

Carol Stewart
Am St 304
Professor Mike Taylor
Op-Ed #1-American Studies Major?
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American Studies Teaches You to Read America Before You Try to Lead in It.

I did not switch into American Studies because I wanted an easier major. I switched because I wanted a major that matched reality.

The moment it clicked was BYU's Career Fair. I was sitting at the American Studies booth, representing the major with a name tag that seemed to invite the same question over and over: What is American Studies, exactly? Students and others passing by were not trying to be rude. They were simply interested, asking, "What are you going to do with this degree?" They wanted a definition, a job list, and proof that the major was not a polite way of saying, "I like interesting topics." Or, I just need to graduate in something—anything.

The student seated beside me (whom I have continued to learn from) handled those questions with calm confidence. She did not speak in foggy academic language. She gave careful, detailed explanations. American Studies, she said, can lead to work in museums and archives, public history, education, communications, nonprofit leadership, community engagement, policy, and research. More importantly, she explained what the major actually trains: the ability to make sense of American life by connecting parts people usually study separately, such as law, religion, media, race, family life, economics, migration, and public memory. She explained her personal plans. Listening to her, I realized something that surprised me: the major is not vague at all. It was broad but structured.

That structure became real after the career fair and throughout the semester in our American Studies class project: building an installation about Gail Halvorsen, the "Candy Bomber." We were not only writing papers about the past. We were learning how to read the past through archives and artifacts. We treated photographs and preserved recordings as text, and we had to justify our claims by tracing them back to evidence. BYU's L. Tom Perry Special Collections preserves Gail S. Halvorsen materials that reflect the kinds of sources we worked with, including photographs connected to Candy Bomber displays and an audio recording collection where Halvorsen discusses the Berlin Airlift and Operation Little Vittles.¹

By the end, the installation felt less like a class assignment and more like a public presentation with a heartbeat. Visitors could see objects and hear voices that made a historical figure feel like a real person. A person who made a difference for many groups of people across the world, without asking for, nor taking any sort of credit throughout his life. Getting to know the "Candy Bomber" in this way was rewarding in a way that grades rarely capture. For me, it was the first time I stepped outside my regular world of creating graphics (as a Graphic Designer)

and began learning a new way to read and interpret history as visual text. That experience answered the three main questions people asked at the booth.

Q: What can you do with an American Studies major?

A: You can do work that requires bridging worlds.

Organizations fail every day because they misread the people they claim to serve. They choose language that sounds polished to insiders but does not come across as trustworthy to the public. They overlook local history, design programs as if communities are interchangeable, and then act surprised when trust does not appear on schedule. I saw the opposite at BYU while we built the Candy Bomber installation. We had to treat photographs, artifacts, and archived voices as text, compare accounts, and test our interpretations against evidence. That process is the point. American Studies trains you to notice context, power, and meaning before decisions are made, not after harm has already been done.

Employers say they want these capacities. In Job Outlook 2025 and related publications, the National Association of Colleges and Employers reports that employers most often look for evidence of problem-solving on new graduate résumés, along with teamwork and written communication.² Those are not niche skills. They are basic requirements for work that involves people, institutions, and public trust.

American Studies is not a conveyor belt to a single job title. It is training for careers where meaning and systems collide: public history, museums, archives, education, nonprofit leadership, community engagement, communications, and policy work. These are jobs where you have to interpret evidence, understand stakeholders, and speak to real people, not only classmates.

Q: What is American Studies anyway?

A: American Studies is the study of the United States as a lived system, not only a timeline of events.

The simplest way to say it is that American Studies follows the connections. The United States is shaped by law, religion, media, education, migration, economics, war, geography, public memory, and cultural storytelling, all interacting at once. American Studies refuses to pretend that any one department can explain the whole picture.

At BYU, this is not “do whatever you want” learning dressed up with a fancy name. The BYU undergraduate catalog states that American Studies graduates “will be able to read critically and analyze cultural, economic, historical, literary, political, social and religious texts and artifacts.”³ That line describes exactly what the Candy Bomber project demanded. We read a historical life not only through written accounts but through artifacts and preserved recordings. We learned that evidence has layers and that interpretation has to be earned.

This matters because American public life depends on interpretation. How Americans remember the past shapes what we think the country is, what we think it owes people, and who we think belongs. American Studies teaches students to handle that responsibility with care and discipline.

Q: It sounds like you just do whatever you want. Is that true?

A. No. That criticism confuses flexibility with a lack of standards.

American Studies often gives students room to pursue topics that matter to them. But that freedom is not permission to wander. It raises the bar. You have to ask a real question, choose methods that fit the question, defend your evidence, and make a clear argument that can stand up to disagreement. You do not get to replace scholarship with emotion.

The professional world already recognizes this kind of work. USA Staffing, which helps federal agencies fill positions, defines an interdisciplinary professional position as one whose duties are closely related to more than one professional occupation and may be classifiable to more than one occupational series; people with education in any of the relevant series may be considered equally well qualified.⁴ That is a government way of admitting something simple: many real problems do not stay inside one lane.

American Studies is practice for that reality.

Q: Why BYU keeping American Studies makes sense

Some universities are dissolving interdisciplinary majors, and that trend can make students nervous because it sounds like a warning label. I see it differently. BYU keeping American Studies shows confidence that integrative learning still matters and that the country needs graduates who can connect disciplines responsibly.

BYU's mission is not only to produce specialists. It is to educate people who will lead in families, churches, schools, communities, and civic life. A major that teaches students to read America carefully, interpret evidence responsibly, and communicate clearly is not an indulgence. It is preparation for service.

When people stop at the booth and ask what American Studies is, they are really asking whether it is serious. My answer now is simple. It is serious because the country is complex, and American Studies trains you to meet that complexity with discipline instead of slogans.

Footnotes

1. L. Tom Perry Special Collections, "Photographs of Candy Bomber Display at LDS Church History Museum, 2000 (Gail S. Halvorsen Papers)," BYU Library Archives, accessed January 20, 2026, https://archives.lib.byu.edu/repositories/14/archival_objects/200347; L. Tom Perry Special Collections, "Gail S. Halvorsen Collection of Audio Recordings, 1977-2008," BYU Library Archives, accessed January 20, 2026, https://archives.lib.byu.edu/repositories/ltpsc/archival_objects/a34cf2cc9c689273ee5ba243762919ce.
2. National Association of Colleges and Employers, Job Outlook 2025 (Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employers, rev. January 2025), 17-19, <https://www.nacweb.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2025/publication/research-report/2025-nace-job-outlook-jan-2025.pdf>; National Association of Colleges and Employers, "The Attributes Employers Look for on New Grad Resumes –and How to Showcase Them," news release, January 28, 2025, <https://www.nacweb.org/about-us/press/the-attributes-employers-look-for-on-new-grad-resumes-and-how-to-showcase-them>.
3. Brigham Young University, "American Studies (BA)," BYU Undergraduate Catalog, accessed January 20, 2026, <https://catalog.byu.edu/programs/34562>.
4. USA Staffing, "Interdisciplinary Request Overview," USA Staffing Online Help, last modified May 27, 2025, <https://support.usastaffing.gov/hc/en-us/articles/33034765090708-Interdisciplinary-Request-Overview>.