Pushing Boundaries: Making the Medieval Relevant through Public History and Engagement On and Off Campus

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When I arrived on the campus of this small regional public university fresh out of graduate school, I felt like I had won the lottery. Not only had I secured a tenure-track job in a terrible market, but I had done so at an institution with small class sizes, a liberal-arts based teaching mission, and a long history of supporting women’s education, which was precisely the type of university at which I had always wanted to teach. I soon discovered that leaving behind a well-supported medieval community comprised of a diverse and thriving scholarly body, phenomenal library, and financial support for teaching and research had its challenges. While my new university valued my teaching skills, its library resources were far more limited than I had anticipated, and the student body, comprised largely of first-generation college students, did not immediately understand the relevance of medieval history to their course of study or future career goals. Despite the warm welcome I received from my new colleagues, I soon began to wonder if
some of them harbored similar questions about the wisdom of using one of their few tenure-track lines on a premodernist. As the lone medievalist in a department of only four historians, and one of only two medievalists on the entire campus, I have found that the best way to ensure that medieval history is taken seriously by my colleagues is by actively seeking ways to professionally engage both with my departmental colleagues outside of the medieval period and as a medievalist across and beyond campus. In my experience, the following six areas have been key in demonstrating how my training in medieval history can be an asset in program and curricular development, undergraduate education in core history skills, student recruitment, and public outreach.

**Apply your skills to the task at hand: Saving the archives and creating undergraduate research opportunities**

Through my co-leadership, our department successfully lobbied the university to reopen the shuttered university archives that had lain dormant for nearly twenty years after a tornado damaged the building housing the collection. Working closely with colleagues in history and women’s studies whose research agendas could make far better use of the materials in this collection than my own, I used my training as a medievalist to make an argument for the value of archival research in undergraduate education. I reached out to contacts at similar college archives for advice and was also able to use my previous experience with grant writing to help us locate and eventually win a small disaster-relief grant to begin the rebuilding process. We recruited a local volunteer with degrees in library science and history to help us with the more technical portions of our task and over the course of a few years were able to get him hired on a part-time and, eventually, full-time basis as the new university archivist.
Along with presenting the archives as an exciting tool for hands-on undergraduate research and student engagement, we also explained to our administration how a functional university archives would be a boon for institutional history projects, reaccreditation documentation, and long-term university record-keeping. It took us several years, but I am pleased to note that the university archives is now a thriving program that employs multiple student workers and interns each semester, many of whom collected oral histories, conducted original archival research, and produced a public website and published anthology as the core of our campus-wide celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the university’s desegregation. The archives has also proven valuable to the university’s public relations and alumni offices, providing them with historical information, images, and the occasional magazine or website article to stir interest in the university and its history. While the materials in this collection are still irrelevant to my own research agenda, I make use of them in my classes and work regularly with our archivist and my history colleagues to help promote history and original undergraduate research across the university.


Build the program: A medievalist’s role in creating a public history major

As we worked to reopen the university archives, my colleagues and I decided to use the opportunity to launch a new undergraduate program in public history. Now offered as a concentration option within the larger history major, this program combines traditional history courses with classes like archives management, oral history, public budgeting, and internships and is unique as an undergraduate major within our region. Here again, my background as a medievalist meant that I did not have any obvious contributions to make to a program focused by practical necessity on the history of the United States. However, I saw the value of the new major track to our overall department and looked for ways that I could contribute. While I leave courses like archival management and oral history to my colleagues, I am more than capable of guiding students as they seek out internships at regional and national archives, museums, and history centers and then coordinating with their supervisors to manage their academic internship credits and ensure that they get the most out of the program. I also collaborate in preparing our advanced students to present their research at academic conferences and at public forums such as the local library’s lecture series or semi-annual research events on campus. Although I may not be as familiar as some of my colleagues with the students’ source material or the immediate historical context of their research, my years of experience presenting my own research in public means that I can offer suggestions about structure, pacing, and public speaking skills. Beyond that, I provide a sympathetic audience for an initial read through and a supportive presence in the crowd at the event itself. The new public history program has led to a significant increase of these “archives to podium” student projects, and we are becoming recognized in our region for the enthusiasm and skill our undergraduates show in both research and presentation. I am proud to contribute as I can to those presentations, even if the
material is not medieval, and I know that my students and colleagues appreciate my help.

**Adapting modern history techniques for a medieval classroom: An oral history collection project**

After working so closely with my modernist colleagues, I began to wonder if there was a way that I could incorporate some of the techniques I was learning from them into my own classes. In particular, I was intrigued by the idea of an oral history project. Normally oral histories are quite impossible for medievalists, at least without the use of a séance and a very active imagination. However, I realized that an oral history project might be just the solution I needed to solve a challenge in my course on the early Islamic world. When I had initially developed the course I had access to the library resources of a much larger research university. The library at my new institution had a much smaller operating budget, which meant that purchasing deeply on the topic of the medieval Middle East was understandably not near the top of their annual acquisitions list. That made it very difficult for students to complete an independent research paper successfully. The first time I taught the course I relied on a combination of lending out my personal resource collection and attempting to guide my students through the pre-planning and coordination required for interlibrary loans and trips to other, larger university libraries in our vicinity. Although it was not a total disaster, I certainly would not call it a successful approach. When the time came for me to teach the course again, I decided to scrap the research paper and replace it with an oral history project. With the generous help of an Americanist colleague and our local county public archivist, I designed a project where teams of my students contacted local Muslims and conducted oral histories about their experience living as a minority religious group in a relatively rural, deep southern community in the early twenty-first century. I introduced my students to oral history best practices, guided their proposal through the Institutional Review Board, helped them hone their interview questions, and assisted them
with developing phone and email scripts to invite area Muslims to participate in the process.\footnote{The Oral History Association offers many helpful resources when starting a class project like this, including \textit{Principles and Best Practices for Oral History}, Oral History Association (2009), http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/.
} We practiced interview techniques and recorder use in the classroom and had regular team progress reports nestled between discussions and lectures about the medieval Islamic world. The interviews were conducted by small teams and the resulting digital recordings and student-generated transcripts were donated to the county archives where they are housed in the permanent collection.

On the surface, this project sounds like an interesting alternative to the traditional research project but looks completely disconnected from the medieval subject matter of the course. However, the completion of the oral history project actually helped my students to better understand the nature of the medieval source base and to better appreciate the importance of the historian’s work. Too often, the voices of the “average” person from the medieval era are lost to the modern student. When previous classes had questioned the imbalance of elite voices to those of the comparatively silent majority in this course, I engaged them in a discussion about how literacy rates, perceived value of texts for preservation over the intervening centuries, and bias in modern source translation to English have resulted in a lack of accessible source materials about the common person’s experience. That conversation took on an entirely different tone in the semester when I introduced the oral history project. The students quickly realized that, due to the small nature of the Muslim community in our region, their stories were equally hidden from the larger historical narrative. Those who had already conducted interviews spoke about how some area Muslims were hesitant to speak about their faith in public out of concern for their safety or the success of their family businesses. The majority of interview subjects tried to keep a low public profile and often socialized within circles that rarely overlapped those who
wrote the news, advocated for public policy, ran for local office, or otherwise had their stories told in places that might wind up in the region’s historical record. The students connected the experience and worries of this modern religious minority community to how the earliest Muslim community may have felt in and around seventh-century Mecca where they were similarly viewed by some as a disruptive and potentially dangerous religious and political threat.

Further, my students recognized that without the work they were doing to collect these oral histories these modern “average” Muslims might face the same fate as their medieval brethren and be lost to the historical record, not through deliberate omission but rather through simple oversight. The occasional failure to connect with an interview subject or refusal by some potential interviewees to participate in the project caused frustration among my students, but it also led to a deeper understanding about the challenges inherent in oral history collection and the generation and preservation of historical source material. More than one student mentioned that they would never again take the existence of primary source materials for granted. This project gave my students a deeper understanding of the nature of the medieval source base and a way to access the emotional repercussions of living as a minority religious group in a larger community that is sometimes uncomfortable, or at least perceived to be uncomfortable, with their presence. These realizations substantially increased their pride in recording the oral histories and several students have told me in the semesters that followed what an impact the project had on their understanding of the medieval world and their appreciation of the importance and difficulty involved in historical research.

The opportunities of departmental curricular review: Service courses with a medieval twist

When the time came to reassess the core major courses of historical methods and capstone, I worked closely with my modernist colleagues to create a more skills-driven sequence that has
greatly improved our student outcomes. Along with my upper-level medieval and world civilization survey classes, I now regularly teach the department’s historical methods and research course. As it would for any of my colleagues, my training as a historian allows me to teach students the skills required to plan a research project, utilize local archives and libraries, organize a research paper, and convert a written paper into a compelling oral presentation. While I recognize that some historians find teaching the methods course to be a chore best avoided whenever possible, I have come to see it as an opportunity to show students how medievalists and medieval source materials are relevant to modern historical understanding. Previous experience had shown me that it is sometimes easier for students to discuss difficult topics like racism, sexism, and institutional violence in the relative safety of the distant past than it is to do so in a course focused on a more modern period. The same proves to be true of discussions about historical ethics, source use, or methods for uncovering authorial bias, where beginning with a medieval example and moving to more modern ones led to lively student discussions. I also ask my students to read Judith Bennett’s article “Forgetting the Past” and to consider what might be lost if we ignore the distant past in favor of the more popular recent periods of history.5 Thankfully the debate about whether or not research on premodern topics is still relevant in the modern age generally results in the conclusion that it is, in fact, still important, and I’m fairly certain that they are not all just pandering to their professor in saying so.

Beyond making a case for the importance of the medieval world to contemporary students of history, teaching the methods course has helped me to develop connections with my colleagues. I cannot teach this course without engaging with the materials, sources, and techniques used by my modernist peers, which has caused me to have a better understanding of their research practices. Asking them for reading suggestions has helped

to broaden my own education and has led to some fascinating professional conversations which I otherwise might have missed. After several years I think that my colleagues all recognize that, while the medieval material I teach may remain foreign to them, I can use it to impart the same vital skills for academic or public history and that our students are able to successfully transfer those skills into their other courses within the department.

**Student outreach: Build the minor and grow your program**

While gaining the respect of my students and colleagues for the relevance of medieval coursework and research has helped them to see me as a valuable member of our department, it is also important to show administrators how a medievalist can be an asset to the contemporary university. The public history major appealed greatly to them since it is more clearly tied to job opportunities than a traditional history degree and provides many opportunities for our students to actively engage in hands-on learning, which is an important part of our university’s teaching mission. My work in developing that program, along with the curriculum work in my department and my extensive service work on university committees, proved that I was willing and able to work outside of my immediate field to benefit our students and institution. To make my case for the relevance of medieval studies to the modern student, however, I had to push further. Capitalizing on public enthusiasm for the Middle Ages, I created an interdisciplinary Medieval and Renaissance Studies minor on campus which is now housed in our department.

Despite clear student enthusiasm for the subject, I was wary of creating a medieval studies minor on a campus where the only medievalists were a professor in the English department and myself. However, with a little flexible thinking the program came together quite easily and did not require the creation of a single new course or teaching line. After poring over our course catalog I decided to expand the temporal range to include the Renaissance. I compiled a list of thirty courses from nine different disciplines which had a substantial medieval or Renaissance
component that formed the core of the minor’s elective course offerings. By initiating several discussions with the faculty who regularly taught those courses, I generated both the structure for the minor and a faculty advisory board. The minor was easily approved by the university’s undergraduate curriculum committee, where the provost happily noted that the minor was both unique among our regional peers and would cost the university nothing to create since the required courses were already regularly taught by existing faculty.

While the minor is certainly a niche program, it attracts an enthusiastic group of students and is growing steadily. The minor has helped to steer students into medieval courses which had suffered from low enrollment in the recent past, thus keeping the premodern period regularly on the academic schedule and earning the gratitude of my colleagues and their department chairs. Programming like medieval movie nights and a fencing demonstration have generated student interest beyond our small core of existing minors, which has also helped to draw students into medieval and Renaissance courses to fulfill their general education or elective requirements. Enthusiasm has in fact been so high that this year saw the reemergence of Latin language courses, which had been discontinued some ten years ago when the previous Latin instructor retired and the subject area was not deemed important enough for a replacement. While the current Latin course offerings are few and the instructor was already an employee of the university rather than a new hire, the growth of this program in just a few short years has proven that student interest in the Middle Ages can help to raise enrollment in existing courses and revive previously suspended ones.

Public outreach: Using popular interest in the Middle Ages to build the university’s local profile

A second way I have found to show campus administrators how a medievalist can be an asset to a small university is by performing community outreach through public speaking engagements. Broad interest in the Middle Ages provides the lone medievalist
with a built-in method for public outreach. For an institution of our size, appearances in the local media and public lectures are a great way to garner regional recognition and appreciation for the university. They are also a good way to gain the respect of the public relations staff and administrators inside the campus gates. I have been able to use media appearances and public lectures to good effect in this way. In my first year at the university I was contacted by a local news outlet and asked to record a short interview for a segment on the history of Valentine’s Day. That interview went well enough that I have now been invited back to do brief live segments about the history of other holidays with medieval roots, such as St. Patrick’s Day, and to advertise community outreach programs, such as the free event I coordinated to assist area high school students and their parents in preparing to apply for college. I have also presented public lectures on topics like the “real” history of St. Patrick and medieval interactions between Muslims, Jews, and Christians on our campus and at the local public library. I will soon give another public lecture explaining how medieval subject matter is not only relevant, but important, to contemporary undergraduate education. All of these engagements have helped to raise my university’s local profile. Each one has generated interest, and usually a press release, from our public relations department, which in turn has shown the university administration how a medievalist can contribute to the university’s larger mission and regional reputation.

While I stumbled into most of these opportunities without much planning or forethought, in retrospect the key was letting it be known that I was willing to speak. Most small communities are desperate for public speakers on interesting topics, and as the recent spate of medieval-themed movies and television series demonstrates the Middle Ages are a very trendy topic. Our university public relations office keeps a list of resident subject experts which they use when the media calls to request someone to speak on a given topic. I recommend that you find out who keeps that list at your university and ask to be added to it. I was not on the list when I received my initial interview request, and I certainly would not have listed the history of early Christian
saints as an area of expertise if I had been, but someone in the public relations office knew that I was the “historian of really old stuff” on campus and routed the call to my office. Similarly, my first offer to speak at the public library came from helping the public archivist employed in that library with an NEH grant she won to bring the Muslim Journeys bookshelf program to our community. Because we worked together in developing my department’s public history program and I regularly took my majors to visit her archives, she knew that I occasionally taught a course on medieval Islamic history. She therefore invited me to join the grant programming committee which led to me giving a presentation and introducing a film screening for the series. It was also part of the genesis for the student oral history project in my course, the results of which are now housed in her archives. That lecture led to an invitation to submit my name and further public lecture proposals to the state humanities council, which offers programming across the state. My public lectures on campus have been the result of similar collaborations and discussions. What I learned is that if you let your colleagues know what you do and are enthusiastic when explaining to them why it interests you, it can lead to interesting invitations. Being willing to say “yes,” even if the requested speaking topic takes you slightly outside of your comfort zone, is also an important part of the equation. Although I would never claim to be an expert in some of these topic areas and would certainly never present on them at an academic conference, I know that my understanding of the material through teaching and reading widely in my field is deep enough to help clear up common public misconceptions about the medieval period and to offer a new perspective on a familiar topic to an interested lay audience.

These six items have helped me to show my colleagues and administrators that medieval history can teach the same vital historical skills as more modern subject material while also proving to be a great tool for outreach and student recruitment. Though most of these programs have led me outside of my temporal field, my familiarity with grant writing, the vital nature of archival research, my broad training as a medieval historian,
and my interest in engaging with the public meant that I was at the forefront of all aspects of these departmental developments. By stepping outside of my comfort zone, I have shown myself willing to engage with my colleagues, students, and community members where their interests abut my own, and I have proven that a medievalist can be relevant in a twenty-first century university.