In this issue we pay tribute to our students and to a community partner that has provided a rich array of experiences for our students and faculty: The Arab American National Museum. From internships to research opportunities, the AANM has been a valued community partner.

Congratulations, Graduates!

Where Are They Now?
AC Grad Works in Detroit Schools through City Year Program

Caitlin Kelly, originally from Grand Rapids, Michigan, transferred to the University of Michigan from Arizona State University. She graduated in May 2008 with a BA in American Culture. Program Academic Advisor Richard Meisler recently invited Caitlin to visit his class. “She is an intensely curious and intellectually alive person,” Meisler comments. “It was exciting for me to see her pursue her interest in social change following her undergraduate years here.”

When choosing American Culture as her concentration, Caitlin reports that her decision was made easier when she realized that there was not a single American Culture course that she didn’t want to take. Paul Anderson’s “The Culture of Jazz” and Meisler’s “American Politics and Society” were among her favorites.

Following graduation, Caitlin had a strong desire to remain in the state of Michigan. She is presently working for City Year Detroit. City Year, supported by AmeriCorps, is a national organization with programs in 19 U.S. cities and Johannesburg. The Detroit team provides tutoring and mentoring to students in Detroit Public Schools four days a week and also participates in physical service projects. Caitlin has helped to organize a community garden and paint murals within Detroit Public Schools.

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Dear Alumni, Students, Faculty, and Friends of the Program in American Culture,

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Working in public and community settings, whether they are heritage museums or teen groups at public libraries, many of our students participate, first-hand, in America’s cultural production. Such students often report to us their terrific learning experience. Research on teaching and learning backs up these anecdotal reports. Working together to explore the nation’s big questions in real-world settings has proven to be mutually inspiring for students and faculty; it also inspires those of us whose teaching remains more bounded by the classroom walls.

We have outstanding public scholars on the faculty, and their range of activities and interests can be suggested by some examples. Professor Joseph P. Gone, who holds a joint appointment in Psychology and who achieved tenure this year, is deeply engaged in seeking to improve the delivery of mental health care to American Indian reservation and urban communities from Detroit to Montana through his research on American Indian psychology and creativity that have produced the American community in the United States, is also known to the Arab American National Museum, where students under the direction of Evelyn Alsultany regularly intern. These are just a few examples of the kind of community-based work that is currently going on in AC. Our students visit Ojibwe communities “up north,” they opt, in some of their courses, to write up community-based research projects in lieu of those drawing on the resources of our terrific libraries.

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This year we turn our attention, then, to scholarship that engages the public and the community. In keeping with the theme, we will honor the Arab American National Museum at our commencement luncheon. I hope this newsletter provides you with some insight into one vibrant aspect of AC, and continuing insight into the program’s vitality.

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Student Scholarship

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Research Topics in AC350 Approaches to American Culture

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“Marijuana, Masculinity, and HBO’s Entourage: An Examination of American Television’s Representation of Current Culture”

“American Music: Sonic and Social Citizenship”
by Eli Hager
Double Major in American Culture and English

This essay looks at how citizens enter into the “musical life” of America. How do certain definitions of what counts as American music “sonically exclude some citizens,” Hager inquires? His argument is motivated by the conviction that “morally engaged” citizenship should challenge restrictive notions of American music. He appreciates the need for “sonic spaces” that respect cultural “interaction, competition, and change.”

Hager thoughtfully weighs the pros and cons of three framings of American music: affirmative notions, restrictive notions of American music. He appreciates the need for ‘sonic spaces’ that respect cultural “interaction, competition, and change.”

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Recognizing a Key Community Partner

The Arab American National Museum (AANM) in Dearborn has been selected for special recognition as a key community partner of the Program in American Culture. For the first time, we are using the occasion of our end-of-term luncheon, a celebration of graduating seniors and their families, to recognize a community organization that has worked with faculty and students in theProgram for many years.

Director Greg Dowd notes that this occasion gives the Program a chance to recognize an organization that has “truly served as a partner in the positive development of our diverse region.” The AANM embodies the Program’s values of diversity, excellence, and collaboration, Dowd observes, “making it a natural choice” to inaugurate this honor.

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Program in American Culture

Director: Gregory Dowd
Ethnic Studies Directors: Vince Diaz, Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies
Maria Cotera, Latina/o Studies
Tiya Miles, Native American Studies

Mission:
The Program in American Culture promotes publicly engaged and socially committed scholarship and teaching aimed at understanding the struggles and creativity that have produced the societies and cultures of America. In particular, we seek to illuminate the significance, the lived experience, and the relation among race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and class, both within and beyond national borders. The Program brings the history and interpretive strategies of ethnic studies into conversation with critical approaches to literature, history, cultural studies, and social sciences, as well as with knowledge produced outside the boundaries of the university.

Program in American Culture News

Graphic Design and Layout: Veronica Garcia/Judith Gray

Editor:
Julie Ellison

Please submit any changes, corrections, letters, updates, and/or suggestions to Judith Gray, judygray@umich.edu.

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Denise Illich
Olivia P. Maynard
Andrea Fischer Newman
Andrew C. Richner
S. Martin Taylor
Katherine E. White

The University of Michigan is an equal-opportunity, affirmative-action employer.
Breaking the News.....
When I Told My Father I Was Majoring in American Culture

“What the hell?” he wanted to know. “What the hell kind of major is ‘American Culture’?”

Now, to be fair, my dad was a great fan of a liberal arts education. He was not telling me to go to the engineering school or get a business degree.

Sociology, he could deal with.

History, he liked.

Anthropology, he knew what that was.

English, even, would be OK: I might have trouble finding a job but at least I’d be reading good books.

But American Culture, he couldn’t get his head around. What was it? It was so ordinary and so obscure, at the same time.

I tried to explain. It’s what we produce and what we consume and why we produce it and consume it. It’s what we see on TV and hear on the radio, it’s the games we play and the cities we build and the people that inhabit them. It’s about dominant cultures and subcultures and how groups of people behave and what really motivates them. It’s all around us. It’s the life we live.

“I’m paying for college so you can learn about THAT?” he asked. We were sitting at the dining room table in his apartment, and he was kind of banging his fist on it, as he often did when he got excited — or incensed.

Yes, dad, you’re paying for that.

Well, as it happened, shortly after graduating, I found a way to get paid reasonably well for something that I love to do – namely, writing about that obvious, ordinary, every-day thing called American culture. And I’m still doing it. And when my dad’s law partners and his friends read some of these stories on the front page of the New York Times, and when they hear I got a Pulitzer, and they ask him, ‘how does your daughter get her ideas?’ he tells them, “Well, she majored in American Culture.”

* * * * *

Just in case, on this triumphant day, you feel, as I did when I was sitting in your place, a few butterflies in your stomach. Just in case anyone here is second-guessing the choices they made when they were in college, or experiencing some trepidation about what is to come next that they are leaving it, I bring you good news. You are among the lucky ones.

If the American Culture program is anything like it was when I attended, you have been inculcated with a skill that is sorely needed at this juncture in our cultural evolution: critical thinking. You have been taught to look at your own culture as an ethnographer, and to interpret it for others. You have been taught to synthesize the personal and the sociological. You have been taught to question the standard interpretations of historical and contemporary events, and to offer alternatives.

Those are rare skills, and they will come in handy. They will come in handy whether you find your way into a job in high finance or community organizing. They will come in handy whether you pursue a career in law or sports or academia or politics or, as I hope some of you will, in forging the next generation of American journalism. - Amy Harmon

Amy Harmon is a national correspondent for the New York Times. She won a 2008 Pulitzer Prize for her series, "The DNA Age," which examines the burdens and benefits of new genetic technology on American life. This is excerpted from her American Culture commencement address, 2009. To read the complete text, visit our website at http://www.lsa.umich.edu/ac

Jonathan Tenezapf
Class of 2010
Major in Biology and Minor in Native American Studies

As a freshman entering the University of Michigan, little did I know that I would eventually declare a minor in Native American Studies. During my sophomore year, I decided to take a course on a religion other than my own and ended up enrolling in Religion 267—Native Religious Spiritual Traditions—with absolutely no idea what to expect. After reading an unbelievably powerful text in this course—God is Red by Vine Deloria, Jr.—I was shocked to see the perils that Euro-Americans had brought to Native America through the imposition of Christianity and Western world views.

Over the course of this class, I began to become enlightened about parts of the history of this country I had never come across in any history course in the past. Ultimately, it triggered my interest in learning more.

As a minor, I have taken courses in religion, literature, anthropology, history, and writing—all over the map.

Every NAS professor I have taken a course with has been extremely kind, approachable, and stimulating. They bring their passion into the classroom. They are teaching these courses because they love the material—a huge incentive for students to want to be in the class as well.

Jonathan’s Picks

AMCULT 205 Native American Literature: Great Lakes Ojibwe Tales (Dr. Meg Noori)

Students encounter both written and oral literature by Native people in the Great Lakes Region, in particular the Anishinaabeg. The fun and relaxed atmosphere in this class helps create a great learning environment, and the stories and texts chosen were some of the best I’ve read at the University. I’ve kept them all.

AMCULT 338/HISTORY 338 Native American Women’s History (Professor Tiya Miles)

This course breaks down the history of interactions between the Euro-American and Native American people from the perspective of women. In this course, we try to wrestle with primary sources to learn about the lives of Native women. A combination of lecture, discussion, videos, and visits by guest lecturers all help to bring forth ideas about Native American women’s history.

AMCULT 496 Amerindians and the Lettered City: Rewriting History Against the Grain (Professor Gustavo Verdesio)

Students get to learn about indigenous people not only in North America but also in Central and South America. The course emphasizes the writing systems and forms of communication used by Native people. The small class size allows the students and Professor Verdesio to get to know each other and gives the opportunity for everyone’s voice to be heard.

AC Curriculum Highlight:
Community-Based Courses

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AMCULT 301: Detroit Politics and Community Organizing (Prof. Scott Kurashige)

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A Student Reflects on NAS Minor

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In the other direction, Penny Von Eschen has set up exhibits in the political heart of our republic, the Capitol Building itself. More locally, Julie Ellison, our undergraduate director, has this year had students assist Ann Arbor teens facing the challenge of college applications through a course titled “Getting In.” Detroit is a focus of Scott Kurashige’s undergraduate teaching and his scholarly research. Dearborn, a near neighbor to Ann Arbor and home to the largest Arab-American community in the United States, is also home to the Arab American National Museum, where students under the direction of Evelyn Alsultany regularly intern. These are just a few examples of the kind of community-based work that is currently going on in AC. Our students visit Ojibwe communities “up north,” they opt, in some of their courses, to write up community-based research projects in lieu of those drawing on the resources of our terrific libraries.

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Spring 2010

American Culture News

The Program in American Culture at the University of Michigan

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