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Extra Credit 1: Dr. Renata Forste, “Going Global: The History of Women’s Studies at BYU”

Institutional change is usually much slower and more deliberate than people want it to be. Programs do not appear because one person has a good idea and everyone immediately agrees. They develop over time through people who understand how a university works, recognize its limits, and keep moving forward anyway. That tension between patience and progress ran through Dr. Renata Forste’s lecture from beginning to end. She was not simply explaining how a program was created. She was showing how change happens inside an institution, how ideas gain legitimacy, and how something lasting gets built in a place that was not originally structured to support it.

Her description of BYU in the late 1970s made that process easier to see. When she said that people talked about women going to BYU to get their “MRS degree,” she captured an entire cultural environment in one phrase. Women were present on campus, but their purpose was often assumed before they even arrived. The other details she mentioned, including dress expectations and the constant use of the word “co-ed,” reinforced that same point. Those were not minor habits or harmless expressions. They reflected a broader culture that shaped how women were viewed and how women were expected to see themselves. Institutions communicate values through more than formal policy. They also teach through language, assumptions, routines, and the atmosphere they create.

Her lecture also drew an important distinction between policy change and cultural change. Dr. Forste explained that Title IX expanded educational access for women across the country, and BYU responded in visible ways, including making scholarships available to women. That was important, but it did not immediately transform women’s experience on

campus. Access changed first. Attitudes followed much more slowly. That gap felt central to her argument. Structural reform alone is never enough. Institutions can revise policies, but culture often lags. Expectations, assumptions, and daily experiences do not shift overnight just because a rule has changed. That part of the lecture felt especially honest because it acknowledged that progress can be real and still incomplete at the same time.

Her discussion of the Women's Research Institute helped show how institutional change often begins by creating space for attention and legitimacy. Under President Oaks, the institute made room for research and discussion about women's issues at BYU. That mattered because it gave these concerns a visible place inside the university. At the same time, Dr. Forste made it clear that progress depended heavily on individuals who recognized the need and were willing to act. Her description of hearing Ida Smith speak and being "blown away" captured that process well. Before something becomes institutional, it usually becomes personal. Someone sees the problem differently, imagines something better, and starts persuading others that it matters. That pattern runs through the whole story she told. Structures matter, but people are often the ones who first move them.

The closure of the Women's Research Institute could have ended that momentum, but instead it redirected it. That part of the history stood out because it showed that change is rarely clean or straightforward. Progress does not always move in a straight line. Sometimes a setback forces a different form of growth. Rather than keeping women's studies isolated in one place, BYU eventually rebuilt it in a way that crossed disciplines and created a broader academic framework. By 2011, the program was intentionally designed to be interdisciplinary, historically informed, globally focused, and shaped by a spiritual perspective. That combination says a great deal. It shows that the program was not simply imported from elsewhere. It was adapted to fit the university's academic and religious setting. That adaptation is part of what made the program distinctive, but it is also part of what helped it endure.

The transition to Global Women's Studies did more than update the program's title. It clarified its direction by connecting classroom learning to the lives of women around the world and to larger questions about culture, history, development, inequality, and belonging. Moving it to the Kennedy Center gave it added support and room to grow. The increase in student participation suggests that this shift mattered in real ways. It was not simply an administrative adjustment. Students found it meaningful. The program was sustained not only by institutional permission but also by student response to an international, interdisciplinary approach tied to real human concerns.

Dr. Forste's final points were effective because they were practical. She emphasized building relationships of trust and legitimacy, learning how the system works, and recognizing that cultural change often comes before structural change. Those ideas help explain the history she had just presented. The program lasted because people worked carefully, built credibility, and understood that institutions are shaped as much by relationships as by policy. Her final statement, "You cannot have everything, but you can have most things," carried that same realism. It did not sound pessimistic. It sounded realistic. Real progress rarely comes through one sweeping victory. More often, it comes through persistence, credibility, and the willingness to keep working even when change feels slow.

The history of Women's Studies at BYU is not just the story of one academic program. It is the story of how institutional change becomes possible through patience, adaptation, and steady effort. It is also a reminder that progress must be built, protected, and sustained. Dr. Forste did not present the program as a finished achievement that no longer needs attention. She presented it as something people before us worked hard to create and something that still depends on whether others are willing to keep that work moving forward. That ending felt right to me because it left the responsibility in the present. The program exists because people chose to build it, and its future will depend on whether others continue that work.

Bibliography

Forste, Renata. "Going Global: The History of Women's Studies at BYU." Lecture, Kennedy Center for International Studies, Brigham Young University, March 3, 2026