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Celebrating Twenty Years of Honors through Oral History: Making an Honors Program Video Documentary

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On April 4, 2008, the University of La Verne Honors Program celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a benefit dinner. The main entertainment for the night was a twenty-minute video documentary based on excerpts from oral histories I had completed with former students and faculty of the program. As students and faculty sat side by side and watched the documentary, I could see people in the audience smiling or nodding their heads in agreement with the person speaking on screen. An occasional "Hey, that's me!" was followed by laughter from the crowd. After the documentary, a discussion followed that added to the memories collected in the documentary as individual faculty and students stood up and reminisced about their experiences in the honors program. The stories gleaned from oral histories and incorporated into the film documentary had transformed a large, formal dinner into a warm, intimate setting.

Ten months earlier, when the founding director of our honors program, Dr. Andrea Labinger, asked me to do an oral history of our honors program for its twentieth-anniversary benefit dinner, I found myself enthusiastically agreeing to go one step further and use the oral histories to create a video documentary. To make this project work, however, I knew that I would need a lot of support from people on campus who had the equipment and technological skills required to do a good job. While the main reason that we embarked on this project was to put some oral histories together to entertain guests at our honor program dinner, we were also committed to the task of gathering important images and distinct, first-person experiences that could articulate the importance of our program: we wanted our finished documentary to reflect the high standards of our program so that it could potentially serve as a supplemental resource for future grant applications, fundraising events, and institutional program assessments.

Because they are preserved, documentations through oral history provide valuable institutional memory to honors programs that lack administrative or staff continuity. Oral histories have been referred to as "spoken memory" or "personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews"(Ritchie 1). They are usually documented through audio or (more

recently) digital recordings, with the interviewer asking the interviewee, otherwise known as the narrator, specific questions prepared in advance. With the accessibility of video and computer editing equipment, more and more oral histories are now both audio- and videotaped. Unlike news reporting, the entire taped dialogue between the interviewer and the narrator is usually transcribed and archived in a library or archive for future use.

As a discipline, oral history has ethical and legal guidelines as well as professional standards. For students and faculty new to oral history, two good sources of information about oral history are *The Oral History Manual* by Barbara Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan and *Doing Oral History* by Donald Ritchie. Both books include the “Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association” as well as forms and documents commonly used in the field. A good online source is the Oral History Association’s website, <<http://www.oralhistory.org>>, which also has valuable resources such as regional oral history workshops and institutes for both the professional and the amateur oral historian.

GETTING STARTED

As an instructor in the honors program, I knew that our financial resources were limited (that’s why we were doing a dinner benefit!), so immediately I had to assess whether I had the appropriate equipment to complete an oral history project. Before I started contacting former students and faculty of our honors program, I first set out to determine whether I had access to any available film and editing equipment on campus. Fortunately, my university’s Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), which works closely with our Office of Instructional Technology (OIT), was equipped with a digital camcorder, professional lighting equipment, and microphone; it also had a studio that included Apple computers complete with editing software that instructors could use for free. I learned from this experience that, if you need to keep equipment costs for your oral history project to a minimum, ask around at your school whether you have access to audio-visual equipment either from your instructional technology office or such departments as broadcast journalism, communications, or film. Your local historical society may also have audio-visual equipment available to rent as well as staff historians to help you with developing, interviewing, and archiving your project (but check their fees first).

After locating the appropriate equipment, I then met with Dr. Labinger, who became the main advisor for this project. We discussed potential interviewees for this project and identified the themes and topics to cover with former students and faculty members of the program. I also began my research by asking Dr. Labinger basic questions about the honors program. I wanted to know who was involved in getting the program on its feet and what the first classes were like. What year was the honors program born? Who taught the first courses? Who made the decision that honors courses were to be team-taught and why? I also began working on questions that I wanted to ask students: Out of

all the classes they took, which was their favorite honors class? What is their fondest memory or craziest experience that they had in honors? Which professors had an impact on them? Through my initial phone conversations with former students and my conversations with Dr. Labinger, I was able to prepare a list of open-ended interview questions for faculty and students that I revised and/or expanded according to the themes and topics I covered with each individual interviewee (see Appendix C).

From our conversations, Dr. Labinger and I drew up a list of twenty-five students and six faculty members to contact for an oral history interview. Ultimately, seven former students and four faculty members were willing and available to appear on camera to talk about their experiences in the honors program. I was able to interview the two key faculty members who founded our program. I invited the two other faculty members for an interview after three students mentioned that these instructors had an impact on their lives. I was lucky to have found seven students who had been in the program at different periods: one student was in one of the program's earliest classes in the early 1990s; two students were from the late 1990s; and four students were recent graduates. In addition, the two male and five female students included two Asian Americans, two Latinos, one African American, and two whites from different socio-economic backgrounds and college majors. The diversity added to the richness of the program.

This mix of faculty and students ended up sharing some of their most vivid memories and experiences in the honors program. Two students talked about being the children of immigrants as well as the first in their family to go to college and how their professors in the honors program helped them succeed in college; another student talked about the eye-opening experience she had when she went with her professor and fellow honors students to Los Angeles' skid row and ate a meal at a homeless shelter; one professor talked about his course on "Utopian Societies" and taking his students on a field trip to Arcosanti, an experimental town in Arizona infested with scorpions (the hostel where they stayed gave them fly swatters for the night); other students spoke movingly about life-long friendships they made as a result of being in honors.

CONDUCTING AND EDITING THE INTERVIEWS

Perhaps the most time-consuming and tedious part of this project was transcribing each interview and then editing it for "just the highlights." Because I was new to editing film, I decided to set the length of my documentary at twenty minutes and to schedule interviews in thirty-minute blocks of time in order to keep to a minimum the number of hours of film to edit. I also emailed a list of open-ended questions and guidelines for audio-visual oral history interviews to participating faculty and students so that they were well prepared when they sat down in front of the camera (see Appendix C). The result was that most interviews lasted twenty minutes, and, although I ended up with over 250 minutes of film to cut, edit, and shape into a tight,

well-written, twenty-minute documentary, I did not feel overwhelmed by the task of editing.

Because I had no funds to hire a professional editor, I found a staff member from my university's Center for Teaching and Learning/Office of Instructional Technology to teach me how to use iMovie, which is a relatively simple computer program on most Apple Macintosh computers that provides any Mac user with the tools to create and edit movies. It took me an average of nine hours to edit each interview down to "just the highlights." To identify the highlights of each oral history, I looked for particular moments in each interview where the interviewee opened up and articulated the most compelling, insightful, or funny anecdote or experience that he or she had in the honors program. Almost all of the highlights that ended up in the documentary were then whittled down to approximately sixty seconds in length. As I chose the highlights from each interview to include in the documentary, I also began the process of writing and organizing the documentary around them. In its final form, the documentary was organized into six sections, each with a different theme: "In the Beginning: the First Adventures"; "And Then There were More Adventures . . ."; "Great Times Learning from Professors"; "Meeting Andrea Labinger"; "A Place to Grow . . ."; "And to Form Lasting Bonds." With these themes in mind, I then transferred and organized different interview highlights that fit any of the themed sections into the documentary. I then had a staff member from my CTL/OIT do final edits of the sound, background, and lighting.

LESSONS LEARNED

Because I had the time and the equipment, I was able to do most of the work for this project. In retrospect, however, if I had the funding and a large budget, I would have hired a professional editor and post-production crew to help with sound editing, lighting, and music. I would have asked my colleagues in the Department of Communications if they or their students would be interested in collaborating with me on this documentary, perhaps incorporating it into one of their courses on documentary filmmaking or film editing. With a good film crew, I would have been able to concentrate more on the administrative and historical aspects of an oral history project: contacting and organizing interviewees, doing preliminary interviews and research, preparing different forms, developing questions, and doing the actual interviews. However, the chance to do this project on my own was an invaluable experience as I now understand and know how to manage, direct, edit, and write a visual documentary based on oral histories from beginning to end (see Appendix A).

At the end of the project, I also began to see more benefits and reasons for doing an audio-visual oral history project. Because this project was of historical and research value to my university, the University of La Verne's Wilson Library agreed to keep all of the original oral histories in their archives. And with the library holding these oral histories in their archives, I can now continue to build on the number of interviews conducted with former students and

faculty members of the honors program. These interviews are now available for any future research on and institutional assessment of La Verne's honors program. This project's in-depth, ethnographic-style research could potentially supplement traditional quantitative assessment that relies on statistical data rather than case-study-style responses. One professor who was interviewed and praised by her former students in this documentary even included a copy of this documentary—along with her students' regular course evaluations—in her file for tenure.

In addition, as universities cut programs as a result of the financial crisis, oral history video documentaries could be shown to university administrators, boards of trustees, legislators, and other audiences as part of a comprehensive argument for the continued existence and funding of honors programs and colleges. Perhaps, most importantly, they are ready to be used for the next celebration!

REFERENCES

- Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995.
Sommer, Barbara W. and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2002.

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APPENDIX A*

BASIC STEPS TOWARD COMPLETING AN ORAL HISTORY DOCUMENTARY

Pre-production (Time frame: three months minimum)

1. Identify the focus of your project and name your project. If you are creating a documentary to share at a particular event, determine the date of this event.
 - a. Ask your Department or Honors Program Chair if your project needs to go through any type of institutional process for approval. While oral histories are usually considered exempt from Institutional Review Board approval, more and more institutions are requiring that oral history projects go through the IRB process. Check with your IRB Committee for university guidelines.
2. Review and determine equipment needs, budget, time frame, and personnel. Average professional costs are listed in parenthesis; obviously the quality of the equipment will vary. Ask your university if you have privileges to check out film and video equipment and to use any video/post-production rooms on campus.
 - a. pro HD camcorder with tripod (\$150–300/day)
 - b. lighting equipment (\$30–70/day)
 - c. microphone (\$12–35/day)
 - d. video deck monitor (\$100–\$225/day)
 - e. editing video deck (\$150–300/day)
 - f. video room rental (\$150–300/day)
 - g. post-production room rental (\$600–850/day)

Many production companies also have video equipment packages; plan on spending a minimum of \$3000/week. In the state of California, the cost of a 2-person production crew (equipment included) is \$1400 for a ten-hour day (the price tag varies with each state). A post-production film editor can cost \$2000–\$20,000/week.

3. Review and determine location, budget, and deadlines for production and post-production
 - a. place to do interviews
 - b. dates for scheduling interviews (minimum of 1–2 weeks)
 - c. dates for transcribing and reviewing interviews (minimum of 3–4 weeks)
 - d. dates for editing and writing the documentary (minimum of 2–4 months)

4. Identify and meet with Honors Program advisors and project personnel who will help you identify and locate potential narrators as well as provide technical support.
 - a. Establish deadlines, time frames, and budget with advisors and personnel.
5. Find funding (if needed).
6. Decide on who will own project materials (archive or repository).
7. Create files for record keeping (agreement forms, biographical information form, interview forms, initial contact letter, interview confirmation letter, master schedule form). See Appendix B for a sample agreement form. A full-size, reproducible sample of these forms can be found in Sommer and Quinlan's *The Oral History Manual* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2002).
8. Meet with advisors to begin background research on your project .
 - a. Do background research on Honors Program. Find and gather photographs from director of Honors Program, former faculty and students.
 - b. Create list of potential interviewees.
 - c. Identify interview questions and the themes and topics to cover during the interview (see Appendix C).
 - d. Write up interview guidelines to help prepare interviewees (see Appendix C).
9. Begin contacting potential interviewees and scheduling interviews.
10. Do preliminary interviews with interviewees (schedule phone appointments) and prepare them for the interview (provide guidelines and basic list of questions).

Production (Time Frame: two weeks minimum)

11. Do the interviews
12. Process interviews. Make a copy of each interview and archive original interviews
13. Send thank you notes to interviewees (budget \$10–20 for cards and postage)

Post-Production (Time frame: four months minimum)

14. Transcribe interviews (professional cost for transcription: \$4/page. On average, the transcription of a thirty-minute interview will cost between \$140–170).
15. Review and edit interviews for “highlights.”

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16. Determine major themes based on interview highlights. Determine title of the documentary.
17. Write narrative (if needed) and organize documentary around themes.
18. Begin integrating interviews into documentary.
 - a. Integrate relevant, funny, or noteworthy photographs into the film (in between sections as well as at the beginning and end of the documentary).
19. Edit documentary for picture, sound, lights, background, etc.
20. Add “thank you” list of interviewees, interviewers, advisors, donors and funders to end of movie. Also include by-lines for writer(s), director, editor(s), and other crewmembers and personnel.
21. Preview and critique documentary. Revise and re-edit documentary as many times as needed.
22. Show documentary.

The total time and cost of an oral history video documentary project will vary. If you will be working on this project part-time with a bare bones staff, plan on working on this project for a minimum of eight months. If you will be hiring a professional production and post-production crew and support staff, plan on spending a minimum of \$10,000.

*Parts of Appendix A are based on Barbara Sommer’s “Oral History Project Planning Steps” in her book *The Oral History Manual* (Walnut Creek, CA; Alta Mira Press, 2002).

The author also wishes to thank Shane Rodrigues of the Communications Department at the University of La Verne for reviewing the budget in Appendix A.

APPENDIX B*

THE HONORS PROGRAM ORAL HISTORY VIDEO DOCUMENTARY PROJECT AGREEMENT FORM

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with the Honors Program at _____ (name of institution) and their video documentary project. The purpose of this project is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use. In return for the recording of this interview, the Honors Program will place and maintain it in _____ (designated archive or repository). These materials may be made available for research and such public programming as determined by _____ (designated archive or repository). These materials may be made available in formats other than the original, including, but not limited to, radio, television, cable, web/internet, or any other form of electronic publishing for purposes of research, instructional use, publications, or other related purposes.

Thank you for participating in this project.

I _____ (name of interviewee) have read the above and knowingly grant to _____ (designated archive/repository) the full use of this interview. I hereby transfer to _____ (designated archive/repository) legal title and all property rights to this interview (including copyright).

Interviewee's signature _____ Date _____

Narrator's name (please print) _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Interviewer's signature _____ Date _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

*Parts of this agreement form are based on the "Narrator Agreement Form" used by the Center for Oral and Public History at California State University, Fullerton.

APPENDIX C*

HONORS PROGRAM VIDEO DOCUMENTARY: INTRODUCTION FOR EACH INTERVIEW

Hello, my name is _____ (name of interviewer). It is DAY, DATE, YEAR. It is a (beautiful, hot, warm, cold) (evening, afternoon, morning). We are at PLACE OF INTERVIEW. The interview is with NAME, a former Honors Program student/instructor at NAME OF SCHOOL. We will be discussing his/her memories and experience as an Honors student/faculty member at NAME OF SCHOOL during the years _____. This interview is being conducted for the Honors Program Video Documentary Project. The interview will be archived at ARCHIVE/REPOSITORY.

Good (morning/afternoon, evening), _____. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

HONORS PROGRAM VIDEO DOCUMENTARY: PROFESSOR GUIDELINES

At the interview, I'll be asking general questions to get us started. To prepare for the interview, please go over the questions below and reflect on your answers. Sharing specific memories about events and people during the interview would be great. If you need time to go over your notes during the interview, we can stop the camera and you can go over your answers.

Questions for Professor, Department of

Here is the list of general questions to get our interview started:

1. Tell me a little bit about how you got involved with the Honors Program. Which courses did you teach?
2. Who co-taught the course with you? How did you both decide on the focus?
3. What are the strengths of teaching your course in an inter-disciplinary manner?
4. What are the strengths of Honor students?
5. What impact has the program/faculty had on students? What impact has the program had on you as a faculty member?
6. What is your most vivid or most memorable experience working in the Honors Program with students and faculty? Any other memories?
7. How does the Honors program help prepare students for their lives after college?
8. Since its inception, how has the Honors Program grown?
9. What message would you like to send to past, present and/or future Honors students?
10. Is there anything else about the Honors Program that you would like to share with me today?

General Information

What to Wear, Make-up, etc.

- The video interview will be from the “shoulders up,” so dress business casual: Wear a long or short-sleeve shirt that is not “busy”—a solid color is good. For men, a tie looks good. Since the background is green, you might want to wear a different color than green.

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- Bring a comb or brush. We don't provide make-up, so if you do your own, wear "flat" make-up. The lighting is pretty intense.

The Place of the Interview

During work hours, the interview will take place in the video room at _____. Evening or weekend interviews will take place at a convenient location for both the interviewer and the interviewee.

I think that's about it! If you have any more questions, feel free to call me at _____.

Thanks again,

Signature

HONORS PROGRAM VIDEO DOCUMENTARY: STUDENT GUIDELINES

At the interview, I'll be asking general questions. To prepare for the interview, please think about your answers to the questions below. Jotting down notes usually helps. Consider talking about specific memories, events, and people during the interview. If you need time to go over your notes during the interview, we can stop the camera and you can go over your answers.

Questions for Honors Students

Here is the list of general questions to get our interview started:

1. When were you in the Honors Program? Which Honors classes did you take? What was your major?
2. Why did you want to be in the Honors Program?
3. What are the strengths of the program? How did the program help you navigate through your college experience?
4. What is your most vivid experience or fondest memory of the Honors Program? Any others?
5. What impact did the teachers and your fellow Honors students have on your life? (Any specific memories or examples?)
6. How did the Honors program help you professionally or after college?
7. What are your future endeavors? What is your current or future career/occupation?
8. What message would you like to send to past, present and/or future Honors students?
9. Any other memories or experiences that you would like to share with me?

What to Wear, Make-up, etc.

- The video interview will be from the “shoulders up,” so dress business casual: Wear a long or short-sleeve shirt that is not “busy”—a solid color is good. For men, a tie looks good. Since the background is green, you might want to wear a different color than green.
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I think that's about it! If you have any more questions, feel free to call me at

_____.

Thanks again,

Signature

*Appendix C guidelines were created during pre-production meetings with my technical advisors at the University of La Verne's Center for Teaching and Learning.