

Study offers blueprint for community-based public history research

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Learning by doing. The field experience team learns how to 'pick out' cashew seed at the home of Terese Tillett and Landis Wade in Belize. Credit: Katherine Pendleton

A new paper on fieldwork in rural Belize serves as a case study for how an established anthropology fieldwork model can be used to both develop site-specific cultural and historical exhibits and train a new generation of public history scholars. The paper also highlights the

importance of diversity to research teams when engaging in research - especially community-based scholarship.

"Public [history](#), as a field, focuses on both sharing information about history and working with the public to place history in context - and understand how people already relate to their cultural and regional history," says Alicia McGill, an assistant professor of history at North Carolina State University and author of the paper.

"For this project, we worked with two Belizean villages - Crooked Tree and Biscayne - that are in close proximity to the Mayan ruins of Chau Hiix," McGill says. "Most of the residents in both villages are Belizean Kriol, of African descent. Our goal was to develop exhibits and educational materials that could be used by the villages to foster tourism and support educational efforts."

To that end, McGill led a team of public history graduate students from NC State and undergraduates from the University of New Hampshire (UNH) and Galen University, in Belize, as well as collaborating with archaeological researchers from UNH. The team worked closely with residents of Crooked Tree and Biscayne to ensure that the exhibits and related materials addressed not only the Mayan civilization, but the importance of Kriol culture to the region.

"We learned several things over the course of the project that I think are broadly applicable to other public history efforts," McGill says.

First, that the methodology of anthropological fieldwork can easily be adapted to the field of public history, particularly in regard to community engagement.

"It works so well because you are engaging in cultural immersion, which offers unique insights into the subject matter," McGill says.

Second, identifying local and regional partners is critical to success.

"We worked with national, regional and local partners, who provided us with resources, access and cultural and political insights that we may otherwise have missed," McGill says.

Lastly, the project also drove home the importance of having an ethnically diverse research team.

"For example, we found that local residents of African descent raised different topics when talking with African American members of our research team than when talking with other members of the research team," McGill says. "It gave us more insight and different perspectives on the subjects we were studying and the nature of our community engagements.

"And while I think all of these observations hold true for public history fieldwork in the U.S., they may be particularly valuable for public historians interested in international work," McGill says.

More information: Alicia Ebbitt McGill, Examining the Pedagogy of Community-Based Heritage Work through an International Public History Field Experience, *The Public Historian* (2018). [DOI: 10.1525/tph.2018.40.1.54](https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.1.54)

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