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Recommended Citation

Balasko, Arabeth, "The Memory Keeper: Analyzing the Importance of Collecting and Preserving Oral Histories in a Twenty-First Century University Archival Repository" (2013). *History/Archives Capstones Collection*. Paper 1.
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The Memory Keeper: Analyzing the Importance
of Collecting and Preserving Oral Histories in a
Twenty-First Century University Archival
Repository

Arabeth Balasko
Final Draft
5/10/13
Di Scala/Stapleton

Outline

- I. Introduction
 1. What is a memory?
 2. Identifying different types of memories.
 3. Introduction of archivist's role as the "memory keeper" of an academic archive.

- II. By taking on the role of a "memory keeper," an archivist has a dedicated responsibility to preserve the story of her repository. How does an academic archivist collect personal stories of staff, faculty, students, etc. and preserve the memories for archival research?
 1. Whose story are you telling? Why? Whose are you not telling? Why not?
 2. An archivist cannot collect everything, but how can you, as a professional, deem what is worthy of collection and preservation? Today's technology sharing is expanding, how to maintain validity?
 3. What are the benefits of having oral histories as part of your archival collection? Downfalls?

- III. Printed literature and articles vs. the memory of staff and faculty
 1. How can the oral histories be preserved and interpreted along with the printed literature in order to tell a more completed story? Who are you collecting for? Can the two really be "divorced" from one another, or are both views needed to properly understand and research the evolution of UMass Boston?
 2. Discuss the different interviews taken and compare/contrast the stories they told to the stories found in printed literature. Were there significant changes, overgeneralizations, strong reactions, etc. *Students, *Bureaucracy
*Downtown Location

- IV. Anniversary: Since the anniversary is approaching, why now are these individuals stories being told and shared? Why have they not been sought out beforehand? Why are milestones places from reflection? Is this an unjust way to collect and preserve personal stories if they are only of interest at this time?

- V. Conclusion
 1. The big "so what?"
 2. Revisit the important role the archivist plays and how, academic institutions should include personal stories, but how do you, as an archivist, collect those stories?
 3. Is there an answer to this question? Do all academic institutions need oral histories, or is it sufficient to only collect around milestones? End thoughts.

“There is the truth of history, and there is the truth of what a person remembers.”—Rebecca Wells¹

I. Introduction

What is a memory? Is it a taste, a touch, a smell, or a sound? Is it an experience that transcends the barriers of time? Memory is officially defined as “a person’s power to remember things.”² Memories are personal, they are distinct, and they are unique. Over time, our memories may betray our minds; the sequencing of events easily becomes a blurred timeline each person nostalgically attempts to recreate. According to the Syracuse University’s “Public Memory Project,” “Memory differs from traditional notions of history in that memories can change, transform or become altered over time. They can also be forgotten or recalled.”³ The way an individual chooses to remember an important event in her life, does not necessarily recreate the order in which the event actually happened. For example, two people who were at the same event can have contrasting recollections of what was apparently a mutually-shared experience. Moreover, reminiscing can create an array of emotions, both positive and negative, that influence the way one views the world around them. Individual memories are also connected to a person’s interpretation of her own life situations at the time of the memory’s formation. Such factors, as her political and social beliefs at the time of the event, and how her involvement influenced the incident’s outcome, will alter each individual’s later memories, for better or worse.

However, personal reminiscences are not the only types of memories that individuals retain. Popular or fantastical memories of places often influence the ways in which a society embraces and supports collective memory. Collective memory is comprised of groups of people sharing the same interpretation of an experience. Even if an individual was not personally

¹ Brainy Quotes, “Memory,” <http://www.brainyquote.com>, 2013.

² Dictionary Definition, “Memory,” www.dictionary.com, 2013.

³ Syracuse University, “Public Memory Project,” <http://vpa.syr.edu/initiatives/public-memory-project>, 2013.

associated with the event, through the use of collective memory, her interpretation will largely reflect those who had been a part of the shared experience. The notion of collective memory shapes the perceptions of the general public and allows a society to access the past while focusing on the ways that memories influence current political and cultural lives.

When collective memory begins to generalize and group together interpretations of an event, and, in turn, use the collected memories as truthful representations, the authenticity of these memories needs to be thoroughly analyzed, particularly if that memory is being collected as oral history and preserved in an archive. Whose story is being told and why? Whose history is being recorded and preserved? Many times collective memories will celebrate the victors or feature certain desirable outcomes; therefore, archivists must interrogate the accuracy of popular memory from the event.

Liz Sevckenko, a humanitarian public historian states, “Memory is a critical language and terrain of human rights.”⁴ For the past fifty-years, oral histories have been used around the world as mediums for capturing and interpreting several known atrocities against humanity. By giving the power and the individual voice back to victims, oral histories have created a new outlet for capturing collective memory. Collective memory has become an important construct in history that has enabled the founding of Truth and Justice Commissions in South Africa and other countries throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas. By choosing to acknowledge the importance of compiling and preserving individual as well as collective memory, oral histories are now assuming a new position in twenty-first century archival repositories around the world.

⁴ Liz Sevckenko, *The Power of Place: How Historical Sites Can Engage Citizens in Human Rights Issues* (Minneapolis: The Center for Victims of Torture, 2004) pp. 1.

Memories are complicated and complex; therefore, when conflicting interpretations arise, validity becomes questionable. Collective memory is a powerful medium for interpretation; it is a way to link a spectrum of experiences and interpret them for a larger audience. However, collective memory should not be the only criterion for remembrance that historians, archivists, and the general public rely on as a basis for truthful representations of an entire society's experiences.

Another way memory is preserved is through the collection of institutional or organizational memory. This institutional or organizational memory depends largely upon the proper archival preservation of and accessibility to historical documents, but institutional archives also can strive to include and preserve the accounts of individual experiences in an organization. Due to the sizable infrastructure of corporate and academic organizations, and consequently the massive volume of documentation generated, the institutional archivist has a substantial responsibility in selecting what materials produced in the normal course of operations is to be preserved. She becomes the essential gatekeeper of institutional memory. However, her decisions regarding the preservation of an institution's collection should be reflective of the organization's mission and should include individual memories, as well.

However, institutional archivists may find it difficult to approach the preservation and collection of employee memories. Oftentimes, these individual narratives fall outside of the normal collecting scope; however, these stories must be properly preserved and accessible to future users. However, once the oral histories are obtained, where do the individual memories fit into the overarching historical narrative of an institution? What happens if they have conflicting stories to tell, that do not fit into the popular notion of an institution's documented history?

In the case of individuals' memories, organizational memory's veracity is invariably compromised by the inherent limitations of human memory. Individuals' reluctance to admit to mistakes and difficulties compounds the problem. The actively encouraged flexible labor market has imposed an Alzheimer's-like corporate amnesia on organizations that creates an inability to benefit from hindsight.⁵

Do institutions want to present and preserve their failures and weaknesses in their recorded historical narrative? Most likely the answer is no. Corporations and institutions certainly shy away from scandal; the mistakes made tend to be hidden or glossed over; and the individual memories become legendary stories or bitter remarks that get rewritten and reshaped in order to complement, not contradict, the received institutional narrative.

However, awareness of the differing interpretations of historical memory is an essential trait an archivist must possess. As an archivist, it is important to acknowledge that conflicting accounts of history will ultimately make-up a country's, institution's, or individual's cultural heritage, legacy, and memory. "Curatorial standards guide the interpretation of social phenomenon and this is represented through the collection of cultural heritage."⁶ The availability of a spectrum of historical information is also likely to enhance the institutional archives' trustworthiness for all of its constituencies. Therefore, it is vital to encapsulate as many different interpretations as possible in order to give the future generations an opportunity to create their own individual perspectives of the past.

One way archivists have collected personal stories and memories of the past is through the use of oral history. A modern definition of oral history is "the recording of personal testimony delivered in oral form"; however, the collection of oral histories is a practice that has

⁵ Annie Brooking, *Corporate Memory: Strategies for Knowledge Management* (London: Thompson Business Press, 1999) pp. 77-93.

⁶ Ingrid Mason, "Cultural Information Standards—Political Territory and Rich Rewards," in Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderine, eds., *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 224.

been around for centuries.⁷ In fact, Thucydides, a fifth century B.C. Greek historian, is credited as being the first oral historian due to his amassed collection of Peloponnesian War stories.⁸

Over the centuries, the tradition of using oral histories to represent and record the various recollections of individuals' in society continued; but as technology developed during the twentieth-century, the physical process of collecting oral histories dramatically changed. During the 1900s and into the 1940s, folklorists used wax cylinders and cumbersome recording devices as instruments designed to capture and document the musical sounds and personal stories of folksingers.⁹ This mode of recording continued into the mid-1940s, but after WWII, the development of portable recording devices enabled historians and social scientists to quickly and feasibly record the stories of substantial groups of people. During the 1960s "an interest in recording the memories of people other than elites became paramount among academics," and since the 1960s the interest and popularity in recording the personal stories and memories of a variety of individuals has continued.¹⁰

With the rapid evolution of technological devices over the last fifty years, instant communication with individuals all over the world is now an expected and demanded norm. Twenty-first century individuals have the ability and the technological devices to record and preserve their own stories and create their own oral history collections. In this circumstance, it is now more important than ever for modern day archivists to properly document, preserve, collect, and make accessible oral histories as part of their repository's permanent holdings.

⁷ Valerie Raleigh Yow, Recording Oral Histories: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences (New York: AltaMira Press, 2005) pp. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 3.

“And the moral of the story is that you don’t remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened.”— John Green¹¹

II. The Memory Keeper

Recognizing the importance of collecting and incorporating individuals’ memories into an institution’s archival repository is a fundamental task that archivists must professionally and ethically accept. Depending on the repository’s specific needs and mission goals the collection policies will differ; however, disregarding the personal stories of the working population of the university is a disservice to archival collecting. How can a user analyze the completed history of an academic institution without providing the documented input and sharing of personal experiences of faculty, staff, and students? How can a researcher evaluate theory and explore a multitude of viewpoints, if only printed media is available as research tools?

How then, does a university archivist preserve the cultural memory—or “the spiritual and familial practices,” and oral traditions of an academic institution?¹² How are oral histories represented in the historical narrative of a college or university? Unfortunately, more often than not, the oral histories of a university community remain largely uncollected and underrepresented. Collections that do have interview transcripts or recordings of individuals are more likely to document those who are in a position of authority in the university community than those who are responsible for its daily operations.

Currently the University of Massachusetts Boston’s University Archives and Special Collections holds only two oral history collections regarding individual employee experiences and personal remembrances. For a University that is approaching its fiftieth year as an academic

¹¹ Brainy Quotes, “Memory,” <http://www.brainyquote.com>, 2013.

¹²Gail Anderson, Reinventing the Museum, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift (New York: Altamira Press, 2004), pp. 103.

institution, why are only a handful of such stories and personal journeys preserved? Obviously, an archivist is not physically able to collect the personal stories of every individual who has been a part of the UMass Boston community, but as a keeper of memory, how does an archival institution decide what is, and is not, worth collecting and preserving?

In Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts Frank Boles states that, “archivists have no greater responsibility than deciding what information they will preserve for society.” As keepers of memory, archivists have an ethical responsibility to collect an array of materials that best represent the mission of their repository. Why then have so few oral histories been collected at the University Archives and Special Collections? Out of the two oral history collections accessible at the archives, one holds the stories of a dozen faculty for the University’s Twenty-fifth Anniversary Celebration. Now, twenty-five years later, it is still only one of two available collections at the archives.

The good news is that it is never too late to start the collection and preservation process of recording oral histories. In fact, it is probable that significant opportunities for scholarly research, personal discoveries, and the birth of a new method of interpreting the past, can still be achieved through the use of academic oral histories. The way a modern user accesses and utilizes information in a twenty-first century archival repository is rapidly changing. With the evolution of web 2.0 and web 3.0 technologies, and the rise in the popularity of blogs and live journals, as well as social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter; the way individuals share and access information is becoming more personalized, and reflective of oral history principles. For example, Facebook allows users to create a personalized page that characterizes and emphasizes individuality. By all appearances, Facebook mimics what oral histories have done for centuries; allowing an individual to tell his or her personal story in a platform that is

accessible to a variety of communities. Why then are Facebook pages or Twitter tweets acceptable representations of an academic environment's historical narrative; yet, oral histories are still enduring questions of authenticity and reliability?

Over time, oral histories have gained a reputation as being unreliable sources of information, particularly in academic institutions. Since oral histories are unique representations of each storyteller's past experiences, they tend to be chock-full of emotional content, rather than being strictly factual, and are therefore labeled as being of questionable validity. The sequencing of events in a series of personally-coherent episodes typical of oral histories can be confusing to researchers who are used to documentation that has clear date order, and easily fits into a predisposed narrative.

Paper documents represent facts and information that has been accepted and accredited by a variety of scholars and general users for generations. Users have been more willing to accept printed archival documents as truthful representations of history. Why do printed documents hold more legitimacy than personal stories in an academic environment? Possibly, it is because memories change and opinions transform as time passes, but printed documents remain unchanged, and leave more room for analysis. Or perhaps, human experiences of betrayal and falsification of information allow printed documents to stand out as pinnacles of authority in an untrusting world. Regardless of the reasoning, is it fair for a majority of scholars to discount oral histories or individual memoirs as unreliable sources of information in an academic environment?

Oral histories have consistently been associated with the portrayal of wartime experiences, the retaining of ethnic rituals, or the mode of remembrance for numerous atrocities

against humanity. By giving a voice to the underserved and underrepresented; oral historians have significantly preserved the trials and tribulations of entire communities of peoples, and enabled scholars an access point for study and interpretation. In this regard, oral histories, personal stories, and recorded memories often are praised, revered, and at times coveted by scholars and archivists alike. Society values and even empathizes with human struggle and survival, but only under very specific circumstances. Why are the stories of Vietnam Veterans sought out for collection and preservation by a university archivist, but the recollections and memories of a secretary, who dedicated over sixty years of her life to the same academic institution, is not included in the university's historical narrative? If archivists are designated keepers and preservers of memory, then by neglecting to include oral histories and individual memories in an academic archival collection, archivists are failing their appointed mission.

In today's society where information is instantaneously available on countless websites and myriad interpretations of history are easily accessible and readily available to users, it is important for archivists to adapt to the changing ways of sharing information with their patrons. Post-modernist archivists have an ethical responsibility to include contrasting points-of-view and represent all classes in their collecting scope.¹³

The decentering of the humanities relies, to some degree, not just on cultural memory passed through communities, but on the historical responsibility of scholars, critics, artists, and institutional leaders who see themselves in this transitional generation as ready and able to move into another system of knowledge and thought.¹⁴

By accepting the inevitability of an ever-changing social demographic, and the realization that oral histories, even in an academic institution, are vital contributions to the collection, archivists

¹³ For further reading regarding postmodern theory and archival principles see, John Ridener, [From Polders to Postmodernism: A Concise History of Archival Theory](#), (Litwin Books, 2009.)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 103.

of a twenty-first century university repository should strive for inclusion, not exclusion, of various and differing historical narratives.

Collecting and preserving oral histories in an academic institution can be a daunting task. Romanticized notions of a university's history can often times overshadow the unpopular truths shared through oral histories. Finding employees, staff, faculty, and students who have an opposing version or opinion of the documented truths, and are willing to be identified and recorded may prove challenging for archivists; but it is necessary to preserve a diversified collection of stories. Arguably, archivists need to actively seek underrepresented individuals out, and offer them a chance to share their insights and experiences of their time at a university. Without the documented archival inclusion of a variety of personal stories, experiences, and memories, an archivist may be delivering one-sided perspectives to her patrons. Moreover, by neglecting to incorporate differing points-of-view, an archivist is violating the archival ethical code of conduct.

In May 2011, *The Society of American Archivists (SAA)* approved an ethical code that outlines the duties and responsibilities archivists are to adhere to as preservers of the past. By collecting a majority of materials that tend to coincide with the received historical narrative, an archivist is failing to, “document and preserve the records of the broadest possible range of individuals, socio-economic groups, governance, and corporate entities in society.”¹⁵ As an academic archivist, documenting the evolutionary growth of administrative, educational, and social components of your university should be a top-priority. Therefore, the inclusion of oral interviews of faculty, staff, and students should be a permanent part of your overall mission goals and repository's collection policy.

¹⁵ SAA, “Ethical Code,” <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>, 2011-2013.

Nevertheless, archivists in academic repositories remain hesitant to include oral histories in archival collections because at times, the reliability of personal memory is questionable. The SAA code of ethics dictates that archivists engage in “the process of remembering the past through authentic and reliable primary sources.”¹⁶ Memories are authentic to every individual; yet, they are also personal representations of experiences. Some may question how an oral recording of an individual’s memory can be regarded as an authentic primary source, but historians and scholars often rely on memoirs, diaries, and journals to recreate stories and experiences of the past. For centuries, these mediums, which are similar to oral histories in being personal, have been ordained as truthful representations of the past. Therefore, why do oral histories continue to be regarded as falsified, or at best, incomplete representations of organizational history?

Written documents continue to hold a place of authority in our society just as they have for millennia. Academia has habitually relied on the written word as a vehicle for preservation and posterity of a University’s legacy. Course bulletins, faculty papers, newsletters, yearbooks, administrative correspondence, building and development plans, and student handbooks line the shelves of the typical university repository. However, something is missing amongst all these documents—where is the human connection to these paper records? Where are the personal experiences and the stories? The SAA ethics statement argues that

Archivists recognize that primary sources enable people to examine the past and thereby gain insights into the human experience. Archival materials provide surrogates for human memory, both individually and collectively, and when properly maintained, they serve as evidence against which individual and social memory can be tested. Archivists preserve such primary sources to enable us to better comprehend the past, understand the present, and prepare for the future.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid, 2011-2013.

¹⁷ Ibid., <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>, 2011-2013.

How do archives “serve as evidence against which individual and social memory can be tested”?

How can a theory, idea, or historical narrative be questioned or tested if only one perspective is represented?

Stories and oral recollections have been a part of society just as long, if not longer, than written records. However, over time, paper has been deemed a more powerful authority than the human voice. The way oral histories have been set aside in an academic archival repository has to change. It is time that they too, are valued as unique archival documents worth collecting and preserving.

“Our memories are card indexes consulted and then returned in disorder by authorities whom we do not control.” –Cyril Connolly¹⁸

III. Collecting a Different Point-of-View

How can the history of an educational institution be identified and defined? Is it the University’s published literature or printed records? Do twenty-first century social networking or educational websites affiliated with the school play a role? How do we document the individuals, the students and workers who could be sources of significant personal opinions or narratives of their experiences at the University? Does the *true* history of an educational institution combine several different aspects?

Archival documents and records have traditionally defined and formed the public identity or historical narrative of a university. However, in a twenty-first century postmodern technological society, public opinion, networking websites and word-of-mouth significantly transforms the way information is disseminated and accepted. Postmodernist theory—the theory which believes that distinct human involvement and authentic individual experiences are valuable components to the historical narrative—has shifted the way twenty-first century archivists collect. Many archival repositories are dedicated solely to the collection and preservation of oral histories. StoryCorps, for example, collects the memories and stories of individuals from various societal and ethnic backgrounds across the nation. It has become a well-known and reputable institution in the archival community.

Perhaps it is not fair to compare an NGO focused on collecting digitized oral histories to an academic or university repository charged with documenting institutional history, but it is important for university archivists to start thinking about the needs and interests of their patrons

¹⁸ Brainy Quotes, “Memory,” <http://www.brainyquote.com>, 2013.

who work in a digital-rich environment. Many individual scholars and historians of the twenty-first century are looking for a personal or intimate connection to their research topic. Over the last several decades, photographs, diaries, and oral histories have grown in popularity amongst scholarly researchers and the general public as critical sources of the past. Often times, media collections, and archival material other than the correspondence are the most requested series in an archival repository. Without having multiple interpretations or various media formats to offer to users, patrons will go elsewhere to seek-out information. Many users will turn to sensationalized or inaccurate internet sites, such as Wikipedia, to provide them with what they believe to be factual representations and authentic interpretations of the past. Wikipedia is not an academically accredited website, nor is it an authority on history; however, it provides images, media links, videos, and other interactive tools that today's users find appealing.

How do collection policies of academic institutions encourage or discourage the preservation of institutional memory through the use of workers, students, staff, and community oral histories? As an archivist, how do you facilitate and promote the preservation of personal memories? According to the *SAA*, "Archivists should demonstrate professional integrity and avoid potential conflicts of interest. They strive to balance the sometimes-competing interests of all stakeholders."¹⁹ This is not a responsibility to be taken lightly; therefore, as a university archivist, it is extremely important to incorporate into the collections the voices of the underserved and underrepresented. By offering a variety of materials, including oral histories, to archival patrons, while continuing to balance the mission goals of the academic institution, university archivists have the opportunity to attract new groups of users to their respective repositories.

¹⁹ *SAA Archival Code of Ethics*, <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>, 2011-2013.

The use of oral histories allows a university archivist to approach collecting institutional records in a different way. These unique collections are helping researchers interpret a different historical narrative and uncover new modes of interpretation. However, it is important to understand that acquiring oral histories of an academic institution requires in-depth training and institutional approval. The University of Massachusetts Boston Institutional Review Board (IRB), the University's authority on social science projects, mandates that researchers and interviewers who are "working with human subjects," complete in-depth on-line tutorials, meet with University representatives, and submit a detailed proposal that must be approved by the IRB members. It is a lengthy and time-consuming procedure, but in order to ensure the quality of research, and provide privacy rights and authority to participants, it is a necessary process to undergo. Additionally, once trained, the interviewer or researcher is certified to work with human subjects for a three-year period. As a university archivist, it is necessary to invest the time in oral histories if you hope to procure its benefits.

Obviously, accommodating the diverse groups of patrons and administrators is not an easy task to undertake, but it is vital if an archival repository is to offer its users an objective view of the institution's history. In order to publicize the importance of providing patrons with a balanced archival collection of both oral and paper records, archivists need to have a clearly defined archival mission statement and collecting scope.

The UMass Boston's Archives and Special Collections mission statement reads,

University Archives & Special Collections (UASC) at UMass Boston collects materials that reflect the University's urban mission and strong support of community service. UASC also collected and preserves the history of UMass Boston. Additionally, UASC has assumed curatorial responsibility for the archival and manuscript collections acquired

by the University's William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences that relate to the study of the Vietnam War.²⁰

This mission statement clearly outlines the specific materials that the UMass Boston's UASC collects and preserves. As a result, the UASC has done an impeccable job of collecting and preserving the oral histories and documented memories of the University's surrounding communities. However, in the process of collecting outside oral histories, it has largely overlooked the potential oral histories in UMass Boston's University community. By stating to "preserve the history of UMass Boston" in the mission statement, the archives must strive to actively incorporate various forms of collecting, which includes oral histories. The UMass Boston historical collection consists of photographs, urban planning, and various forms of correspondence and printed materials; however, it is largely missing a personalized connection to the University community, which could be achieved through the collection of faculty, staff, and student oral histories.

The UASC staff now has plans to collect numerous UMass Boston oral histories. Through encouraging class oral history projects, and drawing on the impetus of a 50th Anniversary celebration, over the next several years, the University's repository will actively collect, preserve, and make accessible, a variety of stories provided by the UMass Boston University community.

Hopefully, this progressive movement by UMass Boston's UASC will inspire other academic institutions to reconsider their approach to collecting, preserving, and disseminating their universities historical narrative to patrons. It would benefit other academic institutions will begin to value and reassess the voices and stories of those who have enabled the daily operations

²⁰ University Archives and Special Collections, "*UASC Mission Statement*," <http://openarchives.umb.edu>, 2013.

of their facilities to continue. By acknowledging the “common peoples’” contributions to the overall growth and evolution of a university community, the historical narrative of any academic institution will become significantly enriched.

“The hardest thing about the road not taken is that you never know where it might have led.”
–Lisa Wingate²¹

IV. (continued) “Should have—Could have—Would have:” Coming to Terms with Challenging Resolutions

As a result of developing oral history sources for this capstone essay, a new series containing the personal stories and memories of long-standing employees will soon be added to the UASC’s permanent archival holdings. These new voices, insights, and opinions could uncover unexplored ideologies and perspectives; they will provide one basis for the existing historical narrative of UMass Boston to be reevaluated and reexamined. With the completion of this project, the voices and personal experiences of ten staff and faculty members who have been a part of the University’s community for over thirty-five years, will offer researchers alternative interpretations of UMass Boston’s historical past.²²

This component of my capstone project was created in order to obtain a contrast to what printed literature reveals about the historical development of the University of Massachusetts Boston. By researching, studying, and analyzing both printed materials and personal stories, this project aimed to interpret the different positions and common themes appearing in both the personal interviews and the existing institutional record. The goal of this project was to gain insight into the way a University archivist could strategically collect archival materials to document institutional history, using UMass Boston’s history as a case study. I wanted to explore and analyze the available materials at the UASC in order to understand how the archives ultimately presented the University’s historical memory and popular legacy to patrons. Carrying out a research project for the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies during the 2012-2013

²¹ Brainy Quotes, “Memory,” <http://www.brainyquote.com>, 2013.

²² Interviewees contain faculty and staff that are still working or recently retired, but remain active in the UMass Boston University community.

academic year, I read the printed literature of the University, and formulated a picture of the received historical narrative of UMass Boston.

After I had read and researched the printed sources, I listened to the existing UASC oral histories, which were entirely of leading faculty and administrators. In my view, the combination of both sources did not suggest that a researcher could access a well-rounded interpretation of the history of the University. How could the archives tell the story of the University without the input of the mass of administrative workers who experienced the everyday life of the university at the grass-roots? I personally, do not think that it could. Therefore, I decided to seek-out constituents consisting of faculty and staff that had been a part of the UMass Boston community for upwards of thirty-five to forty years, to share their stories. I was interested in evaluating how the stories of such individuals fit into the University's received history. In the spring 2013 semester, I interviewed, recorded, collected, and preserved the personal reflections and memories of ten faculty and staff members from the University of Massachusetts Boston, each with approximately thirty-two to thirty-five years of service to the UMass Boston community. I believed that by interviewing individuals who have been a part of the University system since at least 1981, I would be able to properly compare and contrast the printed materials versus their individual recollections. I choose 1981 as a starting point due to the UMass Boston and Boston State College merger that occurred during the 1981- 1982 academic year. I wanted to have individuals who had been an integral part of the UMass Boston/Boston State College merger interviewed because the story of the two universities' merger is not discussed or is simply glossed over in the published record. In fact, the 1989 history of UMass Boston, which is a one-page overview available in the UASC, states only that, "In 1982 consolidation with Boston State College brought well-established programs to the

University.”²³ This was the only mention of the “consolidation,” which upon further research, reveals that this process was not a consolidation, but an authorized take-over.

Another historical account, which was available on the University’s homepage until August 2012 stated, “In 1982, Boston State merged with UMass Boston to form what has become one of the state’s major academic enterprises and Boston’s only public university.”²⁴ This account called the joining of the academic institutions a merger, but painted the event in a positive light. In April of 2013, the history of the University once again was redrafted on the school’s homepage, and the merger of UMass Boston and Boston State College was hardly mentioned, and when it was, it said, “In 1982, Boston State College was incorporated into UMass Boston, eliminating duplicate programs.”²⁵ Each year, a different adjectival description was offered on the website as to how the joining of the two institutions occurred. What then was the true history of the merger?

As I researched this event, it was quite obvious that there was more to the story than the existing narrative offered. Therefore, I actively sought out for interviews individuals who had worked at Boston State College, as well as those who had worked at UMass Boston during the merger but had still been affected by its occurrence. I felt that it was important to capture the experiences of individuals who were likely to have had loyalty to one University over the other, and see how each individual remembered the apparently powerful merger experience.

²³UASC, “The University of Massachusetts Boston: A Brief History,” Finding Aid for UMB Publications Collection, 1964-, 2013.

²⁴ The University of Massachusetts Boston homepage, “*History of UMass Boston, History #1*,” www.umb.edu/history/, June 2012.

²⁵ The University of Massachusetts Boston homepage, “*History of UMass Boston, A Growing Presence*,” www.umb.edu/the_university/history, April 2013.

During the interview process, I attempted to craft each question so that each of the responses would enable the individual to draw from past experiences in order to best interpret the way that they felt they helped shape the evolution of the University. I wanted interviewees to reflect upon their time and their experiences at UMass Boston, and pick out themes and memories that they felt were important to share with the UMass Boston community. I was surprised to see how themes and experiences transcended the lives of the interviewees regardless of their professional position.

Interviewee #1 and interviewee #3 had worked in the same department together for approximately 30 years; however, their personal experiences differed significantly. Interviewee #1 chose to reflect upon the interdepartmental relationships she formed at the University; whereas, interviewee #3 focused more on how she saw herself in regards to the overall expansion of the University. Even though each interview revealed similar themes and overlapping professional experiences, the interviewees each perceived their specific or individual role at the University in different ways.

Interviewee #2 currently holds an executive title at the University; however, many of her personal views and opinions coincided with those the interviewees that hold administrative or teaching positions. During her time at UMass Boston, she reflected largely upon the times when she felt disappointment in the way the University handled budgetary decisions and distributions. Interviewee #2 had previously worked in another University where budgetary constraints were not an issue. Instead of dwelling on the negative outcomes of budget cuts, she tended to reflect on the ways that the state and the UMass Boston community could raise awareness of the urban mission, and advocate for the additional funding and support from legislature and government officials. She acknowledged that UMass Boston has problems, but she also shared her belief that

it is never too late to right a wrong. Additionally, she expressed her faith in the mission of the University, and her continual devotion to the student body of UMass Boston. In fact, she stated that it was due to her love of the students that she had not yet officially retired, even though she technically could have done so.

Similarly, interviewees #6, #7, and #8 acknowledged the struggles of acquiring monetary assistance for projects at UMass Boston. Each of these employees, both staff and teaching faculty, began their professional careers at Boston State College. After Boston State College merged with UMass Boston, they continued their service at UMass Boston. Even though they hailed from different departments and different backgrounds, each interviewee commented on the struggles faced in adjusting to a new institutional home. Regardless of their individual experiences, they all stated that, in the end, they were glad and thankful that they had been selected for employment at UMass Boston. Even though they had experienced, at times, unjust treatment by the university bureaucracy, they rose above individual struggles and made a successful lifetime career at UMass Boston. They still had fond memories of their time at Boston State College; however, they embraced their new surroundings, and made the best out of what they had offered to them. None of the interviewees from Boston State College dwelled on the losses they sustained during the merger, instead, they chose to share the knowledge they gained from the experience. Each had a unique story to tell, and in the end, their professional resilience to chaotic circumstances was inspiring.

Interviewees #4, #5, #9, and #10 are all professors or former professors at UMass Boston. Each of these interviewees approached their memories in a different way; however, like the previous interviewees, each used their negative experiences as learning lessons and character builders. The mantra of life goes on, regardless of specific trials, tended to be a shared theme in

all of these interviews. Even if you do not always get what you want, you have to make the best out of what is available to you. These professors voiced dedication to the enrichment of students; however, they also satisfied their own personal goals. They each sought out the opportunities that were available to them as UMass Boston faculty. By seeking out fellowships, research sabbaticals, and intercollegiate support groups, these interviewees did not let the lack of university resources stop them from pursuing their career goals. Making the best out of the situation before them was the option they chose to embrace. By creating their own innovative ideas pathways and inspiring their students to do the same, each of the interviewees felt that their lifelong service to the UMass Boston community was justified.

Oral histories are tools that allow researchers into another's personal world. By giving individuals their own voice, their own power, their own authority over their individual legacy, oral histories offer the possibility of new modes of interpretation. For this study, I wanted to see whether the oral histories of faculty and staff of UMass Boston, supported or rebuked those comparable stories that were offered in printed media sources.

I found that some elements of the oral histories matched, at least to some extent, the printed narratives of the University's history. Authors in UMass Boston's newspaper the *Mass Media*, particularly students and assorted faculty, as well as individual recollections collected in this 2013 study, agreed that the University did not handle the merger between the two Universities well. However, during the interviewing process, each individual interviewee attempted to see the positives of the merger instead of reflecting on the negative aspects. The interviewees did not ignore the fact that the UMass Boston and Boston State College merger significantly changed the course of their own lives, as well as the lives of many of their friends and co-workers; however, each interviewee reflected on the realization the merger was

inevitable. They did not excuse the actions of the university's bureaucratic choices nor did they agree with them; however they chose to accept them, and move on. Throughout the years, all of the interviewees retained their own voice, and refused to let the voices and struggles of those affected by the merger go silent. These interviewees accepted the inevitable changes but they did not lose their own ideals nor did they remain silent in the face of adversity. In fact, the former Boston State College Staff continue to celebrate the legacy of Boston State College, and continue to honor its memory.

Even though these interviewees celebrate the memory of Boston State College, they also shared that the merger with UMass Boston did bring positive changes for their personal lives. In fact, one interviewee stated that even though he was originally an employee at Boston State College, the merger was in retrospect “a Godsend.”²⁶ This interviewee had previously been interviewed as part of the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration collection, and had offered a different interpretation regarding the UMass Boston and Boston State College Merger. In 1990, this individual participated in an interview discussing the hardships brought about by the merger. Throughout the interview, his tone suggested that he was irritated and frustrated by the merger of the academic institutions. With the merger less than a decade old, the sufferings remained fresh in his mind; he was outraged by the treatment he and his fellow colleagues received.

However, the spring 2013 interview had a more nostalgic tone that tended to reflect the passing of time. At this point, the merger was over thirty years old, and the anger he had expressed in his previous interview had faded as the years had passed. Being able to compare his previous interview, which was conducted roughly twenty-five years prior to my interview, with

²⁶ Interviewee 6, interviewed by Arabeth Balasko, March 28, 2013, 6th Interviewee, Balasko Capstone UMass Boston; Boston, MA.

the interview I conducted was illuminating. How an individual chooses to remember or emphasize an event can obviously change over time; however, seeing the ways in which a human evolves through the use of oral histories is priceless.

Being able to objectively reflect on an event that has passed in time is a great way to utilize oral histories, particularly in an academic archive. Studying how time can transform the interpretations of events, and being able to compare and contrast the different interpretations of history allows for a researcher, scholar, or everyday user to interpret the past in various ways. Having multiple viewpoints, voices, and format sources available in a university archive can enable a researcher to clarify her own theories and interpretations of the perceived narrative. By having several sources available, including oral histories, at the UASC repository, users can objectively theorize their own ideas of UMass Boston's true historical narrative.

Printed literature tends to be a muted primary source. By not including recognized subjective emotions, these sources are deemed accredited representations of an institution's accurate history. The story of idolizing the University tends to be an unwritten goal of University sponsored printed literature. Sponsored works tend to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. Even though the story of UMass Boston has evolved and changed over the years, the printed sources have continued to tell a similar story of urban growth and expansion. By focusing on the positive changes, and largely disregarding the negative events, the historical narrative of the University is one-sided.

Human memories, and human experiences are not always as revered as printed literature, but they are essential pieces that supplement the written record of an academic institution. Often times, oral histories and individual interviews can focus on the negative aspects of an event, but

that is not always the case. During the interviewing process, all of the interviewees praised the efforts of the University, regardless of a specific outcome. Many interviewees had not been pleased with all of the choices the University had made over the years, but each interviewee expressed a belief that the University did its best to work with what it had. The way that each interviewee positively reflected on the failures of the University was actually, quite refreshing. While interviewees did not withhold their opinions, at the same time, they attempted to reflect objectively on a past experience. This does not mean they enthusiastically commended the behaviors that the UMass Boston community displayed over the years, but instead of dwelling on blame, they used their respective trials and tribulations to overcome the professional and personal obstacles in their lives. By using examples of personal experiences of professional setbacks, the interviewees created opportunities for reflection, and shaped an historical account of the shared struggles of public employees.

Throughout the interviewing process, several of the individual reflections coincided with the University's printed narrative; however, I uncovered approximately three episodes that greatly differed between the interviewees' responses and the printed sources. The role of students; the undeniable presence of a sometimes difficult intuitional bureaucracy, and the loss of the Park Street campus were themes that resonated with interviewees as being low points in the University's history.

All of the interviewees believed that the move away from the city campus to the University's harbor location conflicted with the University's urban mission goals. UMass Boston has, since its creation, signified an awareness of the struggles of city life, and attempted to create programs that benefit those in society that have a role in the city's urban development. The loss of the Park Street campus, located in the heart of Boston, was an upsetting episode for

the majority of interviewees. While those interviewed suggested that, over time, UMass Boston has, continued to support its urban mission; the majority of interviewees also believed that if the University had maintained a presence in the city, the urban mission could have been an even more powerful or substantial asset to the University. In their view, by losing access to, and maintenance of the Park Street campus, the University misplaced a factor of its focus on the intended urban renewal goals.

When asked the question, “What have you enjoyed the most about working for a public University?” every interviewee stated that one of the main reasons they have remained at UMass Boston for so long was due largely to the students. Regardless of whether they had been a professor or in an administrative position, all of the interviewees had a strong dedication to the students at the University. The interviewees believed in the mission and goals of the University, and they supported and admired the strength and diversity embodied in the students of UMass Boston. These revelations and personal feelings could not have been shared as effectively via another historical medium. The pleasure in their voices and the expressions of joy they shared in these moments of recollection cannot be conveyed substantially through paper documents. Oral histories allow for intimate connections and reflections. By including emotions and sentiment in the University’s historical narrative a new assessment of the individuals’ role in the UMass Boston community can be evaluated and considered.

Although each interview contained similarities to the received narrative of UMass Boston’s history, there were clear differences disclosed when analyzing portions of the oral interviews. For example, the printed literature praised the move to the Harbor Point Campus—neglected to mention that the continual increases in tuition and fees worked against the University’s urban mission, particular serving immigrants and working poor; and how those in

positions of power, mandated the changes that, in the view of the interviewees, negatively affected the University community. These perspectives are important contributions to the documentation of the University's history, and I believe are essential for the UASC to incorporate into its collections. Therefore, the interviews that I have collected in this study will be donated and preserved as part of the UASC UMass Boston collection.

Once the interviewing process was completed, I found myself questioning rather or not personal or individual stories truly belonged in a University's historical narrative. After much deliberation and consideration, I came to the conclusion personal stories are important if a historian is to completely comprehend and interpret any fragment of history. Moreover, it is necessary to include, evaluate, and remember the stories of the underrepresented in society even if, it is equally important to include the stories of the administrators and presidents. Every individual has a story to tell. If they are willing to share it with an archivist, it is her ethical responsibility to record it.

Stories propel history forward; the sacrifices of the people—the triumphs of the oppressed; history is about the struggle and survival of the human race. Through the use of oral histories and personal interviews an integral part of any historical narrative is captured. These stories are historical representations of truth, and they should be actively collected in a university archival repository and mandated important documents to preserve and include in an institution's collection policy.

As an archivist, particularly in an academic environment, it is vital to record as many stories as can be obtained, as many interpretations as can be collected, and to properly preserve them, and provide access to them for generations to come. Ultimately, each researcher, scholar,

and everyday patron will decide on the history they want to accept and believe, but as an archivist, it is necessary to provide each user with a variety of authentic information and primary sources that reflect all points-of-view, regardless of popularity.

The history now available at the UASC that reflects the growth and evolution of UMass Boston consists primarily of printed materials. Over the past fifty years, few publications or individuals have taken on the daunting task of interpreting and analyzing the significant role the University of Massachusetts Boston has assumed. During UMass Boston's short-history, the University has been riddled with political scandal, plagued by budget woes, and endured cut-backs and mergers. Oppositely, it has also been the "first University to offer a program in Green Chemistry," dedicated constant time and resources to recognizing the University's urban mission philosophy, and provide an affordable yet "world class," education to a varied class of students including those that come from the underserved and underrepresented communities in Massachusetts.²⁷ The history of UMass Boston is rich and diverse, and the stories collected in the UASC should honestly represent the University's history in its entirety, sharing both its positive and negative aspects.

However, all of these attributes of UMass Boston have been assigned via printed resource materials. Many, if not all, UMass Boston known legacies are drawn from paper documents, and transcribed snippets of outdated interviews. Individual knowledge and opinions have not been properly incorporated in the documentary heritage of the University. How can third-party observers obtain a well-rounded narrative if individual stories are not included in the University's historical narrative? The short answer is they cannot. The incorporation and inclusion of a wide-range of voices and perspectives is essential if a comparison/contrasting

²⁷ UMass Boston Homepage, "*Mission Goals*," http://www.umb.edu/the_university/mission_values, 2013.

examination of the personal stories and printed literature regarding the University of
Massachusetts Boston is to transpire.

“No memory is ever alone; it's at the end of a trail of memories, a dozen trails that each have their own associations.” –Louis L'Amour²⁸

V. 50 Years in the Making

“An anniversary is a time to celebrate the joys of today, the memories of yesterday, and the hopes of tomorrow.”²⁹ With the fiftieth anniversary of UMass Boston less than a year away, the University’s public relations community is currently organizing a task force of committees responsible for overseeing celebratory events throughout the 2014-2015 academic calendar year. Many projects have been discussed, created, and devised in order to highlight the accomplishments of UMass Boston since its founding in 1964. One significant project that is now in progress is the composition of an anniversary book dedicated to telling the historical narrative of UMass Boston. By retelling and repackaging the historical narrative of UMass Boston into a short anniversary booklet, a new group of scholars and researchers will undeniably be attracted to the UMass Boston’s UASC holdings, in order to perform their own research and explorations. Therefore, if the archive plans to be prepared for a new group of users, looking for a variety of primary sources, the UASC may need to seek out innovative acquisitions from the University staff, student, and faculty community.

The up-coming anniversary celebration is a perfect opportunity for the UASC archives to make the repository’s holdings better known in the UMass Boston community. The UASC has an opportunity to collect a variety of oral histories, paper records, and photographs that will complement the already existing UMass Boston historical collection. The UASC is a University archive: therefore, it should make collecting the stories and history of the University a top

²⁸ Brainy Quotes, “Memory,” <http://www.brainyquote.com>, 2013.

²⁹ Unattributed quote, www.endlessquotes.com, 2013.

priority. The fiftieth anniversary should create an entry point for new collaborations and relationships to form between the University community and the UASC.

It is important that the archive is presently determined to collect the stories for the fiftieth anniversary, and by all appearances, those in the University community are planning events that will allow staff, students, and faculty to share their stories with the archives. The stories will become a part of the University's legacy and will be a permanent collection that is accessible through both the archives and its website. However, it is disappointing that it has taken the celebration of an anniversary to inspire the mass collection of UMass Boston oral histories. As previously stated, the UASC has only two oral history collections included in the UMass Boston collection, and one of them was created specifically for the University's twenty-fifth anniversary. Why does it appear that UMass Boston anniversary milestones tend to be the major time oral histories are deemed sufficient for archival collecting? Why are they used primarily for reflection, and not as archival sources that are important to actively collect throughout the years? Should an archive be continually collecting oral histories, or is it sufficient to only collect oral histories when a University milestone approaches?

Clearly, this is a question that each university archivist will have to answer for herself; however, it is important for archivists to be aware of the unique stories that are readily available for collection in their respective University communities. By neglecting to record oral histories every year, or even every five years, archivists risk losing the opportunity to acquire a diverse group of stories and experiences. By actively recruiting and advertising for the sharing of oral histories from staff, faculty, and students of an academic institution, the archives will be able to focus on other archival tasks during the anniversary celebration instead of struggling to collect oral histories from the University community at the last minute. For example, if a substantial

group of oral histories has been previously recorded one or two years prior to the anniversary celebrations, archivists can focus on creating compilations and interactive exhibits that reflect the stories of the University community. By creating a successful and innovative exhibit, the archives can encourage others to share their stories and promote the mission of the archives while forming new relationships and attracting a new group of users to the repository. An archivist's main goal is to preserve, protect, and make information accessible; therefore, by making the archives known to the University community an archivist is taking a vital step towards the preservation of her University's legacy.

Perhaps anniversaries should be a time for reflection. Anniversaries are perfect venues for spotlighting the oral history collections available in the University archives. However, an anniversary celebration should not be the only opportunity offered to the University community for the collection and preservation of a personalized historical narrative. A university archive should be receptive to the collecting and preservation of anyone's story; as long as they are willing to share it. By choosing to primarily collect oral histories only when anniversaries approach, University archivists are unjustly representing the mission of an academic archive, and are missing critical opportunities to serve the University's diverse community.

“The worst memories stick with us, while the nice ones always seem to slip through our fingers.”
— Rachel Vincent³⁰

VI. Where Do We Go From Here?

Oral history collections are not easy to collect, especially in an academic repository. Often times, the institutional rules and regulations negatively influence the willingness of staff and faculty participants. The process of obtaining several oral histories can be long and tedious; however, the results are worth the inconveniences. Being able to connect with another’s story and personal journey is a touching experience. Oral histories are unpredictable and unique. Uncovering the way individuals choose to replay their lives is captivating as a historian and as an archivist. Being able to identify the common threads linking contrasting experiences is illuminating; it can even cause individuals to rethink their own personal interpretations.

Recognizing the methods behind an individual’s reasoning and identifying the resilience of the human spirit is an experience that researchers, historians, and archivists cannot get from paper documents. Being able to intimately connect to words, sounds, and the human voice is a rare trait distinctive to oral histories. The voice is a powerful medium, and the ability to articulate the past is a gift that archivists should strive to preserve. In an academic repository, where the opinions and papers of the privileged are generally preserved, it is essential to collect the stories of the underrepresented. One way to include and incorporate the recollections of the masses in a University’s historical narrative is through the use of oral interviews.

More than likely, there are many in the university community that does not believe that others would want to hear, share, and learn from their stories and experiences. By advocating for the collection and sharing of oral histories, you are, at the least, giving the University community

³⁰ Brainy Quotes, “Memory,” <http://www.brainyquote.com>, 2013.

the opportunity to share their experiences with the archives. By providing the community with a safe outlet for sharing, who knows what kind of revelations the archives could collect.

Oral histories have their place in an academic archive; however, it is up to the archivist to decide their overall role in the repository's collection. For example, if the UASC chooses to use oral histories as part of the University's historical narrative, the repository is offering its researchers an alternative or a supplement to the paper records. The acquisition of oral histories allows for the collection of records in a different way. These special collections are helping researchers uncover new theories, ideas, and ideologies in a different way.

Also, with the developing digitization process, the accessibility and affordability of oral histories is easier and cheaper than it has ever been before. Oral interviews can now be conducted on a digital recorder, iPhone, or on the computer. The recordings can be saved as MP3s, MP4s, or other audio files, and easily accessed via a web link or WindowsMediaPlayer. Additionally, the recordings can be easily uploaded as podcasts or video links for user accessibility. Once processed or uploaded onto the computer, the oral interviews can be edited for length, quality, and usability. Or if the archivist prefers, the interviews can also be saved on archival gold standard CDs for preservation, or on regular CDs for user conveniences. This process is not overly expensive, and these unique oral history collections can become popular mediums for the archivist to use in order to promote the varying documents accessible at the UASC.

Evaluating the ways in which oral histories fit into an academic repository allows an archivist to reshape the old-fashioned modes of incorporating individual memory into the UASC's repository. I believe it is time to rethink the individual's role in a University

community. Regardless of their position or title at the university, all individuals have something vital to share about their time at UMass Boston. From the custodian to the President; from the Registrar to the history professor, every person has a story to share. By accepting that truths come in varying forms, and seeking out the contributions of all factions of the UMass Boston university community, the archivist has a chance to preserve a new perspective for society. The stories are already there, they just need someone who is willing to listen.

“The memories of men are too frail a thread to hang history from.” –John Still³¹

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³¹ Brainy Quotes, “Memory,” <http://www.brainyquote.com>, 2013.

“Nothing is ever really lost to us as long as we remember it.” — L.M. Montgomery³²

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