



## Best Practices in Public History

### *Certificate Programs in Public History*

Prepared by the NCPH Curriculum and Training Committee  
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#### ***Introduction:***

Responding to the increasing need for trained public history professionals, many academic university departments created graduate certificate programs in public history. Certificate programs are often a part of advanced degree programs, usually out of a history department. In many cases, students can opt to pursue just the certificate or the entire master's degree associated with the certificate. The programs run the gamut from broadly-based general certificates in public or applied history, 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 historic preservation or museum studies.

Many of these programs are based in departments of history, but they are also found in other departments. 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.

Certificate programs can be geared to serve various groups. Many are designed for people already working in the field; individuals who may never had any formal coursework in public history, but who choose to gain that training through a certificate program. This is not the only audience, however. Students who have 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 the undergraduate degree. Certificate programs also serve students enrolled in a master's degree program.

The number of hours required for the certificate alone varies, averaging between 15 and 24 hours of coursework, including an internship. Fifteen hours, or about five courses, seems to be the minimum for an effective certificate program. This allows for an introductory course, which provides an overview of the theories and methodology of public history, an internship, and three or four more specialized courses. The configuration of the courses varies from program to program, depending on the focus.

#### ***Recommendations:***

1. The best certificate programs are those embedded within a larger program, which requires students to gain a contextual and theoretical background for the study of public history by taking courses outside of public history. This grounding in a larger program is essential, as students need to understand the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of at least one academic field. History departments serve this purpose very well, as do departments of anthropology, art history, architecture and urban planning. The combination of hands-on training and academic theory is a critical component in order to provide students with a high-quality education.

2. The best certificate programs will allow students the option of combining their certificate training with either an undergraduate or graduate degree. The credits acquired in the certificate should count toward the total number needed for the final degree.
3. 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.
4. Skills-based courses are essential. For example, an historic preservation program should have required courses in building conservation and architectural history. Other courses that work well in certificate programs include, but are not limited to: archival practices, museum and archive management, exhibit design, oral history, and museum methods.
5. Students need to gain hands-on experience. A required internship is essential for students seeking a graduate degree, and should be offered to students seeking an undergraduate degree. A practicum course might be an additional avenue for students to gain practical, project-based experience. 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 of public history, and/or engage in service-learning projects.
6. 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 a mentor in their particular field of study. There may also be opportunities for students to “shadow” a public history professional for a day.
7. 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/or with the facilities where local public historians work will facilitate the development of internships, provide opportunities field based projects, and advance the goals of the certificate program and partner institutions through cost-sharing and joint grant opportunities.