

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How to Do Humanities Internships

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Abstract

Public humanities programs have the potential to engage diverse communities, while addressing the employability challenges faced by many humanities graduates. This article outlines how to build a humanities internship program that pays students to collaborate with local governments, museums, nonprofits, and healthcare organizations, on projects for public good. Through these mutually beneficial partnerships, students apply skills – such as writing, archival research, critical thinking, and data analysis – beyond the classroom, demonstrating the relevance of the humanities in real-world contexts. The article discusses key strategies for developing a sustainable program, including networking to build community partnerships, fundraising through small grants, and evaluating impact on all stakeholders. By reflecting on the successes and challenges of such a program, the article highlights the value of public humanities in preparing students for diverse careers while supporting community-driven projects.

Keywords: assessments; career diversity internships; community partnerships; fundraising; higher education; public humanities

For the last seven years, I directed a public humanities program at Wayne State University in Detroit. Modeled after a legal clinic, the program paid humanities graduate students to work on projects with city government, museums, nonprofits, and healthcare organizations. Students gained professional experience, while organizations received support free-of-charge. After building partnerships with 150 organizations, I learned that many of the skills emphasized in the humanities – like writing, critical thinking, archival research, and data analysis – are essential at every type of organization, from art museums and grassroots nonprofits, to hospitals.

“Public humanities” often refers to making academic research accessible to non-academic audiences. As a public historian, I practice this regularly. However, in order for the humanities to survive and thrive within and beyond higher education, it is important for the next generation of humanists to understand how to apply their skills beyond the academy. This prepares students for diverse careers and mitigates the problem of unemployment that many humanists face.¹ Applying humanities knowledge beyond the

¹ See Hiro and McDanel 2022 and Rogers 2020.

classroom demonstrates the value of the humanities in ways that traditional humanities centers and institutes – which promote academic research – do not. Reciprocal relationships between students and communities expand our understanding of the public humanities to include work led by public stakeholders, otherwise unaffiliated with higher education.²

1. Build community partnerships using your existing network

Strong community partnerships are the cornerstone of any public humanities program. Receiving support free-of-charge is attractive to local government, museum, and nonprofit organizations, which sometimes operate on shoestring budgets. Community partners gain help from a highly skilled humanities major, usually a graduate student, who is self-sufficient and intellectually curious. These partnerships are advantageous to faculty and students because they bridge the gap between learning in the classroom and learning in and with communities.

In 2024, Lisa DiChiera, Deputy Director of the City of Detroit's Historic Designation Advisory Board, worked with two history graduate students on StoryMaps projects about Detroit's Cass Corridor Chinatown and Native American history. Both students were recommended by a faculty member who teaches Native American history. Students brought knowledge about the history DiChiera was trying to convey, and knew how to create a StoryMap to make that history accessible to the public. This gave the students an opportunity to apply their knowledge to a public-facing project, and make connections with professionals outside of the academy.

While this mutually beneficial model helps sustain community partnerships, the first step toward building a program is connecting with people working outside of higher education. You can do this through networking. If the word “networking” makes you cringe, begin by thinking about the connections you already have. For example, I met staff at the Historic Designation Advisory Board through a philanthropy and alumni relations officer on campus, who knew an alum on the board. I reached out to them and it resulted in a multiyear collaboration. Along with StoryMaps projects, students have done archival research, conducted site visits at historic sites, and prepared reports on potential historic districts in Detroit for the Historic Designation Advisory Board.

After working with students from my program, Lisa DiChiera encourages other public humanities programs to be open-minded about the types of organizations that may have an opportunity for a humanities student. “A student can come in without a background in city government or a specific historical topic, but still be able to use their skillset to do really detailed cataloguing, research, and database gathering,” says DiChiera.³

Humanists also build professional networks by attending conferences and conducting research at museums, historic sites, and libraries. Reach out to people you know who work at these places. Ask if they have an ongoing project, or an idea for a new project, that you or your students could contribute to. Once you have made a few connections, encourage those contacts to share information about your program with their colleagues.

When conducting historical research, I work with archivists at museums and historic sites, like the Detroit Institute of Arts. From my conversations with archivists there, I knew that

² See Berkowitz and Gibson 2022.

³ All quotes are from personal interviews with program participants.

staff needed support due to budget cuts and reduced work schedules for some employees during the pandemic. I approached an archivist I knew who introduced me to Amy Dunn, an assistant registrar at the museum. Dunn has since worked with several students from my program, including history and library science student, Willow Hockett. In 2024, Hockett worked with Dunn on a copyright project for 1,000 artworks and objects in the museum's collection. Hockett applied technical skills required to enter and correct information in the museum's database. Hockett also showed her passion for leading collaborations within museums. Dunn says that it has been enlightening to see how student's skills and interests shape her own work. "Willow's museum background and passion for museum education led me to ask more about what we're doing at the museum, collectively, and how my job as an archivist correlates to programs in other departments," says Dunn.

Hockett divided her internship hours between the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Detroit Historical Society. Meanwhile, she worked part-time at the Zekelman Holocaust Center. Hockett appreciated seeing how different museums function from different perspectives, she says. At the Detroit Historical Society, Hockett developed history curriculum for grade school children participating in the museum's summer camp. "There was a community aspect to all of the work I did," she says. "The summer camp engaged families from the local community, and the art I was researching will eventually be in exhibitions and in pamphlets and materials for the public." Following Hockett's internship, she was hired as a full-time outreach associate at the Zekelman Holocaust Center.

One criticism of service-based learning is that it is short-term in its goals. Students might work with a community to fulfill a course or internship requirement, but typically only for a semester. This can lead to a simplistic understanding of need, or perpetuate a one-sided "charity model," that reinforces race, class, and gender biases.⁴ To address this concern, have students participate in cultural competency training at the outset of a project. Ideally, the training would include a focus group where students and community partners can discuss questions, concerns, and past experiences together. Most schools have an office of inclusive excellence, or diversity and inclusion, that can lead or help develop such a training. Community partners usually provide additional training to prepare students for work in a particular community. This deepens the reciprocal relationship between students and communities.

Have students submit a letter of recommendation from a faculty member, a resume, and a list of professional skills or specialized knowledge that may be applicable to a range of projects. Share these materials with community partners so that you can work together to identify the right students for a particular project. Most students in my program were history and English majors. Other students came from anthropology, philosophy, and social science departments like sociology, communications, and political science. Directors of graduate and undergraduate studies in these departments often knew which students had the knowledge and skillset required for particular projects, and their career goals.

Many program alumni have made long-term commitments to the communities we work with by forging careers beyond the academy. They are terrific resources when it comes to creating community partnerships. Carly Slank, a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology, was an intern with my program in 2019 and 2022. As an intern, Slank worked with nonprofits on grant writing and web development projects. She now works full-time as the associate

⁴ See Clifford 2017 and Kahl, Atay, and Amundson 2022.

communications director at Zaman International, a nonprofit that provides mothers with the support, training, and employment they need to lift their families out of poverty.

Slank uses her anthropology training in her work at Zaman, which serves many women who have been displaced due to war and political unrest in their home countries. Slank says that Zaman was founded on the anthropological idea of transcultural care and making things manageable for individuals on a case-by-case basis. Everything from healthcare and education, to training courses for jobs are intended to be flexible to fit individual clients based on their cultural and spiritual needs and experiences. The vocational training program at Zaman emphasizes industrial sewing and culinary arts. These skills provide many potential pathways for clients. Many have transportation barriers and language barriers, but with these skills they have many potential pathways, including building their own businesses, Slank says.

Last year, Slank and I reconnected at a nonprofit leadership conference. She let me know that she needed humanities students to work on Zaman's Meet Up & Eat Up Summer Food Program, which distributes food to children from low-income households. Cathryn Wriska, a philosophy major, was one of two students matched to the project. Wriska tracked the distribution of food to 12,000 children at 13 sites throughout Detroit. Because the Summer Food Program is grant-funded, Wriska had to track and document what food was served, the number of leftover meals, and enter the information into a database. This may seem like tedious work, says Wriska, but with her knowledge of applied ethics, she understood exactly what the Summer Food Program is doing to help families.

Gail Zion, the chief operating officer at Zaman International, observes that humanities students like Slank and Wriska, have a wider view of the world. "They have compassion and a willingness to empathize and sympathize," Zion says. This is important for a program like Summer Food where patience and accuracy are essential. Zion says that humanities students bring compassion and an understanding of the impact their work will have on individuals and communities.

While it may be obvious how humanities majors can apply their training at nonprofits and museums, it may be less clear how to build partnerships with hospitals and healthcare organizations. Yet the humanities are critical in fields like science and healthcare, says Denise White-Perkins, M.D., chair of the Department of Family Medicine and director of Healthcare Equity Initiatives at Henry Ford Health System in Detroit. During the pandemic, I reached out to White-Perkins and other faculty in the medical and nursing schools at Wayne State. I asked if they had projects that humanities students could contribute to. White-Perkins responded with a request for students to help with a community outreach project aimed at communicating healthcare information to Detroiters. She says that the humanities bring a valuable perspective and skillset to the work she and her colleagues in medicine do. "We call people 'patients,' but the humanities remind us that our patients are humans," says White-Perkins.

Since 2020, White-Perkins has worked with more than 10 humanities students on community outreach, cultural competency, and research projects. In 2021, Allie Penn, a history Ph.D. alum, worked with White-Perkins on a StoryMap about the history of Detroit. The project was intended to show medical students how Detroit's complicated history continues to impact healthcare in the city. Penn understood that her research for the project had to be interesting and accessible for people who were not historians. Penn applies this experience to her current job as a librarian and research services manager at Butzel-Long, a Detroit-

based law firm. “The research and time management skills I practiced at Henry Ford [Healthcare System] are things that carry over to my current job,” says Penn.

2. Fundraise by starting small

At this point, you may be thinking: “This all sounds great – but who pays for it?” Indeed, one of the roadblocks to establishing a public humanities program is finding a sustainable source of funding. Whether you are starting from scratch, have recently won a large grant, or have a hefty endowment, you will probably need to fundraise. Funding for my program initially came from a National Endowment for the Humanities NextGenPh.D. grant. However, when I took over the program in 2019, the grant had been spent on research and development to start the program, and a few internships.

Collectively, many small grants and donations can grow a robust program. I raised grants ranging from \$500 to no more than \$48,000. They came from organizations like the Council of Graduate Schools, the American Historical Association, Michigan Humanities Council, and Ford Community Corp. On-campus stakeholders also gave money to the program. They included the Wayne State Graduate School, Office of the Provost, Office of the Vice President for Research, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Labor@Wayne, Humanities Center, and the history, English, and political science departments.

These small grants had a big impact. For example, in 2021, one Ford Community Corp grant of approximately \$1,500 helped pay an intern to work on a database project with the Wayne County Council for Arts and Humanities. A second Ford Community Corp grant supported an intern working on an archival project with the Heidelberg Project, a public, outdoor art environment in Detroit. Between 2021 and 2024, a \$48,000 Council of Graduate Schools Humanities Coalition grant paid for 18 history and English students to work on research, writing, and archival projects with 16 museums and nonprofits.

All of the money I raised went directly to paying students for their work with community partners. If your program relies on students to work, it is important to pay them. Unpaid internships may be infeasible for many students. This is especially true at urban, public research institutions like Wayne State where a high percentage of students rely on financial aid. Moreover, paid internships are more likely to lead to fulltime employment.⁵ To encourage participation from students of all backgrounds, my program paid \$20 per hour for 100 hours of work. Other programs, such as the Fostering an Entrepreneurial Mindset for Humanities and Social Sciences Students program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and the Public Humanities Internship Program at the University of Michigan, pay students similarly. Individual departments may be willing to spend money to support a single student, especially if the work of finding them an internship, and possible career connections, is built into the program. If \$2,000 for a single intern is beyond your department or program budget, students could work for course credit and a smaller stipend.

Fundraising can be daunting. By raising smaller grants, at least initially, you will have an opportunity to build momentum and focus on other important aspects of your program, like building community partnerships.

⁵ See Hurst, Gardner, and Dorie 2023.

3. Assess the impact of your work on all stakeholders

Once you have raised money, built community partnerships, and successfully completed a project (or two), assess your work. Incorporate the perspectives of all stakeholders. In 2020, I collaborated with the National Humanities Alliance to design surveys that measured everything from how the program changed perceptions of the humanities in off-campus communities, to its impact on career readiness among humanities majors.⁶ Surveys were given to students and community partners at the conclusion of each project. I used data from the surveys to strengthen the program. For example, data about the skills that community partners needed helped me recruit and match the right students to particular projects. Archival research, historical documentation, project development, and data analysis were among the top skills community partners requested. I ensured that the students I hired had these skills before matching them to projects requiring those skills.

Surveying multiple stakeholders helps strike a balance between student learning and community needs. Data often highlight the exchange of skills and ideas that can take place within the public humanities, therefore transcending a one-sided “charity model” of service learning.⁷ At the conclusion of an internship, most students will have gained as many skills and as much knowledge as they brought to an organization.

Assessments are also a source of data for grant applications. For example, data from surveys indicated that all of our community partners agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to hire humanities majors after working with our interns. This helped me make a case for funding to university leaders and external donors like the Council of Graduate Schools, because it showed how students could reap benefits from the program in the long run.

4. Share your work widely

Finally, share your work. In 2021, I collaborated with Wayne State librarians to set up a *Knowledge Commons* site. This free, open-access digital repository made the work that students and community partners did together, accessible to anyone. *Knowledge Commons* makes it easy to archive and retrieve specific projects. This was useful when it came to applying for grants.

Conferences and meetings are additional places where you can share your work. Discussing your program with other humanists is a great way to generate ideas for improvement and growth. I spoke about the program at the American Historical Association and National Humanities Alliance annual meetings, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, and Humanities Without Walls, among other events. I also wrote short articles about the program for publications like *Humanities for All* and *GradEdge*. The Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes is another place where you can share information about your program and network with other public humanities leaders.

To reach a broader audience, consider hosting an event that features the work you have done with community partners. Ask students and community leaders to make short presentations about the work they did together. This can be virtual or in-person. Invite students, faculty, prospective community partners, and leaders at your school or organization. If a large event is beyond your budget, organize regular, hour-long, virtual events for

⁶ See May-Curry and Oliver 2023.

⁷ See Kiesel 2022.

stakeholders to share their experiences. This is an inexpensive and convenient way to bring students, community partners, faculty, and donors, who typically have conflicting schedules, together to reflect and generate ideas for future collaborations.

Although I have focused here on building a university-based public humanities program, these practices can be used to create or strengthen programs at any type of organization. Community partnerships, fundraising, assessments, and sharing program outcomes are integral to the success of all public humanities programs. From a higher education perspective, public humanities programs can help prepare humanities majors for a variety of careers. This is important for attracting students to the humanities and boosting student retention, especially among graduate students in a dry tenure-track job market. From a public perspective, the humanities bring fresh insight and essential skills to organizations and communities of all kinds. Collaborations between humanists and public stakeholders are critical for elevating the humanities across disciplines and throughout our society.

Lillian Wilson is a public historian and postdoctoral fellow in the Graduate School at Wayne State University. From 2018–2024, she transformed the Wayne State Humanities Clinic into a nationally recognized public humanities program that supported 150 museums and nonprofits. Wilson's public history work includes contributions to the Smithsonian Institution, the Freer House, the Phillips Collection, and the Detroit Historical Museum. She lives in Michigan with her husband and son.

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