

**CROSSING BOUNDARIES:
A ROUNDTABLE ON NEW DIRECTIONS
IN PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC HISTORY
PROGRAMMING**

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Somewhere in that netherland where History, Heritage and the Humanities converge, the potential for new institutional partnerships and creative collaborations comes into view. In this landscape, the sometimes artificial boundaries that separate scholarship and the public's appetite for a good story become more transparent and a "usable past" comes into play. Rigid formalisms appear more artificial or transient in light of popular consumption of new cultural products. And perhaps equally significant, the power of the written word makes way for a new media technology that changes the representation of the past in the present.

In the hopes of encouraging a fresh perspective on the relationship between History, Heritage and Humanities initiatives in the Commonwealth, the Pennsylvania Historical Association hosted a panel discussion entitled "New Directions in Public History Programming" at its October, 2006 Annual Meeting in Philadelphia. The session attracted a large and animated audience of academic historians, museum curators, and

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humanities personnel. Discussants included Barbara Franco, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Joseph Kelly, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, and Charles Kupfer of Penn State University-Harrisburg and the Middle Atlantic American Studies Association. Dennis B. Downey, President of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, served as the moderator.

The panelists brought extensive experience in public history and humanities programming. Each has been a leader in promoting heritage education and an enlightened citizenry in the Commonwealth. Like the Pennsylvania Historical Association, the organizations represented in the session have provided leadership by example in expanding the boundaries of creative partnerships that benefit a public audience. It is worth mentioning that along with the Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations, these organizations have formed a collaborative responsible for several important public history and heritage programs in the last two years. Success in this ongoing working relationship—and *relationship* is the right word—created the opportunity to gather in Philadelphia and explore with other practitioners the strengths and limitations of public outreach programs in the new millennium.

The session's commentators offered breadth and insight from the perspective of their respective organizations. A lively and informed discussion followed that touched on a host of local, state, and national issues. The conversation was open-ended and constructive, and what emerged was a more mature and balanced appreciation for the creative possibilities and institutional constraints that influence cross-organizational collaboration.

With this in mind, the editors of *Pennsylvania History* invited the participants to prepare more formal remarks that appear as the following roundtable discussion. This is the second such roundtable to appear in the journal since 2005, providing further evidence of the value of the format to readers.

Readers are encouraged to take these offerings as a whole, noting similarities and differences within a larger commitment to collaborative partnerships that advance public appreciation of History, Heritage, and the Humanities. Each of the following essays differs in content and perspective, but they share some common assumptions about cultural programming and the general public. These assumptions are best summed up by Joe Kelly's phrases: "connecting cultural resources to citizens" and "sparking civic participation." What surfaces is not just a new relationship between author and audience, but a new style

of learning that values the place of the humanities (broadly defined) in the everyday lives of people.

One clear message emerged from the conference session and it is echoed in these pages. The world of public history and humanities programming has changed, and not always for the better. This reality can be shaped and shaded and stated in a variety of ways, but all agree that in the changing milieu of public programming collaboration is not only essential, it is strategically necessary. Words like “collaboration” and “partnerships” and “relationships” have to be more than tag lines meant to impress donors or grant reviewers. They must be the working capital that supports a new paradigm that combines resources, expertise, and audiences to advance public awareness of history, heritage, and humanities issues.

Several factors have influenced this shifting landscape of public programming. First of all, there is a *funding shortfall* in public and private support for worthy initiatives. Available revenues are scarce and likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. In the competitive marketplace of cultural programming, there is no shortage of ambitious and noteworthy proposals, but legislative appropriations continue to evaporate as costs rise. Out of necessity, collaboration seems to be one strategy that offers the possibility of expanding worthy initiatives.

The changing nature of *technology* has affected the capacity of cultural agencies to engage the public. More specifically, the Internet has created tremendous potential for new types of formats for exhibits and programs, and every organization is expected to have a viable and engaging web presence. “Virtual” and “digital” are part of the popular lexicon and serious discourse on public culture, and there appears to be no turning back. The explosion in digital technology and online resources has created the expectation that cultural agencies will have a meaningful web presence, and it is very expensive to maintain that presence. But adjust they must if there is any hope of capturing a younger audience well versed in video reality. Technological innovation seems to be a prerequisite to an effective public presence, especially for a post-baby boomer generation that is computer literate.

This in turn reinforces the authors’ shared view that there is an *audience* receptive to collaborative programming. Whether offered in a traditional face-to-face setting, or in a virtual format, good programming should find an audience, but organizations need to work collaboratively to find and nurture those audiences through quality outreach initiatives. Is there merit to hosting an engaging program, conference, or museum exhibit if no one attends?

Anyone familiar with events planning knows you cannot assume the presence of a large audience. Like combining resources, regardless of the format combining memberships and building an audience is often essential to a successful program.

Finally, each of the authors agrees that *expertise* matters, and combined expertise best serves the ends of quality cultural programming. Content and interpretation are as important as images and aesthetics to successful cultural programming. Not only do practitioners have to engage their audience (the public), they have to engage each other. When curators, interpreters, and scholars acknowledge complementary expertise and join forces, there is a better chance of realizing both institutional and audience objectives.

As cultural programming experiences a paradigm shift, public and private agencies are challenged to rethink basic operating assumptions and reach across traditional boundaries to form new partnerships. Self-interest and the public interest require that professional organizations dedicated to quality cultural programming find ways to reach across the divide. Collaboration by its nature encourages re-imagining common ground and forging new relationships that are themselves the life-blood of public memory.