

Thank you very much, Simon and Helen. It has been a real pleasure and honor to have worked with them intensively over the past year. And congratulations to the class of 2014!

As you heard from both Helen and Simon, History majors seem especially subject to questions about the value of our discipline, whether they are coming from outside or within ourselves. It is hard enough to deal with the doubts that any of us, including your professors, wrestle with from time to time. But we live in a society that seems at times to be particularly dismissive of the value of history. Our political leaders speak endlessly of the importance, even preferability, of the STEM disciplines, while casually denigrating the Humanities as bad choices of misspent youth. In conversation we hear people hand-waving away topics with the phrase “that’s old history” or cutting off a story by saying, “and the rest is history.” There is even the line barked out in triumph over an opponent: “You’re History!” We may all have run into the science major who asks you “but don’t we already know all the History?”

Well, in the face of all that, I’d like to say congratulations to you all on choosing and completing the best major on campus! And let me assure you this is not false bravado. I have completely drunk the Kool-Aid and I can testify that it is delicious! I want to say just a few things to help you walk off this campus with the confidence you should have, in part because the world that awaits you has a number of serious misconceptions about what you have done. You will encounter, as both Helen and Simon said, puzzlement and I want to encourage you to embrace your education here.

In these times of high unemployment and high student loan debt, the History major looks either terribly risky or like an indulgence for those who can afford it. Everyone imagines that the practical majors in the sciences and engineering, or economics, will lead directly to jobs and a prosperous lifestyle. This is based on a belief that the skills learned there are “practical” and the skills learned here are not. But this is a misunderstanding of both what constitutes “practicality” and what we learn here. Learning to code, to work in a lab, to manage data are all good skills to have, of course. But they prepare students for a fairly narrow range of skills needed in the workplace and in many cases companies who hire students whose training has particularly focused on this skill set have to retrain them for their proprietary practices anyway.

What you have learned here are the hugely important skills that center on information. You’ve been taught to research (gather information), analyze (process information) and write (communicate information). These are skills that are difficult to quantify but that, I assure you, are absolutely vital to any enterprise in the “real world”, whether that is a company, an NGO or an NPO. This is especially true of writing. Ask any teacher in the room (or ask your parents) about the declining quality of writing today and then look around you throughout the day at how pervasive the written word is in our lives. When you begin to pay attention, you will see writing that is powerful and you will see even more writing that is weak, unpersuasive and ineffective. Realize then, that this is one of the most important skills we have worked on with you. It is one of the reasons we have asked you to read so much (so many examples of good writing) and write so much.

And I'm not the only one making the case. Just a few weeks ago, the head of University Relations—the money-raising arm of the university, from whom you have already begun to receive a tsunami of messages—came to a History Department meeting. He is in charge of the campus campaign to raise hundreds of millions of dollars to help secure our educational mission in a time of declining state support. Because of that, he spends a lot of time with the big money people in L.A., San Francisco and Silicon Valley. And he told us something that I have seen echoed elsewhere. He said the CEOs tell him “Send us more Humanities majors!”

Why in the world would this be true? It is because of the skills you have. Writing skills, of course. But also the ability to analyze complex social endeavors, to relate the accumulated pasts that created the now to the future into which we act, to understand the role of culture in the economy or technology, to understand how and why things change. The better businesses, the more effective non-profits out to solve social problems: they all understand that the world does not operate on the stripped down rational choices of the economists' models. The world is messy, always culturally inflected, shot through with human passions, human meanings and human intentions.

Does that not sound to you like the subject of pretty much every History class you took? In this major we asked you to think about these things not just in the abstract, but in the lived experiences of people throughout the world. We encouraged you to focus on a part of the world so you could gain insight into the deep complexities of a place, to wean you of desires to give monocausal explanations, and to gain sophisticated understanding of how much people rely on stories to make sense of things, how powerful those stories can be, how many stories seem to never get told and what the consequences of those silences can be.

At the same time, we made you take classes in subject from other parts of the world and we made you take classes in periods of human history that are temporally far removed from the times that were your primary passion, so you could encounter and wrestle with real difference. This is especially where you get your training in what Simon was calling empathy. Empathy operates not merely in the terrain of the familiar—empathy for those like us—but it operates most importantly in the terrain of the unfamiliar and the radically different. You learned how incredibly diverse human experience and culture can be while also learning to recognize humanity in that diversity. In our globalized present and future, when barriers that I had to getting information and physical access to places around the world when I was younger have significantly fallen, how important is that empathy? Your lives are likely to unfold on a global stage and that is something your professors have been trying to prepare you for. It is a skill that has so many applications in the world today.

I have been trying to make a short case that the History major is a major that prepares you for the real world, that it is not about a dead past, but a living present that is always already full of many pasts. I have been trying to say that these are incredibly useful and rich skills that people in the working world need from you. I'm saying this, in part, because none of us—you, your parents or your teachers—wants you to be unemployed. I want you to not hide your History

major at the job interview, but to aggressively assert it. “I am a history major,” you can say. “I am exactly the person you need!”

But I don't want to just frame this in terms of your employability. The history major has given you crucial thinking skills you need to be an engaged citizen of the world. It has also given you the resources to feel the richness of the world—a richness defined by an abundance of stories and layers of human experiences, whether that be tragedy, comedy or hope. A couple years ago, my colleague, Kate Jones, stood on this stage and told that graduating class that she thought of historians as optimists. That is where I, too, would like to end. And that might strike some of you as strange. Good Lord! you might think, so many of our classes chronicled one catastrophe after another (Historians tend to look at that stuff, its true). Human history can, at times, seem like one horror after another. And, dammit!, people never seem to learn!

By studying subject across distant times—even in relatively short periods—you have learned how fundamental change is to the human endeavor. People without historical training often think in terms of constants and stabilities. They look at the past and they look for continuities. “People were the same in the past as they are today!” they exclaim, with relief. But those trained to think historically—that's all of you—look at that past and you see real differences, which is another way of saying endless possibilities. You can see a story that leads to a depressing outcome and you can also see stories of paths not taken, of possibilities that perhaps succumbed to greater forces, but that remain reserves for thinking about other possibilities for ourselves now. History is not just the story of the bad things that happened in the past and how we got to our miserable present. It is a vast reserve for thinking about change.

I'm a historian, so I'll end with a story. In the early 17th century, at the end of 160 years of ferocious civil war in Japan, the victor, Tokugawa Ieyasu set about to create a stable regime that would last forever (Historians can all snicker here). One of the things he understood by looking at the past was that succession disputes have been one of the most common problems to beset all dynastic systems. So he devised a solution that would ensure a good, objective solution to this human problem. He took three of his sons and he made them heads of collateral households. To the first household he gave the job of breeding. Just produce heirs to my position as head of the regime. Don't engage in any political activities. Just breed. To the second household he also gave the job of breeding. Just produce heirs to my position as head of the regime on the off chance that the head of the first house doesn't produce heirs. Don't engage in any political activities. Just breed. To the third household he gave two jobs. The first was to be a third level of breeding, in case the first two failed (all systems admins understand the importance of back up). The other job he gave this household was to write the history of Japan. Compile all the documents and evidence of the past and write the narrative that makes our regime the culmination of that historical process, he said. And so they did. For 250 years, that household, the Mito domain, worked on the history of Japan that would validate for all time the outcome of that civil war. Ieyasu was thinking of history as a conservative story of inevitable results. But a funny thing happened. Over the course of time, that third household, writing the history of Japan, came to the conclusion that the regime was not the logical outcome of history,

that there was another way, other possibilities. And when a revolution broke out against the regime in 1868, it was led by the historians.

Let me put it another way. Faced with both evidence and crises in the mid-19th century, the historians of Mito offered an alternative, not a grim story of inevitability. Those historians looked at the past and proposed an alternative future.

By the way, they did eventually finish that history. After starting the work in 1630, they finally published it in 1911. Remember, sometimes the wheels of publishing turn slowly.