

An Interview with Michael Cook Historical Administration Coordinator

Eastern Illinois University offers a unique alternative to the traditional Master of Arts degree in History. Since its inception in 1975, the Historical Administration program has garnered national prominence. Interested in the specifics of the program and concerned over recent rumors regarding the program's uncertain future, *Historia* spoke to Program Coordinator Michael Cook.

Historia(H): What does the Historical Administration program prepare students for?

M.C.: The program prepares graduates for careers in museums, historical agencies, historical societies and jobs in related fields. These types of jobs require the ability to think historically, to think critically, to conduct historical research and to be aware of the importance of preserving our American heritage.

H: How do the courses offered by Historical Administration compare to those found in Eastern's traditional history graduate program?

M.C.: While the courses emphasize history, some take a more practical approach to history--how to actually put things into use. Some of the courses offered include U.S. Social and Cultural History, Oral History and Local History Research, History of American Architecture, Archival Photography, as well as museum related courses like History Museum Exhibits, Historical Interpretation, Archives and editing, Care and Management of Historical Artifacts and a seminar in Historical Administration.

H: What are some student activities?

M.C.: The Greenwood School Museum, located on Hayes Avenue, is used in coursework as a place for students to learn skills needed to plan and install an exhibition and serves as a learning laboratory. The museum houses a photography lab and other equipment used by students. Other sites providing hands-on experience include the Dudley House on Seventh Street and the Lincoln Log Cabin State Historic Site, South of Charleston.

Each class visits and analyzes several historic sites and museums. The Indianapolis Children's

Museum, Conner Prairie Living History Village in Noblesville, Indiana, the Illinois State Museum and the Illinois State Historical Library represent a few of the field trips taken during the year. Other areas of the country are visited on a rotating basis by year. This year's class will visit areas in the South and Southeast, including Colonial Williamsburg.

After two semesters of courses, students begin internships. While some find their own internships, the department keeps a large file and often assists in this process. Internships count for credit and offer a method of practical experience which strengthens students' skills and helps them secure professional employment once they have finished the program.

H: Why would someone interested in work at a history museum or agency choose Eastern's program?

M.C.: Eastern's program has a remarkable reputation and is one of the few nationally recognized programs in Historical Administration. Important to note is the fact that the past five winners of the Malkovich award (presented to outstanding, young, historical professionals in Illinois) have been graduates of the program.

Established seventeen years ago, the program provides a broadly-based background for people interested in this field. The students are prepared to perform a variety of skills needed to handle the different aspects of museum, archival and historical agency work. Another reason for choosing Eastern's program is that the alumni are very active in the professional organizations of this field and remain in contact with the program, current classes and other alumni.

The program maintains an association for alumni which holds an annual Symposium. The Symposium hosts speakers on topics which vary from year to year. This is an important event as it exposes students to outside speakers and allows them to interact with alumni. This intermingling allows the current class to enter the existing network of the museum related field.

H: There was once discussion of dropping the program; how does it stand now?

M.C.: The program was able to meet and surpass the university requirement in question and is no longer in any danger of being cut.

H: Is there a typical applicant to the program?

M.C.: I would not define any of these students as "typical", but many of them do have similarities: all are committed to working in history museums or in historical agencies, most are

experienced in the field, many are volunteers in related institutions, and most of our students are from out of state.

H: After completion, are students successfully placed in their chosen field?

M.C.: Yes, the placement record is close to 100 percent. The History Department office continually gets notices of opening positions and job announcements and we often help place people not only once, but two or three times at various points in their careers. People like Eastern because of the broad base they receive in the program. The program's alumni are located across the United States and in the Province of Ontario. Many of them hold positions as directors, curators, interpreters, and archivists and some have gone on to be educators or to work in other related fields.

Historia thanks Michael Cook for his time and insight and would also like to recognize the rest of the Historical Administration professors: E. Duane Elbert, Wendy Hamand Venet, Robert E. Hennings, David J. Maurer, Christopher Waldrep and Patricia L. Miller. The abilities of these instructors are reflected in a wide range of professional activities, publications, and outstanding accomplishments. For more information concerning the program, its faculty, students or alumni, contact the History Department Office, 224 Coleman, or Michael Cook in office 216E Coleman.

--Cheryl E. Munyer