood, by offices of Admissions and other departments tasked with recruiting and advising prospective and new students. Recruitment materials need to be reviewed periodically to ensure that the information that is being provided to prospective students is accurate, timely, and attractive. Faculty could be helpful in providing feedback or corrections to materials, but these materials ultimately must be produced in alignment with campus processes for producing the recruitment materials for all majors. Information about potential professional pathways is especially important to students who want to know what professional opportunities would be available to them with the degree after graduation. If this information has not been revised recently, it should be revised to include Ethnic Studies teaching in high schools and K-12 more broadly, as well as work in the area of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) which is a growing sector of the labor market with opportunities for AMCS graduates to work in either public or private entities.