Charting the Course: Challenges in Public History Education, Guidance for Developing Strong Public History Programs

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ABSTRACT: Is there a crisis in public history education and employment today? Many experienced public historians believe there is. This article examines issues related to public history training and recent efforts by the National Council on Public History to improve the quality of graduate programs in the field through targeted advice to students and educators. It focuses on the thinking behind development of the new best practices document, “Establishing and Developing a Public History Program,” which appears in full at the end of the article.

KEY WORDS: public history education, public history employment, profession, job crisis, training

This three-part essay looks at a set of intersecting issues that many see as a crisis confronting public history within higher education today: a proliferation of MA programs at a time of shrinking job markets for public historians, particularly in the United States. The co-authors focus on what the National Council on Public History has done recently—and is currently doing—to address these concerns. Part I offers thoughts for colleges and universities about the essential building blocks on which a strong curriculum might rise, as well as ideas for empowering students to identify the best programs for their professional interests. It concludes with discussion of an on-going NCPH initiative that is gathering hard data on how well public history education reflects the expectations of public history employers. Part II recounts the development of, and reasoning behind, a new NCPH best-practices document, “Establishing and Developing a Public History Program.” Part I is written by Robert Weyeneth, based on one of his presidential columns.

1 The authors wish to acknowledge John Dichtl’s role in inspiring and deftly implementing the initiatives discussed in this article. As executive director of the National Council on Public History, he guided development of the best practices document for establishing and developing a public history program, organized a team to write the student consumer’s guide to choosing a public history program, and strategized the complicated launch of the joint task force on public history education and employment.
“A Perfect Storm?” He is a professor of history at the University of South Carolina, where he directed and co-directed the public history program from 1992 to 2014. Part II is written by Daniel Vivian, assistant professor of history and director of public history at the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky. Vivian participated in a 2013 NCPH working group that explored questions about the growth of public history education and challenges facing new programs. He and Jon Hunner of New Mexico State University co-wrote the new best practices document, which appears in its entirety as part III.

**Part I. The Big Picture: Is It a Perfect Storm?**

*Robert Weyeneth*

To many, it looks like the perfect storm: five disturbing trends coming together to spawn a monster disaster. Here’s the meteorological analysis. (1) There are now too many public history programs in colleges and universities, especially at the graduate level. (2) The programs are producing record numbers of new MAs, probably too many. (3) These newly minted public historians are not finding good entry-level jobs in the field. (4) Some of the new graduates are not finding jobs because they are poorly trained by new public history programs that are struggling to figure out what they should be doing. (5) Even graduates of long-established programs are not getting jobs because their stodgy curricula have not kept up with the realities of the twenty-first-century economy and the digital revolution. Regularly, I hear alarming observations like these from colleagues whom I respect. Let’s look at the issues raised by these comments and consider what the National Council on Public History might do, consistent with its long-time impulse to welcome all into the “big tent” of public history.

NCPH’s Guide to Public History Programs now lists a total of 241 programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels in fourteen countries. Two hundred sixteen of these are in North America alone, and 166 of those are graduate programs. From one perspective this is a remarkable story of success: a stunning and recent spurt of growth. Just in the United States, forty-five of the fifty states (plus the District of Columbia) offer some form of public history education. From another perspective, how sustainable is this program proliferation, especially in graduate education in the United States? What would a sustainable number of programs be? Job placement statistics are certainly one measure of sustainability and success. Academic program reviewers in deans’ offices are ever mindful of such placement statistics, as

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2 The essay was published in *Public History News* 33, no. 4 (September 2013) and as a four-part series on *History@Work*, September 6, 2013. See http://ncph.org/history-at-work/tag/a-perfect-storm-series/.

3 The NCPH Guide to Public History Programs can be found here: http://ncph.org/program-guide/. Just three years ago, when a version of this essay originally appeared, the guide listed a total of 221 programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels in ten countries. Two hundred of these were in North America, and 138 of those were graduate programs.
are resourceful prospective students with multiple admission offers. But is it ethical simply to watch the propagation and assume that market forces will weed and prune?

The enormous growth has multiple causes. At the undergraduate level, public history is “parent friendly”: it helps history departments answer the question “What can sons and daughters do with a history major?” Some departments reason that offering public history classes and internships will bolster the sagging number of history majors. University administrators can point to public history initiatives as evidence that their institutions are “civically engaged.” For graduate students, public history provides multiple career directions for those who want to practice history but not to teach. For faculty, it is rewarding to teach public history, collaborate with community partners, and complete projects that have relevance and real-world impact. Whether students and faculty are affiliated with a full-blown program or working as sole practitioners, whether they are in a decades-old program or a scrappy new one, whether the curriculum has a local focus or international reach, public history in practice in the academy can be catalytic and contagious.

Without question, the global financial crisis has taken a toll, as have the slashing and sequestering of budgets at the local, state, provincial, and federal levels, where many public history jobs have long been funded in the public sector. People have lost jobs, positions have gone unfilled, and many individuals are doing the work once done by two, three, or more colleagues. Some who were planning to retire soon are holding on to jobs to build back retirement funds, postponing others’ prospects for mid-level advancement. Entry-level jobs are scarcer, more temporary, with fewer benefits. Museums, heritage agencies, and cultural institutions generally are being scrutinized as never before for their relevance to modern life, and some are being eliminated entirely or dismantled to the point of dysfunction. Many accept this grim news as the new normal. The Great Recession reduced positions in the museum world, but doubts about the economic and cultural viability of historic house museums and outdoor museums predated the financial crisis and continue to erode employment in the museum sector. Although some historical consultants report fewer contract opportunities for their consulting services, others are finding more term-employment openings, as institutions and companies have cut full-time staff and hired independent contractors. On the brighter side, state and federal laws continue to mandate processes of environmental and historical review, which in turn creates employment for some historians and preservationists. The digital revolution is energizing and expanding opportunities in all fields of public history, perhaps no more so than in library, archival, and information science. Reducing the salaries and lowering the threshold degree requirements for some curator and local museum director jobs are part of these unfortunate trends but, ironically, the belt-tightening has opened up these positions to recent recipients of the MA eager to have the job, the title, and the pay.

The pain of friends and colleagues, as well as the numbing impact of cutbacks on nearby institutions, give all of this a very personal feel for me. However, it is also
the case that the top graduates of our public history program are consistently finding jobs in the field. Colleagues in similar programs at other universities tell me the same thing. Obviously, a desire to live in a particular part of the country or in a specific city is going to reduce the odds of finding a good first job. But if one is well trained and geographically portable, alumni of strong programs do well. Clearly this is just anecdotal evidence from programs for which I have first-hand knowledge. Placement statistics from a few programs or a handful of alumni success stories cannot take the place of hard evidence about broad patterns.

Let me turn to what NCPH has been doing about these vexing questions. I will focus on graduate education, on the assumption that the master of arts degree has replaced the bachelor’s degree as the minimal ticket of admission into white-collar employment. Although many talented undergraduates may be able to secure satisfying public history employment straight out of college, the current debates concern the expansion of MA programs.

**What Can the National Council on Public History Do?**

The observations with which I began single out for alarm the rising numbers of both programs and graduates. While these critiques are focusing on the issue of quantity, it is equally important to think about the issue of quality. NCPH can address the issue of quality from two different but related angles. First, it can speak directly to program directors and public history educators, equipping them with resources to teach public history courses, to help administer programs, and to survive in an academic environment that may not completely understand public history. Second, NCPH can speak directly to prospective students about being smarter consumers of their educations: encouraging them to seek quality, recognize it, and gravitate to it. The focus on these two constituencies represents a strategy with both a top-down and a bottom-up component. One hopes the interaction between the two will be synergetic.

**Quality Control from Directors and Educators**

A seminal effort to think about programmatic quality from the perspective of directors and educators began ten years ago, shortly after John Dichtl became executive director of NCPH in January 2006. In conversations with colleagues, particularly with Susan Ferentinos who was then working at the Organization of American Historians (OAH), Dichtl recognized that high quality public history scholarship, teaching, and program administration rested on the foundations of

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4 An important related conversation has also started in the profession about how to define “success” for a public history program and its alumni. It poses the question: Do graduates need to end up with jobs in the world of public history—museums, historic sites, and archives, for instance—or does it count as success if they find meaningful work that is not directly connected to history but draws on their public history training and perspective? For a glimpse of the discussion, see [http://ncph.org/history-at-work/defining-success-seeking-clarity/](http://ncph.org/history-at-work/defining-success-seeking-clarity/).
tenure and promotion guidelines that acknowledged the special nature of public history work in colleges and universities. He proposed, and the NCPH board of directors approved, establishment of a Working Group on Evaluating Public History Scholarship in April 2007. Between 2007 and 2010, Dichtl chaired this working group comprised of representatives from the American Historical Association (AHA), the OAH, and NCPH, which brought together multiple long-standing efforts and on-going conversations in each of these three professional organizations to address an employment problem that was affecting a growing number of their members. In 2010, this working group produced the pioneering collaborative report *Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian* and a detailed background document. The two documents have become invaluable resources for everyone involved in the process: for public historians seeking and negotiating academic offers, for department chairs hiring public historians, for tenure and promotion committees evaluating public history work, and for university administrators outside history departments.5

Dichtl was also responsible for another important initiative aimed at promoting program quality. A version of the NCPH Guide to Public History Programs had existed since the 1980s as a hard copy print publication.6 Dichtl realized that it was time to put the guide online with updated information and multiple points of access, a project for which planning began in 2008. He envisioned the revitalized guide as a resource for students but, as much as anything, as a way to track the number and spread of public history programs and as a means for educators and directors to see their own programs in comparative context in this burgeoning field. What were others doing? What were the components of a strong curriculum? Who were the faculty who directed strong programs and might help answer questions from other directors about program improvement? In the spring of 2016, NCPH transferred the Guide to Public History Programs to the organization’s new website, with a reconfigured interface.7

Credentialing: Some in NCPH and others in kindred organizations are calling for professional societies to “credential” or “certify” quality programs by setting minimum standards and then enforcing them by denying admission of subpar programs to the guild. I’ve been an NCPH member long enough to remember similar calls twenty-five years ago at the breakfasts that bring together public

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7 For the current guide, see http://ncph.org/program-guide/.
history educators and program directors at our annual meetings. Then and now, I remain very uncomfortable with this approach to the issue of quality control. One, it is hostile rather than welcoming. A great strength of NCPH has always been the unpretentious friendliness of our organization and our conferences. Two, the practicalities: who would do the policing and enforcing? NCPH has scarce resources and, in any event, probably does not have the interest or will. Rather than trying to patrol higher education curricula, NCPH is institutionally focused right now on the excitement of a field that is both globalizing (which opens up jobs) and digitizing (which also opens up jobs).

Best practices: Where a national and international professional organization can play a role in promoting program quality is through “best practices” documents. This approach is a friendly alternative to credentialing and is potentially more effective, especially if the best practices documents avoid one-size-fits-all prescriptions. There are multiple excellent models for public history education that take full advantage of unique local resources. NCPH has a deep bench of seasoned veterans with wide-ranging experience and expertise, and over recent years it has been assembling this wisdom into a set of online resources, which include best practices documents on MA programs, public history for undergraduates, internships, and certificate programs. Our Curriculum and Training Committee has also developed lists of recommended readings on provocative case studies, controversial history, and oral history. When a version of this essay appeared in 2013, I called for a best practices document on how to establish a public history program. It was apparent that NCPH conferences were brimming with lots of new participants from the academy, keen to ask questions about how to start a program, how to teach public history, and how to take the classroom into the field. NCPH was uniquely positioned among learned societies to share this knowledge with a new generation of practitioners and educators, as it had been doing since the 1970s. “Establishing and Developing a Public History Program” was published on the NCPH website in February 2016. I am very pleased that The Public Historian has chosen to highlight this important document with this extended discussion here.

Is there a disconnect between public history training and the skills that employers want? This is a big question but not a new one. I've heard this complaint for over twenty years, particularly from colleagues in the private sector. In the past, misgivings about the training of public historians in graduate school have identified time management skills, the ability to work against deadlines, grant writing experience, and knowledge of budgets and budgeting. Today, we hear complaints

8 Resources for Public History Educators at the Graduate and Undergraduate Level on the NCPH website: http://ncph.org/publications-resources/educators/graduate-and-undergraduate/.
in a similar vein and, in addition, that newly minted MAs lack familiarity with basic business practices, with technical writing, with working as a member of a team, with imagining creative ways to meet client demands. Some employers lament the inability of their new hires to “think outside the box,” to assess the intellectual contours of a specific project, and to consider a range of methodologies and modes of inquiry. There are also expectations for basic (and advanced) digital proficiency, including working with big data, building spreadsheets, designing websites, and using Geographic Information Systems (GIS). While some of these expectations fit comfortably within the teaching mission of history departments, others raise questions about the proper role for highly technical training in the humanities-oriented curricula of history departments. Once upon a time employers could spend a year or so getting new hires up to speed, but the business climate facing many companies today has created an environment where new employees must hit the ground running. The times have changed and we need to take a hard look at this potential disconnect.

Teachers who are practitioners: One trend that may be exacerbating the skills deficit in public history curricula and contributing to quality control problems is that more and more teachers of public history are not actually practitioners themselves. In some cases, they may have classroom learning in public history, but not the practical experience from working as a museum curator or a preservation consultant, for example. Often new faculty hires are asked to teach public history courses or even to start public history programs on the assumption that as new PhDs they must certainly know something about public history. (I’ve never understood this logic.) Equally concerning is the dismissive view that “anyone can teach public history.” (I once heard a university-based historian assert that practicing public history just means saying yes to every television and radio request.) And,

11 A History@Work comment by Sarah Wassberg on September 7, 2013, in response to the original essay asserted that public history programs with museum studies concentrations “need to better prepare their students for the real world of museum jobs. That means better training in corollary fields (non-profit administration, business management, grants and fundraising, marketing and PR, web design and database management, etc.) that many graduates will find themselves working with in addition to the more familiar jobs of education, events, curatorial, archival, interpretive, and exhibit work. In addition, universities need to be honest (brutally honest) about the salaries (or hourly pay rate) many students will be facing upon graduation. Not everyone can work at the Smithsonian and, honestly, lots of small historical societies and museums NEED people with professional training and are the most likely to be students’ and recent graduates’ first job or even volunteer experience. The pay rate at these places is pretty paltry. . . . But being honest about the time it takes to get a ‘real’ full-time job in the field is only going to help graduate students be realistic about their options and also how dedicated they are to the field. . . . The jobs are simply not there and career advancement is simply not available even for those who do have jobs in the field (most job movement tends to be horizontal, not vertical). Maybe someday that will change, but for now, brutal honesty is the best policy.” See http://ncph.org/history-at-work/a-perfect-storm-part-4/#comment-726.

12 Part of the confusion here may be a failure to understand that “public history” is not simply “history for the public.” For one useful definition of public history, see http://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/.
finally, the nature of much PhD funding contributes to the trend of teachers who are not practitioners, as funding packages tend to emphasize teaching assistantships, rather than the hands-on experience of working in a public history assistantship.

Although these observations focus on quality control in MA programs, the dilemma of professors who are not practitioners (and therefore ill-prepared to teach public history to MA students) is a piece of the puzzle. Going forward, the challenge will be to get interested PhD students more deeply into the trenches of public history before they go into their own classrooms as new faculty. It will also be important for academic search committees to realize that they must look for practical experience and public history expertise in their public history hires.

**Quality Control from Students**

In addition to the efforts of directors and educators to build high-quality programs, students themselves can be a potent force for quality control. Every year prospective public history students research programs and curricula, fill out applications, weigh admission and financial aid offers, and eventually make decisions about where to go to graduate school. These applicants, whether fresh out of college or midcareer, need the tools to make the decision-making process as informed as possible.

Empowering students: In its own way, NCPH’s Guide to Public History Programs is a best practices document. It is an international listing of graduate, undergraduate, and related public history programs that can be searched by geographical location, curricular concentration, and type of degree. It also permits an apple-to-apple comparison of programs. Thus, prospective graduate students can compare curricular requirements (required internships or applied theses, for example), opportunities for intensive study and practice (specialized tracks, field schools, courses in new media and digital history), financial assistance that provides experience (applied assistantships), the record of recent placements, the existence of alumni networks, the appeal of a particular regional location, and anything else they want. The guide enables these comparisons if—and this is a big “if”—students know the guide exists and they invest the thought and time to identify core components important to them and then look for programs with these strengths.

In my experience, though, many undergraduates are still trying to figure out what they want, even as they apply to multiple graduate programs and eventually matriculate in one of them. The more general problem is that students need to be more active and critical consumers of education, as my colleague Allison Marsh points out to me regularly. They need to realize that it matters where they go to graduate school. One of the most constructive roles that history departments can play is to better advise their undergraduates on what public history is, what public history careers exist, the necessity of a graduate degree in the field, and how to
choose the right graduate program for themselves. And, it bears repeating that merely attending a strong program does not guarantee a job. Even completing a challenging graduate program will not guarantee a job. Ultimately each student is going to have to step up to the plate, take the initiative, and go the extra mile.

In the original essay I urged NCPH to develop “a student consumer’s guide to public history programs.” This would be a field guide to what every student should know about going to graduate school in public history: ideas for the kinds of questions to think about when they study websites, e-mail program directors, or visit campuses. I am very pleased that in 2015 the NCPH New Professional and Graduate Student Committee published the invaluable The Public History Navigator: How to Choose and Thrive in a Graduate Public History Program, which does a superb job helping prospective graduate students identify their interests, abilities, and career goals and then to find programs that are “a good fit” for them personally and professionally.

It matters where you go to graduate school in public history: We had a good example of the need to help students evaluate graduate programs in order to make informed decisions in a posting to History@Work on “Looking for a Job in Public History,” which inspired extensive commentary a couple of years ago. Two points are worth emphasizing from the standpoint of the discussion here. One is that an MA in history is a completely different degree from an MA in public history. There is no doubt that the latter degree would have opened up many of the closed doors that the author of the post encountered in his job search. But he seems not to have appreciated the distinction while in school.

13 A History@Work comment by Emily Greenwald on September 7, 2013, in response to the original essay urged: “One thing to consider... is the benefit of having public historians in every history department, whether or not the department has an actual public history program. Every student in history, whether headed to a public history career, an academic career, or something outside of history altogether, can benefit from the theories and methods of public history.” See http://ncph.org/history-at-work/a-perfect-storm-part-4/#comment-725.

14 A History@Work post on September 19, 2013, by Mattea Sanders in response to the original essay commented: “While a public history program should equip students with the necessary tools, skills, and knowledge required for their future career, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done by the student in securing their future career. ... There are steps that students need to take along with their studies to be competitive in the job market. They should be networking, joining associations, going to conferences, interning (paid and unpaid), presenting at conferences, getting A LOT of coffee and lunches with anyone who will sit down with them, taking on leadership roles in associations, publishing, and becoming part of the world they have decided they want to be a part of by getting that MA in Public History.” E-mail communication from History@Work to Robert Weyeneth, September 19, 2013.


Second, the supposed catch-22 conundrum that “you cannot get a job without experience and you cannot get experience without a job” is actually neither a riddle nor an obstacle for students who have chosen programs wisely. The best public history programs incorporate an enormous amount of hands-on experience into the curriculum. Thus, applied graduate assistantships at public history institutions pay students a stipend (their financial aid package) and they work fifteen to twenty hours per week in a preservation or museum setting, for example. Courses teach real-world skills and require hands-on team projects, often working in collaboration with community partners. A course in historic preservation might require preparation of a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for a neighborhood group; a museums course might require some exhibition development for a local historical society. A field school can offer opportunities for real-world projects in distant cities or other countries. A thesis can be an important requirement, and many programs allow “applied” theses that can be extended and engaged public history projects in the community. Good programs require an internship and encourage students to think strategically about it. Most students complete an internship in the summer when they often have a large block of time and the ability to live temporarily somewhere else. If they want to move to a particular city or region after graduation, they are encouraged to do the internship there to build contacts. If they wish to work for a particular type of public history institution, sample it through the internship. If there is something they discover they need to know, and it is not part of their curriculum, they can use the internship to build this knowledge and skill set. The Public History Navigator will go a long way toward empowering students to seek quality in a graduate program, recognize it, and choose it.

Let me conclude by reiterating that these personal reflections are offered in the spirit of “NCPH as a big tent,” open and welcoming to all public historians, old hands and new, inside and outside the academy. I have tried to report candidly, if distressingly, on the conversations I hear about how public history is making headway or falling short in colleges and universities today, especially at the graduate level. To my way of thinking, the fundamental issue that underpins current concerns is quality: in programs old and new, big and small. I have suggested both top-down solutions for program directors and educators, as well as bottom-up solutions for student consumers, with the NCPH membership playing a central role by sharing its expertise and experience. If it is indeed a perfect storm, the good news is that NCPH’s hard-working volunteer committees and the professional staff in the executive office have been provisioning us with a range of “wayfinding” guides and navigation aids.

Taking the Next Steps: The Task Force on Public History Education and Employment

My original essay concluded with a call for NCPH to organize a task force with a multiyear commitment to collect data about public history education and
I suggested two goals. (1) Document the big picture by assessing the state of public history in the academy today. What is the nature and extent of the job crisis in public history, beyond the anecdotal evidence? How are programs actually doing with placement of MA students within a year of their graduation? What kinds of jobs are they getting? Are there correlations between placement records and the structure and curriculum of programs? Let’s look at how public history is being taught. Let’s learn who is teaching public history and whether they are practitioners with knowledge of the skills their students will need in public history employment. Let’s look, too, at whether departments are giving their public history faculty the resources they need: staff support, release time, summer salary, eleven-month appointments, dedicated budget lines, and appropriate tenure and promotion guidelines. What strategies are faculty using to generate their own external and internal funding for programmatic needs? What can history departments do to better advise their undergraduates on public history as a career option? What can we learn from each other and how can we make the best case for public history in the academy in the coming years? (2) Survey employers in the private and public sectors to assess whether there is a disconnect between academic training and real-world skills. What do public history employers in the private sector, the nonprofit world, and at all levels of government expect to see in people they hire? Is the MA now the entry-level degree? What are the implications for graduate education as an intellectual enterprise, as a set of interdisciplinary explorations, and as an arena for technical training?

I am pleased to report that a Task Force on Public History Education and Employment was formed in 2014, populated by representatives from NCPH, the AHA, the OAH, and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). It is hard at work, gathering empirical data about current trends in public history education and employment. Last year, the task force conducted a survey of public history employers that received more than four hundred responses. It is now examining the data and preparing a report on the findings. A survey of alumni of MA programs in public history and closely related fields is now open and available at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/phalumni. Readers who hold an MA in public history or a closely related field are encouraged to take the survey. The task force aims to report the findings of this survey later this year or early in 2017.

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17 As a model I recommended a joint task force similar to the working group that John Dichtl formed a decade ago to assess the challenges of tenure and promotion for public historians employed by colleges and universities.


Like it or not, public history is changing. Exactly how the 2008 recession has affected the field remains poorly understood, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that important changes have taken place and others are ongoing. The concerns that gave rise to fears of a “perfect storm” remain central to discussions about the future of public history and opportunities for new graduates of MA programs. How practitioners, educators, and professional organizations adapt will determine the role of public history within the historical profession and in civic life in the coming years. No matter what happens, NCPH is committed to supporting public history educators, practitioners, and students. A new best practices document, “Establishing and Developing a Public History Program,” is part of its efforts to ensure continued strength and vitality in the years to come.

The best practices document is intended mainly for public history educators and college and university administrators. It identifies practices that have proven successful in graduate programs with strong records of alumni placement and advancement, community engagement, and overall achievement. The document explains what has worked well and what experienced educators believe is needed to adapt to changes currently reshaping the field. As a general guide to program development, the document does not anticipate all the challenges that public history programs may face, nor does it prescribe a “one-size-fits-all” formula. Rather, it offers proven strategies that program directors and senior administrators should know about and draw upon as they work to manage and develop the programs for which they are responsible.

The origins of the best practices document lie in concerns about the growth of graduate-level programs in public history and the job market that developed in the mid-2000s. As early as 2006, seasoned public historians raised questions about the proliferation of graduate programs and the prospects for graduates. In the wake of the 2008 recession, concerns about a long-term decline in employment and possible “overproduction” of public historians mounted. In 2012, three experienced

20 Although concerned exclusively with graduate-level education, the document includes a number of provisions that are easily applied to undergraduate training. Educators responsible for undergraduate programs are encouraged to draw from it to the extent they find useful. In 2009, NCPH issued a best practices document on teaching public history to undergraduates. See “Public History for Undergraduate Students,” http://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Undergrad-Best-Practice.pdf.

educators and practitioners—Larry Cebula of Eastern Washington University, Denise Meringolo of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and Jon Taylor of the University of Central Missouri—organized a “Best Practices for Establishing a Public History Program” working group for the 2013 NCPH meeting in Ottawa, Canada. From the outset, the effort identified development of a NCPH best practices document as an eventual goal. The working group attracted ten participants, mostly new public history educators charged with developing fledging programs. Case statements shared in advance of the Ottawa meeting highlighted the challenges facing faculty responsible for curriculum development, building and maintaining relationships with community partners, and teaching and advising students while also carrying out other duties and trying to meet the expectations of department chairs and administrators.22

Discussions that took place in Ottawa provided the seeds of the document that ultimately developed. The working group met for two hours on the afternoon of April 17, 2013. Cebula, Meringolo, and Taylor served as facilitators and offered insights based on their experience as educators and public history program directors. Participants shared stories of success and accomplishment, frustration and exhaustion, and competition for scarce resources. Many described strong enthusiasm for public history among students and community partners and varying levels of support on campus. Others mentioned pressure to achieve results. Some spoke about the challenges inherent in teaching courses involving applied projects, supervising internships, and working with community partners while also trying to find time for “traditional” research and writing projects. By the end of the session, the working group identified several topics that needed attention but made little progress toward determining the form and content of the envisioned document.

In the wake of the Ottawa meeting, members of the working group considered several options for proceeding. Meringolo became a member of the OAH’s standing committee on public history a short while later, which raised questions about which organization should take the lead in developing and promoting guidance. Should the OAH assume that role, or should NCPH? Or would a partnership be desirable? After considerable discussion, the NCPH board of directors decided that NCPH should take the initiative to begin the process and asked its Curriculum and Training Committee to prepare a best practices document. Jon Hunner of New Mexico State University and I wrote an initial draft in December 2014 and January 2015. The document was reviewed by the full committee and also by Cebula,


22 The case statements are available at http://ncph.org/phc/prototype-library/02-12-2013/.
Meringolo, and Taylor. In the weeks before the 2015 NCPH meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, Hunner and I prepared a revised draft and readied it for distribution. We made copies available at the annual breakfast for public history educators and invited comments from everyone present. A post published on History@Work on June 3, 2015, introduced the document to broader audiences and encouraged readers to submit comments. Suggestions trickled in throughout the summer. All of the comments expressed strong enthusiasm for the initiative. Most offered suggestions for improvement and some made minor criticisms, but all found the range of topics addressed appropriate and the guidance sound.23

The Curriculum and Training Committee conducted a final round of review in September and October and then forwarded the document to the NCPH board of directors. In February 2016, Stephanie Rowe, NCPH interim executive director, returned the document to us with suggestions for revision. Board members had discussed the document in detail and, although generally receptive, wished to see additional guidance incorporated. Specifically, the board urged that the document encourage academic institutions to consult with practitioners before offering public history training and to highlight the competitiveness of the public history job market. The committee viewed these recommendations as useful and consistent with the document’s overall goals. The committee also approved language suggested by the board in regard to both points. The committee immediately returned the document to the board of directors, which subsequently provided final approval. NCPH published the document on its website on February 17, 2016.24

As adopted, “Establishing and Developing a Public History Program” has several major emphases, all of which reflect the rising stakes of public history education. It urges institutions to adopt thoughtful and judicious approaches to curricular development, to exercise responsibility toward students and faculty, and to determine how their offerings contribute to public history education and have relevance for the public history marketplace. The document also emphasizes the continuing relevance of lessons drawn from the first generation of graduate programs in public history. The examples established by early programs provide a valuable framework on which to build. None provide clear recipes for future success, nor should they be followed dogmatically. Still, the pioneers of public history education got a great deal right. Their example remains relevant and offers a sound basis for further development and innovation.25

24 “Best Practices in Public History.”
Public history programs with strong records of success are characterized by high levels of academic rigor, a combination of traditional historical training and development of applied skills and knowledge, a balance between theory and practice, and experiences that immerse students in conditions typical of public history practice. Most have well-developed curricula with one or more areas of focus; strong involvement with local, regional, and national professional organizations; requirements for at least one internship; sound and productive relationships with partner organizations and institutions; and interdisciplinary support on campus. Some have dedicated budgets and administrative support; others benefit from workshops and symposia that augment student coursework and engage staff at local institutions and the public. Many programs have applied assistantships that place students at local institutions to gain experience while also receiving financial support. In short, the best programs have earned their success. By taking a committed, long-term approach to program development, they have created pedagogical systems that produce graduates with the knowledge and skills needed to compete successfully for jobs at top-tier institutions and grow as professionals over the long term.

The example set by leading programs suggests several priorities for new entrants to public history education. First, institutions will do well to identify and acknowledge their place in the evolving landscape of public history education. As competition for jobs in public history increases, institutions that are frank about what they do and do not offer are best able to serve students, community partners, and practitioners. Two decades ago, most institutions educating public historians offered well-developed programs dedicated to training students for professional careers. With the proliferation of certificate programs and more institutions offering a limited number of public history courses, students have more choices. Greater educational variety is welcome, for it indicates growing appreciation of the skills and knowledge that public historians possess and opportunities in the field outside of full-time employment. At the same time, it places new demands on students, educators, and practitioners. “Establishing and Developing a Public History Program” addresses this reality with recommendations aimed at helping educational institutions understand the opportunities available to them and taking a sound path toward program development.

The best practices document recommends that program development begin by consulting practicing public historians about the regional and national job market. Determining if opportunities exist for trained public historians is a prerequisite for success. Discussions with practitioners should seek to gauge the strength of the job market, identify in-demand skills and expertise, and determine if growth in public history employment is likely.

It is also essential to determine if outside institutions and organizations are willing and have sufficient capacity to host interns and graduate assistants. Public history education relies heavily on community partners. No educational institution can
provide high-quality training without the support of outside organizations. Internships and applied assistantships are widely viewed as crucial to training public historians. Moreover, it can be valuable to the institutions themselves to interact with classes, to undertake collaborative projects, and to seek mutually beneficial opportunities. Without local support, meaningful education will not happen.

Beyond these considerations, educators and educational administrators should pay careful attention to possible areas of specialization. Public history encompasses multiple subfields, and no institution can train students for careers in all of them, or even more than two or three. Many programs concentrate on one or two. Determining what specializations can be effectively supported given faculty expertise, available resources, and the missions and activities of outside organizations is essential.

Overall, the best practices document urges institutions to view program development critically and thoughtfully, with a balance between short- and long-term goals. Too many institutions have entered into public history education hastily, without due consideration of available opportunities and realistic assessments of the demand for public history professionals. Offering a “typical” menu of public history courses is, in many ways, a sign of misguided thinking. Successful programs tend to combine foundational courses with others developed in response to recognized needs and their ability to provide relevant training. This approach matches needs to resources and provides a clear rationale for focused study. Moreover, it is inherently responsive to the needs and priorities of partner institutions.

Above all, the contours of public history education affirm the validity of at least some of the stories shared at conferences in recent years. Some institutions have launched public history programs without adequate forethought, resources, and knowledge. Some have jumped on the public history bandwagon without understanding what good programs offer and what employers expect. In some cases, graduates have struggled to find employment because of inadequate preparation. Moreover, some institutions have seen public history as a way to address declining enrollments or as an easy revenue stream. In order to prevent missteps and mistakes, the best practices document underscores the seriousness of public history as an educational enterprise. Offering public history courses at any level requires resources, and establishing a program with the capacity to train students for successful careers cannot be done on a shoestring budget. Increasingly, MA-level training in public history looks much like PhD programs in history and similar fields. The document thus emphasizes the need for thoughtful, well-informed approaches to program development and appropriate allocation of resources. To do less is irresponsible.

Taking Responsibility for Public History Faculty and Students

A second emphasis of the best practices document is responsibility toward students, faculty, and the field in general. Public history is a small, close-kit realm of historical endeavor. Practitioners, educators, and students have long benefitted from a strong sense of collegiality, generous sharing of information and support,
and an ethos of mutual assistance. These qualities are among the reasons newcomers to annual NCPH meetings routinely rave about the conference experience. They are also a source of tremendous strength. As public history continues to grow and develop, NCPH is committed to ensuring that the field remains welcoming, supportive, and encouraging.

The best practices document includes a number of recommendations aimed at ensuring students and faculty receive the support they need to succeed. First, the document urges institutions to adopt tenure and promotion guidelines that recognize public history scholarship before hiring public history educators.\(^\text{26}\) Although this measure may seem an obvious step toward protecting new hires, it has not always been followed and, in some cases, new faculty have suffered. Second, the document urges institutions to be realistic about public history educators’ workloads. During the early 2000s, as the number of new programs grew, experienced educators quickly recognized that many institutions expected new faculty to earn tenure on the basis of “traditional scholarship” while also carrying out the full range of duties involved in managing an active public history program. Surveying the situation in 2012, Cebula noted, “many new public history professors are being set up to fail.”\(^\text{27}\) The best practices document urges that departments establish clear expectations regarding advising, administration, outreach, and managing student projects. These expectations should be adjusted as circumstances change. Insisting that public history educators continually work on the edge of burnout serves no one’s interests and will damage the field in the long run. Finally, the document urges institutions to take responsibility for student knowledge and expectations.\(^\text{28}\) “Establishing and Developing a Public History Program” urges academic institutions to do their part by being clear about the types of training they provide, whether they offer financial assistance and other forms of support, and how alumni have fared on the job market. Making this information available by way of departmental websites and brochures is essential. The document also recommends that institutions adopt and regularly update mission statements specifying pedagogical and professional goals and main areas of specialization. Many institutions have found a mission statement useful for establishing a clear focus and vision that can be shared with community partners, the public, and prospective students.

Learning the Lessons of Experience

A third major emphasis of “Establishing and Developing a Public History Program” relates to basic principles of public history education. In recent years, some of the

\(^{26}\) Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian and the associated background document.


\(^{28}\) The recently published Public History Navigator empowers prospective graduate students by outlining questions they should ask of any graduate program.
fundamentals developed and articulated by the pioneering generation of public history educators seem to have fallen by the wayside amid the rush to create new programs and enroll students. Although the old ways are not necessarily the best ways, much can still be learned from the origins of public history education. The now-common notion that hiring a new faculty member with expertise in public history is the crucial step for beginning a successful program shows broad misconceptions about public history education and the field in general. The first generation of public history educators took an informed and careful approach to curriculum development. They began by assessing the skills and knowledge used by historians working in nonacademic settings and then considered how students could be trained for such jobs. Next they developed programs dedicated to training historians for careers in government, business, and historical institutions. A balance between theory and practice, interdisciplinary training, internships, and projects undertaken collaboratively with fellow students and working professionals became hallmarks of first-generation programs. So, too, with those that followed. As graduate programs grew in number during the 1980s and 1990s, virtually all showed the influence of their predecessors. Variations appeared, but none deviated significantly from pioneering examples at the University of California at Santa Barbara, the University of South Carolina, Carnegie Mellon University, and Arizona State University.  

Although sheer scale and disparate currents of activity make generalizations about recent developments difficult, in at least some cases institutions have entered into public history education without fully understanding the necessary resources and commitments. The best practices document therefore reaffirms foundational principles and recommends strategies aimed at meeting developing needs. First, it reminds readers that public history is fundamentally interdisciplinary and needs cross-campus commitments to succeed. Although history departments are the appropriate home for public history programs, close relationships with other departments are needed to expose students to perspectives they will encounter in professional practice and to ensure that students understand the core principals of other disciplines. Second, the document urges that department chairs and staff in deans’ offices be involved in curriculum development. Junior faculty do not have the influence needed to compel other departments to offer courses relevant to public historians. Tenured faculty may do only slightly better. Higher-level administrators have a vital role to play in coordinating course offerings. Third, the document reminds readers that training public historians often requires different resources than are typical of graduate history programs. Students involved in exhibit design and production need access to graphic design software, a large-format printer,  

hand and power tools, materials, and a workspace. Historic preservation courses will likely need supplies for fieldwork and access to Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software and training. The fast-growing emphasis on digital history has made access to specialized software and hardware, audio-visual equipment, and recording rooms increasingly important. Few, if any, of these requirements should put public history beyond the reach of most institutions. In many cases, securing access to equipment and facilities already on campus will suffice. Still, public history usually requires a commitment of resources that most graduate humanities programs do not. The needs are real and important and should be addressed in advance.

Treating Adjuncts as Professionals

A final point concerns the longstanding reliance on working professionals to teach public history courses as adjuncts. This practice, as many educators have noted, has strong pedagogical and practical value. Opportunities to learn from experienced practitioners give students direct insight into the day-to-day demands of work in historical institutions. Students develop appreciation for the relationship between theory and practice, knowledge of skills expected by employers, and an understanding of the practical realities of public history employment. In addition, courses taught by working professionals fill important curricular needs without the expense of hiring full-time faculty. Many programs rely on outside instructors out of necessity. Without courses taught by working professionals, students would have fewer options and receive inferior training.

Problems associated with courses taught by working professionals fall into two categories. Inadequate pay relative to qualifications and experience is all too common. Departments have a long history of paying experienced professionals at the same rate as adjuncts hired to teach history survey courses. This shows little appreciation for the deep knowledge and considerable expertise of working professionals and provides limited incentive for them to devote the time and energy needed to ensure successful learning experiences. The vast majority do put in the effort because of their professionalism and commitment to the field, but relying on these qualities to ensure effective instruction is, nonetheless, poor practice. Departments should make committed efforts to compensate outside instructors at rates commensurate with their experience and expertise.

Secondly, departments should take steps to ensure the quality of courses taught by working professionals. Too often, outside practitioners are hired and then left to teach year after year, with limited support and little, if any, feedback. Failure to evaluate such instructors from time to time is inconsistent with practices typically applied to untenured faculty and adjuncts teaching “traditional” history courses. Moreover, it misses opportunities to achieve greater coherence, improved delivery, and more effective assignments. The best practices document thus recommends that departments establish procedures for vetting prospective instructors, approving qualified candidates, and carrying out regular qualitative
review of adjunct-taught courses. It should be noted that these recommendations do not stem from widespread reports of poor-quality teaching but, rather, a seeming disconnect between the importance of adjunct-taught courses and the support and attention they should receive.

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Overall, “Establishing and Developing a Public History Program” is a forward-looking effort aimed at improving public history education across the board. Although inspired by the recent sense of a crisis in the field, it offers guidance that draws upon a long record of public history instruction while accounting for new areas of specialization, an increasingly competitive job market, and rising expectations among public history employers. The document offers recommendations relevant to established and new programs alike. Even highly successful programs will benefit from critical review of existing protocols and new attention to shortcomings. Less-developed programs have ample opportunity to adopt measures that have proven effective elsewhere. Moreover, the comprehensive guidance offered by the document may well inspire further innovation. The opportunity for educators to think critically about the basis of past successes and what new needs require should suggest pedagogical possibilities that deserve exploration. The best practices document offers no easy fixes for under-resourced programs and those founded on flawed assumptions. To the contrary, it underscores the commitments needed for success. In some cases, the document should serve as a wake-up call for institutions whose programs desperately need overhaul or discontinuation. Regardless, “Establishing and Developing a Public History Program” is part of NCPH’s ongoing efforts to ensure continuing growth and success. As an investment in the future of public history, it aims to ensure the quality of the next generation of public historians and their contributions to the field.

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Introduction:

As graduate programs in public history have proliferated, many educators and professionals have become concerned about the quality of training provided and the future of the field. Public history differs from traditional forms of graduate study in its emphasis on skills-focused courses, civic engagement, and interdisciplinarity. These characteristics are well established. Providing high-quality training requires dedicated funding and administrative support, ongoing curricular development, and partnerships with outside organizations. Depending on curricular emphases, it may also require use of specialized resources and facilities. In addition, administrative practices at the department and college level may need to be modified to meet program needs.

Successful public history programs are distinguished by well-developed curricula; strong relationships with community partners; robust internship programs; clearly-specified areas of specialization; involvement with local, regional, and national organizations; and extracurricular events that promote professional dialogue and civic engagement. Specializations should be tailored to local strengths. A museum studies concentration, for example, is unlikely to be effective without museums in the immediate area that are willing to host interns and undertake collaborative projects. Successful programs use institutional strengths and community partners to their advantage. Program development is undertaken with involvement of department chairs, academic deans, and college-level curriculum committees. Outreach, including coordination of workshops and special events, is undertaken mainly by administrative staff at the department and college level.

The following guidelines are intended for use by department chairs and academic administrators responsible for public history programs. They enumerate practices that have proven effective at well-respected programs and have produced strong records of student placement, faculty productivity, and community engagement.

Recommendations:

1. Institutions are encouraged to adopt tenure and promotion guidelines that recognize public history scholarship before hiring public historians as faculty members. Collaborative work (including projects undertaken with students); creation of museum exhibits; nominations to the National
Register of Historic Places and local landmark registers; and digital history projects should count as scholarship. Post-publication peer review is common in public history and should be specifically acknowledged. Institutions are strongly encouraged to adopt the recommendations of “Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian” (see http://ncph.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/Engaged-Historian.pdf).

2. Institutions considering development of a public history program are urged to begin the process by reaching out to practicing public historians both within and outside the university. This outreach should entail speaking to non-faculty historians who work both in the local community as well as non-academic historians who work in communities across the nation. This outreach should be focused on (1) assessing the potential job market (both locally and nationally), (2) determining the possibility of internships (both locally and nationally), (3) determining the kinds of skills that non-academic historical organizations seek in potential hires, and (4) gauging the ability of community partners to fund graduate assistantships. (Most public history programs make a distinction between assistantships and internships. Assistantships—whether teaching assistantships in the classroom or public history assistantships in a local agency or institution—may offer relevant experience, but are primarily designed to provide financial support to graduate students. Internships, which may be either paid or unpaid, are primarily designed to provide hands-on professional experience.)

3. Institutions considering development of a public history program are urged to consider cluster hires because of the multiple areas of public history specialization. While a single faculty member can offer courses in public history, it is not realistic for one person to teach in multiple areas of specialization, let alone do so while also carrying out administrative duties, community engagement, and scholarship.

4. Programs should adopt and regularly update a mission statement that specifies (1) a definition of public history appropriate to the institution and the local community, (2) pedagogical and professional goals, and (3) main areas of specialization. Mission statements focus institutional efforts and set expectations for students, faculty, and community partners. Programs should be forthright about the types of training provided. Because public history encompasses a wide range of specializations, no program can realistically offer training in all areas of practice.

5. Because many public history programs rely on adjuncts to teach specialized courses and electives, departments should adopt policies for hiring adjunct instructors that recognize the accomplishments, expertise, and pedagogical authority of these established professionals. Professionals from local institutions are often excellent instructors because of their experience and ongoing involvement in programing and administration, but it is important
not to assume that all local professionals are willing or able to take on teaching work. Departments should therefore begin their planning by speaking to public historians in the local community to determine their level of interest in serving as adjunct faculty; this information should be used to inform the structuring of any tenure-track hires. Departments should establish procedures for vetting prospective instructors, approving qualified candidates to teach, and undertaking qualitative review of adjunct-taught courses. Pay for adjuncts should be commensurate with professional qualifications and public history experience, not based on the too-often minimal stipends paid to adjunct instructors for traditional history survey courses.

6. Public history graduate students should be funded on a par with graduate students in “traditional” fields. Dedicated funding for public history students is recommended. In determining how students will be supported, programs should seek to match funding with students’ academic and professional goals. In general, public history students will benefit from assistantships at local historical institutions more than teaching assistantships. Assistantships hosted and supported in part by partner organizations are especially valuable. Outreach should be done to determine whether local institutions and organizations possess funds that would make these partnerships viable. Because history departments that offer the PhD often exclude MA students from funding altogether—or fund them at lower stipends—securing adequate funding for public history students may be an enormous challenge at some institutions. Those seeking to establish or build public history programs may have to argue that departments and institutions must re-think how they assign funding and reserve some financial resources for MA students. This is a tough sell because departments usually do not value the success of their MA students in the same way that they value the success of their PhD students (although a comparison of placement rates can be a revealing and effective counter-argument). Another way to make the case is to argue that an MA in public history is, for most graduate students, a terminal degree like an MFA or a JD.

7. Similarly, before the creation of a public history program, outreach should be done to determine whether local institutions and organizations want and have the ability to host and supervise interns. Assessments of these partnerships with local institutions should be done with an understanding that local institutions and organizations may be unable to host interns every semester.

8. Programs should secure commitments from other departments for courses that contribute to the public history curriculum. Many programs rely on courses offered by other departments for electives and required courses. Ensuring that such courses are offered regularly is essential. Department chairs, deans, and college-level committees should participate in
coordinating course offerings. Individual faculty members, especially junior faculty, are poorly positioned to secure commitments from outside departments.

9. Departments should establish clear expectations for developing and maintaining relationships with community partners. Determining who will handle such responsibilities and what community partnerships are intended to achieve is essential. If public history faculty bear primary responsibility, the time and effort involved should be accurately assessed and counted toward annual workloads. Departments should set realistic expectations to ensure that partnerships are well supported and to avoid overburdening staff and faculty.

10. Departments should be realistic about admissions and enrollments. The advising responsibilities of public history faculty should be commensurate with those of other faculty members, taking into account the differing needs of public history and “traditional” students. Admissions should be based partly on faculty capacity in order to avoid overcommitment. In addition, departments should recognize that advising may assist in integrating public history into the overall curriculum. In many cases, public history students do not need to be advised by public history faculty; other faculty members may have sufficient expertise. In such cases, assigning public history students to advisors who are not primarily public historians will assist in minimizing distinctions between public history and “traditional” students.

11. Public history programs require dedicated administrative support and budgets. Travel expenses, professional memberships, and costs for class projects and activities are standard. These should be anticipated and incorporated into annual planning. Budget requirements will vary depending on the size of the program and other factors. At a minimum, allotments should be made for (1) student funding, (2) travel and expenses associated with applied projects, (3) professional memberships, and, if appropriate, (4) hosting workshops, conferences, and community forums.

12. Programs should secure and maintain resources and equipment needed for areas of specialization. A concentration in museums studies, for example, will require use of exhibit design and construction facilities. A concentration in digital history will require access to computer equipment, software, and information technology support. Programs should secure required facilities, equipment, and supplies before advertising and enrolling students in specializations.

13. Departments should work actively to integrate public history into departmental and institutional cultures. Dividing students into “traditional” and “public history” categories, even rhetorically, invites unnecessary tension and conflict. A culture of mutual respect that recognizes all types of historical practice as valuable and emphasizes difference rather than hierarchy and relative prestige is recommended.
14. Programs should lead in articulating the value and relevance of history. Public history training should require students and faculty to consider the value of history and become skilled in explaining its significance in contemporary life. Significance, in this sense, should include creation of new knowledge and applied uses, including independent thinking, nurturing personal identity, developing strong and resilient communities, making informed decisions, and inspiring leadership.