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Mountaineer Stories: An Appalachian State University First-Year Oral History Project

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MOUNTAINEER STORIES: AN APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY FIRST-YEAR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

Appalachian State University (App State) is a 4-year public institution that is a part of the University of North Carolina System. The university is located in Boone, North Carolina, in the northwest corner of the state. While App State offers both Master's and Doctoral degrees, its enrollment is overwhelmingly composed of undergraduates. Fall 2019 enrollment was 19,280 students and of those, 17,518 were undergraduates ("Appalachian State University Facts," n.d.). The student population is also predominantly white but the university has multiple initiatives in motion to recruit and retain a more diverse student body. This includes not only a commitment to more ethnic and racial diversity but also First Generation, rural, low income, transfer, and veteran students, among others. With those students come stories and experiences on what it means to be an App State Mountaineer—experiences that are largely absent from the official record of the university.

In Fall 2019, following up on several informal conversations about the idea, the App State University Archivist and First Year Experience Librarian began meeting to discuss starting an oral history project focused on the current student experience. Both were new to App State and had experience conducting oral histories at previous institutions. The archivist brought the goal of more intentionally collecting materials that document the history of student life at App State, as experienced by the students, and not through the lens of administrators, faculty, or staff. Likewise, the First Year Experience Librarian brought the goal of finding new ways to connect with first-year students and new opportunities for them to engage with each other to build community. Both also had the objective of highlighting underrepresented students, which aligns with the university's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Since the university is a site for the collective memory of the Mountaineer experience, an oral history project would offer a way to diversify the ideas and beliefs of App State as well as connect future students to a longer history of the student experience, ideally creating more of a sense of belonging. It would also complement and broaden students' engagement with the university library as it would focus on Special Collections and usage of the library technology resources such as its recording studio. The archivist and librarian researched similar projects and identified ones to examine more closely, including projects at the University of Northern Colorado and Johns Hopkins University, among others. They also sought guidance from the librarian who runs North Carolina State University's "Wolf Tales" project.

After several meetings, the two identified potential faculty partners in the university's First Year Seminar (FYS) and Watauga Residential College (WRC) programs whose courses thematically connect with the project, and decided to pitch the idea of integrating a tailored oral history assignment into their courses.

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Based on conversations with colleagues and relationships the librarian made through supporting first-year courses in Fall 2019, three professors/courses were targeted: a course on comparing societal issues and advancements (past, present, and future) using H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* as a springboard; a course on the importance of stories and storytelling in our culture; and a course specific to the Student Support Services program that deals with the importance of community and community-building both locally and globally. (Student Support Services is a federally funded program common at colleges and universities across the United States whose purpose is to "increase the number of disadvantaged low-income college students, first-generation college students, and college

students with disabilities in the United States who successfully complete a program of study at the postsecondary level" ("Frequently Asked Questions," 2011)). All three faculty members were interested in participating but due to timing and other circumstances, only *The Time Machine* professor opted to participate in a Spring 2020 pilot. In light of that, the remainder of this paper will focus primarily on the experiences in that course.

The archivist, librarian, and professor met several times late in the Fall 2019 semester to develop a plan for what an assignment would look like. These are the primary components they wanted to include:

- Student engagement with and reflection on oral histories from other organizations
- Participation by students in the project would be optional
- Participants would interview each other in pairs in the library's recording studio
- Interviews would be around 15 minutes in length to keep file sizes and transcripts more manageable
- Recordings would be audio-only for ease of equipment usage and to encourage participation for those apprehensive about appearing on camera
- Interviewers would transcribe the recordings and share with interviewees for approval
- Students would choose from a list of questions with the option to ask their own
- The librarian and archivist would lead an in-class instruction session on oral history, primary sources, project logistics, and interview best practices

The professor wanted the project to happen after spring break due to prioritized course content but, otherwise, was very flexible with removing previous assignments and rearranging his course calendar. Since this was the first time any of the three individuals had done anything of the sort, student learning outcomes for the project were more informal early on, but were later better defined. The emphasis was primarily on the logistics of the project which, as COVID-19 emerged in March 2020, became even more relevant and important. Project learning outcomes essentially consisted of the following.

Students will:

- Identify basic aspects of oral history and best practices of conducting interviews
- Identify university library resources and services to support this project
- Be able to locate university special collections and define its role in preservation and promotion of university history
- Recognize their place in university history and discuss the importance of documenting and preserving their stories and experiences for future students and researchers

From there, the trio developed a more formal set of assignment instructions and composed a list of questions (Appendix A). In addition to answering required questions about name, hometown, anticipated major, and graduation date, students were asked to choose seven questions from a list. Alternately, they could choose six questions and ask a seventh question of their own but it had to be approved by the professor in advance of the interview.

The archivist contacted the university's Office of Research for Institutional Review Board approval and created a combined consent/deed of gift form for students to sign as both interviewers and interviewees. The archivist and librarian also created a lesson plan for their class visit and met with a member of the library's Tech Services department to plan for the class to use the library's recording studio during a pre-scheduled period of time. Additionally, they developed a system of Google Drive folders for students to upload the recording files and transcripts for easier retrieval. By the start of the Spring 2020 semester, everything was in place for a pilot. Then came the COVID-19 disruption.

Like many places, the COVID-19 pandemic hit during App State's spring break. The university transitioned the second half of the spring semester to online-only delivery and, in order to do that, extended spring break by a week to give faculty and staff time to prepare. During that time, the archivist, librarian, and professor were in communication and decided to proceed with the oral history assignment pending several modifications—the main ones being 1) the removal of a final presentation and replacing it with a short reflection essay on the experience and 2) revising how to conduct the interviews.

Since App State uses Zoom as its official web conferencing tool, that was an obvious candidate for conducting and recording the interviews, but the group had concerns regarding possible confusion and consistency around the use of video as well as the file format meeting archival standards. After some research, the librarian found an online podcasting tool called Cleanfeed, designed for audio-only interviews from a distance. In addition to its ease of use, it offered a free version that met the requirements of the project. The format of the files generated is WAV, which is an acceptable format per National Archives' standards ("Appendix A: Tables of File Formats," 2019). Otherwise, the project proceeded as planned.

Students began the project by listening to or watching oral histories from either NPR's StoryCorps or NC State University's "Wolf Tales" collection and writing a reflection, followed by a Zoom meeting led by the librarian and archivist on the project logistics, oral history, etc. Then, the professor solicited participants—twelve out of twenty-three students volunteered. The professor paired-up those students and it was up to them to schedule their interview times. The librarian created a workflow for students to follow before, during, and after the interview and extended his availability should questions or technical difficulties arise. From there, five of the six total pairs were able to successfully interview each other in the time provided. The sixth pair ran into scheduling and home/life/pandemic-related issues so the librarian interviewed each student individually since both were still interested in participating.

Lessons Learned

The archivist, professor, and librarian reviewed the student interviews and reflections shortly after the semester ended and all agreed that, despite the circumstances, the pilot was a success. Initially, none of them were sure how well the interviews would go since there was so much uncertainty due to the pandemic and the professor only expected three or four of his students to participate. However, everyone was quite pleased that the interviews not only happened with relative ease but that the students seemed to appreciate and get something meaningful out of the experience. Also, in their reflection essays, students mostly thought it would be worthwhile to integrate the assignment permanently. The professor was also happy that most of the students who participated made the connection between the project and the theme of the course. A few common themes that emerged from the interviews were: not feeling prepared for the first-year of college, the mixture of stress and excitement of being independent for the first time, and the uncertain journey of becoming a part of a new community. Several students also commented in their reflections that they missed not being able to do the interviews in-person and hoped future students would have that opportunity. In the event that online continues as the delivery method of classes in the near future, Zoom or other web conferencing tools may be reconsidered to capture some semblance of a face-to-face interview.

Beyond that, other logistical lessons learned included getting an earlier start on students signing the release forms, anticipating desired interview length, training on asking follow-up questions, and having alternative assignments. Another small but significant change to the project was that the consent forms were recreated and distributed for electronic signatures using Adobe Acrobat. The forms generally were not emphasized as much as they should have been earlier in the process and resulted in the librarian hounding students with frequent email reminders and addressing confusion surrounding the forms. The length of the interviews was also shorter than anticipated—all were around ten minutes long. In the future, they will likely be required to ask eight instead of seven questions, as well as more training on asking follow-up questions. The professor also wants a more consistent alternative assignment that is more in the spirit of the oral history project. A couple of ideas discussed include having students

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record interviews with family members or App State alumni, and/or 'interview themselves' through a personal narrative essay.

THE FUTURE

In the near future, the *Time Machine* professor wants to make the assignment a permanent part of that class and possibly incorporate it into a class he teaches called Historic Green Buildings. Additionally, when the participants from this project become seniors, he would like to invite them back to his first-year classes to speak about their time at App State. This is related to a similar idea of the librarian, who wants to invite seniors who participated in the project during their first-year to participate in a follow-up interview. This is a longer-term goal of the project for which a process has not yet been developed. Another shorter-term goal is to integrate similar assignments into the courses mentioned in the introduction.

Due to the disruption caused by the pandemic, participation of the storytelling course is yet to be determined but the course with the cohort of Student Support Services students is set to participate in Spring 2021. Plans are underway for how the assignment will be configured in that course, but that opportunity is exciting not only because it represents a new course, but also because it is a group of underrepresented students whose voices the archivist and librarian are eager to document as the collection starts to grow. The librarian has also started to identify additional First Year Seminar, Watauga Residential College, Honors College, first-year writing faculty or courses with which to partner. And even if not every course in those respective programs participates, it is the hope of the librarian and archivist that the recordings and transcripts will be integrated into the broader curricula through assignments where students have to listen to or read interviews of their classmates and produce a deliverable in response.

Of course, the archivist has plans to officially designate these interviews as a collection and catalog and preserve them as such. Beyond that, the plan is to create a website where the interviews will be streamed and transcripts are available to be read. From there, the archivist plans to approach student clubs and organizations about participating and eventually would like to secure funds to purchase equipment for a mobile story booth that could travel to university events or be center stage at oral history specific events like a Human Library.

Other longer term ideas that the librarian and archivist have discussed include pursuing research grants or other opportunities that would allow them explore implications of using the student experience as curriculum, examining students' sense of belonging through representation in the archives/as a part of the university's narrative, and possibly a qualitative study (in partnership with other campus stakeholders) on the impact of experiences on perceptions vs. realities of college life; a follow-up senior interview would dovetail well with this last idea.

It is obvious that there are many valuable possibilities and uses for a project such as this, of which engagement with the university library and special collections is just the tip of the iceberg. Academic libraries have long been supporters of and advocates for diverse patron voices, as well as hubs of creative research ideas and opportunities that bring together faculty, staff, students, and even communities outside the university. This work serves to strengthen not only their missions but the missions of the universities they serve, thus contributing to lifelong curiosity, learning, and building a stronger community.

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APPENDIX A

Oral History Assignment: UCO 1200 - The Time Machine

Step 1

Students will listen to, read, or watch 3 oral history interviews of their choosing from StoryCorps and/or Wolf Tales and write a one-page reflection. Questions to consider when writing the reflection:

- Why did you choose these particular interviews? What makes these interviews special to you?
- What is one thing you learned from the person being interviewed? Why is it important?
- Did you observe any techniques that will inform how you will conduct your interview? If so, please explain.
- Is there anything else you would like to know from the interviewee or anything you wish the interviewer had asked? Please explain.

Step 2

The FYE Librarian and University Archivist will visit class for an instruction session to introduce the assignment, share oral history best practices, discuss interview questions, and logistics.

Step 3

Students will choose questions. Then, they will interview each other outside of class (around 15-minute interviews per student), transcribe interviews, and share with their partners for accuracy.

Step 4

Students will write a final essay reflection of the experience (2-3 pages). Last, students will upload the audio file(s) of the interview and accompanying transcripts to Google Drive folders (provided by the library) for archival processing.

Interview Questions:

Must ask:

- What is your name and your hometown?
- What is your anticipated major and graduation date?

Choose 7 questions from this list, or choose 6 and come up with a 7th on your own (must be approved):

- Why did you choose to come to App State? Who or what led you here?
- Describe your dorm life experience.
- What is one thing you would tell a new student before arriving at App State?
- What is your favorite memory from your first semester?
- What has been the most challenging aspect of your first year at App State?
- What items from home do you wish you'd bought?
- What is your favorite place to go off campus? Why?
- Are your experiences here what you expected in high school? How does this match or differ from your high school experience?
- What is the most important 'hack' you've learned in your first year? Why is it important?
- Are there any clubs/organizations/communities with which you connected? Do you recommend these to other students?
- How would you describe your community at App State?
- What is the most important thing that people should know about this community, years from now?
- How have you changed since you arrived at App State?
- What advice would you give next year's incoming students?