

Showcase of Excellence Opening Remarks 4/28/17

Thank you President Birx and the Showcase of Excellence Committee for inviting me to speak today.

It's often on ceremonial occasions like this that we remember that the university is an ancient structure that dates back to medieval times. The university was a place where scholars gathered to share their ideas, a forum where intellectual theories were debated and tested, and a living-learning community where ideas engaged with the broader world. People wore robes and cloistered themselves away in libraries and studies to write down their ideas, and then they came together to share, debate, and to socialize.

Today, research, particularly amongst most college students, often gets a bad rap. Sometimes—especially nearing the end of a semester, like now—it feels burdensome, overwhelming.

Something MORE that we have to do on top of reading for class, taking notes, studying for exams, living our lives. It might feel like some of your professors are making you go through some kind of medieval torture chamber, more an ancient rite of passage that is more about “WE HAD TO DO THIS, SO YOU DO, TOO” than it is about earning your degree. But I would argue there is no separation between your research and earning your degree. In order to be a successful, creative, adaptive thinker in your professional lives, we must understand the history, theory, and body of knowledge in our disciplines and to be able to apply those concepts in real-world situations. THAT is what research gives us. Doing research is engaging in a broader community of thinkers, intellectuals, and idea makers. Research marks you into a Time Lord. It's joining a

conversation that's been going on long before you got here and will continue long after you leave, and yet you get the chance to dip your toe in, share your ideas, and make a difference.

I know I'm probably preaching to the choir a bit today, because, after all, you are all here because you are excited about and dedicated to academic research. But I want to challenge you to think about our conventional understandings of research a bit more deeply.

My specific research over the past five years has been in the area of fan studies, particularly in the area of fan fiction. Fan studies explores the participatory practices of audiences who are deeply invested in a particular topic or field of study. Now, there's a long history to the concept of fandom and fans themselves. My favorite scholarly guru, USC professor Henry Jenkins, explains that the root of our contemporary word 'fan' comes from the Latin, 'fanaticus,' meaning "of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee," but the term soon began to be associated with people "inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy" (Jenkins 12). By the late 19th century, journalists began describing American sports followers as 'fans,' and in the 1920s, the term was used to describe female theater audiences, the "Matinee Girls" who obsessed over the actors rather than the plays (Jenkins 12). Fans learn and memorize minutiae and fun details about our subjects. For example, did you know the English word 'bonfire' originates during the medieval period when the Black Plague was prominent? So many people were dying during that time period that there wasn't enough available grave space in consecrated churchyards. So, the gravediggers would dig up unmarked, old, or paupers' graves to re-use and burn the unearthed bones. Hence: bonfire—bonfire. See? I love sharing details like that.

Fans also often attend cons (conventions or, in our case, conferences) with other fans in our disciplinary fandoms. Some of us even buy academic merchandise advertising our membership within different scholarly fandoms like Trekkies advertise whether they are followers of the

‘original series’ or fans of the more recent television spin-offs, or, dare I say it, the J. J. Abrams reboot. (My family and students over the years has bought me everything ranging from “Grammar Police” t-shirts to Sherlock Holmes—themed coffee mugs).

Academia and fandom share inherent practices, assumptions, and values that highlight the integral relationship between intellect (our attention to detail, our desire for encyclopedic knowledge) and affect (our passion, interest, and commitment to our fields). Fandom is about passion and knowledge and participating and sharing. Isn’t that what academia is about, too? Scholarship is just fandom in an older disguise.

Many of my friends and family outside of academia—heck, even some colleagues INSIDE academia—ask me why I do research. Well, in many ways, I think that research is the definitive act that makes academics who we are. We are all *actively contribute something new* to our fields. At PSU, a significant part of our lives is dedicated to scholarship, to thinking deeply and for long periods of time about important cultural issues and ideas, and to creating *new meaning* in the world. New scholarship has a ripple effect that is often difficult to determine at the micro level. We...explore. We delve. We...investigate. And the things we research and study are objects of fascination to us, hopefully to our colleagues, to our disciplines, and to the broader world.

So why do I do research? Because I love it. Because I am passionate about my subject and about learning. Research is addictive. I get a little thrill, right here in my brain, when I encounter something new, when I discover a new idea, when I realize a larger cultural pattern that seems to reveal to me the mysteries of art, of meaning, of being human. Fan studies showcases the best in me and the best in scholarship because it forges a bridge between my personal and professional fascination with fictional characters, storytelling, and the world of fiction. After all, isn’t that

what we all want? To learn something new? To be excited? To be passionate about our work?

We all need to find that bridge, that connection between our passion and our research, and then nurture it, value it, and make sure it has a future in the academy and in our daily lives. Thank you.