

WRITING MISSION STATEMENTS

for American Studies departments and programs

An ASA White Paper

Composing, replacing, or revising a mission statement for your American Studies program or department is a great means of looking inward and outward simultaneously; it's a process of both introspection and publicity. With a little preparation, you can transform that process from a perhaps unwelcome burden into a tool for advancing your program's particular interests and goals.

For better and worse, mission statements have taken on greater importance in higher education during the last generation. For worse, these declarations often try to satisfy so many constituencies, and they get designed by so many people, that the results can be worse than a boilerplate and fall into the category of gibberish. On the other hand—and for the better—writing mission statements compels groups of people working on a common project to clarify and articulate their shared aims and hopes. It's a reasonable hypothesis that the smaller the group the statement is written for and by, the higher the degree of clarity and authentic aspiration it contains.

Here are just a few recommendations about getting the most out of your department or program's statement, and of the brief process of producing it. These may sound too prescriptive as written here, but that is an inescapable by-product of the brevity that is needed in a suggestive guide like this. You will have your own ideas about what to emphasize in your statement, and about how to proceed.

First of all, let's remember who we are. This is American Studies we are talking about! The mission statement must be, in part, the reflection of our identities as scholars and teachers. Therefore it will emphasize *interdisciplinarity*, *collaboration*, *diversity*, and *grounding in the liberal arts*.

The first point to emphasize is that your department or program is engaged in teaching and research that is truly interdisciplinary, and the first action you should take is to get together a manageable-sized group of people, say four to eight—and not necessarily “representatives” of every constituency you want to support you—and have a conversation about what you mean by the term. If you do have a need for more participants, break the number into two or three focus groups with colleagues assigned to be recorders. A great way to start the exercise would be to ask everyone to read or reread the finest recent meditation on the subject, Philip Deloria's 2008 presidential address to the American Studies Association: “Broadway and Main: Crossroads, Ghost Roads, and Paths to an American Studies Future,” in *American Quarterly* 61 (2009), 1-25. But the essay should be a mental stimulant, not the subject of the discussion itself. (For a distinctly unenthusiastic opinion about mission statements and interdisciplinarity, see Mark Bauerlein, “The Institutionalization of American Studies,” *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 19 (2003), 37-46.)



Interdisciplinarity is not one thing; it is many things. But that does not mean that it is *anything* faculty or administrators want it to be. Over the decades many of the finest American Studies scholars have expended a great deal of energy trying to clarify what can reasonably be claimed about the term “interdisciplinary,” from Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx to Gene Wise and beyond. Often they did so because of administrators who, sometimes for the wrong reasons (such as saving money with minimal effort), wanted to embrace it. It seems that any time two departments are involved in any activity at all, the endeavor is said to be interdisciplinary. But there can be immense differences between projects that are interdisciplinary and those that are interdepartmental, multidisciplinary, and multi-departmental. Majors in international studies, for example, are just not engaged in the same kind of pursuit as those in American Studies. Likewise, a student who takes a political science course and then a sociology course on a similar topic is not thereby being interdisciplinary; and the fact that your college or university has programs that require courses in more than one department does not magically transform them into interdisciplinary programs.

So you have begun with a collaborative process that clarifies and exemplifies what you mean by interdisciplinary. The next characteristic to emphasize is diversity. Diversity is almost as perplexing a concept as interdisciplinarity. You might need some discussion to clarify what it means in the context of your program or department. But what is clear to us all is that American Studies interrogates the *cultures* of the U. S. in their historical and social settings. The excellent American Studies mission statement at the University of Texas describes their activity as “the interdisciplinary study of the myriad historical and contemporary cultures of the United States, in both domestic and transnational settings.” In many institutions, American Studies is the most diverse of liberal arts fields by many measures: race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, scope of courses, publication venues, and intellectual specializations. These should be noted, and their development established as a part of the mission.

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—Matthew Mancini, Saint Louis University

It’s vitally important that your department or program’s mission be aligned with the university or college’s. The best way to do that is to stress how the program exemplifies the best qualities of the liberal arts. Almost all university mission statements will at least genuflect in the direction of liberal arts education; most will emphasize it conspicuously. No matter what aspects of such an education the institutional statement seems to stress, you can make it sound as though it is written about American Studies. Using your institution’s “liberal arts” language as the basis for your own articulation, you can show that American Studies is central to the institution’s identity, at least insofar as that identity is projected to the society at large. Critical thinking; integration of knowledge; social justice; the community as classroom; acknowledgement of an Arnoldian “best that has been thought and said” in the field combined with a Foucaultian radical skepticism about discourse and power; training suitable for the professional schools; excellent writing and oral

communication skills; the production of rigorous, first-rate scholarship: all these and more thrive in our departments and programs—and, obviously, the mission must be to support the constant improvement of these liberal arts-oriented endeavors.

I noted near the start that the mission statement must “reflect” who we are, but that is only partly true. We have to, in a sense, look beyond who we are now, and seek to develop into what we can become. A mission means a task that an individual or group has to undertake. It’s not the same as a goal. As we look at who we are, we should try to imagine who we could become and make that our self-assigned task. To be specific, we might ask questions like: what number or percentage of our faculty should have specific training in American Studies? What is, or should be, our relationship to the professional associations? How many of our publications are in the general field? When our undergraduate students graduate, have they the capability of explaining to others what American Studies means? And many others that will arise in the context of your own institutional set of opportunities and constraints.

If you have not been asked, or required, to develop a mission statement for your department or program, don’t worry—you will eventually! By focusing on key themes like interdisciplinarity and liberal arts, and by completing the task by a collaborative method, you can, with minimal effort, create an instrument that advances your programmatic interests, increases collegiality, and provides a general sense of forward motion for yourself and your colleagues. Try it—you will be glad you did. 

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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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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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