



Best Practices in Public History

Public History for Undergraduate Students

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Introduction:

Nationwide, history departments introduce public history to undergraduate students in a variety of ways. Some departments introduce public history to students as a field, subfield or research method, while other departments offer a major, minor, emphasis, concentration or certificate in public history. Still others offer a class or two on public history theories and/or practices.² Clearly, the needs and resources of departments are as diverse as their approaches to public history. Below are some recommendations for undergraduate public history “programs” that are flexible.³ These recommendations should provide guidelines but should not be followed as a recipe for a “one-size fits all” approach to introducing undergraduates to public history. Undergraduate training in public history should be designed around the local resources available, the unique interests of department faculty, and the needs of the students. Undergraduate programs that offer public history should keep the following four basic priorities in mind: (1) Provide students with strong training in the basic skills of the historian; (2) Provide students with a solid grounding in historical content; (3) Introduce students early in their studies to the wide variety of careers that incorporate some component of public history; and (4) Encourage students to participate in field-based research, service learning, and/or internships.

There are many different reasons why history departments should consider introducing public history at the undergraduate level. The number of undergraduate history majors is on the rise in departments across the country, but students graduating with history degrees and going on to graduate study in history is declining. Studies project that this trend will likely continue.⁴ Some have concluded that students’ interests in history exceed their interests in pursuing what some might consider “traditional” careers in history, particularly teaching in the classroom or becoming professors.⁵ Students may be interested enough in history to declare the major, but may lack the knowledge or training necessary to transform their love for history into a career. An interesting study conducted by Deborah Welch indicates that by integrating public history techniques throughout the undergraduate curriculum, students became more engaged in their classes, and the number of students who declare history as their major increased significantly as well.⁶ Corresponding research indicates that students who get involved in hands-on research early in their undergraduate careers not only are more likely to graduate, but they also tend to graduate with significantly higher grade point averages than students who do not participate in research.⁷ Since one of the key aspects of public history education is its hands-on component, integrating public history into undergraduate programs will benefit students and departments in ways that far exceed career or graduate program preparation. Finally, public history courses and programs provide students, faculty and departments with rich opportunities for undergraduate research, experiential learning, service learning, and community partnerships.

Recommendations:

1. Training in History Basics

First and foremost in any undergraduate history program should be an emphasis on teaching students the best methods in researching and writing history. Students need to understand basic historiography and theory, the methods of researching historical topics, and above all else, practice writing and revising to produce clear and effective prose.

2. Grounding in Historical Content

Introducing students to public history should in no way reduce students' exposure to core curriculum in historical content. Students at the undergraduate level still are predominantly consumers of history and need a strong background in their chosen fields of study in order to become effective researchers. Students should also be encouraged to explore courses that provide content in areas related to public history careers, such as art history, cultural resource management, and historical archaeology when appropriate. It is imperative that students get broad training in the theories, methods and content that provide the basis of a traditional undergraduate history education. The introduction of public history at the undergraduate level should not become a source of vocational training. Training students in the skills of public history should not replace content courses.

3. Introductory Courses to Public History

Introductory courses should introduce students to the theories that inform various fields of public history, the historical traditions of these fields, the relationship between public history and the history profession, and major debates in the field of public history today. When possible, introductory courses should cover a wide array of fields of public history, including museums, archives, historic preservation, heritage tourism, media, oral history, and cultural resource management. Students should also be introduced to case studies that examine public history practices from a local, national and international level.

4. Introduction to Careers in Public History

Students need an early introduction to the wide variety of careers that are available under the title of public history. An early introduction to possible careers will accomplish the following objectives: (1) Students not interested in teaching or traditional graduate training in history will see how their interest in history can translate into a clear career goal; (2) Graduate programs in history may not be the best track for some students, who might be served best by preparing for advanced degrees in Library and Information Science, Archival Management, Historic Preservation, Non-Profit Management, etc; (3) Students uneasy about majoring and graduating in history due to family or peer questions like, "What are you going to do with that history degree?" may have more confidence and success in their decisions to major in history, which may lead to a corresponding increase in graduation rates for history majors, if they understand the variety of careers available to them.

5. Internships

Undergraduate students should be given the opportunity, or in formal programs they should be required to complete at least one external internship in the field of public history. Internships encourage students to think beyond their professors as their primary audience. Students who engage in internships also see the benefits of clear writing and oral presentation, professional conduct, and enjoy opportunities to present their work to a public audience. These experiences give students the active learning they desire, as well as opportunities for hands-on research and the exposure to public history careers that will guide them in making long-range educational and professional goals.

6. *Experiential Learning/Service Learning/Community Partnerships*

Public History courses provide ideal opportunities to incorporate experiential learning, service learning, community partnerships and student-based research into the curriculum. History departments should encourage faculty to engage students in the community through public history. Benefits include: highlighting the strengths of their departments to university and college administrators; increased student achievement; and eligibility for numerous grants that support service learning.

¹ Please direct comments, questions and suggestions regarding this document to Dr. Cherstin Lyon, Public and Oral History Program Coordinator at California State University, San Bernardino (clyon@csusb.edu, or 909.537.3836).

² John T. Schlotterbeck, "Public History for Undergraduate Students: Let a Hundred Flowers Boom," National Council on Public History Annual Meeting, Santa Fe, New Mexico, April 12-15, 2007. For lists of undergraduate programs offering public history training, see: National Council on Public History (<http://ncph.org/Education/GraduateandUndergraduate/tabid/323/Default.aspx>); and Public History Resource Center (http://publichistory.org/education/where_study.asp).

³ This document uses "program" to mean any organized method used to introduce students to public history from a handful of course offerings through a distinct major in the field.

⁴ Robert B. Townsend, "History Grains Ground in Majors and Undergraduate Degrees, Graduate Studies Continue to Decline," *Perspectives Online* 44:7 (October 2006), <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2006/0610/0610new1.cfm>, accessed March 5, 2008. See also: William J. Hussar, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2015* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2006), <http://nces.ed.gov/Pubs2006/2006084.pdf>, accessed March 5, 2008.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Deborah Welch, "Teaching Public History: Strategies for Undergraduate Program Development," *Public Historian* 25:1 (Winter 2003): 71-83.

⁷ Association of American Colleges and Universities, "The Student as Scholar: Undergraduate Research and Creative Practice," Long Beach, California, April 19-21, 2007 (http://www.aacu.org/meetings/undergraduate_research/index.cfm, accessed March 30, 2008).