History Challenge

As an academic discipline, history has experienced declining undergraduate enrollments in the US over the last decade. And yet at the moment the biggest hit on Broadway is the critically acclaimed, Grammy winning, standing-room-only “Hamilton,” the musical biography of Alexander Hamilton, the first US Secretary of the Treasury. These two situations represent a challenge for historians under discussion for a number of years: Does history matter? Why? How does history matter? In what ways can history be engaging, accessible, and meaningful to students and the general public today?

There are many different efforts underway attempting to address these questions, all with the aim of bridging the gap between academic historians and popular interest in history. Among the terms applied to these efforts are: public history, community-based/involved history, applied history, hands-on history, crowd-sourced history, and active history. From public lectures and exhibitions to citizen corps of interviewers, transcribers, digitizers, and more, all of these approaches endeavor to broaden both the audience for and the understanding of historical research and interpretation. In that spirit, we offer the Futures of History Challenge – a team-based, time-limited competition to generate innovative ways for demonstrating how and why history matters using a unique collection of primary sources – municipal graffiti removal records.

The Inspiration
South EL Monte Arts Posse’s (SEMAP) “East of East: Mapping Community in South El Monte and El Monte” is an award-winning public history and archive project that seeks to build a reciprocal relationship among academics and community members and transform how underrepresented communities enter the historical record and think about their own history. SEMAP and “East of East” are redefining how, why, where, and when history matters as well as what public history means.

Romeo Guzman, co-director of SEMAP and a PhD candidate in History at Columbia University, and his team found at least a decade’s worth of graffiti removal records from the late 20th century in the basement of the South El Monte (CA) City Hall. In keeping with the “East of East” mission to democratize knowledge production and archive building, Romeo agreed to allow Futures of History attendees access to digital images of the records for the purpose of generating ideas for a community-involved project with the archive as a centerpiece.

The Challenge
The FoH History Challenge is designed to allow historians to stretch their communication and collaboration skills while engaging with a time- and subject-bounded project. With plenty of guidance, Challenge participants can try out new ways of “doing history.” Over the course of the Futures of History conference, teams will be asked to develop a 3-minute, 2-slide oral presentation directed at potential sponsors/funders for a community-involving history
engagement (activity, event, resource) that addresses the “does history matter” debate. Teams will make their presentations to the FoH attendees and a panel of judges during the second day of the conference. The first and second place winners will receive flash drives, water bottles, bragging rights, and serious implementation consideration for their solution.

On the first day of the conference (Thursday, 2/25), two orientation/working breakout sessions will be held for potential participants at 11am and 2:50pm. Teams may be formed before or during the sessions. Anyone interested in participating needs to bring a laptop or tablet and a willingness to collaborate. All other resources will be made available at the sessions, including SEMAP co-director/historian Romeo Guzman and information design specialist Barbara Lehman.

On the second day of the conference (Friday, 2/26), teams will present their solutions beginning at 11:50am, with first and second place winners determined at the conclusion of all the presentations.

Solution Requirements
Solutions are required to:
- Make community involvement (broadly and flexibly defined) a central feature
- Identify their targeted community
- Use the “East of East” municipal graffiti removal records archive in a significant way
- Be interactive

Teams
Teams must be a minimum of 2 people and cannot be larger than 5 people. All team members must be registered and present at the conference for both days of the competition. Each team must attend at least one of the orientation/work sessions on Thursday. Teams/team members may attend both sessions.

Conference organizers, challenge facilitators, and competition judges cannot be on any team. There are no other restrictions on the composition of the teams – they can include anyone attending the FoH conference.

Teams may be formed ahead of the conference start. Organize a team from your university, organization, department, or field. Reach out to people from different institutions using the Whova app. If you do not have a team ahead of time, come to the orientation/work session and find one to join.

More Information
More information and access to digitized images from the “East of East” archive will be provided at the History Challenge Work Sessions (Breakout Session #1, Malibu Room, 2nd Floor) scheduled for 11am and 2:50pm Thursday, 2/25.

---

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamilton_(musical)