

# **University and Community Partners in Oral History Projects: Fulfilling the Urban University Research and Service Mission within the Complexity of Engaged Scholarship**

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## **Abstract**

*Central to the urban university's academic mission is supporting scholarship that expands knowledge and "service to the state" and local region. Documenting local history is an aspect of scholarship that supports the community directly. This manuscript addresses the role of the urban university in collaborating with community organizations on oral history interview projects, which offer a compelling presentation of the interviewees' lived experiences.*

## **Introduction**

Oral history interviews often are the timeliest way to document the perspectives of aging or complex subjects. Over some time, Library of Congress and Smithsonian interview projects, and more recently, the NPR StoryCorps program, have increased public awareness of oral-history projects.

Placed in the context of national projects, partnerships of community members and academic institutions can foster access to this valuable research content. However, a level of complexity is inherent in such collaborations. As potential partners, community members often have access to interviewees, credibility, and the desire to capture these stories, but they may lack the knowledge of research design. However, university partners, including teaching faculty and librarians, bring expertise in research design, subject or disciplinary areas, organization, data storage, digital media, web design, search software, coding and retrieval, as well as ownership and rights issues. This article addresses the nature of two projects involving collaboration between an urban university and local immigrant communities and local GLBT organizations, highlighting the primary goals of access to the collections, maintaining relationships with community partners, and protecting the interests of interview subjects who represent potentially vulnerable populations.

The discussion is presented in the context of the broader aspects of engaged scholarship, particularly in relation to fostering respectful and beneficial partnerships between academic researchers and community members.

## **Oral History Research**

As defined on the Smithsonian's website, oral-history research is:

“A process of collecting, usually by means of a tape-recorded interview, recollections, accounts, and personal experience narratives of individuals for the purpose of expanding the historical record of a place, event, person, or cultural group.” (2012b)

At the national level, a number of major oral history projects have increased public awareness of oral-history research, particularly the Library of Congress and Smithsonian interview projects, and more recently, the NPR StoryCorps program.

The Library of Congress and Smithsonian oral-history interview collections are extensive and vary across a range of subjects collected over many years. The Library of Congress interview projects have included the Veterans History Project, which contains interviews with veterans from World War I through the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Other examples are the Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, which includes interviews with American diplomats and the LBJ Library Oral History Collection, which is comprised of “interviews pertaining to the Civil Rights Movement, including those with Johnson [presidential] administration staffers, politicians, and activists” (Library of Congress 2012a).

Smithsonian interview projects have ranged from the Computer Oral History Collection, a project which began in 1967 “to collect, document, house, and make available for research source material surrounding the development of the computer,” (Smithsonian 2012a) to oral history interviews related to atomic development in “The Manhattan Project.”

Finally, the StoryCorps program is one of the largest oral history projects of its kind. The components of the StoryCorps program include projects involving “post-9/11 veterans, active-duty service members, and their families” in the Military Voices Initiative; African American participants in the Griot Initiative; Latino participants in StoryCorpsHistorias; and the Memory Loss Initiative, which documents the stories of individuals who suffer from various levels of memory loss. “The mission of StoryCorps Legacy is to provide people with life-threatening conditions and their families the opportunity to record, preserve, and share their stories” (StoryCorps 2012a). Characterized by engagement with the community, the StoryCorps program emphasizes collaboration with community organizations, through its Mobile Tour Outreach, which encourages wide program participation.

The StoryCorps interviews become a part of a collection in the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center, with some interviews being aired on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* and made available on the StoryCorps website's Listen pages.

In addition to representing examples of major oral history projects, the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress offer support for other organizations and individuals who are initiating interview projects. The Smithsonian's Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide is made available through the Smithsonian website. In addition, the Library of Congress also provides information on "Planning an Oral History Project," as well as "Interviewing Tips" through its website (Library of Congress 2012b).

In relation to the philosophy that undergirds the StoryCorps program and in the cases of each of these projects at the national level, a library is a key or central player in the project. This model provides the basis for collaborative projects involving academic institutions, with academic libraries in particular, having a lead role in oral history projects at the local level. The role and importance of libraries in oral history projects will be addressed in greater detail later.

## **The Urban University**

While the academic mission of research, teaching, and service is interpreted and forwarded somewhat differently across institutions, the mission is the same at its core. The urban university's role has often been defined in relation to the potential for "the integration of teaching, research, and service within a community context" (Mundt 1998, 252). The aspect of the academic mission associated with service can be interpreted to encompass public service, including community engagement and outreach, economic development, and social change.

Rutgers-Newark is one of three campuses of Rutgers University, a large research university of 58,000 students, with a shared mission across the campuses. In the context of the broader mission of research, teaching, and service, the President and Board of Governors identified "two overarching aspirations" for the university in 2004: "greater academic distinction and more significant service to communities beyond campus, particularly to the citizens of our state." While the two aspirational statements help to define the Rutgers University context, the statements illustrate aspirations which are quite similar to those of the university's peer institutions and many public universities, in general.

The distinctiveness of the Newark campus within the university has been defined in relation to the academic program offerings and their rankings and reputations, the large proportion of graduate students (one-third of the student population), and diversity and community engagement. Rutgers-Newark has been ranked nationally for the level of diversity of the student population as the most diverse doctoral degree-granting campus in the U.S. by *U.S. News & World Report* for fifteen years and as the

most diverse college campus by *Forbes* magazine. In terms of community engagement, Rutgers-Newark is ranked among the Nation's Top 25 "Best Neighbor" Colleges and Universities.

In terms of context, Newark is the largest city in New Jersey, with approximately 265,000 residents, and a high level of diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, and country of origin. The city is home to a number of major employers and is the world headquarters for Prudential and Continental Airlines. While the city benefits from its close proximity to New York City, Newark has suffered from a range of "urban" issues, such as high rates of crime, including violent crime, high unemployment rates, and a high school graduation rate of approximately fifty percent.

The general set of challenges that characterize Rutgers-Newark's engagement with the community relates to the mission, perceptions about the "Ivory Tower," and concerns that the university will dominate in collaborations. The way in which the university mission and the urban university mission are defined and understood may determine the extent to which faculty are supported in and choose to engage in "applied scholarship" or research that is community-focused, addressing social problems. There is "often a conflict between the values of traditional discipline-based scholarship that is more theoretical and institutional emphases on social problems that by their very nature are interdisciplinary" (Lynton 1995, 784).

In addition, there is the issue of community understanding of the university mission and the extent to which the university's articulation of its mission clearly reflects genuine support for and commitment to research, which has engagement and community benefit as a goal. As a result, there is the need to clarify if such research falls into the category of mission-relevant work, when compared with mission-critical work, such as teaching and traditionally defined research.

Members of the community may attach the stigma of the "Ivory Tower" to the academic institution based solely on perceptions or the basis of prior interactions with university representatives. In this regard, community members may doubt that university faculty and administrators fully understand community needs and respect members of the community as potential partners. As a result, there may be the expectation that faculty members will be condescending. In addition, there also may be the assumption that the university will dominate (or attempt to dominate) in interactions with community members. There may be the sense that the university is taking from the community, reflecting concerns about the sociological or anthropological study of residents, and that after the research is complete the university representatives will depart, leaving the community's problems unaddressed or unresolved.

Oral history projects differ from other types of research collaborations. Placed in the context of national projects, partnerships of academic institutions and community members can foster access to the valuable research content in oral history interviews. However, the nature of the relationships between the academic researchers and

community members is key in ensuring not only success of the projects, but also the reputation of the university as a respectful community member.

In the context of oral history research, the StoryCorps program maintains a statement of principles, which defines both StoryCorps as an employer in addition to the relationship with potential interviewees and other participants.

## **Statement of Principles**

- StoryCorps is built on an uncompromising commitment to excellence across all aspects of the project, from collecting, sharing, and preserving people’s stories; to organizational management; and maintaining an extraordinary work environment where respect and dignity are paramount.
- The interview session is at the heart of StoryCorps. We treat participants with the utmost respect, care, and dignity.
- StoryCorps has a relentless focus on serving a wide diversity of participants.
- StoryCorps is a public service (StoryCorps 2012b).

## **The Library**

In Rutgers-Newark, the campus’ research library has taken a central role in community engagement activities. In addition to traditional academic library community engagement roles, such as conducting workshops on research techniques and technology for faculty-led programs involving K–12 students, and conducting instruction related to funding opportunities and business plan development for entrepreneurs in collaboration with local Small Business Development Centers, the campus’ Office of Community-Based (Service) Learning reports to the library for the Rutgers-Newark campus.

As an academic unit, the library has the unique role and potential in supporting community engagement activities. In addition to the expertise represented by librarians and the research collections and other resources, the library mission reflects a focus on neutrality. In this regard, the library mission includes not only supporting the range of academic disciplines in teaching and research, but also the commitment to reflecting a range of viewpoints and perspectives, including those which are controversial, in library collections—a philosophy that extends to the range of disciplines, interview subjects, and topics potentially represented in oral history projects.

A number of goals have defined the community engagement projects undertaken in the library for the Rutgers-Newark campus. These goals relate to the support of the larger university mission; enhancing the campus’ place in the larger urban context and the view and perception of the university by outsiders; assisting in the demonstration of the academic institution’s societal and economic value; and addressing unmet

community needs, including increasing the accessibility to higher education for students from the local community while keeping in mind the university and campus resources available.

Thus, library administrators at Rutgers-Newark make a concerted effort to identify and understand needs, as articulated by community members, by deans and other academic administrators, and by faculty members. Specific challenges include the fact that the needs in a city, such as Newark, are tremendous. Two key challenges are prioritizing those needs and determining the needs that the library is in the best position to address. As indicated in the general challenges, the need to prioritize also is based on the ongoing challenge associated with the allocation of funding to support such initiatives. In addition, potential community partners often exhibit some apprehension regarding partnerships with individuals from the university—apprehension based on past experiences in some cases or on perceptions about motives.

## **Engaged Scholarship**

The importance of fostering credibility and trust with community partners is evidenced in the StoryCorps principles, which emphasize the issues of the respect and care for and the dignity of participants. In the academic context, these are key considerations in relation to the concept of engaged scholarship.

In their research, Small and Uttal have noted that, “Because of differences between the research that academic faculty usually conduct and train their graduate students to do, and the research and information needs of communities and practitioners, developing collaborative, productive research relationships between academic and community partners can often be challenging” (2005, 936).

In considering the nature of partnership, there is the concern regarding respect and some measure of equality between partners. This question of equality is complicated by issues of expertise, resources, and power or perceptions of power. Based on the complexity of such relationships, Small and Uttal suggest the importance of “Balancing Authority” between academic and community partners. Small and Uttal suggest that, “Rather than most relationships being egalitarian or with one partner as the expert, the balance of power is likely to shift back and forth between the community and the academic partners as the demands of the research process change, various expertises are needed, and different perspectives are called for” (2005, 941–942).

Obviously, this type of balance may not be easily accomplished. The Carnegie Classification’s definition of community engagement refers to the importance of reciprocity. “The quality of this engagement is defined such that engagement is equated with reciprocity. Reciprocity specifically signals a shift in campus-community partnerships toward relationships that are defined by a multidirectional flow of knowledge and expertise between campus and community in collaborative efforts to address community-based issues” (Saltmarsh et al. 2009, 27).

However, in the results of an analysis of university applications for the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, researchers found that most universities had difficulty in describing “how they had achieved genuine reciprocity with their communities” (Driscoll 2008, 41).

As potential partners in oral history projects, community members and university representatives bring strengths and limitations to the collaboration. These members may have direct access to potential interviewees, as well as credibility with those interviewees, and the desire to capture the stories. However, the community partners may lack knowledge of and experience with research design. While universities can be seen as exploitative of research subjects, university partners, including teaching faculty and librarians, bring expertise in a number of areas. Teaching faculty may bring expertise in research design and subject or disciplinary areas, such as history, cultural studies, or sociology for example, which can be relevant to the content and context of the oral history interviews. Librarians may bring expertise in the organization of data, data storage, digital media, web design, search software, coding and retrieval, as well as ownership and rights issues.

## **Oral History Projects**

Two oral history projects, for which Rutgers-Newark teaching faculty members approached the library for assistance, involve local immigrant communities and local GLBT organizations. In both cases, the projects involve potentially vulnerable populations.

In addition, both projects consist of existing collections of interviews from a number of different sources. In the case of the immigration project, for example, interviews range from an account of an individual who immigrated to the United States from Germany in the late 1940s after the Jewish members of his family were killed in concentration camps to a Chilean immigrant who moved to the United States with his family in 1985 for better economic opportunities.

Many of the interviews are being preserved in unstable media, such as cassette tapes, and questions arose regarding whether Institutional Review Board and other paperwork is in place. Lastly, in addition to previously recorded interviews, the researchers plan to add new interviews to the collections.

Fulfilling the ultimate goal of highlighting access to the collections requires comprehensively looking at the oral history projects and considering each of the major components: the inventory of the collections, including the descriptions of the materials; the language(s) of the collections; subject terms; ownership and rights issues; storage requirements; search and retrieval software; digitization and sustainability plans; and collection development and collection management plans. Digitizing and indexing provide an opportunity to search individual interviews or a collection across interviews, enabling researchers to find specific content.

The collection inventory includes developing a description of the collection's composition by types of materials, such as audio recordings, audiovisual recordings, written transcripts, or photographs; and by the type of media or format, including cassette and VHS tapes, paper copies of transcripts, or digital files; and the number and sizes of such items. The identification of such material types and formats enables for the calculation of storage requirements and staffing needs for digitizing the interviews, transcripts, and photographs, for example. Information on the languages of the taped interviews is necessary for determining staffing needs for transcription (if not yet completed), for portal design, and to ensure the necessary staffing with the appropriate expertise for assisting those who will use the collections for research.

The development of metadata—the identification of indexing or subject terms—is critical in order to facilitate searching for particular content within the interviews. The metadata should reflect the project's goals and consider factors such as the potential uses of the material, standard subject lists used by archives, and the relationships among aspects of the content represented in the interviews.

Generally ownership and rights are important with oral history collections. However, these issues are particularly important when existing collections are being considered, given questions about the availability of the appropriate legal documentation, which provides information on ownership of copyright, physical property rights and title, and permitted uses. These documents address questions such as who holds rights, title, and interest in the materials. These types of documents might include deeds of gift, copyright agreements, licenses, and memoranda of understanding. In addition, there is the need for the appropriate documentation associated with research involving human subjects, including informed consent forms and confidentiality statements. While those conducting new interviews can be advised regarding human subjects' review guidelines, existing collections may include interviews for which there is not human subjects' documentation for a number of reasons, including the fact that the interviews may have been conducted by individuals who were not affiliated with institutions that had IRB requirements or not affiliated with institutions at all. In assessing the collections, the librarians and faculty researchers must confirm whether the necessary documentation has been or can be obtained, in order to determine to what extent the interview content can be made available. In terms of rights and permissions, it is necessary to ensure uses consistent with what was communicated to and agreed to by interview subjects. Given the changes in technology, including digitization and the Internet, potential uses at present may have been unanticipated at the time the interview was conducted. Thus, with existing collections, there is the need for informed consent and other documentation, in order to ensure that participants agreed to uses of the content in ways that are facilitated in a web-based environment.

The focus on these issues, as well as other considerations related to storage requirements for digitized content, based on the collections' size (the digitization plan's development, the interface design; the design and use of search and retrieval software; the collection development and management plan as new interviews are

conducted; and the sustainability plan), is important in defining project timelines, funding, and other resource needs for requests to funding agencies, university administrators, or community members.

## **Conclusion**

The ultimate goal of completed oral history projects is that of providing access to valuable research content in useable way so that it can be searchable and web accessible, while protecting the rights of research subjects and the institution that hosts the collection.

The urban university's mission and context provide the basis for fostering oral history research that makes the words and perspectives of a range of interviewees available to a wide audience, particularly in the digital age. However, fulfilling this ambitious goal requires consideration of the complexity of oral history collections and the complexities associated with relationships between university and community partners. Using the examples of two ongoing and complex oral history projects, and the discussion of the way in which the university is defining the projects comprehensively, provides the opportunity to consider the application of principles of engaged scholarship in fulfilling an ambitious goal, while respecting the community members as true and contributing partners.

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