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FIU's Department of History Collaborates with Underrepresented Miami Communities

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Kenneth Lipartito
Department of History

What research projects/community engagement activities have you participated in?

I have worked with diverse communities in Miami to help them tell their stories and extend and conserve their historical resources. This work includes constructing a historical archive for the City of Miami Beach; running a school enrichment program and mounting a historical exhibit for the Historic Hampton House in Brownsville and helping the Black Police Precinct and Courthouse Museum in Overtown build professional capacity as a community museum. I also ran a Humanities Edge project with FIU students and Miami-Dade College students and faculty.

What were some of the challenges you encountered through this process?

When working with different communities it is important to understand how they remember and acknowledge their own history, yet at the same time build with them the capacity to produce more sophisticated historical narratives. Building trust with the public is important, as one of the goals is to uncover within a community untapped memories and historical resources. Many of the communities I have worked with are underrepresented and under resourced in Miami. There is much FIU can do to expand the range and diversity of historical and cultural resources for Miami but at the same time for many of these communities FIU is regarded as an elite and alien institution.

How did you engage FIU students?

Each of the projects provided opportunities for FIU undergraduates and graduate students to work as funded interns. Some of the projects were able to support graduate students as GAs. Most importantly, the students gained research, writing, digital, archival and curatorial skills from their work. Several have gone on to careers at other cultural institutions, including the University of Florida Library and the Tenement Museum in New York City.

How does your work support the goals of public humanities?

As I see it public humanities has two goals. One is to bring the values and contributions of humanistic disciplines to the public in ways that engage them in their civic lives. This is done by providing venues and formats for the public to consider matters of current moment through historical, aesthetic, ethical or literary reflections and representations. The other is to be an educational resource for students at all levels, to bring to them a deeper understanding of what the humanities can offer them in their lives. My work has engaged both of these areas, from programs that have touched students from the middle school grades to graduate school, and with historical productions that have opened to residents of Miami and beyond opportunities to explore the history of the city in multiple dimensions.