Doing Public Humanities at Williams

The public humanities are an emerging academic field and a longstanding practice that translates thinking and creation into action. Starting with skills and knowledge gained through study of art, culture, and history, it focuses on sharing research, ideas, and creative work in order to engage, inspire, and educate public audiences. In particular, public humanities initiatives can be effective ways to build awareness and stimulate dialogue around issues of controversy and conflict. Public humanities methods vary: they may include exhibitions and installations, multimedia and digital presentations, public programs, oral history projects, and interpretive tours. Students in the public humanities learn skills including oral history interviewing, collaborative or community-based research, exhibition techniques, and communication with broad audiences through writing, visual design, oral presentations, or digital displays.

You can undertake public humanities work as a class or independent study project, a fieldwork course, an internship, or an extracurricular activity. The project might be something you accomplish on your own, as part of a group of students, or in partnership with – or in the service of – an organization off-campus. Examples of public humanities projects completed by Williams students:

- Virtual timelines and digital maps that convey information about the history of a time or place
- Oral history interviews that are incorporated into books and websites in which local people tell their stories
- Video and audio documentaries that present and represent the work of nonprofit organizations
- Initiatives to document and archive materials generated by campus activists and shared to inspire future students

Successful public humanities initiatives require thoughtful planning, often in collaboration with the public or with humanities organizations (e.g., museums, historical societies); and necessitate open communication, follow through, and trust to plan and complete projects and to assess their impact. In other words, deliberate *processes* that reflect the desired goals may be as important (or more important!) than tangible outcomes.

You should begin planning by considering these questions: what do you want to do? What outcome(s) do you want to achieve or what impact do you hope to make? Who (if any) are your collaborators? Who is your intended audience? How will you make your work public – and how will you let the public know it exists? When will the project occur – and how much time can you dedicate to it? How will you measure outcomes or know if you have succeeded? Finally, what resources are available to help you accomplish your project?

Talk to experts on campus who can help you plan and/or achieve your goals by pointing you to relevant information, materials, equipment, or funding.

Dr. Anne Valk, Associate Director for Public Humanities at the Center for Learning in Action, helps students and faculty develop and undertake public humanities projects – talk to her early in your planning.

**Public Humanities Project Check List**

If you are undertaking a public humanities project with the support of the Center for Learning in Action (CLiA), you must follow these steps:

➢ Consult early with Anne Valk, Associate Director for Public Humanities at the Center for Learning in Action to discuss your ideas and develop a feasible plan. Communicate with her regularly throughout.

➢ Talk to your partners/collaborators to secure and define their participation and together determine processes and outcomes.

➢ Create a detailed and realistic workplan that designates who is responsible for each task and establishes due dates and benchmarks.

➢ Receive any necessary training or approvals (e.g., learn how to use equipment; get certified to drive campus vehicles; seek human subjects approval).

➢ Establish and maintain a reliable system for organizing your materials (files, notes, research, etc.) and sharing them with your partners (e.g., Google drive or Dropbox). If appropriate, make arrangements to archive materials that you collect or create.

➢ Be thorough and responsible, honoring commitments and sticking with your workplan. Don't make promises to partners or participants that you can't or don't keep.

➢ Develop a publicity or outreach plan to ensure that you can get participation and share your accomplishments.

➢ Wrap up your project by thanking your collaborators and partners and following up on any remaining commitments or obligations. With your partners, schedule time to assess and reflect on what you accomplished, including how the project could be improved or continued. If appropriate, gather materials to pass on to your partners or to deposit in an archive.

➢ Submit a final report of your activities to CLiA, including information about community impact and future opportunities.