

*Report on Retreat, American Studies  
Program*

Director: Richard Millington

*Retreat Date:* May 14, 2008

*Program faculty in attendance:* Nina Antonetti, Justin Cammy, Floyd Cheung, Jennifer Guglielmo, Alice Hearst, James Hicks, Daniel Horowitz, Helen Horowitz, Alexandra Keller, Daphne Lamothe, Richard Millington, Sherrill Redmon, Kevin Rozario, Michael Thurston, Steve Waksman, Frazer Ward, Louis Wilson

*No guest speakers.*

*Goals for the retreat.* 1. Discussion of the AMS major in relation to the College's recent curricular initiatives (capacities, enhanced research opportunities, pathways through the major), and in light of the relevant recommendations of our recent External Review Report (October, 2007). 2. Discussion of our priorities in designing the full-time, tenure track position in AMS linked to anticipated retirements. 3. Discussion of the curriculum in earlier US History/Native American History, and the uses of the .5 FTE designated to fill that need. 4. Time permitting, a discussion of other promising suggestions contained in the External Review Report.

*Outcomes.* 1. We identified ways the AMS curriculum advances the College's redefined curricular goals and, with the assistance of the External Review report, identified a number of strategies for linking our core courses and guiding our students in the shaping of their work in the major. 2. We discussed a possible timetable for our search for the anticipated full time position in AMS, but postponed further discussion of the configuration of the position. 3. We agreed that the ongoing discussion of curricular priorities in US history, now conducted by the chairs of HST, AAS, and AMS, should expand to include "next generation" members of each program (Guglielmo, Lamothe, Rozario), and endorsed the idea of applying (jointly with HST and AAS) for one of the new Mellon-style post-docs in that field. 4. Time did not permit us to discuss all such suggestions, but we did consider ways to distribute the advising workload more equably among us, once the Horowitzes retire. We'll continue to discuss other suggestions next year.

*Plans to achieve outcomes.* The curricular suggestions in 'Outcome' #1' (see fuller discussion below) will be implemented by the Director and the AMS Committee next year, and by the staff of AMS 201. The AMS Committee will formulate a request for a full-time tenure track position, solely located in American Studies, during the next academic year. The informal committee to think through the curriculum in earlier US history and Native American history, mentioned above, will meet to develop strategies for addressing this critical gap in our curriculum.

*How do your plans advance departmental goals as outlined in mid-term or decennial reports? See fuller discussion below.*

*The American Studies curriculum and the goals of the Smith Design.* (This section covers the rest of the questions on the Report form, and addresses significant recommendations made by our External Reviewers).

The American Studies major is already contributing aggressively to the achievement of the goals of the Design; in several ways, the structure of our curriculum, as it has developed over the past ten years or so, anticipates the Design's priorities and initiatives. We thus spent most of our time discussing some concrete ways that we might enhance the effectiveness and clarity of an already-successful curricular structure. Our discussion was linked to and shaped by specific suggestions made in the External Review Report.

Intellectual Capacities. All of our core courses—like the courses in other departments that our students take to complete their majors—work to develop and challenge our students' abilities to think critically and to convey that thinking lucidly and forcefully. We think that AMS 202, "Methods in American Studies," does this with particular success, and has helped our majors to a degree of intellectual ambition and self-awareness that's unusual at the College. Our requirement that students, in close collaboration with their advisers, design a four-course "focus" within the major further moves them, we think, toward intellectual independence and responsibility. We have designed our major requirements to ensure that majors work across historical periods and scholarly disciplines, and that they engage a wide range of texts, episodes, and cultural forms. Their work is thus comparative in several ways, and we do require a course that enables a specific comparison between the US and another culture. This last area is one where we think we could improve (as our External Reviewers suggested), and we have accordingly decided to try, through more focused advising and providing a listing of courses that meet this requirement especially well, to enhance the effectiveness of this requirement. We also discussed the possibility of including American Studies more prominently in the international study initiative now under way, perhaps through the development of an Amsterdam year for Smith AMS majors.

Navigating the major. Our sequence of core courses clearly implies a "cumulative" or "developmental" structure for the major: students begin with a primary-source-centered, "hands-on" introduction to American Studies thinking; they then move to an emphatically theoretical "methods" course in the sophomore or junior year, and they finish their careers with a senior year capstone course ("Symposium in AMS") that's built around independent research. Nevertheless, with the help of the External Review Report, we identified some fairly simple ways that we might guide our majors through their work more effectively and to help them to move toward the next stage of their intellectual development. First, we plan to renumber our "Introduction to the Study of American Society and Culture," moving it from the 200 to the 100 level. We considered, but rejected the External Reviewers' suggestion that we establish, in lieu of the more openly defined "focus," a set of established "tracks" through the major. Instead, we plan to post on our website not pre-established "sample" focuses, but some student or faculty

authored accounts of the kind of thinking that has gone or might go into constructing a focus. Many of us regard the discussion of the focus as “the best part of advising,” and we see no reason to abandon our current open yet collaborative process. (This positive view of the focus requirement was confirmed by an informal survey of senior majors conducted before the retreat). We also decided, as a way of linking our “Introduction” to our “Methods” course and of demonstrating more lucidly what an AMS “approach” is, to integrate some short theoretical readings into the former course.

Toward a Culture of Research and Inquiry. It is in the area of research and independent inquiry that the AMS curriculum has most clearly anticipated Design initiatives. In our introductory course, students find and analyze a primary source from the 1890s; in the “Methods” course they apply a theoretical perspective to cultural materials of their choosing; and the senior symposium is built around independent research projects that address the course theme. In many of these projects, and in a history course taught by a member of the AMS Committee, students are introduced to and work with the extraordinary materials in the Sophia Smith Collection and the College Archive, and we offer two courses that are built upon the rich collections at Historic Deerfield and Historic Northampton. Via the Smithsonian Internship program, many of our majors spend a semester doing professional-level research under the guidance of a curator from one of the Smithsonian museums. We have a healthy honors program that consistently attracts our strongest majors (4 or 5 in a typical year), and AMS students take an average of 15 special studies courses per year. Our External Reviewers also suggested a research-generating course, based on local/regional history, that we are quite interested in pursuing.

*Future hiring and the curriculum in earlier US History.* During the course of our discussion, we were able to establish a fairly clear sense of the likely timing of our request to search for a tenure-track assistant professor (1.0 FTE) to replace Dan and Helen Horowitz (1.25 FTE and all administrative duties in AMS). If the current retirement scenario holds, we would be formulating and submitting a position request next year, for a search to be conducted in '09-'10. A much less defined retirement picture makes the disposition of the .5 FTE designated by the Provost and CAP to bolster the curriculum in earlier US History much less clear. We spent part of our time working through the confusion created by the way the conception of this half position had initially been communicated to us, but our discussion revealed an eagerness to collaborate with History and Afro-American Studies in finding a way to meet this shared, pressing curricular need. As a step in this direction, we suggested that the committee of the three chairs who have been discussing this issue be expanded to include another member of each unit (Professors Guglielmo, Lamothe, and Rozario)—a proposal already welcomed by the Provost. And we endorsed the idea of pursuing, along with HST and AAS, one of the new “teaching post-docs” in the field of early “Encounter” or Contact—which seems to us an especially promising way to begin to think about repairing the truly distressing gaps in the Smith curriculum created by Neal Salisbury’s retirement.