



Best Practices in Public History

Certificate Programs in Public History

Prepared by the NCPH Curriculum and Training Committee February 2024

Adopted by the NCPH Board of Directors March 2024

Introduction:

By the mid-2010s, public history graduate program growth in the United States reached a new zenith.¹ At the same time, students, and their parents, were all too aware of the rising cost of education and the related student-loan crisis; after all, student-loan-debt increased 107% in the last decade alone.² Realizing that a full degree is not for everyone, while also acknowledging that some people may want additional training beyond what their degrees afforded them, many universities have looked for new ways to attract students, retain them, and train them in industry-specific essential skills, knowledge, and experiences. With this in mind, public history certificates have started to blossom. In September of 2023, the [NCPH Guide to Public History Programs](#) listed over 100 universities offering a graduate degree in history with a certificate or minor concentration in public history.³ There were another 68 programs at the undergraduate level. In addition, some schools offer stand-alone certificates, rather than ones combined with a degree. In short, there is real diversity in these offerings, and it is important to note that certificate programs vary by institution, by discipline or specialization, and are definitely situationally specific.

Variety of Certificate Programs

Public history certificate programs run the gamut from broadly-based general certificates in public or applied history, or in the public humanities, where students take a variety of courses in the field, to certificate programs that are focused on specialized topics within the field of public history, such as oral history, historic preservation, museum studies, or digital humanities/digital history. Many of these programs, particularly the generalized ones, are based in departments of history, but certificate programs are also found in other departments, or are offered as interdisciplinary certificates that are not tied to a specific major. For example, historic preservation certificate programs might be housed within a school of architecture or urban planning, while museum studies might come out of art history, or anthropology. Or a program might be administered by one department, but the certificate is made open to a range of majors.

Certificate programs speak to a variety of student needs and can be geared to serve various groups. Many are designed for people already working in the field, such as individuals who may never have had any formal coursework in public history, but who need or want the formal training that a certificate program would offer. This is not the only audience, however. Students pursuing a bachelor's degree in history or an allied field like art history, architectural history, urban planning, or anthropology, may also seek a certificate in public history to enhance their undergraduate degrees. Certificate programs are also beneficial to students enrolled in graduate M.A. and Ph.D. programs, and can supplement their training and coursework by providing students with opportunities to add new skills and to think about how to develop new public projects, programs, and audiences for research and teaching.

Just as with successful public history graduate programs, successful certificate programs use institutional strengths and community partners to their advantage. Thus, strong certificate programs also speak to the needs and strengths of the department and school in which they are housed, as well as the communities they are located in. They take advantage of faculty strengths in departments and schools that cannot support a full-fledged program. They can also be used as a means to develop, organize, strengthen, and sustain relationships to community partners, as certificate programs almost always include internships, fieldwork, collaborative knowledge production, experiential learning, and practicums. In addition, some courses may be taught by public history practitioners outside of academe, further cementing the connections between universities and the communities they reside in, and with local public history and humanities organizations.

The number of hours required for the certificate alone varies, averaging between 15 and 24 hours of coursework. Most programs include an introductory course, which provides an overview of the theories and methodology of public history or of the specialized topic at hand, an internship or practicum, and three to five additional electives, often drawn from courses across a range of humanities departments. The configuration of the courses vary from program to program, depending on the focus. In addition, check with your institution and state's requirements prior to developing a certificate program as they may need to approve it in some form.

Recommendations:

1. Those seeking to develop a certificate program should obtain institutional buy-in. Specifically, it is important for institutions to recognize that the success of the certificate program is contingent upon the institution's ability to support it in a myriad of ways, including but not limited to providing the certificate program with financial, resource, and promotional support. Note: the recommendations

below assume that institutions are developing the certificate program, rather than a single department or individual.

2. Institutions that are considering developing a certificate program should first map out their faculty's strengths, their desired goals or outcomes of the certificate program, the needs of the students they wish to serve, and possible community assets they could activate (including but not limited to institutions, people, funding, and spaces). Institutions must carefully consider these factors when deciding what type of certificate program to develop (e.g., certificates in public history, public humanities, museum studies, digital humanities, etc.), and at what level (i.e., graduate, undergraduate, or stand-alone).
3. Institutions that are considering developing a certificate program should consider which department or program will administer the program. This department or program should be the one that has the most resources to offer the certificate program and the one that best aligns with the certificate program's goals. It is crucial for a certificate program to be grounded in a larger program, as this guarantees that it has dedicated resources and institutional support from the beginning and provides students with a solid theoretical and methodological foundation in their chosen field of study. History departments serve this purpose very well, as do other allied fields.
4. The certificate program administrator should be housed within the certificate program's home department. This person should be duly compensated for their work: Developing a certificate program is laborious; maintaining it is as well. It is imperative that the certificate program administrator be acknowledged for their work. In addition, it is important to note that the administrator is not responsible for every course that will be offered, but rather guides the program and its students.
5. Even though the certificate program will be housed in one specific program, the certificate program itself should be interdisciplinary (after all, one of the many benefits of a certificate program is that it affords students the opportunity to move beyond the constraints of a single discipline). As such, certificate program administrators should partner with department chairs, deans, and college-level committees. This coalition of partners will determine how the certificate program can benefit multiple departments and their students by advancing their career goals, how to coordinate the course offerings that will contribute to the certificate program's curriculum, and how to direct funds for public programs, financial aid, and other costs to ensure that the program is well resourced.
6. In addition to the collaboration of institutional partners, the certificate program coordinator will need to build a wider coalition composed of community

stakeholders, partners, and organizations. Certificate programs should play to the strengths of the location of the institution. In other words, programs should use the resources that are available in the surrounding area to guide their program development. Seeking partnerships with public history institutions and with the facilities where local public historians work will facilitate the development of internships, provide opportunities for field-based projects and collaborative knowledge production, and advance the goals of the certificate program and partner institutions through cost-sharing and joint grant opportunities.

7. All certificate program courses should be offered regularly enough to ensure that students can meet the number of credit hour requirements of the program. At the very least, each required course should be offered once every year and each elective once every other year. In addition, certificate programs should give students the option of combining their certificate training with the fulfillment of requirements for undergraduate majors and graduate degree programs. The credits acquired in the certificate should count toward the total number needed for the final degree.
8. Certificate programs should include an introductory course, where students learn the theoretical and methodological basis for their field of study. The specific content of the introductory course should match the overall emphasis of the program.
9. Skills-based courses are essential. Courses that may work well in certificate programs include, but are not limited to: archival practices, museum and archive management, exhibit design, oral history, digital history, and/or museum methods.
10. Students need to gain hands-on experience and the ability to expand their professional network. They can do both through a required internship. As internships are essential to their training, the certificate program administrator should try to grow paid internships either on or off campus. Once again, having strong partnerships with community organizations and stakeholders is vital.
11. Certificate programs should provide other opportunities for students to gain experience, and survey the practical application of their fields of study. Students should be encouraged to observe work in their particular field or area of public history or the public humanities, and engage with community partners through their varied coursework.
12. Certificate programs should provide students with access to professionals practicing in the field of public history, above and beyond the contacts they establish through internships. This can be done in a variety of ways, including

inviting guest speakers into the classroom, hiring working professionals to teach some of the skills-based courses, and matching students with mentors in their particular field of study. There may also be opportunities for students to “shadow” a public history professional for a day.

¹ See, for example, Robert Weyeneth’s multiple part essay, "A Perfect Storm?" in NCPH’s *History@ Work* (blog), 2016; or Stella A. Ress, "The Circle of Life: Reinvigorating the Humanities with Undergraduate Public History Curriculum," *International Public History*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2019-0007>.

² Abigail J. Hess, “Student Debt Increased by 107% This Decade, Federal Reserve Data Shows,” CNBC, CNBC, 30 December 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/30/student-debt-totals-increased-by-107percent-this-decade.html>.

³ Note: this best practices document specifically only focuses on certificate programs, rather than minors or concentrations in history degrees.