What are the expectations for my success?

- We expect you to move from being a consumer of knowledge to a producer of original knowledge.
- In class, we expect you to be an engaged and active member of the learning community—to talk, collaborate, bring ideas, and write at a sophisticated level.
- We also expect you to participate in the larger learning community outside of class. That means scholarly activities—presenting your work at conferences, attending or even arranging colloquia and brown bags, and working on publications.
- In American Studies, we also hope that your work might consider the broader social contexts in which it is produced, and we encourage you to consider these issues explicitly with your colleagues and faculty.

Most of all, we want to see you grow as a thinker and communicator of knowledge.

Survival Knowledge for the Transition to Graduate School
Often Unspoken Assumptions

Think of graduate school as a whole process in which you are learning about the profession and self-representation as much as you are learning about new theories and methodologies!

Attendance. The general expectation in graduate school is that you will not miss any classes during the semester unless you are ill or have an emergency of some kind. If you must miss a class, inform your professors as soon as possible and stay caught up on the work.

Contributing to seminars. In most graduate seminars in American Studies, students are expected to generate much of the content for your classroom time together. This requires not only that you have read the assigned materials, but that you have made notes and thought about the readings or viewings. Come to class with observations about the reading, cohesive comments, and/or questions prepared. Every student is expected to contribute substantively during every class session.

Developing your own analysis or critique. Graduate training is focused on analysis and critique (as in deep engagement, not only negative assessment) of the class materials. The generic questions you should be prepared to assess are:

- What is the argument?
- What is/are the methodological approach/es? What are the framing theories?
- How was the research conducted (sources and methods)?
- Who are the intended audiences?
- How/why is the intervention significant?
- How does it contribute to larger conversations occurring within American Studies and related fields?

Respect other viewpoints in the classroom. Good class discussion and scholarly exchange requires putting our ideas out there and learning from the responses. In a diverse scholarly
environment, you may encounter ideas that seem uncomfortable or even threatening. Remember that good learning requires discomfort, risk, and receptivity. Practice respecting speakers who have quite different experiences and points of view. Be a good listener and an active and respectful learner. Open yourself up to other disciplinary perspectives and positions. This kind of intense and interactive exchange or challenge is at the heart of good American Studies scholarship.

**Take responsibility for your own learning.** At the graduate level, professors will likely not articulate what exactly you should be learning or how to learn it. Nor will each class session touch on everything you read for class. Nonetheless, you should read and try to master all the course material. You are preparing yourself to become a professional scholar, so it is your responsibility to dive in and grapple with the subject matter—be active! Success at this involves a couple of things. Because the reading loads for graduate level courses are large, students need to learn to scan materials quickly for the core of the argument and contribution. Good note-taking or recording skills (such as keeping a reading journal) are a must. Learn how you learn most effectively and practice those techniques.

**Planning your graduate career.** Take responsibility for mapping out your graduate and professional career. Don’t expect advisors to initiate this for you. The American Studies program provides you with an abundance of resources for developing your scholarly interests. Be proactive in seeking out resources and advice. Especially at the beginning of your graduate program of study, balance requirements with new and growing interests. Map out a rough schedule for yourself—2 years if you are a fulltime M.A. student and 5 years if you are a fulltime Ph.D. student—but revisit and revise your schedule frequently with your advisors. Allow for flexibility as you gain new knowledge and uncover new opportunities.

**Cultivating mentors.** You should not hesitate to seek out scholarly mentors either among the core department or affiliate faculty. Relationship with mentors may be one of the most important of this period of your life—and it may last lifelong. How do you find a mentor? Be proactive about identifying professors whose interests you share. Make an appointment to visit them during office hours. Invite them for lunch or coffee. Take their classes. Join working groups and attend events where you may have the opportunity to interact with professors outside of the classroom. Most important, get to know your mentor! Give him or her the opportunity to learn about your work and your scholarly plans in detail; ask and learn about his or her current projects and approaches to your mutual interests. Developing a good mentor/mentee relationship takes time, patience, respect, and care.

**Asking for help.** What do you do when, as often happens, particularly in the first year of graduate school, you feel overwhelmed with the workload and are entertaining doubts about graduate school? This is such a common first year experience that it can seem like a cliché, but it is serious business. Ask for help from your peers, professors, and from professional counselors on campus earlier rather than later. If you feel you have miscalculated about how many courses you can handle, or what size semester project you took on, see your professor immediately and seek advice. Professors are much more likely to grant you flexibility in assignments or deadlines if you take responsibility to let them know you are in trouble well in advance of the deadline. If you take an incomplete, be sure to follow up quickly with the professor; negotiate a firm plan for
when you will deliver the unfinished coursework. Stick to that deadline. Not checking in with the professor for an entire semester after the incomplete was assigned may result in disaster—or an F grade!

**Fighting graduate school doldrums.** Acquiring and practicing professional research skills is challenging—no doubt about it. One strategy for fighting the doldrums is developing an area of scholarly research that you feel passionate about. Another is to choose at least one class or project per semester that you feel particularly excited about. Remember to practice some balance in your life. Take care of your health. Adopt a relaxation practice that works for you. Observe a regular day off that you use to refresh and renew yourself. Consider developing a peer support network by organizing or joining a writing or study group.

**Improving your writing skills.** Few of us write as well as we will need to produce good quality scholarship. Pay attention to and ask for feedback about your writing skills. Start working on improving them now. Writing is a craft. It takes hard work and a lot of practice for most of us. Improve your writing so that you can put yourself in the position to express your original scholarly ideas precisely and with conviction. Get in the habit of near daily writing. Ask your professors and your good peer writers for guidelines and strategies.

**Improving your research skills.** Good quality professional level scholarship requires a thorough grasp of the primary, secondary, and tertiary sources available for your research. Since you are engaged in interdisciplinary research, this will be challenging, since you must understand the ways information is gathered, processed, organized, and communicated in two or more fields. Develop and practice hybrid approaches to discovering relevant sources and literature:

- Pick the brains of professors and knowledgeable peers
- Identify key sources and mine their footnotes
- Check the resources beyond your home library
- Ask a reference librarian for help
- Become familiar with the key reference sources in your fields and use them
- Shelf read and browse journals

Take a course in bibliographic instruction and cultivate a set of experts who can help you develop the best and most efficient strategies for identifying sources.

**Pursuing complaints.** There is a chain of command at the university that should be followed. Complaints about a particular class or professor should always begin with that professor. Make an appointment to discuss the situation in detail face to face. The DGS is there to help with advice, but the next step in the chain of command is to inform the chair of the department about the situation. You may also wish to consult the Graduate Ombuds Office where you can be assured of impartial and confidential conversation and perspective.

**Think about how you represent your graduate program.** We are where you have carefully chosen to pursue a graduate degree. We work hard to provide the highest quality program we can. We are not perfect. The reputation of our program depends on everyone in our American
Studies community. Your success depends partly on the reputation of our programs. Help us build the best program we can. If something is not right, bring it to our attention so that we can address it.

Professionalism. Good guidelines for professional comportment include promptness, careful preparation for the work you do, interacting respectfully with professors, peers, and staff people, and acting and speaking with thought and deliberation. Avoid gossiping, acting out, and malicious backbiting. Academe is a small and peculiar little world; these negative practices have a way of becoming known and coming back to haunt you.

Know the rules and requirements of your degree program. Every student should become familiar with the department’s requirements and options for their degree program. This information can be found on the department’s website under Graduate Studies M.A. or Ph.D. program Overview. Similarly, do learn the Graduate School’s rules and requirements governing your degree program. These can be found at www.gradschool.umd.edu under Graduate Catalog. Deadlines for students contemplating graduation are posted every semester on Testudo. Students are responsible for informing themselves about and meeting these deadlines. Do not expect to be reminded. Some of these deadlines are do or die!

Present your work at conferences. A key component of scholarly development centers on intellectual exchange. Act early and frequently to present your ideas at local symposia and at regional and national conferences. We improve our scholarship much more efficiently when we present it to the scholarly community and hear criticisms and responses. CHASA is an especially convenient venue for your first foray into conference presentations. Often students and faculty work together to put sessions forward.

Back up your computer files religiously. It is not a matter of whether your hard drive will fail, it is a matter of when. Seriously! Do it! Start tonight!