

Public History Program at UNCW Gets a Revamp

Written by Ms. Kendall C. Rogers
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Until recently, the Masters in Public History program at UNCW consisted primarily of classroom learning. Now the two-year curriculum includes a year of traditional course work followed by a year during which the students engage in applied learning experiences at three different local historical institutions. Dr. Kenneth Shefsiek, a historian of Early America and the director of the Public History Program, believes that the new curriculum will provide an innovative educational experience and attract more students to the program. While there are over a hundred Public History Programs in the U.S., UNCW's new program is highly unusual.

Shefsiek refers to the second year as "history outside the classroom." During this time, students spend three months at each historical institution, where they gain practical experience that will prepare them for their future careers. Each practica focuses on a different sub-discipline of Public History: historic house interpretation at the Burgwin-Wright House, historic preservation at Historic Wilmington Foundation, exhibits and digital history at UNCW Special Collections, archival preservation and collections development at UNCW Archives, museum education at the Bellamy Mansion Museum of History and Design Arts, collections management and education at the Cape Fear Museum of History and Science, and archival management at the New Hanover County Public Library.

The students must complete between 150-170 hours for each practica, which typically amounts to two full days per week. For each practica there is also a defined reading list of professional literature and an individualized project that relates to each institution.

The practica expose the students to a wide variety of skill sets and theoretical knowledge, ultimately helping them decide what specialty they want to pursue. On the other hand, most of the students will start out working at smaller organizations, where they will likely need to wear many hats. With the experience gained from their year of "history outside the classroom," they should be well-prepared to succeed in this type of environment. In addition, their participation in the program should make them more competitive as they enter the job market.

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