

STATE OF THE STATE OF TEACHING PUBLIC HISTORY

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It has been almost fifteen years since the 1979 meeting in Montecito, California, that sparked the organization of the National Council on Public History (NCPH), an event that may be used to signal the birth of the "official" public history movement, so perhaps it is an appropriate time to reflect back on the nature of teaching public history over the years. That is not to say that no public history courses were taught before the late 1970s, for that is certainly not the case. Archival management programs and historical agency programs predate that time and produced many successful graduates. The earliest program of the 55 cited in *A Guide to Graduate Programs in Public History* (NCPH, 1990) dates from 1973, before the term "public history" was first used for the University of California-Santa Barbara program.¹ Beginning in the late 1970s, particularly at the University of California-Santa Barbara, more multi-purpose or generalist public history programs developed within academic history departments, almost always at public or large urban institutions with missions to serve taxpayers or local communities.

At least some of these came, in part, because a few people recognized that historians could and should be, indeed *had* long been, pursuing careers as historians in the National Park Service, National Archives, state historical societies, and other organizations. These historians were almost invisible to academic historians, though, unless, as did former National Park Service historian Dr. Heather Huyck, they wore their uniforms when attending AHA and OAH meetings. Students interested in pursuing public history careers, then, found it difficult to get advice on options available.

Another impetus to the creation of public history programs was the academic job crisis of the 1970s, which also helped spur the creation of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History. The job crisis came at a fortuitous time, in some ways, because the public's interest in history skyrocketed with the well-known *Roots* phenomenon and the celebration of the

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¹ The NCPH guide cites the following dates for the origin of programs: 1973 - 3, 1974 - 1, 1975 - 3, 1976 - 1, 1977 - 1, 1978 - 4, 1979 - 2, 1980 - 6, 1981 - 3, 1982 - 3, 1983 - 3, 1984 - 2, 1985 - 6, 1986 - 4, 1987 - 2, 1988 - 2, 1989 - 3, 1990 - 2, n.d. - 3. The date given is the first introduction of course work, but, in a few cases, programs expanded or changed directions at a later date. Wichita State University's program is not listed in this catalogue, and West Georgia College is considering developing a program.

nation's bicentennial in 1976. Historic preservation, building on the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, also entered a new phase in the 1970s, as increased federal regulations required agencies to identify and evaluate historic resources and federal income tax credits encouraged the rehabilitation of historic buildings into commercial space.

Departments that initiated public history programs in these years had to experiment to determine where public history fit into their traditional curriculum. How does one evaluate an internship? Do public history students need to study a foreign language or are other research tools more appropriate? Is the public historian the person to whom one sends all requests for service from the faculty, regardless of the individual's expertise? How does research based on faculty-student contracts for federal agencies factor into the promotion and tenure formula? Who will hire graduates of these programs? While every department has not yet answered all of these questions to its own satisfaction, there is now enough history to the teaching of public history, and enough tenured faculty doing this work, that new programs should no longer have to search as hard for answers.

Public history programs that have been successful have become integrated parts of their departments. Courses may come and go as interests and resources change, but at least some of the young public historians who started these programs are moving into the graying ranks of the senior faculty. Words like "non-teaching careers" or "non-academic careers" are disappearing from the profession as graduates have become established in their own careers. Networking now can entail contacting graduates to seek their help in placing new students.

Academic Level of Public History Programs

Most public history programs are at the master's level because students need a good knowledge base that comes from an undergraduate program. The undergraduate level is also the best place for students to take courses in other departments that will help to prepare them for a public history career, for graduate programs are usually limited in the number of hours students can take outside the history department. Students interested in museology or historic preservation, for example, benefit from courses in archaeology or geography, while geology would be an excellent science requirement for budding historic preservationists. Courses in the history of interior design or landscape architecture would benefit students working at historic sites or managing historic house museums. Students who wish to work in state or federal government offices could take political science courses in public policy. Basic accounting and management courses would help all students who expect to progress into the ranks of administrators, and most public historians end up with some of those responsibilities as they move through their careers. Good undergraduate advising, then, can help students decide if they want to pursue a career in public history and develop some of the knowledge that they will need to be effective members of the

interdisciplinary teams that are so important in public history. Undergraduate students can also learn valuable skills and test their areas of interest by volunteering for local historical agencies during the academic year or on summer vacation.

Public history programs, at whatever level, share a common goal of preparing students as historians who have the knowledge and skills to work in a public arena, such as an archives or library, government history office or state historical agency, state historic preservation office, historic site, or museum. Students may also choose to work for a contract history business or a historic preservation contract firm that may also include archaeologists or landscape architects, or they may choose to be independent contractors. Historians interested in environmental history, land use history, and public policy are well suited to address some of the major issues of the 1990s, such as toxic waste disposal, "Super Fund" clean-up projects, and the protection of open space. Arizona State University prepares some of its students to work in the field of book publishing, while two West Virginia University graduates have used their public history background to staff the research office of the university's fund-raising foundation. Others may find employment in both the public and private sectors, not always with the title of historian, but as policy analysts and policy makers who employ their knowledge of history, research, and historical thinking to considerable advantage. In addition to paid employment, public historians are excellent volunteer board members for historical societies, historic preservation organizations, and museums because they understand the language of those institutions and have access to national networks of colleagues for information.

Some history departments offer a minor doctoral field in public history, and it could be argued that few departments would have the resources to offer more than that. However, in *most* departments, and probably across the profession, the doctorate may still be too "sacred" a degree to "risk" what some might consider "tampering" by introducing public history. There are, however, many public historians with Ph.D.s, particularly in the high levels of administration at state historical agencies, archives, and federal history offices; students wishing to pursue public history careers in those areas would be well advised to consider getting a Ph.D. eventually, even if it is not an entry-level requirement as it is for an academic career. A public history M.A. background might also be valuable for historians planning to pursue traditional academic careers, for it will allow them to introduce their students to a variety of career options for historians, enliven their classes by assignments that incorporate public history or teach a public history class, and better provide professional service as they become involved in exhibit planning, consultation, or agency research. Likewise, students in traditional graduate programs can benefit from public history courses to broaden their perspectives on the profession.

Evaluating Public History Programs

The most important key to evaluating good public history programs is that public historians are, first and foremost, historians. They know how to seek out knowledge and develop a context for that knowledge in the traditional areas of the discipline and should be able to navigate the aisles of a library as well as any other historian. Public history students sit next to other graduate students in lecture and seminar classes, with the proportion of those classes varying by institution. American history courses seem to be most popular, but students who wish to work for international corporations should also be taking a broader range of courses.

Public historians are also historians who develop additional tools of their trade, such as a knowledge of federal policies for cultural resources management or the ability to process manuscript collections, to add to their research, writing, and analytical skills. Here, they often speak a different language than their traditionally trained colleagues, for words like "accession" and "deaccession," "National Register of Historic Places" and "CRM" (cultural resources management), "RFPs" (requests for proposals) and "cost sharing" are tossed around casually and, to the uninitiated, confusingly. Good public history programs, therefore, should offer their students at least a beginning course in understanding this specialized language of their preferred area of work, just as good general history programs provide students at least a beginning knowledge of the specialized tools of research needed in Asian or African history, if that is their area of expertise.

Public history programs vary widely, depending primarily on faculty strengths and available resources such as museums and archives. Faculty should have experience in the areas they will be teaching and should continue to be active in that area, for the practical side of public history education is based on experience more than "book learning," and legislation in a field like historic preservation can change far faster than a book can get it into print, with legal and financial consequences if the wrong information is conveyed to a federal official or building owner. The most common areas of emphasis, however, as documented in *A Guide to Graduate Programs in Public History*, compiled by the NCPH Publications Committee in 1990, are in agency administration (15), archives (34), editing and publishing (14), local and community history (24), museum studies (31), oral history (18), policy studies (11), and historic preservation/cultural resources management (29). Fewer programs exist in business (7), historical archaeology (4), living history (1), and nonprint media (3).

Special Components of Public History Education

Students in these programs learn to use more than the traditional manuscript collections, scholarly articles, and monographs that historians have long considered their stock-in-trade when doing research. Students in a museum studies

program use the museum collections to research a particular artifact or to develop an exhibit that uses artifacts to discuss daily life or military engagements. Monographs provide context for a political campaign. Artifacts such as posters, newsclips, and buttons, in a well planned exhibit, bring that campaign to life for far more people than are likely to ever read the monograph. Public history students also may use oral history far more extensively than other history students, for they are preparing for careers where they may be documenting history by preserving the memories of those who helped make policy in institutions like the U.S. Senate or documenting the history of a neighborhood by interviewing long-time residents and community activists. This kind of documentation, particularly at the local level, can help empower a community to preserve its own history and understand its place in the region or nation. Also, public history students interested in working in historic preservation or for local historical societies are well served by becoming as familiar with the resources in courthouse record rooms or historical society libraries as they are with those in an archives.

Some assignments in the 1989 *Public History Course Syllabus Packet* illustrate ways to blend historical research with public history methods of presentation. For example, Edward Berkowitz's course on social welfare history at George Washington University asked students to research and write "a short historical analysis of Reagan's workfare proposals and their effects on public policy" and to write on "the reserves controversy in old-age insurance and try to draw parallels between it and the modern controversy over social security financing." Philip Scarpino's "The Practice of Public History" course required students to complete a "mini-internship" for a client in the Indianapolis area, as well as write grant applications for two statewide funding agencies. Field trips and guest speakers, which are rarely part of traditional history courses, are also important in introducing students to public history opportunities and providing role models and contacts for students.

Some of these types of assignments can be introduced into other history courses at the undergraduate level. When teaching a U.S. history survey course once, I asked students to write their paper as a policy statement to President Reagan, explaining to him that one of the domestic or foreign policy issues in the news that semester had a history that he should know when making his decisions. *Thinking in Time*, by Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, is an excellent guide to this approach.² Students in my women's history class do oral histories with older women to learn how one "average" woman's life fits into the broad themes of the course and to learn that all sources historians use are not words on paper. I have also used slides of historic sites to discuss urban history or the history of the New Deal in a survey course and taken students in a West Virginia history course on a walking tour of downtown Morgantown to explain how the history of the

² Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

community and state could be reflected in the buildings they saw everyday. These become both subtle and blatant ways to introduce to students the idea that historians can learn from and work at historic buildings or sites. Some departments may have mechanisms for students to do undergraduate internships or special projects.

Team research is also an important part of public history work and should, therefore, be part of a good public history program. Traditionally trained historians have few opportunities for collaborative research, but public history students must learn to integrate and value many perspectives on a project. Dr. Theodore Karamanski of Loyola University of Chicago, for example, had students in his "Management of Historic Resources" course participate in the *Survey of Maritime Cultural Resources on the Illinois Shore of Lake Michigan* as part of a contract between the Chicago Maritime Society and the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. My "Introduction to Public History" course each year includes a class project that requires the 12 to 15 students to design a product that meets the needs of our client, research the material needed, and write up their part of the project; clients have been as diverse as the Women's Centenary Project of West Virginia University, the local Easter Seals Society, and Main Street Morgantown, a downtown revitalization group.

Almost all public history programs have some type of internship requirement, while about one-half also require a master's thesis. Internships provide students an opportunity to apply their classroom experiences under the supervision of a professional. They should also allow students to produce a substantial product that is valuable to both the student as a learning experience and to the sponsoring institution to justify the supervision that the intern needs.

Professional ethics and professionalism in general is one common theme that appears in public history courses on a regular basis but probably rarely in traditional history courses. Public historians recognize, more than do academic historians, that they can face issues of professional ethics in dealing with supervisors, employees, or the public. In many ways, these are the same types of issues that academic historians face in determining what they will publish or teach, for they do not operate in isolation from demands of administrators, students, or publishers either, but public history courses provide a forum for discussing these issues.³

Public History Academic Programs and the Historical Profession(s)

Public history programs must be tied into a wider range of networks than the American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians, or

³ For more on the area of ethics, see Theodore J. Karamanski, ed., *Ethics and Public History: An Anthology* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Co., 1990).

similar groups provide. These should be both regional and statewide, as well as national. Public historians in the academy, for instance, are likely to be active in their statewide historic preservation or museums associations because those organizations attract the professionals whom they will need to know to arrange internships or to make contacts for job placement.

This is particularly important because public history programs that include archival training or historic preservation must address the pressures of accreditation or standards that the American Association of Museums (AAM), Society of American Archivists (SAA), and National Council on Preservation Education (NCPE) have introduced. The American Association of Museums published its "Criteria for Examining Professional Museum Studies Programs" in 1983. The Society of American Archivists approved its second set of "Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs" in 1988. NCPE's revised "Standards for Graduate Education in Historic Preservation" were issued in 1992, and similar standards for undergraduate programs are expected soon. Formal accreditation is an issue very familiar to our colleagues in business or engineering, or even in psychology if one looks at Colleges of Arts and Sciences, but it will likely only enter academic history departments through their public history programs as the SAA and NCPE suggest the number and types of courses students should have. The National Council on Public History has also discussed professional standards for programs, and additional information on this issue is available from NCPH. Accreditation, however, usually requires dollars to support a site visit and to make any recommended additions to the curriculum or library holdings. In these days of tight funding for higher education, that may be difficult to accomplish.

The National Council on Public History provides a forum for public historians to meet and share ideas, just as the Society of American Archivists, American Association of Museums, National Trust for Historic Preservation, and American Association for State and Local History have long provided places where those interested in archives, museology, historic preservation, and state and local history, respectively, could gather. The NCPH is unique, though, not in its ability to draw together practitioners, academics, and students, but in its attempt to attract *all* those interested in public history in its myriad forms. This has been particularly important for the teaching of public history for NCPH conferences have been a continuing source of new ideas and camaraderie. The NCPH Curriculum and Training Committee, for example, organized a post-conference meeting for public history program directors at the April 1993 conference in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, that allowed directors to examine issues such as accreditation, helping students find employment, and evolving curricula.⁴

⁴ For more information about public history programs, *A Guide to Graduate Programs in Public History* is available through the NCPH at 327 Cavanaugh Hall, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, 425 University Blvd., Indianapolis, IN 46202-5140. NCPH also has available the AHA-NCPH sponsored *Careers for Students of History*, which provides a bibliography for further information, and a 33-minute video entitled "Public History Today," which features historians working for the

Teaching public history is challenging and fun. You can see the "lightbulbs go on" when students view "Public History Today" and exclaim, as one of mine did on the first day of the "Introduction to Public History" course, "I never knew historians could do all that!" Students like the idea of doing something with their knowledge of history other than writing book reviews and term papers. Good public history programs should provide them with opportunities to create a beginning resumé for their job search and help prepare them for that all-important job search as well as for future graduate study. Students should also know, as should faculty, that continuing education is as important as formal public history education at the graduate level. Workshops sponsored by the National Park Service for its employees or by professional groups like the Society of American Archivists, as well as national, statewide, and local professional meetings all help public historians, including public history faculty, stay current in their knowledge.

Even if they never teach a course in public history or attend such a meeting, however, all faculty, at whatever level they may teach, can at least introduce students to the idea that historians are engaged in a wide variety of activities, where their teaching may be to school children in a museum program or their research in a government office. That would be the best service that we could offer to our future colleagues during their years in our classes.

National Park Service, a large urban historical society, and a contract history firm specializing in land-use issues. NCPH's Committee on Professional Standards published its *Analysis of the 1990-91 Survey of Academic Programs in Public History* in 1992, and copies are available for \$10.00 through the Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation. Charts documenting careers in information science, business, and other areas are available through the National Center for the Study of History, RR #1, Box 679, Cornish, Maine 04020-9726. Newsletters and journals from groups such as NCPH, the Society for History in the Federal Government, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), the American Association of Museums, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the Society of American Archivists should be available at major libraries. AASLH publishes a directory of historical societies and organizations in the United States and Canada. At least browsing through these publications provides an easy way to begin to understand the issues facing these organizations and the opportunities they provide.