

Learning to Identify and Evaluate

The National Register and Higher Education

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It should come as no surprise that the National Register of Historic Places is the most commonly discussed aspect of the national preservation program in college and university teaching. Course work involving the National Register lies at the heart of the curriculum at both the undergraduate and graduate level, regardless of whether the student is majoring in American studies, archeology, architecture, folklore, geography, historic preservation, history, museum studies, planning, or urban affairs.

The National Register is most often introduced with the mention of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, and the beginning of the present-day “new movement” in the field. The list is a reflection of what has been recognized as significant at the national, state and local levels, and the legislation leads the student to consider a host of preservation processes and public policies.

More important, it is by learning the process of identifying and evaluating a historic site—in essence, following the National Register procedures—that students take the first step toward preservation. Instruction in documentation is considered a fundamental aspect of the historic preservation field. It is required in all historic preservation programs, as stipulated in the standards for undergraduate and graduate preservation education issued by the National Council for Preservation Education. In addition, the Council’s standards emphasize the importance of practical application of this knowledge in communities near at hand. Hence, the approaches and methodologies employed in the National Register are among the first that students learn to apply in the field.

This can be illustrated by a number of examples. Ever since the founding of the historic preservation program at the University of Oregon, each student has been required to work with a faculty member toward completing a National Register nomination. Although the nomination need not be accepted to receive a grade—largely because some building owners are not supportive of the effort—most nominations are successfully completed and approved. Last year, a National Register seminar was introduced, taught by an adjunct faculty member with a considerable amount of experience in the process.

At Georgia State University, students are introduced to the National Register, explore its growth since 1966, and use *National Register Bulletins* in a case study course to learn how to apply the criteria for evaluation. Faced with a wide range of cultural resources in a community, the students focus on determining type of significance, applying the criteria to each resource, and determining the integrity of each.

At the University of Nevada-Reno, National Register nominations may be completed during the academic year in a “practicum” course, working with a city planning office or a federal agency. In addition, two archeological field schools—devoted to prehistoric archeology and historic archeology—review the requirements of the nominations of districts and sites. The work of documenting rock art, for example, may extend over several summers.

Across the country at Cornell University, a semester-long fieldwork course is required of all students in the master’s program. Following contextual research and a preliminary “windshield survey” of a community, the students conduct a broad survey to identify its historic resources. With the assistance of the local historical society and planning agency, each member of the class documents with title research and describes at least a dozen sites using computerized state inventory forms. This develops community awareness while providing the data base for sound historic preservation planning. In some communities, such as Corning, NY, this may be a three-year commitment. At the conclusion of this work, the community is left not only with the ability to distinguish the edges of its historic districts, but also with the preliminary work for a National Register district nomination, which any of the same students may take up in an advanced course, or be assigned as one responsibility of a graduate assistantship.

As might be expected, the National Register also lies at the heart of many summer and post-graduate internships, whether at the local, state, or national level, leading the student to consider aspects of the built environment in areas of the country he/she never previously considered. This year, for example, through the support of the Legacy Resource Management Program of the United States Air Force, 10 summer internships will be offered by the National Council for Preservation Education at major command facilities from Hawaii to Virginia. This exciting opportunity will allow selected student to work under the guidance of cultural resource professionals on relatively recent sites, documenting their significance in modern military history.

By documenting buildings a student often becomes an advocate for a district, site, structure, or object that might otherwise be forgotten or willfully demolished. In fact, it is often in the process of documentation that the student finds, suddenly, that the remaining aspects of the curriculum have new meaning and relevance. That, of course, would be the subject of another article.

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