



Martha Norkunas' UT history students in front of a slave cabin at Barrinton Farm at Washington on the Brazos.

All history is local

UT historians take history back to where it happened

★ by Rick Cherwitz and Julie Sievers

IN THE PAST, ACADEMIC historians were known as a tweedy set. We imagine them squinting over dry books in heavily restricted archives, quibbling over historical minutiae.

But in some quarters of academe, scholars are beginning to reinvent what it means to do history. They are taking it back into the

communities where it first happened and teaming with experts from other disciplines. Rather than imposing their expertise on audiences, they are listening, collaborating with local communities to tell important, often untold stories in new ways. The resulting "citizen scholarship" not only brings scholars and

communities together, but it produces new and more vibrant local histories.

At The University of Texas, there is an emerging breed of graduate students — "intellectual entrepreneurs" — who use their knowledge to promote social good in imaginative, concrete ways. Engaging in projects through the University's nationally

acclaimed Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program (IE), these citizen-scholars are making an impact in Texas communities via their work with museums and living history centers.

Martha Norkunas created the project in "Interpreting the Texas Past" (ITP) and for five years has taught two graduate seminars ("Cultural Representations of the Past" and "Oral Narrative as History") as part of UT's 16 IE graduate courses. Funded primarily by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department with assistance from UT, these classes introduce graduate students from multiple disciplines to local citizens. Together, the two groups use their knowledge to bring Texas history to life.

Each year, Norkunas' classes focus on a different site suggested by Texas Parks and Wildlife. Students survey area museums in the fall, asking critical questions about how history is told. Because sites often lack resources, their interpretations can be outdated. Stu-

dents analyze a site's historic presentation in interdisciplinary teams and then develop project proposals to improve it. In the end, several proposals are funded. During the spring, students learn interviewing, fieldwork, and documentation skills. Several additional proposals are funded at the end of the semester.

In 1999-2000, Cary Cordova, doctoral candidate in American studies, designed the first Interpreting the Texas Past project for Varner-Hogg State Park, a former plantation site where numerous slaves lived. Cordova's research led to the Varner-Hogg Slavery Project, consisting of a database documenting the names and stories of more than 200 slaves and an interpretive tour focusing on Rachel Patton, the plantation owner's black wife, who was not mentioned in any park exhibits.

In 2000-01, graduate students Antony Cherian (information) and Mark Westmoreland (anthropology) filmed a documentary of residents of Washington County, home of the Barrington Living History Farm, where Anson Jones, the last president of the Texas Republic, lived. The video, "Truth I Ever Told," showcases interviews with three generations of area families and won the American Folklore Society's 2002 Hurston Prize for its contribution to black folklore. Jessie Swigger (American studies) created new interpretive materials examining the lives of five women who lived at Barrington Farm

in 1958: Mary Jones, the wife of Anson; Mary Jones, the single sister of Anson; Mary, the enslaved field hand; Charity, the enslaved cook; and Lucy, the enslaved house servant who bore a child at the same time as Mrs. Mary Jones.

In 2001-02, Andrea Woody and Tracy Fleischman, graduate students in American Studies, produced interpretive activities for fourth and seventh-grade students at Penn Farm Agricultural History Center. The games focus on migration, ecology, farm technology, and labor/class issues. "Giving voice to groups whose history has previously gone untold has huge impacts on our perceptions of an era, which in turn impacts our approach to the future," Fleischman says.

Sarah H. Cross, a student in women's and gender studies, edited a film along with Anne Glickman, interdisciplinary doctoral candidate in radio-TV-film, and Ryan Molloy, master of fine arts student in design. They and four of their classmates produced a short video based on oral histories, interweaving stories from residents of Cedar Hill — where Penn Farm is located — with images of the farm and the town.

In 2002-03, the designated site for the class was Sauer-Beckman Living History Farm. This has been the most ambitious series of ITP projects to date. Students actively engaged in creating an orientation film, a detailed historical Web

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site, a permanent exhibit at the site, teacher education materials, a public program on midwifery, and four booklets based on oral history interviews that will be published and sold by the park's bookstore.

In the spring of 2003, a new component was added to the ITP project. Struck by the quality of work produced, the Summerlee Foundation and Houston Endowment funded the addition of a three year scholar-in-residence to the project. Antony Cherian, one of IE's "Interpreting the Texas Past" students, received the first "Scholar-in-Residence" fellowship to work for 13 months at Varner Hogg State Park. He will build on Cary Cordova's work and greatly expand the quality and scope of the interpretive programming at the site.

The success of ITP lies in its navigating across disciplinary boundaries, connecting with society, putting research to work, and making educa-

tion more responsive and accountable. As universities and communities struggle to better connect and collaborate, programs like this are blueprints for a new academic model best described as intellectual entrepreneurship. These citizen-scholars are part of a growing body of intellectuals whose research contributes both to academic disciplines and to society. While differing from traditional conceptions of scholarship, these undertakings hold real and substantive value. They should be supported, celebrated, and recognized as both intellectual and community work.

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Rick Cherwitz is founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program (<https://web.space.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/index.html>) and a professor in the Department of Communication Studies and the Division of Rhetoric and Composition at UT Austin. Julie Sievers is a doctoral candidate in English at that institution.