



**THE PUBLIC HISTORY NAVIGATOR:  
HOW TO CHOOSE AND THRIVE IN A  
GRADUATE PUBLIC HISTORY PROGRAM**



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This guide is divided into two sections. The first focuses on identifying and choosing a high-quality graduate program to fit your interests and career goals. The second focuses on the experience of graduate school itself, with tips on how it is different than college and how you can thrive as a grad student.

## SECTION 1: CHOOSING A PROGRAM

“Public History” is putting history to work in the world. It is a large field that encompasses every profession connected to history outside of a classroom (and sometimes even in a classroom). Public historians are consultants, archivists, preservationists, museum professionals, researchers, documentary editors, and more. A public history program teaches students to be historians then provides opportunities to develop the skills of applying that knowledge and engaging with community members.



The Jenks Society for Lost Museums. Courtesy of the Brown University Public Humanities program.

### Finding the Right Fit

This publication offers suggestions for finding the right public history graduate program for you. We encourage you to use this guide in conjunction with the [National Council on Public History \(NCPH\) Guide to Public History Programs](#). Together they will help you decide what public history programs most interest you! Remember there is no one size fits all. The best program is the one that aligns with your personal goals and interests. You can also use the hashtag [#PHNavigator](#) to follow relevant discussions on Twitter or let us know how you used this guide.

## WHERE TO START?

The field of public history is wide ranging with dozens of specific lines of work from which to choose. This is both exciting and empowering, but can also be daunting when you are looking at schools and feel like you have to decide where to focus. In order to bring clarity to your own public history path, it is important to identify your unique interests, abilities, and career goals.

### Explore Your Options

Knowledge is power, so familiarize yourself thoroughly with the field of public history and what it entails. Browse through course listings at different universities; read job titles and descriptions on the websites of organizations such as [NCPH](#) and the American Association for State and Local History ([AASLH](#)); and invest in some high-quality public history literature that will give you exposure to the field. Goodreads, a book recommendation website, has some great suggestions [here](#). Once you have a clear understanding of the range of options open to public historians, you can reflect on which direction is most in line with your abilities and interests, and move forward accordingly.



Eastern Illinois University student at the Lincoln Log Cabin Historic Site Harvest Frolic.

### Identify Skill Sets

What skills and tasks do you excel in and enjoy the most? Talk to your current employers or professors in history, public history, or museum courses, and any other mentors you may have, and ask them to tell you what they see as your biggest strengths and talents. Think about your personality, too. Do you like to work as a member of a team, or do you prefer more autonomy? Use the feedback you get to figure out where

and how in the field of public history you can apply your strengths and to determine the arenas in the field in which you are most likely to thrive.

### Ask about Career Paths

While speaking with current professors or professional contacts in the field, you can also ask them to give you insight into what their career path has been like, in order to get an idea of where established professionals start and how work in the field progresses. Asking for an informational interview can be very helpful. The 2002 publication *Careers for Students of History* is a bit dated now, from the standpoint of the digital revolution, but gives useful outlines of career paths and short biographical sketches of public historians.

### Identify General Career Goals

Before trying to concretely figure out if you want to be a curator, educational programmer, oral historian, or other specific title in the field, identify general career goals in stages. Where do you see yourself during the first year or two after grad school? Five years, ten years? Do you expect to be employed full time right away, or do you want to complete a series of fellowships or travel abroad to do contract work? Do you want a job with a clearly defined workday, or would you prefer more fluidity between work and the rest of your activities?

### Be Realistic

Make sure you set yourself up for success by setting achievable and reasonable goals and expectations for yourself during and after graduate school. Look into hiring and promotion timelines in a range of public history jobs, find out what the experience requirements usually are for entry-level jobs, and examine expected salary ranges. Knowing these things can equip you with information you need to set reachable and productive goals for yourself as you begin your career.

### Examine Your Passions outside of Your Role as a Professional

Really reflect on and try to identify what interests you as a consumer. Attend museums, historic homes, park programming, or research workshops as a regular member of the public, and find out what makes you passionate or what you enjoy the most or thrive at. Focus on the areas that draw you in, in normal contexts, because those are more likely to be a good alignment for you in a career context.



Western University public history student intern for the Ontario Heritage Trust.

## CONSIDER TYPES OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS

### Public History

Public history is an inclusive term, and if you do decide to join the field, you will find that its meaning is often a topic of debate. [There](#) is the definition of public history on the NCPH website, which is a good starting point. At its simplest, it is facilitating and understanding the way the public interacts with history. This can include museums, historic sites, oral history, etc. Most public history programs will incorporate traditional history courses with public history courses, as well as instruction in theory. Public history courses may either focus on the theoretical foundations of public history and/or the practical skills necessary to practice history at a museum or historic site. Some programs require a thesis, a capstone project, or exit examinations. How this division is handled will differ from program to program. What works best for you may depend largely on your ultimate goal(s). Many public history programs will also offer students the opportunity to earn a concentration in a subfield, such as historic preservation, museum studies, oral history, or archival management. Consider your responses to the exercises described in the previous section as you learn about program options.

## History

A traditional history master's degree program will focus on historiography and developing research skills within a particular area of focus (such as women's history, early American history, etc.) You may or may not have the opportunity to take courses in public history, but generally a traditional history degree does not provide the same opportunities to learn public history skills as studying in a formal public history program. That said, the specific fields or emphases that traditional history programs offer are useful to public history activities. Some history master's programs do include the option to get a certificate in public history. In addition, the exposure to a variety of research methods, learning to formulate an argument, and engaging with fellow historians are also valuable skills in the public history field.

## Museum Studies

The field of museum studies is sometimes referred to as museology and encompasses both the practical skills that are necessary to run museums as well as the theoretical study of museums. Museum studies is not necessarily specific to history museums (there are science and art museums, for example) but instead teaches general skills including curatorial practice, educational programming, technology, conservation, and preservation. There are master's programs as well as certificate programs in museum studies. Depending on your career interests, it may make sense to explore earning a history master's with a certificate in museum studies, or a master's in museum studies, with internships and capstone projects focused on history museum work. The important point is that a degree in museum studies is very different from a degree in public history. Learn the differences, and choose the right fit for you.

## Historic Preservation

Historic preservation focuses on places and objects. It is an interdisciplinary field that can be studied and practiced from a variety of perspectives: through a public history program, a college of architecture, or a school of planning or even design. Some programs focus more on National Register of Historic Places projects or cultural landscapes. Others center on conservation of building materials or offer courses on historical interior design. Ideally, a historic preservation program will offer a variety of these project opportunities. The [PreserveNet website](#) provides a helpful listing of current preservation

programs. You should be aware, though, that programs have to pay to be on this list, and therefore it may not include all of them. If you are interested in being trained first and foremost as a historian, while also learning the skills of historic preservation, you are probably most interested in a public history program based in a history department.



University of West Virginia public history students employed by the Monongalia County Courthouse learn about techniques for document conservation.

## Archives and Libraries

Skills and knowledge of archival processes can be very beneficial to public historians. However, if you want to specifically pursue a career in archives or libraries, then a master of library science (MLS) degree is almost always required, especially in the United States. If you are considering a program and/or career outside of the United States, it is important to look into the customary requirements in that particular country. Many public history programs include dual MLS options or archives specializations. If you are looking to be a librarian or archivist with a strong knowledge of history and historical research, a public history program paired with archives classes or an MLS degree could be the right choice for you. A strong historical background will be invaluable as you assist your patrons and give context to collections. The [Society of American Archivists](#) (in Canada, the [Association of Canadian Archivists](#)) is a good place to find more information and resources on archival training.

## Digital History

Digital tools and training are now essential for any type of history graduate degree. Certifications and graduate

programs are emerging in the newly evolving field of digital history (often termed “digital humanities”), which focuses on the integration of information technology and humanities. Even if you do not want to pursue such a specialized area of study, skills in digital media are increasingly important to public history agencies. Not only is being able to navigate the world of online research a must for public history students, it is also necessary to be familiar with skills such as producing online exhibits, conducting oral histories, managing digital archives, and utilizing social media. Consider how well a program will give you the digital tools you need to work in your desired area of public history. Does a program include a digital historian on its faculty or offer courses in digital theory? Look for programs that either incorporate digital history into courses or offer classes that focus on specific digital skills.

## BEFORE APPLYING

There are many excellent programs in the field of public history, and more continue to emerge, so an important point of focus when you apply to graduate school should be identifying which programs are a good fit for you both personally and professionally. It is also important to consider finances and the location of the school. Again, the information provided in the [NCPH Guide to Public History Programs](#) provides a head start on many of the previous and following questions. Some tips for assessing your fit with a graduate program appear below.

### Speak or Meet Directly with the Program Director

Contact program directors and ask to meet with them one on one, in person (if you are within traveling distance), at a conference, or via phone or video chat. Ask questions such as those suggested in the “More Questions to Consider” section later in this guide.

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

Not only can students give you an honest and realistic perspective about what going through a specific program is like academically, they can also give you insight into the atmosphere in the program among students and between students and faculty. These dynamics can be just as important to your success in a graduate program as the academic factors, so it is good information to have. Feel free to look up the program on

various online platforms. What are the students talking about on social media?



Students at grand opening of Museo Urbano. Courtesy of the University of Texas at El Paso.

### Research the Course Listings

See what specific classes a program offers, and ask yourself which programs have courses that will allow you to gain both content knowledge and skill in the specific parts of the field in which you are interested. Does a given program have classes that will train you in a way that will help you get to your next career goal? Which program is most likely to help you network in the parts of the field in which you are most interested? You may even ask professors in the programs if they would be willing to share a sample syllabus with you for some of the classes. If you plan to visit a campus during the school year, ask if you can sit in on a course.

### Consider Finances

As much as we wish it were not the case, finances are a huge consideration when making educational decisions. Research financial options at each university (are there grants, assistantships, or tuition waivers?) and see if you can rule out any schools early in the decision process because they simply are not realistic or feasible for you.

### Reflect on Location

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

are good things to consider early on. As many programs have deep relationships with local organizations, it may also be a good idea to consider where you would like to eventually live and work when choosing a program. Even if you don't think you want to have a career in the location where you attend graduate school, it's always a good experience to live in another part of the country from where you grew up or went to college.

### Look at Professors' Research and Career Interests

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

## WHAT WE WISH WE'D KNOWN BEFORE GOING TO GRAD SCHOOL!

### OTHER TIPS AND TRICKS

#### What Do Programs Look for in Potential Students?

Public history programs across the country vary in coursework, requirements, and experiences; however, they all look for similar qualities among their prospective students. Graduate school is quite the undertaking. As an undergraduate student, sometimes you hear people describing graduate school as a more intense version of undergraduate coursework. While in some ways that may be true, it is also misleading. In

general, the quality and quantity of work expected from you is so much beyond what you did in undergraduate classes, that, looking back, you will hardly be able to compare the two. You must be internally motivated and try not to procrastinate.

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

#### Public history experience

Internships are a great way to gain some experience and to learn what the field is really like. Interning can help you gain insights into certain careers and get a feel for those that really interest you (or those that, after further exploration, do not). It also creates great networking opportunities for future job references. There are many public history skills you can learn on the job, rather than in a classroom. Internships are a great way to do this, and you should not wait for graduate school before taking advantage of this opportunity. Finding a paid internship would be ideal, but be aware that many internships, especially for undergraduates, remain unpaid. Even so, you should work with your undergraduate advisor to try and earn credit hours for your internship experience.



Installation of exhibit at Jekyll Island. Courtesy of Middle Tennessee State University.

Volunteering a few hours a week, or even a month, can go a long way toward showing the graduate school selection committee your dedication to the field. Most

public history institutions or cultural organizations run partially on volunteer labor. Volunteering somewhere can be a great opportunity to try out a new kind of public history job and open your eyes to various kinds of work in the field.

### *Demonstrated success in undergraduate coursework*

You should be able to demonstrate the successful completion of your undergraduate program. If you did not do so well in an accounting course or if chemistry got the best of you, that is okay. We all have strengths and weaknesses. If it is just a few classes bringing your overall grade point average down, be sure to highlight your excellent GPA in your major in your cover letter. However, if it is upper-level courses in your history-related major that bring down your GPA, you may want to reconsider graduate school at this time. Maybe work on your employment record and public history experience for a year or two and apply then.

### *Letters of recommendation*

Letters of recommendation are an essential part of your application. It can be tempting to ask certain superstar professors to write you a letter, and if you know them personally, they are a great choice. If you hardly talked to them or don't have a positive relationship, then that person is not the best candidate to write you a letter. Remember that an academic department is principally concerned with your ability to complete the degree. While it is fine to include an additional letter from a workplace supervisor attesting to your performance there, most admissions committees want information first and foremost on your academic promise and ability to handle the rigors of graduate school. Choose your letter writers carefully, and know that these letters could disclose some red flags depending on what is said and what is left out about you as a student. Some programs even ask your recommenders to rate your personality, maturity, and ability to communicate.

Your letter may gain particular notice if a professor writes about you handing in your projects on time, finding internships/volunteer opportunities on your own, going the extra mile, etc. A successful graduate student has to be self-motivated. Ideally, your letters will mention some of these things about you. If you think you might take a few years between degrees, ask professors to write you a letter of recommendation before you graduate, to keep on file. If you've already taken some time off, reconnect with your

former professors and bring them up to date on your experiences and aims before they write you a letter. However, if you have been out of school for many years and feel that you can't ask professors, it is worth speaking to your boss or coworkers about what skills from your current job would translate to the academic world. For example, have you managed any large projects, do your job duties include research, or do you collaborate with colleagues on a regular basis?

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

In today's economy, graduate school may sound like a good way to postpone the job hunt or delay repaying student loans. However, graduate school is a tremendous financial and personal commitment that shouldn't be done on a whim. You need to reassure graduate programs that you are serious and committed, which should be evident in your reasoning for wanting to enter their particular program.

Proofread your personal statement. Share it with your recommenders, and ask them to look over it for you. If you are applying to multiple programs, make sure you tailor each personal statement to that particular program. Do not simply change the name of the school. Though these elements of an application are referred to as "personal" statements, it is often better to think of them as "professional statements." It's usually best to avoid narratives about grandparents, childhood encounters with museums, and your general "passion" for history. The best statements convey what it is about the past that you find most compelling or how you see yourself engaging with history in the future, what your career aims are, and why the program in question is the best place for you to obtain the specific training you need to reach those goals.

### *Demonstrated research and writing skills*

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

### *GRE scores*

Your scores on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) are important (and expensive), so study! While most

humanities majors have a solid vocabulary and writing abilities, many haven't taken math classes since their freshman year of college. As the quadratic formula isn't something you use every day, make sure you brush up on the basic formulas. You don't have to rock the math section, but you do have to make sure that it doesn't send a red flag.

GRE scores sometimes help decide whether or not a program funds you. You are in competition with everyone applying to your program or maybe all the graduate programs at the campus. Therefore, if you want a better shot at having your graduate school costs funded, make sure that you do study. There are a range of resources available to help. Remember that scores do expire, so if you already took the test, make sure the scores are still valid.

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

Public history cohorts are comprised of a diverse group of people. Making public history your career later in life is common. If you have been out of school for years, make sure you especially study for your GRE and maybe take a few courses at the university you want to attend before you even apply. That will help you get your feet wet in the academic world again and allow you to know a few professors who can potentially write you up-to-date and relevant letters of recommendation.

Also, you chose to make a career switch for a reason; probably you have participated in the field through volunteering or serving on a committee, board, etc. You have relevant experiences, so make sure you highlight these and that you brainstorm ways to make your first career relate to the public history world. Some public history programs prefer second-career students to those fresh out of college.

## **MORE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

These are questions that you can ask and think about when you review program websites, talk with program directors, and/or visit campuses. Some of these are discussed in depth later in section two of this report, "Thriving as Public History Graduate Students." You may not be able to learn the answers to all of these questions, but considering them, balanced against your own goals, can help you choose a graduate program.

## **What Is the Average Time It Takes Candidates to Graduate?**

Be sure to check out the track records of the programs you are considering. Coursework may take one or two years. Then there may be an internship, capstone project, or thesis. Some programs may take one year for people to graduate,; others may take three or four years, while some people never graduate. Most M.A. programs in public history are two years in length. If you are fortunate enough to be offered funding, the funding package may be limited to the standard time-to-degree for the program.

## **What Is the Average Amount of Debt Students at This Program Incur?**

Public history isn't a field you enter to get rich. It is essential to make a cost-benefit analysis by comparing how much you will earn in the future against how much debt can you afford to take on now. This is an example of a question that may be difficult to answer, as it often isn't tracked. However, it is essential to consider the financial implications and compare programs to see what makes sense for you personally. What type of funding is available at the programs you are looking at? How much is an average credit hour? See more on cost-benefit analysis in section two of the guide.



American University students pause in moving a portrait of a judge during a project for a federal courthouse.

## **What Is the Starting Pay of Entry-Level Jobs in Your Desired Field?**

Start looking at job advertisements *now* for the kinds of positions you want. See what they ask for and then find out if the program will help you gain those skills. Use those ads and look at how much entry-level jobs pay. "Salary surveys" offered by professional associations can provide helpful information. This is important when considering the aforementioned student loan debt and knowing what to expect for future advancement in the field.

## What Are the Job Placement Rates of a Program?

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



West Virginia University Historic Site Interpretation class visits Washington's Headquarters at Valley Forge.

## How Much Practical Experience Does a Program Offer?

Look for programs that integrate hands-on practical experience with classroom learning. Is there an internship requirement? Are students funded through graduate assistantships in public history agencies, not just as teaching assistants in history courses? Do students take on real-world projects within their classes? Can you write an “applied” thesis or do a capstone project? Does the curriculum take advantage of local resources and community partnerships? What kinds of projects have the faculty worked on?

## What Is the Sense of Community like among Students in the Graduate Program?

Are students supportive of each other? Does the program help first years acclimate to graduate life? How is the overall stress level and mental health in the program? You might find talking to former or current students will give you the best insight into these issues.

## LIST OF RESOURCES

NCPH is your “go-to” organization for public history resources. Check out our [website](#) and [blog](#) to get a feel for the field of public history.

### Public History Information

National Council on Public History. *Guide to Public History Programs*. <http://ncph.org/cms/education/graduate-and-undergraduate/guide-to-public-history-programs/>.

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Kuther, Tara. “What Do Grad Schools Look for in Students?” *About Education*. <http://gradschool.about.com/cs/miscellaneous/a/want.htm>.

Schulz, Constance, Page Putnam Miller, Aaron Marrs, and Kevin Allen. *Careers for Students of History* (2002). <http://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-resources/careers-for-students-of-history>.

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### GRE Preparation

Educational Testing Service. *GRE Information*. <http://www.ets.org/gre>.

World Food Programme. *Free Rice*. <http://freerice.com/#/english-vocabulary/1504>. *Vocabulary practice*.

### Graduate School Personal Statements

Purdue University. “Writing the Personal Statement.” *Online Writing Lab*. <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>.

## SECTION 2: THRIVING AS PUBLIC HISTORY GRADUATE STUDENTS

### GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Choosing the best public history program for you is the first step in the journey to a rewarding profession. While finishing a graduate program fulfills certain career requirements, a diploma alone does not guarantee a job! Personal effort put into the process, both within the program and beyond it, ultimately equips you with skill sets desirable to employers. Every program and degree includes certain requirements, but exactly what students get out of graduate school is ultimately up to them. Just as undergraduate courses required more student initiative than high school, so graduate school will place even more responsibility on students. Advisors and professors will certainly be there to aid you, but graduate students must take the lead in shaping their education and developing their skill sets.

Following are several suggestions for going the extra mile and ensuring a successful graduate experience. This is a brief guide, with some things to consider. Be sure to check out the links we've put at the end, which provide even more tips!

### GAINING PUBLIC HISTORY EXPERIENCE

#### Courses with Real-World Application

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

Independent studies may be another way to pursue public history experience if a program offers limited courses or if you have found a project that you want to explore in depth. For example, you might use an independent study to do background research for an exhibit with a partner organization. Or you may use it

as an opportunity to gain a specific skill that is not part of the regular curriculum and that you then showcase in a final product you can list on your résumé. However, you must have departmental approval and a competent mentor, if you want course credit. If working with an outside organization, make sure the terms of your project are clearly communicated. The possibilities are only limited by what you can sell your advisor on.

Public history is inherently interdisciplinary, so it is entirely appropriate to take a course outside of your department, if permitted. Students may consider Geographic Information Systems (GIS), business or public administration, historical archaeology, architectural history, library science, land-use planning, museum studies, education, recreational tourism, or other classes. However, students will have to clear this with their primary advisor and the professor offering the course. Graduate courses may require prerequisites.

Even in courses without obvious field experience, students should think broadly about how they might apply to public history settings.



University of North Alabama student presents at a joint UNA and Tennessee Valley Historical Society event.

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

Finding the balance between a strong theoretical framework and practical skills is tricky but essential to developing into an effective public historian. Graduate school is your main opportunity to go deeply into certain regions and/or time periods and to learn ways

of thinking that you will apply later on in your career. During school, keep in mind how you would apply this knowledge in the field. Making these connections yourself will help you stand out and gain critical thinking skills. If you're having trouble finding ways to apply these skills to your public history interests, ask a mentor for help. Many professors will be glad to allow public history students to add an additional component to research papers. Remember, you will also have opportunities to perform practical applications through internships, on-the-job training, or professional development.

## Field School

Field schools are group-based learning processes that typically involve traveling to a specific site and working on a project for a set period of time. These are great opportunities to get hands-on experience, for example at an archaeological dig or preservation site. Some programs offer field schools during the summer that are often immersive, fast-paced, and engage with communities. These can be locally or regionally focused or have international reach. Usually, each student performs a duty or is responsible for one aspect of the project.

## Thesis or Final Project

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

At the same time, remember that a thesis is a project with deadlines like any other, and be careful not to get too bogged down in the process. If possible, strategically use your other courses or seminar papers to work toward the historiography, research, and/or writing of your thesis. If this isn't possible, don't sweat it too much; remember that a master's is not a specialist degree and acquiring broad knowledge of history should be one of your goals. Finding a balance between speed and content is key. As James Thurber, one of the most

popular humorists of his time, said, "Don't get it right, get it written." Students seldom think they've done a perfect job, and that is OK. The goal is to earn your degree. The best thesis is a finished thesis.



Public history students from Stephen F. Austin State University cleaning a tombstone during a restoration workshop.

## Internship

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

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

position is paid. Interns should be compensated in some way—either monetarily or in-kind (e.g., housing and travel). Always search for paid work first, and if you can't find a paid (or in-kind) situation that works for you, don't get stuck doing endless volunteering. While volunteer internships are not ideal, supplementing your coursework with some type of real world experience remains a good idea.

In the ideal internship experience, the student learns under the guidance of someone who knows more about the process than the intern does. If you are expected to “provide” the expertise, consider that a red flag. No matter your pay status, make sure that the intern supervisor has an appropriate background and will be a genuine mentor. Good mentoring means assigning projects that support professional growth and match your interests, contributing to your personal professional network, and offering career guidance such as résumé review. This person should be a valuable reference when you leave. Remember, too, that this is a professional experience and that your internship supervisor expects you to do your job and behave professionally. If you aren't sure what that means, ask!

While many public history students go into internships wishing to gain experience in a specific discipline (such as museum studies or historic preservation), do not forget to be open minded and to acquire essential transferable job skills, such as administration, grant writing, customer service, etc. It is a good idea to begin an internship as soon as possible and to try multiple positions in various work environments during the length of your program. Even if you end up working with the same organization, work on different kinds of projects, if you can.



University of North Carolina Greensboro professor and students assembling *Past the Pipes: Stories of the Terra Cotta Community*, 2013 winner of the NCPH Graduate Student Project Award.

## Graduate Assistantships

Some programs offer graduate assistantships to help students pay for their education. These generally require a twenty-hour-per-week work commitment. Many history programs offer teaching assistantships, but some public history programs are able to offer assistantships that are more public history oriented. Either way, teaching assistantships can be valuable exercises in how to present information and understand historical topics. They offer a great way to acquire or hone professional experience while you are in school and help cover some of the expense. Look for programs with regular graduate assistantships that might suit your interests.

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

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Networking

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

If you find someone working a job that you are interested in, ask for an informational interview. This may mean making a cold call or asking a mutual acquaintance for an introduction. Offer to buy this person coffee or lunch. If interviewees are far away, ask for a phone conversation. Be prepared to ask a series of

questions about their jobs and how to get involved in their organizations or line of work. You may ask about their hiring cycle, but do not ask for a job! Always follow up with a thank you note and offer ways that you might be of assistance, either now or in the future. You may want to follow up again in a few months if you are still looking for a job. They may refer you to someone else, and that is how you grow your professional network.

While it is helpful to cast a broad net while networking, it is more important to build quality relationships with people. You need a handful of people in your corner that will pass along opportunities to you or recommend your name to a hiring official.



Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis public history students on historic preservation tour of Monument Circle in downtown Indianapolis.

## Mentors

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

Don't forget about the resources of people further along in the program than you are! It is very rare that you

are the first to encounter a particular difficulty or not get along with a certain professor. Students who have been there longer can help you handle these situations with grace, as well as providing tips on navigating the sometimes confusing program requirements. Don't let all of your free time with other students turn into venting. Some of that is needed (of course!), but find people who work toward solutions. Remember, too, that those who are now your peers may someday be in situations to provide recommendations, whether official or not, for you.

## Conferences

Conferences are a great way to expand your network, build your résumé, and learn about cutting-edge scholarship and practice. Potential employers will likely want to see participation in professional organizations. For emerging professionals, conferences are a great way to get your name out there and engage with others doing similar work. In addition to conferences hosted by NCPH, the [American Association for State and Local History](#) annual meeting is another event that aligns closely with public history and provides an engaging environment for new conference-goers. Check out ways to get involved with regional associations of historians, museum professionals, and archivists. Presenting at conferences can be stressful, but there are many ways to ease into it. First, graduate student conferences are usually "safe" venues for first-time presenters. NCPH's annual meeting is graduate student friendly and offers many ways for students to present their work, such as traditional panel sessions, working groups, or the popular poster session. Conferences also offer lots of ways beyond presenting to get involved and connected in the field, so even if you do not give a presentation, attending has many benefits. Regional conferences are also valuable for networking, especially if you are interested in working in a particular geographic location.

## Developing a "Personal Brand"

Today your online presence plays a critical role in determining your personal brand. Many employers turn to the Internet when hiring for a new position. Public historians on the job market find that having an online presence can help in the search by providing a readily digestible professional version of themselves that they can show future employers. This can be done through a variety of social media websites, including LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, academia.edu, Tumblr,

and Wordpress. Some public historians create online portfolios and use social media accounts to talk about relevant things. Obviously, these accounts need to be professional and kept separate from more personal accounts. However, these are great opportunities for potential employers to see the whole person, and not just a résumé. This is important to keep in mind as you develop a personal brand. Like it or not, most employers will run an Internet search for your name. Do the same now and then and see what comes up. You want to be visible, but also professional.

## WHAT WE WISH WE'D KNOWN IN GRAD SCHOOL!

### OTHER TIPS AND TRICKS

#### What Do Employers Look for?

Many of the specific things employers look for can change. In general, people will want to hire someone with transferable skills. Highlighting these along with your experience is key. On the other hand, employers also want to work with well-rounded, likable people. While in graduate school, through networking, volunteering, internships, and relationships with your peers, try to be easy to work with. Being willing to “go with the flow” and cultivating a positive and helpful work presence can go a long way. This doesn't mean being a pushover; it means listening, responding to needed changes, and doing high-quality work. Practice good communication, written and verbal. Not everyone is outgoing or a “people person,” but the ability to work as part of a team and communicate effectively is a requirement for any job.

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

Honestly, it may take awhile. Anecdotally, the average is about a year. Being limited to a specific location makes this process even more difficult, so try to be as geographically flexible as possible. It is important to keep in mind that jobs today look quite different from our parents' and grandparents' generations. It is very common to have to “cobble” together different incomes until landing that single full-time position. In the meantime, find more paid internships, work two part-time positions, or be open to positions outside your preferred specialization. Do anything you can to continue to gain new skills and experiences. Be ready to be entrepreneurial; you might need to look for ways to help an institution create or maintain

your position. Look for work in a wide range of nonprofit organizations and be open to positions in education, events, or outreach depending on your goals. Nonprofits, corporations, and public agencies all require skills that public historians can provide. Sometimes people find steady work in a field outside of public history and can then afford to do part-time work or volunteer in the field before transitioning into full-time positions. Be flexible and open; this is why cultivating a wide range of skill sets and experience is key.



Western Carolina University students at the Mountain Heritage Center in Cullowhee, North Carolina.

### Cover Letters and Résumé Tips

Be sure to check out the List of Resources later in this section for more complete advice and examples. Don't be too flowery and never apologize or highlight some skill that you don't have. Send your drafts out to several professors and professionals to get their take. Some of the advice might conflict, and that is OK; choose what works best for you. Remember to show the skills that you have through examples. Just saying “I manage people well” doesn't mean anything to potential employers. Saying something like “When working on project x, I coordinated the efforts of y number of people while balancing the budget” shows employers that you manage people well. Most importantly tailor the application documents for each job. When you are ready to send these documents out, if you are emailing

them, it might be a good idea to send the documents as PDFs in order to maintain all of that careful formatting. Though, as always, double check the application preferences and do what they require.

### Getting a Good Reference

Try to hunt for internships and jobs ahead of time. This isn't always possible, but remember that your professor and professional mentors aren't obligated to pull an all-nighter to write you a reference. Anything less than two weeks from when you send the request is a rush job and should be avoided. Acknowledge that when you ask. Ask people with whom you have worked closely and who understand the field.

Make it easy for the folks you want to give you a reference by sending them the job advertisement, your résumé, and your cover letter (both ready to go for this job). Tell them when you will need the letter and if there is anything you'd like for them to emphasize. If you won't need a letter, but the people recommending you may be getting a phone call, still send them all of the above information, and let them know when they might expect a phone call. Most folks are more than happy to provide references, but it is unpaid work on their part. Be sure to thank them!



Youngstown State University public history students visit Italy.

### Mental and Emotional Health

Unfortunately, stress and anxiety are often a common part of graduate school. It is often difficult, but important, to find a way to prioritize different pressures and keep a balanced perspective for your emotional and mental health.

All campuses should offer some sort of counseling

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

Avoid burnout by pursuing interests and hobbies outside of school. Try new things. Actually take time to explore the new city you moved to or pursue other activities. Remember, physical health is tied to mental health. Be kind to your body by eating well and getting enough sleep. Engage in healthy stress relievers like exercising or meditating.

Your fellow graduate students can be a great support group during your program. However, it can be easy to stay wrapped up in school. Talk about things other than school with your cohort! Have a code word for when it's time to change the subject, if you must. (Seriously.) When you look back years later, you won't remember the intense discussions of theses and methodologies but the laughs and fun adventures you had.

### Cost-Benefit Analysis

Graduate school is expensive, and few of us can afford to ignore this practicality. Historians never make the big bucks to justify mountains of debt. Loan money comes fairly easily, but try to get as little as possible. Think carefully about what you really need and what makes the best sense for your financial situation. Very few jobs in public history, even professorships, will pay enough at the outset to help you make much progress on paying these loans. Large loan payments will make those entry-level salaries feel even smaller.

### Navigating Academia

As you know by now, graduate school is just as different from undergraduate as that was from high school. You will hopefully form closer relationships with your professors, which will benefit you both. Some of them may even become your friends, but remember that things don't start out that way. An important part of graduate school is developing your professional communication skills. Approaching email professionally is essential. Follow proper etiquette by including a subject, offering proper salutations, and proofreading your message. When you talk to and email your professors, err on the side of formality unless they



SUNY Brockport student explaining an exhibit he curated to the Dean of Graduate Studies.

ask you to do otherwise. If you need something from a professor, ask clearly, recognize that you're asking for a favor, and give him or her a deadline. Just like you, professors' tasks pile up, and tasks without hard deadlines often get pushed to never. You can be clear and specific while still being courteous. For example, you might say, "I'd like to talk to you about my project. Do you have time on Monday afternoon? If not, when works for you?"

Graduate school is a job, but with significant differences from traditional careers. Use this time to further develop and refine important skills such as time management and multitasking. Remember, you'll need letters of reference from your mentors, supervisors, and professors. Develop professionalism. If you aren't sure how to do those things or aren't sure what works for you, ask a mentor and check out the links we've provided. This also means that you will probably need to explain to family and friends the unique pressure graduate school places on your time. While your schedule may be more flexible than with a traditional full-time job, you will have to set limits in order to be successful. For example, integrate set hours for studying or writing into your daily schedule and stick to it!

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

## LIST OF RESOURCES

Websites like *Inside Higher Ed* and its *GradHacker* blog provide great resources for navigating graduate school.

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## Conclusion

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

## NCPH NEW PROFESSIONAL AND GRADUATE STUDENT COMMITTEE

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