

Grant allowed student to research public history in Hawaii

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For Josh Nielsen, researching and writing about historical issues is important, but how historians publicly present information is of equal, if not greater, value. In the summer of 2008, Nielsen traveled to the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii to further his research on the preservation of public history.

According to its Web site, the Polynesian Cultural Center is a 42 acre facility founded in 1963 by the Mormon Church. Focusing on eight South Pacific nations with recreated villages, exhibits, and hands-on activities, it has become one of Hawaii's top tourist attractions.

For a week, Nielsen observed the center's operations and interviewed cultural performers. The experience helped him to write his departmental honors thesis, entitled "The Power of Preservation: The Polynesian Cultural Center." Nielsen said his thesis is "focused on how culture can be preserved in a non-traditional, museum-type setting and how anti-modernism has helped fuel this desire for Americans to reconnect with authentic culture."

The trip was funded by the history department, under a new grant created to emphasize applied learning and hands-on primary research for undergraduate students. The department hopes to support more students in the future.

Nielsen graduated in December 2008, and will begin law school in Fall 2009.