Larry J. Griffin, Ph.D., will soon leave Georgia Southern University for the Roosevelt Study Center in the Netherlands, where he will conduct research as the Fulbright Distinguished Research Chair during the Fall 2013 semester. While in the Netherlands, Griffin will devote the majority of his time to studying American national identity in a comparative perspective through a variety of international social surveys.

“American identity is what philosophers call ‘an essentially contested concept,’” Griffin said, “so the definition of ‘America’ and thus of ‘American identity’ are the subject of heated debate, negotiation, and conflict. On the one hand, civic definitions of America assert that the United States is not premised on a common race, language, religion, or even homeland, and what makes Americans ‘Americans’ – that is, why we have the particular national identity we do – is not rooted in particularistic, ‘ethnic’ or cultural characteristics but in a set of political ideals and moral understandings assumed universal in their applicability. This is the sort of national identity we find in a number of ‘identity-defining’ texts, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the writings and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Franklin Roosevelt’s ‘Four Freedoms’ speech. This national identity sends the message that ‘Anyone can be an American, regardless of her or his race, ethnicity, religion, ancestral homeland or language.’”

However, Griffin explained, “‘ethnic’ or ‘folk’ definitions of American identity generally assert the opposite, that America is in fact grounded not in universalistic, civic ideals but in concrete ethno-cultural markers: in a particular ethnicity or race (European, especially northwestern Europe), in a particular language (English), and in a particular religion (Christian, especially Protestantism). Adherents to this definition therefore believe American identity to be clearly and properly stamped by cultural particularism rather than political universalism.”

Griffin said that much of U.S. history and of the history of the U.S. in world affairs is the consequence of the interplay between these two definitions.

The academic study of these competing understandings has been ongoing for almost a century, Griffin explained, and survey data show that today many Americans tend to reject civic, universalistic understandings of the nation and adhere more closely to ethno-cultural, particularistic definitions, a troublesome fact to Griffin because of the latter definition’s inherent logic of “exclusion, inequality and hierarchy.”

These issues of collective identity are particularly important, Griffin said, because they define “who we as a people are and who we permit to become ‘us.’”

Griffin said he will take advantage of comparative social survey data available at the Roosevelt Study Center, including the European and World Values studies. These resources, which seek to determine an individual’s perceptions of what characteristics are most important to being a true member of his or her nationality, will help Griffin develop a “civic-ethnic national identity continuum,” on which he will plot both European nations and the U.S.

“The national identities of European societies exhibit the same universalistic-particularistic tensions we see in the U.S.,” Griffin said. “I expect to use this fellowship to figure out what America’s national identity looks like when couched in terms of this tension and compared to European national identities.”

While in the Netherlands, Griffin will also lecture to audiences at various Dutch universities. Because there is great interest in America and in the American South among scholars in the Netherlands, Griffin said he will likely speak on the American South after 1965 as a transitional, newly democratizing society, on the influence of race and region on recent presidential elections, and on his Fulbright-sponsored research on American national identity in comparative perspective.

The Roosevelt Study Center, a research institute, conference center and library on 20th Century American history, is located in the 12th Century Abbey of Middleburg, the Netherlands, and named after Presidents Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt. The RSC is a founding member of the American Studies Network, a cooperation of the 20 outstanding American Studies centers in Europe, and it has awarded its Fulbright Distinguished Research Chair fellowship twice each year to an American scholar since 2006.

There are several reasons for the European interest in American Studies, Griffin explained.

“Middelburg is located in the part of the Netherlands – Zeeland – that is the ancestral homeland of Theodore, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt,” he said, “and the Dutch take great pride in that fact.”
Additionally, after World War II, the U.S. was viewed as a liberator, and throughout Europe there was an interest in all things American. The U.S. government used this interest and worked to establish American Studies centers in areas vulnerable to communist influence. There is also an understanding that anything America does affects the world.

The Fulbright Scholars Program is the U.S. government’s flagship program in international educational exchange and was proposed to the U.S. Congress in 1945 by Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas. In the aftermath of World War II, Senator Fulbright viewed the proposed program as a vehicle for promoting a “mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries of the world.”

The Fulbright Distinguished Chairs are among the most prestigious appointments in the Fulbright Scholar Program, and grantees are judged to be eminent scholars by their peers.

A professor of sociology, Griffin is the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences Research Scholar, the director of the University’s Center for American Studies and Faculty Research and Writing Workshop. He said that the Fulbright Scholar’s Program is clear in its hope that the experience of serving as the Fulbright Distinguished Research Chair will be beneficial to the home institution of the fellow. Griffin said he is pleased to represent Georgia Southern to European audiences.