



Best Practices in Public History

Establishing and Developing a Public History Program

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Introduction:

As graduate programs in public history have proliferated, many educators and professionals have become concerned about the quality of training provided and the future of the field. Public history differs from traditional forms of graduate study in its emphasis on skills-focused courses, civic engagement, and interdisciplinarity. These characteristics are well established. Providing high-quality training requires dedicated funding and administrative support, ongoing curricular development, and partnerships with outside organizations. Depending on curricular emphases, it may also require use of specialized resources and facilities. In addition, administrative practices at the department and college level may need to be modified to meet program needs.

Successful public history programs are distinguished by well-developed curricula; strong relationships with community partners; robust internship programs; clearly-specified areas of specialization; involvement with local, regional, and national organizations; and extracurricular events that promote professional dialogue and civic engagement. Specializations should be tailored to local strengths. A museum studies concentration, for example, is unlikely to be effective without museums in the immediate area that are willing to host interns and undertake collaborative projects. Successful programs use institutional strengths and community partners to their advantage. Program development is undertaken with involvement of department chairs, academic deans, and college-level curriculum committees. Outreach, including coordination of workshops and special events, is undertaken mainly by administrative staff at the department and college level.

The following guidelines are intended for use by department chairs and academic administrators responsible for public history programs. They enumerate practices that have proven effective at well-respected programs and have produced strong records of student placement, faculty productivity, and community engagement.

Recommendations:

1. Institutions are encouraged to adopt **tenure and promotion guidelines** that recognize public history scholarship before hiring public historians as faculty members. Collaborative work (including projects undertaken with students); creation of museum exhibits; nominations to the National Register of Historic Places and local landmark registers; and digital history projects should count as scholarship. Post-publication peer review is common in public history and should be specifically acknowledged. Institutions are strongly encouraged to adopt the

recommendations of “Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian” (see <http://ncph.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/Engaged-Historian.pdf>).

2. Institutions considering development of a public history program are urged to **begin the process by reaching out to practicing public historians both within and outside the university**.

This outreach should entail speaking to non-faculty historians who work both in the local community as well as non-academic historians who work in communities across the nation. This outreach should be focused on (1) assessing the potential job market (both locally and nationally), (2) determining the possibility of internships (both locally and nationally), (3) determining the kinds of skills that non-academic historical organizations seek in potential hires, and (4) gauging the ability of community partners to fund graduate assistantships. (Most public history programs make a distinction between *assistantships* and *internships*. Assistantships --- whether teaching assistantships in the classroom or public history assistantships in a local agency or institution --- may offer relevant experience, but are primarily designed to provide financial support to graduate students. Internships, which may be either paid or unpaid, are primarily designed to provide hands-on professional experience.)

3. Institutions considering development of a public history program are urged to consider **cluster hires** because of the multiple areas of public history specialization. While a single faculty member can offer courses in public history, it is not realistic for one person to teach in multiple areas of specialization, let alone do so while also carrying out administrative duties, community engagement, and scholarship.

4. Programs should adopt and regularly update a **mission statement** that specifies (1) a definition of public history appropriate to the institution and the local community, (2) pedagogical and professional goals, and (3) main areas of specialization. Mission statements focus institutional efforts and set expectations for students, faculty, and community partners. Programs should be forthright about the types of training provided. Because public history encompasses a wide range of specializations, no program can realistically offer training in all areas of practice.

5. Because many public history programs rely on adjuncts to teach specialized courses and electives, departments should adopt policies for hiring **adjunct instructors** that recognize the accomplishments, expertise, and pedagogical authority of these established professionals. Professionals from local institutions are often excellent instructors because of their experience and ongoing involvement in programming and administration, but it is important not to assume that all local professionals are willing or able to take on teaching work. Departments should therefore begin their planning by speaking to public historians in the local community to determine their level of interest in serving as adjunct faculty; this information should be used to inform the structuring of any tenure-track hires. Departments should establish procedures for vetting prospective instructors, approving qualified candidates to teach, and undertaking qualitative review of adjunct-taught courses. Pay for adjuncts should be commensurate with professional qualifications and public history experience, not based on the too-often minimal stipends paid to adjunct instructors for traditional history survey courses.

6. Public history graduate students should be **funded** on a par with graduate students in “traditional” fields. Dedicated funding for public history students is recommended. In determining how students will be supported, programs should seek to match funding with students’ academic and professional goals. In general, public history students will benefit from assistantships at local historical institutions more than teaching assistantships. Assistantships hosted and supported in part by partner organizations are especially valuable. Outreach should be done to determine whether local institutions and organizations possess funds that would make these partnerships viable. Because history departments that offer the PhD often exclude M.A. students from funding altogether — or fund them at lower stipends — securing adequate funding for public history students may be an enormous challenge at some institutions. Those seeking to establish or build public history programs may have to argue that departments and institutions must re-think how they assign funding and reserve some financial resources for MA students. This is a tough sell because departments usually do not value the success of their MA students in the same way that they value the success of their PhD students (although a comparison of placement rates can be a revealing and effective counter-argument). Another way to make the case is to argue that an M.A. in public history is, for most graduate students, a terminal degree like an MFA or a JD.

7. Similarly, before the creation of a public history program, outreach should be done to determine whether local institutions and organizations want and have the ability to host and supervise **interns**. Assessments of these partnerships with local institutions should be done with an understanding that local institutions and organizations may be unable to host interns every semester.

8. Programs should secure commitments from other departments for **courses** that contribute to the public history curriculum. Many programs rely on courses offered by other departments for electives and required courses. Ensuring that such courses are offered regularly is essential. Department chairs, deans, and college-level committees should participate in coordinating course offerings. Individual faculty members, especially junior faculty, are poorly positioned to secure commitments from outside departments.

9. Departments should establish clear expectations for developing and maintaining **relationships with community partners**. Determining who will handle such responsibilities and what community partnerships are intended to achieve is essential. If public history faculty bear primary responsibility, the time and effort involved should be accurately assessed and counted toward annual workloads. Departments should set realistic expectations to ensure that partnerships are well supported and to avoid overburdening staff and faculty.

10. Departments should be realistic about **admissions and enrollments**. The advising responsibilities of public history faculty should be commensurate with those of other faculty members, taking into account the differing needs of public history and “traditional” students. Admissions should be based partly on faculty capacity in order to avoid overcommitment. In addition, departments should recognize that advising may assist in integrating public history

into the overall curriculum. In many cases, public history students do not need to be advised by public history faculty; other faculty members may have sufficient expertise. In such cases, assigning public history students to advisors who are not primarily public historians will assist in minimizing distinctions between public history and “traditional” students.

11. Public history programs require **dedicated administrative support and budgets**. Travel expenses, professional memberships, and costs for class projects and activities are standard. These should be anticipated and incorporated into annual planning. Budget requirements will vary depending on the size of the program and other factors. At a minimum, allotments should be made for (1) student funding, (2) travel and expenses associated with applied projects, (3) professional memberships, and, if appropriate, (4) hosting workshops, conferences, and community forums.

12. Programs should secure and maintain **resources and equipment** needed for areas of specialization. A concentration in museums studies, for example, will require use of exhibit design and construction facilities. A concentration in digital history will require access to computer equipment, software, and information technology support. Programs should secure required facilities, equipment, and supplies before advertising and enrolling students in specializations.

13. Departments should work actively to integrate public history into **departmental and institutional cultures**. Dividing students into “traditional” and “public history” categories, even rhetorically, invites unnecessary tension and conflict. A culture of mutual respect that recognizes all types of historical practice as valuable and emphasizes difference rather than hierarchy and relative prestige is recommended.

14. Programs should lead in articulating the **value and relevance of history**. Public history training should require students and faculty to consider the value of history and become skilled in explaining its significance in contemporary life. Significance, in this sense, should include creation of new knowledge and applied uses, including independent thinking, nurturing personal identity, developing strong and resilient communities, making informed decisions, and inspiring leadership.