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# How Best to Educate the Next Generation in Historic Preservation

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# How Best to Educate the Next Generation in Historic Preservation

Ten key takeaways from a first-of-its-kind conference on preservation education, hosted by the School of Architecture, Art and Historic Preservation



September 13, 2012 | Brian E. Clark

**Bristol, R.I.** -- How the next generation of historic preservationists is educated has profound implications across the preservation world, especially given that effective education means a greater likelihood of qualified professionals.

But while the U.S. is home to an array of quality preservation programs at colleges and universities, there has been surprisingly little conversation among educators about how best to teach those who will comprise the preservation workforce in the future.

On Sept. 8 and 9, more than 75 educators from not just the U.S. – but from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia, Brazil, Mexico and more – convened in Providence, R.I., to discuss best practices at a conference titled “Preservation Education: Sharing Best Practices and Finding Common Ground.”

The conference was hosted by the School of Architecture, Art and Historic Preservation at Roger Williams University with support from Clemson University, the College of Charleston, the University of Florida and the University of Georgia.

After two days of discussion and debate, a set of key ideas emerged. In the following 10 points, Assistant Professor of Historic Preservation Jeremy C. Wells, the conference chair, offers his take on the major takeaways from the Preservation Education conference.

1. **Don't wait for college – start with K-12.** We often think about integrating undergraduate and graduate education, but what about the pre-college experience? We can be more proactive in introducing young students to the concepts of heritage and conservation by engaging them in related experiences – more than just a 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade tour of a historic site, where kids are passive consumers of information. How about high school classes taking part in Main Street revitalization projects? To instill interest, we should engage students directly.
2. **Link the built and natural environments.** We can encourage students to understand that they are part of a broader conservation movement that extends beyond the built environment and into the natural world. Whatever is being affected – plants and animals or buildings and neighborhoods – a joint effort among preservation professionals and natural resource conservationists can be a win-win. Re-using existing resources in the built environment means less development and decreased impact on undisturbed land; and those preserving natural resources help historic preservationists make a better argument for conservation and re-use.
3. **Integrate preservation with urban planning, architecture, sustainability, public health and other disciplines.** Outside of the U.S., preservation is more closely tied to relevant disciplines; if we can shift toward collaborating more broadly on challenges facing the built environment, remarkable solutions can be developed. We can help colleagues beyond preservation understand that any intervention in the built environment will affect cultural resources and that the conservation perspective should be considered. Now that buildings and landscapes designed in the 1950s and early '60s are considered worthy of recognition and protection, preservation needs to be a part of the broader conversation on changes to most existing built environments.
4. **Adapt to evolving technology.** We can take advantage of geo-spatial technology tools – GIS data, for example – in how we assess, understand and value historic resources, interpret people's perspectives and better communicate information about those resources. Beyond simply teaching today's students how to use software, we need to make sure they emerge with a technological mindset to advance preservation in this direction.
5. **Embrace innovation.** As educators, we need to demonstrate to students that this is a discipline in which innovation is paramount. Historic preservation is important because of its effect on people – to that end, we need a constant stream of new ideas and improved approaches because people, cultures and values evolve and change. We don't want to be perceived as impeding progress. Using historic resources to benefit people implies flexibility, adaptation and innovation.

6. **Integrate experiential and service learning into preservation education.** Getting students into the field offers the ability to interact with stakeholders who are affected by the decisions that preservation professionals make. They learn to view issues through the lens of those stakeholders. There is a dramatic difference between thinking about a solution in a theoretical sense and facing a situation where pragmatism is key when the perfect theoretical solution simply isn't attainable.
7. **Work with the real estate community.** We tend to think in dichotomies – real estate developers and preservation professionals at odds with each other – but black and white thinking hinders more than it helps. Buildings and landscapes need to have well-defined uses and they need to have value – developers can teach our students these things. On the flip side, we can offer research and data on sustainability or on how historic properties retain their value and appreciate. We share a common framework and if we integrate, we can turn a traditionally adversarial relationship into something collaborative and mutually beneficial.
8. **Decide on certification.** There is a general interest from both preservation practitioners and academics in investigating the possibility of whether preservation professionals should be certified in some way. There is less consensus on *how* such a system might work. As we move forward, we should examine the pros and cons, look toward our peers in Europe and elsewhere and determine the role that higher education can play in establishing a certification to help ensure quality and consistency.
9. **Refine the role of historic preservation as a discipline.** What preservation means as a discipline is not well defined. We need better understanding and consensus around our view of the world. There is even some discomfort with the term *historic preservation* itself. Does *preservation* imply stasis – that things never change? Would *conservation* more accurately represent our approach? We need to envision a future in which we build consensus on these questions, among preservation practitioners and educators alike.
10. **Continue the conversation – and make it global.** In determining how best to educate the future leaders in historic preservation, there are few simple answers. But with a dedicated effort to continue the conversation – and to integrate perspectives from Europe, Latin America and other corners of the globe – we can shape the future of the discipline. Technology can play a role, too. With the wide array of networking tools available, there's no excuse for allowing the conversation to reach a standstill.

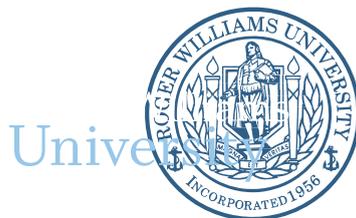
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