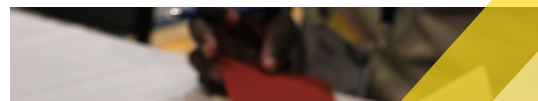
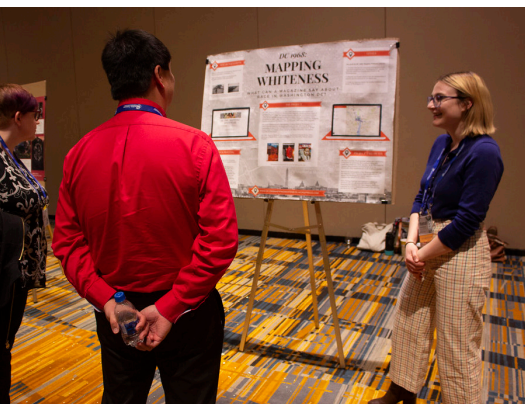


# THE GRADUATE STUDENT HANDBOOK:

CHOOSING AND  
THRIVING IN A  
PUBLIC HISTORY  
PROGRAM



A National Council on Public History resource provided by the  
New Professional and Student Committee

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# The Graduate Student Handbook: Choosing and Thriving in a Public History Program

This guide is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on identifying and choosing a public history graduate program that is a good fit for your interests and career goals. The second section discusses the experience of graduate school and provides advice on how you can thrive as a public history graduate student. This *Handbook* is based on a prior 2015 publication, “*The Public History Navigator: How to Choose and Thrive in a Graduate Public History Program*,” with thanks to its authors Theresa Koenigsknecht, Michelle Antenesse, Kristen Baldwin Deathridge, Jamie Gray, Jenny Kalvaitis, and Angela Sirna.

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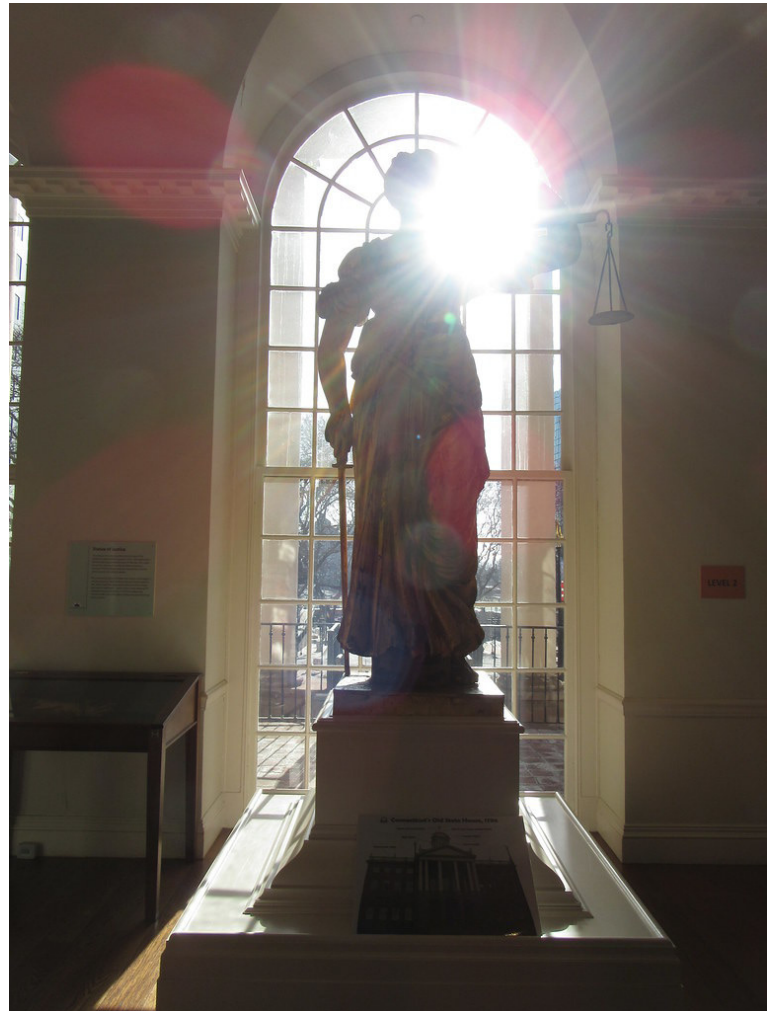
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Session on The Amistad Trial and the Old State House at the 2019 NCPH Annual Meeting. Image courtesy of Kelly Schmidt.

## SECTION 1: CHOOSING A PROGRAM

“Public History” is putting history to work in the world. It is a large field that encompasses every profession connected to history outside of academia (and sometimes within academia). Public historians are consultants, archivists, historic preservationists, museum professionals, researchers, documentary editors, oral historians, educators, and more. A public history program teaches students to be historians and provides opportunities for students to apply that historical knowledge to real-world projects and engage with people outside academia.

### Finding the Right Fit

This publication offers suggestions for finding the right public history graduate program for you. We encourage you to use this guide in conjunction with the National Council on Public History (NCPH) [Guide to Public History Programs](#) and career resources pages. These resources will help you decide which public history programs and jobs best align with your career goals and research interests. Remember that there is no one-size-fits-all option when it comes to public history.



An attendee takes notes at the 2019 NCPH Annual Meeting. Image courtesy of Elizabeth Gelvin.

### WHERE TO START?

The field of public history is wide-ranging with dozens of specific lines of work to choose from. This is exciting and empowering, but it can also be daunting when you first begin looking at graduate programs. In order to bring clarity to your own path—and identify programs that are a good fit for your interests—take some time to identify your unique interests, abilities, and career goals. Also consider other important factors, such as the cost of graduate school ([there is more information on this below](#)), cost of living in different areas, and anything else relevant to your personal situation.

Remember that your interests and goals may change as you enter graduate school and learn more about the public history field. That is completely normal! While it is helpful to identify your interests and goals before beginning the search for a public history program, don't feel that you are locked into one specific path. Public history contains multitudes—you will find the best path for you.

### Explore Your Options

Familiarize yourself thoroughly with the field of public history and what it entails. Browse through course listings at different universities and read job titles and descriptions on the websites of organizations such as [NCPH](#) and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). Public history textbooks are a good place to begin your exploration of the field, as they will often discuss the different subfields of public history, including historic preservation, archives, museums, and digital history. Think about which subfield (or subfields—public history is interdisciplinary, and public historians often specialize in more than one subfield) is most in line with your interests and abilities.

### Identify Skill Sets

Think about which skills and tasks you excel at and enjoy the most and, conversely, which tasks you do not enjoy doing. Consider talking to your professors, coworkers, internship supervisors, or other mentors to ask them what they see as your biggest strengths and talents. But don't just listen to other people; think about your personality, as well. Do you like to work as a member of a team, or do you prefer more autonomy? Use the feedback you get and your own reflections to figure out the areas of public history in which you are most likely to thrive.

### Ask about Career Paths

If you already know people working in the public history field, you can ask them to give you insight into what their career path has been like, in order to get an idea of where established public history professionals began their careers and how work in the field progresses. If you don't know anyone working in the public history field, ask your history, public history, or museum studies professors to put you in touch with people they know in the field. You could also consider cold emailing professionals that you admire ([more information on this available in the networking section](#)).

## Be Realistic

Set yourself up for success by setting achievable and reasonable goals during and after graduate school. Keep up-to-date on current trends in the job market, find out what the experience requirements usually are for entry-level jobs, and examine salary ranges on job postings (the NCPH [jobs board](#) is a good place to look, as it requires all jobs posted to list a salary). Knowing these things can help you develop the skills you need while still in graduate school and set reachable and productive goals for yourself as you begin your career. Also, if you can, visit museums, historic sites, archives, and other public history-related places, and find what makes you passionate and what you enjoy the most. Areas that draw you as a visitor are likely to be areas of the public history field that are a good alignment for you in a career context.

## CONSIDER TYPES OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS

### Public History

Public history is an inclusive term. If you decide to join the field, you will find that its meaning is often a topic of debate among scholars and practitioners. NCPH's [definition of public history](#) is a good starting point. At its simplest, public history is facilitating and understanding the way the public interacts with history.

Most public history programs combine traditional history courses with public history courses. Public history courses typically focus on the theoretical foundations of public history as well as the practical skills and tools of research that are necessary to practice history at a museum or historic site. Some programs require a thesis, a capstone project, or exit examinations to graduate; specific requirements vary from program to program.

Many public history programs also offer students the opportunity to earn a concentration in a subfield, such as historic preservation, museum studies, oral history, or archival management. Consider your responses to the exercises described in the previous section as you learn about program options.

### Public Humanities

The interdisciplinary field of [public humanities](#) expands upon the tools and methods of public engagement offered in public history programs to include the arts, heritage, and cultural sectors. Public humanities graduate programs provide more flexible curriculums and broader training

between multiple humanist departments; affiliated professors with this degree can be located in history, but also arts management, literary arts, philosophy, and ethnic and gender studies programs, to name a few.

Oftentimes, the public humanities allow students to self-design their degree to prepare them with broader skills to work across various industries, be that cultural, governmental, or nonprofit settings. Consider the program's emphasis, priorities, and faculty expertise to see if a degree in public humanities is right for you.

### History

A traditional history master's degree program focuses on historiography and developing research skills within a particular area of focus (such as early American history, women's history, etc.). In a traditional history master's program, you may or may not have the opportunity to take courses in public history, depending on the courses offered within your specific program. Generally, though, a traditional history degree does not provide the same opportunities to learn public history skills, or to gain hands-on public history experience.

That being said, some traditional history master's programs do include the option to get a certificate in public history. In addition, being exposed to a variety of research methods, learning to formulate an argument, and engaging with fellow historians are valuable skills in the public history field.



Two attendees at the Atlanta History Center during the 2023 NCPH Annual Meeting. Image courtesy of Sharon Leon.



## Museum Studies

The field of museum studies, sometimes referred to as museology, encompasses both the practical skills that are necessary to run museums as well as the theoretical study of museums. Museum studies is not necessarily specific to history museums (there are science and art museums, for example) but instead teaches general skills including curatorial practice, educational programming, technology, conservation, and preservation. There are master's programs as well as certificate programs in museum studies.

Depending on your career interests, it may make sense to explore earning a history master's degree with a certificate in museum studies, or a master's degree in museum studies, with internships and capstone projects focused on history museum work. The important point is that a degree in museum studies is very different from a degree in public history. Learn the differences, and choose the right fit for you.

## Historic Preservation

Historic preservation focuses on the preservation, conservation, and protection of buildings, objects, and landscapes of historical significance. It is an interdisciplinary field that can be studied and practiced from a variety of perspectives: through a public history program, a college of architecture, or a school of planning or design. Some programs focus more on [National Register of Historic Places](#) projects or cultural landscapes. Others center on conservation of building materials or offer courses on architectural history and material culture. Ideally, a historic preservation program will offer a variety of these opportunities. [PreserveNet](#) provides a helpful listing of current preservation programs, as well as jobs in the field. You should be aware, though, that graduate programs have to pay to be on PreserveNet's list, and therefore it may not include all historic preservation graduate programs. If you are interested in being trained first and foremost as a historian, while also learning the skills of historic preservation, a historic preservation program based in a history department is probably the best fit for you.

## Archives

Knowledge of archival processes and hands-on archival skills can be very beneficial to public historians. If you want to pursue a career in archives, a master's degree in library science (MLS or MLIS) or archival studies is

often—but not always—required, especially in the United States. If you are considering a program and/or career outside of the United States, it is important to look into the customary requirements in that particular country. Many public history programs include specializations or certificates in archival management, and some programs offer dual master's of public history and MLS degree options.

If you would like to be an archivist with a strong knowledge of history and historical research, a public history program paired with archives classes or an MLS degree could be the right choice for you. A strong historical background will be invaluable as you assist your patrons and give context to collections. The [Society of American Archivists](#) (in Canada, the [Association of Canadian Archivists](#)) is a good place to find more information and resources on archival training.

## Digital History

Digital tools and training are now essential for any type of history graduate degree. Certifications and graduate programs are offered in the rapidly-developing digital history (often termed “digital humanities”), which focuses on the integration of information technology and humanities. Even if you do not want to pursue a career in digital history specifically, digital media skills are increasingly valued by public history organizations. Being able to navigate the world of online research is a must for public history students. It is also helpful to be familiar with skills such as producing online exhibits, conducting oral histories, managing digital archives, and utilizing social media.

Many public history programs may specialize in digital history or offer courses on the subject. Consider how well a program will give you the digital tools you need to work in your desired area of public history. Does a program include a digital historian on its faculty or offer courses in digital history and new media? Look for programs that either incorporate digital history into courses or offer classes that focus on specific digital skills.

## BEFORE APPLYING

There are many excellent programs in the field of public history so, as noted earlier, it is important to identify which programs are a good fit for you personally, financially, and professionally. The information provided in the NCPH [Guide to Public History Programs](#) provides

a head start on many of the following questions. Some tips for assessing your fit with a graduate program are provided below.

### Look at Professors' Research and Career Interests

Find programs with instructors who specialize in the area you want to pursue and who have research or field experience in the line of work you want to get into. Who wrote that fabulous book, article, or public history report that you really liked? Find out where that person is based; maybe you can study or work with them. In particular, look for professors who are practitioners of public history themselves. You want instructors who do public history, not just lecture about it. Are faculty members actively involved in professional organizations in their field, whether a national public history organization (like NCPH, of course!), a regional museum association, a statewide preservation nonprofit, or a dynamic local historical society? Professionally active public history practitioners can make great mentors since they have knowledge tailored to your specific public history niche. They can also connect you to great opportunities and individuals in the field. Of course, professors have a myriad of responsibilities and many students, so it's important to cultivate relationships with more than one specific professor. Look for departments with the potential for multiple mentors depending on your interests and their availability.

### Speak or Meet Directly with the Program Director

Contact program directors or faculty whose research and/or career paths align with your own interests and ask to speak with them over Zoom or in person (if you are within traveling distance and comfortable meeting in person). Questions to ask include:

#### *What is the average time it takes students to graduate?*

You want to consider the track records of the programs you are looking at. Coursework may take one or two years. Then there may be an internship, capstone project, or thesis. In some programs, students may graduate in two years; in others, time to graduate is three or four years, while some people never graduate. Most MA programs in public history are two years in length. If you are fortunate enough to be offered funding, the funding package may be limited to the standard time-to-degree for the program.

#### *What is the average amount of debt students at this program incur?*

It is essential to make a cost-benefit analysis by comparing how much you will earn in the future against how much debt can you afford to take on. This question may be difficult to answer, as it often isn't tracked. However, it is essential to consider the financial implications and compare programs to see what makes sense for you personally. What type of funding is available at the programs you are looking at? How much does tuition cost each semester? Are you able to work a part-time job, or be assured of a paid internship while completing coursework? There are few fully funded MA history programs; here is a [list of such programs](#) as of November 2024. Consider what type of work you would like to do after graduating and if you may qualify for [Public Service Loan Forgiveness](#) (PSLF) when doing a cost-benefit analysis.

#### *What are the job placement rates of this program?*

Programs may not track this specifically, but they should know generally how their recent alumni fare a year after graduation. Do program faculty and staff use their networks to help new graduates navigate the highly competitive job market? If program directors have no idea how their graduates are doing, consider that a red flag.

#### *How much practical experience does this program offer?*

Is there an internship requirement? Are students funded through graduate assistantships in public history agencies, not just as teaching assistants in history courses? Do students take on real-world projects within their classes? Can you write an "applied" thesis or do a capstone project? Does the curriculum take advantage of local resources and community partnerships? What kinds of projects have the faculty worked on?



Eleanor Shippen attends the New Professional and Student Social at the 2024 NCPH Annual Meeting. Image courtesy of Eleanor Shippen.



## Ask to Be Put in Touch with Current and Former Students

Currently enrolled students and recent graduates can give you an honest and realistic perspective about what going through a specific program is like academically, as well as insight into the atmosphere in the program among students and between students and faculty. These dynamics can be just as important to your success in a graduate program as the academic factors, so it is good information to have. Are students supportive of each other? Does the program help first-year students acclimate to graduate life? How are the overall stress levels and mental health of students in the program?

## Research the Course Listings

See what specific classes a program offers, and ask yourself which programs have courses that will allow you to gain both content knowledge and skills in the specific areas of public history in which you are interested. Don't look only at a program's course catalog, which lists all the classes that could potentially be offered. Not all classes listed in the catalog will be offered each semester (or ever, if a professor who used to teach a particular class has left the program, for example). Try to find the program's actual course offerings for each semester, which will give you a good idea of what types of classes are currently being taught within the program. Googling "[university name] course schedule" may help you find the actual course offerings for each semester.

Think about whether a program's course offerings will help you achieve your career goals after graduation. Ask current and former students if they feel that their coursework helped them secure internships and/or jobs and make relevant connections within the field. You may even ask professors in the programs if they would be willing to share a sample syllabus with you for some of the classes. If you plan to visit a campus during the school year, ask if you can sit in on a course.

## Consider Finances

As much as we wish it were not the case, finances are a huge consideration when choosing a graduate program. Research financial options at each university (are there grants, assistantships, and/or tuition waivers?) and see if you can rule out any schools early in the decision process because they simply are not realistic or feasible for you. Reach out to the financial aid office and program faculty to discuss funding opportunities. Consider asking what kinds of travel grants the university may provide for

conference participation and research. Does the university provide funding support for emergencies (e.g., short-term loans, hardship assistance grants)? What types of awards are available through the program (e.g., teaching assistantships, research assistantships, fellowships)? Additional sample questions may be found on Duke University's "Questions to Ask a Graduate Program" webpage, linked below in the General Graduate School Information section of the List of Resources.

When considering finances, also take into account factors such as the cost of living in the town or city where the university is located. Is there access to public transit, or will you need a car? Can you find roommates in order to reduce housing costs? Are there nearby communities where graduate students live that are more affordable? If you will commute in from a nearby town, how will that affect your work/life balance? How much does it cost to park on campus? Contemplate the cost of relocating and ask the school if they cover relocation costs (many do not). Consider reaching out to a current student in the program to ask how much relocating to the area cost them, so that you have a starting place for your own estimate of relocation expenses.

At your current college or university, there may be an option for a dual degree, or a combined bachelor's and master's degree program in your fifth year. These programs are designed to save students time and tuition compared with a two-year master's degree. If this is of interest to you, reach out to faculty associated with the BA/MA program as soon as possible, since entering these programs can be time sensitive for class scheduling. Consider all of the other questions and factors in this section, though. Are the right people at your current university? How will this impact your experience in the graduate community? What does the funding package look like?



Tour of Milton-Parc Neighborhood at the 2025 NCPH Annual Meeting. Image courtesy of Heritage Montreal.

## Reflect on Location

When picking a school, and especially when considering moving for graduate school, keep a few things in mind about location. Are you able to easily relocate? Would practical items like health care coverage or car insurance transfer over to your new location? Are there any family commitments or current job obligations that would make it difficult to move if you decided to attend a school farther away? None of these things need to be deal breakers, but they are good things to consider early on.

As many programs have deep relationships with local organizations, it may also be a good idea to consider where you would like to eventually live and work when choosing a program. However, you should also research the size of the public history sector in the area where the program is located. How many local organizations/museums/archives/historic sites, etc. are there? Ask whether students tend to remain in the area after graduation, or whether they have to leave the area in order to find jobs. Depending on the state of the local job market, understand that the area where you attend graduate school may not be the area where you start your career. On the other hand, even if you don't think you want to have a career in the location where you attend graduate school, it's always a good experience to live in another part of the country from where you grew up or went to college.

## International Students - Applying to Programs Outside the United States

Universities in several countries other than the United States offer public history programs with diverse subject areas and fields of study. These countries include the United Kingdom, Canada, India, Australia, Ireland, Germany, and more ([see a map and list of programs from the International Federation of Public History here](#)). Pursuing a degree in a different country has benefits and disadvantages. Familiarizing yourself with the pros and cons of pursuing a graduate degree outside of the US will help you make an informed decision about your future degree and/or certificate.

Questions to consider:

- What opportunities are available for internships, jobs, or volunteer positions? Is your working ability limited by visa restrictions?
- How does this region demonstrate support or engagement with your field and its practitioners?
- What recent scholarship has emerged from this area in public history, museum studies, historic preservation, etc.?

- Which subjects comprise the main areas of focus in the program's course offerings and hands-on experiences?
- What funding is available in your program(s) for international graduate students? Are there any university-wide scholarships available for international graduate students?
- What degrees are offered? Consider how this may influence future academic and career choices.
  - Example: In the United Kingdom, the University of Oxford has a graduate program in History where, upon completion, students are awarded a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) degree. Few institutions in the United States award this degree.
- Where would you enjoy living for the duration of your degree?
- What is the predominant language of instruction? Do you have the necessary language skills/fluency? Is there an academic writing and/or reading requirement?
- What is required of students concerning study permits, health insurance, and other official documentation?

Requirements for study permits, visas, and other official documentation will depend on the particular country in which your program is located. Consult government websites for specific information for international students. If available, review study permit application guides and consult resources for international students. This can be done online or, if you are either currently or formerly a student, by reaching out to your university. Ask professors, student admissions representatives, or fellow international students about the logistics of pursuing a degree in a different country. You are not the only person who has done this - help and advice is out there!

## International Students - Applying to US Programs with a non-US Degree

### Degree Evaluation

If you received your Bachelor's degree, a previous Master's degree, or another academic credential outside of the United States, your degree will most likely need to be evaluated by an external degree evaluation service before applying to your chosen public history program(s).



Universities have specific requirements for which type of evaluation they prefer for application and may have recommendations on which service to select. Make sure to look at each university's information on international graduate admissions to learn more about admission requirements for that university, suggested degree evaluation services, and proof of English proficiency (if required).

Most universities in the United States will direct applicants to have their degrees evaluated by the [National Association of Credential Evaluation Services](#) (NACES). Applicants select a credential evaluation service from a NACES member organization. Specific instructions for evaluation will depend on each service. Reach out to your previous university (if applicable) and the program you are applying to if you have questions or concerns.

## WHAT DO PROGRAMS LOOK FOR IN POTENTIAL STUDENTS?

While public history programs across the country vary in coursework, requirements, and experiences, they look for similar qualities among their prospective students. This section discusses what will help you stand out to program admissions committees and what you can do to improve your chances of being admitted to your preferred program.

### What Will Help You Stand Out to Admissions Committees?

#### Public history experience

Internships are a great way to gain some experience and to learn what the field is really like. Interning can help you gain insights into certain careers and get a feel for those that really interest you (or those that, after further exploration, do not). It also creates great networking opportunities for future job references. There are many public history skills you can learn on the job, rather than in a classroom. Internships are a great way to do this, and you should not wait for graduate school before taking advantage of this opportunity.

There is currently a robust conversation in the field about paid versus unpaid internships. Institutions increasingly offer paid opportunities, but be aware that many internships, especially for undergraduate students or with small institutions, remain unpaid. Regardless, you should work with your undergraduate advisor to try and earn credit hours for your internship experience, and find out



Kathryn Morgan during her curatorial internship at the National Museum of American History. Image courtesy of Kathryn Morgan.

if there are grants, scholarships, or other funds available to support an unpaid internship. Volunteering a few hours a week, or even a month, can go a long way toward showing the graduate school selection committee your dedication to the field. Most public history institutions or cultural organizations run partially on volunteer labor. Volunteering somewhere can be a great opportunity to try out a new kind of public history job and open your eyes to various kinds of work in the field, if you can afford to do so. If regularly volunteering is not financially possible for you, consider volunteering for one-time special events at local historic sites, state or regional conferences, or National History Day.

Additionally, as you look back on what you've done in your undergraduate career, think expansively about all of the experiences that you've had. Are there experiences that you now realize were public history experiences, even though they were not framed as such at the time? If so, add them to your resume!

#### Demonstrated success in undergraduate coursework

You should be able to demonstrate the successful completion of your undergraduate program. If you did not do so well in an accounting course or if chemistry got the better of you, that is okay. We all have strengths and weaknesses. If it is just a few classes bringing your overall grade point average down, be sure to highlight your excellent GPA in your major in your personal statement.

However, if upper-level courses in your history-related major have brought down your GPA, you may want to reconsider graduate school at this time. Maybe work on your employment record and public history experience for a year or two and apply then.

### Letters of recommendation

Letters of recommendation are an essential part of your application. It can be tempting to ask certain superstar professors to write you a letter, and if you know them personally, they are a great choice. However, if you hardly know them or don't have a positive relationship with them, then that person is not the best candidate to write you a letter. If you think you might take a few years between degrees, ask professors to write you a letter of recommendation before you graduate to keep on file. If you've already taken some time off, reconnect with your former professors and bring them up to date on your experiences and aims before they write you a letter. It might also be helpful to provide them with some information about the program itself; this can be as simple as sending them a link to the program's website. Some recommenders may ask for you to send your resume or personal statement to them as they prepare their letter. As you begin your applications, look at each program's application requirements. Some programs will accept letters of recommendation from public history professionals in addition to professors.

### Cover letter/letter of intent/personal statement

In today's economy, graduate school may sound like a good way to postpone the job hunt or delay repaying student loans. However, graduate school is a tremendous financial and personal commitment that shouldn't be done on a whim. You need to reassure graduate programs that you are serious and committed, which should be evident in your reasoning for wanting to enter their program. Proofread your personal statement. Share it with your recommenders, and ask them to look over it for you. If you are applying to multiple programs, make sure you tailor each personal statement to that particular program; some programs will include guidelines or specific instructions that you should follow. Do not simply change the name of the school. You can also include the names of faculty with whom you would like to work, as this indicates that you've done your research about the program and its offerings.

Though these elements of an application are referred to as "personal" statements, it is often better to think of them as "professional" statements. It's usually best to avoid narratives about grandparents, childhood encounters with

museums, and your general "passion" for history. The best statements convey what it is about the past that you find most compelling and/or how you see yourself engaging with history in the future, what your career aims are, and why the program in question is the best place for you to obtain the specific training you need to reach those goals.

### Demonstrated research and writing skills

Public historians are trained to be historians. The same basic research, analysis, and writing skills that are part of training a historian are at the forefront of public history programs. The best programs will then train you to apply these skills into projects with real world application. You can highlight these skills by mentioning any publications, exhibit text, professional blog posts, or public writing that you have completed in your personal statement.

Many programs will ask for a writing sample as part of your application (the length varies among programs). This can be a research paper written for a class, part of an undergraduate thesis, or another polished piece of writing that demonstrates your research and writing skills.

### The GRE

Many graduate programs no longer require applicants to submit Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores, but this is not universal. Make sure you check the application requirements of programs you are interested in to determine if GRE scores are required.

### Making Public History Your Second, Third, Fourth... Career

Public history cohorts are comprised of a diverse group of people. Making public history your career later in life is common. If you have been out of school for several years, consider taking a few courses at the university you want to attend before applying to ease your way back into the academic world and allow you to get to know a few professors who can potentially write you up-to-date letters of recommendation. It also is a good idea to read a few books (or articles) recently published in your area of interest, to get a sense of where the field is currently (what are the major issues? What direction is the field going in?). Also, you chose to make a career switch for a reason. You have probably participated in the field through volunteering or serving on a committee, board, etc. You have relevant experiences, so make sure you highlight these and brainstorm ways to make your first career relate to the public history world. Some public history programs prefer second-career students to those fresh out of college.



## LIST OF RESOURCES

NCPH is your go-to organization for public history resources. Check out our website and blog to get a feel for the field of public history.

### Public History Information

- National Council on Public History. *Guide to Public History Programs*. <https://ncph.org/program-guide/>
- National Council on Public History YouTube Channel. <https://www.youtube.com/@nationalcouncilonpublichis9004/videos>
- What is Public History? <http://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>
- Weible, Robert. "Defining Public History: Is It Possible? Is It Necessary?" *Perspectives on History* (March 2008). <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/defining-public-history-is-it-possible-is-it-necessary-march-2008/>

### General Graduate School Information

- "Questions to Ask a Graduate Program." Duke University. <https://gradschool.duke.edu/admissions/how-choose-right-graduate-school/questions-ask-graduate-program/>
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## SECTION 2: THRIVING AS PUBLIC HISTORY GRADUATE STUDENTS

### GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Choosing the best public history program for you is the first step in the journey to a rewarding profession. While finishing a graduate program fulfills certain career requirements, a diploma alone does not guarantee a job. Every program and degree includes certain requirements, but exactly what students get out of graduate school is ultimately up to them. Just as undergraduate courses required more student initiative than high school, graduate school places even more responsibility on students. Advisors and professors are there to aid students, but graduate students must take the lead in shaping their education and developing their skill sets. Below are some suggestions to ensure a successful graduate experience.



Hannah Byrne presents her poster on "DC 1968: Mapping Whiteness" at the 2019 NCPH Annual Meeting. Image courtesy of Jess Lamar Reece Holler.

### GAINING PUBLIC HISTORY EXPERIENCE

#### Courses with Real-World Application

If you've chosen a program with a strong public history emphasis, there should be plenty of courses available to acquire experience through a classroom setting. Most often these courses combine classroom learning with real-world application and usually require a final project. Such courses are great opportunities to broaden your knowledge of public history, immerse yourself in a particular subject, and even venture outside of your comfort zone. Try to build and refine skills in each class, and add these professional projects/products to your resume.

Public history is inherently interdisciplinary, so it is entirely appropriate to take a course outside of your department, if permitted. In fact, some programs encourage students to take courses beyond the history department. Depending on your interests and career goals, you may consider Geographic Information Systems (GIS), business or public administration, historical archaeology, architectural history, graphic design, library science, land-use planning, museum studies, education, or recreational tourism classes. However, be sure to clear taking an “outside” course with your advisor and the professor offering the course, as the course may require a prerequisite.

### Making the Most of Courses on Theory or Without Field Experience

Finding the balance between a strong theoretical framework and practical skills is tricky, but this is essential for developing into an effective public historian. Graduate school is your opportunity to delve deeply into the history of certain regions and/or time periods and to learn ways of thinking that you will apply later on in your career. Throughout your graduate career, think about how you can apply knowledge from theory and/or traditional history courses in the field. Making these connections yourself will help you stand out and gain critical thinking skills. If you’re having trouble finding ways to apply these skills to your public history interests, ask a mentor for help. Many professors allow public history students to add a public history component to traditional research papers.



Attendees at CampingCon 2024 take a hike in the Gila Wilderness. Image courtesy of Mike Wurtz.

### Field School

Field schools are group-based learning processes that typically involve traveling to a specific site and working on a project for a set period of time. These are great opportunities to get hands-on experience, for example at an archaeological dig or preservation site. Some programs

offer field schools during the summer that are often immersive, fast-paced, and engage with communities. These can be locally or regionally focused or have international reach. Usually, each student performs a duty or is responsible for one aspect of the project.

### Thesis or Final Project

If a traditional academic thesis is a requirement for your degree, find ways to connect it to public history. Engage with the community where you are doing research. Share your findings via social media networks. Write about how your research has broader applications in the public history field. Remember that being able to complete a sustained research project like a thesis demonstrates your ability as a project manager, particularly if you have dealt with research funds, travel, and/or local communities. You may have to make this connection explicit in interviews and cover letters, but it is valuable experience.

At the same time, remember that a thesis is a project with deadlines like any other. Be careful not to get too bogged down in the process. You may be able to use your other courses or seminar papers strategically to work toward the historiography, research, and/or writing of your thesis. If this isn’t possible, don’t sweat it too much; acquiring broad knowledge of history should be one of your goals. Finding a good balance between speed and content is key to writing a thesis. Remember that the best thesis is a finished thesis.

### Internships

Internships are critical opportunities to gain professional experience during graduate school. Some programs offer internships as part of their requirements and/or may have established relationships with local institutions willing to take on an intern. If your program doesn’t require an internship, find one anyway. It doesn’t have to be on your transcript to count professionally. An internship may not lead to a job at that particular organization, but it should help you gain skills, tap into a network, and learn the language of the public history field—all of which is essential for the job search.

However, a word of caution is necessary. Organizations have increasingly turned to college students for cheap labor without giving sufficient thought to how these new professionals might grow and contribute to the field. Students must also take a hard look at their current financial situation and work out an arrangement that will meet their needs and not necessarily create more debt.



When seeking internships, look for organizations that value interns. One indication is if a position is paid at or preferably above minimum wage. Interns should be compensated in some way—either monetarily or in-kind (e.g. housing and travel). Always search for paid work first, and if you can't find a paid (or in-kind) situation that works for you, don't get stuck doing endless volunteering. While volunteer internships are not ideal, supplementing your coursework with some type of real world experience remains a good idea. In the ideal internship experience, you should learn under the guidance of someone who knows more about the process than you do.

No matter your pay status, work towards finding an intern supervisor that has an appropriate background and will be a genuine mentor. Good mentoring means assigning projects that support professional growth and match your interests, contributing to your personal professional network, and offering career guidance such as resume review. This person should be a valuable reference when you leave. Remember, too, that this is a professional experience and that your internship supervisor expects you to do your job and behave professionally. If you aren't sure what that means, ask! While many public history students go into internships wishing to gain experience in a specific discipline (such as museum studies or historic preservation), do not forget to be open minded and to acquire essential transferable job skills, such as administration, grant writing, customer service, etc. It is a good idea to begin an internship as soon as possible and to try multiple positions in various work environments during the length of your program. If you do multiple internships at the same organization, try to work on different types of projects, if possible. With the help of your supervisor, ask to be connected with other team members at the organization for informational interviews. This is a great way to learn more about how the organization works and to expand your network.

### Graduate Assistantships

Some programs offer graduate assistantships to help students pay for their education. Many history programs offer teaching assistantships, in which you assist a professor with teaching/administration for their classes (such as grading and offering office hours). Some public history programs offer assistantships that are more public history-oriented. If your program only offers teaching assistantships, remember that they can be valuable exercises in how to present information and understand historical topics.

Don't be afraid to ask for a different assistantship, if there is something that you want to learn. The program may not be able to accommodate you, but so long as you demonstrate professional courtesy, you don't lose anything by asking. If possible, work at a variety of assistantships. This will help you develop transferable skills that can prepare you for many different types of jobs and give you a broad skill set.



Exchanging cards at the 2019 NCPH Annual Meeting speed networking event. Image courtesy of Melody Hunter-Pillion.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Networking

While the NCPH jobs board is indispensable, some jobs are not even advertised. So how do you find these positions fresh out of graduate school? Networking! It is important to build reciprocal relationships with people in the field throughout your graduate school experience. For instance, build a cohort among your graduate school colleagues, because you may work with them again one day. Seek to meet people outside your normal group, especially those actively working in an area that you hope to enter. Joining and participating in professional organizations is one way to connect. NCPH and most other associations offer student memberships at a discount and have specific resources and committees for students and new professionals (such as the NCPH New Professional and Student Committee, which put together this handbook!).

Other useful groups for networking are alumni associations and local organizations, such as statewide preservation or museum groups. If you find someone working a job that you are interested in, ask for an informational interview. This may mean making a cold call/cold email or asking a mutual acquaintance for an introduction. Offer to buy this person coffee. If interviewees are far away, ask for a phone conversation or

a Zoom meeting. Be prepared to ask a series of questions about their job and how to get involved in their line of work. You may ask about their hiring cycle, but do not ask for a job! Always follow up with a thank you note and offer ways that you might be of assistance, either now or in the future. You may want to follow up again in a few months if you are still looking for a job. They may refer you to someone else, and that is how you grow your professional network. While it is helpful to cast a broad net while networking, it is more important to build quality relationships with people. You need a handful of people in your corner that will pass along opportunities to you or recommend your name to a hiring manager.

If you are interested in a career outside of the US (and Canada), check out the [International Federation for Public History \(IFPH\)](#). The IFPH Student and New Professional Committee works to consider the interests of public history undergraduates, graduate students, and new professionals around the world. The committee shares information about public history projects, jobs and internships, educational programs, and resources across all borders. Many countries are starting their own public history associations, such as Italy, and we recommend doing some research on your desired location.

## Mentors

It's good to have guidance at all stages of your career. This means that you will likely have many mentors throughout your life. In graduate school, your advisor or another professor should be a mentor to you. This means that they should provide constructive feedback when necessary and help you through your degree. Don't limit your mentor search to only professors in your department. For example, faculty in museum studies, philanthropic studies, or anthropology may share many of your interests and make helpful contributions to your professional growth. If you intend to have a career outside of the academy, you should look for people in your field who can also provide feedback, introduce you to their networks, and provide career guidance. Often these relationships happen organically (i.e. staying in touch with an internship supervisor) and evolve as people grow and move on to different things.

Don't forget about the resources of people further along in the program than you are. It is very rare that you are the first to encounter a particular difficulty or to not get along with a certain professor. Students who have been there longer can help you handle these situations with grace

and provide tips on navigating the sometimes-confusing program requirements. However, don't let all of your free time with other students turn into venting. Some of that is needed (of course), but find people who work toward solutions. Remember, too, that those who are now your peers may someday be in situations to provide recommendations, whether official or not, for you.



Coffee break at the 2019 NCPH Annual Meeting. Image courtesy of Jess Lamar Reece Holler.

## Conferences

Conferences are a great way to expand your network, build your resume, and learn about cutting-edge scholarship and practice. Potential employers will likely want to see participation in professional organizations. For emerging professionals, conferences are a great way to get your name out there and engage with others doing similar work (networking!). In addition to conferences hosted by NCPH, the American Association for State and Local History annual meeting is another event that aligns closely with public history and provides an engaging environment for new conference attendees. You can also check out ways to get involved with regional and/or state associations of historians, museum professionals, and archivists.

Presenting at conferences can be stressful, but there are many ways to ease into it. Conferences organized by and intended for graduate students are usually supportive venues for first-time presenters. NCPH's annual meeting is graduate student friendly and offers many ways for students to present their work, such as traditional panel sessions, working groups, or the popular poster session. Conferences also offer lots of ways other than presenting to get involved and connected in the field, so even if you do not give a presentation, attending has many benefits. Regional conferences are also valuable for networking, especially if you are interested in working in a particular geographic location.



## Developing a “Personal Brand”

Today your online presence plays a critical role in determining your personal brand. Public historians on the job market find that having an online presence can help in the search by providing a readily digestible professional version of themselves that they can show future employers. This can be done through a variety of social media websites (which in the past have included LinkedIn, X/Twitter, Instagram, Bluesky, and TikTok), or by creating a personal website for yourself that highlights your work and professional achievements. Many public historians use social media to network and to discuss relevant issues related to the field. Obviously, these accounts need to be professional and kept separate from more personal accounts. However, these are great opportunities for potential employers to see the whole person, and not just a resume. This is important to keep in mind as you develop a personal brand. Like it or not, most employers will run an internet search for your name. Do the same now and then and see what comes up. You want to be visible, but also professional.

Note: Many public historians and public history organizations have moved off of Twitter and are instead building a community on Bluesky.

## WHAT WE WISH WE'D KNOWN IN GRAD SCHOOL! OTHER TIPS AND TRICKS



Session on The Amistad Trail and the Old State House at 2019 NCPH Annual Meeting. Image courtesy of Krista Pollett.

### What Do Employers Look for?

Many of the specific things employers look for vary from organization to organization and job to job. In general, people will want to hire someone with transferable skills. Highlighting these skills along with your experience is key. On the other hand, employers also want to work with well-rounded, likable people. While in graduate

school, as you network, volunteer, complete internships, and build relationships with your peers, try to be easy to work with. Being willing to “go with the flow,” and cultivating a positive and helpful work presence can go a long way. This doesn’t mean being a pushover or accepting unethical circumstances. It means listening, responding to needed changes, and doing high quality work. Practice good communication, written and verbal. Not everyone is outgoing or a “people person,” but the ability to work as part of a team and communicate effectively is a requirement for any job.

### How Long Will It Take Me to Find a Job?

Honestly, it may take a while. Anecdotally and at the time of writing, the average is about a year. Being limited to a specific location makes this process even more difficult, so try to be as flexible as possible in terms of location. It is important to keep in mind that the job market today is very different than it was in previous generations. It is very common to have to “cobble” together different incomes until you find a full-time position. As you job-search, find more paid internships, consider term-limited work or fellowships, work two part-time positions, consider freelance or contract work, and be open to positions outside your preferred specialization. Do anything you can to continue to gain new skills and experiences. Be ready to be entrepreneurial; you might need to look for ways to help an institution create or maintain your position. Look for work in a wide range of nonprofit organizations and be open to positions in education, events, or outreach depending on your goals. Nonprofits, corporations, and public agencies all require skills that public historians can provide. Sometimes people find steady work in a field outside of public history and can then afford to do part-time work or volunteer in the field before transitioning into full-time positions. Be flexible and open; this is why it is key to cultivate a wide range of skill sets and experiences. Remember, your first full-time job doesn’t have to be your forever job, but try to look for growth opportunities in any position.

### Cover Letters and Resume Tips

When writing a cover letter, don’t be too flowery and don’t highlight skills that you don’t have. Read aloud your letter to catch any mistakes or unclear wording/phrasing. Send your drafts out to several professors and professionals to get their take. Some of the advice might conflict, and that is OK; choose what works best for you. Remember to show the skills that you have through examples. Just saying “I manage people well” doesn’t mean

anything to potential employers. Saying something like “When working on project X, I coordinated the efforts of Y number of people while balancing the budget” shows employers that you manage people well. [Ask a Manager](#) has excellent advice on writing cover letters and creating resumes that highlight your experience.

Most importantly, tailor the application documents (including your resume) for each job. When you are ready to send these documents out, if you are emailing them, it might be a good idea to send the documents as PDFs in order to maintain your formatting (and please, consider your file names!). However, be sure to double check the organization’s application preferences and do what they require. If the organization asks you to individually enter each job experience into their digital template, while it may be time consuming, do it! Sometimes organizations use digital software, like USAJOBS, to evaluate and rank applicants’ experience in order to select their initial interview pool. By using their template, instead of uploading just a PDF, you ensure the computer has an easier time “reading” all of your great experience.

### Getting a Good Reference

Try to hunt for internships and jobs ahead of time. This isn’t always possible, but remember that your professor and professional mentors aren’t obligated to pull an all-nighter to write you a reference. Anything less than two weeks from when you send the request is a rush job and should be avoided. Acknowledge that when you ask. Ask people with whom you have worked closely and who understand the field. Make it easy for the folks you want to give you a reference by sending them the job advertisement, your resume, and your cover letter (both ready to go for this job). Tell them when you will need the letter and if there is anything you’d like for them to emphasize. If you won’t need a letter, but the people recommending you may receive a reference request from the employer, make sure to notify them that they will be receiving the request and provide all of the above information. Most people are more than happy to provide references, but it is unpaid work on their part. Be sure to thank them!

### Mental and Emotional Health

Unfortunately, stress and anxiety are often a common part of graduate school. It is difficult—but very important—to find ways to prioritize different pressures and keep a balanced perspective for your emotional and mental health. All campuses should offer some sort of counseling

services, even if they aren’t advertised specifically to graduate students. Some campuses and programs will have various formal and informal support groups; some will not. Be sure to find out what is available at your school and don’t be afraid to create a support system of your own! Writing groups, graduate student associations, or having a monthly meet-up with your cohort all help.

Avoid burnout by pursuing interests and hobbies outside of school. Try new things. Take time to explore the new place you moved to or pursue other activities. Remember, physical health is tied to mental health. Be kind to your body by eating well and getting enough sleep. Engage in healthy stress relievers like exercising or meditating. Your fellow graduate students can be a great support group during your program. However, it can be easy to stay wrapped up in school. Talk about things other than school with your cohort. When you look back years later, you won’t remember the intense discussions of theses and methodologies, but the laughs and fun adventures you had.

### Navigating Academia

As you know by now, graduate school is just as different from college as it was from being in high school. You will hopefully form closer relationships with your professors, which will benefit you both. Some of them may even become your friends, but remember that things don’t start out that way. An important part of graduate school is developing your professional communication skills. Approaching email professionally is essential. Follow proper etiquette by including a subject, offering proper salutations, and proofreading your message. When you talk to and email your professors, err on the side of formality unless they ask you to do otherwise. If you need something from a professor, ask clearly, recognize that you’re asking for a favor, and give them a deadline. Just like you, professors’ tasks pile up, and tasks without hard deadlines often get pushed aside. You can be clear and specific while still being courteous. For example, you might say, “I’d like to talk to you about my project. Do you have time on Monday afternoon? If not, when works for you?”

Graduate school is a job, but it is significantly different than a traditional career. Use this time to further develop and refine important skills such as time management and multitasking. Remember, you’ll need letters of reference from your mentors, supervisors, and professors. Develop professionalism. If you aren’t sure how to do those things or aren’t sure what works for you, ask a mentor and check



out the links provided below. This also means that you will probably need to explain to family and friends the unique pressure graduate school places on your time. While your schedule may be more flexible than with a traditional full-time job, you will have to set limits and boundaries in order to be successful. For example, integrate set hours for studying or writing into your daily schedule and stick to the schedule you've set for yourself.

At the same time, graduate school is not like a job, because it is one of the few times that you will be able to really dig deeply into subjects that you love. Embrace and enjoy the theoretical side of your coursework and the luxury of thinking deeply about a topic. It can be easy to push readings and projects to the last minute—especially if you are also working and/or have a family—but try to make the most of the time. Remind yourself that you chose this and try to enjoy the reading and research. It may not seem like it, but you really do have enough time. Make the most of it!

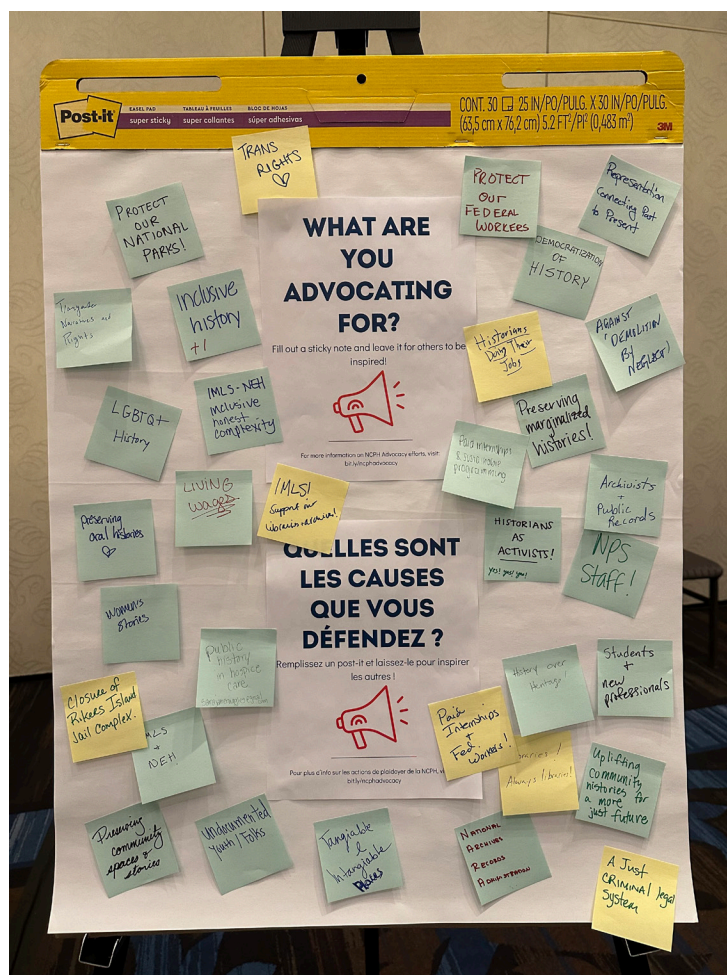
There is no one right way to navigate academia and the graduate school experience. What works best for your classmate or your favorite HistoryGramer or HistoryToker might not be what's best for you. Some grad student “influencers” may not give good advice or model sustainable practices, so be cautious. Others offer useful tips on time management or how they practice self-care. Take what makes sense for you to personally succeed!

## LIST OF RESOURCES

Websites like [Inside Higher Ed](#) and its [GradHacker](#) blog, along with [NCPH's YouTube channel](#) provide great resources for navigating graduate school.

### General

- “How Much am I Worth?! for Librarians, Archivists, and Museum Professionals.” Relicura (January 7, 2021). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-M7665fbT4>
- Martin, Susan. “Informational Interviewing for PhDs.” Humanities Commons (2020). <https://hcommons.org/docs/informational-interviewing-for-phds/>
- Croxall, Brian. “An Open Letter to New Graduate Students.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, online content (August 19, 2010). <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/an-open-letter-to-new-graduate-students>
- Freelancers Union. <https://freelancersunion.org/>



"What are you advocating for?" brainstorm at the 2025 NCPH Annual Meeting. Image courtesy of Eleanor Shippen.

- 2016 NCPH “What Do Public History Employers Want?”: <https://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/What-do-Public-History-Employers-Want-A-Report-of-the-Joint-Task-Force-on-Public-History-Education-and-Employment.pdf>
- 2019 NCPH Career Report: <https://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Career-Paths-in-Public-History-Report-of-the-Joint-Task-Force-on-Public-History-Education-and-Employment-March-20-1.pdf>

### Job Application Advice

- American Association for State and Local History. AASLH Career Center. <https://jobs.aaslh.org/>
- Ask A Manager. <https://www.askamanager.org/>
- The Professor Is In. <https://theprofessorisin.com/>
- Aujla, Dev. “50 Ways to Get a Job.” <https://50waystogetajob.com/>
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## Online Presence

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- “The Ins and Outs of a Professional Academic Website.” *The Professor Is In* (February 7, 2012). <https://theprofessorisin.com/2012/02/07/the-ins-and-outs-of-a-professional-academic-website-guest-post-2/>

## Mental Health

- Farkas, Meredith. “Vocational awe is always harmful.” *Information Wants To Be Free* (December 22, 2022). <https://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2022/12/22/vocational-awe-is-always-harmful/>
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- “Opening the Dialogue on Mental Health in Grad School for MIAW.” *Overworked TA* (October 8, 2013). <http://overworkedta.blogspot.com/2013/10/opening-dialogue-on-mental-health-in.html>
- Fullick, Melonie. “‘My grief lies all within’ — PhD students, depression & attrition,” *Whiteboard Workout* (May 15, 2013), <https://meloniefullick.com/2013/05/15/phd-students-depression-and-attrition/>
- The Jack Project. <http://www.jack.org/>
- *Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum* by Jessica Calarco

## Research and Writing

- Easley-Houser, Arika. “The 2-Year Dissertation.” *Inside Higher Ed* (June 11, 2014). <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2014/06/11/essay-how-finish-dissertation-two-years>
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- Mewburn, Inger, ed. *The Thesis Whisperer*. <http://thesiswhisperer.com>

## CONCLUSION

Choosing the graduate school and public history program that will suit you best can be an overwhelming experience. We hope that this guide helps you more easily navigate the process and thrive in the program that you choose. Over time, the NCPH New Professional and Student Committee will revise these recommendations to reflect changes within graduate school programs and the public history field itself. We look forward to hearing your feedback and concerns.

## 2023 – 2025 NCPH NEW PROFESSIONAL AND STUDENT COMMITTEE

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