

Betsy Borst

History Graduation Celebration Speech

I didn't apply to UCSC as a history major. I don't want to drone on and on about other potential paths, but the simple version of my path was Sociology to Politics to History to Literature, and finally settling on History and Literature as a double major. While I have learned a lot from all my classes here, my passion for history specifically has grown due to the faculty members who have inspired me, changed my perception of myself and the world around me, and given me the keys to unlocking a broader understanding of history, some of which I will share with you today.

History is personal. In Professor Dana Frank's Great Depression class, I learned that history is not just about presidents or war heroes, but regular people who took a stand and made a difference. It can be easy to think that someone who's about to graduate and has no definitive plans for the future (whoever that might be) cannot make a difference in our world. As much as I had hoped to avoid a cliché filled speech, studying history has taught me how accurate that immensely popular Margaret Mead quote is: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has". Especially in our current world, it is important to see that throughout history, regular people can create just as much change as those in power.

History is alive. In Professor Greg O'Malley's senior seminar, I studied events that occurred 200 years ago through the lens of the "Atlantic World", a topic that has only become a widespread field of study relatively recently. A historian wouldn't argue that the fields of British or Egyptian history aren't valid or worth studying, but debates over new fields of study like Atlantic History demonstrate **that** our understanding of history is ever-changing. Though it may seem paradoxical to non-historians, the events of hundreds or thousands of years ago can be seen through new lenses, bringing to light new approaches of historical study that reveal the idea that the past is still evolving. I can only imagine that in the future, history will continue to adapt and change, creating new considerations and perspectives on the world we inhabit.

History is expansive. I'm an American history major, and in Professor Elaine Sullivan's Women in Ancient Egypt class, I was confronted with studying a society wildly different from my own. Whether through diaries and journals or the more modern equivalent of social media, Americans document pretty much everything we do. In Professor Sullivan's class, I studied a culture with extremely low literacy rates, and many of the primary sources I encountered took the form of images and artwork. If historians centuries from now somehow find my Twitter, they'll have to parse out the primary source "An iced macchiato and hot Cheetos is the definition of a healthy lunch". While it's funny to imagine someone analyzing or writing a paper citing this tweet, it demonstrates the fact that historians of the future will have new challenges to face similar to the challenges I faced. Studying Egyptian history required a different approach to analysis than what I was used to, even though it was still history. I wasn't used to studying this time and place that had a completely different set of cultural practices, but out of that discomfort came an appreciation for both the world we live in and the world that came before us.

Finally, history is present. In every history class I've taken, I've found connections between that class discussing what happened in the past, and how we perceive the lives we live today. On the last day of my class with Professor Sullivan, she said that history is "A study of the messy lives of people in the past and trying to figure out what it means". I haven't quite figured out what these messy lives have meant, but I'm working on it. By studying history, we can look at problems and patterns that have arisen for centuries and see them in our own world; but we can also see the success and forward movement that has happened. When studying history, we often note that change is an incredibly slow process. I, like many in this room, don't know what I want to do in the future, but by studying history, I can look forward with my knowledge of the past and have hope that we can make our world what we want it to be. I've talked a lot already, but if you'll allow me one more quote, I think Richard Holmes summed history up well when he said "the past is not simply 'out there', an objective history to be researched or forgotten at will; but... it lives most vividly in all of us, deep inside, and needs constantly to be given expression and interpretation."

Thank you, to every faculty member who I've had a class with, especially Professor O'Malley for your constant support and mentorship even during my constant office hours visits, and congratulations to my fellow members of the class of 2017!