



## Best Practices in Public History

### *Public History Internships*

Prepared by the NCPH Curriculum and Training Committee<sup>1</sup>, May 2008  
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#### **Introduction:**

Internships are an important part of public history education that allow students to gain new insights into the nature of public history practice by engaging in meaningful work under the mentorship of experienced and knowledgeable public history professionals. Successful internships provide students with work experience combined with structured opportunities to reflect on their activities and connect their practical experience with the skills and knowledge gained in their public history training.

Because internships are offered for college credit, public history internships should be designed with clear educational objectives, and on-site work should be accompanied by rigorous supplemental reading and writing assignments appropriate to college-level coursework. Faculty members supervising internships should utilize appropriate methods to evaluate student interns and to determine whether or not students have met the course's educational objectives.

While internships are first and foremost intended to educate public history students, it is important for programs to remember that internships are partnerships between students, public history programs, and the sites hosting interns. No two internships will be exactly alike, so it is vital that faculty, students, and on-site staff who will be supervising interns take the time to discuss the process and to establish clear expectation about what will take place during an internship. Internships should be designed to balance the needs and goals of these partners, and it is the responsibility of public history programs to ensure that both students and internship sites are well informed about what is expected from a successful internship. Once an internship begins, it is vital for student interns, faculty, and on-site supervisors to maintain open lines of communication in order to address problems should they arise.

While it is expected and desirable that programs will shape internships to meet their unique missions and pedagogical goals, the NCPH would like to recommend the following characteristics as defining "best practices" for internships undertaken as part of public history programs.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 1) Nature of work: Internships should engage students in professional-level work that employs their public history training, strengthens their skills, encourages collaboration and teamwork, and enriches their understanding of how public history methods are applied in practice. Such work should be performed under the supervision of experienced public history professionals willing to share their knowledge and insights with student interns. Additionally, students should have the opportunity to produce a significant work product exemplifying their internship experience.
- 2) Pay for Students Conducting Internships: Recognizing the value of public history work and the skills possessed by students, every effort should be made to see that interns receive compensation for their work commensurate with the qualifications required for a position.
- 3) Internship Agreements: Before an internship begins, it is desirable that the student intern, the on-site internship supervisor, and faculty internship supervisor agree to a clear set of guidelines

for the internship. These should specify the conditions of employment; the educational objectives of the internship; and methods that will be used by both the faculty member and on-site supervisor for evaluation. This may take the form of informal letters of agreement, or a more formal written contract signed by all parties, but the parameters of the internship should be placed in writing and approved by all parties before the internship begins. Public History programs may also find it useful to provide both students and sites hosting interns with printed information explaining the role of internships within their curriculums and the academic requirements for student internships.

- 4) Site Supervisors: Internships should be supervised at their internship site by individuals with sufficient training or experience to ensure that interns are exposed to methods and procedures that are consistent with the best practices in their field. Supervisors should be encouraged to meet regularly with interns to answer questions, to provide feedback on their work, and to provide mentorship.
  - 5) Faculty Internship Supervisors: Internships should be supervised by faculty members who are knowledgeable about the field of public history and who can appropriately evaluate all of the components of an internship. Faculty members who are responsible for arranging and supervising interns should have that work counted as part of their regular teaching load.
  - 6) Regular Communication: Efforts should be made to maintain regular contact during the internship between the faculty internship supervisor, the intern, and the on-site supervisor. If possible, it is desirable to provide student interns with opportunities during the internship to share their experiences with faculty and other student interns and to reflect on how the internship experience connects to their coursework and issues of public history theory and practice. This can take many forms, including face-to-face meetings or virtual discussions using distance education technologies (e.g.: blogs, chat-rooms, instant messaging, message boards, video conferencing).
  - 7) Evaluation: All internships should include evaluation methods that allow institutions to determine that students have met the educational objectives of the internship. Evaluation methods and procedures should be clearly defined at the outset of the internship and should include written input from on-site supervisors. Interns should be given an opportunity to discuss their evaluations with both their faculty internship supervisor and their on-site supervisor. After the completion of an internship, students and on-site internship supervisors should be asked to evaluate the internship experience and to identify areas for future improvement. These surveys should be used for enhancing future internship experiences as well as for indentifying sites that may not be appropriate for hosting future interns.
  - 8) Use of Interns to Replace Paid Staff: Work performed by interns should supplement the existing staff of an institution, or provide assistance to institutions that do not have paid staffs. Interns should not be used to replace work normally done by a paid staff member.
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