

Teaching and Researching
By John McNay

Mitch Lerner's recommendation in a recent Passport that SHAFR devote more attention to historians who do not work at major research universities was a welcome note to those of us working at institutions where there are heavy teaching loads.

The job market has been poor for diplomatic historians for many years, and as a result there are very good historians in small colleges and branch campuses all over the country. One need only scan the list of home institutions of presenters at the SHAFR annual meetings to realize that many people remain productive despite the demands for teaching and service at smaller colleges.

Because I have published and been active in SHAFR while teaching at Raymond Walters College, a suburban branch campus of the University of Cincinnati, Lerner asked if I might have some advice on how to stay active, publish, and meet the demands of teaching and service at a small college. I certainly do not have a simple solution, since I routinely struggle with this problem. I can, however, offer some suggestions, and I hope most of what will follow will be useful to anyone who would like to publish more, regardless of the nature of their institution.

In order to write a more useful piece I consulted with two SHAFR colleagues who have been productive and active in the profession while working at institutions where the teaching demands are greater than at major research institutions. Phil Nash teaches at Penn State-Shenango, a branch campus near Pittsburgh. Robert Shaffer teaches at Shippensburg University, a state college in south central Pennsylvania. Both of them have been generous with their experience and suggestions. Because I am incorporating

their views with my own, they must share credit for what follows, while any blame should be attached to me alone (or to Lerner).

One way in which almost everyone can be more productive is to make full use of time off. Most historians, no matter where they work, get plenty of time off between school years. During the school year, those of us who have heavier teaching loads and greater demands on our time find research and writing almost impossible. Summer, spring break, and even winter break all provide opportunities to make progress on a project.

Another way to be more productive is to have an efficient research design. There are many great projects that ask really interesting questions, but the difficulty of actually doing the research makes them impractical, especially with a heavy teaching load and a small research budget. In addition, beginning with an idea and then trying to find relevant archival sources is like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. To maximize productivity, the best idea is to seek out an unexploited or inadequately exploited archival collection. Get to know the archivist. Start with the archives first, see what the documents have to say, and then develop an idea. Narrow the focus to decrease the number of archival sources that must be examined. This is not meant to discourage historians from considering big questions or thinking “outside the box,” but those who have serious demands on their time and energy and are still hoping for tenure and/or promotion must focus, focus, focus. What the profession really needs, in any event, are good solid monographs rather than sweeping Braudelian interpretations.

It is a good idea to make the most of work that is already done before moving on to another project. Some people leave their dissertations sitting around for years. When

asked why, they often reply that “it isn’t a book.” That might be true, but the first step to making a dissertation into a book is getting it into a publisher’s hands and having peers suggest ways to revise it. Manuscript reviews at university presses are very valuable. Use the process. Those who have unpublished dissertations can also mine the larger work for smaller pieces that can be published as articles without doing damage to the publication potential of the dissertation. Once the work for one paper is done, look for ways to expand on the topic rather than launch into a new field.

Send papers to a broad range of journals. Rejections happen, but the odds of being published increase with the number of journals targeted. Aiming for just the top tier of journals is risking great disappointment. As the number of academic journals shrinks, it is critical to make use of the full range of available publishing opportunities.

It is also a good idea to submit papers for conferences. By presenting at conferences scholars can increase their exposure, get an audience for unpublished work, and elicit valuable criticism. In addition, journal editors often express an interest in publishing papers they have heard. The essay will still need to go through review, but it is very helpful to have an editor who is favorably disposed to a paper.

Those of us who are employed at institutions where the primary objective is teaching have the option of writing about teaching-related issues: how textbooks and curricula have changed over the years, how to engage students in writing and critical thinking exercises, or good primary sources to use in class. Many colleges that stress teaching have funding for this work, and some have centers that concentrate on the scholarship of teaching, like the Center for Learning and Teaching at my institution.

Getting funding for discipline-based research can be a serious problem for those who work at a teaching institution. Those at branch campuses should make full use of available main-campus funding opportunities. But once again, creative approaches are important. I was recently awarded a small grant from the Cincinnati chapter of the English-Speaking Union to conduct some research on a project at the Public Record Office in London. The grant was not large enough to cover expenses, so I approached my dean about matching it. She did, and the combined monies provided enough funding for the trip. The lesson is to consider all options for funding.

Finally, despite the pressure and desire to publish, find time to enjoy your career. Have a life. Value your students. Getting away from the documents and the footnotes can allow you to return with a fresher perspective. Having previously had a career in the world outside academia, I can vouch for how fortunate we are to be serving the public in this profession.