



Best Practices in Public History

The M.A. Program in Public History

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Introduction:

The field of public history has become increasingly professional. This observation is easily made by a quick survey of job announcements—for museum curators, preservationists, federal historians and other positions—most of which now list an M.A. degree in public history as an appropriate foundation for entering professionals. Given this trend, M.A. programs in Public History must prepare students for work in the public sector.

Public History degrees differ significantly from degrees in Museum Studies, Museum Education or Archives and Library Science. While public historians may find employment in museums, archives or federal history centers—working as colleagues and peers to museum technicians and archivists—Public History unites a facility with practical skills, a sensitivity to stakeholder interests, and an intellectual command of historical content in ways that distinguish our work from that of others in the public sector.

The best Public History M.A. degrees provide students with a firm foundation in historical methodology and content and access to educational experiences and skills-oriented training. These programs prepare students to practice history in environments that require shared authority, reflexive educational practices, civic engagement, and political sensitivity. Programs also advance a clear concept of public history as BOTH service-oriented and scholarly.

The majority of public history programs are situated within a larger Department of History Department or a department in which History is located. The number of credits required to complete the M.A. differs from institution to institution. In addition, a few, cutting edge, free-standing public history programs afford students an opportunity to take a broader range of courses. Regardless of this diversity, the NCPH recognizes some curriculum requirements as necessary to ensure the promotion of best practices in our field.

Recommendations:

A public history program should train students as historians, by providing:

1. The opportunity for students to become expert researchers, writers and interpreters of history by acquiring a strong foundation in historical research methodology.
2. The opportunity for students to begin developing an area of historical expertise.

The program should also train students as public historians, by providing

1. A course that introduce students to the ways in which a public sector work environment raises particular issues of ethics and professionalism that might differ from those faced by our university-based peers and that exposes students to the scholarship of the field.
2. A required internship that enables students to acquire some marketable, real-world experience. Some programs might also offer a practicum course which provides

students with the opportunity to acquire hands on experience under the supervision of a professor and in the context of a graduate level course.

- Internships and practicum courses should require a significant work product as the outcome
- They must provide students with direct access to professional practitioners of public history
- The goal of internships and practicum courses should be to provide students with practical work experiences and/or projects that encourage collaboration and teamwork, two essential skills in the field

3. A selection of skills-oriented classes that introduce students to the theory and methods of public history as a field. Depending on the specific restraints of a given program (in terms of required credits and required courses), effective programs might take one of three general approaches:
 - Larger programs can offer a broad selection of public history courses such as oral history, archives management, or material culture from which students can choose in order to develop a specific area of expertise;
 - Smaller programs might develop a particular niche in the field, such as historic preservation or museum studies;
 - Regardless of size, an effective public history program might identify the core professional conditions of public history (shared authority; collaborative work environments; community-building) and develop courses in which students learn to apply historical content and methodology to public projects under these conditions.
4. The opportunity for students to fulfill elective requirements through interdisciplinary study. Because public history invites creativity in the presentation of history, public history students benefit from a departmental and campus atmosphere that invites creativity in individual program development. For example:
 - Students interested in Cultural Resource Management might benefit from taking archeology or architectural history courses.
 - Students interested in museum education might benefit from taking courses in educational pedagogy.
 - Students interested in exhibition work might benefit from taking courses in visual studies or art.
5. A culminating final project that documents and demonstrates the student's advanced thinking in both history and public history. The final project might be a thesis, but not all programs require one. Some programs invite students to produce a non-traditional scholarly product (such as an exhibit proposal, documentary film treatment, website development plan, etc). Others place students in internships not unlike student teaching opportunities and require them to produce a reflective writing assignment and portfolio. Still others require students to produce both a project and a scholarly essay.
6. Finally, it is advisable—though sometimes impractical and therefore not required—for public history programs to actively seek out partnerships with schools, museums, parks, or other historical organizations so that the program itself is modeling as well as teaching active, mutually-respectful collaboration. These collaborations also provide excellent learning experiences for graduate students.