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ARTICLE

How to Prepare Faculty and Graduate Students for Public Humanities Leadership

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Abstract

Graduate career development has grown over recent years with increasing interest in public scholarship and career diversity. In interviews with 41 public humanities leaders, participants agreed that public humanities introduces students to various career opportunities through community-engaged work and allows them to develop skills needed for those careers, such as event planning and fundraising. Some participants also noted that career diversity is becoming an important area of public humanities leadership roles. However, participants shared that faculty have not been formally prepared for their public humanities roles, and, in turn, faculty have not been prepared to teach graduate students for public humanities or career diversity. How do faculty prepare students for opportunities when they do not feel prepared for those same opportunities? This piece offers answers to that question.

Keywords: curriculum development; faculty preparation; graduate education; public humanities

Graduate career development has grown over recent years with increasing interest in public scholarship and career diversity. To learn if faculty preparation is keeping up with graduate student interest, we interviewed 41 public humanities leaders who shared that, although career diversity is becoming an important area of public humanities, faculty have not been formally prepared for their public humanities roles, and, in turn, faculty have not been prepared to teach students for public humanities or career diversity. So, how do faculty prepare students for opportunities when they do not feel prepared for those same opportunities? In this piece, we coalesce interview responses with scholarship to answer that question.

As a faculty member who has negotiated a commitment to public engagement with meeting tenure-track requirements, I (Elizabeth) reflected on this question as I prepared a new public humanities graduate course for my department. Nothing obvious in my graduate training prepared me for public work; rather, it was my non-academic work as a veterinary assistant, Emergency Medical Technician, small business owner, and spiritual director that taught me most how to work across contexts. I wondered if other public humanists shared this

experience and how that experience was impacting how faculty were preparing their students for publicly engaged scholarship.

I turned this wondering into a funded, two-year research project. With my research assistant, Rachel., a PhD candidate in Philosophy who held career diversity fellowships previously, we searched for graduate programs in the public humanities with the goal of identifying program directors, deans, and administrators to interview of active programs that offered certificates, masters or PhD degrees, or an emphasis or track in public humanities. Fifty-one programs fit the inclusion criteria, and at the end of each interview, we asked participants who else we should talk to; additional participants were identified and contacted through this method. We contacted a total of 67 potential participants, and 41 agreed to 30-minute interviews on Zoom.

We asked each participant, "Has anything in your experience made you feel prepared to fulfill your role in public humanities?" A pattern emerged in which many participants *laughed* at this question before saying that no, nothing in their academic career until that point had made them feel prepared for their leadership role in the public humanities. However, participants cited roles, experiences, and positions that they held outside of the academy that prepared them more than graduate training or coursework had. As they elaborated on their initial responses, though, some participants named the value of their graduate training in their public work, specifically the skills they developed while training in their field.

Participants found that when graduate students are introduced to public humanities during their graduate study, they are in turn exposed to various career opportunities. For example, community-engaged work allows students to develop skills needed for a variety of careers, such as event planning and fundraising. Some participants also noted that career diversity is becoming an important area of public humanities leadership roles. Some participants saw career diversity and public-facing work as quite literally saving the humanities as a whole. As one participant said, "Academic jobs limit the university's ability to have impact – we need to look both ways."

With this in mind, we analyzed interview transcripts using grounded theory[1] and put findings in conversation with public humanities scholarship, which calls for structural, curricular, and cultural changes in graduate humanities education so that students and faculty who have a passion for the humanities can ensure their expertise is not limited to and stifled by ivory towers, should they choose to work beyond academia.[2] Echoing scholarship, graduate students want to, as one participant put it, "do more in the world than the academy allows." Right now, most graduate curricula do not showcase the full range of what students can do, and this gap is, in part, due to faculty not knowing what students can do outside of the university. We combine these perspectives to present heuristics for public humanists who are involved in curricular discussions, programming, and planning so that faculty can widen the aperture of possibilities for humanistic endeavors.

[1] See Creswell and Creswell 2017, Corbin and Strauss 2008, and Farkas and Haas 2012.

[2] See Arteaga and Erickson Johnsen 2021, Bartha and Burgett 2015, Basalla and Debelius 2014, Cassuto and Weisbuch 2021, Fisher 2021, Hartman and Strakovsky 2023, Hiro and McDaneld 2022, Jay 2010, May-Curry and Oliver 2023, Rogers 2020, Sánchez 2022, Smith 2015, Smulyan 2020, Wickman 2016, and Woodward 2009.

1. Check in with yourself and with your colleagues

Participants commented that one of the biggest challenges to public humanities and career diversity work was biases, their own and that of others, and the lack of support from people in their departments and colleges. Biases of non-academic jobs being lesser than academic jobs and community-engaged work being less rigorous and intellectual than "traditional" scholarship limited participants' and their colleagues' abilities to be fully open to what graduate students are interested in and need for their professional development. Professional organizations like the American Council of Learned Societies (https://www.acls.org/) and the Modern Language Association's Connected Academics (https://connect.mla.hcommons.org/) provide career diversity resources for faculty.

- If you or your colleagues have concerns or criticisms about career diversity, explore those. Are they negatively impacting students and the work they could do in and for the world?
- How can you turn criticism into curiosity and learn more about public work and career diversity?
- What assumptions do you hold about careers inside and outside of academia?
- How do those assumptions show up when you are working with students?

2. Avoid crisis language

There is not a job crisis – it is how programs are preparing students for the future that is the crisis. Crisis language surrounding placement after graduation does not reflect the full picture. Yes, academic jobs in the humanities are shrinking, but the humanities are thriving elsewhere, with companies actively recruiting experts in storytelling, curriculum design and corporate training, and research and policy. Humanities education is figuring out how to prepare our students for these careers, which requires a little more leg work, innovation, and creativity than other majors that easily translate into job titles like "nurse" or "engineer." Instead of seeing that as a crisis, faculty can see it as an opportunity to prepare our students for a range of possibilities.

- How are you talking about the humanities with yourself, your colleagues, and your students?
- Are you using crisis language?
- How does that impact your students?

3. Start with admissions

Career diversity starts with admissions – who you accept into a program forms your program and what you can do with your program. Integrate career diversity language into personal statement prompts or admissions material. For example, invite candidates to write about how they envision their disciplinary endeavors will inform a career in non-profits. In addition to a writing sample, ask candidates to submit an optional dossier of public-facing materials or projects that they have created for work, and require a cover letter that explains how their disciplinary knowledge is exemplified in that dossier.

- How does your program cultivate career diversity in admissions? If it does not, how could it?

- What language does your program use that showcases your openness to students who want a graduate degree and do not want an academic job?

4. Integrate career diversity and public work into the curriculum

One of the biggest concerns we heard about public work and career diversity was that it risks being extra work for students or an item to be checked off a to-do list. To address that concern, consider how course projects might include public-facing elements. For example, ask students to turn their final papers into an elevator pitch that focuses not on the disciplinary content of the class, but the larger takeaways of the work and the skills, characteristics, and values the students have come away from the class with. So, if a student is interested in children's consent, women's identity, or minority representation in a historic period, they are demonstrating a commitment to human rights and advocacy.

- How do you use the skills you have developed and gained inside and outside of your academic position in your own career? How can you talk to students about it?

- How do you see your current students bringing innovation and creativity to your program?

- What are your students teaching you about career diversity and public humanities?

5. Invite alums to shape the curriculum

Building an alumni network can strengthen curriculum and community. Alumni who work outside of the academy can point out gaps in curriculum by offering feedback about what would have helped them in their graduate training for their non-academic jobs. Alums can also mentor graduate students and help them translate their academic work and skills into non-academic language and deliverables.

- In your ideal world, what does a public humanities program look like?
- What are the best practices?
- How can you start to implement them now?

If humanities students are going to thrive in the world using what they have learned in the humanities, we as faculty need to prepare ourselves. We need to re-orient ourselves to see the bigger picture and look outside our own experience to prepare our students for their own experience. We risk being our own undoing if we do not look at the wider impact the humanities can have outside academia. This way, more communities can experience the imaginative, transformative power of humanistic thinking, training, and teaching. This work starts with you.

Elizabeth Angeli is Associate Professor of English at Marquette University and a spiritual director. As a leading expert in prehospital healthcare communication, Liz partnered with first responder clinicians and educators to research and improve their writing training and practice. Her first book, Rhetorical Work in Emergency Medical Services: Communicating in the Unpredictable Workplace, won the 2020 NCTE CCCC Best Book in Technical and Scientific Communication Award. Liz's work has appeared in JEMS: Journal of Emergency Medical Services, Wisconsin Medical Journal, Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal, and Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual

Direction. As a spiritual director, Liz accompanies people on their personal and professional journeys, teaches discernment-based writing classes and workshops, and serves on retreat leadership teams (https://lizangeli.com/).

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