

“Your major is Canadian Studies? What’s that?”

BY NATALIE RIGGS

Natalie Riggs finished her BA Honours in Canadian Studies at Glendon College, York University, in 2006 and her Master’s in Public Administration at Queen’s University in 2007.

When asked throughout my undergraduate career what my major was, this was a fairly typical response. It could also include some combination of a blank stare, a smile and nod, or a request for some type of explanation.

This response, while occasionally disappointing, was not wholly unexpected; I myself could not have explained what it was until I actually enrolled in the program after my first year at Glendon College, York University’s bilingual liberal arts campus. Yet this confusion about my major also provided the perfect opportunity to explain what exactly Canadian Studies is, what I have learned through my course of study, and why it should be promoted as a subject of interest in universities.

DISCOVERING CANADIAN STUDIES

I came to discover the realm of Canadian Studies completely by fluke. First, I took an Introduction to Canadian Studies course as an elective in my first year, which I thoroughly enjoyed. Then, as I was choosing courses for my second year, I realized that nearly all of my top picks counted as credits toward a major in Canadian Studies. These two discoveries took me to Glendon’s Office of Student Programs to get the paperwork to change my major, and I haven’t looked back since.

The second question asked of me is, “why did you choose that program?” There are many possible answers, but a major draw to a Canadian Studies program that I found was that it is very flexible, and it allows a student to choose an area of interest while also giving a broad overview of other potential specialties. This provides a very thorough and well-rounded study of Canada that can act as a natural complement to many different

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fields once a university career is finished, and it is truly surprising how each different subject is applicable to another, be it politics, history, literature, etc.

The flexibility of the program did occasionally present a challenge in terms of getting to know other Canadian Studies students. While we were familiar with each other as acquaintances, students in the program had such varying interests

that we usually took only core courses as a group. Even then the core courses were often cross-listed and filled with students of other disciplines. This is an interesting point to note: many students will have, at some point or another, taken one or more courses that can be considered a Canadian Studies course. This leads me to think that there is a greater interest in Canada than is evident from looking at the number of students enrolled in Canadian Studies programs.

As such, language of instruction and differing interests meant that it was not until my fourth year that I really got to know the four others I would be graduating with. When I took the fourth-year seminar, it was composed of five graduating students, and we were able to share our knowledge of the different subject areas that we had been studying. Our research focuses for that class were quite different, from politics, gender issues, education, and economics; there was never argument over who got to study which issue. Canadian Studies gave us a subject, and from there we could pick whichever concentration we enjoyed most, and these differing interests gave us much to talk about and enriched our discussions, both within the classroom and without.

CAREER PROSPECTS

The next question would usually be, “what are you going to do with that?” It is often assumed that a degree such as this would lead to work in the federal government, and this could well be the case because students leave with a firm understanding of government, history, and cultural cleavages that are essential to policy- and decision-making. Furthermore, many students learn French as a part of their program (or in the case of

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perspectives and formats. As John Wadland has said, CS “is the meeting ground for insights drawn from disciplines ... the points of intersection” that enable people to “understand, resolve and synthesize.” Canadian Studies teaches students to solve problems by examining the big picture, the relationships between the forces and ideas shaping the country in their regional, national, and international contexts. They learn to articulate Canada to Canadians and to the world using knowledge, skills, and multiple frameworks, which are so essential to diplomatic, business, foreign aid, constitutional, social and public policy decision-making. Sounds like an employer’s wish list to me.

MARKETING CANADIAN STUDIES

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PR overhaul. Graduates of Canadian Studies programs need to be encouraged to promote the program by showing their experiences. Employers need to hear more about CS and its graduates. This is not a new problem but it has never been addressed through a concerted, unified effort by those who administer CS programs or regard themselves as CS scholars. At the undergraduate level, CS offers

as much or more to the future leadership of Canada as a BA in English, History, Political Science, or any other traditional discipline. Crassly put, we have something valuable to sell. We need to figure out a way to package and market it better to our university administrators, academic colleagues, employers, and students. Otherwise, CS programs, like mine, will eventually become academic relics. 

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Glendon College, all of them learn French as a part of the program), a skill that I have since heard referred to by members of the federal public service as “essential if you want to advance in the federal government,” and otherwise certainly an important asset.

In terms of the job market, I do not think that there is one specific field that Canadian Studies students gravitate to more than another. Out of the five that I graduated with, our interests were vastly different and as a result so too have been our exploits in the past year—one having taken an internship in Parliament, one in teacher’s college, and one in a management position. It is such a versatile field of study that students are not really pointed in one direction over another; rather, many opportunities are available and encouraged. The multi-disciplinary skills that we are taught are applicable to many different types of employment.

While I myself am only now exploring whether or not this kind of background is useful in the great job hunt, I do believe it was a good one to have when it came to applying to various Master’s programs.

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It has also certainly been of help to me as I have worked toward completing my Master of Public Administration, and not surprisingly I am the only Canadian Studies student of the 50 MPA candidates in my class. The multi-disciplinary skills that I gained as an undergraduate student in Canadian Studies are undoubtedly both an important advantage and asset in this particular program that is itself multi-disciplinary.

My experience in Canadian Studies was incredibly positive; the program is very flexible and offers students the opportunity to focus on personal interests. There are so many natural complements to the field and so many choices of where to go afterward. As such, I found that Canadian Studies taught me valuable problem-solving skills that span many different disciplines, which is a distinct

advantage and necessity when it comes to solving today’s problems.

NO LIMITS

My question about Canadian Studies is not a what or a why question, but rather a how question: if Canadian Studies was created to promote and encourage knowledge of our country, how can we (students past and present, universities and scholars, federal and provincial governments) garner more interest in the subject? Winston Churchill once said, “there are no limits to the majestic future which lies before the mighty expanse of Canada.” There is so much that many Canadians don’t know about this mighty expanse, and sparking interest is the key to instilling knowledge and understanding of our country and realizing the future that is laid out before us. 