CASE STUDY

How to Design Public Events

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Abstract

This essay demonstrates the impact of careful, intentional event design on public humanities programming. In particular, it records the practical and pedagogical methodologies we have developed through a decade of sustained collaboration between a humanities scholar and an arts administrator. We outline the ways that arts administration practices have informed our approach to public humanities, and we suggest that these practices can help us to address skills gaps in graduate training in the humanities. In the essay, we walk through our framework for the intentional design of a public humanities event (the Life Cycle of an Event worksheet) and offer practical advice on further collaboration between humanities practitioners and arts administrators. We have found that when humanities practitioners and arts administrators collaborate, accessibility and inclusivity become central to public humanities program design – an achievable expectation and not just an aspiration. Above all, our collaboration has deepened our commitment to curating relevant public humanities programming that welcomes community members and provides mentorship opportunities for students.

Keywords: accessibility; arts administration; education; inclusivity; public humanities

We have all been there: drawing from time around the margins of an already packed academic schedule, we spend hours organizing what we believe is a meaningful and important public-facing event centered on a broadly interesting topic. We believe the event can generate new conversations and collaborations. We promote it on social media and hang posters around campus and beyond – in arts venues, cafes, and local shops. We make sure our colleagues know the event is public-facing and broadly relevant and ask them to invite their friends, neighbors, and students. Eight people from the campus community show up. Often, what we imagine as a public humanities event ends up being, well, just another humanities event.

When we first met in 2015, Calhoun described something like the scenario above: his attempts at a couple of small, mostly unsuccessful "public" events he hosted to try to welcome nonuniversity audiences into the university's Special Collections library. Marty had notes. We tried the event again as a collaboration and found that a few key changes translated a frustrating public engagement effort into a collaborative, accessible, inclusive

event that filled the event space to capacity and engaged participants in conversations that lasted well past the event's end time. The event's success ultimately inspired a sustained collaboration: Holding History, a program focused on the history of media and book arts and one that invites participants to explore – and reimagine – the ways we record, preserve, and share our stories across time and space.

Our collaboration inspired a lot of productive disagreements, too. Building and sustaining the program has required us to discuss, debate, and sometimes argue about logistics, goals, and values. For Marty, an arts administrator, the experiential and ephemeral dimensions of an event are often the focus: Is an attendee comfortable, immersed, and engaged? For Calhoun, a humanities scholar, the contextual and preservable dimension is often the focus: How does the experience speak to and with past, present, and future cultures? For Calhoun, poor attendance at an event is a frustration; for Marty, a poorly attended event is a failure and a threat to financial stability.

Over time, we have come to a collaborative peace about how these disciplinary cross-emphases prod us to move beyond aspirations, identify the specific actions that make events inclusive and accessible, and curate public humanities programming that is public in practice as well as in name. And because both of us are enthusiastic educators, mentorship and training are also a core goal for each event that we design. In short, a decade of arts administration and public humanities collaboration has helped us to develop both a methodology and a pedagogy for event planning that reflect our program's values.

1. Complementary skill sets: arts administration and public humanities

Traditionally, humanities scholars and scholars-in-training have advanced their careers by building deep knowledge of a particular subject in conversation with other specialists. Success in one's field has meant publishing in academic journals, writing a book or three, and presenting work in progress at academic conferences. These metrics of success remain important, but the academy is changing. Increasingly, humanities departments are recognizing (and counting toward promotion and tenure) "a continuum of scholarship," to borrow a particularly useful term from Julie Ellison and Timothy K. Eatman, in turn bolstering institutional efforts to recruit and retain a more diverse faculty and student body.[1] Increasingly, too, graduate training in the humanities invites students to explore the diverse, multimodal forms in which meaningful scholarship appears. "New models of scholarly assessment are needed," writes Rachel Arteaga in her introduction to *Public Scholarship in Literary Studies*, "so, too, are new models of scholarly training."[2]

And yet, as Elizabeth Angeli and Rachel McNealis note, "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."[3] Angeli and McNealis described a noteworthy pattern that emerged when they interviewed 41 public humanities leaders about graduate training in public humanities: when asked "Has anything in your experience made you feel prepared to fulfill your role in

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[1] Ellison and Eatman 2008, 10–11, 18–19; see also the Modern Language Association 2022.
[2] Arteaga and Erickson Johnsen 2021, 7. On the value of training graduate and undergraduate students in the public humanities, see also Balleisen and Chin 2022 and Smulyan 2022.
[3] Angeli and McNealis 2025, 1.

public humanities?" they found that "many participants *laughed*...before saying no, nothing in their academic career" made them feel prepared to train others.[4]

In short, public humanities practitioners at the instructor level have a skills gap problem. We have been trained as experts in particular areas of the humanities, but many of us have no formal training in what Michelle May-Curry and Younger Oliver refer to as the "hard skills and methodologies for public engagement."[5] This skills gap naturally inspires some anxiety and imposter syndrome at the personal level; at the program level, it inspires unrealistic expectations and eventual frustration. We too easily fall back on the "sage on the stage," open-invitation-lecture-as-public-humanities model where advertising equals engagement. If we build it, surely they will come. Right?

Building a relevant public humanities event or program, like building a business or building a garage, requires both a vision and the skills needed to realize that vision. In our experience, the principles of arts administration can help address key skills gaps in public humanities. We suggest that these two areas have much to offer each other in terms of collaboration and scholarship because they share similar goals and have complementary skill sets. Public humanities practitioners and arts administrators have tended to coexist without crossing paths on campus.[6] And yet, during our decade-long collaboration, we have noticed an encouraging shift that puts these two fields into productive conversations and collaborations.[7]

Arts administration, the work of producing events and activities, of building community and bringing people together to participate in and to support arts and culture, predates the amphitheaters of ancient Greece and the works of Euripedes and Sophocles. For centuries enterprising individuals have provided spaces and places for musicians and artists to share their work and have brought audiences together for concerts, shows, and exhibits.

What is new in this long history is the formalization of arts administration as an academic field of study. Changes in U.S. tax laws in the 1960s and an increase in federal and state funding played a pivotal role in the expansion of the nonprofit arts sector which then spurred additional interest in the business management training required to facilitate the day-to-day operations of mission-driven arts and cultural organizations such as museums, symphony orchestras, and theater companies.[8] The field has since expanded to include a social entrepreneurship curriculum where students learn how to develop, fund, and implement solutions to social, cultural, or environmental issues while exploring hybrid and for-profit business models.[9]

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[4] Angeli and McNealis 2025, 2. Full disclosure: Calhoun was one of the interviewees for this study – and one of the exceptions in terms of academic preparation thanks to training in 2008 with the Delaware Public Humanities Institute (DELPHI), an innovative public humanities graduate training program at the University of Delaware.

[5] May-Curry and Oliver 2023, 32.

[6] Although we focus on the value of Arts Administration relative to skills gaps in Public Humanities, we emphasize the reciprocal value, too. The Association of Arts Administration Educators 2024 website includes a detailed "Careers" page "intended to serve as a general guide to potential careers and employers for the field of arts administration"; nowhere does the word "humanities" appear. For in-training arts administrators, public humanities initiatives present new opportunities for education, engagement, and employment.

[7] See, for instance, the UMass Lowell Master of Public Administration degree with a track in public humanities and the Humanities Without Walls Career Diversity Summer Workshop in 2023.

[8] Laughlin 2017, Lent, Ingersoll, Feldman and Gibas 2016, and Taylor 1969.

[9] For an overview of Arts Management, see Rosewall 2021; for the development of the field, see Varela 2013; on the shifting foci, see Toscher 2019.

Like graduate students in the humanities, graduate students in arts administration often start on a focused pathway: hours of intensive practice for an undergraduate concentration on a particular subdiscipline in the performing arts, film and photography, or visual arts. For these students, the transition to graduate-level arts administration training shifts their perspective outward as they learn skills needed to develop sustained relationships with local communities – their primary long-term audiences – and to gain a deeper understanding of the business of the arts.

Arts administration training further teaches the essential concept of a dual bottom line: money and mission.[10] Arts administrators have experience and expertise navigating complicated systems and competing priorities while making mission- and money-driven decisions about how best to invest limited resources. As they are often required to make a case for grant funding and donations, they must be able to demonstrate a strong track record of engagement (number of attendees, number of events) and impact (qualitative and quantitative data). Arts administrators operate on thin margins, so financial skills are survival skills. From an arts administration perspective, a play – much less a sustained arts program – cannot succeed with an audience of eight.

Drawing on arts administration and business terminology, Marty occasionally deploys phrases that sound not unlike fingernails on a chalkboard to the humanities half of our team. For instance, she talks about the ways our skills training helps students to "operationalize their values." Calhoun would say that "details reveal values." It is the same thing: when you attend to the details that allow an attendee to access the space and feel welcomed there, they will not need to look at your mission statement to know that you value accessibility and inclusivity.

Ultimately, we are both drawn, in our thinking about skills training, to the language of "fabrication" as used in a *White Paper on the Future of the Humanities*, a 2013 study focused on solutions to "the chronic problem of humanities PhD academic underemployment."[11] Citing a rising emphasis on professionalization training in humanities PhD programs, the authors call attention to three features – publicity, collaboration, and fabrication – that are essential to doctoral programs that value career diversity. They write that "fabrication shifts the primary emphasis within graduate education from the cultivation of deep learning to high-level skills training."[12] This emphasis on skill as fabrication plays well with our program's emphasis on craft and mentorship. We turn now to the practical application of these methodologies at the event level.

2. The life cycle of a relevant event

In *The Art of Relevance*, Nina Simon, an arts administrator with extensive experience in the museum sector, argues that relevance is about mattering more to more people, "about making connections that unlock meaning."[13] For Simon, relevance is about expanding audiences of arts and cultural organizations by building stronger connections with specific communities. The work of creating relevant programming is both about the content (what is shared) and about intentional event design and production (how you invite others to participate). How do I take this thing that I am passionate about and share it with more

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[10] Zimmerman and Bell 2010 and 2014.
[11] *White Paper* 2013, 1.
[12] *White Paper* 2013, 12.
[13] Simon 2016, 22.

people? And, how do I connect to conversations around me–and in the community, especially, if I want to engage participants from beyond the borders of campus?

We share Simon's emphasis on outward-facing relevance, but for us, each event has a second core goal: to give an inside audience – our students – a chance to cultivate practical, relevant skills in real time with real feedback. Education and mentorship are at the heart of every public humanities event we host. For us, every event is both publication and research. For Holding History, relevance = experience/event success + training and mentorship.

We devote most of the rest of this article to describing what the arts administration side of that mentorship looks like, providing examples from a signature event in our program, and drawing from our own experience as humanities/arts administration collaborators who share a passion for old books, intergenerational learning, and sustained mentorship. One tool that has been especially effective in our undergraduate and graduate skills training is our Life Cycle of an Event worksheet (see Appendix).

Though we have an existing work plan for each of our major activities, we now start our first meeting with a new team of students with a blank life cycle worksheet. We find it particularly useful to provide space for students to grapple with a series of important questions and concepts as part of the learning process. We invite them to consider their values, but we also ask them to confront the space, budget, and time constraints of the event. Students gain confidence as they make these challenging decisions and contribute to the development of the plan. They also gain an understanding that the life cycle of an event is not limited to a single day: it starts months before the day of and does not end when you say goodbye to the last attendee.

Guiding questions come first, and they encourage students to consider how the values of our event are nested within the values of our overall program. Details come next. After talking through the guiding questions at the top of the framework, we look through all eight sections of the worksheet, and then spend more time on particular sections based on student needs, interests, or skills. Behind the scenes, the two of us work together to identify and coach student strengths and areas for improvement. In addition, we build in multilevel mentoring where we work with graduate students who, in turn, mentor undergraduate students on archival research and serve as co-leaders for portions of our events.

Note that an arts administration approach seeks to systematize processes, which is why we advocate physically recording answers to the worksheet. Put your notes in a shared folder that is accessible to all collaborators. Once you have completed the big-picture life cycle worksheet, you are ready to create a focused work plan with a timeline, budget, and marketing plan.[14]

Below we walk through two sections of the Life Cycle of an Event framework and how they have helped us move from passive, "all-are-welcome" invitations to actively accessible, inclusive events.

Our first consideration is space. Practically, how do we remove barriers to access? Start with the building itself – Where are the entrances? Which are most visible or easily located?

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[14] We especially recommend free resources available from Springboard for the Arts 2020.

Closest to disabled parking? Nearest to an elevator? While you are not likely to find one entrance that meets all of these criteria, asking these questions will raise awareness of potential barriers to finding your event and give you an opportunity to think about how to best counter them.

At arts venues and museums, arts administrators often have fleets of ushers and docents on hand to assist audience members in finding the box office, locating the restrooms, and getting to their seats or finding an exhibit. Consider designing a public humanities event in a similar manner with "wayfinders" as a form of hospitality and care for those who are participating in your event. Our campus' rare books library is located on the 9th floor of an architecturally complicated, 1953 Brutalist building. Entering our main library, you see a literal gatekeeper and a security gate that requires a campus ID for access. It is enough to make an outsider feel they should turn around and walk right back out.

So on the day of a Holding History Keynote Event, we have students assigned as wayfinders. At the main entrance, a wayfinder welcomes each guest and scans them through. They have a list of names of everyone who RSVPed, give each person a name tag, and direct them to the next wayfinder, who then helps them find the right elevator. While they are waiting, they chat with the attendee – again, making the person feel seen and welcome in what may be an unfamiliar space. When attendees step off the elevator onto the ninth floor, a third student wayfinder shares a reminder about what can be taken into Special Collections (camera, phone, pencil, paper), helps participants access lockers for their bags and coats, and directs them to restrooms and the event itself. The process repeats in reverse at the end of the event.

As we set up for events, we think about the space and the layout as a form of set design. What space is available and how will we use it? How can we position tables and chairs to create pathways to encourage flow and maintain space for those who use mobility devices? Do we have places where someone can sit down if they need a rest and a quiet area nearby if they need to step away? For our events where we have rare books and objects displayed on six-foot tables, student curators are seated behind the table and we have chairs at the ready if someone would prefer to look at the items from a seated position.

Communication is another overarching concern in creating a more accessible and inclusive event. Consider, for example, RSVPs. They are not the norm for Calhoun, and he even felt a bit resistant to the idea when Marty brought them up. He thought of RSVPs as a barrier – or at least a hassle, but she made a convincing case for RSVPs as a means of removing barriers and welcoming outsiders.

Asking attendees to RSVP for your event means that you will be able to collect an email address that can be used to send a "You're registered" email with some key details about the event (description, time, location). Two days before the event you can send a "Know before you go" reminder with information on parking, nearby food/coffee, and event info. RSVPs also allow you to print name tags ahead of time and to prepare to welcome people by name.

Why does this matter? It helps remove a barrier to access and reduces anxiety about attending a new experience in a new place you are not familiar with. And, since you collected email addresses, you can then thank attendees with an email and photo on the day after the event, add them to your newsletter email list, and reach out to them about your next event or activity. Additionally, knowing how many people participated helps you talk about the impact and should be included in evaluation assessments, grant reports, and your

final project report. This brings us back to values: all of this work improves the event within your program and makes it more viable – and, all of these careful decisions about communication also are attentive to the needs of participants and long-term community-building.

Finally, an important part of mentoring students in this work is cultivating a culture of care. It is not enough to simply send a few emails, arrange the room in a way that is more physically accessible, and assign students as wayfinders. In our mentorship sessions, we also talk about how to communicate with others, how to observe the user experience and respond in a way that provides support where needed, and how to be curious and open to opportunities to listen and learn. One of our greatest achievements is having community members return to Special Collections – one of the more difficult spaces to find in our library – on their own after attending one of our events. All of the signage in the world does not replace a person greeting you and making you feel seen, valued, and included.

3. Conclusion: re-engaging and re-imagining PH

When public humanities practitioners and arts administrators collaborate, accessibility and inclusivity become a central part of program design – an achievable expectation and not just an aspiration. In the spirit of the how-to, we conclude with three practical tips for public humanities practitioners interested in finding and collaborating with arts administrators.

Finding: Figure out where arts administration programs live on your campus. While the program at our university is in the business school, arts administration training programs and classes are more commonly found in schools/departments of art (visual and performing arts).[15] Degree and certificate titles vary across institutions but may include arts administration, arts management, arts leadership, arts entrepreneurship, music business, theater management, and service learning through the arts, among others. Even on campuses without a formal arts administration program, production management, and stage management courses in theater departments offer valuable experience in project management and standalone courses on "the business of" may be found in individual arts departments.

Teaching: Invite an arts administrator to visit your class. We have found that Calhoun's undergraduate and graduate students, many of whom are actively thinking about career diversity, have appreciated the chance to talk and think with Marty. As we have begun to demonstrate here, the skills that make arts administrators particularly good at building and sustaining programs are immediately relevant to, if seldom discussed with, students and especially graduate students in the humanities.

Collaborating: Invite an arts administrator to partner on a grant proposal. Holding History would have a fraction of the grants we have received if not for Marty, who was not scared away by the university's bureaucratic financial systems. If you can involve an arts administrator in the grant-writing process, they will ask surprising questions, catch overlooked details, and teach new skills. If they join after funding is awarded, then they will improve every phase of the grant's life, from early implementation to successful programming to detailed grant reporting that will help set up future grant successes. And on top of it all, in our experience, you will learn more, have more fun, and create programming that is more inclusive and accessible.

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[15] Varela 2013, 80–81.

Joshua Calhoun, Associate Professor of English and Faculty Affiliate with the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, specializes in Shakespeare, early modern poetry, the history of media, publicly engaged research, and the environmental humanities. His first book, *The Nature of the Page: Poetry, Papermaking, and the Ecology of Texts in Renaissance England* (UPenn Press, 2020), explores the ecopoetic interplay between literary ideas and the physical forms they are made to take as paper texts. Calhoun is also a co-founder and co-director of Holding History, a mentorship-driven public engagement project that includes hands-on training in book arts and archival research.

Sarah Marty, Director of the Bolz Center for Arts Administration in the Wisconsin School of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is an artist, educator, and arts producer whose professional career includes extensive experience in artistic collaboration and administrative leadership and a passion for sharing the arts with broader audiences. As Producing Artistic Director of Four Seasons Theatre, she helps bring musical theater performances to stages, libraries, and assisted living facilities across Madison and has mentored countless high school and college students through the Backstage Arts Internship program. Marty is also a co-founder and co-director of Holding History, a mentorship-driven public engagement project that includes hands-on training in book arts and archival research.

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Appendix: Life Cycle of an Event Worksheet

The Life Cycle of an Event Worksheet

Use this worksheet as a tool to discuss the big picture: how are the values of a given event nested within the values of your overall program? Once you've completed this exercise, you're ready to create a focused work plan for the event itself.

Program Name:
Event Name:
Event Lead(s):

Guiding Questions

The Big Three for our program:

Who are we?
What do we do?
Why does it matter?

The Big Three for this event:

Who are we?
What do we do?
Why does it matter?

How does the life cycle of this event fit into the life cycle of our mission-driven program?

Design Questions

1. **Space:** Where is it happening and why that location?
   - Accessibility concerns
   - Capacity
   - Room layout options
   - Parking options

2. **People:** Who are our key partners and stakeholders?
   - Key personnel
   - Key partners/collaborators
   - Our department
   - Our funders
   - Other

3. **Participants:** Who are our audiences?
   - Community: school or community programs, intergenerational audiences, off-campus partner organizations, etc.
   - Campus: departments and units, faculty and staff, student majors and organizations, etc.
   - Virtual communities

4. **Resources:** What resources do we need to succeed?
   - People (skills and expertise)
   - Materials and Equipment
   - Funding (grants, donors, sponsors)

5. **Costs:** What are our time, labor, and materials costs?
   - Venue costs
   - Equipment and materials
   - Paid labor vs volunteer labor

6. **Communication:** How do we get people there?
   - Targeted emails
   - Newsletter
   - Specific campus and community audiences
   - Flyers
   - Social media

7. **Documentation:** How do we create an event archive?
   - Shared folder for work plan, budget, grants, photos, and RSVP list
   - Program evaluation
   - Newsletter
   - Future storytelling

8. **Follow-up:** What happens afterwards?
   - Photos shared among participants
   - Social media
   - Thank you email sent to attendees
   - Thank you note to venue and key partners
   - Program report to funders

Note: if you have limited resources/time, which 2 or 3 areas above are non-negotiables? Which areas are crucial to short-term goals (life cycle of this particular event)? Which are crucial to long-term planning (life cycle of your program)?

Next Steps: Work Plan

For free, user-friendly templates and frameworks for creating specific work plans, promotional materials, grant proposals, etc., we recommend the Springboard for the Arts "Work of Art: Business Skills for Artists" toolkit.

Source: Joshua Calhoun and Sarah Marty, Holding History, University of Wisconsin-Madison (holdinghistory.org)