

What's the Use? American Studies After Graduation

some observations by John Ibson, Professor of American Studies at CSUF
(circa 1975)

I continue to be surprised at the large number of majors who are unaware of the potential careers open to those with an American Studies degree. In a very important way, however, I think it is to the credit of this department that that number of majors has increased so dramatically despite little appreciation of the degree's "practical" uses other than as preparation for a teaching career. For once upon a time a good university's most honored purpose was encouraging students to think, not merely to do. We, faculty and students, have absolutely no reason to apologize for taking seriously the development of critical thought as an end, not simply a means. That question you so often hear – "But what's it good for?" – reveals more the orientation of the questioner than it does any limitations of the discipline of American Studies.

There is unfortunately an increasingly powerful sentiment favoring a more practical orientation in higher education, toward making universities more "efficient" and otherwise in step with the dictates of a business-dominated culture, accentuating doing at the expense of thinking and making the university in general more of a vocational school. I have no complaint against vocationally-directed learning as long as it is realistically in tune with the demands of the job market and as long as it doesn't seek to overwhelm other types of learning. Our culture in general has long favored the practical in nearly all aspects of life, with commercially-inspired rationales influencing what ought to be noncommercial activities, much to the detriment of Americans' minds and emotions. We are in sorry shape indeed when what can be one of the few antidotes for unwavering practicality, liberal arts education, is seriously jeopardized. We already have enough Nixons and Haldemans.

I am soundly convinced that a discipline like American Studies fully justifies itself, when properly taught and learned, without being a direct ticket to a specific career. Yet we can hardly be so naïve and insensitive that we ignore economic facts of life except as an object of study. Despite my criticisms of "unwavering practicality," I'd suggest that those facts, when looked at carefully, are reasonably encouraging for American Studies majors, that there are, after all, many practical "uses" of the degree. Something often ignored by the vocationally-oriented programs is that many employers prefer to provide specific skill training themselves and desire people whose education has been broadly-based and rigorous. The breadth of American Studies training is most importantly an intellectual benefit but it also may be an asset in the freedom it allows in career choice – one is not mechanically programmed for only one type of job. Our graduates are currently working in a wide range of fields which required no further institutional education – in management, sales, personnel, and various

types of counseling. Naturally some of these people had to inform their prospective employers exactly what their American Studies training involved – it isn't widely known – and once that was done their B.A. in American Studies was hardly a liability. I'd insist that even if these people never again directly employ materials from their American Studies courses in their occupations, they may well be significantly better people for having majored in American Studies, with some wider horizons and increased capacities for critical thought. The indirect applications of American Studies training are as extensive as one chooses to make them. The subjects of our courses are matters well worth understanding in their own right, but understanding them well can also significantly intensify one's understanding of the complexities of contemporary life.

In the most general sense, American Studies training is valuable for any occupation calling for a keen socio-cultural perspective, and job in which relationships among people is a crucial aspect – from working at some level of government to writing a newspaper column on rock music. The range is so wide that some students are understandably frightened by the very freedom of choice. That this is so is a comment on the horrifying degree to which we are conditioned to think and operate within tidy boundaries. One of the principal motives of interdisciplinary learning is the breaking down of those stagnating boundaries, in the classroom and in one's outside life as well.

There are, of course, more direct ways of "applying" American Studies training, ways in which the major serves as a pre-professional curriculum. Law schools and schools of social work, for example, are very appropriate goals for those with interdisciplinary undergraduate majors. The B.A. in American Studies can be highly useful for other professional programs as well, from journalism to architecture, from public administration to medicine. (A few more doctors with social consciences wouldn't hurt.) The most widely known "use" of the major, of course, is in teaching. Though teaching positions at all levels, elementary school through the university, are far from plentiful nowadays, those whose training has been flexible and wide-ranging will have considerably better chances of finding positions than those schooled in the more traditional disciplines.

The alumnae and alumni of my American Character class may have heard quite enough about my thoughts on the implications of the American inclination to ground identity in occupation. With that in mind, I insist once again that we serve a purpose well beyond job training. Nevertheless, we can't slight the importance of career preparation – I hope these remarks have cleared the air just a bit.