

# TEACHING FOR PROSPERITY?

## Preparing American Studies Students for the Job Market

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**Abstract:** This article explores the challenges faced by American studies faculty and students in Denmark, specifically those preparing for careers in Danish-American relations outside academia. It discusses the evolution of American studies programs at Danish universities, particularly the University of Southern Denmark, in response to criticism regarding the applicability of humanities degrees in the private sector. The article highlights curricular changes that emphasize practical skills, such as the inclusion of business courses and internships, while maintaining the interdisciplinary foundation of the program. Additionally, it examines the cultural and academic benefits that American studies students bring to business and diplomatic sectors, especially in understanding US-Danish transnational relations. The article also addresses the broader dilemma faced by humanities programs in balancing traditional academic virtues with practical job skills. Finally, it reflects on the shifting global influence of the US and its implications for future American studies faculty and students in Denmark.

**Keywords:** American studies, Danish-American relations, humanities, academic job skills, transnational understanding

But what can you do with an American studies degree? All students in Danish American studies (and likely beyond) have probably been asked this genuine but often slightly disapproving question. While the job skills of humanities graduates are frequently questioned in the media and by politicians, one would think that American studies graduates should be highly sought after. The US remains Denmark's largest export market, the two countries have a historically strong bond through NATO, and just last year (2023), a new agreement allowed for the establishment of an American military presence on mainland Denmark (Greenland already houses US troops). Besides, there is the overwhelming American cultural presence in Western Europe in terms of popular culture and brands (e.g., iPhones and Coca-Cola). In short, the US is arguably the most important foreign nation in Danish daily life. Fascinated by the American presence in Danish society, I was an American studies student myself in the graduate program at the University of Southern Denmark, where I later joined the faculty. In my fifteen years at the American studies program, I witnessed firsthand the challenges of preparing for a career in Danish-American relations, and later, I faced those challenges from a different angle as I tried to prepare students for the very same journey. In those years, the curricular changes to the American studies programs (BA and MA) reflected major developments in job prospects for American studies graduates. The focus of this essay will be on these changes and their impact.

### **Adapting to the Market**

Like most other humanities programs in Denmark, American studies is struggling with criticism from politicians and the media for having high unemployment among recent graduates and not training students in skills immediately applicable to the private sector. As an interdisci-

plinary program, American studies at the University of Southern Denmark emphasizes both historical and cultural approaches, and after the BA program was established, business and politics were given additional attention in the curriculum. In addition to the traditional skills of humanities students—critical thinking, problem-solving, and cultural literacy—the program also focuses on language skills and transnational communication. While mandatory courses comprise the majority of the program, students are encouraged to analyze the US from a variety of perspectives through electives and their choice of a third-year program beyond American studies. This allows students to cultivate their own particular interest in the US and their future career. Yet the path to a US-focused career has not always been as easy as many students might have hoped.

While many, including myself, have argued that the interdisciplinary approach provides the best comprehensive understanding of the US, and while many students would agree, there have been voices of criticism from some students who wished for further opportunities for specialization. These might not represent the majority, but these types of comments have been presented frequently enough and for long enough to be taken seriously. Students have courses on American politics but lack the theoretical knowledge and administrative experience to compete with political science graduates for jobs in ministries and embassies. They are taught business history but cannot compete with business majors. They are required to read, study, and take exams in English but lack the linguistic specialization of students in the English program. Due to reforms in the Danish educational system, American studies graduates can no longer qualify as high school teachers of English, which was a common career choice for graduates just a decade ago. The negative responses that many graduates experienced in their job search also reveal that the problem lies not just

with the students or the university but with the perception of employers. Some private companies would rather hire a business major with a minor interest in the US than an American studies graduate with a flair for business.

However, this is one area where action has been taken in recent years with considerable success. Within a few years, the curriculum in the American studies program has expanded to include more business courses, such as “American Studies in Perspectives,” a project-based course in which students collaborate with a local private company. Furthermore, after pressure from students and the administration alike, the program has significantly expanded its internship opportunities. Today, most students in the MA program complete internships as part of their study, giving them practical experience that helps them translate their academic skills into potential jobs. While humanities faculties struggle to make their graduates more attractive to the job market, they have also tried to make the private sector more aware of the benefits of hiring graduates from the humanities. While universities and specific programs have had to adapt, sectors of the job market have also developed their view of humanities graduates. In recent years, various organizations and government institutions have focused on marketing the skills of recent graduates to small and mid-sized businesses in Denmark. The variety of skills and interdisciplinary approaches taught in the humanities have proven to be beneficial to companies that had previously overlooked the advantages of hiring graduates proficient in communication, cultural awareness, dissemination, and critical thinking. American economic and cultural power and its impact on the Nordic countries highlight the importance of understanding cultural differences. Research conducted by students on behalf of Danish businesses revealed that many Danes and Danish businesses incorrectly assume that Nordic cul-

tural norms can easily be translated into beneficial partnerships across the Atlantic. This assumption is likely due to the dominance of American popular culture in Western Europe, the extensive media coverage of American politics, and the high level of English proficiency among the general population. While American studies students might not be explicitly trained in business theory, they can provide valuable insights into the challenges of cultural translation, which play a crucial part in business and diplomatic cooperation.

### **Academic or Practical Skills?**

This leads to an age-old dilemma for the humanities. How far should programs go in cutting out traditional academic skills in exchange for practical skills? And who should teach them? For faculty members, it can be challenging to go from teaching the eighteenth-century social history of New England one day to teaching how to conduct market analyses the next. The increased focus on practical skills has forced some faculty away from their core topics. Furthermore, in a small nation like Denmark, scholars are sometimes torn between conducting research into the US itself and studying its transnational relationship with their home country. Researching Danish-American relations and history will arguably attract more funding and immediate public interest at home but runs the risk of being relevant only to Danish audiences, leading to a lack of opportunity to highlight the great international potential among scholars at Danish universities. On the other hand, by focusing on the Danish or Nordic angle, scholars are in a unique position to provide insights into American power and influence abroad. The increased demand for ‘applicable’ research in the humanities and immediate economic benefits for the private sector in Denmark risks forcing scholars away from their main academic interests and, therefore, their best work.

The demands of the university administration and the political pressure to develop new courses emphasizing job skills impact not just faculty but also students. Reports and public debates emphasize the importance of working while studying in order to secure post-graduation employment, and students increasingly rely on jobs outside the university not just to pay the bills but also to provide the best possible transition into life after graduation. This focus on employability can come into conflict with important learning opportunities. Experiencing American society firsthand remains a crucial element of understanding Danish-American relations, and students are encouraged to take advantage of exchange opportunities at American universities. But studying abroad, even if only for a semester, can seem overwhelming for students who are expected to earn top grades, compete for student jobs, and succeed in life in general. The Danish job market encourages young American studies students to focus on non-academic student jobs rather than dedicating themselves to their studies—a discouraging but understandable development from the students' perspective. It is in the nature of interdisciplinary programs like American studies to lack a clear career path. Currently, graduates from the program at the University of Southern Denmark work at embassies, international offices at institutions of higher education, and communication departments, and hold a variety of teaching positions, as well as follow many other career paths. The variety of careers for American studies graduates can be seen as an advantage for many but a disadvantage for the job-conscious student. In this context, role models and older graduates sharing their stories are powerful tools of reassurance. Student organizations such as the Danish Student Association for American Studies (DSAAS) also play a crucial role in providing networking opportunities through events and social media. These provide valuable

knowledge-sharing forums for students and graduates, as well as a sense of community.

### **The Decline of US Influence**

While the history of American studies is rife with debates over theoretical trends, departmental loyalties, and the very question of how America itself is defined, American studies in Denmark faces another fundamental challenge: what if potential students lose interest? The decline of American hegemony and the rise of China as an (the?) economic and military power of the future has already begun, but it remains unclear how long the process will take. The US remains of crucial influence to Denmark and the other Nordic countries due to its military, political, economic, and cultural might, but the tides are shifting. If the twentieth century was the American Century, it is still unclear what the twenty-first century will be, but it will not be another one dominated by the US. This is already visible in the application numbers for American studies programs. This is likely due to a combination of factors, many of which are completely unrelated to the US (e.g., demographic developments in Denmark mean that there are generally fewer potential students). For American studies scholars, the dismantling of American power is a topic of intense interest, but it can be difficult to convince students to dedicate their future to understanding a culture that seems to be lessening in impact. We must not underestimate the significance of the current political chaos in the US and the reality of a second Trump presidency. For many American studies students, the US is a topic of not just academic interest but also emotional impact. Admiring the US is not a requirement for studying it (in fact, it can be detrimental to understanding it), but many students who choose the program have a generally positive view of the US.

Despite the central role of the US in the Danish economy and popular culture, many Danish graduates of American studies have struggled to find a clear career path. The American studies program at the University of Southern Denmark was used here as an example of how that challenge has been addressed by the university and its faculty members. While improvements have occurred and practical skills are more emphasized, the academic core of the program—an interdisciplinary understanding of the US—must continue to be acknowledged for the benefits it provides its students.

