

February 28, 2024

TO: Members of the Board of Trustees

FROM: Anne D'Alleva, Ph.D.  
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs



RE: Establishment of the Department of Social and Critical Inquiry

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Board of Trustees establish the Department of Social and Critical Inquiry in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

BACKGROUND:

The new Department of Social and Critical Inquiry joins four non-departmentally organized units into a single department. The existing units that are forming the new department are: the American Studies Program (AMST), Asian and Asian American Studies Institute (AAASI), Native American and Indigenous Studies Initiative (NAIS), and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program (WGSS).

The units offer large courses that serve a significant percentage of UConn's general education population alongside degree programs that allow students to engage deeply with these fields of study. Several existing academic programs will be housed in the new Department: a major, minor, and Graduate Certificate in American Studies; minors in Asian, Asian American, and India Studies; the Native American and Indigenous Studies minor; the major and minor in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Graduate Certificate. This work is crucial, as our state and nation are engaging in dialogues about the value of a pluralistic society; the Department will equip students with the tools to understand and engage such discussions as informed, ethical, invested citizens.

A total of 31 existing faculty are expected to form the Department of Social and Critical Inquiry. The formation of a single department from multiple separate units will provide more efficient administrative and curricular processes. This includes the ability to tenure faculty within the new Department, reduced administrative burden in areas such as course scheduling, improved sustainability in leadership, and to develop new programmatic synergies across all areas of research, teaching, service, and community engagement. The new Department is expected to increase the recruitment and retention of historically excluded and marginalized students, faculty, and staff.

The Department of Social and Critical Inquiry will be effective as of July 1, 2024.

# **Department of Social and Critical Inquiry**

## **Board of Trustees Proposal**

### *Rationale*

The new Department of Social and Critical Inquiry activates the synergistic strengths and resources of four non-departmentally organized units. Specifically, the American Studies Program (AMST), Asian and Asian American Studies Institute (AAASI), Native American and Indigenous Studies Initiative (NAIS), and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program (WGSS) will join to form the Department. These units and programs of study have long advocated for greater institutional presence and commitment. The new Department generates University-wide transformation by providing continuity and increased capacity to meet the original intent of the constitution of the institute of Asian and Asian American Studies; the two programs of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and American Studies; and the Native American and Indigenous Studies Initiative. As the Hartford, Stamford, and Waterbury campuses are designated federally recognized Minority Serving Institutions, this Department improves the ability of the university to meet its mission of offering equitable and transformative education.

The Department of Social and Critical Inquiry builds on decades of generative impact in teaching, research, and community engagement, and is primed to advance deep, wide-ranging advances for UConn's student population and the State of Connecticut. The units forming the Department have responded to student desire for curricular and programmatic offerings that are responsive to the distinctiveness of culture and identity, and forward-thinking by envisioning new collaborative pathways to knowledge, recognition, recuperation, and healing. Serving a significant percentage of UConn's general education population, the units have offered large, capacious courses in their areas as well as degree programs that allow students to engage deeply and specifically with issues of social justice, the nature and formation of U.S. society, systemic racism, settler colonialism, oppression, militarism, war, historically excluded and racially othered communities, and social privilege. Departmentalization also affords stronger collaboration across the overlapping geographies of gender and sexuality, Indigeneity, U.S. empire, and the emergent field of Global Asias and Transpacific Studies found among the constituent units. In addition, the units have expanded their impact even further by spearheading the pop-up courses *Confronting Anti-Asian Racism* and *Transformation Now*, which have reached thousands of undergraduate students. In terms of the State of Connecticut, the units have and will continue to support the development of K-12 teaching and curricula in the areas of Asian American and Pacific Islander studies, Indigenous and Native American studies, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other sexual orientations and gender identities studies, and racism. The units under the new Department have evidenced sustained commitment to UConn's students, communities, and the State of Connecticut.

As both the demographics of the State and of UConn's undergraduate population have become increasingly diverse, the Department will enable a multifaceted transformative impact, offering responsive and innovative curriculum, community engagement, and groundbreaking research. This work is crucial, as our state and nation are engaging in dialogues about the value of a pluralistic society; the Department will equip students with the tools to understand and engage

such discussions as informed, ethical, invested citizens. Further, the sites of knowledge and critical thinking skills offered through the Department's curriculum and programming are cornerstone to a liberal arts education. The Department will also enable more focalized work across UConn's regional campuses, serving both the diverse student population and the communities in which they live. The work of the Department will build on UConn's strengths and commitments, partnering with such entities as the Human Rights Institute, and will advance important ethical obligations to the State's tribal nations by developing curriculum and serving Indigenous students. The Department's community-facing, justice-oriented initiatives will expand upon UConn's record of leadership in service to the state, the nation, and the world, open transformative partnerships, and leverage additional philanthropic and external grant-based resources.

The Department will unite existing programs and institutes to continue and amplify their work at a critical time in the history of the University, the State, and the world. This new Department will support the University, as one of the nation's oldest land grant institutions, in teaching, conducting research, and providing service and outreach to communities. The Department will not only leverage the collective expertise and ethical commitments of its faculty to produce ground-breaking interdisciplinary research and scholarship but also more sustainable, equitable, and just ways of life. It is our goal to gain a global reputation for research, teaching, and community engagement that distinguishes the University at the same time it enhances the quality of life in the state of Connecticut and beyond. The Department also addresses our commitments to the State of Connecticut for enhanced K-12 education on the subjects engaged by the Department. Finally, through all of the above, the Department will create an institutional hub for race, transnational, Indigenous, gender, and sexuality studies at the University. This vibrant intellectual community will advance efforts to recruit and retain historically excluded and marginalized students, faculty, and staff.

The Department will serve as the institutional home for several existing academic programs: a major, minor, and Graduate Certificate in American Studies; minors in Asian, Asian American, and India Studies; the Native American and Indigenous Studies minor; the major and minor in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Graduate Certificate.

### *Mission*

The primary aim of the Department is to support multi-, trans-, and interdisciplinary, and publicly-engaged faculty whose work spans national and worldwide contexts. The Department promotes scholarly production and pedagogies about historical and contemporary economic, social, and political processes, including community partnerships. Department faculty emerge from current (2024) CLAS units, advancing several decades of pedagogical, scholarly, and social justice oriented research, teaching, and programmatic agendas. The Department scaffolds these established programs using new, innovative configurations to advance academic and scholarly production on past and present intellectual, cultural, economic, and political contributions in the U.S. and specific regions of the world, and across disciplines focused on various gender-based, transnational, diasporic, and Indigenous communities; and to provide innovative, cross-disciplinary teaching practices and resources.

### *Structure*

The proposed Department will be housed in CLAS and report to CLAS, functioning with institutional powers and purview as an academic department. This institutional shift from a separate institute and programs enables the following new capacities: (1) to hire and recommend tenure, promotions, and salary increases for faculty housed within the Department; (2) to centralize and reduce labor demands on tasks such as course scheduling; (3) to develop new programmatic synergies across all areas of research, teaching, service, and community engagement; (4) to cultivate and expand a sustainable pool of faculty to serve in leadership positions; (5) and to increase the recruitment and retention of historically excluded and marginalized students, faculty, and staff.

At present, we anticipate more than 25 tenure system faculty members to have at least partial appointments in the new Department. Many of these individuals are currently jointly appointed between one of the institutes/programs and a CLAS department. In addition, 6 in-residence faculty members are fully appointed in one of the existing units and will transition their appointments to the Department once it is formed. There are no plans to shift or reduce staff in the transition from independent units into the Department.

### *Bylaws:*

A bylaws document has been prepared for ratification upon the formal creation of the Department. This document includes an introduction followed by articles on the following topics:

- Article 1: Department Approval
- Article 2: Department Structure
- Article 3: Leadership and Governance
- Article 4: Committees
- Article 5: Additional Department Policies
- Article 6: Definitions
- Article 7: Grievances
- Article 8: Review of and Amending Bylaws

With the establishment of the new Department, the following will cease to exist in their current form: American Studies Program, Asian and Asian American Studies Institute, Native American and Indigenous Studies Initiative, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program.

### *Timeline:*

The process of developing the Department began in Spring 2021 through year-long process led by a working group including directors of the units and senior faculty members with affiliations across units. During the 2021-2022 academic year, large meetings and topic-specific focus groups were held to discuss various aspects of governance and to construct possible organization models for the new Department. Further discussions took place during academic year 2022-2023. In Fall 2023 the faculty voted on whether to join a new Department, and 93% voted in favor. In

February 2024 they voted to accept the name of “Department of Social and Critical Inquiry.” The bylaws of the Department have been fully drafted and will be ratified upon approval of the departmental proposal. The Department will be effective as of July 1 2024.