

SOME THOUGHTS ON CREATING GOALS AND OUTCOMES for American Studies Programs

An ASA White Paper

When developing **goals** and **outcomes** for American Studies programs—whether those be at the undergraduate or graduate level, and whether they be for a new or existing program—faculty need to keep in mind their institution’s mission statement or goals and should work to align their program with those goals. This is an important step in order to argue either for the startup of a new American Studies program or for the defense of an existing one during periodic reviews or in times of administrative threats to the program.

Fortunately, it is often quite simple for American Studies programs to make such alignments given the frequently-seen institutional goals of things such as “critical thinking,” “global citizenship,” “experiential learning,” and “diversity.”

With these things in mind, **goals** are the broad things that you think your students should be able to do or know. They are part of the big picture and are often found on departmental or institutional websites. For example, and at a very basic level, “*American Studies graduates will understand interdisciplinary approaches to the study of American culture.*”

While that is a fine goal to have, the question becomes this: How do you measure whether or not students “understand” something? This is where **outcomes** come in. While “outcomes” is sometimes used interchangeably with “goals,” outcomes are more specific and concrete than goals. In short, they are “assessable”; they are those things that can be measured in order to demonstrate achievement of a goal.

Working with the example above, that particular goal can be divided into a couple of different outcomes:

- ***Students will apply two or more disciplinary approaches in to the analysis of a specific dimension of American life.*** (Note here that there are both concrete and open-ended components to this outcome. The concrete—apply two or more disciplinary approaches—can be assessed to demonstrate the achievement of that outcome. The open-ended—a specific dimension of American life—allows different faculty members to accomplish this outcome based on their own areas of interest/expertise: immigration, gender relations, music, etc.)
- ***Students will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different disciplinary approaches to the analysis of a specific dimension of American life.***

Carefully selected assignments are used to assess outcomes. For the two outcomes above (and working from the perspective of my undergraduate program), I might assign a review essay of three scholarly articles about a particular topic, having first approved of the sources in order to make sure that different disciplinary approaches were being used.

One thing that is worth keeping in mind is this: **the more goals you put into an American Studies program, the more outcomes you will be required to assess.** (On some regular basis, all outcomes have to be assessed.) This presents at least two schools of thought:

- Be as comprehensive as possible and make explicit every goal and every outcome of the program and be prepared to develop assessments for each of them. This can be useful for showing just how central to the institution’s educational mission American Studies is as well as for getting buy-in from faculty members who may not otherwise support the program. However, this also leads to more intensive assessment activities for the program.
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- Mark Rice, St. John Fisher College
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- Be explicit about as few goals and outcomes as you can get your faculty to agree to in order to minimize the required reporting of your assessment activities. Make the program goals more selectively aligned to the institutional goals and adjust as needed. The program can still do many other things but it isn’t beholden to the assessment regime while doing them.

For more on how to discuss, identify and align goals and outcomes see also white paper on [“How to position American Studies as vital to your institution of higher education.”](#) 

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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.

Acknowledgments: Lynne Adrian, Ben Chappell, Lorraine Cox, Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, Lisa Duggan, Ben Feldman, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Alyosha Goldstein, Rebecca Hill, Karen J. Leong, Curtis Marez, Chandan Reddy, and Mark Rice.



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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.

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