

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

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Located in Boone, North Carolina, Appalachian State University (“App”) is a four-year public institution that is part of the University of North Carolina System. App’s enrollment is overwhelmingly composed of undergraduate students. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Fall 2020 enrollment exceeded a university goal of 20,000 students and of those, 3,906 were first-year students (*Appalachian State University facts*, n.d.). App’s commitment to recruiting and retaining diverse students continues apace with various initiatives targeting a number of groups. In Fall 2020, 18% of students were members of racially and ethnically underrepresented groups (*Appalachian State University facts*, n.d.). The percentage of other populations like first generation and rural students is also significant—both demographics sit at 31.7% and 36.7%, respectively, in Fall 2020 (Institutional Research and Planning, n.d.). With those students come stories about what it means to be a ‘Mountaineer’—experiences that are largely absent from the official record of the university.

In Fall 2019, the App University Archivist and First Year Experience Librarian decided to start an oral history project focused on first-year students. The pair also plan to interview the same students again in their senior year. The idea came about because of their mutual interest in oral history and documenting current student experiences to subsequently house in the University Archives, which largely lacks such voices. After several meetings, they decided to identify courses in the University’s First Year Seminar (FYS) program that thematically complement such a project and approach the instructors about possible collaboration. The FYS program is one with which the librarian already works closely. This outreach resulted in an initial ‘pilot’ partnership with an FYS instructor who teaches a course on comparing societal issues and advancements using H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* as a springboard.

In Spring 2020, the librarian, archivist, and instructor integrated a newly developed assignment into the course. First, students engaged with external oral history interviews. Then, after an instruction session from the librarian and archivist, students paired up to record audio interviews with each other. Finally, students transcribed the interviews and wrote reflections on their experiences. Students did not have to participate in this assignment and had the alternative option to write a research paper. Students also had the option to participate in the project but not sign the release form granting permission for the interview materials to be transferred to the University’s Special Collections Research Center. Despite these necessary limitations and the challenges presented by the pandemic, the pilot project proceeded and was largely successful. Nearly all of the students in the class participated, signed release forms, and indicated the experience was worthwhile in post-interview reflections, despite a few challenges getting the release forms in a timely manner. As a result, the instructor enthusiastically committed to participating again in Fall 2020.

Since the project’s development and implementation, a more cohesive set of goals have emerged to guide it:

- Diversify, enrich, and challenge current/longtime ideas, beliefs, and overall narrative of App
- Connect students to longer history of Mountaineer experience, creating engagement and belonging via the curriculum and archives
- ‘Inclusify’ the curriculum by incorporating interviews, starting with First Year Seminar and a focus on diverse populations
- Document how the Mountaineer experience changes from students’ first year to senior year

Evidence of achievement of these goals will be offered in the form of:

- Recordings and transcripts of the student interviews
- Analysis of the interviews by the First Year Experience Librarian, University Archivist, and/or relevant partners
- Curricular and extracurricular research projects or creative activities by other students that incorporate or utilize the interviews
- Research or creative activities by faculty or staff at both App and at other schools

This paper will offer a brief overview of the beginnings of the project but, to reduce redundancy from the earlier paper, will primarily focus on the 2020-2021 academic year, take a closer look at the implications of establishing and growing a collection of interviews, and discuss future goals.

Fall 2020-Spring 2021

In light of pandemic-fueled uncertainties and concerns, Fall 2020 classes at App were held exclusively online. Spring 2021, on the other hand, was a mixture of online and in-person offerings. While the librarian and archivist thought they might have a new FYS instructor/course partner in Fall, it was delayed until Spring. The instructor they worked with in Spring 2020, however, had already agreed to continue participating. In terms of how things went with this course in Fall compared to Spring, nothing changed significantly: most students participated and opted to have their interviews transferred to the Special Collections Research Center.

A new idea came from the archivist’s research, however, and that was to anonymize student recordings, transcripts, and other documents in the soon to be created collection, identifying students only with their initials. This idea came from Johns Hopkins’ First-Generation College Student Oral History Project. The archivist felt it would protect vulnerable students and possibly increase participation from any who might be uncertain. The intent to anonymize materials is something that the librarian and archivist incorporated into their presentations to students.

With the arrival of the Spring 2021 semester and new FYS instructor/course, “Our Appalachian Community,” meant a new set of circumstances (the previous instructor volunteered his course again, as well). Course enrollment in Our Appalachian Community is restricted to Student Support Services students—these students qualify for the federally funded TRIO program, which is designed to support disadvantaged students including those with disabilities, low income students, and/or first-generation students.

The course already had elements of interview and storytelling so the oral history assignment meshed quite well. The assignment was largely unchanged except that, unlike the other course, participation in the project was not optional, though signing the release form still was. The librarian, archivist, and new instructor also added some interview questions to the pool from which students drew, though students still had the option to come up with some of their own (see Appendix). Another new element was an emphasis on asking follow-up questions. An observation from previous semesters was that students rarely asked follow-ups, so the librarian and archivist added content to their presentations to focus on the importance of this interview technique.

Overall, things went well with the new course, as well as the other course that was still participating. COVID-19 was an obvious theme of the interviews—particularly students’ exhaustion with online learning. Despite those challenges, students shared positive and honest experiences from their first year, as well as stories of perseverance. The new course offered some fresh perspectives from the more diverse group of students, including the following highlights from their post-interview reflections:

- “I definitely feel that this helped us reflect on each other and on the Appalachian community which is literally the name of our class.”
- “I honestly wish I was able to watch or listen to other students’ interviews before coming to Appalachian State. I feel like I would’ve known what to expect and how to be a little more prepared.”
- “It was pretty intimidating especially with how class is today not actually being there to see facial expressions and read body language you basically only have the tone of voice to go off of.”
- “Although my interview may not have been perfect I feel that if someone was to hear my interview 20 years from now they would take some very important points out of it. I hope they learn the importance of community, and how joining one will make the college experience better. The importance of having goals and having a plan to achieve them. Also, the importance of the past and how you can use what you have learned from those experiences to influence your future decisions.”

(Special Collections Research Center, n.d.)

The librarian and archivist also solicited feedback from the instructors (only one responded as of this writing):

This was absolutely a valuable experience for my students. It helped create community and empathy in my classroom.

Students saw how much they had in common with their peers and got to know them on a deeper level than your average classroom chatter.

Students had a few suggestions for how this assignment could be improved. I think the biggest thing they wanted were questions that got at bigger “life” things or were more personal. The scope is to focus on student life, but I think they wanted to dig in a bit more. We also got a few suggestions about making this a group interview so you got to know more classmates and it was more of a conversation. I already taught an interview section and it blends so well with my storytelling theme that I’m going to really expand on this when I teach my sections in the fall again.

(M. Fitzgerald, personal communication, April 29, 2021).

Creating a Collection in the University Archives

One of the project goals was to increase the student voice within the university narrative, especially students from marginalized communities. The librarian and archivist agreed at the beginning of the project that creating an archival collection of the oral histories would be the way to go. In order to create a collection, however, there had to be students willing to sign the release form. The release form serves to formally transfer a student’s audio interview, their interview transcript, and their project reflection and make them available for research. The interview materials will only be transferred to the Special Collections Research Center and made accessible with a signed release form in place. The materials created by students who opted not to sign a release form will not be added to the archive and will be kept at the discretion of the professors.

For the interviews that do have a release form, the librarian transferred the files (audio, transcript, reflection) from AsULearn into a Google Drive folder shared between him and the archivist. The library’s digital preservation specialist will eventually be given access to the folder so that he can copy the files into the Special Collection Research Center’s dark archive for permanent retention and preservation. In the interim, the archivist is making access copies. The access copies are being redacted in order to retain student anonymity. For the transcripts and reflections, names are replaced with initials. The audio files will be edited to remove identifying information before being made public. For the time being, the archivist is not editing the transcripts to correct grammatical errors or misspelled words.

The archivist started drafting a collection guide for the collection, which is formally called the “Mountaineer Stories Oral History Project.” While adding in the file names for the interviews has been easy, providing access to the anonymized transcripts has proven more difficult. While the transcript can be uploaded as a digital object into the collection guide, it must be stored on a server the collections database can access, and as of this writing, App campus IT has not approved the request for server space. Eventually, however, the librarian and archivist expect that the transcripts, audio files, and reflections will be accessible online through the collection guide without having to physically come into the Special Collections Research Center for access. As of this writing, the collection guide is still in development.

Challenges

Thus far, the project challenges have been relatively small but not insignificant and are mostly related to technology. Probably the biggest challenge has been getting signed release forms. It is not that students don't want their interviews to be a part of the archival collection, rather, it's either getting students to remember to sign the forms or troubleshooting technological barriers they encounter when trying to complete the forms. This is an instance where paper would be better than digital but, due to this being conducted online, electronic forms have been the primary option. Hopefully, when classes return to in-person, this challenge will subside.

Another challenge has been inconsistencies in both the audio and the transcript file formats. Despite it being clearly stated in the directions and the librarian making himself available to help, some students have used other recording methods besides the agreed upon interview recording tool, Cleanfeed. The librarian and archivist plan to work with instructors in the future to require usage of specified programs and equipment, as audio quality has been inconsistent, as well. In regards to transcripts, admittedly, guidance on format was missing from the instructions. Moving forward, more instruction on transcripts and a requirement for them to be submitted as PDFs is planned. Additionally, spelling and grammatical errors are recurring issues with the transcripts—this is something else that the duo will discuss with faculty partners to mitigate issues in the future.

A final challenge that is starting to emerge is the lack of sustainability in terms of project coordination and management. This project has been a 'labor of love' for the librarian and archivist but as more courses participate and as more interviews accumulate, having a third person on the team to help manage and process files, especially, will be crucial to the long-term success of the project. The archivist has discussed the creation of an oral historian position, but that is not currently feasible due to budgetary restraints. Moving forward, that is a goal to pursue as well as the development of a maintenance plan. There are additional ideas and considerations for the future that the two have discussed, as well.

The Future

After conducting this project for a full year in the online environment, the librarian and archivist are excited to (tentatively) return to their original plan of conducting it in-person using the library's audio studio in Fall 2021. Since the studio is a controlled environment, hopefully formatting and audio quality issues will be minimized. However, since things have functioned well online, overall, having that as an alternative option is useful. Additionally, the pair wishes to pursue project grants and create more of a web presence for the project. The archivist also wishes to expand the project to include other students via campus clubs, organizations, and events—grant funding could make that goal possible if it could cover the cost of something like a mobile recording booth. Of course, having an oral historian on staff would also go a long way to making that idea possible.

The primary future goal, however, is reestablishing contact with as many students as possible who participated in this in their First Year Seminar classes when those students are seniors. It is the hope that those students will agree to be interviewed again to reflect back over their years at App and look ahead to their plans after graduation. If that can be accomplished with even a sizable percentage of students, along with the creation of a publicly accessible collection that is included in the First Year Seminar curriculum, then this project will be considered a success.

References

- Appalachian State University facts.* (n.d.). Appalachian State University. Retrieved from <https://www.appstate.edu/about/facts/>
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- Special Collections Research Center. (n.d.). *Mountaineer Stories Oral History Project, UA 64.* Appalachian State University. Retrieved May 5, 2021 from <https://appstate-speccoll.lyrasistechnology.org/repositories/2/resources/1403>

Appendix: Oral History Assignment: UCO 1200

Step 1

You 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 (including the release forms), train students on oral history techniques and best practices, discuss interview questions, and walk through logistics.

Step 3

You must choose 9 questions or you can choose 8 and come up with your own 9th question (per instructor approval). Then, you will interview each other during our interview day (around 15-minute interviews per student), transcribe interviews, and share with your partners for accuracy.

Step 4

You will also write a final essay reflection of the experience (2-3 pages) or record a 5-7-minute podcast. Lastly, you will upload the audio file(s) of the interview and accompanying transcripts to AsULearn. Questions to consider when writing your reflection of the interview experience:

- What was this experience like for you as an interviewer? What was it like being interviewed?
- Why did you choose these questions to ask your partner?
- What did you learn about your partner? What did you learn about yourself?
- What would you do differently if you were to do this project again?
- If someone listened to your interview 20 years from now, what do you hope they learn?
- What final thoughts or observations do you have about this project?

Interview Questions:

Must ask:

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

Choose an additional 9 questions from this list, or choose 8 and come up with a 9th on your own (must be approved):

- Why did you choose to come to App State? Who or what led you here?
- Since people are more isolated than they would've been normally, how have you created or found community?
- 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 semester/year at App State?
- What is your favorite place to go off campus? Why?
- 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?
- What advice would you give an incoming TRIO SSS student?
- How has being a first-generation college student impacted your experience at App? (check ahead of time if your partner is first gen if you want to ask this question)