

## **Graduate Assistant Interns at the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry & Labor Tom Leary, Youngstown State University**

**SUMMARY:** Graduate Assistant Interns are an important component of a recent agreement between the Ohio Historical Society (OHS) and Youngstown State University (YSU) whereby operating responsibility for the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor (YHCIL) is now lodged in the YSU History Department and its Applied History Certificate Program.

YHCIL, which OHS opened in 1992 after more than a decade of development in the wake of regional economic devastation, is a premier facility of its type – indeed it could be considered unique in the US. Its activities may be visualized as consisting of three concentric rings: a museum, including a permanent exhibit on the steel industry of the region; an archives / library whose collections include the records of businesses and labor organizations generally (though not exclusively) related to the rise, fall and rebirth of steel as well as a repository of oral history interviews; and community programming whose range is broader than the specific focus of the exhibits and collections.

I arrived at YSU in 1999 to occupy one of two history department faculty lines in what was then constituted as an undergraduate / graduate historic preservation certificate program. The proximity of resources such as YHCIL eventually resulted in the addition of a museum studies track as well as an applied history sampler curriculum intended for social studies educators.

Internships have always been a requirement of the program in its various incarnations. It has turned out that internship opportunities (as well as practicum projects) were more plentiful on the museum studies side of the program than in the historic preservation area. Core applied history faculty and other members of the department placed students in various (unpaid) internships with regional historical agencies, but the greatest potential clearly lay at YHCIL which offered the tantalizing prospect of a first-class laboratory with a wide range of experiential learning opportunities for aspiring public historians.

Between this mirage shimmering within two blocks of the YSU campus and the realization of its delights, however, certain institutional obstacles loomed. Since a detailed mapping of this negotiating firmament lies beyond the scope of a brief discussion, suffice it to say that the stars shifted into a more favorable alignment because of a fiscal crisis at OHS and key personnel changes in the higher administrative levels of YSU.

By the summer of 2008 OHS budgetary constraints (which had previously eroded staffing levels and scope of services over time) reached a crisis that threatened to curtail YHCIL museum hours even further. Since operation on a seasonal basis would clearly have a deleterious impact on applied history course-based projects and internships, YSU faculty and some influential community supporters began lobbying for an alternative predicated on a more salient role for the university. OHS was initiating a process of formulating joint management agreements for numerous other sites in its statewide network; YSU brought resources to the table that could help keep the doors open, including student work-study funding and the Graduate Assistant Internship Program.

GAls receive tuition remission and a stipend through funding from external sources. Applied History students had previously undertaken such internships at regional historical societies or archives, and faculty envisaged such an arrangement as an integral part of a joint OHS / YSU management plan. Beginning in the Fall of 2008 two GAls have worked at YHCIL each semester. I have received one course release time per semester (3 semester hours) to supervise the GAls and coordinate their activities with OHS staff on site and in Columbus. So far the arrangement has proven virtually frictionless. The Office of the Provost and the YSU Foundation have provided bridge funding that has been very welcome. Indeed, the YHCIL venture has become something of an institutional priority (though the university faces its own perilous voyage into an uncharted student marketplace.)

GAls engage in a range of duties and projects during their tenure. They conduct group tours of the museum and assist with collections processing (mostly concentrating on backlogged archival materials though they were also pressed into emergency service when a plumbing leak flooded an artifact storage area). They deploy their research skills to help faculty devise new interpretive programming (the permanent exhibit has remained static since the museum opened); the GAls also put in periodic stints covering the visitor reception desk (though since the History Department assumed operating responsibility on 1 January 2010 work-study students have taken over most of that routine).

In short, OHS has retained ownership of the YHCIL building (designed by post-modernist architect Michael Graves and perched on a hillside where the YSU campus adjoins downtown Youngstown) as well as its collections; likewise OHS remains responsible for funding two YCHIL staff positions during the initial phase of the two-year management agreement (subsequently renewable or renegotiable) and for defraying major capital expenditures. YSU has taken over the chunk of the budget related to utilities and maintenance with the History Department playing the lead role in daily operations. The Center for Applied History recently relocated to YHCIL to create further critical programmatic mass. The GAI program has thus far been an indispensable cog in the institutional support mechanism, though a funding stream for future appointments remains an issue. However, a community-based support group offers hopeful prospects as well as volunteer energies. The applied history students who have held these positions the past two years have performed exceptionally well and appear to have enjoyed their experiences. My own attitude might conservatively be categorized as elation.

### **Peter Morrin, University of Louisville**

I spent over thirty years working as an art museum curatorial assistant, curator or director. Institutions included the Harvard University Art Museums, the Washington University Art Gallery, the Vassar College Art Gallery, the High Museum of Art, and finally, the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, where I was director for 21 years. At none of these institutions did I experience the kind of full collaboration between the museums and area universities that I wanted to realize. Even the nested college and university museums where I worked did not really have full partnerships with academic departments outside of studio art and art history. I am fortunate that now I have been able to embark on a new

career within a university dedicated to outreach, attempting to create a new model of university/cultural organization collaboration.

I have two overlapping jobs at the University of Louisville. I teach in the Masters' Degree program in Critical and Curatorial Studies and I coordinate the Arts and Culture Partnerships Initiative. ACPI has 15 formal memoranda of understanding with area cultural institutions. Included are historic homes, art, science and craft museums, and places with very specialized purviews such as the Muhammad Ali Center and the Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind.

Our mission is to provide these cultural venues with access to the university's student and faculty energies and the university's intellectual capital; in turn, we endeavor to utilize our local cultural resources as full as possible in the teaching mission of the university. The program is conceived as a full and fair exchange, albeit with a "big brother" in the case of the University. Examples of service to our partners include an annual academic conference on the history of Louisville with topics in part proposed by the partner institutions. We do workshops on issues of interest to partners, such as fundraising and collection cataloguing. The University also acts as a community convener: for example, in providing expertise, Hispanic community contacts, and faculty and student engagement in Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos) observations.

Partners provide internship and research opportunities, archaeological sites, exhibition and concert venues. Partner staff lecture in history, language and curatorial studies classes and occasionally act as adjunct professors. Some partners provide free admission to faculty, staff and students.

In order to ensure that faculty supervisors, on-site supervisors and student interns treat their internships with the highest seriousness, we have created a competitive program in which the interns receive free tuition for three credit hours for their internship, and faculty and site supervisors receive a very modest cash incentive. The extra pay makes it easier to convince faculty that repeated meetings with the supervising museum professional at an historic site, for example, are necessary for adequate intern supervision and evaluation.

Like all such programs, we struggle with site administrators trying to extend student commitment beyond the time permitted. ( Although students do often continue past the end of the semester as volunteers). We are working towards internship "contracts" to set out terms of internships in detail, although we have not fully implemented that yet. Much more could be done to incentivize faculty to utilize resources in their midst: programs to publicize resources of our partners to the academic community are in planning. (For example, Louisville's Filson Historical Society has 1.5 million manuscripts on the history of the Ohio River Valley; the Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind houses one of the world's leading historical archives on the education of sight-impaired peoples). The incentivized internship program outlined above has had great success in its first year, but so far only 6 positions are funded. The University of Louisville is in the process of launching a Public History program with its first faculty member coming in July, 2010, which should draw greater prominence and utility to the Arts and Culture Partnerships Initiative.

There are many challenges ahead. Funded in its first two years by special grants from the President and Provost of the University, ACPI must now begin its own fundraising. Finding means to assist the cultural institutions in the most severe straits is challenging: places with one or two staff members typically lack the time to furnish adequate supervision for interns to provide a significant learning experience. There is little that can be done for those who have not learned in the phrase of Stanford Business School Professor David Bradford, “post-heroic management.” ACPI plans joint fundraising projects with its partners in the future, but for institutions in the most dire straits they are unlikely, in the memorable Kentucky phrase, “to haul the ox out of the ditch.” As part of my role I am active in the planning of Louisville’s next iteration of its Cultural Blueprint. The effort, on behalf of the 106 members of the Arts and Cultural Attractions Council of Louisville, seeks additional government funding and greater attention and utilization of our sector in education, urban redevelopment, cultural tourism, city branding, and stimulating the creative economy. No individual institution in Louisville is likely to excel unless the sector as a whole excels. One of the persistent questions in my job is how to employ the prestige of the university to enhance the position of our partners.

I look forward to learning from others. My sources of inspiration have been the nested university art museums funded by the Mellon Foundation as well as the programs outlined in past NCPH conventions, and I am excited and honored to be part of this dialogue.

### **Andrea Burns**

Greetings to the working group! My name is Andrea Burns, and I received a Ph.D. in History from the University of Minnesota in 2008. In August 2009, I had the great fortune to begin my job as an Assistant Professor of Public History at Appalachian State University (ASU) in Boone, North Carolina, located in Watauga County, in the midst of the Appalachian Mountains.

One of my primary goals as a new resident of Boone, and a new professor of public history, is to forge connections with local public history organizations. At ASU, undergraduate students seeking a B.S. in History (with a concentration in public history) are—rather inexplicably—not required to complete an internship prior to graduation, though an internship class is on the books if they wish to receive course credit. Graduate students seeking an M.A. in Public History are required to complete an internship prior to graduation. Although ASU operates an innovative visual arts museum, the town of Boone doesn’t have a traditional “history” museum. Indeed, several years ago, ASU’s administration closed the Appalachian Cultural Museum, which had been initiated by a senior public history faculty member in my Department. As such, it’s understandable—though admittedly frustrating—that many graduate students complete their required internships at institutions in larger cities several hours away from Boone.

How, then, can I increase the level of involvement between public history students and the community? First, I would like to have the internship course be a requirement for public history undergraduates. Ideally, I would also like undergraduate internships to remain locally-focused. Staying local would get their feet wet, so to speak, in the field, while further cementing a community-university partnership that I see as mutually beneficial and, to date, underdeveloped.

Staying local would also mean that travel, living, etc. expenses would likely not be an issue; thus, unpaid internships wouldn't pose as much of a problem. However, I recognize at least one risk of making an internship a requirement for public history undergrads: the small number of public history sites located in Boone might become overrun with students, thus decreasing the quality of the internship experience.

When I began my position, I started making contacts with an organization called Hickory Ridge Homestead, which is located on the grounds of a theater called "Horn in the West." The Horn, in operation since the 1950s, features a play on Daniel Boone that runs throughout the summer. Hickory Ridge, which is administratively separate from the Horn but often lumped together with this popular but kitschy tourist attraction, is a living history museum focusing on the 18<sup>th</sup> century Appalachian frontier. The Homestead consists of several period cabins, as well as cabins reconstructed during the 1930s. The staff is largely volunteer-based; the curator, who essentially rescued the site from poor management, is paid only part-time. The organization has been through numerous ups and downs in terms of leadership and finances for many years; indeed, I was "warned" about getting too involved with this organization when I began my position at ASU because of their past difficulties.

Obviously, I do not want to send students to an organization that may not be able to provide them with a beneficial internship experience. However, the enthusiasm with which Hickory Ridge volunteers greeted me, and the several brainstorming sessions they had on how to promote Hickory Ridge (which they see as being ignored by the town *and* the university), made it difficult for me to say no—which, I suppose, is also problematic. Hickory Ridge representatives repeatedly emphasized that they had had little success in establishing a relationship with anyone at ASU, despite reaching out in the past. Ethically, I felt that as a public history professor with a supposed commitment to local partnerships, I had to assist this organization—despite its history of financial and leadership difficulties, and despite the fact that I knew trying to promote unpaid internships at this site might not be as "desirable" as paid internships at other, more financially stable organizations.

Despite my concerns, throughout the fall semester, I met with Hickory Ridge representatives to discuss what partnership opportunities might exist. To begin "spreading the word" among our students, none of whom had heard of the site, I invited the curator of Hickory Ridge dress in his period costume and speak to my Introduction to Public History class. In December, Hickory Ridge representatives and I finally drew up an advertisement for an unpaid internship. I circulated the electronic ad through ASU's Career Services Office. To date, that ad has received no response. However, I had more success in speaking directly with a public history undergrad who expressed an interest in Appalachian history; she will begin her internship at the site this week, and will receive 3 credit hours. I am extremely pleased I helped facilitate the beginnings of a tentative partnership, and I hope that this student's experience will, in turn, make it easier for both me and for Hickory Ridge to attract future interns to the site.

One of the factors that made it significantly easier for me to establish the parameters of the internship is because ASU's College of Arts and Letters at ASU has an official "internship contract," which the faculty supervisor, agency representative, and the student must sign. Once the student signs up for the course, a fee of 15\$ is automatically applied to the student's bill,

which covers liability. A separate form requires the signatures of the History Department Chair, the Public History director, the faculty supervisor, and the Dean of the College of Arts and Letters. The student must also write a brief explanation of their goals and duties for the semester and circulate it to these parties (and at the end of the semester, the student must also write a report or produce other work documenting their internship experience). The responsibilities for each party—faculty supervisor, agency representative, and student—are outlined on the contract, which is extremely helpful when I talk to all the parties involved regarding their expectations and duties. In a sense, there are safeguards built into the internship process, which perhaps addresses the 2<sup>nd</sup> question posed by the working group: “Have students found the financial difficulties and sometimes unrealistic expectations of these rescue work environments deflating, and does this negatively affect program retention? How might internship supervisors best mitigate this possibility?”

Obviously, my relationship with local public history organizations has barely begun. With no end to the economic downturn in sight, I see little chance of small organizations like Hickory Ridge being able to pay student interns—and with that, I know that there is a risk that interns could be overused and overworked (though I hope the safeguards built into the contract all parties sign would help lessen that risk). Indeed, during the course of my student’s internship, I will be making several visits to the site, and I will talk separately with the student and the internship supervisor to assess how the relationship is progressing.

Another difficulty I face concerns promoting local partnerships to public history graduate students. I think it’s a difficult sell to convince graduate students that completing an unpaid internship at a small, volunteer-based local history organization would be beneficial to them—though I could absolutely guarantee that were they to intern at Hickory Ridge, they would have immediate, hands-on experience with the running of a public history site (as opposed to, say, photocopying and other mindless tasks).

I look forward to meeting all of the members of this working group, and exploring the rewards and difficulties of engaging in partnerships with financially-strapped—but clearly invaluable—public history organizations.

### **Larry Hassenpflug**

I am Larry Hassenpflug. I am pursuing a master’s degree in public history at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico. I also took my internship in the collections department at the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum, where I continue to do volunteer work. Currently, the state is experiencing an economic downturn like the rest of the country. This means, among other things, that there is a hiring freeze for the next two years. Consequently, the museum has become increasingly reliant on help from its volunteers.

For the most part, this lack of funds has not seriously impacted morale. Certainly, there exist varying degrees of frustration centered around career advancement and simply finding the people needed to do what is necessary. Also, many of the museum personnel find it necessary to engage in a second job of some sort, ranging from selling artwork to

running a retail store. The general attitude, however, has been forward looking, anticipating the day when the economy will start improving. This atmosphere, as well as direct encouragement from the museum employees, helps to maintain a positive feeling among the interns that I know. If anything, I think the current situation is good for the profession in that it potentially weeds out people who are simply looking for a job, while those who truly love the work they do and will be doing professionally stay in the program. Hopefully, those who stay will become more resolute regarding the importance of supporting museums and similar institutions.

An additional side effect of the absence of means is increased creativity. When an institution cannot afford to do things at the same level that they were once accustomed, its staff must become more creative in the things they do (as my supervisor calls it, “thinking out of the box”). People will be forced to approach their tasks from a different angle that may lead to new and innovate methods beneficial to the field as a whole. They also have to accept that they can only do what they can do with the means at hand, without losing sight of the final, idealized goal.

From a more administrative angle, the relationship between my department and my museum has been strengthening. Those of us from the program who perform their internship at the museum have carried our enthusiasm for the institution back to the university. My supervisor, Holly Radke (collections manager/registrar for the museum), has noted an increase in communications between public history program faculty and the museum and an agreement between both parties over the dire need of the museum for interns and volunteers seeking to enter the field professionally. She also points out the need to have trained professionals at the institutions seeking interns. Untrained personnel cannot properly teach interns, making the exercise pointless and uneducational.

Continuing this train of thought, it is my opinion that interns certainly can and should do the work of the professional. Naturally, supervision is required to ensure that the job is performed correctly and that the intern learns proper methodology, but the need for guidance diminishes over time. The job done is no different for the intern than the professional, save in the individual’s level of skill, which is increased through experience. The only way to become a professional is to do the work of a professional. Some faculty members I have dealt with stress having a “hands on” experience at the site of their students’ internships and will recommend that the student not go to a place where this environment will not be found. For example, my program suggests each intern acquire a letter of intent to guarantee that the whole internship will not consist of making photocopies and cleaning toilets.

What I would like to see emerge is a semi-formal agreement (though not legally binding) between my university and both the Farm and Ranch and other local museums. The public history program could agree to supply a certain number of students to the museums, which in return agrees to accept those students. This provides the advantage of an educationally sound, worry-free experience for the student, exposure to and experience with local institutions for the university department, and a steady supply of much-needed quality help for the partnered public history sites. However, the downside is that some of the experiences of a real job search (e.g., writing resumes and interviewing) is lost. Not all

students are as well prepared for job-hunting as others, and going through the process in order to obtain an internship can be of benefit.

Though the current recession creates dire straits for many public history institutions and the job market continues to contract, I see this situation as an opportunity to learn, to grow, to become stronger. We may deplore these circumstances, and rightfully so, but I believe that in the long run the profession will be better than it was before.

## **Aaron Cowan, Slippery Rock University**

### Introduction

Hello everyone – a quick bit of background on me: I received my Ph.D. from the University of Cincinnati in 2007, and I was hired in my current position at Slippery Rock University in Fall 2008. At SRU I teach courses in U.S. history and have been developing new courses in Public History, with the eventual goal being the development of a Public History concentration for our MA program. I also serve as curator of the Old Stone House, a small stagecoach tavern museum owned by the university, and wear the hat of “internship supervisor” for our department.

### Case Statement

The problems that I raised for this working group came out of a specific experience in my first semester at SRU. In the fall of 2008, the Lawrence County Historical Society in New Castle, Pennsylvania (about 20 miles from Slippery Rock University) released its director, the sole paid professional historian on its staff. This release was necessitated by severe budgetary shortfalls, caused in part by the precipitous financial decline then wracking the U.S. economy. Like historical societies around the country, the LCHS is a non-profit organization that receives most of its operating budget from membership dues, donations, and charitable organizations. Early in my first semester, a representative from the society’s board contacted me and asked for some assistance in assessing the society’s needs, advising the board about next steps, and perhaps guiding student volunteers and interns.

The needs of the historical society were severe. The previous director had, to say the least, a very loose interpretation of the society’s mission and collections policy, which had resulted in a massive backlog of accessioning of donated items. The attic of the society’s massive 1904 mansion was filled, literally from floor to ceiling, with donated items ranging from city phone directories to local industrial records to fireworks (!) to Civil War artifacts. Crates filled with samples of Shenango China, a local and noteworthy ceramics manufacturer, filled entire rooms. All of this was completely haphazard, with no obvious organizational system. Because of tensions and personal conflicts that remained after his firing, the previous director was unavailable to consult about the organizational system or potential significance of these varied artifacts to Lawrence County history and the mission of the society.



Furthermore, the society had (and has) clearly lost its significance to the people of Lawrence County and the city of New Castle. Attendance figures for the society's museum were abysmal (except for the occasional school field trip) and a brief visit to the museum revealed part of the reason why. Though the city has a marvelously rich industrial and labor history<sup>1</sup> and a diverse population of ethnicities and races with long histories in the community, its exhibits focused either on staid presentations of traditional topics like the Civil War, trivial displays of antiquities (hundreds of Native American arrowheads, with no explanation of their significance) or bizarre and incongruous objects (a collection of reproductions of Egyptian statuary). The society had no paid professional staff on board; only a determined and energetic septuagenarian accountant staffed the office on the days the society was open.

Eager to help, in Spring 2009 I enlisted a graduate student to serve as an intern and rallied my first Public History class to do some "rescue" work. We encountered a number of issues. First, because LCHS has no supervisor with any academic training, interns are left largely independent and rudderless, leaving it up to the faculty member (me) for guidance on methods, best practices, etc. The advantage to this situation is that the intern can work on almost anything they want; their downside is that, of course, they do not receive the type of professional mentoring that is essential to a good learning experience without intensive supervision from me.

Second, the intensive involvement required for "rescue" work has created tension with the society's board, many of whom, while well-intentioned, do not have a good understanding of the standard practices of such a public history institution. For example, I enlisted my Public History undergraduates to cull a small group of the *obviously* insignificant or redundant artifacts from the collection, make an inventory of these, and present this list to the board with recommendation that the items be deaccessioned. This led to rounds of second-guessing and questioning from the board ("But this book is about the Civil War, and part of the Civil War happened in Pennsylvania. Shouldn't we keep it?"). Students grew quite disheartened that their hard work was being dismissed, and frustrated that they were placed in the awkward position of being both desperately needed and at the same time constantly critiqued for being "only students." When graduate student interns in the most recent semester suggested developing new exhibits that might interpret the history of Italian immigrants or African-Americans in the region, they faced resistance from many members who clearly favored antiquarian displays of fine china or antique toys over community-focused interpretive history. Without a professional historian on the staff of the society, there is no mediator to serve as "translator" between graduate student interns immersed in the historiographical shifts of the academy and the patrician guardians of local heritage. While this sort of tension is, of course, one of the classic dilemmas of public history in practice, it does not create an environment in which students can easily develop and hone their craft. Nor does it help in convincing students that public history is a rewarding and fulfilling career in which their education is valued!

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<sup>1</sup> For example, it was a major hub of the Industrial Workers of the World in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1909-1917 New Castle was the home of *Solidarity*, the only IWW newspaper east of the Rocky Mountains.

Furthermore, I have begun to try to envision what the long-term goal should be in helping the society. To date, the LCHS has been quite grateful for the help received, but has taken few steps to move forward with any remedies to its larger structural issues. The elimination of the director's salary and benefits has now brought their monthly budget "in the black" and, because the society is underutilized, intern and volunteer labor has sufficed to maintain the status quo. The board has not conducted a search for a new director, nor has it (to my knowledge) attempted to develop any innovative strategies for fundraising and greater community engagement. Because of this, I have questioned whether our department has helped to rescue the society or rather simply further enabled a dysfunctional organization.

Despite these significant challenges, I still feel that as a public historian and faculty member, I have some ethical responsibility to serve and provide resources for LCHS and other organizations like it. From this early encounter, it seems to me that, where institutions lack professional staff, a significant amount of conversation and educating has to take place with whatever supervisory authority (in this case, the board) remains; trust is important, and mutual goals have to be clearly defined. Clearly students placed with institutions in crisis need significantly more care, attention, and guidance than those placed in "healthy" organizations if the internship is to be both successful and truly educational. How we manage all this without losing our minds is another question. I look forward to continuing the conversation!

### **Elizabeth Fraterrigo, Loyola University Chicago**

I am an assistant professor of U.S. history and public history at Loyola University Chicago. Prior to holding this position, I taught in the graduate public history program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. I have been responsible for establishing and supervising internships as well as creating project-based courses in partnership with cultural institutions. My interest in this discussion group stems from experiences working with organizations of varying sizes but with very limited resources.

A few notes on our program. There are three options for public history at Loyola: a master's degree program in public history; a master's degree program in public history and library information science; and the joint doctoral program in American History/Public History. Additionally, students pursuing other fields can minor in public history. An internship is required for each of the three degree programs. Graduate students receive three hours of course credit upon the successful completion of an internship, with a minimum time requirement of 150 hours. Many students do not merely complete the internship requirement and move on; rather, they often undertake a practicum or obtain volunteer positions in order to broaden or deepen their experience in a desired area. The master's programs have a mix of funded and unfunded students.

Our program is fortunate to be located in a city with a number of healthy institutions where students can learn best practices and receive adequate guidance on their assigned tasks. There are also many fledgling or struggling organizations in our midst. As public historians working in the

academy, I believe we have a responsibility to assist organizations that have fallen on hard times. One of the first things we as public history faculty/internship supervisors can do is realistically identify the skills and benefits students can obtain from an internship or practicum in a small, struggling institution. Students in these environments must exercise initiative, self-direction, and resourcefulness. They must be problem solvers. Often, they must be able to shepherd projects from start to finish. Above all, they can get a valuable sense of the big picture in terms of the range of issues involved in the administration of a small museum or historic site. The reality is that many organizations, regardless of size, operate with inadequate funding and staff. Learning to plan and prioritize in a less than ideal situation is a valuable skill.

At the same time, partnering with struggling organizations raises several issues. For unfunded students, the prospect of paying tuition to receive course credit for an unpaid internship is less than desirable but almost always unavoidable in the case of a struggling organization. Without adequate on-site professional mentoring, interns placed in institutions in crisis also need more contact with and oversight from faculty supervisors. Another challenge comes from the fact that some of the individuals devoted to the hard work of keeping an organization afloat may feel threatened by the “intrusion” of graduate students. A director may welcome assistance in the form of a university partnership but long-time volunteers or staff with little or no professional training may feel upstaged. They may worry about students wresting control from them or implying that they are not doing things “the right way.” This can pose a challenge, but it’s also an opportunity for students to become more adept as communicators and to further develop interpersonal skills.

Once they have played some part in advancing the mission of an organization, it can be difficult for interns to resist requests (or sometimes begging!) from small institutions to stay on beyond the terms of an internship or to assume additional responsibilities. Their continued involvement in administrative duties (often at little or even no pay), however, can make it difficult for students to finish coursework or make progress on theses or dissertations. A similar situation arises as faculty are recruited or entreated to advise organizations or join their boards. As public historians, we have an obligation to lend our assistance. Accordingly, the universities at which we work should recognize the import of our assisting these perhaps unglamorous or low-profile institutions, for this is time-consuming service nonetheless.

A successful approach to working with financially-burdened organizations is one that meets the needs of the cultural institution in question as well as the needs of students. To me, this means thinking holistically about 1) an organization’s immediate concerns and long-term goals, and 2) the relationship of coursework to internships. Because students placed in institutions in crisis need more guidance from faculty, organizing a class project can provide a better alternative to establishing internships, at least in the early stages of the partnership. The public history course provides the supervised context within which some of the “rescue” work takes place.

Such endeavors require intense preparation in terms of identifying needs, establishing goals, and defining outcomes. They also pose logistical issues, given that, depending on the type of project, students will need access to a site, collections, databases, storage facilities, etc. This can be a real challenge when working with a financially-burdened local history organization that has a tiny staff and limited hours of operation.

A semester- or year-long cooperative endeavor with a university's public history program will seldom be enough to set an organization on solid footing. Collaborations with local institutions do give students an opportunity to gain practical experience, while simultaneously providing assistance to cash-strapped partner institutions with limited staff and resources. Within the context of a class project, students can undertake initial phases of work under faculty supervision. Subsequent student interns can build on this momentum to implement a proposal, write grants, complete a project begun in class, or undertake another phase of work in a multi-step process. Collaborating with organizations to envision a series of class projects and related internship assignments can be a form of "triage" that provides assistance with strategic planning; actually getting some of the urgent work done can put the organization in better standing to pursue the tasks of fundraising, collections management, public programming, and so on.

I look forward to discussing these issues and others addressed in case statements by the members of the working group.