

Bright future for history: Course ventures off campus, examines careers

by Alex Hummel - Thursday, March 20, 2014

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/32567/strong-future-for-history-course-ventures-off-campus-examines-careers/>

Professor Gabriel Loiacono is half-joking when he refers to himself the “job czar” of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh history department.

Loiacono, a Fulbright Teaching Award winner with a deep background and expertise in colonial American history who taught in Hungary in spring 2013, isn’t simply lining up job interviews for his students. Rather, he is helping design and teach courses like the dynamic “Public History,” a class that introduces students to museum directors, environmental preservationists and other professionals in the region – people who have built long-lasting and rewarding careers out of history and environmental studies degrees and experiences.

Even insurance claims researchers get a shout-out.

“Once (students) are here, I want them to have the best ammunition possible when they go out into the market,” Loiacono said.

How the hybrid Public History course engages students is as innovative as the overall concept.

The course involves everything from class outings along the banks of the Fox River in Oshkosh to examine the waterway’s environmental legacy to a class or two spent playing and analyzing “Assassin’s Creed,” a popular video game whose story is woven into the historical (and sometimes wildly reimagined) fabric of the Revolutionary War.

“It’s both a class with an eye on careers and what you might do and a class that’s just plain fun from a historian’s point of view, from a teacher’s point of view and from an environmental scholar’s point of view,” Loiacono said. “We also try to analyze how we, in the United States, present the past and, to a lesser extent, how we present scholarship about the environment to a broader audience.”

Students in the 300-level history and environmental studies are also required to read and analyze children’s historical and environmental fiction, critique films ranging from period blockbusters such as “The Patriot” to historical documentaries. At the end of the spring 2014 semester, four students – as part of a required final course creative project – will collaborate with the Oshkosh Public Library to develop, build out and help promote an exhibit on the 100th Anniversary of World War I and its impact in early 20th Century Oshkosh.

It is the diligence involved in quality research and analysis, the appreciation for the craft of historic and environmental preservation and the power of public education that the course nurtures in students, Loiacono said.

They are incredibly employable values and skills, he and other faculty members attest.

“Probably well over 50 percent of our majors go into something that’s not as obvious. An insurance claims investigator doesn’t get into the War of 1812, but she does to research and she writes it up to say whether this claim works or not. Those kinds of skills are what we equip our students with.”

UW Oshkosh History Department Chair Professor Stephen Kercher credits Loiacono for helping build upon the growing array of history courses getting students motivated about career applications for their educations.

“Gabe deserves a lot of credit for getting students to think early in their college career about jobs,” Kercher said. “We have a good number of students who are interested in some type of job related to public history. For them, this course is entirely relevant... (Public History) is a great addition to the new types of courses that the history department is offering.”

The course and the History Department’s commitment to it and similar new courses addresses the growing concerns about the challenging market for traditional history professor and Ph.D. career paths. Reports cited by the American Historical Association (AHA) and the journal *Inside Higher Ed* since 2010 have spotlighted a sharp decrease in the number of history faculty job postings around the country.

One 2011 AHA report, titled ‘[No More Plan B](#),’ by AHA President Anthony Grafton (Princeton Univ.) and Executive Director Jim Grossman, drew attention to a lack of effort in introducing history graduates to the “dizzying array of positions outside the academy,” including “museum curators, archivists, historians in national parks, investment bankers, international business consultants, high school teachers, community college teachers, foundation officers, editors, journalists, policy analysts at think tanks (yes, an entry-level position).”

UW Oshkosh student Ashley Bartha said she already counts “the Public History course as one of the greatest classes that I have taken thus far in my career at Oshkosh.”

“My desire is to become an interpretive park ranger when I graduate, and this course is solidifying the background that I need to become a marketable applicant,” Bartha said. “I know that it is going to be a challenging adventure to get an established position that will turn into a life-long career, but this class is adding more and more information to the ‘tool-belt,’ so to say, that I can use in my future endeavors.”

Beyond its structured excursions outside the classroom, Loiacono requires students to regularly write short biographical summaries about K-12 teachers, “digital historians,” park rangers and other professionals who are putting history to work.

Bartha said it was “a bit scary” choosing to go into a field that many perceive to be “non-employable.” However, she said Public History’s subjects and materials quickly boosted her confidence.

“I am learning that there is a movement for history to be presented to the public in a more enjoyable manner that is coming to the front of the field,” Bartha said. “I am able to see that there are many different facets in portraying history to the public in order to increase their understanding and interest in historical information. By having many different forms of media that the public can choose from, it gives

historians a greater lens to present historical information to the masses.”

The earlier students can start exploring new career paths, the better, Loiacono said, calling Public History a “springboard class” for students to “get a taste and see if they might like something as a career.”

“You have to start thinking about these things early on,” he said.

Learn more:

- [UW Oshkosh Department of History](#)