

Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian

A Report

by the Working Group on Evaluating Public History Scholarship

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Current standards for evaluating historical scholarship for tenure and promotion do not reflect the great variety of historical practice undertaken by faculty members, including a growing body of publicly engaged and collaborative scholarship. The work of faculty members pursuing civically engaged and collaborative scholarship is too often overlooked in a tenure process that emphasizes single-authored monographs and articles at the expense of other types of scholarly production. At the same time, tenure guidelines fail to acknowledge the increasing numbers of historians hired by institutions specifically to direct public history programs or to teach as designated public history faculty.

Departments that advertise, interview, and hire candidates on the basis of their public history qualifications and expect those historians to carry out the range of public history activities should regard themselves as contractually obligated to recognize those activities as professionally valid and reward them in the tenure and promotion process. As a matter of equity, then, these departments should also feel obligated to adopt tenure and promotion guidelines that incorporate fair and appropriate means of evaluating public history scholarship and teaching.

It is critical to note that these issues affect not only faculty members in public history—that is, the joint endeavor in which historians and their various publics collaborate in making the past useful to the public—but also those involved in other publicly engaged and collaborative types of scholarship, such as interdisciplinary and digital history projects. Moreover, they potentially affect all faculty members in academic history departments. Publicly engaged projects can bring funding and prestige to departments and fulfill institutional missions. Yet, because tenure and promotion decisions are most often made solely on the basis of published scholarship, many academic historians who may be interested in pursuing publicly oriented projects shy away from such work, fearing that it will not “count” towards career advancement. Therefore, creating equitable ways to assess and credit publicly engaged and collaborative research will not only benefit public historians; such an effort can encourage all interested scholars to pursue such projects with the confidence that their hard work will be rewarded.

This report is the product of the Working Group on Evaluating Public History Scholarship (WGEPHS) convened by the American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians, and National Council on Public History. It is designed to help faculty members, personnel

committees, department heads, deans, and other administrators develop a plan for evaluating historians who do public and collaborative scholarship. Drawing on a survey of existing promotion and tenure guidelines and input from public history faculty members, the report offers suggestions for evaluating public history work as community engagement, scholarship, teaching, and service. It defines a number of best practices and describes possible approaches to the hiring, review, and promotion of publicly engaged historians in the academy.

Existing Tenure Standards

Public history has become professionalized as both a field of study and a field of professional practice. It figures in a growing number of undergraduate and graduate curricula, and many history departments now employ tenured or tenure-track public historians. However, standards for assessing tenure-track public historians for tenure and promotion vary widely. Several four-year colleges and PhD-granting departments have addressed the special problems of assessing tenure standards for public historians. Their solutions offer models that other institutions might consider.

Community Engagement

Community engagement entails an active partnership between scholars and a community for the creation and application of knowledge through teaching and scholarship. Community engagement infuses the work of public historians, but most historians now are doing community-engaged work at some level, bringing their “disciplined learned practice” to interactions with various communities.¹ Giving due weight to community engagement in tenure and promotion decisions, however, requires review by peers familiar with community engagement as well as with the professional standards of the historian. The recognition of community engagement in the tenure process, as it includes professional peer review informed by the community being served, is a critical issue facing public historians in academic departments. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation urge greater support for community engagement in institutional policy and practice.

Scholarship

The American Historical Association’s *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* defines

scholarship as a process, not a product, an understanding now common in the profession. The scholarly work of public historians involves the advancement, integration, application, and transformation of knowledge. It differs from “traditional” historical research not in method or in rigor but in the venues in which it is presented and in the collaborative nature of its creation. Public history scholarship, like all good historical scholarship, is peer reviewed, but that review includes a broader and more diverse group of peers, many from outside traditional academic departments, working in museums, historic sites, and other sites of mediation between scholars and the public.

Teaching

Through internships, collaborative projects with students, and public programs, the public history faculty member’s teaching responsibilities typically extend beyond the classroom and demand additional time and effort. Departmental guidelines for tenure and promotion should recognize and accommodate this reality. How departments do this will vary. At the very least, the reality of the additional time and effort required to teach public history should be factored into research expectations. Those evaluating faculty using the three distinct spheres of scholarship, teaching, and service should consider adjusting upward the weight assigned teaching courses in public history or courses that include a community engagement component. Departments and universities adopting a broader definition of scholarship should consider including certain teaching activities as a form of scholarship, requiring for those activities rigorous documentation and evaluation, including some form of peer review. Any approach to balancing public history teaching and scholarship should consider the missions of the department and its parent institution and the faculty member’s role in fulfilling those missions.

Service

For public historians in the academy, service includes the administrative work necessary to create robust programs and vibrant connections to the community. The many administrative tasks performed by public historians, particularly program directors, should be considered in tenure and promotion decisions. Moreover, as the number of public history programs expands, the position of program director is most often filled by assistant professors carrying unusually heavy service loads for untenured faculty

members. Departments should recognize the work of program directors with workload distribution and course releases for administrative duty.

Recognizing and rewarding publicly engaged scholarship will benefit higher education as a whole. While no single approach can adequately meet the needs of all institutions, the WGEPHS urges history departments and universities to find ways to honor the range of scholarly methodologies employed in the profession.

BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For College and University Administrators

1. Institutions that hire faculty in the field of public history must take account of best practices for evaluating the work of those faculty members.
2. Tenure standards should be calibrated with departmental and institutional values and missions, and work should be valued accordingly. If an institution has stated a commitment to community engagement and public history, that commitment should be reflected in how faculty members are evaluated for tenure and promotion.
3. Departments and universities should look beyond the traditional monograph when evaluating public history creativity and productivity.
4. Workload categories should be rethought in order to give appropriate weight to community engagement and service.
5. Tenure and promotion standards should be clear and consistent from the time of hiring.
6. Those forms of teaching that involve a creation or transformation of knowledge, such as internships and community-based class projects, should be considered and rewarded as a form of scholarship.

For History Department Chairs and Tenure and Promotion Committees

1. Departments should honestly evaluate the demands of running a public history program prior to hiring a new faculty member. If a department hires public history faculty, it should make a commitment to honor good work in that field by ensuring that departmental guidelines for tenure and promotion reward public history scholarship. Tenure and promotion standards should be clear and consistent from the time of hiring.

2. In crafting job descriptions and devising work contracts for positions involving program direction, departments should include administration among the primary duties of the position and assign new faculty members with program administration duties the title of director to formalize their dual status as both faculty members and administrators.
3. Departments supporting public history faculty for promotion and tenure should articulate clearly in letters of support to upper levels in the tenure and promotion decision-making process that the work of public historians meets high standards for scholarly rigor in the profession.
4. Departments and universities should look beyond the traditional monograph in evaluating public history creativity and productivity.
5. Departments holding fast to the traditional model of evaluating faculty using the three distinct spheres of scholarship, teaching, and service should allow faculty members working on publicly engaged scholarship to negotiate their contracts to adjust workload distributions and expectations so that they reflect the nature of public history practice.
6. Other departments may adopt a more holistic definition of scholarship when evaluating the work of public historians. Rigorous documentation and evaluation, including some form of peer review, should be part of that process for all forms of scholarship.
7. Departments should seek to create an appropriate peer-review process that considers work beyond the monograph for publicly engaged scholars.
8. Qualified peer evaluators include professionally trained and professionally active historians working outside the academy.
9. Engagement projects should be valued at all stages of a scholar's career. Historians at the assistant professor level should be encouraged to develop publicly engaged projects with the knowledge that their work will count toward promotion to associate professor. Historians at the associate professor level should be encouraged to continue such engagement as appropriate activity for promotion to full professor.
10. In writing or revising tenure and promotion criteria, departments should expand the

definition of historical scholarship to include the variety of products generated by department faculty members. Departments might list products, venues, and media relevant to tenure decisions; however, the primary criterion should be excellence in historical scholarship and recognition at the regional, national, or international level (depending on the rank for which the candidate is being considered) for the quality of historical work produced.

11. Alternative forms of teaching, such as the establishment and supervision of internships or the planning and management of community-based class projects, should be factored into a faculty member's workload.
12. The establishment and supervision of internships, in particular, should be considered and rewarded as a form of teaching in the traditional evaluation rubric and as scholarship involving the transformation of knowledge through teaching when using a continuum evaluation process.
13. Public history projects with students should be recognized as a form of teaching that typically requires time and effort beyond that of traditional courses. Consequently, it is proper for departments to consider this in determining a faculty member's course load. Departments need to decide if such projects also constitute scholarship based on their own guidelines. Such activity might also be evaluated as civic engagement if the institution includes that category in its evaluation rubric.
14. Public programs that draw on a faculty member's expertise and specialized skills should be recognized as a form of teaching or transformation of knowledge. Inherent in this is the recognition that teaching and the transformation of knowledge often occur outside the traditional classroom.
15. Public history-related teaching activities—be they internships, projects with students, or public programs—should undergo peer review to determine their quality and assure such efforts are appropriately recognized in the evaluation and reward process.

For Historians Seeking Tenure or Promotion

1. Historians must be careful to provide clear documentation of the ways in which their work qualifies as scholarship in the eyes of the historical profession.
2. Publicly engaged historians should work with their departments to establish the criteria by which they will be evaluated for tenure *from the outset*, as part of standard job negotiations.
3. In departments that use the traditional model of evaluating faculty using the three distinct spheres of scholarship, teaching, and service, faculty should negotiate their contracts to adjust workload distributions and expectations so that they better reflect the nature of public history practice.
4. Public history faculty members serving as program directors should receive course reductions if they are to perform their duties and still pursue their own research goals.

Report approved by the OAH Executive Board on April 8, by the NCPH Board of Directors on June 3, and by the AHA Council on June 5, 2010.

¹ American Historical Association, *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct*, January 6, 2005.
<http://www.historians.org/pubs/Free/ProfessionalStandards.cfm> (accessed 10.22.2009).