The Field of Folklore Studies

Folklore studies is a listening discipline that uses locally based qualitative research to understand culture and community through expressive life.

Folklore graduates find work in a number of settings. They carry out field and library research in communities around the world. They present performing artists at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and engage in legal and intellectual property debates at UNESCO. They write environmental impact statements, document slam poetry competitions, and teach about local cultural responses to public health campaigns. They publish articles, books, reviews, audio and video recordings, blogs, and web sites, and produce performances, exhibitions, and conferences. They curate and provide access to valuable cultural collections in museums, libraries, and archives.

Since its formation, the field of folklore studies has pioneered an inclusive view of culture and creativity in communities by examining expressive life across boundaries of time and distance.

Like their colleagues in other countries, US folklorists promoted the idea that music, stories, handmade objects, customs, beliefs, and rituals serve as windows into the worldviews and values of people and communities. In the 19th century, folklorists were among the first US scholars to recognize, study, and document the unique expressive traditions of Native Americans, African Americans, and European immigrants. Later, folklorists advanced the idea that all people, not only those of minority cultural or ethnic groups, have folklore.

Throughout the 20th century, US folklorists occupied research and teaching positions with universities, libraries and archives, where they documented, analyzed, and taught and published about music, folktales, language, customs, traditions, and legends from hundreds of ethnic, racial, and immigrant communities.
Universities in the US and Canada started or expanded their folklore courses and graduate programs.

Furthermore, folklore developed a remarkable popular front, as Benjamin Botkin, Kenneth Goldstein, Alan Lomax, and others produced books, recordings, and radio programs that were embraced throughout the country and brought the materials and methods of folklore to millions of Americans.

More recently, American and Canadian folklore programs of long standing—at Berkeley, Harvard, Indiana University, the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Université Laval, the University of North Carolina, and Western Kentucky University—have remained strong.

Today, at Arkansas State University, Cape Breton University, George Mason University, George Washington University, Goucher College, Michigan State University, the Ohio State University, the University of Alberta, the University of Louisiana, the University of Missouri, the University of Oregon, the University of Wisconsin, and Utah State University, younger centers, programs and departments also offer undergraduate majors and minors, graduate degrees, or both, and are energizing the field by creating their own approaches to scholarship, teaching, public service, and professional preparation.

Other folklorists work solo or in small teams at many US universities, engaging in undergraduate and graduate teaching, research, and publication, as well as public programming, such as exhibitions, festivals, and K-12 school programs.

In the last 35 years, folklorists have created new homes for their work in government arts and humanities agencies (including the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage), in non-profit organizations devoted to public education about folklore, and in private consulting practice.

These days, almost half of US folklorists, including some based primarily at universities, work in this “public sector,” engaging with public audiences of all ages and descriptions.

Today, our field and its core concepts—including art, context, folk, genre, group, identity, performance, text, and tradition—continue to make unique and meaningful contributions to scholarship and understanding in the humanities and social sciences, and the field is more relevant today than at any time in its history.

Folklorists work to understand and communicate knowledge about community-based creativity in a global economy, and cultural communication and conflict within and across religious, geographic and ethnic divides. We describe the relations of lay and expert knowledge in complex society, and advocate for mutual understanding and respect within the world’s diverse cultural commons.

Folklore also contributes unique intellectual insights to the creation, analysis, and evaluation of public policy.

Folklore students can pursue interests in a great variety of topics: from fairy tales to jump rope rhymes, from creation myths to YouTube videos, from women’s culture to digital media, from intellectual property to traditional ethnic customs, from...
performance analysis to religious belief systems, from hand-made furniture to street slang, and from clothing to architecture.

The extensively networked field of folklore offers remarkable opportunities to those seeking meaningful careers in the academic and public humanities, and in the active application of humanistic knowledge to the understanding of critical public issues, such as health care, immigration, and the environment.

We invite you to join our field.

**The American Folklore Society**

The American Folklore Society, the US-based association of people who study folklore, and communicate knowledge about folklore, throughout the world, serves this lively field.

The Society produces publications, meetings, and both print and web-based resources to support our members’ work to study, understand, and communicate about folklore, and to help them build professional and social networks inside and outside our field.

Our annual meeting is the largest single gathering of folklorists in the world, and offers multiple opportunities for face-to-face communication and a growing virtual presence as well.

The Society’s more than 30 interest-group sections offer smaller-scale opportunities for communication among colleagues who share your interests in the field.

**AFS Is Student-Friendly**

Almost 300 of our members are students at all levels, undergraduate and graduate.

Student dues—which are $40 per year, about 1/3 the cost of standard member dues—bring all the same benefits as regular membership, including:

- The quarterly *Journal of American Folklore*, published continuously since 1888 and the premier journal in our field—now with online versions and a Web-based multimedia supplement that hosts audio, still-image, and moving-image materials from *JAF* articles
- Deeply discounted registration rates for the Society’s annual meeting—where more than 700 folklorists meet to share their work in a different city each October or November—which includes many presentations by students and a number of professional and social events specifically for students
- Eligibility for AFS student travel stipends to the annual meeting, and for a number of prizes for excellent student work
- The opportunity to take part in the activities of the AFS Student Section, the body representing all students in the Society

To join AFS, visit [www afsnet org](http://www afsnet org). Have questions? Please email us at americanfolkloresociety@gmail.com. We look forward to hearing from you.