

April 13, 2015

Graduate Affairs Committee  
Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis

Dear Colleagues:

The IUPUI Ph.D. proposal for a Ph.D. in American Studies is, in many ways, a field-defining statement for applied American Studies that deserves a national readership as more academic units develop an emphasis in public sector work. I support this proposal wholeheartedly: it offers a strong rationale for the program's curriculum; it reinforces and expands the mission of the institution; and it builds from faculty expertise and university programs that orient the institution to the communities it serves.

I appreciate the reference to the 1970s beginnings of American Studies at IUPUI. Typical of so many American Studies efforts during those turbulent years, the interdisciplinary field incubated other successful clusters that have since grown to autonomy. American Studies at its best is generative, open to new ideas, and responsible to the social circumstances surrounding the university. The current effort should be read in this context. As the last comprehensive survey of American Studies departments and programs (Bronner, 2007) indicated, the growth and innovation in American Studies academic units now takes place at the graduate level and is increasingly turning toward the public sector as well as transnational ideas and movements – both of these are emphases in the IUPUI document.

There is a national need for an applied American Studies degree and IUPUI is uniquely positioned to offer it. Other programs – including the ones cited in this report as comparators – offer degrees that allow for an applied option but I know of no Ph. D. program that is so self-consciously oriented toward “careers outside of academic teaching” (4). To my knowledge, only one Ph.D. program is oriented toward the public sector: Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg, but there are so many institutional, geographical, and financial impediments that I do not view them as comparable in terms of reach or impact. Some MA programs, most notably those at Trinity College (Hartford), Utah State University, Miami University (Ohio), and the University of Wyoming have done as much to connect American Studies with non-academic employment in the public sector as most Ph.D.-granting institutions. From 1982 to 2014 I presided over the Wyoming program, which has prominently featured internships and public sector thesis options during my entire tenure as director. During that time more than 1/3 of our graduates have entered public sector fields and have pursued very productive careers. However, there is a limit to what an MA-qualified job seeker can aspire to do, especially at the beginning. Those shaping the futures of our most important public sector institutions must hold the Ph.D. degree. I can add my personal observations to the other evidence offered by this proposal: there IS a need, not only in the public sector but in other non-academic areas, for exactly the sort of Ph.D. program outlined here.

IUPUI is the right place for such an innovative degree. I have long admired the university's commitment to service-learning and community engagement, not only through a robust array of student opportunities but in faculty scholarship and university-supported statewide programs. Many of the centers at IUPUI that would link American Studies students to communities are associated with this proposal and key faculty members are affiliated with this effort. The existing programs at Purdue and IU-Bloomington are oriented toward more traditional employment in the academic profession; I agree with Deborah Cohn that there is no duplication. She states: "The ways that we have organized our programs, what we emphasize (and how we emphasize it), and the projected goals for our students ... are quite different." IUPUI is located in the state's most vibrant urban center, which is, strategically the home of not only the state government but many foundations and non-profit organizations that could be ideal locations for interns. Requiring a yearlong internship is a bold, innovative move that the program and the community can sustain.

There is also ample opportunity for connecting with international American Studies programs and centers. Some partnerships could be arranged through institutions participating in the already-successful European Studies exchanges. The present proposal identifies a few more potential partners and correctly states that there are American Studies national organizations and networks that could help make further connections. Over the past 35 years I have set up a number of exchanges for our American Studies program, several of them the result of the five Fulbright experiences that I have been fortunate to have. By now I feel that I know the European American Studies landscape pretty well. So I am encouraged to say that opportunities abound, particularly in Germany, and IUPUI should look forward to the enviable task of being selective.

I have very few concerns with this proposal. The Ph.D. is structured to have a minimum impact on existing curricula and faculty workloads and to draw upon the expertise (and, perhaps, the financial assistance) of cooperating institutions and agencies. This argues for sustainability and collegiality. I hope that financial aid packages can be offered to students as the Ph.D. program becomes more grounded in College structures. The roll-out of the program is quite sensible but I would expect that demand, particularly among non-traditional, perhaps place-bound applicants, will be high. The nature and scope of the qualifying examination is unclear to me. This innovative degree will inevitably introduce bodies of scholarship not usually included in American Studies exams and will, at its core, develop a literature pertaining to applied American Studies that should be of great interest to the programs that follow IUPUI's lead. So, I am curious about the nature of reading lists: A prescribed core with a choice of optional texts? Separate thematic lists? A cluster of materials customized to relate to dissertation projects? Designated space for digital materials and texts from other cultures? The authors might also consider maintaining at least one component of the curriculum – a portion of the required seminar sequence or an element of the qualifying examination – that requires the candidate to view the historical development of American Studies, both as a field of inquiry and a location in academic institutions. The link between the substantial (and substantive) internship and the dissertation is explicit and necessary to the structure of the applied degree. It is less clear to me what this dissertation would look like – anticipated length, format, the possibility that "chapters" would consist of work in different media (digital or exhibit-based, for example) that would produce more of a linked portfolio than a traditional, written text.

This is a fine proposal that will stand alone among the more than two dozen Ph.D. degrees in American Studies. I hope that it approved in time to meet the projected schedule. Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

