PROPOSAL FOR A JUNIOR-SENIOR CLUSTER COURSE

(cover sheet)

(the proposal coordinator may duplicate this sheet and distribute to faculty participants)

Please type:

Titre of proposed course: American Culture (Anth 315)

When will this course be offered?: Winter 98

Title of cluster: American Studies

Name of cluster proposal coordinator: Sue Danielson

Please address the following matters in your narrative, keying your text to the corresponding item below:

A. COURSE DESCRIPTION (100 words or less).

B. COURSE DEVELOPMENT. Please indicate whether the course is based on an existing course (and if so, specify), or is a new course in development. If the course is a revision of an existing course, please explain what form the revision will take (this may be addressed under item C).

C. GENERAL EDUCATION GOALS. Please describe how your pedagogical goals for the course promote the goals of General Education as adopted by the Faculty Senate. Please review the relevant sections of the General Education Working Group Report, or the September 16, 1994, report of the General Education Committee (both documents are available in the Office of University Studies, 445 NH). Applicants are reminded that the junior-senior cluster courses are expected to focus on program goals related to Human Experience and to Ethical Issues and Social Responsibility, while continuing to build on Inquiry and Communication program goals. Course instructors should use active learning strategies and challenge students to display increasingly sophisticated research and communication abilities. Examples of strategies for each of the General Education program goals are listed in the General Education Working Group Report and in the General Education Committee report (also, please be advised that faculty development events bearing on these strategies will take place in the Winter and Spring, 1995 terms). Attention should also be given to how the course functions in tandem with other courses in the cluster in working toward curricular integration within the cluster.

D. COURSE OUTLINE. Please provide a detailed outline of the proposed course. This need not be a completed syllabus, but should include an outline of topics, a preliminary reading list, and the name(s) or instructor(s) committed to teaching the course during its first year.
AMERICAN STUDIES CLUSTER COURSE PROPOSAL  
ANTH 315--AMERICAN CULTURE  
Instructor:  Tom Biolsi  
8 March 1997

A.  COURSE DESCRIPTION  This course approaches American culture through an examination of the imagination of Americans about science and technology, the body, race, gender, sexual orientation, family, nation, and the future.

B.  COURSE DEVELOPMENT  
This course was originally designed and taught by Martha Balshem. With Balshem's resignation from the Anthropology Department, I have taken it over and will teach it for the first time in Winter 1998. Although it will formally be the same course presently listed in the catalog, I will design it from the ground up with the American Studies Cluster and University Studies in mind, along with its functions in the departmental curriculum. The University Studies Committee should be advised that this proposal (submitted mid-March 1997) is a description of curricular work in progress, and that comments and suggestions are welcomed.

C.  GENERAL EDUCATION GOALS  This course will be based on methodological insights derived from traditional critical theory (the "Frankfurt School") and from recent innovations in marxist cultural studies and postmodernist cultural theory: namely, the
proposition that much can be learned by a critical reading of
"our own" culture.

1. Inquiry and Critical Thinking. The instructor takes
"critical thinking" to mean serious intellectual reflection based
on a awareness of the necessarily constructed (and, therefore,
conventional) and merely heuristic (and, therefore, provisional)
status of all concepts, all knowledge. This is emphatically not
to say that no knowledge can ever be "true," but that all
knowledges are both situated and partial (both in the sense of
incomplete, and in the sense of partisan). The point of this
epistemological premise is not to deny the validity of
"positivist" knowledges, or scientific and empirical studies in
an undergraduate education. Rather, the point is connected to
the larger goal of University Studies in developing mature
thinking among our students. A mature thinker in the late 1990s,
whatever her field or profession, must necessarily be highly
self-reflective and comfortable with a world organized by
profoundly different, even conflicting, and certainly changing
points of intellectual reference. I recognize, of course, that
this is one conceptualization of "critical thinking" that will
coexist more or less peacefully with very different
conceptualizations among the faculty teaching UnSt courses.

This course will approach American Culture on the basis of
an examination of American "imaginaries." The central organizing
principle of the course is an open question: What insights can
we gain by examining the way Americans imagine things and people in their world? The assumption is that by bringing imaginaries into focus, many fruitful questions can be asked: What cultural assumptions and premises are involved here that make the things imagined possible to imagine as such? What matters are foregrounded and backgrounded, taken for granted or problematized? Who and what are made normal/abnormal/paranormal, natural/unnatural, moral/immoral/amoral, true/false, right/wrong, central/marginal by this imaginary? Who is thereby empowered to speak, write, and represent reality authoritatively, and who is silenced? How are the ideas in this imaginary connected to ideas drawn from other American imaginaries? Both the (heuristic) questions and the (provisional) answers will require disciplined intellectual work and revision of ideas on the part of students. While the readings and lectures will provide possibilities and examples of how to "read" or "deconstruct" elements of American culture, the work of the course will be a matter of student creativity in arriving at insights about American "common sense" knowledge on their own.

2. Communication. The course will require three 5-page papers. The papers will be expected to convey original ideas clearly and persuasively, and to use standard humanities/social science referencing where appropriate.

3. Diversity. Diversity issues will be directly addressed in two venues:
a) There, of course, is no such thing as "American Culture," but there is rather, in oversimplified terms, a plurality of cultures. Students will be encouraged to examine both "mainstream" and "marginalized" imaginaries, and to consider the relationships and dynamics between them.

b) One of the central questions in the course is the power relations inevitably entailed in any "culture." Seeing the world in a particular way—having a particular worldview—necessarily privileges some people as it disadvantages others. Certainly I would argue and attempt to convince students that this matter can never be escaped in human societies.

4. Ethics and Social Responsibility. If inequality and power can never be escaped in human endeavors, than a principled and intellectually honest person will address directly the question of social responsibility and social justice from the beginning. There can never be "pure" knowledge divorced from politics, ethics and accountability, or so I will argue if only for Socratic effect. To the extent that we recognize the constructedness, arbitrariness, and contingency of what we hold to be true, we necessarily accept responsibility for "the way things are." The alternative is the bad faith of putting our heads in the sand and hiding behind "the way things are." I will encourage students to address the larger "political" questions (broadly understood to be about struggles over social justice and the sides we take or do not take in those struggles) that are
implicated in their readings of American culture. This course aims explicitly to "politicize" the curriculum in the sense outline above.

D. COURSE OUTLINE

1. Technoscientific Imaginaries.

Science is the last remaining American discourse that can effectively claim status as a metalanguage above politics, subjectivity, "bias," and fiction.¹ How do Americans imagine science to be "above it all"? Does science stand "above" American culture and its metaphors? Possible topics: "Culture wars" in Science Studies, the Social Text fiasco of 1996.

2. Imagining the Body and the Self. The body is a fruitful site for examining American culture because it is a nexus of beliefs about health and disease, race, gender and sexual orientation, and family. Possible topics: AIDS, standards of female beauty, privacy, rape, sexual harassment.

3. Others of Invention. How are "others" imagined by Americans, both internal others (minority races, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants) and foreign others? How are the boundary lines drawn in imagination? Possible topics: "racial" difference, "sex"

¹Consider, for example, how at one time, Law also could legitimately claim to be an objective, law-like metalanguage, but that by the late 1990s law is widely viewed as hopelessly partisan, subjective, political, biased, unreliable—indeed, unjust.
differences, fictitious others (artificial intelligence, aliens, cyborgs).

4. Visions of American Futures. The last topic will engage students in analysis of an American expression of a vision of the future (film, fiction, political ideology—something of their choosing). Possible topics: science fiction, utopian and dystopia ideologies.
Frankenberg, Ruth

Ginsbrug, Faye, and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, eds.
1990 *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*. Beacon.

Haraway, Donna J.

Kaplan, Amy and Donald E. Pease, eds.

Lavenda, Robert

Lutz, Catherine, and Jane Collins
1993 *Reading National Geographic*. Univ. of Chicago Pr.

Marcus, George, ed.
1995 *Technoscientific Imaginaries*. Univ. of Cal. Pr.

Martin, Emily

19 *Flexible Bodies: The Role of Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of Aids*. Beacon.

O'Barr, William M.

Ryan, Michael, and Avery Gordon, eds.

Stoeltje, Beverly
1996 *Snake Charmer Queen: Ritual, Competition and*

Yanagisako, Sylvia, and Carol Delaney, eds.