

## Creating connections, building community: The role of oral history collections in documenting and sharing campus diversity

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### **Abstract:**

The collection and sharing of oral history is a growing area that libraries and archives are using to connect with their communities and document campus diversity. This column discusses opportunities for libraries and archives to include diverse and underrepresented voices in the historical record, highlighting the Wolf Tales project from the North Carolina State University Libraries, which was the topic of a talk by Virginia Ferris at the 2018 North Carolina Serials Conference. This column discusses that presentation and briefly examines oral history projects at several other institutions, providing perspective on the efforts to use oral histories to document campus and community diversity in the profession. Further resources for institutions interested in pursuing or growing oral history programs are also provided.

**Keywords:** academic libraries | archives | community engagement | diversity | oral history | special collections

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

Oral history interviews constitute important holdings in many libraries, special collections, and archives. These materials offer unique, firsthand perspectives on the lives and experiences of participants while also providing opportunities for integration into teaching, learning, research, and outreach. This column addresses the growing usage of oral history as a way to connect with, document, and share perspectives from diverse and traditionally underrepresented voices.

What is oral history?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2018) provides two definitions of the phrase *oral history*: “a body of stories about past events passed on by word of mouth” and “the branch of history that

deals with the compilation and study of such recollections, usually through the use of recorded interviews with people having personal knowledge of the past.” The Oral History Association provides a more succinct definition, stating that: “Oral history refers both to a method of recording and preserving oral testimony and to the product of that process” (Oral History Association, 2009). Their site also describes oral history as both a field of study and an intentional activity that involves gathering, preserving, and interpreting history from participants (Oral History Association, n.d.b).

This column focuses on library and archives oral history work associated with the latter definition, both in the context of the recording and sharing of interviews with campus members and associates who can provide diverse perspectives on their experiences and in relation to the role of libraries and archives in preserving and providing access to these collections.

### **Oral history: Documenting diverse voices**

The archival profession has long recognized the problem of dominant voices receiving unequal coverage in the historical record, creating omissions and gaps in collections (Zinn, 1977). Many archivists now consider it a priority to build and provide access to accurate and balanced research collections that document history from multiple perspectives—not solely from the elite or from government documents (Keough, 2002). Meanwhile, collaborative projects that bring together libraries and archives with their communities are seen as increasingly important in building connections and providing opportunities to share historical materials and perspectives (Gwynn, 2016).

Oral history is one avenue where libraries and archives can build connections and trust within diverse communities while also giving underrepresented groups an opportunity to share their stories and have their voices become part of the historical record. The collection and sharing of oral history is not a new area to libraries and archives; as Zachert pointed out in 1968, the establishment of oral history archives allows librarians the opportunity to contribute to the creation of intellectual content while also providing access and taking on questions of copyright, preservation, and more (Zachert, 1968). More recently, Albin addressed the connections between oral history and librarianship while working on a project to document the history of GLBTIQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer) people in Kansas (Albin, 2011). Banerjee also discusses the role of oral history in community collaboration and engagement, specifically in relation to the South Asian Oral History Project at the University of Washington Libraries (Banerjee, 2018).

The importance of diverse oral history collections and the role of oral historians in supporting diversity are also addressed by the Oral History Association. Their recent statement on diversity and inclusivity welcomes diverse perspectives into the organization’s membership and advocates for oral history as a way to document and preserve diverse voices (Oral History Association, 2016).

The creation of new intellectual content in the form of oral histories, combined with the recognized importance of community building and collaboration, provides libraries and archives

with an opportunity to share perspectives beyond just dominant voices. Some institutions are already pursuing this direction through purposeful, diversity-focused oral history projects.

## NCSU Wolf Tales

The 2018 North Carolina Serials Conference, held April 6, 2018, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, centered around the theme “Blazing a New Path: Diversity, Collaboration, and Innovation.” During the conference, the connections between library oral history projects and diversity were highlighted by Virginia Ferris (outreach and engagement program librarian, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries), who gave a short presentation during the lightning talks entitled “Wolf Tales: Documenting Voices of Diversity At NC State.” Ferris’s presentation discussed North Carolina State University (NCSU) Libraries’ work to build connections with campus constituencies while also diversifying the campus historical record through the use of oral histories.

Ferris discussed the factors that led the NCSU Libraries Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) to create the Wolf Tales project. Like many archives and special collections, the SCRC has been working to increase the visibility of its collections and encourage their use. Ferris summarized the SCRC’s collecting areas and showed visual examples of exhibit materials used in outreach events, explaining that events with alumni often led to the sharing of stories related to campus experience and campus history and that these stories were not necessarily documented in the university’s archives. SCRC personnel wanted to include these stories as part of the archives’ record of campus history, and they also saw an opportunity to help prevent future omissions in documenting the history of the campus. These factors led to the creation of the Wolf Tales project.

In 2015, the SCRC launched Wolf Tales, which Ferris described as “a mobile storytelling program.” The project was initially supported through an NCSU Libraries Good Ideas Grant, and the goal was to collect oral histories from students and alumni while also “creating a more diverse and inclusive picture of the campus community.” In response to a question from the audience, Ferris acknowledged that the project derives partial inspiration from StoryCorps, another oral history project that strives to build connections in and across communities (StoryCorps, 2018). But Ferris also pointed out that the Wolf Tales project collects oral histories that are generally shorter and more informal than the model of traditional oral history.

Ferris gave an overview of some of the logistical details of the project. Their equipment includes a mobile video recording unit, which they take to targeted campus events and use to capture short recordings, generally ranging from five to 20 minutes. The limited lengths of the recordings were a purposeful choice, selected to allow personnel opportunities to capture multiple short videos instead of fewer long ones. The recordings vary in form, with some structured as interviews, some as monologues, and some as groups speaking together. Ferris indicated that the facilitated interview form is used less frequently, instead favoring the provision of written prompts that participants can address as desired. Rights transfer is also a consideration with these recordings. Ferris stated that SCRC personnel have a written release form as well as a process to communicate copyright transfer and discuss consent with participants.

After recordings are captured, they go through a preservation and access workflow and are then loaded online with consent from the participants. Ferris indicated that at the time of the presentation, 143 recordings had been completed, with 90 available online and plans to make additional recordings available online in the future. The online recordings are available through the NCSU Libraries' website (NCSU Libraries, n.d.). The public interface showcases recordings by collection, with a number of collections focusing on narrative areas that are historically underrepresented in campus history. Current online collection areas are: Partnerships, Open Recording Days, Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity Mini-Grants, African American Cultural Center, Alumni Association, Association of Women Faculty, EKTAA (South Asian Student Association), GLBT Center, Multicultural Student Affairs, Native American Students Association, and Student Veterans (NCSU Libraries, n.d.).

Recordings are available as streaming videos and are also downloadable as MP4 files. Searchable metadata, browsable by various facets, is displayed on individual recording pages. Descriptive metadata provides information about each recording, including names of interviewees and subjects of discussion. Preferred citation information, rights information, and further contextual information about the resource and its repository are also supplied.

Ferris stated that the recordings began with open recording days but have grown to encompass specific events—frequently through partnerships with institutional equity and diversity groups. Ferris identified benefits of working with event partners, where partner personnel can help promote the event, identify potential participants, and provide prompts or questions to be addressed by interviewees. She also discussed the process used to prepare for recording events. A specific model is created for each event, with NCSU personnel working with partners to develop questions that will be relevant to the expected audience. The collaborative work with partners also connects to the SCRC's goals to increase the visibility and usage of these recordings.

In the context of working with potential interviewees, Ferris discussed the importance of reiterating to potential participants that their stories matter. She also stated that the presence of Wolf Tales project personnel at events with the express purpose of listening encourages interviewees to connect with the archive, while also growing and strengthening the historical record.

Ferris shared common themes that have come up in the recorded interviews. Participants have discussed the importance of safe spaces and community support networks, the impact of the national political climate on campus life, the importance of engagement in decision making on campus, and the representation and challenging of stereotypes. She also mentioned that while many recordings are very substantive in subject matter, others are more lighthearted and fun.

Ferris also addressed next steps for the project. They are continuing to record interviews and are working to make more recordings available online. Encouraging the use of recordings is another priority area, both in terms of outreach to campus community members and through direct engagement in the classroom. Ferris mentioned the inclusion of Wolf Tales in incoming student orientation sessions as one example, and she said that they also want to promote usage through exhibits, blogs, podcasts, and documentaries. Additionally, they are working to integrate Wolf

Tales into the curriculum and research usage through course-based instruction digital media workshops.

Ferris's full slides and talking points are available on the North Carolina Serials Conference web page (<http://web.lib.ecu.edu/ncserialsconference/2018/agenda.cfm>). The short presentation yielded further interest and questions from the audience. One participant asked if the group has considered working with the campus counseling center. Ferris said not yet, but they are in consideration as a future partner. Another participant asked if Ferris could provide advice to others whose institutions are contemplating similar projects. Ferris suggested that institutions who are new to collecting oral histories try a low-tech approach first—perhaps by starting with audio recording, not video. She recommended creating a release form and having it available before embarking on recordings. She also reminded participants that “building relationships is important and free,” and she mentioned that NCSU wants to create an online toolkit that could help support others in this type of work. Another participant asked how recording session length is determined. Ferris stated that this varies, with some decisions affected by the length of the associated event.

#### Diversity-focused oral history collections and projects on other campuses

The Wolf Tales project at NCSU is part of an ongoing movement to document and share oral histories relating to campus communities. Different programs and projects demonstrate the wide variety of content, methods, and forms that this scholarship can take. Some projects are fully online, others discoverable via research guides and finding aids that direct users to archives. Some projects, such as Wolf Tales, capture video recordings of participants, while others record audio only. Metadata, display, and discovery features can vary wildly, and the content of each institution's oral history recordings is unique. Four examples are briefly discussed here:

1. The Stanford University Archives holds the Stanford Diversity Oral History Project, which was created to document “the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the Stanford student body.” These audio recordings, created between 1999 and 2012, are available online through the Stanford Libraries' website, along with transcripts and descriptive metadata (Stanford Libraries, n.d.).
2. The University of Illinois holds oral histories documenting the Special Educational Opportunities Program and the struggle for equal educational opportunities for traditionally underrepresented groups at the University of Illinois. These oral histories were not available online at the time of this writing, but associated materials and information are available through the University of Illinois Student Life and Cultural Archival Program (Student Life and Culture Archival Program, 2010).
3. Villanova University's website showcases the project Black Villanova: An Oral History, which documents the period 1950 to 1985 “through the voices and perspectives of African American students who contributed significantly to the history of Villanova University” (Villanova University, n.d.). The project site includes profiles of participating individuals, with biographies, photographs, and excerpts of videotaped interviews that are accessible to online audiences (Villanova University Falvey Memorial Library, n.d.).
4. The University of La Verne Archives and Special Collections hold the Alfred Clark Oral History Collection, which contains “oral history interviews of students, alumni, faculty,

staff, and other individuals connected to the University” (University of La Verne Wilson Library, 2018). A LibGuide is the primary access point for this collection, with a downloadable finding aid available in Microsoft Word form. This finding aid lists the collected oral histories, along with topical areas they address. Diversity is one of these topic areas; further contextual information states that diversity is addressed “especially related to underrepresented minorities” (University of La Verne Archives and Special Collections, 2017). Content from these oral histories was used by students to create a series of documentary videos for a course on university history. One of these documentary segments (“Diverse Students; Diverse Faculty”) relates to diversity on campus, and is available online (University of La Verne Wilson Library, 2018).

### **Further resources for getting started with oral history**

As mentioned earlier, Ferris provided brief tips on getting started with oral history recording in response to a question after her North Carolina Serials Conference lightning talk. Many additional resources are available online and in print. Freely accessible online resources include the Oral History Association, the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, the University of California, Los Angeles Center for Oral History Research, and the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky.

The Oral History Association (OHA), the “principal membership organization for people committed to the value of oral history,” has a website with guidance, support, education, and community-building opportunities for oral history practitioners (Oral History Association, n.d.a). Their website provides practical information, including oral history principles and best practices with steps to address preinterview, interview, and postinterview stages of oral history work (Oral History Association, 2009). They also offer a guide with suggestions for further reading about the practice of oral history, covering topics such as information on planning and conducting interviews, curating and preserving oral history materials, and selecting recording equipment and associated technology (Oral History Association, 2012).

The American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress also provides online resources to support oral history work, especially in the context of family histories. The Educational Resources section of their website includes detailed information on how to plan an oral history project, interviewing tips, and further resources (American Folklife Center, 2015). While not strictly an oral history archive, there are many oral histories included in the online collections of the Center (American Folklife Center, 2018).

The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Library is home to the UCLA Center for Oral History Research, which collects oral history interviews “related primarily to the history of Southern California and the Los Angeles metropolitan region.” Their site provides a number of resources for oral history practitioners, including interviewing guidelines, information on interview techniques, equipment and recording information, suggested topics for discussion in family oral histories, a sample interview donor agreement, links to other oral history collections and institutions, and suggestions for further reading (UCLA Center for Oral History Research, 2015).

The University of Kentucky Libraries hold and provide access to over 11,000 oral histories through the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History. Their website also shares resources for oral history practitioners, including an interview release and deed of gift form, an interview information form, and technology resources (University of Kentucky Libraries Special Collections Research Center, 2015). The Nunn Center is also known for its work to enhance access to online oral history content, through projects such as the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS). OHMS uses searchable time-coded transcript metadata to connect users directly to corresponding moments in recorded interviews, and the software is freely available online (OHMS Oral History Metadata Synchronizer, 2018).

## Conclusion

The recording of oral history interviews offers libraries and archives the opportunity to connect with and document stories from individuals and communities that are part of their institutional histories. This work also provides the chance to include diverse and underrepresented voices in archival collections, where their perspectives may previously have been absent. Numerous libraries and archives have oral history collection holdings, and many are providing or pursuing online access to those resources. The NCSU Libraries' Wolf Tales project is one model, with many others available to meet the needs of institutions at differing stages of development of oral history projects. By preserving and sharing these resources, libraries and archives provide researchers the opportunity to engage with and learn from unique historical perspectives, while making sure that future generations of researchers and learners will also have access.

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