

Aaron M. Cusick. Oral History in University Archives: A Case Study of the Student Leadership Initiative at North Carolina State University Libraries' Special Collections Research Center. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. July, 2011. 44 pages. Advisor: Christopher Lee.

During the mid-twentieth century, oral history gained prominence both as a method of historical inquiry and as a documentation strategy that could help fill in gaps in existing archival collections. Although oral history has many potential benefits for archival repositories, there are also compelling reasons that indicate archivists should not conduct oral history interviews. This study is an examination of the Student Leadership Initiative, a multi-year oral history project conducted at the Special Collections Research Center at North Carolina State University. By interviewing five library staff members involved with the project, the researcher attempted to determine the motivation for and process of implementing an oral history project in a university archives that does not have a permanent oral history program. The study also shows how one university's archives used oral history to enhance its collections, connect with alumni, and provide training opportunities for graduate students in the Department of History.

Headings:

Oral History

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Case Studies

ORAL HISTORY IN UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE STUDENT LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE  
AT NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES'  
SPECIAL COLLECTIONS RESEARCH CENTER

by

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## Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Literature Review .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Methodology .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Findings.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Limitations of the Study .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Conclusions.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>40</b>

## Introduction

Oral history, as defined by Willa Baum, is “recording of a knowledgeable person, by questions and answers, about what he/she did or observed of an event or events or way of life of historical interest. The purpose is to preserve that account for users, both present but especially future users, and make it available for use” (Baum, 2007). The practice of oral history in the United States was largely shaped by Allan Nevins, a journalist turned historian, who founded the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University in 1948 (Ritchie, 2011). Although Nevins used oral history primarily to document the lives of society’s elites, the rise of the new social history movement, beginning in the 1960s, led many historians to redirect their attention to the lives and experiences of ordinary people. As a result, historians began to utilize new methods and sources in their research. Not surprisingly, this led to the increased use of oral history during the second half of the twentieth century (Mayer, 1985).

Archives and libraries have long served as repositories for oral history collections. In fact, Nevins’ program at Columbia, which was the first organized oral history program in the country, was located within the university’s Butler Library (Columbia, 2011). Archivists soon recognized the potential use of oral history as a means to document important historical information that was not represented in their existing records. However, archivists’ use of oral history has not been without controversy. Some critics are skeptical of the interviewees’ ability to accurately recall the events and situations they

are narrating, while others feel that archivists should not “create” records, which is a violation of the principle of archival neutrality.

Despite the objections, oral history has become a prominent component of many university archives and libraries throughout the country. Some institutions have established formal, ongoing oral history programs, while other institutions’ use of oral history is limited to temporary, goal-oriented projects. This paper will examine how one university library’s special collections department is using oral histories to fill gaps in its collections, while documenting vital aspects of university history, without having an established oral history program.

Although much has been written in the oral history and archival literature about the role and uses of oral history in archives, few detailed studies have focused on oral history projects undertaken by university archives and special collections that do not have an ongoing oral history program. The present case study examines the motivations for, and implementation of, a short-term oral history project in a university library’s special collections department. By focusing on one project, this study provides examples of specific issues, challenges, and potential outcomes of undertaking such a project. The case study will examine the Student Leadership Initiative, a three-year oral history project in progress at the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC), a unit of the D. H. Hill Library at the North Carolina State University (NCSU).

## Literature Review

In 1938 Allan Nevins' book *The Gateway to History* was published, in which he described how historians, from ancient times to the present, used oral sources and interviews as a way to gather information. Ten years later, Nevins founded the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University. Nevins conceived of oral history as a documentation strategy that would supplement the records of prominent individuals. As a result of the new social history movement, which began in the 1960s, oral history increasingly gained acceptance as a valid resource for historical research. Social history has been defined as "the history of a people with the politics left out." This type of research encompasses the history of social relationships, social structure, private life, social conflicts, social class, and social groups (Kessler-Harris, 1997).

During the 1960s, several articles in the library and archival literature indicated that oral history had gained prominence in the field. Nunis (1961) wrote that "one of the basic weaknesses in all current oral history programs is the lack of professional librarians working on this new frontier of library service." Dixon (1966) saw the potential value of oral history to libraries. She suggested that since history relies upon both objective and subjective facts, oral history serves as an important tool for the library to act as a "centralized collection agency for all materials pertinent to the advancement of knowledge." In an article titled "The Implications of Oral History for Librarians," Zachert (1968) wrote "[o]ral history is no longer an experiment; it is a healthy movement."

The Society of American Archivists (SAA) established an oral history committee in 1969 in order to examine the intersections between archives and oral history. By 1973, seventy-three percent of respondents to an SAA survey felt that oral history should be a regular archival activity (Swain 2003). In an archival context, oral history was seen as a way to “fill in the gaps” in a repository’s traditional paper collections; however, not all archivists readily accepted this alternative documentation strategy.

Mirroring the skepticism of many academic historians, archivists frequently viewed oral history with a suspicious eye. Since oral history relies heavily on the interviewee’s insights and memories of past events, it seemingly lacks the presumed legitimacy and accuracy of written forms of documentation, such as letters and diaries, that were created contemporaneously with the events in question. Fogerty (1983) argued that while oral history interviews might contain some inaccurate or biased information, written documents are equally likely to contain inaccuracies and slanted views of people and events. Fogerty also indicated that combining the information gleaned from oral history interviews with the existing archival records could lead to a more complete understanding of a person’s life. Wallot and Fortier (1997) also described several of the benefits of oral history interviews to archives: they can provide a more detailed understanding of daily life, they illuminate lesser-known aspects of one’s life, they offer a glimpse at decision-making processes and motivations, and they can enrich institutional histories by providing personal, rather than collective, perspectives.

Even before the proliferation of digital forms of communication, such as e-mail and text messaging, Fogerty (1983) observed that changes in technology and society affected the quality and quantity of our documentary legacy. He wrote,

[a]dded to the problems of dealing with high technology is the certainty that most people no longer keep detail-filled diaries of their daily lives, and that the telephone has replaced long, news-filled letters as a means of communication. Coupled with advancing technology is the fact that the increasingly litigious society in which we live has engendered in business, government, and individuals a desire to record as little information as possible that might be used against them.

Nearly fifteen years after Fogerty's article appeared, Wallot and Fortier (1997) echoed this sentiment, stating that the technological changes of the twentieth century have led to a "qualitative impoverishment of the paper-based documentary heritage." As a result of these changes, Wallot and Fortier encouraged archivists to become more engaged in the process of "building" the documentary heritage. Fogerty more emphatically claimed that "oral history is arguably a necessity in any program that hopes to document facets of twentieth-century history."

Having established the relevance of oral history interviews to archival repositories, the question that now arises is who should perform these interviews? From a practical standpoint, archivists and librarians, as curators of research materials seem to be in an ideal position to identify gaps in collections that could benefit from oral history projects. Conversely, there are also reasons to suggest that archivists should not undertake oral histories.

Moss (1988) identified two primary ways in which an archival repository can acquire oral history materials: through traditional accessioning procedures, such as a transfer or donation; or by the staff's own engagement with oral history interviews. Bruemmer (1991) claimed that most scholars who conduct oral histories are producers rather than curators; meaning their aim is to produce some substantial work, such as an article or a monograph. They are less interested in editing, abstracting, and cataloging their interviews. This means that if, by some chance, a scholar's interviews are acquired



by a repository, they are likely to be on a very narrow research topic and not thoroughly organized and cataloged, thus limiting their usefulness for other researchers.

Regarding the debate over whether archivists should be involved with conducting oral histories, Filippelli (1976) perplexedly asked, “What indeed is all the fuss about?” As an archivist involved with administering an oral history program, Filippelli saw oral history as one of a variety of methods for collecting and preserving historically valuable material. He urged other archivists to perform oral histories, on the condition that they had adequate interviewing skills and subject knowledge of the interview topic. As president of the Society of American Archivists, Ham (1975) encouraged archivists to be more proactive in the “demanding intellectual process of documenting culture,” which included creating oral histories.

Fogerty (1983) stated that archivists should “confront the possibility of becoming oral historians.” He argued that archivists could succeed in this capacity since their knowledge of the collections and clientele would enable them to draw out information during interviews that would be useful for a broad variety of researchers. Furthermore, archivists’ ability to deal with a range of donors and challenging situations implies they already possess many of the skills needed to conduct oral history interviews.

One of the main objections against archivists conducting oral histories is that it violates the concept of archival neutrality, which purports that archivists should serve as neutral, objective, and impartial collectors of documents that contain historical truths (Schwartz & Cook, 2002). Moss (1988) exemplified this belief in describing the potential dangers of archivists conducting oral history interviews: “[s]haring in the creation of the record puts archivists in unfamiliar and perhaps invidious positions which may jeopardize

their preferred status of neutrality regarding record content. This involvement threatens their integrity as impartial servants of all research interests.” In the present time, the idea of archival neutrality has largely been contested. Schwartz and Cook (2002) refuted the claim that archives are, or ever were, neutral. They provided compelling evidence that those in power control what gets preserved in the archives, thereby influencing the course of collective historical memory, by privileging certain groups and excluding others. Jimerson (2006), called for archivists to “abandon our pretense of neutrality,” stating neutrality and impartiality are impossible to achieve. Schwartz and Cook (2002) encouraged archivists to acknowledge the role power plays in the archival process, and to make archives “acquire and reflect multiple voices, and not by default, only the voices of the powerful.”

Another argument against archivists conducting oral histories that often appeared in the professional literature relates to cost. Filippelli (1976) stated explicitly that oral history is time consuming, and that a serious program requires constant attention, in addition to adequate funding. He also described how the process of preparing, performing, and processing one interview can take as much time as would be necessary to acquire several collections of traditional materials. Ekrish (1988) examined 129 oral history programs in academic settings and found that most were understaffed and suffered from “acute financial difficulties.”

Archivists-cum-oral historians might underestimate the resources necessary to adequately undertake an oral history project. Treleven (1989) noted that library administrators have often been reluctant to divert resources for funding the processing, preserving, and cataloging of oral histories. Moss (1988) warned that “stinting of

resources produces a poor product.” In addition to the cost of audio recording equipment, one must also factor in the costs of staff time, travel, transcription, storage, playback equipment, and preservation.

In the digital age, many oral history programs have gone online. MacKay (2007) discussed the potential challenges associated with maintaining a web presence, which include acquiring and upgrading software and hardware applications, licensing and legal issues, design and implementation of the website, digitization, scanning documents, managing databases, and creating metadata. Some of these processes may require specific technical, legal, or subject expertise, and may prove challenging for archives with limited personnel or technological infrastructure.

lie outside of the standard competencies of the general archivist or librarian. Moss (1988) warned archivists not to “venture lightly into oral history,” but noted that it is a worthwhile investment when done well. Filippelli (1976) recommended that archives should only attempt to conduct oral histories when sufficient funds are available, and with the understanding that it will play a major role within the archival program.

In her own examination of the literature on oral history, Swain (2003) found that since the 1990s, fewer library and archival publications have dealt with the role and uses of oral history in research libraries, and have focused more on how to manage interview materials in digital formats; whereas oral history publications have continued to address the important role archivists play in the oral history process. MacKay (2007) also acknowledged the lack of communication between archivists and oral historians, stating “[w]hen archivists don’t know the oral historian’s intention and oral historians don’t

understand how to prepare materials for an archive, the oral history suffers, as does the historical record.”

Swain (2003) suggested that one potential reason for this disconnect relates to a trend among archivists to see themselves more as “information specialists,” with a focus on technology and providing access, rather than as historians with subject knowledge of their collections and awareness of research trends. Swain recommended that librarians and archivists take a more “active role in oral history discourse, collaborate with each other and colleagues in other fields, and be attuned to current scholarship needs.” Moss (1988) emphasized the importance of oral history to archival practice and claimed “archivists must know and understand it in order to meet their professional obligations.”

The role technology plays in oral history production and dissemination is one area that could benefit from more research. Two of the most substantial studies on oral history programs in academic settings, Ekrish’s *An Investigation into the Role of Academic Libraries and Academic Institutions in the Collection, Preservation, and Dissemination of Oral History Materials* and Gusts’ *Oral History as an Information Source: A Descriptive Study of How Oral History Evolved in Fourteen North American Programs*, were completed in the late 1980s, preceding the widespread adoption of networked computer technology. As a result, much of the writings on preservation, access, and dissemination of oral history materials can seem rather dated, since they do not adequately address issues such as digital audio storage, online finding aids, or the presence of archival institutions on the Web.

Tibbo (2003) examined how historians in the United States search for primary source materials since the advent of the Web. She described how, beginning in the latter

half of the 1990s, archival repositories began mounting websites and digital finding aids. Presently, some archives have also begun digitizing primary source materials and making digital surrogates available online. Boyd (2011) emphasized how digital technology has changed users' expectations of finding and using oral history materials. "The physicality of the archive is no longer the preferred public access point for the typical user. . . users want access to digital surrogates of the interview itself." Boyd stated that archivists and librarians should work to find more creative, user-friendly, and intuitive methods for enhancing access to oral history materials.

## **Methodology**

For this study, the researcher conducted in-person interviews with five employees of North Carolina State University Libraries about their involvement with the Student Leadership Initiative. Four interviewees were staff members of the Special Collections Research Center, and the fifth was a library administrator. The researcher attempted to gain multiple perspectives on the Student Leadership Initiative by interviewing individuals involved in the planning and development of the project, as well as those responsible for the implementation and day-to-day operations. The interviewees were Genya O'Gara, Project Librarian for Student Leadership Initiative; Todd Kosmerick, University Archivist; Lisa Carter, Head of the Special Collections Research Center; Jonathan Holloway, Library Associate; and Greg Raschke, Associate Director for Collections and Scholarly Communication. The interviews were conducted at D. H. Hill Library on the campus of North Carolina State University between February 10 and March 11, 2011. A follow-up interview with Genya O'Gara was conducted on June 7,

2011. The semi-structured interviews lasted between thirty minutes to one hour. Questions dealt with various aspects of planning and implementing the Student Leadership Initiative, as well as general questions about the role of oral history in archives. The interview guide is located in Appendix A. The researcher also corresponded with O’Gara via electronic mail during the course of the investigation. The interviews were recorded using an Edirol R-09HR High Resolution WAVE/MP3 Recorder. The researcher made partial transcripts for each interview.

## **Findings**

### **Overview of North Carolina State University and Libraries**

North Carolina State University (NCSU) was founded in 1887 as a land-grant institution to provide teaching, research, and extension services to the people of North Carolina. The mission of the university is

to serve its students and the people of North Carolina as a doctoral/research-extensive, land-grant university. Through the active integration of teaching, research, extension, and engagement, North Carolina State University creates an innovative learning environment that stresses mastery of fundamentals, intellectual discipline, creativity, problem solving, and responsibility. Enhancing its historic strengths in agriculture, science, and engineering with a commitment to excellence in a comprehensive range of academic disciplines, North Carolina State University provides leadership for intellectual, cultural, social, economic, and technological development within the state, the nation, and the world (North Carolina State University Mission Statement, 2009).

Today the university is home to more than 31,000 students and almost 8,000 faculty and staff, making it the largest university in North Carolina. NCSU is known nationally and internationally for its programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

The university is comprised of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, College of Design, College of Education, College of Engineering, College of Humanities and Social

Sciences, College of Management, College of Natural Resources, College of Physical and Mathematical Sciences, College of Textiles, College of Veterinary Medicine, First Year College, and the Graduate School.

The mission of the NCSU Libraries is to serve as “the gateway to knowledge for the NC State University community and partners” and to “support the university’s mission and to further knowledge in the world” (Mission and Vision Statements, 1999). The library system at NCSU includes one main library and several branch libraries. A new library is currently under construction. The libraries are:

- D. H. Hill Library is NC State University’s main library, located on the north campus. The library features the Learning Commons, one of the top student destinations on campus for collaboration, study, and access to technology; the Special Collections Research Center; and the majority of the NCSU Libraries’ collection of over 4.3 million items (D. H. Hill Library, 2011).
- Harrye B. Lyons Design Library supports the College of Design and has collection emphases in architecture, landscape architecture, graphic design, industrial design, and art and design (Harrye B. Lyons Design Library, 2011).
- The Natural Resources Library provides research and instructional support for the College of Natural Resources and the department of Marine, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at NC State. The collection emphasizes research materials related to forestry, natural resources, environmental science,

forest biomaterials, sport management, parks and recreation, tourism, and marine, earth, and atmospheric sciences (Natural Resources Library, 2011)

- Burlington Textiles Library supports the curriculum and research programs in textile chemistry, textile materials and management, and fiber and polymer science. The Textiles Library's collection is made up of approximately 50,000 volumes, with over 200 periodical subscriptions (Textiles Library, 2011).
- William Rand Kenan, Jr. Library of Veterinary Medicine supports the research and curriculum at the College of Veterinary Medicine and the study of life sciences, veterinary medicine, and animal and human health at NC State University (Veterinary Medicine Library, 2011)
- The Satellite Shelving Facility (SSF) is a closed-stack, 20,000 square-foot building on the main NC State campus that provides high-density, environmentally controlled shelving for books, audio-visual, and microform. Other materials housed there include archival and manuscript materials from the Special Collections Research Center, and low-use microforms (Satellite Shelving Facility, 2011).

The Special Collections Research Center at NCSU began in 1995; however, the university archives had begun almost twenty years earlier (Genya O'Gara, personal communication, June 30, 2011). The SCRC includes the university archives, manuscript division, and rare books. The department is known for its innovative digital projects, including an award-winning online finding aid design. According to the library staff directory, the SCRC is comprised of seventeen employees, including a mix of full-time



and part-time, professional and paraprofessional, and permanent and temporary. The department also employs approximately twenty-five part-time students, both undergraduate and graduate, who perform a variety of tasks, such as processing, research, and digitization.

The mission of the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) at North Carolina State University is “to identify and collect rare and unique materials to support the research and teaching needs of the university.” The collections in the SCRC correspond with the established and emerging strengths of the university and mirror the libraries’ overall collection. The first priority of the SCRC is “to collect the papers and recorded research of prominent NC State faculty active in the formulation and development of disciplines in priority collecting areas, as well as scholars and corporations performing seminal research in those disciplines.” Relatedly, the SCRC also collects seminal research and publications associated with faculty disciplines (SCRC Collection Strategies, 2011).

The SCRC has several targeted collecting areas including plant and forestry genetics and genomics, North Carolina State University history, history of computing and simulation, architecture, textiles, veterinary medicine, entomology, and animal welfare. These collecting areas represent disciplines that either emerged or came to maturity during the twentieth century, and are considered “medium-rare” (SCRC Collection Strategies, 2011).

In addition to collecting university records and manuscript collections, the SCRC has also undertaken numerous documentation projects, several of which have involved an oral history component. These include GI Bill Oral Histories, the Centennial Campus

Oral Histories, Oral Histories about Bertram Whittier Wells, North Carolina State University Libraries Integration Oral Histories, Kannapolis Oral Histories, Lewis Clark Oral Histories, George Matsumoto Oral Histories, and the Hunt Library Oral Histories (Genya O’Gara, personal communication, June 30, 2011). Some projects such as “Transforming Society: The GI Bill Experience at NC State,” have involved oral history as a major element of the project. For this project, a special collections librarian and university professor conducted interviews with alumni who were also veterans. The oral histories were used to create a temporary exhibit, and subsequently became part of the university archives collection (G.I. Bill Experience, 2004). Other projects, such as the Kannapolis documentation project, have included oral history as one component in a multi-faceted documentation strategy (Genya O’Gara, personal communication, June 30, 2011).

### **The Student Leadership Initiative**

The Student Leadership Initiative (SLI) is a multi-year project to “document the experience and impact of former student leaders of NC State University, with an emphasis on student body presidents, and their subsequent life-long contributions as citizens.” The goals of the project include connecting users with university history, connecting the University Libraries to a broader base of alumni, and using the Libraries’ special collections to enhance learning and research. The initiative will involve collecting oral histories, collections acquisitions, digitization of materials, outreach and exhibitions, and collaboration with students and faculty (Student Leadership Initiative Project Outline, 2010).

## Origins of the Student Leadership Initiative

The initial idea for what would become the Student Leadership Initiative came from a former Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) staff member who proposed a project for the Library Fellows program. The North Carolina State University Library Fellows program provides highly-qualified recent graduates of Library or Information Science programs a two-year position with the “opportunity for rapid professional growth through assignment to an innovative project, combined with experience and mentoring” (About the Fellows Program, 2011). The head of SCRC requests that staff submit proposals for potential Fellows projects to be carried out within the department (Lisa Carter, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2011).

The initial project proposal, included in Appendix B, was called “Engaging Students in Documenting the Leadership Legacy.” It was described as:

an oral history project which has as its first goal the documentation of the college experience of former NC State student body presidents and their subsequent contributions as citizen leaders. The second goal is to engage current students in the gathering of these interviews so that they can connect with university history, with familiar elements in leaders’ life stories and with methods of inquiry that will enrich every aspect of their academic career. These oral histories will be preserved and made accessible by the Special Collections Research Center, adding to the growing resources on university history and enabling a wide variety of future innovative opportunities.

From the outset, the project had two main goals: to document the experiences of student leadership on campus through oral history, and to build relationships with past student body presidents by engaging current students as interviewers.

The initial proposal was approved by library administration, and was among the projects pitched to the Fellows candidates who were applying for the 2010-2012 term.

Prior to the interviews, departments throughout the library submit proposals for projects that the Fellows could undertake. During the interview process, individual candidates get to rank which projects interest them the most. However, during the interview process, it became clear that there was not a strong match between the oral history project and the candidates' interests and skills (Todd Kosmerick, personal communication, Feb. 15, 2011).

Although no one from the cohort of Fellows applicants that year was assigned to the project, library administration felt strongly that the project was worth pursuing, and began considering alternative ways to implement it. A major reason that administration supported the project was because the university was in the process of building a new library on campus, which would be named after one of the most successful alumni of the university, Governor James B. Hunt. Susan Nutter, Vice Provost and Director of Libraries, wanted a library initiative focused on the rich heritage of student leadership at NCSU to coincide with the opening of the Hunt Library (Lisa Carter, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2011).

At the end of the 2010 fiscal year, Genya O'Gara was finishing her term as a Library Fellow. O'Gara had been the project manager for an SCRC project that chronicled the development, construction, and operation of the North Carolina Research Campus, located in Kannapolis, North Carolina. Although the Kannapolis project involved collecting oral histories, O'Gara did not conduct the interviews. She did, however, oversee the project and process the oral histories (Genya O'Gara, personal communication, Feb. 10, 2011). With her experience as a project leader and her familiarity with oral history, library administration felt that O'Gara was the ideal

candidate to take on the Student Leadership Initiative. With a project manager in place, the library administration provided the necessary funding for the initiative to move forward (Todd Kosmerick, personal communication, Feb. 15, 2011).

### **Expectations and Outcomes**

In speaking to the various people involved in the SLI, I identified several desired goals for this project. The main goal of the Student Leadership Initiative was to capture a more complete picture of the student experience at the university. Echoing the idea of “filling in the gaps,” several interviewees stated that the archives receives organizational records such as meeting minutes and official correspondence; however, these records lack the detailed, personal experiences of life on campus. Todd Kosmerick’s goals for the interviews included getting the “background story” to the official records, and to determine how attending NCSU and being a student leader impacted alumni’s later lives and careers. Citing the benefits both to the archives as well as future researchers, Genya O’Gara claimed the oral histories would be “invaluable.”

Another goal of the Initiative was to build relationships with alumni, who could become potential donors. Unlike individual colleges or departments within a university, the library does not have alumni per se. By focusing on broader issues such as university history, student life, and leadership, the library can connect with a wide spectrum of former students. Lisa Carter hoped that the process of giving an oral history interview would help former students remember what they loved about being a student at NCSU. This could potentially lead to a contribution to the library, which would benefit students throughout the university (Lisa Carter, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2011).

Although financial contributions would be welcomed, the library's primary objective was to solicit collections material from alumni. Many of the former student leaders have had successful careers in fields that correspond to the library's collecting strengths, such as computer science, agriculture, architecture, textiles, and entomology. Lisa Carter highlighted the importance of getting potential donors to recognize that their papers are valuable and are worth depositing in the archives. Greg Raschke remarked that the SLI provided an opportunity to engage alumni about the role of the library and archives in university life, while helping them connect to their own history, and promoting the library's technological innovations and digital content. If alumni understand the value of maintaining archival material and how the materials can be used, they could be more likely to donate their own collections to the university archives.

Another major goal of the SLI coincided with a strategic initiative on the part of library administration to create programming and exhibits around the opening of the Hunt Library. The new library is named in honor of NCSU alumnus and former governor of North Carolina, James B. Hunt, Jr. The Hunt Library will be located on the university's Centennial Campus and will serve as a space for learning and collaboration (Hunt Library, 2011). The exact date of the opening has not been determined, but library administration was planning a variety of programs, events, and exhibits to correspond with the opening.

Apart from the major goals of this project, several SCRC staff members expressed other desired outcomes. Genya O'Gara hoped that the project would help build a stronger relationship with the Department of History to facilitate future collaborations, as well as give public history graduate students valuable hands-on experience, which might include

researching, conducting oral histories, or assisting with exhibits. Lisa Carter the goal that by the end of the project, the department will have amassed a clearinghouse of information about all the former student body presidents, which would include who they were, the dates of their attendance and terms in office, how they contributed to the university, and what they did after graduating. This information would be made available on the library's university history portal called Historical State.

### **Making Adjustments**

While the project was still in its early stages, several changes were made. The initial proposal stated "This project will engage First Year College students in documenting the college experience that former Student Body Presidents had at NC State and their subsequent life-long contributions as citizen leaders." In the process of creating a list of potential interview subjects, administrators and the SLI team realized that many prominent alumni who had demonstrated exceptional leadership, both on campus and in their professional lives, had never served as student body presidents. William Friday, for example, became the first president of the consolidated University of North Carolina system, but he was not a student body president.

It became apparent that by focusing solely on former student body presidents, many outstanding NCSU alumni would be excluded. By defining leadership in broader terms, the project could capture more diverse student experiences, and would provide a more nuanced view of campus life. People who served in the student senate, edited student publications, or were leaders in minority group organizations would also be considered for interviews (Lisa Carter, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2011). Since student government at NCSU began in 1921, the list of potential interviewees would be

quite long. In order to keep the number of interviews at a manageable level, O’Gara, with input from administration and her team, devised a priority list. Factors that influenced one’s inclusion on the priority list included advanced age, prominence, geographical proximity to Raleigh, and being a “first,” such as the first woman or first African American to serve as student body president (Genya O’Gara, personal communication, Feb. 10, 2011).

Another aspect of the project that changed was the role of students. The initial proposal identified First Year College students as the group who would conduct the oral history interviews. The First Year College program’s mission is:

to guide students through a structured process for transition to the University and selection of a major. This is accomplished through one-on-one advising, teaching and experiential learning, the First Year College Village, emphasizing theoretical and practical methods of inquiry, guided reflection, engagement, assessment and analysis. Through this process students will gain the foundation for acquiring the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to become self-reliant and productive citizens of an increasingly diverse community (First Year College, 2011).

When O’Gara became involved with the project, she saw the potential value of collaborating with the Department of History, which offers a master’s degree in public history. The public history program provides training for students interested in working in museums and archives. The Special Collections Research Center employs public history students to process manuscript collections, staff the public services desk, and work on special projects. It seemed only natural to involve them in this project. This collaboration would benefit the team working on the Student Leadership Initiative, providing a ready group of interviewers, and the students would benefit by getting practical experience learning about and performing oral histories (Genya O’Gara, personal communication, Feb. 10, 2011).



Another benefit of collaborating with the Department of History was getting to work closely with a faculty member who is a trained oral historian, and agreed to participate in a series of oral history workshops. The workshops were designed to teach students about oral history methodology, and introduce them to the Student Leadership Initiative and the ways they could be involved with the project, which might involve conducting oral histories, doing pre-interview research, and eventually assisting with exhibit design and implementation (Genya O’Gara, personal communication, Feb. 10, 2011).

### **Implementing the Project**

Although Genya O’Gara, the project librarian for the Student Leadership Initiative, had previously managed a project with an oral history component, she felt compelled to better acquaint herself with oral history methodology and practice. Shortly after starting work on the SLI, O’Gara began contacting oral historians, as well as librarians and archivists who were involved in oral history projects. For the SLI, O’Gara wanted to have current NCSU students interview the former student leaders. Through her research she found several similar projects throughout the country of student-led interviews. This proved to be particularly useful for planning the training and workshops to teach students about how to conduct oral history interviews. Furthermore, she found a wealth of material available online, both from oral history associations, as well as oral history programs in university settings (Genya O’Gara, personal communication, Feb. 10, 2011).

In order to facilitate the process of indentifying and locating interview subjects, O’Gara initially hired one, then later a second, part-time public history graduate student to conduct background research on all the former student body presidents. By using the materials held in the Special Collections Research Center, primarily the *Technician*, the NCSU yearbook, and the student government records held by the archives, the graduate students compiled a brief biography of each former student, with information such as his or her hometown, major, term in office, accomplishments as president, campus activities, current occupation, and a photograph. Once the students had researched and written an entry, the information was added to the Historical State website, which documents various facets of the university’s history. The biographical entries would be used later to help students prepare for interviews.

### **Interview Preparation**

One of the goals of the SLI was to engage current students in conducting oral history interviews with alumni. In order to prepare students for the interview process, O’Gara contacted Dr. Blair Kelley, a history professor at NCSU, who teaches a course devoted to oral history theory and practice. Since Dr. Kelley’s course is not offered every academic year, O’Gara planned to hold a one-day workshop to introduce students to oral history and to discuss the ways they might participate in the SLI (Genya O’Gara, personal communication, Feb. 10, 2011).

The first oral history workshop took place March 28, 2011 at D. H. Hill Library. The attendees included the researcher, six students, and several library staff members. A number of the students used interviews as part of their own research, and came to learn

more about oral history. Dr. Kelley provided an overview of the reasons for conducting oral histories, and discussed how to design and implement a project. O’Gara and Holloway described the Student Leadership Initiative, the opportunities for involvement, and the services and equipment that the library could provide to assist students with their own projects.

Although the number of students who attended the workshop was smaller than the number who had registered, O’Gara planned to offer another workshop the following academic year. Furthermore, Dr. Kelley stated that she will consider having her students interview former student leaders the next time she teaches her oral history course, as well as point students interested in gaining experience in this area towards the project.. Similarly, a doctoral student at NCSU, who teaches a course on the history of higher education, said he would have his class interview former students as part of a course assignment. Some of these interviews could be with individuals targeted by the SLI.

### **Interviewing Begins**

When I first interviewed Genya O’Gara for my study in February 2011, only one oral history interview had been completed at that time. This interview with Cathy Sterling, the first female student body president at NCSU, came about somewhat unexpectedly. While preparing to relocate to a different part of the country, Sterling discovered some of the speeches she had written while serving as student body president. After she contacted the university archives about donating the material, the SLI team realized this could be their only chance to interview Sterling. O’Gara conducted the interview herself, since no student interviewers were available that early in the project. At

our second interview in June 2011, O’Gara stated she had interviewed three more people, and at least four more were being scheduled. Although she conducted these interviews, she stated that the next interview would be done by one of the three students who were currently working with her.

One issue that frequently appears in the archival literature on oral history is to the necessary qualifications to adequately conduct oral history interviews. Filippelli (1976) stated that “what is critical to archivists in the oral history process is not archival expertise but, rather, subject expertise.” Since the subject matter of the Student Leadership Initiative relates to the experience of being a student at NCSU, current NCSU students would seem to have the needed expertise to conduct meaningful interviews.

I asked Jonathan Holloway, who attended NCSU both as an undergraduate and graduate student, if his experiences of being a student at NCSU would make it easier to connect with interviewees. He answered in the affirmative. Holloway stated that while working at the SCRC public service desk, patrons, who were NCSU alumni, would begin telling him stories about their time on campus upon discovering that he was also a student (Jonathan Holloway, personal communication, Feb. 25, 2011). O’Gara anticipated that alumni would find it easier to establish rapport and share engaging anecdotes with a current student, rather than with a librarian (Genya O’Gara, personal communication, Feb. 10, 2011).

When I interviewed Lisa Carter, we had a lengthy discussion about the role of oral history in archives, particularly relating to her ideas of who should conduct interviews. Having previously worked at an institution with an established oral history

program, Carter was familiar with many of the challenges, as well as opportunities, that archives face when dealing with oral history. Carter described how library administrators at NCSU promote the use of oral history within the SCRC; however, there has never been any one staff member to serve as an oral history coordinator. The department has had to rely on temporary staff or students for most of the oral history initiatives.

This routine requires constantly training new staff members, not only on the methods and practices of oral history, but also on technical aspects of using the recording devices, storing, and preserving the digital files. Todd Kosmerick described the level of oral history training SCRC staff and students have had prior to beginning an oral history project as a “real mixed bag,” with some individuals having extensive training, and others having virtually none. As a result of this, Carter admitted that the quality of the interviews conducted tended to vary, stating “they’re just trying to figure out how to do this based on what they’ve read or what they’ve learned from the previous temporary person working before them.”

Carter described oral history as a craft, and said that the people who are most successful tend to have significant training in or experience with conducting interviews. They also know how to structure interviews and ask questions that elicit rich, compelling responses. Furthermore, Carter cited institutional support, adequate funding, equipment and resources as elements that promote quality oral history programs. Although she admitted some frustration over the fact that SCRC does not have someone to direct an oral history program, she claimed “I do think we’ve gotten some good interviews from our temporary staff. . . Any interview is better than no interview.”

When asked how she felt about having students conduct interviews, Carter stated she had no reservations. “These people [alumni] are very busy, and they’re only going to give us an hour or two of their time. They’re not really going to get into the ‘meaty’ things in an hour long interview anyway.” For the purposes of the SLI, Carter thought student interviewers could achieve three basic goals: elicit a basic story from the former student leaders that was not represented anywhere on paper, build relationships with alumni to foster leadership potential, and create a dialogue with alumni to facilitate future collaborations. Carter conceived of these student-conducted interviews as preliminary or pilot interviews, meaning that they could be used to uncover potentially valuable leads for future oral history initiatives that might be more narrowly focused.

Given the Special Collections Research Center’s past and present use of oral history as a documentation strategy, I wanted to determine what role oral history might play in the department’s future. I asked Todd Kosmerick if other areas of university history could benefit from conducting oral histories. “Absolutely.” He targeted student organizations and the breadth of research carried out at the university as two areas that lacked adequate documentation from archival records. However, given the limited resources within the department, future oral history projects would have to be focused very narrowly in order to be effective.

Both Kosmerick and Carter expressed their interest in the possibility of establishing a more permanent oral history component within the department. Kosmerick stated “Lisa [Carter] and I have both repeatedly made the pitch that if we’re going to be expected to conduct oral histories, then maybe we should be developing an oral history program.” He continued to explain that the main obstacle to implementing an oral history

program was the budget: “it’s frequently easier to find funding for very term-limited kinds of things. It’s a much different thing to create a permanent position that’s going to have to be funded every year.” Referring to both the financial and human resources needed to sustain an effective oral history project, Carter concluded “we can’t continue to do it on soft money and temporary staff.”

Carter hoped that the Student Leadership Initiative would help the department determine the feasibility of running an oral history program without a full-time oral history librarian position. Carter posited a situation in which a department staff member, collaborating with an oral historian faculty member, would dedicate some of his or her time to training and overseeing students or volunteers to conduct the oral histories, and subsequently manage the transcription and processing. Even though the students would be temporary, having a dedicated staff person to manage oral history activities would provide some degree of continuity (Lisa Carter, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2011).

Kosmerick expressed his interest in having a permanent oral history librarian position. As someone with no direct experience conducting oral history interviews, Kosmerick recognized the value in hiring someone with substantial oral history experience: “They’re trained in this, and they’re going to think of things that I’m not thinking about, or know the places where you can go wrong that I don’t know about.” He also acknowledged that if the department had an oral history librarian, there would be more than enough work to accomplish. Kosmerick envisioned the oral history librarian’s duties as surveying current archival collections to identify gaps, then developing and implementing projects to fill in those gaps (Todd Kosmerick, personal communication, Feb. 15, 2011).

In the event that a permanent position did become a possibility, Carter stated, “I think we’re always going to be in a position where, whoever is in charge of the program here isn’t an oral historian first: they’re an archivist first, or they’re a librarian first. They’re always going to have to learn how to do oral histories.” Although she acknowledged that her preference would be to hire a trained oral historian, she also recognized the potential opportunities for library staff to collaborate with faculty and students, who may have more training or experience in oral history methodology.

### **Using the Oral History Materials**

The oral history interviews with former student leaders collected for this project will ultimately be utilized to create a series of exhibits to celebrate the opening of the Hunt Library, which is scheduled for late 2012 or early 2013. This aspect of the project was still under development when I conducted my interviews; however, the staff had some ideas about what these exhibits might entail. One likely outcome will be an exhibit located in the gallery space in Hunt Library. This exhibit would cover some aspect of student leadership at the university, and would likely include audio or video clips from the interviews. During our second interview, O’Gara informed me that the department had recently hired an exhibits librarian, with whom she had begun collaborating to sketch out possible ideas for the Hunt exhibit. O’Gara and Kosmerick also mentioned some sort of virtual exhibit that would be accessible via the library’s website. This exhibit would likely link to complete interview recordings and transcripts, as well as other digital content from the Special Collections Research Center.



In addition to their use for creating exhibits, I asked the SCRC staff how the oral histories might also be used. Lisa Carter expected the interviews to be useful for a variety of researchers. She continued by saying that although the archives collects materials that fit within existing strategic areas, one can never anticipate how or by whom the collections will be used. “The nice thing about archives is that you never know what you’re going to find, and you never know what kind of applicability it’s going to have.” Genya O’Gara informed me that a doctoral student at NCSU had already used one of the interviews for his own research on student protests during the 1970s, and that he would likely use more of the interviews as they became available. O’Gara also speculated that if students were involved in the creation of the materials, they might be more likely to use the interviews for their own research projects.

### **Collaborating across the Library**

Although the Student Leadership Initiative was primarily based in the Special Collections Research Center, the staff has benefited from collaborating with departments throughout the library. Lisa Carter described the level of collaboration within the library as “one of the really unique things about N.C. State.” Carter explained that library administrators were committed to integrating the special collections department with the rest of the library. Rather than having an enclosed reading room, or a separate special collections library building, the SCRC’s reading room shares space with an open study area for students, and the department’s office suite is located on the same floor as other technical service departments, such as Metadata and Cataloging, Acquisitions, and Preservation. Carter stated that this sense of openness and communal space facilitates cross-departmental collaboration, concluding, “I don’t think we could be as successful as

we are as a special collections without the collaboration that has happened across the library” (Lisa Carter, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2011).

Carter saw this type of collaboration as part of an emerging national trend in academic research libraries. With the rise of online journals, electronic books, and general collections that are also held by other libraries, special collections materials are what make each library unique. As a result of this, Carter stated that libraries have begun to rally around their special collections department to assist with cataloging, digitization, programming, and collection management (Lisa Carter, personal communication, Feb. 24, 2011).

One major collaborator with Special Collections on the Student Leadership Initiatives will be the Digital Library Initiatives (DLI) Department, which “leads the library in innovative projects to enhance the development of the digital library” (Digital Library Initiatives, 2011). Greg Raschke stated that “any time you want to do a digital presentation, our Digital Library Initiatives group is involved.” The DLI team will provide technical infrastructure support for mounting the digital audio, video, and image components of the virtual exhibit and for providing access to the oral history interview materials through the library’s website (Greg Raschke, personal communication, Mar. 11, 2011).

Special Collections staff will also be working with External Relations, which will help facilitate communication between the Libraries and some of the most prominent alumni to set up interviews. The department of Program Planning and Outreach will be involved with planning events and activities around the opening of the Hunt Library.

Development staff will also be involved to manage either financial or material contributions to the library as a result of outreach efforts through the Student Leadership Initiative (Greg Raschke, personal communication, Mar. 11, 2011). Raschke noted that administration was always on hand to offer guidance and help shape the project. Carter concluded that the project was “definitely a library-wide initiative.”

## Challenges

When I conducted my interviews with the library staff involved in the Student Leadership Initiative, the project had only been operational for a few months. Even at that early time, the staff members were able to identify several challenges. Nearly all the interviewees described the budget as being a major difficulty, particularly while also trying to construct and staff a new library during an economic recession. Several people indicated that the project seemed to have gotten off to a slow start. In addition to an uncertain budget, library administrators were focused on the planning and construction of the Hunt Library, thereby leaving less time to devote to other projects, including the Student Leadership Initiative. O’Gara mentioned that the project also involved technical challenges, such as how to integrate different types of digital media into preexisting infrastructure systems.

## Limitations of the Study

This case study examined an oral history project undertaken by a special collections department in the library of a large, public research university. The results of this paper may not be applicable to non-university based archival repositories, nor to

repositories without adequate resources to undertake an oral history project. The Student Leadership Initiative staff received assistance from a variety of sources, such as institutional support within the library in the form of guidance, funding, and technical expertise; as well as the collaboration of a trained oral historian in the Department of History; and the work of many dedicated graduate students. Since this investigation was performed while the oral history project was still being implemented, it is impossible to comment on the ultimate success of the project; however, the project manager seemed confident that the initiative would meet its goals.

## Conclusions

This goal of this study was to examine in detail why and how one academic library initiated an oral history project in the absence of an established oral history program. The results of this study indicate that oral history can serve as a valuable documentation strategy in the context of a university archives. This study also suggests that a university library special collections department can implement oral history projects without having an established oral history program. Collaborating with parties both inside and outside the library has allowed the Special Collections Research Center staff to accomplish more than would have been possible without the support from the Department of History, Digital Library Initiatives, and library administration. Furthermore, given adequate training, archivists and librarians appear to be able to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to conduct oral histories.

This project indicates that not only is oral history an effective method for enhancing and supplementing collections of archival materials, it can also be useful tool

for engaging students, connecting with alumni, and promoting the university and the library to the community at large. As expected, computer technology plays a greater role in the production and dissemination of oral history materials than it has in the past. The Internet provides new opportunities for discovery and access of primary source materials; however, the technical aspects of managing digital collections can also lead to numerous challenges. As indicated in the professional literature, a major obstacle for oral history initiatives in archives and libraries is obtaining adequate and continuous funding.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

Could you describe how the Student Leadership Initiative got started? Whose idea was it? What aspects have changed since it was initially conceived?

Is the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) collaborating with any other departments in the library or university?

Could this project be a success without support from other departments?

How does this project support the mission and goals of the university/library/department?

Should archives/special collections “create” materials or just collect them?

Does SCRC’s current collection have other “gaps” that oral histories could fill?

Who will be conducting the interviews?

What preparation/research will interviewers do before interviewing subjects?

Do you think oral histories could/should be a permanent feature of a university archives/special collections?

Are there plans to continue doing oral history projects in SCRC?

Are there any differences between this project and other oral history projects done in SCRC?

What are the anticipated uses of the oral histories that will be collected?

What potential benefits do you see resulting from this project? For the university/library/department?

Prior to beginning this project, did you have any training or experience working with oral history?

Could you describe some of the challenges you have encountered while working on this project?

Thus far, what has been the most rewarding aspect of working on this project?

How will you determine whether or not the project was successful?

From your experiences working on this project, what advice or recommendations would you give to other librarians/archivists who wanted to undertake an oral history project?

What plans, if any, are there to disseminate information about this project once it has been completed?

## Appendix B: Initial Proposal for Student Leadership Initiative

- A. Title of Proposed Project:** Engaging Students in Documenting the Leadership Legacy
- B. Expanded title:** This project will engage First Year College students in documenting the college experience that former Student Body Presidents had at NC state and their subsequent life-long contributions as citizen leaders. Through the gathering of oral histories, students who are seeking to define their own leadership path in society will learn about the legacies of students who came before them and how the college experience can inform a life time of service, success and achievement. These oral histories will be preserved and made accessible by the Special Collections Research Center, adding to the growing documentation on university history and enabling a wide variety of future innovative opportunities.
- C. Supervisor for the Project:** Todd Kosmerick, University Archivist and Cate Putirskis, University Archives Specialist
- D. Project Description:** Building on the successful 2008 collaborative project between the University Archives and the First Year College to assist students in the publication of the *Brick*, the Fellow will develop a similar engagement project involving students in creation of information resources. This is an oral history project which has as its first goal the documentation of the college experience of former NC State student body presidents and their subsequent contributions as citizen leaders. The second goal is to engage current students in the gathering of these interviews so that they can connect—with university history, with familiar elements in leaders’ life stories and with methods of inquiry that will enrich every aspect of their academic career. These oral histories will be preserved and made accessible by the Special Collections Research Center, adding to the growing resources on university history and enabling a wide variety of future innovative opportunities.
- E. Fellow’s role:** The Fellow will be at the center of this collaboration between the University Archives and First Year College, acting as manager, coordinator, instructor and archivist. The Fellow will handle much of the administration of the project. S/he will
- Build a relationship with First Year College faculty
  - Instruct students to undertake archival research and conduct oral histories
  - Prioritize former student body presidents to be interviewed (in consultation with Alumni Affairs, Libraries’ External Relations and University Archives)
  - Create a core set of questions to be asked of all interviewees (with the faculty member and University Archives)
  - Process interviews and oversee transcription
  - Develop the interviews into a web resource

- Assess student feedback about the project (with the faculty member).