MA Program in Transnational American Studies

Founded in 2003, the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Abdulaziz Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at the American University of Beirut has a mission to foster scholarly understanding between the United States and the Arab World. Starting in Fall 2013, CASAR will offer an innovative M.A. program in Transnational American Studies. The M.A. program will be unique in the field of American Studies – and in the region – because of its transnational focus on U.S./Middle East cultural, historical, and political relations.

The MA in Transnational American Studies will attract students throughout the Middle East – and beyond – who are interested in the cultures of the United States and cultural and political interactions between the United States and the MENA region. Applicants may come from many humanities fields, as well as disciplines such as education, journalism and business. The Transnational American Studies MA will prepare students for continued advanced graduate training in American Studies as well as for a range of careers in fields such as education, law, international relations, journalism, government, NGOs, and business.

1. Program Philosophy and Learning Goals

Over the last decade, the discipline of American Studies has undergone a major transformation as a result of globalization and the ascendancy of U.S. economic and military supremacy. Whereas the field once thought that its mission was to better understand the “American character” in American literature and everyday life, the field today is far more concerned with understanding the interdependencies between domestic politics and culture and U.S. engagements abroad. This new focus has led many American Studies programs to focus on transnational and comparative understandings of American culture.

Moreover, American Studies programs are growing internationally, with new programs developing throughout Europe, the Middle East, and China. AUB’s program in American Studies is somewhat unique within the field of international American Studies because we are independent of U.S. State Department support and are therefore independent of U.S. “soft”-diplomatic efforts that often characterize American Studies programs abroad.

CASAR was developed at a critical moment for the field of American Studies. Just when the discipline turned to internationalism, CASAR was founded with the mission to understand the United States, and its relations with the Middle East, from “abroad.” CASAR has thus provided an important critical vantage point from which to understand cultural and political events in the United States, such as the war on terror and the racialization of Muslims and ascendancy Islamophobia.

The CASAR MA in Transnational American Studies will take advantage of our unique position within the discipline of American Studies by approaching the study of America through the prism of U.S./Middle East relations, broadly conceived. The MA program, then, will maintain CASAR’s initial mission statement, “to promote better understanding between the United States of America and the Arab Word, and to deepen knowledge in the Arab World of American society, politics, history, culture and institutions through teaching, research, and outreach missions.”

The MA program will have three core learning goals (lg).

LG1: Students completing the MA in Transnational American Studies will gain an understanding of the interdisciplinary history, theory and methods of the discipline of American Studies.

LG2: Students completing the MA in Transnational American Studies will gain an understanding of the historical, cultural, political or economic dimensions of U.S./Middle East Relations.
LG3: Students completing the MA in Transnational American Studies will conduct a final project that will employ the methods and theories of the discipline of American Studies.

2. American Studies MA Curriculum and Admissions Criteria

Curriculum

The MA in Transnational American Studies will require 30-credits of coursework, which can be fulfilled in one of two ways. 1) Most students will be encouraged to take 27-credits of coursework and a 3-credit final project. Of the 27-credit course requirement, 9 will come from required American Studies courses. The remaining 18-credits will be fulfilled in American Studies or other units offering graduate-level, American Studies-related content. 2) In rare cases, students can opt to complete a 9-credit thesis. Thesis students will take 9-credits of American Studies core courses, 12-credits of electives (above the 300-level), and 9-credits of thesis work. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of American Studies, the graduate advisor in American Studies will work with related departments to determine an appropriate list of electives for MA students each semester.[1] Electives will be divided into two concentrations that comprise the interdisciplinary core of the American Studies discipline: “Politics and Policy” and “Culture and Society.”

The 3-credit final project will consist of a capstone project to be determined by the student in consultation with his or her advisor and an additional committee member. The project allows students the flexibility to design a final assignment that best suites his or her post-MA career. Students applying for PhD programs in the humanities will be encouraged to write a journal article that can be submitted for publication. Students working in media, may decide to produce a media project. The purpose of the final project is to encourage completion of the degree in a timely manner as well as to encourage students to produce a capstone project that will be more relevant than a thesis to their career goals.

A thesis is a more traditional capstone project that is significantly larger than the final project. The thesis will be limited to a substantial research project drawing on the theories and methods of American Studies. Students who have developed a research project during the course of their undergraduate or graduate coursework elsewhere may want to choose the thesis.

There is no language requirement for this MA program. Students may apply 3-credits of Arabic language coursework to their list of electives.

The 3 required American Studies courses are:

American Studies 300: Graduate Introduction to Transnational American Studies (required fall first year). 3 Credits. Offered annually.

This graduate seminar will introduce students to the historiography of the field, as well as the core theories and methods. The class will draw on a list of readings developed collectively among the American Studies faculty. It will include regular visits by affiliated faculty who will discuss their scholarly research. At the end of the semester, students will write a final paper in which they synthesize some of the core theories and methods of American Studies.

American Studies 301: America in the Middle East (required spring first year). 3 Credits. Required prerequisite: AMST 300

This graduate seminar offers close readings of scholarship and cultural artifacts related to U.S./Middle East relations. Students will gain a deep understanding of how the Middle East has been understood within the United States, as well as how U.S. culture circulates within the Middle East. Among the topics this seminar might address are: Arab and Lebanese migration to the U.S., U.S. images of the Arab World, political and diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Middle East. A requirement for this seminar is regular attendance at CASAR visiting lectures and a final research paper.

American Studies 302: Theories and Methods of Transnational American Studies (required fall second year). 3 Credits. Offered Annually. Required Prerequisite: AMST 300

This seminar introduces American Studies graduate students to the art of interdisciplinary research methods. Students will read examples of interdisciplinary research, discuss theories and methods, and begin to develop some of the skills
of historical archival research and cultural analysis. Faculty across FAS will be invited to the seminar to discuss their methodologies. In addition, students will work closely with University Libraries to learn how to use primary sources. At the end of the semester, students will develop their final project or, in rare cases, their MA thesis proposal.

In addition to the 9-credit requirements in American Studies, students may select:

18-credits of graduate electives to be approved by CASAR director.
9-Credits of the elective courses will be selected from courses listed under the concentration “Politics and Policy”
9-Credits of the elective courses will be selected from the courses listed under the concentration, “Culture and Society”
3-credits final project, to be directed by an American Studies affiliated faculty member.
Or 12-credits of graduate electives to be approved by CASAR director.
6-Credits of the elective courses will be selected from courses listed under the concentration “Politics and Policy”
6-Credits of the elective courses will be selected from the courses listed under the concentration, “Culture and Society”
9-credit thesis.

**Admissions criteria**

We will admit students to the MA program in the fall semester (only) in accordance with the policies and procedures established by the American University of Beirut. We hope to recruit approximately five students every fall semester. Admissions will be competitive and based on a record or demonstrated potential of graduate level work in American Studies. The application will consist of the AUB application form and fee, a letter of intent, two recommendation letters, and undergraduate transcripts. As part of the letter of intent applicants will be asked to propose a possible research area, as well as to explain how coursework at AUB can help them complete their stated areas of research interest. The CASAR executive committee, as well as the CASAR director, will evaluate and make admissions recommendations about all applications.

[1] We will encourage students to complete the final project, as we believe this will shorten the time-to-degree and will be more useful to students planning to pursue a doctorate. However, with the support of an advisor, students can choose a thesis if they can demonstrate a clear research idea and already have made substantial progress toward a research project prior to their second year.