UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN:
U-M HISTORYLABS

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PROGRAM SUMMARY

The U-M HistoryLabs model emerged in part from the Michigan in the World program that the history department began in 2015 to provide team-based, active-learning opportunities for undergraduate researchers. The program called for students to create digital history exhibits through courses and a summer internship program, using the resources of the Bentley Historical Library and other campus archives. Another important precedent, the Environmental Justice HistoryLab (2017–2021) operated as a partnership between the history department and the Ecology Center (a community partner) and created two multimedia historical websites, two documentary films and an archive of 40 oral interviews through two project courses and embedded Ecology Center interns (13 undergraduate and three graduate students). Around this time, the history department also made a significantly expanded commitment to publicly engaged scholarship and active learning collaborations to revolve around community partnerships, digital humanities, career diversity, public impact and especially the empowerment of undergraduate as well as graduate students to be full collaborators on team-based projects.

> **U-M HistoryLabs provide team-based, active-learning opportunities for undergraduate researchers.**

U-M HistoryLabs formally launched in fall 2018 with two pilot undergraduate-centered projects: the Policing and Social Justice HistoryLab and the Immigrant Justice Lab. Both projects received substantial seed funding from an internal grant (see below), with an agreement to offer each lab course at least once annually; work with community partners; recruit diverse, underrepresented and directly impacted students; and hire around half of the student researchers to continue through paid extracurricular internships and research associate positions.

The Policing and Social Justice HistoryLab has involved 65 undergraduate students and five graduate student supervisors/consultants across four lab courses and a broad array of extracurricular research projects. These groups have created a multimedia website exhibit, *Detroit Under Fire* (2021); three additional website exhibits that are forthcoming; a curriculum

utilized by the Detroit Public Schools; and 16 other digital publications. Undergraduate students have authored or co-authored all of these exhibits and reports, receiving more than 250,000 total webpage views to date.

The Immigrant Justice Lab has worked closely with the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center, its community partner, to involve more than 100 undergraduates, five graduate students, and around 30 law school students in seven project courses so far and many follow-up internships. Collectively, they have produced dozens of asylum briefs for individual clients, "country conditions" templates for attorneys of asylum seekers elsewhere, and a series of "self-defense" immigration guides authorized for distribution in Michigan's ICE facilities and federal immigration court. The Department of Justice has approved a nationwide rollout of these guides.

The Policing and Social Justice HistoryLab has involved 65 undergraduate students and five graduate students and resulted in a multimedia website exhibit; three additional online exhibits that are forthcoming; a curriculum utilized by the Detroit Public Schools; and 16 other digital publications.

In addition to the annual Policing and Immigration lab courses, the department offers several topic-specific undergraduate team-based HistoryLabs each year that majors can take instead of the traditional capstone course with a written research paper (large numbers of non-majors, often a majority, also take the HistoryLab courses). Most labs have been offered only one time and include project courses on Asian Americans in Michigan; the politics of academic freedom; medieval London; environmental justice and the Great Lakes; the history of the Detroit River; a traveling exhibition at the University of Michigan Museum of Art; and the history of the book. The most successful of these additional HistoryLabs are offered more than once and are part of a sustained digital humanities research project led by the faculty instructor and funded by additional resources — specifically the Philippines and the University of Michigan project and another that investigates communities to add to the Sundown Towns website.

In 2019, a graduate student version of U-M HistoryLabs was launched with a co-taught seminar that conducted research in partnership with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to create curated digital resources and educational programming for its website. (Read co-instructor Rita Chin's reflection on the Holocaust Museum collaboration here). The history department has averaged one or two graduate HistoryLabs per year with other projects partnering with the Detroit Institute for the Arts, the University of Michigan Museum of Art, the U-M Center for Social Solutions (for its historical reparations project) and the American Historical Association. In 2024, the history department began offering a new series of graduate HistoryLabs linked to the University of Michigan's recently launched Inclusive History Project to critically investigate its own past.

RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATIVE MODEL

The most ambitious undergraduate HistoryLabs, involving the largest number of students and the most visible impact and sustained community partnerships, have operated with larger budgets and multi-year commitments that do not apply to the one-semester courses. Matt Lassiter and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, the respective faculty directors of the Policing and Social Justice HistoryLab and Immigrant Justice Lab, collaborated closely in designing the pilot version of each course and received a $53,570 grant from the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts' New Initiatives/New Instruction program in exchange for committing to the projects for a minimum of five years. About half of this initial grant went to two individual graduate student lab supervisors who provided indispensable support as full collaborators and made the public engagement project part of their own research portfolio and professional development (U-M makes it very difficult to employ graduate research assistants in departments without federal grants, and HistoryLabs are too small to qualify for graduate student instructors/teaching assistants). The other half went to paying undergraduate students enrolled in these lab courses to continue work during the summer or next academic semester/year, which was very valuable for their own career development and enabled the projects to take on research initiatives beyond the confines of a single semester.

This model was so successful that Lassiter and Hoffnung-Garskof expended the initial grant in less than three years and received a $93,000 supplemental grant from the same funding source in 2021. Both of the pilot projects also became key components of the Carceral State Project's broader *Documenting Criminalization, Confinement, and Resistance* initiative, which since 2019 has received two additional major grants from U-M's Humanities Collaboratory and the Meet the Moment public engagement initiative. These have contributed around $100,000 to the Policing and Social Justice HistoryLab and Immigrant Justice Lab for paid student researchers, faculty summer compensation, honoraria for community partners, curricular development, public events, distribution of publications and the "self-defense" guides, and a series of workshops and mini-conferences designed to spread the HistoryLab model.

In 2024, the history department began offering a new series of graduate HistoryLabs linked to the University of Michigan's recently launched Inclusive History Project to critically investigate its own past.

The other undergraduate HistoryLabs have not received anywhere near the same level of funding or administrative support, with the important exception of the Philippines and the University of Michigan course, which is connected to a larger Humanities Collaboratory–funded project, ReConnect/ReCollect: Reparative Connections to Philippine Collections at the University of Michigan. The history department provides $5,000 in HistoryLab course development funds for instructors the first time that they propose a course that is approved by the review committee. The funds are designated to hire a graduate student to collaborate on the development of the HistoryLab course over the summer and provide some consulting assistance during the semester. Most

faculty report that the HistoryLab course involves a significant workload and that undergraduate team projects rarely are publishable at the end of the semester, leaving the instructor to either work uncompensated to bring the work product online or hire student collaborators from personal research funds. Faculty have expressed frustration that U-M does not authorize graduate student instructors or research assistants to work on non-lecture sectioned courses and that funding for a graduate student consultant is not available if they teach the HistoryLab more than once.

Several of the graduate HistoryLab courses have enjoyed supplemental funding from an institutional partner (i.e., the Holocaust Museum, the American Historical Association) or well-resourced internal partners (Center for Social Solutions, Inclusive History Project). They often have been co-taught (lessening the workload on faculty leads) or integrated into preexisting faculty research agendas (such as an art museum exhibit). Graduate courses also seem to face fewer hurdles in bringing a project to completion during one semester, in part because the process of editing and enhancing student-produced work before public release is not as time-consuming. It also seems that community partners with existing digital platforms have defined more manageable work products than faculty who conceptualize an undergraduate HistoryLab with a website built from scratch and then find that a semester with 15 undergraduates is a very short time period to accomplish their vision.

BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

This section focuses on the undergraduate HistoryLabs, as the graduate HistoryLabs have a distinct trajectory and deserve a fuller analysis than is possible here (for more about the graduate HistoryLabs see Cook & Chin, 2024; Balleisen & Chin, 2022). The two pilot undergraduate projects, the Policing and Social Justice HistoryLab and the Immigrant Justice Lab, account for around half of the U-M HistoryLabs courses offered since 2018, but also operate with significant differences and advantages compared to the majority of the other projects. The goals of these two projects include:

- Providing valuable curricular and extracurricular experiences and career-enhancing opportunities to undergraduate students, especially underrepresented students.

- Providing leadership and career-enhancing opportunities to graduate students employed as supervisors, consultants and collaborators.

- Implementing a social justice agenda that employs historical research methods to address pressing areas of public policy and influence contemporary political and legal debates.

- Developing robust relationships with community partners, especially the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center, as well as other Detroit-based groups.

- Piloting and developing models for scaling the HistoryLab program in the Department of History and spreading the model to other programs and departments at U-M and beyond.

The most important features of these two pilot HistoryLabs are 1) the supplemental grant funding, to compensate graduate student collaborators and paid undergraduate researchers after the semester is over (as described above); and 2) the decision to integrate both HistoryLab seminars into larger lecture courses offered the semester before. Both project directors teach a 50–75 enrollment "flipped" lecture course that introduces students to the general historical content and the team-based, active-learning, document-centered approach (Crime and Drugs in Modern America for Lassiter; Immigration Law for Hoffnung-Garskof). Both instructors recruit most, and often all, of the undergraduate students who join the HistoryLab seminar directly from the preceding lecture course. This enables screening of students who receive overrides into the HistoryLab based on their previous coursework and level of commitment, along with the conscious effort to create a diverse project team that whenever possible includes students from directly impacted communities and/or with a track record of public service and engagement. The two-course scaffolding also means that the HistoryLab teams can hit the ground running on the research project, without spending as much time teaching content and methods as would be required with a typical new group of students, since the larger team-based course familiarizes them with collaborative work, research methods and general historical context. Eleven versions of these two HistoryLab courses confirm that this approach results in a highly motivated group of students, the majority of whom spend at least 12 months (two courses plus the summer internship), and in some cases two to three years, contributing to the projects and becoming very valued collaborators.

Community partnerships also beckon as an effective and compelling approach. The Immigrant Justice Lab launched with a robust partnership already developed with the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center. In contrast, the Policing and Social Justice HistoryLab started with a research agenda that was not formulated in collaboration with community partners, which has necessitated significant work in subsequent years to build the relationships that, in retrospect, would have been advantageous at the outset. On the other hand, the Immigrant Justice Lab has tended to defer to the community partner for its agenda each semester, and its essential work on behalf of clients has been less publicly visible and less likely than that of the Policing HistoryLab to take the form of digital publications and website exhibits with a different type of impact. The other more successful HistoryLabs have also often worked closely with community or campus partners, including most of the graduate versions and the undergraduate collaborations with the Sundown Towns and the Philippines and U-M projects.

CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Faculty compensation, scholarly credit and workload are major challenges for the HistoryLab program. Lassiter and Hoffnung-Garskof, the directors of the pilot projects, were both full professors at the time of the 2018 launch and less worried than many colleagues about whether collaborative public engagement and digital humanities projects would "count" toward their research and scholarship. At the same time, both found the project work so meaningful

that they incorporated the HistoryLabs into their personal research programs and they each received full-year sabbatical fellowships specifically to work on the projects. That said, it has been fairly difficult to recruit assistant and even associate professors to lead HistoryLab projects because of their (not inaccurate) perception that this work is time-consuming and will not be adequately credited in the tenure and promotion process, compared to the traditional book and journal article model for history faculty. It is worth noting that both U-M and the Department of History have recently modified their tenure and promotion criteria to encourage faculty to "mark" this sort of labor and scholarship as research and not just as teaching and service. The U-M HistoryLabs program is disadvantaged by the reluctance of many faculty to participate until they have become full professors and/or finished their second book, and also by a (mis)perception among some that the initiative is primarily for historians of the modern United States.

HistoryLabs has successfully built community partnerships and reached public audiences that were barely on the history department's radar before it began, while also transforming students into publicly engaged historians.

The strategy of incorporating collaborative, public engagement scholarship into the curricular space turned out to be a brilliant move that made it possible for faculty in a humanities department to imagine having the time to engage in this sort of work. But most HistoryLab projects, or at least the undergraduate ones, cannot be completed during a single semester and require significant faculty time commitment after the formal course is over. We have discussed a two-semester sequence but worry this would deter many potential students.

The model of faculty supervising grant-funded graduate students and undergraduates to continue working on the projects is essential and has made possible many of the program's most substantive accomplishments. But most of this faculty labor outside of the semester is uncompensated by the university. The subset of faculty who have received summer stipends through the Carceral State Project or the Humanities Collaboratory do receive some renumeration but generally consider it to be much less than they deserve for the amount of time required. HistoryLab faculty leaders who do not have access to supplemental grants, or do not have funding for a graduate student consultant the second time around, generally express frustration that the workload was much more than they anticipated and that they do not have the capacity or resources to complete the unfinished work (a number of digital projects have come out several years later or not at all).

Another real challenge is dissemination of the work product. Faculty leaders generally lack the time and expertise to publicize their digital publications to diverse audiences, which lessens the public impact that is a central goal of the HistoryLabs initiative. The history department unsuccessfully requested a staff position from the University of Michigan to hire a public

engagement coordinator who would be fully dedicated to its various initiatives, including but not limited to HistoryLabs, and would be responsible for marketing projects, consulting on technology and working with faculty to develop curricula. Multiple faculty also wish they had the funding to hire a custom website designer rather than relying on more limited platforms supported by university technology services. HistoryLabs that have well-resourced institutional partners such as the Holocaust Museum, or access to larger grant funds such as the Carceral State Project, have been able to address this challenge more effectively than those that do not.

All that said, the HistoryLabs program has still been very successful in building community partnerships and reaching public audiences that were barely on the history department's radar before it began. It also has provided an alternative to the solo-authored book and article model through meaningful collaborations that have transformed graduate and especially undergraduate students into publicly engaged historians who have enhanced career-oriented skills and published digital scholarship.

References

Cook, J., & Chin, R. (2024). History Labs: Building a more effective case for the power and efficacy of humanistic training. In D. Fisher-Livne & M. May-Curry (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to public humanities scholarship* (pp. 387–404). Routledge.

Balleisen, E. J., & Chin, R. (2022). The case for bringing experiential learning into the humanities. *Daedalus, 151*(3), 138–152.

The University of Michigan is a public research university in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with 48,000 students, including more than 31,000 undergraduates and more than 16,000 graduate students.