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# AMS Distinguished Graduates: Elizabeth Patten

by

American Studies

*We are very pleased to announce that two American Studies Students were named as honorable mentions to the Dean's Distinguished Graduates list. Over this week and next, we'll profile both students. Today, we're featuring Elizabeth Patten.*

**AMS :: ATX** is a blog dedicated to representing the many activities and interests of the department of American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Together with the department's Twitter feed, this blog exists to serve the AMS and Austin communities by acting as a hub for up-to-date information on events and opportunities at UT and beyond.





**AMS:ATX: When you came to UT, what did you think you would major in?** Elizabeth Patten: I think I was sort of unusual in that I came into college knowing exactly what I wanted to study. In high school I thought I had it all figured out and was sure that I wanted to major in American Studies and minor in Philosophy. The path I ended up taking was a little less straightforward—I ended up abandoning both Philosophy and French as minors but added a History major and joined the LAH program—but my conviction that American Studies was the right discipline for me never faltered.

**What was the first American Studies course you took at UT? What compelled you to take the course, and what do you remember about it?**

The first AMS course I took at UT was Intro to American Studies (AMS 310) with Dr. Davis. I think I picked it because it fit best with my schedule and because it was the intro class, but I like to think it was by a



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little bit of magic that I ended up in that class. It was everything I thought—and wanted—American Studies to be. I remember being a big fan of the way the class focused on WW2 as a watershed moment, and the way we explored post-war culture and society in relation to that. Apart from the material, I think the most memorable parts of that class were when Dr. Davis sang and when she wore the Wisconsin cheesehead hat to class, as only a great professor would do!

### **How did you come to the decision to major in American Studies?**

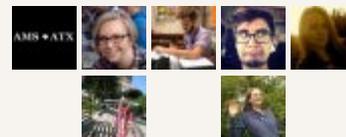
My dad was also an American Studies major at UT in the 80s, so the idea of AMS was always in the back of my mind. He is the smartest, funniest, coolest person I know, so I liked the idea of following in his footsteps! Beyond that, my favorite classes in school were the U.S. History classes I took in 8th and 11th grade, and I am also a big fan of pop culture. I liked the idea of a major that examined things like Beatlemania or the rise of the shopping mall to understand society rather than just military and legislative history.

### **What have been some of the stand-out courses for you in the American Studies department?**

This is a hard question because I can honestly say that I have loved every AMS course I've taken, and also because I am super indecisive. American Literature and Culture of the Late 1960s with Professor

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Gorges was one of my favorites because I am a huge nerd for the 1960s and because of the ways we really delved into 60s culture—we watched famous 60s movies every month, spent two weeks listening to popular 60s music, went to an Arlo Guthrie concert, and even had our own Digger Dinner at Threadgills. I also thought Professor Smith’s Cultural History of Alcohol and Drugs 370 seminar was fascinating, and I will sign up for any class that Dr. Davis teaches because she is a fantastic professor and her classes are always really interesting.

**What are some of the most important intellectual questions that you’ve pursued during your time as an American Studies major?**

Most of my AMS classes have, among other things, grappled with the “so what” question—why is the thing we’re studying significant, and what does it say about the wants/needs/fears/values/ideals of a group of people or society at large. It’s a fundamental question that has come up time and again in my classes, and I think it’s a really important if simple one. It applies to both the most familiar and the strangest things, revealing a broader significance and importance to things as ordinary as the food we eat or as random as the paradoxical experience of simultaneous gender division and community within a mosh pit.

**Many people, I’m sure, have asked you, “what do you plan to do with this degree?” So: how do you plan to bring your training in American**

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**Studies out into the world? You could talk about career choices, but also the ways that American Studies has influenced other ways that you interact with US society and culture, and perhaps other, non-professional goals of yours going forward.**

I plan to take some time off from the world of academia but after a few years I would like to go to law school. I think my degree has given me a skill set and sense of curiosity that will benefit me outside the bubble of collegiate life. I find myself already bringing my AMS background into the “real world.” My AMS training has taught me to read critically, to write carefully, to be aware of who is being excluded from narratives, and to question the familiar—to find meaning in the things that might seem trivial or quotidian and to understand how, for example, facts society more interested in experience and spectacle than truth.

**You majored in a second discipline besides American Studies. Given the “interdisciplinary” nature of American Studies, was this an easy fit, or was balancing two majors a big challenge?**

It was a really easy fit! I hadn’t initially planned on majoring in History, but I found myself really drawn to the classes my twin



sister, Claire (who is a History major), was taking. There is obviously a lot of overlap between American Studies and

History, so I don't think it's really that surprising that my academic interests also drew me towards a History degree. Because American Studies is interdisciplinary, my AMS skill set was perfectly suited to my History classes. But even beyond my two majors, I think that the interdisciplinary nature of American Studies made it easy for me to incorporate that background in my other classes. Whenever I had to write a research paper in one of my classes, I always looked for a way I could incorporate popular culture.

**Besides studying America and winning honors, what other activities have you gotten involved in at UT? Does studying culture academically shape the way that you participate in and understand other aspects of UT culture?**

I've participated in several campus orgs, most significantly Alpha Phi Omega and Students Expanding Austin Literacy (SEAL). Studying culture academically has necessarily shaped the way that I've participated in the cultures of both Austin and UT. For example, my experience in SEAL was more than just getting to have fun and read with some little kids; rather I saw it as a way to understand the cultural perspectives of those with less privilege than me and to understand the significance of their position in society. In regards to understanding UT culture, my training in American Studies encouraged me to see the ways in which the university milieu is a unique culture unto itself but

also a microcosm of larger American culture, fragmented into discrete and diverse niches like that of greek life, football, and, indeed, even AMS nerds like me.

**Finally, since you're the one with the honors degree in American Studies: what's the deal with America right now? In less than thirty words.**

To borrow from the accidental eloquence of George W. Bush, America is going through "some weird sh\*t." But it's sh\*t I'm optimistic we can overcome.

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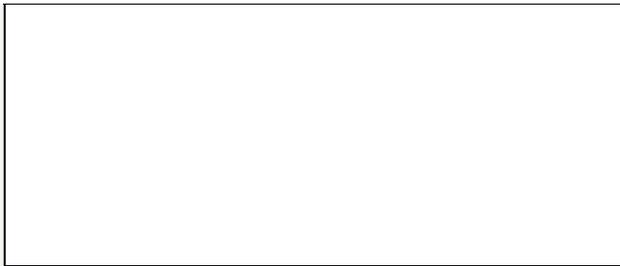
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