

Helen Porter - Graduation Speech

Good morning, and thank you all for being here and celebrating with us! My name is Helen Porter, and I am graduating with a major in history with a concentration in Asia and the Islamic World.

When I declared as a history major I discovered something a bit disconcerting. It turns out that when you tell a lot of people you're studying history, you get this response: (blank face, mouth ajar) "Ohhhhh ... what can you do with that?" Sound familiar? There is a concept that studying history doesn't prepare you for anything. That it's an unemployable, useless degree. The number of unemployment jokes we hear is truly staggering.

I first entered the history department in fall quarter of my sophomore year, when I declared a major in European history. Then I changed my mind and switched my concentration to Asia. Then to Africa and the Americas. Then I had an existential crisis and finally settled on Asia in winter quarter of this year.

What has continually impressed me about the history department here is its humanness. The faculty and staff in the history department are not only brilliant scholars but also profoundly good people who care deeply about their students. Being a history major has been an intense, stimulating, and inspiring academic experience, but it has also been a deeply personal experience; in four years of taking history classes here, I have never for a moment felt like just a number, and that has allowed me and so many other history majors to develop real relationships with the amazing people in this department. So many examples of this come to mind: getting unsolicited life advice from Stephanie just because she could tell I was having a hard time when I came in for advising; laughing so hard I cried at stories one of my professors told me about his kids' pet chickens; building friendships in history classes that I know will extend well beyond graduation. The list goes on.

These relationships allow students to feel more comfortable taking academic and intellectual risks. The professors in the history department are some of the most passionate people you will ever meet – they are excited about what they teach, excited to share their passion and their knowledge, and that excitement is contagious. I will never forget the first time I realized that I was physically shaking with excitement ... in a history class. Or the first time I cried because of a history reading. I don't know if this is universal, but the history degree at UCSC teaches students to look at the world around us in a questioning, open-minded, curious way, which, for me at least, is not something I had ever learned in school before! The way we learn to think is not only applicable to the study of history, but to the study of life and the world around us. Essentially, we have learned the skills necessary to be what my grandfather would call "good citizens": people who are active, engaged, critical, interested, and alive in their world.

So the answer to that question, then, is this: we are going to do whatever we want, and we're going to do it well, because we have been taught to think, to question, to analyze,

to discuss, and those are skills that will help us in any job, and in all aspects of our lives. But beyond that, we are going to do well because we have spent time as part of a creative, intellectually focused community populated by brilliant, driven people who are passionate about what they do, and that is always valuable!

So, what am *I* going to do with a degree in history? I have no idea. For now, I'm moving home to San Francisco to spend some time with my two teenage brothers, who are sneakily becoming adults while my back has been turned.

There are so many people I want to say thank you to, people without whom I would not be here, but I'll try to keep it brief! First, and forever, to my family: to my beautiful mother, my dad, and my grandparents, who are here today; and to my brothers – thank you for your unending faith and love and for never, ever asking me the dreaded question: “what are you going to do with a degree in history?” Thank you also for listening to my never-ending history factoids and for putting up with what an insufferable know-it-all I was for a while there.

Thank you to Stephanie Sawyer, undergraduate advisor and gift from above, for more things than I can even say, but especially for calling me a fool that one time – I needed that! I hope you know how critical you have been to my (and so many others') experiences at UCSC.

To Professor Alan Christy, for giving myself and the other members of the Gail Project the opportunity of a lifetime: to work with him. Alan is not only an incredible scholar, teacher, and mentor, but also one of the kindest and most generous human beings I have ever met.

To Professors Gail Hershatter, Juned Shaihk, David Brundage, Kiva Silver, and others, for the incredible gifts they give undergraduates as members of this department, for your interest and your dedication to teaching. Your care and your attention have introduced me to a world of people, places, stories, and possibilities I never knew existed! And thank you for having enough faith in us to assign the amount of reading some of you do.

And finally, to my classmates, for being some of the smartest, funniest, wickedly honest, creative and fundamentally good people I have ever had the pleasure of learning with and from. Especially to the members of the Gail Project: you are all brilliant and I am humbled by every single of you. Thank you for being my school family – I love you all.

Thank you so much for an incredible 4 years!!