

Canadian Historical Association

MAKING HISTORY WORK

The University College of the Fraser Valley is making history work - in more ways than one. The Department of History at UCFV, situated an hour's drive east of Vancouver, has developed a novel eight-month course which places third-year History students with employers in the community, enabling them to apply the skills they have acquired through academic studies in a variety of work environments. In its inaugural year (1997-98), Applied Studies in History (History 301a/b) placed 23 students in work-based practicums, ranging from archives and museums, to government work, schools and engineering offices.

Dr. Eric Davis, past History Department Head, views the course as "a bridge between the academy and community. 'Hands-on' experience demonstrates - to both employers and students - that the traditional skills provided by a liberal arts degree with a major in History are themselves marketable."

Dr. Chad Reimer, who teaches the course and coordinates its practicums, agrees: "Work placements with local employers and institutions are the heart of the course. They give students the chance to apply history in practical, non-academic settings. Thanks to these, students will graduate with valuable experience and contacts in the community, along with the skills needed to enter such fields as education, law, journalism and business."

Applied Studies in History had its beginning in the winter of 1995-96, the result of department discussions on the relationship between a traditional history degree and the new marketplace. Department members agreed that the current political and economic climate warranted supplementing students' academic development with applied experience and training, something which would alter give graduates an edge in the competitive job market. Drs. Jack Gaston and Sylvie Murray submitted a proposal to the provincial Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Training, which provided seed funding for the construction of the novel course. Dr. Reimer was hired to construct, and eventually teach, the new course.

The result was the first course of its kind in Canada. Stretching over the entire academic year, Applied Studies in History is divided into three components. In Pre-Practicum Seminars (Sept.-Oct.), students address the conceptual, methodological and ethical issues raised by the application of history outside the university classroom, drawing upon the established literature on applied history, along with other historical products (such as film, 'living museums', etc.). During the Practicum period (Nov.-March), students spend eight hours per week in a local company or organization, acquiring the day-to-day skills required in that environment, and working toward a Final Project which is the crowning achievement of the practicum. Each practicum is regularly monitored both at the

workplace, through a supervisor from the company, and by the course coordinator, through scheduled monthly meetings with the students and through direct contact with them and their employers. Finally, students reassemble in Post-Practicum Seminars (March-April), where they have an opportunity to present their practicum work, reflect upon what they have learnt during the practicum, and consider the career options opened to them by the course.

In the first year of the course (1997-98), the 23 students in Applied Studies in History undertook practicum placements with a diverse range of employers, many of which were in fields not traditionally associated with History. More traditional practicums included: preparation of a booklet which was used as the base document for the Chilliwack Museum's exhibit on the 1948 Fraser River flood; and work with a contract historian to research and write a published history of British Columbia Hydro. Less traditionally, one student was placed with a local Member of the Legislative Assembly and Cabinet Minister, to prepare a report on the impact of the Jobs and Timber Accord on local lumber companies. Meanwhile, another student, working with an engineering firm, used historical research methods to identify the location of old underground mines in an area slated for future housing development. Other sponsoring employers included Sto:lo Nation, Kilby Historic Store and Farm, archives/museums in Mission and Abbotsford, the Chilliwack and Abbotsford School Districts, and Abbotsford Community Services.

Aside from the course itself, another product of this initiative was *Applied Studies in History: Report and Guide on the Creation and Implementation of History 301: Applied Studies in History at the University College of the Fraser Valley*. The Report is intended as a guide for other institutions which may be considering a course such as Applied Studies in History; it is available from the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology in Victoria. Those who want further information on the *Report* or the course itself can contact Dr. Chad Reimer at UCFV (Tel: (604) 852-8268, Email: reimerc@ucfv.bc.ca).