**American Studies PhD Handbook**

**2024-2025**

Last revision by Gayle Wald, May 2025

Welcome to the PhD American Studies at GWU! This document walks you through the process of earning your PhD.

**I. The Department and Its People**

American Studies occupies two historic townhouses, at 2106 and 2108 G Street NW. The chair’s and department manager’s offices, PhD student and faculty mailboxes, the department copier/scanner, and office supplies are in the main office suite on the first floor of 2108 G Street.

Unfortunately, because of historic preservation issues, neither building is accessible beyond the first floor. Students needing accessible meeting/working space should consult with the department manager, Andy Johnson.

**Mailing address:**

American Studies

The George Washington University

2108 G Street NW

Washington, DC 20052

Tel. - 202-994-6070

**Department leadership/management (AY 2025-26):**

Jamie Cohen-Cole, Chair

Gayle Wald, Director of Graduate Studies (DGS)

Andy Johnson, Departmental Manager

**Andy** (at [amst@gwu.edu](mailto:amst@gwu.edu)) is your best bet for day-to-day questions (e.g., When do I get paid?)

**Gayle** is best for questions/advice regarding the PhD program (e.g., When should I petition the graduate school to transfer MA credit?)

**Core American Studies Faculty** (see website for more information):

\* = currently not teaching b/c of administrative assignment

Libby Anker

Emily Bock

Jamie Cohen-Cole

Tom Guglielmo

\*Chad Head (Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, CCAS)

Nicole Ivy

Melani McAlister

James McMaster (joint appointment with English)

\*Terry Murphy (Deputy Provost for Academic Affairs)

Dara Orenstein

Suleiman Osman

Gayle Wald

Akae Wright (joint appointment with WGSS)

### **Associated and Affiliated Faculty**

Associated and affiliated faculty are faculty in other units of GWU who identify intellectually with American Studies and/or have expressed an interest in working with American Studies graduate students. The list of affiliate faculty is not a complete list of faculty from outside of American Studies who can be mentors to you. However, it does give you some sense of faculty who have requested a formal affiliation with AMST.

The most up-to-date list of associated and affiliated faculty is on the AMST [website](https://americanstudies.columbian.gwu.edu/associated-affiliated-faculty).

### **II. Overview of the PhD Program**

PhD students must complete **45** credits of coursework (15 courses) before advancing to candidacy, plus **27** credits of dissertation research, for a total of **72** credits. All coursework, examinations, the dissertation, and other requirements for the PhD must be completed within **eight** calendar years. Students must petition the graduate school for an exception to this rule.

The PhD program can be roughly divided into two parts: pre-candidacy and post-candidacy.

In pre-candidacy, a student:

* Completes coursework (12 courses/36 credits, or less, with an MA)
* OF the 12 courses, one each spring semester **must be the Research Seminar** (AMST 6195)
* An additional 9 required hours of coursework are taken in the form of AMST 8998: Advanced Reading and Research
* Completes 1 preliminary and 2 comprehensive exams
* Writes and defends a dissertation prospectus

In post-candidacy, the student is considered ABD, or “All But Dissertation.” In post-candidacy, a student:

* Researches, writes, and defends the dissertation
* Depending on career goals, prepares for the academic job market/outside employment

While students are working on their dissertations, they are encouraged to look for outside funding sources (pre-doctoral fellowships, travel and research fellowships) to supplement (or in some cases supersede) their GWU fellowships. The DGS and faculty mentors can help students identify possible sources of outside funding.

Students who are preparing for the academic job market should be aware that the employment cycle begins in the fall previous to the starting date of employment. So, for example, students will begin applying a year before they hope to begin working as a professor. For such students, the summer before the fifth year of funding is important not just for the dissertation work but for career/employment preparation. To be competitive for academic jobs, students should aim to have drafted at least half of the dissertation by the beginning of the fifth year.

Although the job search process will feel distant to incoming PhD students, they should begin thinking about comprehensive exams and the dissertation from the first year of the program. The department’s Advanced Graduate Workshop—an informal, periodic workshop bringing together students from all years in the program—is designed to help pre-candidacy students anticipate and plan for dissertation work and the academic job search.

Sample 5-Year Schedule

Here is a sample timeline/checklist of a PhD student’s 5 years. Note that this checklist assumes a student entering the PhD program with a BA and on a Regular CCAS Fellowship, not funding from outside of the College. A student entering with an MA may have an accelerated timeline.

Year 1:

* + 6 courses @3 per semester (including Scope and Methods and one research seminar—see below)
  + GTA duties
  + Go to the office hours of faculty whom you don’t encounter through coursework
  + Plan to attend an academic conference (ASA or a local conference of interest)
  + Begin to think about areas for comprehensive exams
  + Prepare to apply to an academic conference; consider writing that might be revised for publication

Summer after Year 1: Guided study (under the supervision of a faculty adviser) for prelimins

Year 2:

* + Take AMST prelim exam at the beginning of the school year
  + 6 courses @3 per semester (including one research seminar—see below). NOTE: The spring research seminar, AMST 6195, will be focused on the **drafting of a dissertation prospectus**
  + GTA duties
  + Continue to go to faculty office hours
  + Submit a proposal to an academic conference and/or revise and submit work for publication
  + Identify and solicit faculty mentors to oversee comprehensive exams
  + End the year with a plan for comprehensive exams
  + Begin thinking about/drafting ideas for the dissertation prospectus (including in AMST 6195 in the spring semester)

Summer after Year 2: Guided study (under supervision of a faculty adviser) in preparation for comprehensive exams

Year 3:

* + Take 2 comprehensive exams by end of the fall (or 5th) semester
  + GTA duties
  + Identify and recruit members of the dissertation committee (by end of 5th semester)
  + Write and defend the dissertation prospectus (by end of 6th semester); leave the defense knowing which chapter you will be writing first
  + Submit a proposal to an academic conference and/or revise and submit work for publication
  + Begin looking for funding opportunities for advanced PhD students (for travel/research/pre-docs)

Summer after Year 3: Write a chapter of the dissertation; and/or conduct field or archival research for the dissertation

Year 4:

* + **This is the year most students on Regular CCAS funding will take a year without GTA duties**
  + Conduct research outside of the DC area as necessary
  + Aim to research, write and draft one chapter per semester, or roughly half of the dissertation by the beginning of year 5
  + Apply for GW funding (for the 5th year) as well as outside funding (travel/research/pre-docs)
  + Submit a proposal to an academic conference and/or revise and submit work for publication
  + If applying for academic jobs in year 5, prepare key materials: academic CV, academic cover letter, writing sample

Summer after Year 4: Write a chapter of the dissertation; and/or prepare materials for the academic job market and for pre- and post-doc fellowships

Year 5:

* Create a plan to complete the dissertation; schedule a defense date
* GTA duties
* Submit a proposal to an academic conference and/or revise and submit work for publication
* Apply for academic jobs, fellowships, and post-docs

**III. Pre-Candidacy (Coursework, Exams, and Dissertation Prospectus)**

Coursework

Most incoming PhD students will take 3 graduate seminars per semester, or 6 per academic year, for a total of 18 credits per academic year, or 36 in the first two years. Students fulfill the remaining 12 credits of coursework required to advance to candidacy through enrollment in AMST 8998: Advanced Reading and Research. This course is the equivalent of independent study and indicates that a student is preparing for comprehensive exams.

45 (credits required before advancing to candidacy, or becoming ABD)

- 36 (credits earned in coursework or coursework + transferred credits)

= 9 (credits earned through enrollment in AMST 8998)

(Once a student is advanced to candidacy—is “ABD,” or “all but dissertation”—they earn their remaining 27 credits by enrolling in AMST 8999: Dissertation Research.)

### Types of courses and course requirements

### There are two kinds of graduate-level (6000 or above) courses in American Studies.

* **Readings** seminars focus on readings and assignments of an instructor’s choice.
* **Research** seminars have less mandatory reading. They may not meet weekly, especially after the midterm. Students in these seminars use the time to generate an original, article-length (25-35 pp.), primary-source-based, research essay under the instructor’s guidance.

Of the 36 hours, or 9 courses, students take before advancing to the dissertation, 9 hours, or 3 courses, are **mandatory** for the PhD in American Studies. They are:

* AMST 6100: Scope and Methods in American Studies (1 semester/3 credits). An introduction to the field of American Studies.
* AMST 6195: Research Seminar in American Studies (2 semesters/3 credits each).

Faculty for AMST 6100 and 6195 vary from year to year, so students will encounter three different AMST faculty members in these courses. For a full list of AMST graduate courses, see the [University Bulletin.](https://bulletin.gwu.edu/arts-sciences/american-studies/#coursestext) For courses offered during a particular semester, see the [Schedule of Classes](https://my.gwu.edu/mod/pws/).

Advising and coursework

Each student begins the program by meeting with the DGS and at least one other faculty member to develop a plan of study. At a minimum, this ad hoc advisory committee meets with the student each fall during the first two years of the program and is a student’s primary source of official mentoring until the student identifies comprehensive exam or dissertation advisers and/or advances to candidacy.

**Students in the first year of the PhD program are required to take AMST graduate seminars.** Exceptions to this rule are rare and are determined by the DGS, in consultation with relevant faculty. We believe that this requirement creates camaraderie and a conveys a sense of the breadth and depth of work in the field of American Studies. It also ensures that students meet and work with a range of AMST core faculty.

After the first year, students are still **strongly encouraged to AMST graduate seminars, including those that may not seem immediately relevant to the student’s declared field of study**. Such courses often end up being important to student’s development.

Students wishing to take courses outside of the department should seek approval from the DGS, who will consult with the student and their advisory committee. It is expected that such external courses will develop competencies students need for their dissertations.

Occasionally a graduate student will petition to earn graduate credit for an undergraduate course (usually at the 3000- or 4000-level). To do so, students must first get permission from the AMST DGS and the course instructor. After they complete the course, the DGS petitions the graduate school for the credit to count toward the PhD. Students earning graduate credit for undergraduate courses will typically strike an agreement with the instructor regarding expectations and extra work.

Students entering with an MA or related degree

Students entering the program with a relevant MA or other master’s degree (MS, M.Ed., MFA) may petition the graduate school to transfer credits to the satisfy the PhD degree.

**Petitions to transfer credit should be submitted to the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) at the end of the student’s first year**. In assessing these requests, the DGS and other faculty members will consider the student’s academic performance in the program, as well as his or her readiness to take comprehensive exams. Any transfer credits awarded *must* contribute directly toward the student’s preparation for candidacy; a maximum of 18 credits may be carried into the program with departmental approval.

Summers

GWU PhD students are paid a stipend and fellowship, and awarded tuition credits, based on a 9-month calendar. University funding packages **do not cover summer tuition**.

Currently, AMST graduate students in good standing receive $5,500 per summer for every summer they are covered by a graduate fellowship. This funding allows them to devote a percentage of the summer to full-time work toward the PhD.

Foreign Language

The department has no foreign language requirement. The department works on a case-by-case basis with students who require reading competency in a language other than English for their dissertation projects. Occasionally the department can support instructional fees related to foreign language study.

Preliminary Exam

PhD students take the AMST prelim at the beginning of the fall semester of their 2nd year. The prelim tests students’ ability to think critically about American Studies as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry; to draw connections and discover themes within this field; and to position themselves intellectual within (or across) fields.

The prelim exam consists of essay prompts. Students are asked to craft three essays in response to these prompts over the course of a seven-hour period, with two hours per essay and an hour for lunch. The prelim exams are written and evaluated collectively by AMST faculty who have taught graduate seminars during a student’s first year. With rare exceptions that must be approved by the DGS, students will take the exam on the same day.

Students will receive a grade of Distinction, Satisfactory Pass, Low Pass, and Fail on the prelim. (Distinction is rare and reserved for extraordinary cases.) To continue on in the program, students must pass the prelim exam. Students who fail the exam may be advised not to continue in the PhD program. Students who receive low pass may be required to re-take the exam; in that case, two low passes may constitute grounds for dismissal from the program. At a minimum, students who fail or receive a low pass will need to consult with the DGS and faculty advisers on next steps.

To prepare for the prelim exam, students will spend the summer after their first year reading and thinking deeply about a series of assigned texts (the “reading list”). The reading list will borrow heavily from material students encountered in their first-year courses. Students will supplement this reading list with a set of texts of their choice, based on their consultation with a faculty adviser. In this way, students will tailor a third of the exam to a topic or area that they deem important to their future dissertation research.

Students will receive reading list for the prelim exam at the end of the spring semester of the first year. By spring break during the first year, they should have designated an individual area of study and constructed a list of texts in consultation with faculty. The entire prelim reading list (faculty-assigned texts + chosen texts) will generally consist of 40 to 50 texts. These will form the basis of all of the exam questions.

During the summer between the first and second years a faculty adviser will meet regularly with students to help them prepare for the exam—both to discuss readings and to discuss strategies for writing essays. If students are not in DC for the summer, meetings will take place virtually.

#### Comprehensive Exams

To advance to the candidacy (the “ABD” stage), in addition to passing a prelim exam students must pass comprehensive exams in two related fields of study. Students must take these exams no later than the end of their 5th semester of study (or earlier for students entering with MA degrees and transferring credit). Students should take both exams within two weeks.

The primary purpose of comprehensive exams is to allow students to read widely and deeply in fields of interest, and to use this reading as an opportunity to locate themselves within these fields. Secondarily, comprehensive exams equip students with the knowledge they need to begin their dissertation research, confident in their command of different fields.

There are no required areas of study for the comprehensive exams. Rather, students design their own fields in conjunction with faculty advisors, and are encouraged to take advantage of faculty strengths to develop a coherent, interdisciplinary program of study. Students may devote one exam field to the comparative study of a non-US culture, if necessary faculty expertise is available. Students are expected to seek out faculty advisement. The DGS can help students with this task.

Each exam field should be supervised by a different faculty member. On occasion, two professors may agree to jointly supervise a single exam field. In such instances, the student and examiners should have a clear agreement about the scope of the exam.

Each of the two comprehensive exams consists of a six-hour written examination. Work is assessed on the scale of Distinction, Satisfactory Pass, Low Pass, and Fail. (Distinction is rare and reserved for extraordinary cases.) Failure usually constitutes cause for dismissal from the program, although with advisory committee and Dean’s approval, a student can be re-examined one time. Two low passes may also be cause for dismissal.

#### Preparation for the Comprehensive Exams

Sample reading lists for comprehensive exams are available in the American Studies Department office. They are intended to map out the basic material that students ought to have mastered before presenting themselves for examination. It is very important to obtain and study copies of recent examinations in fields of interest, for such a study will suggest better than any general directives what competencies are required for a student to do well on these examinations. Yet, because each exam field must be approved by the faculty member responsible for supervising it, students will want to consult closely with their examiners as they put together their reading lists.

In their fifth semester (earlier for students arriving with the MA degree), students should enroll for 9 credits of AMST 8998: Advanced Reading and Research (the equivalent of 3 courses). Such courses are graded by faculty overseeing a student’s exams on a CR/NC (Credit/No Credit) basis; *no letter grade is given for reading courses in preparation for the comprehensive exams*.

#### Dissertation Proposal

The final step of advancing to candidacy is the preparation and defense of a dissertation proposal, produced in consultation with the student’s dissertation director and readers. For students entering with a BA, this step takes place by the end of the 6th semester. During the 6th semester, students register for an additional 3 credits of AMST 8998: Advanced Reading and Research. The proposed dissertation adviser assigns a grade for this course on a CR/NC (Credit/No Credit) basis.

The principal elements of a proposal are as follows:

1. A title, presumably to be used for the dissertation itself.

2. A clear statement of the research problem to be addressed, explaining its importance in the context of existing scholarship. (Which scholars have done most nearly the same thing? Which scholars are most important as models for your work? What do you anticipate your scholarly contribution will be?)

3. A description of the scope of the project. (What subjects are you studying, with what examples, through what period, in what region, etc.?)

4. A statement of methodology and theoretical approach. (By what principles are you selecting and delimiting the subject? What means will you use to analyze the materials? What theoretical frameworks do you expect to employ?)

5. A careful analysis of the primary evidence involved, including nature of the materials, location, limits, sampling techniques, etc.

6. A provisional outline and description of dissertation chapters. (Step #5 may be incorporated within chapter descriptions, if it makes more sense in relation to your dissertation.)

7. A selected bibliography of key secondary sources and of primary materials.

Writing dissertation proposals, like writing dissertations, is often lonely work. Although most students are teaching, they are not taking classes and have no regular places to discuss their evolving work. The department suggests that students find or create a writing group with their peers to aid this process. The DGS can facilitate such groups. A strong dissertation proposal may be used to seek fellowship funding from institutions such as the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Association of University Women, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and again a work group can be helpful in planning grant applications.

Sample copies of dissertation proposals are on file in the American Studies Department office.

#### Defense of Dissertation Proposal

The dissertation director decides when the proposal is ready for circulation to the readers and, after they have had a chance to review the proposal and offer suggestions, determines when to schedule the student’s proposal defense. The defense should occur by the end of the student’s 6th semester (earlier for those with transfer credits).

At the defense, attended only by the student and the dissertation research committee, the student is expected to address any remaining concerns that committee members have about the dissertation project and proposal. The student may also ask the director and readers to discuss any points of disagreement that they have among themselves regarding the dissertation proposal and project. Although students might feel nervous about it, the proposal defense is nearly always a friendly, productive and intellectually stimulating occasion—a precious time when everyone is working together to position the student for success.

At the conclusion of the defense, the dissertation research committee will evaluate the student’s proposal and decide whether to accept the proposal (as is, or with revisions) or to ask the student to rework the proposal for a second defense. Once the committee is satisfied with the proposal, they sign a topic approval form.

### **II. PhD Candidacy/ABD**

#### Advancement to Candidacy

A student is advanced to candidacy after completing all of the pre-candidacy requirements above. Candidacy includes the research, writing and oral defense of the dissertation, the last of which is also known as the Final Examination.

#### Dissertation Committee

The dissertation committee consists of a director (or two co-directors) and at least two readers. At least two members of the committee must be American Studies faculty. If the director is not a member of the GW faculty, a co-director will be named from among the American Studies faculty. Students may also elect to ask two GW professors to co-direct their dissertation. In such instances, the student and co-directors should have a clear agreement about the oversight role that each co-director will play.

The chief task of the dissertation director is to meet regularly with the student and, in general, to oversee the student’s work and progress toward completion of the dissertation. The director takes primary responsibility for supervising the preparation of the dissertation proposal and determines when it is ready for circulation to other members of the committee. Likewise, the director oversees the student’s research and composition of individual dissertation chapters, advising the student on when to distribute them to the rest of the committee for comments. The readers are each responsible for assisting in the preparation of the written proposal and the finished dissertation. The extent of readers’ involvement can vary considerably; the student and director (or co-directors) should have a clear agreement with each reader about her/his intended level of participation.

Although the director and readers should actively support and review the student’s progress, **the primary responsibility for the dissertation rests with the student**. It is a best practice for students to meet with their full dissertation committee at least once a calendar year as a check-in. While a candidate, the student should bring all administrative matters to the attention of the dissertation director or the co-director who is a GW faculty member. Any matter that cannot be handled satisfactorily should be brought to the attention of the Department Chair.

#### Final Examination/Dissertation Defense

After the dissertation has been approved by the director (or co-directors) and the two readers, the director (or co-directors) forms an examination committee and schedules the oral defense of the dissertation, also known as the Final Examination. The examination committee consists of:

* + The dissertation director (who does not speak during the defense)
  + The dissertation committee members
  + An AMST faculty member who is not on the committee (aka the “departmental” examiner)
  + A GWU (or other university) faculty member who is not in American Studies (aka the “outside” examiner)

The student should provide a copy of the complete dissertation to the director (or co-directors) and all members of the examination committee at least three weeks before the scheduled defense. Final Examinations are open to the public, and student often invite other members of the faculty, fellow students, friends and family. Guests observe, but do not participate in, the defense.

At the conclusion of the oral defense, the examination committee and the student’s director (or co-directors) meet in confidence to evaluate the student’s performance and to assess the scholarship presented in the dissertation. At that time the committee will decide whether 1) to accept the dissertation as is, 2) to accept the dissertation subject to requested revisions (which will be conveyed to the dissertation director), or 3) to find the dissertation unacceptable, requiring the student to have her/his dissertation research committee sign off on a revised dissertation.

Once the student has successfully completed the Final Examination and the examination committee has verified that all requested revisions to the dissertation have indeed been made, the student is required to submit the final, approved, properly formatted, complete dissertation and other required forms *electronically*. Instructions for making electronic dissertation submissions can be found at <https://gradpostdoc.gwu.edu/gw-etds> An additional copy should be submitted to the American Studies Department electronically as a PDF file.

Students are responsible for checking with the CCAS Graduate Office about deadlines and to make allowances for possible delays in getting the dissertation into final and acceptable shape for submission.

#### Registration While Writing the Dissertation

While they work on the dissertation, students earn 27 credits of **AMST 8999: Dissertation Research**. Typically, students take 9 credits of AMST 8999 per semester.

After the full number of credits (72) is reached, student register for one credit of CCAS 0940: Continuing Research—Doctoral each semester until they have completed their dissertation. Note that this course is listed each semester in the *Schedule of Classes* under “Columbian College” (CCAS), not AMST.

Academic Leave

Students may petition the Graduate School for academic leave for medical or other reasons. Typically students applying for medical leave do not have to present detailed medical records. During leave, students’ funding and “clock” are paused. There is no academic or financial penalty for academic leave. The DGS can help answer questions about medical insurance during academic leave.

Parental Leave

Currently GWU has no official policy regarding parental leave for PhD students on fellowships. Students wishing to “pause” the program for childbirth or childcare apply for academic leave (see above).