

A Brief History of American Studies

American Interdisciplinary Studies is an amalgam of two different programs with long histories at New Trier. The roots of AIS trace back to the Humanities program created at the west campus in 1966. The Humanities program was a school-within-a-school driven by the National Humanities curriculum. Several schools across the country were involved with this project. It was taught at the west campus only and took place students' junior year because junior year had the most naturally overlapping curriculum. Teachers were excited about the program and attended a three week summer symposium to prepare. In the humanities program, students learned math, science, English, and history. They met periods 1-5 and had completely flexible use of the periods to create their curriculum. Although the subjects still tended to maintain their individual integrity, the group came together for some combined work, speakers, field trips, etc. The subjects were frequently taught in a parallel fashion, but they used common themes (inquiry, identity, pattern and style, diversity, society) to maintain a sense of integration throughout the whole school.

There was much excitement around the new program. Speakers were brought in from all over the country. The speakers were frequently paired with institute days and would address the whole faculty. Students helped design the curriculum.

The other course that was part of the origins of American Interdisciplinary Studies was American Studies, taught at the east campus. American Studies was created in 1976. Originally, the course was integrated in concept and chronology only. The classes basically covered the same chronology (American history and literature from the colonial period to the present) in both English and history and passed in the hallways between periods. Occasionally, the courses would meet together.

As the west campus closed in 1985, significant changes were made to the humanities program. Both math and science were dropped (although this occurred before the west campus actually closed). The courses left were English and history, the same courses that made up the American Studies course. Although the two courses modeled two different forms of integration (the humanities course was more instructionally integrated than the American Studies course; the American Studies course was organized chronologically rather than thematically) there was much pressure to collapse the courses into one. In 1995, the course became American Interdisciplinary Studies rather than American Studies as a nod to the inclusion of the humanities course.

Through an extensive summer grant in 1999, the AIS program was shaped into its current form. At that time there were major differences in the ways the course was taught, some stemming from differences between teams who had been humanities teachers and teams who had been American Studies teachers. Through the summer grant, teachers worked to create an integrated curriculum. Both classes would meet together and the class would be based again around themes. It was at this point that the push to truly integrate the two courses into one unified curriculum began, and much of the current course philosophy was ironed out. A series of chronological thematic units were proposed (Clash of Cultures, Building an American Identity, Identity Crisis: Challenges to Democracy,

Testing the American Dream, Internal and External Responsibilities) and most teachers taught using these themes. After this point teachers began to meet as a whole class for a full 85 minute period. Eventually, due to lack of use and a school-wide space crunch, the second room for AIS was lost and all teachers began to meet with all students for the full period. Part of the work that came out of this summer grant was an AIS website linked from the English and social studies department home pages. Based on our work this year, we've created a new American Studies website and we've linked the 1999 website to our current work. This will be helpful in detailing how the course evolved over the years; much of the material from the previous site will also be useful for teachers.

Currently (2007-2008) there are sixteen teachers teaching 8 sections of AIS at the 9 and 4 levels. Across the teams, teachers use chronological approaches, thematic approaches, and in some cases, a combination of the two. Through a Project of Excellence this year, our goal was to review the AIS program by exploring these specific topics:

- Organization of the curriculum
- Integrated instruction
- Instructional materials
- The nature of co-teaching
- Ways of guiding students to decide whether or not the class is a good fit
- Assessment
- Grading
- Facilities

As an entire course committee, we met during lunch once a month for the entire year and also met each semester for a half-day meeting. During these meetings we had meaningful discussions on all these issues pertaining to AIS, and teachers were able to share their philosophies of the course and find common ground across the entire course committee.

In addition to these meetings, the documents included in this website capture the work we completed. We've organized the documents and sections of the website in a way that we think is logical and usable.

Next year, we will continue meeting to complete and add to the website, share material and discuss the evolving philosophy of the course, especially with new teams forming every year. We will also change the name of the course from AIS to American Studies. The link with the old American Studies course is long over and most high schools and colleges use and understand the term American studies.