Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly Engaged Humanities Scholarship in Languages and Literatures Programs

Executive Summary

These guidelines offer suggestions for departments, institutions, and individual faculty in languages and literatures for valuing and assessing research in the public humanities. Because much public humanities scholarship involves engagement with communities, particularly bilingual and multilingual communities, this document places particular emphasis on the ethical questions that arise in community-engaged scholarly work. The guidelines also acknowledge genres of public humanities work that align more closely with traditional forms of humanities scholarship: research published in non-academic venues, such as periodicals and blogs, or lectures and podcasts disseminated to wider audiences beyond the academy in English and other languages.

Broadly, the guidance provided here is meant to engage with the fundamental questions that drive a peer review process in cases where traditional peer review may not currently be feasible, and to suggest alternative modes of peer review where possible. The suggested principles of evaluation for public humanities projects are as follows:

1) The scope and impact of the project (How substantial is the work undertaken? What are its effects in the geographical and intellectual communities in which it participates? How does it change what we know or what we do?)
2) The form and dissemination of the project (How is the project shared with its audience? How is its form—print, digital, participatory, or otherwise—adapted to the specific needs of its public?)
3) The extent of existing deliverables and where relevant, the future trajectory of the project. How has the project—if, like many digital or oral projects, it is a work perennially in progress—achieved some portions of its aims to date? How does it lay the groundwork for future development? How will such future development be evaluated/assessed?
4) The nature and extent of collaboration where applicable (How, for projects that involve collaboration among scholars or with a wider community, is collaboration structured? How are ethical relationships with the community and/or collaborators secured and assured?).

These questions are the key to valuing and evaluating public humanities scholarship, and this document elaborates on how they can be understood and applied.

Introduction

At a time of increased anxiety over the value of the humanities, public humanities scholarship that engages multiple and diverse audiences beyond the university in literature, modern languages, translation and interpretation studies, history, the arts, and cultural heritage has the potential to demonstrate the powerful impact of the humanities in the world. Public humanities scholarship can actively engage with the needs of bilingual and multilingual communities, both local and global. This scholarship takes [many forms](#), from writing about one's research in magazines or op-eds to contributing to a blog to collaborating with a community to develop an exhibit to leading reading groups at a library. When it involves [ethical collaboration with communities](#), public humanities scholarship can decenter the university as the sole site of expertise, creating new forms of knowledge. Whether sole-authored or composed collaboratively with community partners, public humanities scholarship facilitates dialogue and collaboration with multiple publics to collectively engage new audiences in the humanities. Despite the crucial contributions of public humanities scholarship to the making of new knowledges, faculty reward systems often fail to recognize the value of this work in literature, philosophy, history, and cultural studies.

By the nature of the enterprise, the forms of public humanities projects evolve regularly and change more rapidly than more "traditional" forms of scholarship (i.e. the monograph, edited collection, and journal article). These are strengths, *not* limitations of this work. Public humanities scholarship is [expansive in nature](#) and includes, but is not limited to, print and digital dissemination of individual and collective scholarship in venues that reach broad audiences; community events, such as speaker series or community reading events; analog projects, like exhibits in public spaces or interpretive material and cultural heritage sites; and digital projects like podcasts, websites, or apps—and some projects may appear in more than one of these iterations.

Public humanities scholarship that brings expertise to bear on policy questions and is shared with a broad audience, such as op-eds and essays in non-scholarly periodicals, may have a particular impact, and it is noteworthy that in some areas (educational policy, for example) publications that are read more widely than academic journals may have an impact that is far greater than is typically measured by the prestige of the venue. [The impact of public humanities scholarship](#) on multiple and diverse audiences, across local ecosystems, leading to new understandings of our shared world and action based on that new understanding, demands the creation of guidelines and measures that value the work according to that impact. Whether through sharing of knowledge beyond the academy or in [direct collaboration with community members](#), public humanities scholarship contributes directly to the common good through engagement with our communities both local and global. Therefore, valuing publicly-oriented humanities scholarship and activity within faculty reward structures is a matter of urgency for both humanities scholars and the broader society in which we live and work.

Outcomes of public humanities projects include varied forms of scholarship, such as the development of archives, digital stories, exhibitions, and data sets. Yet, many university departments fail to effectively define, identify, and evaluate public humanities scholarship precisely because the outcomes of this work often do not fit "traditional" models and measurements of scholarship. In public humanities scholarship, the lines between "research," "teaching," and "service" often blur and overlap. Consequently, public humanities work often gets slotted into the "service" category when evaluating faculty, even in cases when the outcomes are scholarly and would fit a more expansive definition of "scholarship." At colleges and universities that place a low premium on "service," public scholarship is thus undervalued in tenure and promotion processes and in the evaluation, retention, and advancement of full-time non-tenure-stream and part-time faculty.

When the scholarly outputs of public humanities work are not valued as scholarship, faculty effectively must undertake double the amount of work to meet "traditional" expectations as well. Scholars of color and other historically marginalized groups have a long history of engaging in community-facing work that pushes the boundaries of the conventional journal article and monograph genres. Therefore, [developing mechanisms to evaluate public humanities scholarship for career advancement](#) is crucial to the struggle for equity and social justice within academia.

Humanities [departments](#) must take the lead on developing robust internal processes to evaluate and recognize public humanities scholarship. Rather than capitulating to pre-conceived notions of "acceptable" scholarly genres, tenured faculty have a responsibility to make the case that the unique outputs of public humanities scholarship are, in fact, accepted and valued forms of scholarship. To assist with this process, these guidelines articulate [core principles for evaluation](#) of public humanities scholarship, [guiding questions](#) for evaluators to consider, and advice for [departments](#), [university committees](#), administrators, and [candidates for evaluation](#).

Principles of Evaluation

Scope and Impact of Contribution

Valuing public humanities work requires reframing "impact" for scholarship. Monographs and journal articles are often assessed through citations and peer review, while grants also serve as markers of impact. Measures of impact for public-facing work can include: advancing the mission of the institution, improving retention of underrepresented populations in higher education, undertaking outreach to new audiences through multilingual public scholarship, preserving local cultures, creating new areas of study and centers, raising awareness for more board diversity and training, fostering participatory partnerships, producing more equitable policy, recognizing the need for language accessibility through paid translation and interpreting services, and facilitating new frontiers of engagement with industry, nonprofits, government agencies, and philanthropy. The impact of this work is measurable—through metrics that differ

from the ones on which evaluation has traditionally relied, and which may be context-dependent. For instance, what did a project set for itself vis à vis reaching a new audience or advancing an institutional mission? How has the project creator demonstrated that the goal has been met, and that the project is sustainable? A related question to that of impact is scope, as it is necessary to acknowledge the volume and complexity of the work involved in creating the contribution.

Form and Dissemination of Contribution

Public humanities scholarship appears in multiple genres, some ephemeral (events, time-limited exhibits) and some longer-lasting (digital products, collaborative publications, publications in non-academic venues). The form of a public humanities project should be appropriate to the goals of the project, grounded in the ethics of collaboration. In the evaluation of public humanities scholarship, it is thus crucial to recognize that the language of the project should also be appropriate to partners with whom project directors are collaborating and the audiences the project team strives to reach. The project should also be demonstrably reaching its audience, whether local, regional, national, or international. Moreover, although some projects may be amenable to traditional modes of peer review, and some may be adaptable to newer forms of peer review like those provided by journals like [Reviews in Digital Humanities](#) that have successfully provided peer review for digital public humanities scholarship, many of the more participatory projects of public humanities scholarship are ill-suited to peer review. It is thus crucial to identify and unbundle peer review from assessment of public humanities scholarship and to, instead, evaluate it through the framework provided here.

Extent of Existing Deliverables

While some public humanities projects may be time-limited, many are works-in-progress that do not have finite boundaries that indicate "completion." Therefore, the onus on project creators is to articulate the short- and long-term vision for the project, its benchmarks, milestones, and timeline. The onus on evaluators is to assess the project through the vision provided by the creator. Outlining and planning for the lifecycle of the project orient evaluators towards assessing a project through its own goals and measuring progress towards its vision. It further sets the stage for long-term contributions and future expansion by the creators or iteration by others who wish to build on an existing project.

Collaboration

Collaboration in public humanities scholarship requires a reciprocal approach that values the talents and labor in the communities with which we engage. Public humanities scholarship creates new networks for faculty, staff, and students within the institution; with other universities, community colleges, K-12; and beyond educational institutions. This work undertaken with experts beyond academic institutions provides our students with a greater array of

career-readiness skills, resiliency, and connectedness to neighboring communities. Collaboration, in this way, requires expanding the notion of intellectual leadership to amplify the grassroots, historically-minoritized voices within and beyond our campuses. Effective public humanities scholarship recognizes community partners as fellow creators of knowledge, not sites of extraction. With the goal of making meaningful contributions to multiple publics, public humanities scholarship thus requires incorporating voices of community partners into project design at all stages (research questions, project design, methods, execution, and analysis) and crediting their contributions.

Collaboration and the Ethics of Public Humanities Scholarship

Collaboration with community partners in public humanities scholarship raises important ethical concerns that must be part of any evaluative process. Efforts to undertake public-facing and community-engaged scholarship and partnerships must be conducted, first, by grasping the complexities of what Davarian Baldwin has termed the "UniverCit[y]," where "the shift in higher education policy from public good to private profits," assumes increasing importance in how institutions of higher learning maintain relationships with their neighbors in the surrounding community. As Baldwin describes in his book *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower*, these interactions are too often driven by agendas that turn on sustaining imbalances of power and resources against the counterforce generated by community activism.

What this means, then, is that, for example, in doing archive-based scholarship for the purpose of creating a public exhibit which uncovers disturbing facts about the past, scholars need to exert the necessary time, energy, and thinking to develop strategies for approaching communities. Approaches from public humanities scholars always occur in the sometimes fraught context of colleges and universities' economic and policy-making initiatives in municipal and regional economies. As Baldwin points out, the term "civic engagement" is complicated by the fact that institutions of higher education can use the term to obscure intent to consolidate economic control in a region.

An ethical approach to the public humanities begins, then, with the open acknowledgement that the work takes place whatever economic and policy initiatives are currently in play, and should be approached from the standpoint of shared struggle and common cause. It proceeds from the assumption that public humanities scholarship often challenges the power of institutions, and should be valued for the challenges it presents. Public humanities scholarship insists that communities are sites of knowledge and cultural production, as well as spaces whose meaning derives from the lived experience of the inhabitants as they go about acts of placemaking. As such, this work should be supported in order to flourish healthier and more generative relationships with communities, not mimic the extractive posture of institutions that have placed (sometimes do still place) high value on the norms often characterized by white supremacist, colonialist, and exploitative postures. The people who reside in the surrounding community, the college's or university's neighbors, are seeking to build an empowered existence that must be respected by those who seek to engage in publicly engaged scholarship and teaching. Public humanities scholars should not approach

these communities as broken, or from a perspective engendered by the thinking of a "deficit model." This does not mean that problem-solving should not be part of the agenda of public humanities scholarship, but any such work done in collaboration with community partners must proceed from an ethical relationship with those partners, and an awareness of this necessity must inform any evaluation and recognition of public humanities scholarship.

What follows, then, are guidelines that hopefully lead to ethical and democratic forms of engagement and collaboration.

1. Projects must be imagined apart from the singular agenda of colleges and universities that seek to accumulate power and influence.

2. Efforts to create archival projects must be framed around the idea of knowledge production that is the result of a partnership in which scholars and community members have an equal say in how to proceed.

3. Proceeds generated by exhibits or presentations that involve admissions fees, should be shared with the individuals from the community with whom we are partnering.

4. Public humanities scholarship and teaching must operate out of a geographically specific, moral, and ethical context in which acts of communal storytelling are valued as requisite parts of the overall agenda.

5. In light of the complexity that accompanies efforts at public-facing scholarship, projects involving community partners should embrace the notion that scholarly needs should never take precedence over communal integrity and morality. There needs to be a commitment to negotiations that operate in good faith, with a spirit of collaboration at its center.

6. The goal of public-facing scholarship should be outcomes that are mutually beneficial for individuals, institutions, and community alike, where us/them frameworks are set aside in favor of generative and flexible commitments that emphasize we/us in which adherence to ethical norms are central.

Guiding Questions for Assessing Public Humanities Scholarship

These questions will be broadly applicable to public humanities work, although they may require adjustment based on the scope of the community engaged and the degree of collaboration involved.

- How does this project contribute to the well-being of the community, beyond its effect on the career of the faculty member developing it, the institution sponsoring it, and the financial interests of the business community?

- How has the faculty member identified and cultivated allies and partners for the common good and the furtherance of scholarship in the project, and ensured this process has been undertaken ethically?
- How does the project contribute to student learning and the mentoring of students?
- How does this project contribute to the community's knowledge of itself and its engagement with the wider world?
- How does this project acknowledge and contribute to the community's agency and not just its status as an object of study?
- How does the project contribute to the advancement of public humanities as an area of inquiry, and how does it interact with the existing disciplinary conversations and advance the fields it engages?
- How does the project demonstrate an awareness of the current scholarly conversation within the field and explain how it advances or revises that conversation?
- How does the project contribute to the common good, adding something to the community's experience and resources that was not there before?
- How does the project foster intellectual community, recognizing that membership in an intellectual community is not simply a matter of credentials?
- What role have community partners played in the design of the project, at all stages (research question, methods, implementation, assessment, development of outcomes)?
- What are the milestones of the proposed project, including the timeline for various phases, and how much progress has been made in relation to the timeline?
- How has the project planned for accessibility, both in terms of disability and public engagement?
- How has the project been shared with public audiences?
- How has the project addressed harm reduction (e.g. safety, surveillance, respect for cultural protocols over what should be shared and with whom)?
- How has the project planned for potential reuse or as a building block for future, cross-disciplinary projects?
- How are collaborative relationships developed to be maintained over time?
- How does this project plan for sustainability beyond initial funding or labor model?

Advice for Departments

Humanities departments have an obligation to broaden their understanding of scholarly outputs expected for hiring, promotion, and tenure in the academy, as well as advancement of non-tenure-track and part-time faculty.

Evaluation rubrics of such work for promotion and tenure, based on the MLA's principles and guidelines for evaluation, should be developed within departments in conversation with deans and provosts. Departmental colleagues should familiarize themselves with these guidelines and be prepared to mentor early career scholars undertaking public humanities scholarship. Developing department-specific guidelines for how public humanities scholarship "counts" for

career advancement would encourage this kind of work and also diversify faculties and ultimately student cohorts.

Advice for Appointment, Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure Committees and Administrators

Faculty evaluators and administrators should broaden their understanding of the scholarly outputs expected for hiring, promotion, and tenure in the academy. Particularly important to consider are the ways the characteristics valued in peer-reviewed scholarly books and journal articles also appear in public-facing projects: depth of engagement with previous scholarship, scope of contribution to major lines of inquiry in the field, impact on the field and on the broader community, and inventiveness and clarity in communication. Just as we should not rely on peer review alone as a marker of value, we can use the guiding questions for assessment to evaluate public-facing work, and to consider and measure the scholarly impact of public humanities work.

Advice for Candidates

Candidates for reappointment, tenure, and promotion should view the guiding questions for assessment as a series of questions they should use, as appropriate, to frame their public humanities scholarship in narratives and other evaluation documents.

Advice for External Reviewers

External reviewers should use the guidelines to assess public humanities scholarship. These reviewers should speak directly to how the projects being evaluated meet the guiding questions for assessment.

Resources and Further Reading

Baldwin, Davarian L. *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities are Plundering Our Cities*. Bold Type Books, 2021.

Badgett, M.V. Lee. *The Public Professor: How to Use Your Research to Change the World*. New York University Press, 2015.

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Shah, Rachel. *Rewriting Partnerships: Community Perspectives on Community-Based Learning*. Utah State University Press, 2020.