



Andrew Diaz
Undergraduate, American Studies

Andrew Diaz graduated magna cum laude from the American Studies department. Following graduation, he plans on entering the teaching credential program in hopes of becoming a high school history teacher. His main areas of interest are the 1960s and the Civil War. He wants to teach United States history, but is open to any opportunities to teach.

Before I begin today, I would like to take the time to thank the fantastic professors of the American Studies department. Especially Dr. Carrie Lane and Dr. John Ibson both of whom have been two of the best teachers I have ever had inside or outside of a classroom.

I would also like to dedicate this speech to three of the most important people in my life. My father, Miguel Diaz, who taught me how to be strong in the face of the most difficult trials in life, My mother, Peggy Diaz, who has been, without a doubt, the hardest working and most loving person I have ever known, and my very significant other, my girlfriend, my partner Shannon Beckman, who has helped me not only to become a better student, but also a better human being.

We all have our own ideas of what college was supposed to be. We came to this university with an idea of what we would experience, what we would learn, and what we would come away with. There are some that came here to experience the wild parties and the late night extravaganzas that only college can afford us. There are some that came here to merely fill their brains with that Oh so terrific knowledge.

My expectations of college were a little different. When I first set foot on this campus I knew what I wanted to take away. Maybe I inherited the notion from my parents, but I wanted this experience to broaden my horizons, alter my way of thinking, and cause me to question my very identity.

In my first semester here though, I found a reality that was a long ways away from my dreams. As an incoming transfer student, I discovered that my initial major's department wanted to narrow my way of thinking and halt my questioning of authority. I met professors who cared more about empirical evidence rather than thoughtful criticism.

I met professors who were outraged at the fact that I would include personal opinion in my coursework. "It's unacademic," I would hear from them. I even met a professor who proudly considered himself a 'Footnote Nazi'. Needless to say I dropped that class immediately.

I felt disillusioned and disappointed in my college experience. I came here hoping to find open windows into exciting new ways of thinking, but instead I found locked doors. Lucky for me though, I took a class on women in American society. It was my first American studies course. It was in this class that I found exactly what I was looking for. As a class we looked at gender roles, we examined the media, and we discussed the structure of power in our society.

I can assume that I had the same feeling that many of you felt after your first American studies course. I was enthralled. I was hooked. I felt like Robert Downey Jr. circa 1996. I had to have more. I changed my major and began taking every American Studies course that I could fit into my schedule. I took a class on popular culture, on the American male, on prejudice, on the American body, on Hollywood, and my personal favorite, the 1960s.

In each course we learned the facts, the historical figures, and once in awhile, we even learned a date or two. But what made these classes stand out was that I learned the relevance and the importance of these moments in history. We also learned how these moments connected to our lives. In learning about the 1960s, I learned just as much about myself as I did about the SCLC. In studying the American Body, I discovered opinions and beliefs that I never knew I held.

My excitement extended far beyond the classroom as well. I met fellow students who introduced a new perspective in my life. Together we went to the edges of insanity; staying up later than we thought was humanly possible, completing papers we thought were beyond finishing. We drank coffee while sharing our opinions on such crucial issues as the economy, the war, and maybe most importantly Judd Apatow and Will Ferrell movies. Some of these students, I know I will remain friends with for many years, and I am eternally thankful to them.

With it all said and done, I found my ideal college experience in the American studies department. While I have heard this campus be referred to as a commuter campus time and time again, I like to think that we succeeded in creating our own little community here. Our own culture, if you will.

Before I end, it is only fitting that I throw in an obscure pop-culture reference. I would like to leave you with this: In the 1980s, GI Joe taught us that "knowing is half the battle." I have jokingly always asked, "Well, what's the other half?" It seems funny to me, that I now realize that the other half is putting your newly acquired knowledge into practice.

And now that we are better critical thinkers than we have ever been I suggest that we remember a quote that a teacher, a mentor, a friend of mine once told me. "Criticism is a form of optimism. Only silence is pessimistic." I hope that each of us will remember to be as optimistic as possible for as long as we can, and to never let our silence get in the way of the world we hope to one day create.

Thank you so very much.