UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

June 23, 2016
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A Bridge to Discovery

UC Santa Barbara is known for its interdisciplinary research. Scientists in materials, for example, work with people in chemistry to develop advanced polymers that wouldn't be possible without both disciplines. But what if you took that approach in the study of religion in the Middle East? Wouldn't you likely get a more complete and nuanced understanding of the topic if you employed disciplines within the humanities and social sciences?

That's the thinking behind an ambitious program sponsored by UCSB's Graduate Division. Known as Crossroads: Conflict and Accommodation in the Global Borderlands, the year-long research and teaching effort brought together faculty and doctoral candidates from the humanities and social sciences divisions to explore topics from a uniquely comprehensive approach.

"One question underlay our Crossroads Borderlands work: 'How do people get along, or fail to get along, in the absence of a strong state?' " said James F. Brooks, the UCSB professor of history and of anthropology who conceived the project. "Intimate daily practices of kinship, gender inequality, orthodoxy, heterodoxy and inter- and intra-community violence, all come to bear, yet, more often than not, produce ever-more interesting questions."

Six doctoral candidates, mentored by five faculty members, participated in the project that culminated in their teaching an undergraduate course based on their own research. The classes — on history, anthropology, sociology and religious studies — were all undertaken with a borderlands approach. The most unlikely,

though, was “Negotiating Religious Change in Tudor England,” taught by William Thompson. It’s a classic subject, he acknowledged, but the Crossroads project gave it freshness and insight.

“My course is really trying to get students to think about this historical time period from the inside out,” said Thompson, who has more than a passing resemblance to Henry VIII. After the students familiarized themselves with the history and narrative of the time, they spent the last five weeks of the class doing in-depth historical role playing — in costume. “The message we’re trying to get across here is that England itself was a borderland, a contested space. It seems sort of commonsensical, but no one’s ever considered that, because it’s not in the traditional borderlands regions. I’m trying to get them to think in a different way.”

Steven Hu used the tools of borderlands theory to explore an even broader field. His course, “Global Christianity in the Public Square,” explored the world’s largest religion and the question of identity. “I look at the public square as this borderland that’s essentially where Christians in different parts of the world contest and make claims about who they are and what the world should be,” Hu said. “So I look at how these Christians make these claims, how they talk about who they are as Christians, and how they talk about the world.”

Greg Goalwin’s course, “Sociology of Globalization: Borders, Boundaries and Belonging,” treated the world as borderland. His class of 75 students examined the prediction that globalization is erasing national boundaries, and what impact that might have on the world. “It’s been interesting, because sociology and globalization deal with a lot with increasing interaction and things like economics and politics and culture, and one of the arguments that people make a lot is that borders are going to matter less and less in a globalized world,” Goalwin observed. “Yet many of the interaction processes that we’ve been talking about in borderlands theory still end up playing out in places that are not on physical borders any more, but that occur through all societies.”

Dana Bardolph, an archaeologist, offered “Blurred Boundaries and Dividing Lines: Archaeology of Culture Contact and Colonialism,” a course that allowed students to explore the past through material remains as small as grains of pollen and as large as the Cahokian Mounds. Additionally, students came to understand some of the ethical issues underlying archaeological work today, “essential knowledge for anyone who wants a career in the field.”

For the Crossroads fellows, interweaving disciplines across the humanities and social sciences divisions proved to be a bridge to new ways of approaching a subject for deeper insight.

“I think it asks questions of identity and relationships between groups and homogeneity and heterogeneity that are really common concerns across a lot of disciplines,” noted Goalwin. “Everybody approaches them in different ways, but it forces us to ask a lot of these questions and to really to take an approach that is going to pay attention to a lot of these things that often slide under the radar.”

Kali Yamboliev, who taught “Violence and Religion in the Medieval Mediterranean (and Today),” examined 1,000 years of history in the region to consider the kinship between faith and conflict — sometimes in ways that defy common perceptions. The seemingly eternal enmity between Israel and Palestine, for example, “is very much a product of the late 19th to the early 20th centuries,” she said. “How do you draw this divide between modern events that still borrow from medieval ideas, but have been framed in secular terms in a new way?

“It’s been interesting to see people who are not really happy with these ideas and, in a way, I think it’s because it’s pushing them to think in ways they’re not comfortable with, more so that the ideas don’t always stand,” Yamboliev continued. “But it’s been a very fiery quarter for me.”

Faith practices also shaped Lauren Smyth’s “Digital Religion and Ethnography” course, even to the point of students entering online religious communities as devotees. Smith asked students to explore “what might new expressions of religion look like in our future?”

Crossroads, whose faculty advisers — Beth Digeser, Mary Hancock, Stuart Tyson Smith, Greg Wilson and Brooks — received no extra compensation for their work, is in abeyance as the Graduate Division assesses the program, but Brooks said he’s hoping the university will renew it in future years. Beyond advancing the fellows’ research goals, he said, the program gives them valuable teaching experience that will make them more attractive in the labor market.

“A part of the Crossroads program was designed to prepare advanced doctoral students to go out into the marketplace and say, ‘Hey, I can do some really original stuff in your curriculum,’ ” Brooks explained. “I can help you transform your curriculum for the 21st century. There aren’t a lot of people who can go out on the

market and show they have designed and taught their own course. That, we hope, is a real value added in terms of marketability."

"Whether or not it's something we do in our own work," noted Thompson, "it pushes each of us, especially me, to think outside the box of the regular approach to my topic."

"I think it was one of the best experiences I could have hoped for in grad school," Yamboliev said.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.