American Studies

The concentration in American Studies seeks to understand American society and cultures as emerging from historical and contemporary processes at work in local, national, and global contexts. Concentrators study four broad themes: social structure and the practices of identity, space and place, production and consumption of culture, and science, technology, and everyday life. The concentration is predicated on the ideal of scholarly engagement with the public, so students take junior seminars that engage some aspect of the public humanities such as public policy, memorialization, community studies or civic engagement. Study abroad is supported and encouraged.

Interested students may contact Prof. Debbie Weinstein (deborah_fran_weinstein@brown.edu), the concentration advisor during spring 2016.

A concentrator in American Studies will be able to:

• Analyze texts, contexts, and data from multiple disciplinary and historical perspectives
• Synthesize research as verbal, visual and/or digital presentations
• Explore the theory and/or practice of the engagement of scholarship with a broader public
• Understand how American society and cultures have been and are being shaped by global flows of people, goods and ideas
• Experiment with new media as critical tools for scholarship

Concentrators have gone on to a vast variety of careers, including law, public humanities, politics, public service, academics, business, creative arts, and medicine.

Each concentrator will take 10 courses including a Junior Seminar as one of four seminars. Courses are organized by the four themes and four approaches that define America Studies at Brown. Each concentrator will use this framework to create an individual focus in consultation with the Concentration Advisor.

The focus is the flexible core of the concentration. Here each student builds a coherent and dynamic interdisciplinary structure of related courses that develops his or her compelling interest in some aspect of American experience. The four themes and four approaches provide the foundation on which each student builds a unique concentration in American Studies.

All seniors in the class of 2013 forward will be required to do a capstone electronic portfolio.

Some concentrators may elect to do an Honors Thesis.

Study abroad is supported and encouraged.

Four Themes and Four Approaches

American Studies at Brown is concerned with four broad themes:

• Social Structures and the Practices of Identity: How do communities and individuals come to define themselves, and how do others define them, in terms of, among other categories, nation, region, class, race, ethnicity, gender, sex, religion, age and sexuality? How do organizations and institutions function socially and culturally? What are the roles of social movements, economic structures, politics and government?
• Space and Place: How is space organized, and how do people make place? This includes the study of natural and built environments; local, regional, national and transnational communities; and international and inter-regional flows of people, goods, and ideas.
• Production and Consumption of Culture: How do people represent their experiences and ideas as culture? How is culture transmitted, appropriated and consumed? What is the role of artists and the expressive arts, including literature, visual arts and performance?
• Science, Technology, and Everyday Life: How does work and the deployment of science and technology shape American culture? How do everyday social practices of work, leisure and consumption provide agency for people?

How we study

American Studies at Brown emphasizes four intersecting approaches that are critical tools for understanding these themes:

• Cultural and Social Analysis: Reading and analyzing different kinds of texts, including literary, visual, aural, oral, material objects and landscapes. Examining ethnic and racial groups, institutions, organizations and social movements.
• Global/International Contextualization: Comprehending the United States as a society and culture that has been shaped by the historical and contemporary flows of people, goods and ideas from around the world and in turn, learning about the various ways in which America has shaped the world.
• New Media Understandings: Understanding the creation of new forms of discourse, new ways of knowing and new modes of social organization made possible by succeeding media revolutions. Using new media as a critical tool for scholarship.
• Publicly Engaged Scholarship: Connecting the theory and the practice of publicly-engaged research, understanding and presentation, from community-based scholarship to ethnography, oral history, and museum exhibits. Civic engagement might include structured and reflective participation in a local community or communities or the application of general theoretical knowledge to understanding social issues.