

## **Career Paths in Public History**

### **Report of the Joint AASLH-AHA-NCPH-OAH Task Force on Public History Education and Employment**

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#### **Summary**

A survey of 1,488 graduates of M.A.-level public history and related programs conducted between April 2016 and May 2017 by a Joint Task Force representing the American Association for State and Local History, the American Historical Association, the National Council on Public History, and the Organization of American Historians reveals generally favorable outcomes in employment, career advancement, and job satisfaction. The survey results report the career paths of public historians who received their graduate degrees between 1985 and 2017, with the majority having graduated since 2007. The members of the Joint Task Force believe this is the most comprehensive assessment of public history careers ever completed.

In recent years, many professionals have become concerned about the potential for a crisis in public history employment. According to one scenario, declining job opportunities and overproduction of public historians threaten to leave graduates of M.A.-level public history and related programs struggling to find employment. This survey shows that no such crisis has developed. Although some respondents reported difficulty finding employment in the years immediately following the 2008 recession, most have not experienced undue duress. In response to the question, “Was the first professional job you secured after completing your degree in public history?,” 65 percent of 1,430 respondents replied, “Yes.”

Although the aggregate responses suggest a favorable employment portrait, comments provided by respondents temper that view. Some respondents voiced concerns about difficult working conditions, declining opportunities, and sacrifices made to obtain employment in the field. Some reported apprehension about the future of public history jobs and view long hours, low wages, and workplace challenges as the norm. Others expressed concern about the financial indebtedness of recent M.A. recipients.

In sum, the survey reveals a complex and varied public history job market. Although some of the findings provide cause for concern, many readers will find the overall results reassuring. Significant numbers of respondents expressed satisfaction with their careers and enthusiasm for the rewards and challenges of public history. When asked, “How satisfied are you with your current position?,” 781 respondents reported an average score of 7.81 on a scale ranging from 0, “Not at all,” to 10, “Extremely satisfied.”

The survey results reveal that graduates of M.A. programs in public history and related degrees generally find opportunities if they develop strong historical skills, obtain practical experience, and make professional employment in the field their main priority. Willingness to relocate, especially for early-career positions, and skills and expertise that employers regard as increasingly valuable, are also important for success.

## Introduction

During the fall of 2015, the Joint Task Force on Public History Employment and Education developed questions for an online survey of alumni of Master's-level programs in public history (and related fields). This effort marked the start of the second major project the task force undertook following its founding at the request of the National Council on Public History (NCPH) in 2014. The Joint Task Force is a partnership of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), the American Historical Association (AHA), the NCPH, and the Organization of American Historians (OAH). It was established to examine questions about trends in public history education and employment. For background on the discussions that inspired the task force, see Robert R. Weyeneth, "A Perfect Storm?", *Public History News* 33, no. 4 (September 2013) (available at <http://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2013-September-PHN22222.pdf>). The same essay also appeared as a four-part series on *History@Work* (see <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/tag/a-perfect-storm-series/>).

The task force is co-chaired by Philip Scarpino of Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis and Daniel Vivian of the University of Kentucky. The other members when the survey began are as follows:

Jackie Barton, Ohio History Connection  
John Dichtl, American Association for State and Local History  
David Glassberg, University of Massachusetts at Amherst  
James Grossman, American Historical Association  
Kristen Gwinn-Becker, HistoryIT  
Anthea Hartig, California Historical Society  
Stephanie Rowe, National Council on Public History  
Aidan Smith, Organization of American Historians  
Scott Stroh, Gunston Hall

The composition of the task force changed while this report was in preparation. Aidan Smith died unexpectedly in April 2018, leaving the OAH without a Public History Manager and, in turn, a staff representative on the task force. During the summer of 2018, the task force co-chairs consulted with NCPH Executive Director Stephanie Rowe and decided to ask each of the sponsoring organizations to reevaluate their appointees and make changes as appropriate. As a result of this process, the AASLH appointed two new representatives, Rich Cooper of Connor Prairie in Fishers, Indiana, and Nicola Longford of the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas, to replace Jackie Barton and Scott Stroh. NCPH also appointed Catherine Gudis of the University of California, Riverside, as a third representative. In October 2018, the OAH named Paul Zwirecki as its new Public History Manager, which again gave the task force a full complement of representatives.

The first major undertaking completed by the task force was a survey of public history employers carried out in 2015. The results are discussed in Philip Scarpino and Daniel Vivian, "What Do Public History Employers Want?: Report of the Joint AASLH-AHA-NCPH-OAH Task Force on Public History Education and Employment" (released February 2017; available at <http://bit.ly/2knHdjz>).

## Methodology

The public history M.A. alumni survey consisted of thirty-three questions concerned with respondents' graduate education, employment history, early-career job searches, job satisfaction, and current employment situation. Respondents were asked to provide the year in which they received

their graduate degree; if they obtained employment in public history before completing their graduate degree; how long it took them to find employment after receiving their degree (for those not already employed); how long they stayed in their first public history position; and whether that position had benefits such as health insurance and a retirement plan. Questions on these and related subjects formed the major part of the survey. They sought to address several questions the task force identified as priorities, specifically:

- Are recent M.A. recipients finding jobs? How long is it taking them to find positions, and what sort of jobs are they accepting?
- How long has it typically taken M.A. recipients to obtain employment in the field? Has the interval between receipt of degree and employment changed over time?
- Is there an imbalance between the number of M.A.-level graduates in public history and available jobs in the field?

The task force also believed it important to capture the full range of public historians' career experiences. Consequently, a number of questions focused on employment outside of public history. Respondents who left the field permanently or have held non-public history positions were asked about the factors that led them to take such positions and how useful they had found their public history training.

Not all respondents answered the same sequence of questions; instead, we attempted to tailor the questions to the individuals' experiences. For example, persons who answered "yes" to Question 3, "Did you secure employment before completing your degree?," subsequently answered follow-up questions to determine if that position was part-time, full-time, or temporary (grant funded or similar) and, further, if the respondents subsequently finished their degrees. By contrast, respondents who answered "no" to Question 3 then answered questions about the length of time they searched for employment after finishing their degree, the type of position they obtained, and how long they remained in that position. Thus, while all respondents answered questions concerned with the same subject matter, the exact questions posed depended on individual responses.

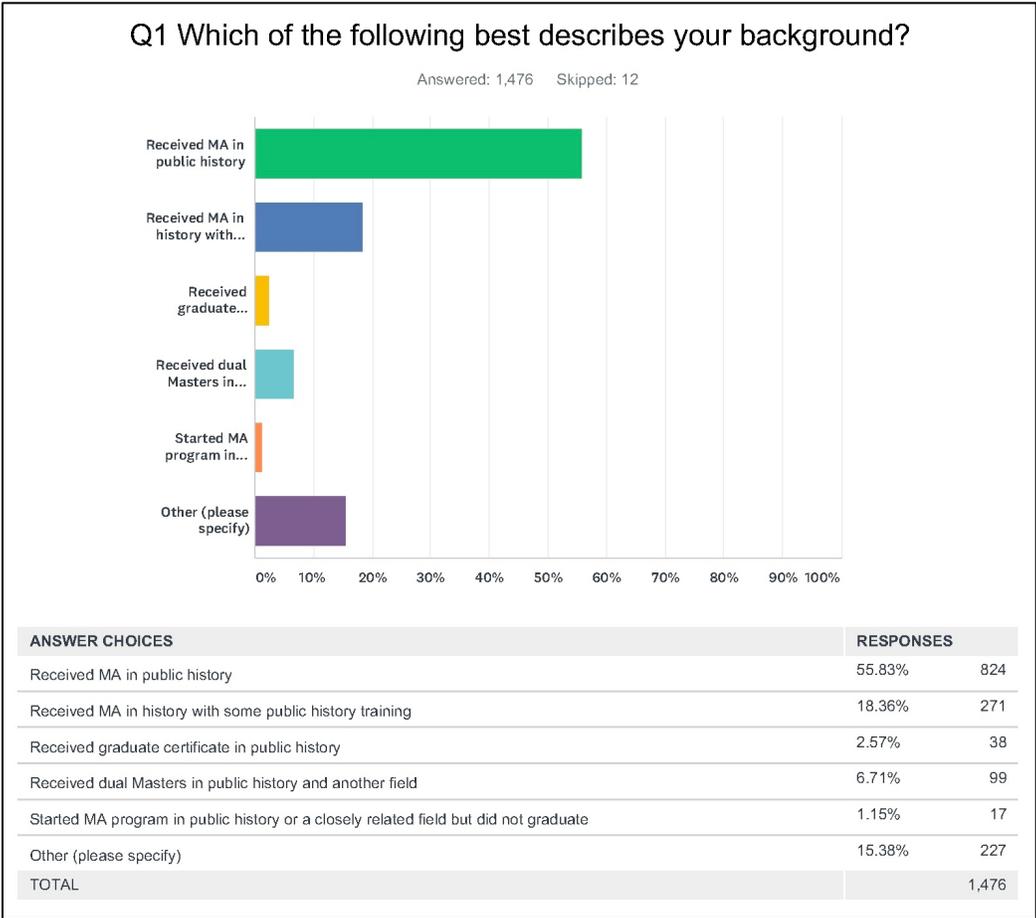
The survey is presented in full as Appendix A.

The survey results may overweight favorable outcomes. Because of limited time and resources, the task force had no way to create a database that included all graduates of Masters-level public history programs and then survey a random sample. By relying on alumni networks and professional organizations to disseminate the survey, the task force likely obtained a pool of respondents that favored people who have developed successful careers in public history or have at least remained involved to the extent that they are engaged with alumni and professional networks. People not employed in public history and no longer attentive to alumni and professional networks are unlikely to have responded.

The total number of respondents suggests that the general pattern depicted in the survey results is accurate. Moreover, the survey is effective in reporting the employment experiences of graduates of Masters-level public history programs. Nonetheless, readers should recognize that a different methodology – specifically, one able to include responses from persons who have left the field and no longer consider themselves part of it – might have produced lower scores for questions about job satisfaction, career preparation, and the utility of public history training for jobs outside the field.

**Profile of Respondents**

The 1,488 people who took the survey represent a broad cross-section of persons who hold an M.A. in public history or related fields. More than half (56 percent) earned an M.A. in public history. Another 18 percent hold a “traditional” history M.A. that included some public history training. Seven percent received a dual Master’s in public history and another field, and three percent completed a graduate certificate in public history. Slightly more than one percent started an M.A. in public history but did not graduate. Fifteen percent marked “other.” This category included students currently enrolled in public history graduate programs; persons holding an M.A. in fields such as American studies, museum studies, historic preservation, and historical administration; and Ph.D. historians (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1 Educational background of respondents.**

Respondents tended to be relatively recent graduates. Nearly 40 percent (557 people, or 38.9 percent) had received their public history degree between 2012 and 2016, and more than 75 percent (1,109, or 77.4 percent) had graduated since 2005. Persons who graduated in earlier years are more sparsely represented. Individuals who received their degrees in the 1990s, for example, made up 10.8 percent of respondents (155). Only 29 (2.02 percent) graduated in the 1980s, while 19 people (1.33 percent) received their degrees before 1985.

Question 25 asked persons with a spouse or domestic partner to categorize their economic status in the relationship. Of the 813 people who answered this question, 15 percent (120) identified themselves as the primary earner in their household, 20 percent (159) considered themselves one of

two earners who contribute about equally, and 26 percent (325) hold secondary earner status (see Figure 2).

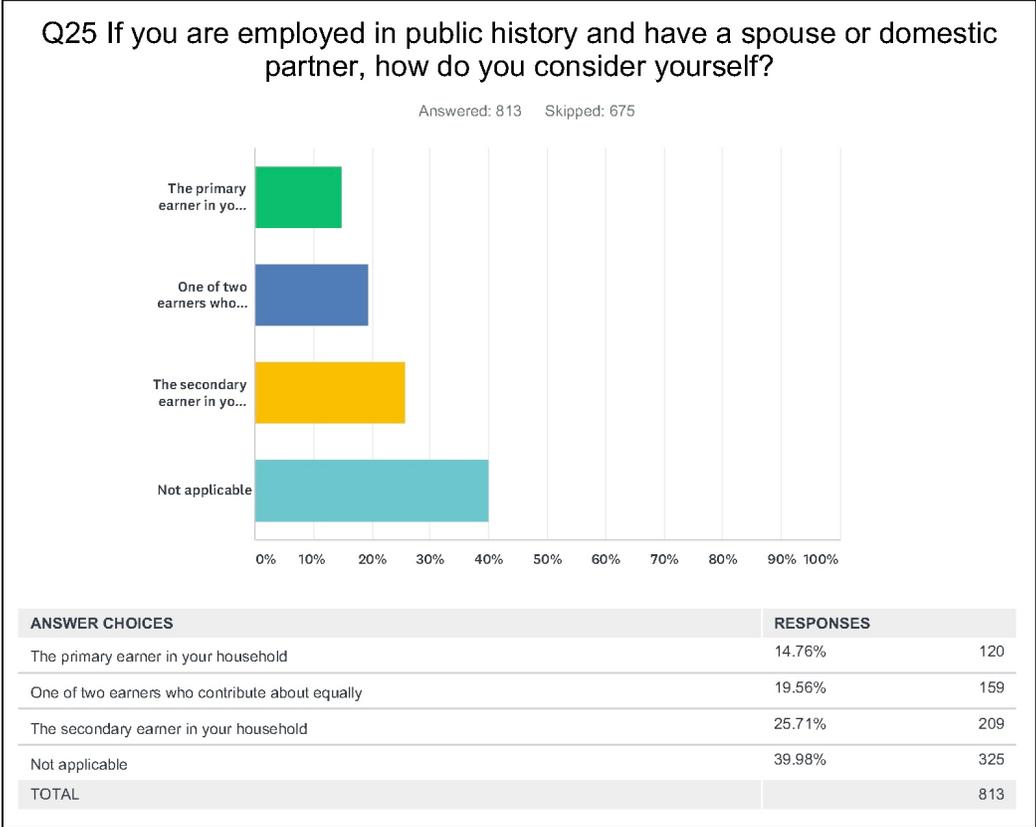


Figure 2 Economic status relative to domestic circumstances.

The task force promoted the survey in the same way as it did the employer survey. Postings on the NCPH’s *History@Work* blog announced the survey and invited participation. Task force members distributed the survey among their professional networks, and the co-chairs sent emails to directors of public history programs asking them to share the survey with their alumni. In addition, the co-chairs and task force partner organizations used social media posts to publicize the survey and invite participation.

The survey data is presented as Appendix B.

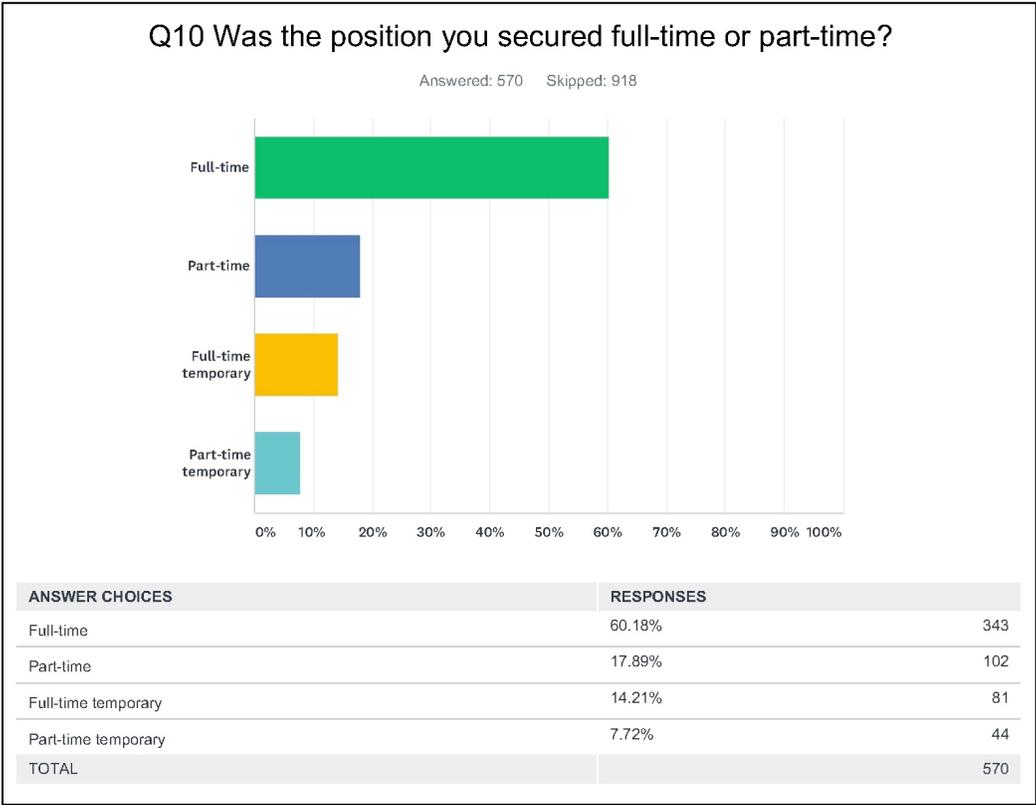
**Findings**

**The aggregate survey responses show that public historians are finding jobs, have opportunities for advancement, and have moderate to high levels of job satisfaction.** These results stand in contrast to some respondents’ written comments, which depict a less favorable job market and difficult working conditions. The survey data do not explain the reasons for this discrepancy, and it is likely that multiple factors are involved, including regional differences, variations among workplaces, and individual perspectives and experiences.

**Most respondents had good success in finding entry-level professional positions in public history.** Sixty-four percent (924) indicated that the first professional job they took after completing

their public history degree was in public history. Forty-one percent (163) obtained employment within 3 months of graduation; 29 percent (113) became employed between 3 and 6 months after graduating; and 12 percent (49) found a job within 6 to 9 months. Nine percent (36) obtained employment within 9 to 12 months of graduation. Put simply, an overwhelming majority of respondents (91 percent) found employment in the year following the completion of their public history degree.

**Despite concerns about the proliferation of term-limited and grant-funded positions, most respondents indicated that the first position they obtained after graduating was full-time.** Sixty percent (343) fit this description. Those who obtained a part-time position made up 18 percent (102) of respondents. Persons who became employed in full-time temporary positions comprised 14 percent (81), and those who secured part-time temporary employment made up 8 percent (44) (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3 Characteristics of first public history position obtained by respondents.**

**Asked how long they stayed in their first public history job, survey takers provided a wide range of responses, with the largest number indicating 1-2 years (31 percent, or 233 respondents), while 24 percent (183) said 3-5 years.** Sixteen percent (122) remained for 6-12 months, and 12 percent (87) stayed for between 5 and 10 years. About the same number stayed for less than 6 months and more than 10 years: 9 percent (68) and 8 percent (63), respectively.

**Sixty percent of respondents (502) received benefits such as health insurance and retirement in their first public history position.** Thirty-eight percent (307) indicated that they did not. **Geographic considerations influenced many respondents’ early-career job searches.** Question 22 asked about the importance of geography when respondents initially sought full-time professional employment in the field. Of 802 respondents, 28 percent (224) limited their search to a particular

area and 21.7 percent (174) strongly favored one area. Of the remaining respondents, 11.9 percent (95) gave roughly equal consideration to geography and other factors; 23.9 percent (192) said geography influenced their search “somewhat”; and 14.6 percent (117) said that geography played little or no role (see Figure 4).

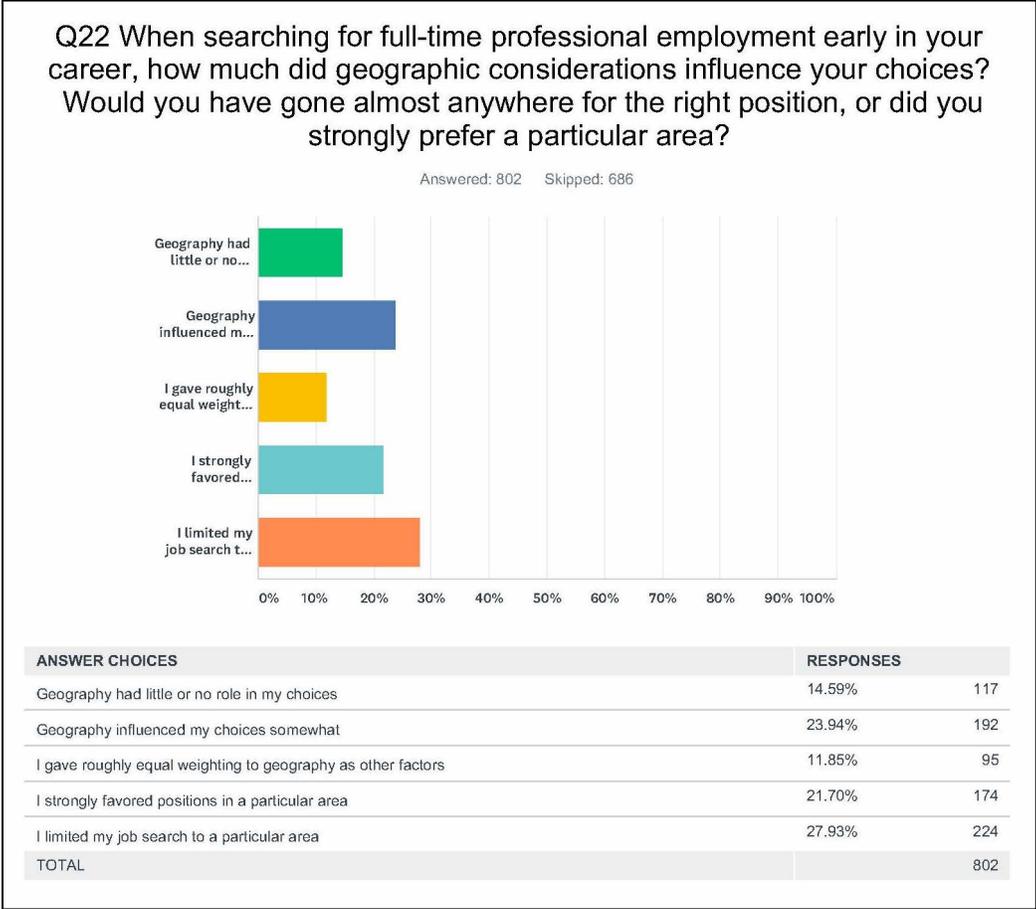
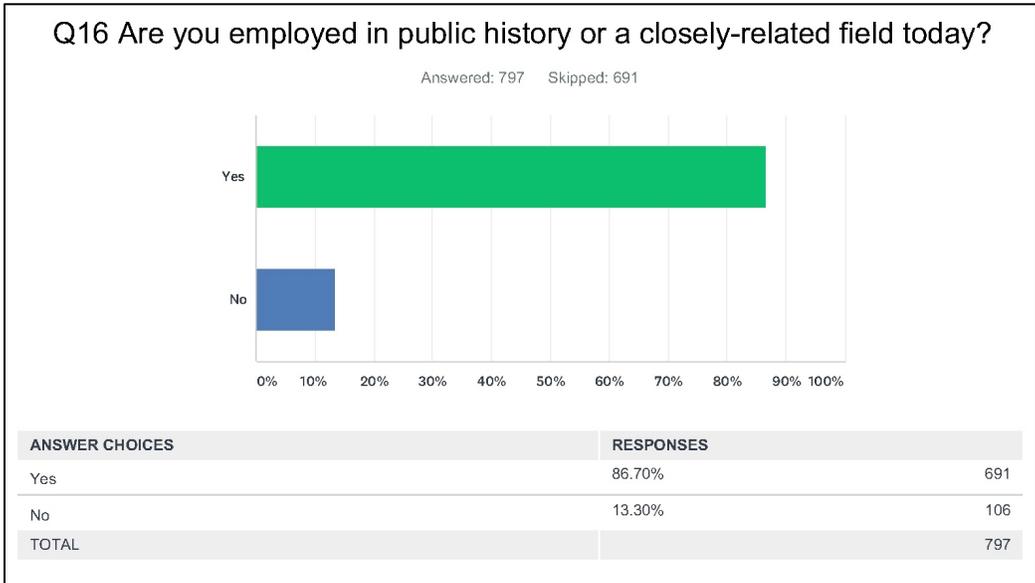


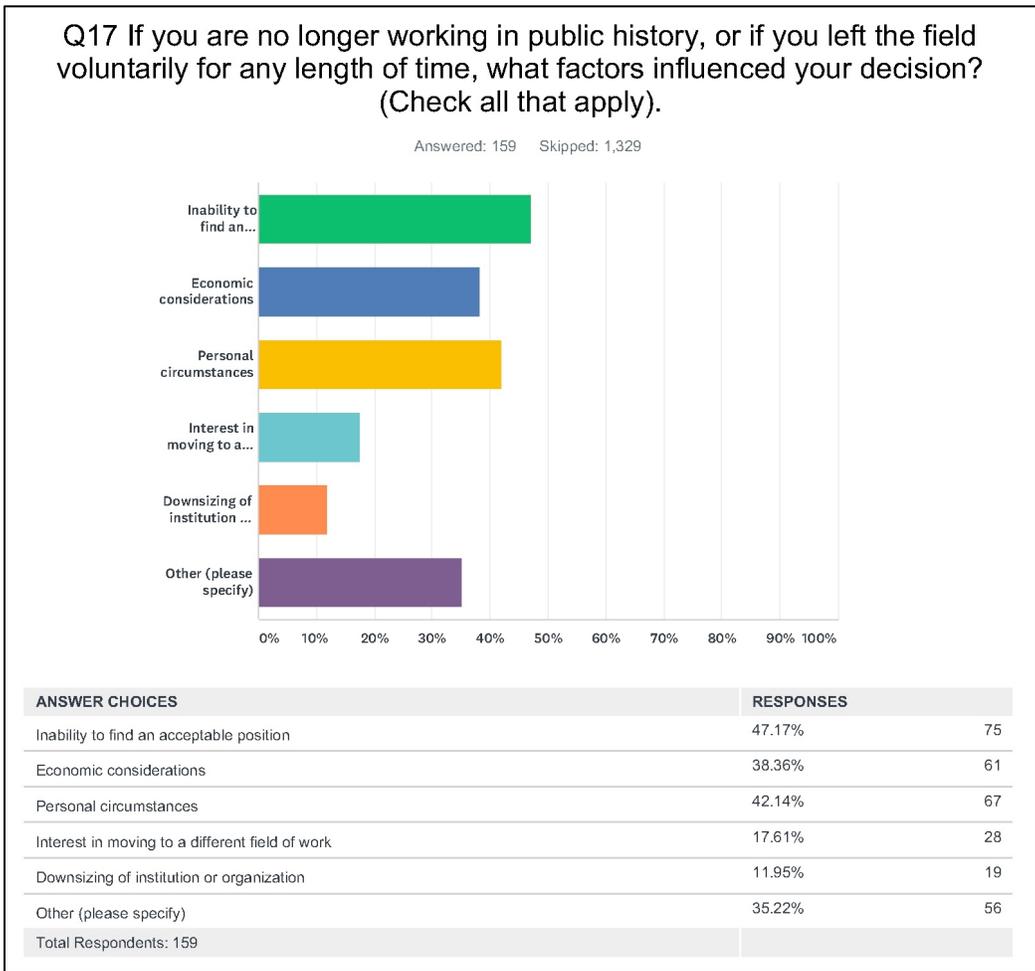
Figure 4 Geographic considerations in job searches.

**The majority of people who eventually left their first public history position remained in the field.** Seventy-six percent of respondents (457) indicated that they moved to another public history position. Twenty-four percent (144) did not. Of those in the first category, 62 percent (418) moved to a full-time position, 13 percent (86) to a part-time position, and 25 percent (170) considered the question not applicable. For slightly more than half of respondents, their second public history position offered benefits.

**A large majority of survey respondents – 87 percent (691) – indicated that they are currently employed in public history or a closely related field.** Thirteen percent (106) stated that they are not. People who left the field, either temporarily or permanently, gave a variety of reasons for their decision. Forty-seven percent (75) indicated that inability to find an acceptable position accounted for the change. Forty-two percent (67) identified personal circumstances as responsible, and 38 percent (61) named economic considerations. Eighteen percent (28) cited interest in moving to a different field of work as their primary motivation, and 12 percent (19) specified downsizing of an institution or organization (see Figures 5 and 6).



**Figure 5 Percentage of respondents currently employed in public history.**



**Figure 6 Reasons for leaving public history.**

**Respondents generally believe their training in public history prepared them for a career in the field.** Question 18 asked survey takers to rate how well their training prepared them for professional employment in public history on a 0-10 scale, with 0 representing “very poorly,” 5 representing somewhat, and 10 representing “very well.” Responses averaged 7.81. The vast majority of respondents (81 percent, or 653 people) rated their training in the 7-10 range.

**Respondents also indicated fairly high levels of satisfaction with their current positions.** Question 23 asked respondents to rate their level of satisfaction on a 0-10 scale, with 0 representing “not at all [satisfied],” 5 indicating “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,” and 10 representing “extremely satisfied.” Responses averaged 7.81. Eighty percent (628) of respondents selected a satisfaction level of 7 or better. Fourteen percent (109) chose a rating between 6 and 4, and 6 percent (44) selected 3 or less (see Figure 7).

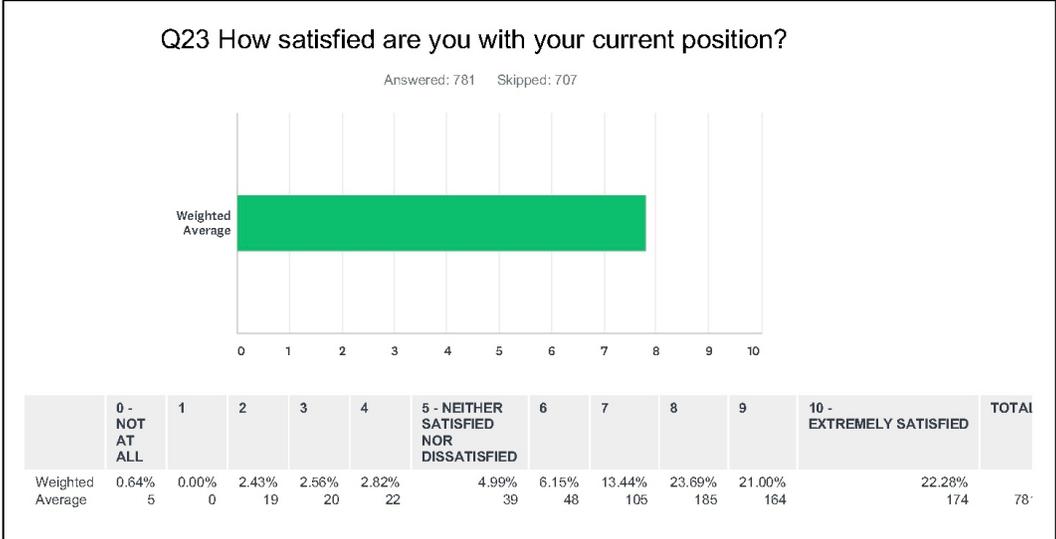


Figure 7 Satisfaction with current position.

**Persons with employment experience outside of public history have found their public history training useful and versatile.** Question 24 asked persons employed in positions not generally considered part of public history to rate the usefulness of their training in the field on a 0-10 scale, with 0 representing “not at all,” 5 indicating “neither useful nor useless,” and 10 indicating “very useful.” Of the 186 people who responded, 68 percent selected a rating between 7 and 10. Twenty-six percent chose one between 4 and 6, and 6 percent selected 3 or less. The average response was 7.24. Question 30 asked the same of people who once held a position outside of public history but have since returned to the field. Of the 433 respondents, 56 percent (244) selected a 7 or higher. Thirty-two percent (141) chose a rating between 4 and 6, and 11 percent (48) selected a 3 or lower. The average for Question 30 was 6.58.

Question 31 asked respondents who have held non-public history positions to indicate how versatile they considered their training in public history on a scale of 0-10, with 0 representing “not at all [versatile],” 10 representing “yes,” and 5 representing “neutral.” Of 447 respondents, 64 percent (288) selected a rating of 7 or higher, 26 percent (177) chose one between 4 and 6, and the remaining 9 percent (42) selected a 3 or lower. The average was 7.06.

**Most survey takers regard their current position as aligned with their skills and experience.**

Question 19 asked respondents to rate the appropriateness of their current position in relation to their skills, training, and experience on a 0-10 scale, with 0 representing “not at all [appropriate],” 5 representing “somewhat,” and 10 representing “very much so.” Of the 722 people who supplied answers, a large majority (81 percent, or 585 people) selected 7 or higher. Sixteen percent (113 people) chose ratings between 6 and 4, and 3.3 percent (24) selected a rating of 3 or less.

**Respondents who provided a rating between 0 and 5 for Question 19 were asked to elaborate on their responses.**

Sixty-one percent of respondents (81 people) indicated that they regard themselves as underemployed, and 12 percent (16) viewed themselves as holding a “position that exceeds their training and experience.” The remaining 27 percent (36) selected “other” and were asked to provide comments describing their status. Comments ranged widely in content, with some respondents naming specific skills they lacked, others noting that they are in an appropriately challenging position but underpaid, and still others expressing frustration with positions that do not allow them to use their full range of skills and expertise. Roughly two-thirds of the respondents who selected “other” could have chosen “underemployed” but selected the former category in order to comment on their circumstances.

**Respondents’ Comments: Broad Trends and Individual Experiences**

The final survey question (number 32) invited comments relating to the goals of the survey and personal experiences. Specifically, it explained:

The goal of this survey is to identify general patterns in employment for graduates of M.A. programs in public history. Is there any information you wish to provide that may help us with this goal? Please feel free to share challenges you encountered in finding satisfactory employment, your overall levels of job and career satisfaction, and any other issues you wish to mention. We are especially interested in the experiences of people trained in public history who have pursued careers in other fields. Comments regarding the usefulness and applicability of your public history training are especially welcome.

As with the survey of public history employers, the comments received are too numerous and too complex to be adequately summarized in a short report. They are presented in full as Appendix C. Readers are encouraged to review them carefully, for they constitute a far-reaching sample of public historians’ opinions on a wide range of questions about public history employment, careers, and trends in the field. Readers should also remember that the comments are only a compilation of responses to an invitation to share information relating to the goals of the survey. They are not the result of a systematic effort to obtain views on working conditions, job satisfaction, or career paths.

Six hundred and eighty-two respondents submitted comments. Most consisted of two or three sentences, while some ran much longer. A few ran several hundred words. As a whole, the comments show limited consistency in terms of subject matter or emphasis. They highlight a wide range of viewpoints (some positive, some critical) and considerable variation in public historians’ backgrounds, educations, and employment histories. The majority of respondents provided information about personal experiences and choices to elaborate on answers to previous survey questions. Some also mentioned types of training or specific skills they believe had helped them obtain employment, and others discussed training they wished they had received during their graduate studies. These emphases held true whether respondents had favorable or unfavorable

employment outcomes. Even respondents who ultimately failed to find acceptable employment felt inclined to describe circumstances they believed to have influenced their fortunes on the job market.

A small but significant subset of respondents provided comments that can be assigned to one of three categories. First, some discussed difficulties they had encountered in finding employment and condemned the state of the public history job market. Comments of this kind generally portray the job market as difficult if not hopeless and identify insufficient numbers of jobs as the basic problem facing public historians.

A second category consists of explanations of personal circumstances and educational histories that respondents view as differentiating them from most public historians. Comments of this kind demonstrate that it is difficult to speak of “typical” public history careers. Respondents holding Ph.D.s, who obtained an M.A. in public history after working in the field in some capacity, or who pursued training and employment in public history after working in another field for a significant length of time often felt compelled to describe their background out of concern that their responses would otherwise skew the survey results. Although members of this group are to be commended for sharing detailed information about their career paths, their numbers demonstrate that public history welcomes people from diverse backgrounds. Although some people enter M.A.-level programs soon after receiving an undergraduate degree and seek employment immediately following their graduate studies, others take less direct routes. The notion that people with “atypical” backgrounds should be assigned to a special category is problematic since it would encompass a significant percentage of public historians. How large a percentage is impossible to determine from the survey data, but the comments suggest it may be 30 percent or higher.

A third category of respondents highlighted pressures facing historical institutions and organizations, the competitiveness of the public history job market, and the conditions of public history employment. Many of these comments repeat views that have become widespread in recent years: (1) that job opportunities in public history are declining, (2) that growing numbers of public history programs are turning out more public historians than will be able to obtain gainful employment, and (3) that encouraging students to pursue careers in the field is irresponsible. Many of the people who expressed these views identified themselves as holding mid-level or senior positions and having extensive experience in hiring and managing public historians. Since people with such backgrounds speak from informed perspectives, determining why their observations differ from the numerical survey results will be important. Further research might seek to understand these differences and what they reveal about conditions within the field.

Beyond these findings, the comments offer considerable insight into public historians’ views of their career experiences and the field as a whole. Many summarized their personal path in public history without offering opinions on the state of the public history job market or related trends. Many in this category shared stories of success, praising the institutions where they received their training and explaining what they believe led them to be hired for positions they feel fortunate to hold. Other respondents discussed circumstances that have limited their opportunities or made it impossible for them to obtain employment in public history. Family obligations, the job of a spouse or partner, and inability to relocate from a particular area all rank highly among those mentioned.

A few respondents recounted circumstances that prevented them from finding stable employment in public history but led to employment in other fields, often in positions where their public history skills proved useful. One praised “analytical and research skills” honed during graduate school and credited them with facilitating success in a student services position in higher education. Another

said that public history education taught strong orientation to detail and project management, both of which had proven useful for a position managing records for clinical trials.

Commentators who condemned the state of the public history job market generally did so unequivocally, in a manner that ignores variations based on specialization or geographic location. One wrote, “There are few jobs. Most are poorly paid.” Another observed, “There are too few jobs and the pay is too low.” Still another respondent wrote, “too many grads, too few jobs.” Although only a few respondents submitted comments of this kind, they nonetheless show a degree of pessimism that, although understandable, is not representative of actual conditions (as revealed by the survey data) or helpful for identifying available opportunities.

When respondents discussed factors that helped them obtain employment, they emphasized the value of networking and internships. “Relationships, networking, and interning are key for finding employment after graduation,” wrote one commentator. Another observed, “My intern work and part-time work led to connections that got me my full-time positions.” Another respondent commented on the importance of “practical experience.” Statements of this kind affirm the longstanding emphasis that public history educators have placed on developing relationships with working professionals and obtaining experience outside the classroom. For many public historians, networking and internship experiences proved crucial for early-career success and subsequent advancement.

Some of the most instructive comments came from respondents who named certain types of knowledge and experience they wished they had obtained while earning their public history degree. A number of respondents, for example, mentioned having to learn about fundraising on the job. As one wrote, “the earlier one learns about raising money and issues of management (such as roles of boards, policies, fiscal health, etc.), the better.” Another respondent noted that training in “non-profit management and museum education” would have been valuable. Other commentators mentioned digital humanities, media literacy, statistics and survey methods, and public relations.

Statements of this kind can be interpreted in several ways. First, they indicate that public historians often have to develop new skills and knowledge after finding professional employment, no matter what the quality of their graduate program. Even the most thorough curriculum will not be able to cover all types of knowledge that public historians may need as professionals. Second, such comments indicate the impossibility of developing a curriculum that prepares students for all types of public history. Although training in museum education, for example, would benefit many aspiring public historians, it would likely not be particularly valuable for people seeking to become archivists or to work in historic preservation. Third, comments about specific skills and abilities show the changing nature of the field. As the survey of public history employers revealed, knowledge of fundraising, project management, and digital technology are in increasingly in demand.

The most sobering comments, which constitute only a small portion of those received, relate to the conditions of public history employment. “I did not fully appreciate the extreme extent to which geography and finances would limit my career choices,” wrote one respondent. Others reported feeling chronically underemployed and poorly compensated compared to professionals in similar fields. One respondent with twenty-five years’ experience observed that most public history jobs “are fun and mostly rewarding, but the pay is unsatisfactory.” Another wrote, “it’s discouraging that pay is so low.” Comments such as these underscore the need for students planning to enter the field to be fully informed about the job market, compensation, and potential working conditions.

Commentators with experience in non-public history jobs generally portrayed their public history training as moderately to highly applicable. A respondent employed at an “ad agency in digital/experiential marketing and content strategy” said “the skills I learned during my public history training translate incredibly well,” adding “I can research and synthesize large amounts of information, I can organize that information like nobody’s business, [and] I can take complex information and turn it into compelling events for the public.” Another respondent wrote that training and experience in museums had translated well to “digital communications at a private company.” Others commented on the utility of public history training for teaching social studies at a public school, for managing higher education accreditation projects, and for processing Freedom of Information/Privacy Act requests at a federal agency. No one indicated that they considered their public history training to have been irrelevant or marginally applicable to a position outside the field.

## Conclusion

In combination with the survey of public history employers, the alumni survey provides insight into the changing conditions of public history employment. It shows that graduates of Masters-level programs in public history and related fields are finding employment, opportunities for advancement, and, in many cases, job satisfaction. At the same time, the survey reveals that some respondents view working conditions in the field unfavorably and are pessimistic about the future. These suggest a field that is enjoying success but has underlying concerns, a tendency to discount its accomplishments, and some anxiety about current trends.

The backdrop to the survey probably accounts for some of the doubt. The 2008 recession led to several years of lean hiring by historical organizations, and although its worst effects have passed, the economic crisis undoubtedly affected the views of some survey respondents. Although it is impossible to say how the comments would differ if the survey had been administered under different circumstances, it seems likely that they would have conveyed greater optimism.

The survey results suggest a number of questions that might be explored through further research. How do conditions and opportunities vary across specializations? How does job satisfaction among museum employees, for example, compare to that of historians employed at historical societies or in cultural resources management? Do rates of advancement vary among specializations? Would a survey aimed at determining how working conditions have changed over time bring greater perspective to comments about low wages and declining opportunities? To what degree do variables such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity influence hiring, advancement, and workplace culture? Investigation of these and other subjects would augment the survey findings and take important steps toward answering outstanding questions.

In addition to alleviating concerns about a crisis in public history employment, the survey results affirm the value of experiences that public history educators have long emphasized and types of training that employers see as increasingly valuable. Internships are a prime example. Comments about the importance of internships echo the views of public history educators and employers. The 2015 survey of public history employers found that 88 percent of respondents rated internships “indispensable” or “extremely valuable.” Students who do not do an internship during their graduate studies place themselves at a severe disadvantage. In a similar fashion, it is no surprise that employers see skills such as “fundraising,” “digital media development and protection,” and “project management” as increasingly important. These reflect new priorities, the changing conditions of public history employment, and employers’ reliance on new hires to obtain needed expertise.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Scarpino and Daniel Vivian, “What Do Public History Employers Want?: Report of the Joint AASLH-AHA-NCPH-OAH Task Force on Public History Education and Employment” (Indianapolis: NCPH, 2015).

The greatest value of the alumni survey may lie in its role as a counterpart to the survey of public history employers. The employer survey identified skills and knowledge that employers regard as important for entry-level professional, mid-level, and senior positions and types of expertise they expect to be in demand in the future.<sup>2</sup> Put simply, it offers a road map to training public historians. The survey of alumni of graduate programs in public history augments its findings by showing what public historians regard as important in obtaining employment, what factors may assist in creating opportunities, and what skills and knowledge are increasingly necessary for success.

In a competitive job market, supplemental skills can make the difference between opportunity and disappointment. Aspiring public historians should seek to develop such skills where possible, so long as those efforts do not compromise their core historical training. Comments about the importance of skills related to fundraising, management, public relations, and digital technologies are an important guide for current students and recent graduates. Although employers continue to see sound historical skills and knowledge as fundamental, other forms of expertise can provide job seekers with an edge.

The survey findings should also inform people considering careers in public history about conditions in the field. In the same way that the NCPH New Professionals and Graduate Student Committee has performed exemplary service by creating *The Public History Navigator: How to Choose and Thrive in a Graduate Public History Program*, the alumni survey offers an incisive overview of working conditions, career paths, and levels of job satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> It highlights the realities of public history employment and what public history careers do and do not provide. Moreover, the survey should help students and others make informed choices by highlighting the consequences of certain decisions (limiting a job search to a particular area, for example), general conditions in the field, and measures that have generally delivered favorable results.

Even though the survey did not ask about socio-economic background, race, or ethnicity, examination of the data invites consideration of the longstanding problem of diversity in public history. The need to bring people from diverse backgrounds into the profession is overwhelmingly apparent. It should also be clear that discussion alone will not solve the problem. The survey results suggest the need for concerted efforts aimed at making it possible for people from underrepresented groups to study public history and move into viable careers. What form such support may take is open for debate, and it will undoubtedly be challenging to secure the necessary resources, financial and otherwise. Yet without sustained and coordinated efforts, it seems likely that a combination of educational costs and generally modest wages will keep the field populated mainly by people from middle-class backgrounds – and unable to model truly inclusive stories, let alone meet the needs of an increasingly diverse nation.<sup>4</sup>

Viewed broadly, the survey results contribute to a growing body of knowledge about historical careers. The most important effort in this regard is the AHA's Career Diversity for Historians initiative, which has compiled detailed information about employment outcomes for history Ph.D.s.<sup>5</sup> Although doctoral programs have traditionally focused primarily on preparing students for academic

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<sup>2</sup> Scarpino and Vivian, "What Do Public History Employers Want?"

<sup>3</sup> Theresa Koenigsnecht et al., *The Public History Navigator: How to Choose and Thrive in a Graduate Public History Program*, rev. ed. (Indianapolis: NCPH, 2018), available at <https://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Public-History-Navigator-2015-Web.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Data on the demographics of public history professionals and students is fragmentary. The above paragraph is based on AALSH Membership Survey Summary, 2015, copy in possession of the authors; Final Report on Update of the Long Range Plan, National Council on Public History, 2017. On strategies for increasing diversity in museums, see *Facing Change: Insights from the American Alliance of Museums' Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Working Group* (Washington, DC: American Alliance of Museums, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-diversity-for-historians>

careers, the AHA's research has found significant numbers of historians employed in government agencies, business, and nonprofit organizations. The survey of alumni of graduate public history programs augments the AHA's research by showing that a sizeable percentage of persons trained as public historians work in jobs outside of the field sometime during their careers. The numbers collected are not as precise as those gathered by the AHA, but they nonetheless indicate that roughly 13 percent of persons who hold a graduate degree in public history have worked or are working in a different field. Moreover, the data show that most people in this category find their public history training relevant for non-public history positions.

In combination with "What Do Public History Employers Want?," the survey results underscore realities that aspiring public historians and public history educators cannot afford to ignore. A graduate degree in public history by itself may not be adequate preparation for a career in the field. Employers consistently expect graduates of Masters-level programs to be capable historians; to have some familiarity with specialized skills such as fundraising, digital technology, or project management; and to have strong applied experience. The growing influence of digital technology and increasing reliance on philanthropy, for example, has pushed employers to favor applicants with some training or experience in these areas. The same can be said for project management, a body of skills whose demand in part reflects growing reliance on outside consultants. These developments are not unique to public history. They evince social and political pressures that have already reshaped many organizations and appear likely to remain influential for some time.

Students considering careers in public history owe it to themselves to develop an informed perspective before making major educational and career decisions. This report and "What Do Public History Employers Want?" provide much of the information needed. They show a changing field that has rewarded many but certainly not all.

For those inspired by a love of history and a desire to share historical information with public audiences, public history offers exciting possibilities. This survey demonstrates that those who pursue public history careers with commitment and determination generally find success. Although there are no guarantees, the gloomy scenario warning of overproduction of graduates and declining job opportunities turns out not to be true.