

Mixed Media

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Experiential Learning and Oral History: A SWOT Analysis

By Joseph Coates, University Archivist, Purdue University Northwest

In 2016, Purdue University Calumet and Purdue University North Central unified to create Purdue University Northwest. The two campuses are both seated in the northwest corner of Indiana, approximately 40 miles apart directly down the Indiana Toll Road corridor. One of the issues that began to emerge from this unification was preserving the individual histories of the colleges that came before. How do we keep our individual histories intact while becoming a new entity? Additionally, what effect would the unification have on our combined history?

One of the benefits of the unification was the opportunity to rethink the way in which we are going to preserve our history. Both universities had different methods of preservation and access. Purdue University Calumet had a small university archives in the back of the library, sometimes tended by an archivist, sometimes by just a student worker, with varying degrees of success depending upon

who was there. Purdue University North Central did not have an official archives, instead filling vast storerooms with unprocessed papers throughout the university. This gave us the opportunity to expand the archives by forming three repositories in two locations while also establishing consistent policies and access.

However, with institutional change came some pain. Both universities had aging faculties, many of whom, not wanting to face the changes at the university, decided to retire. Given this reality, we did not want to lose the knowledge of our retirees nor those getting ready to retire. One of the more shocking losses, and the loss that gave us the inspiration to create this project, was the death of Lance Trusty. Dr. Trusty had literally written the book on the history of Purdue Calumet for its 50th anniversary, and his loss signaled that we needed to act fast to start on our oral history project.



Archivist Joseph Coates interviews Bernie Holicky, professor emeritus of library science at Purdue University Northwest. Photograph courtesy of Purdue University Northwest.

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Because we are a two-person archives and we have many retirees and soon-to-be retirees, we decided that we wanted our oral history project to be an experiential learning project that would include the University Archives, the History Department, and the Communications Department. Our goal was to make this project multidisciplinary and multidisciplinary, bringing in the expertise of three different disciplines to help students understand the importance of interviewing, the importance of oral history, and how researchers use oral history. After working with a communication professor and a history professor, we put together a syllabus that would highlight all three of our strengths to fill the requirements for both disciplines. Because this was a first-time offering for the university, we decided to conduct a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity) analysis afterward to better understand what we will need going forward to make this a meaningful and ongoing project.

Our first step in forming this new multidisciplinary class was to decide who we wanted to attend. Ultimately, we felt that upperclass and graduate students would have the best understanding of the importance of this project. We conducted a literature review, not only of some best practices and concepts, but also of what we wanted students

to take from this course. We modeled the project after the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project. Our goal was to teach our students interview techniques and the importance of oral history. We knew this would be an amateur endeavor, but we still ended up with a usable product. We felt that because our students were amateur interviewers, they should not pay the cost of something that takes years to master. We really wanted our students to gain a basic understanding of interviewing techniques: what types of questions to ask and what types of questions to avoid and, finally, to get decent interviews from our former faculty.

Students in our hybrid class met one night a week for five weeks then once during finals week in December to talk about what they did and what they learned, and to give a final analysis of their projects. We supplied them with a list of employees who had 30 years or more of service, a list of retirees who were willing to be interviewed, camera equipment, Zoom recorders, and any other equipment they needed. In the end, seven students each needed to interview at least three people, make a presentation on this, and write a final paper about their successes, failures, and problems, and what they would have done differently.

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Purdue University Northwest student Kenyatta Scales interviews John Friend, director of athletics emeritus at Purdue University Northwest. Photograph courtesy of Purdue University Northwest.

By the end of the class, we had 24 interviews covering a variety of subjects. Some of our faculty discussed how the students they taught changed throughout the years as the school went from from its beginning as a commuter extension campus to a residential university. Many talked about the changes in the physical campus, the demographics of the area, and the challenges and benefits brought by technology. The first athletic director discussed the changes in athletic programs since the 1960s, and a former advancement staff member talked about marketing issues and outreach over time. Most of the faculty remembered how much they enjoyed teaching and how rewarding it was working with the blue collar and/or minority students of Northwest Indiana.

We learned from this project that our students seemed not to be as technologically savvy as we believed they were. Using video cameras or handheld recorders, recording onto an SD card, and downloading files onto a computer challenged them. For the last 10 to 15 years, we have been

told how students are digital natives, and I believe we are doing them a disservice when we use that term. Our digital native students did not seem to be familiar with things we thought were fairly common. We found our students to be very savvy when it comes to platforms, like social media, but not terribly knowledgeable about things like converting files or the difference between an MP3 and an MP4. Many of the students were uncomfortable with using anything but a phone as a recording device. This may have just been an oddity in our small population, but we noticed it.

Another issue we had was a lack of clarity among the faculty teaching the course. Three faculty members teaching a course is bound to cause problems. Although we set some standards on who would answer what questions, sometimes they just didn't work. Some miscommunication may have hurt our own efforts. Although the syllabus,

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reading list, and subdividing lectures were not problems and setting standards was done at the beginning, instructor discretion was an issue in the end product. This not to point fingers; we all did this unknowingly, and it may or may not be an issue that can be solved in a collaborative project of this nature.

In the end, we had a lot of success. We did not let the great get in the way of the good, and we did end up with 24 oral history interviews that give valuable insight into the history of the university. The oral histories are housed in Omeka, in the Oral History 2020 @ PNW collection. Each of the records includes the metadata associated with the interview, and researchers can watch the video from within the record.

We were happy with the end results of this trial project and were planning on offering this again in the fall, before COVID-19 and social distancing guidelines got in the way. Much of the feedback the students gave was positive. They learned about interview skills, historical context, archival preservation, and primary source research. The final papers were excellent, and the instructors learned quite a bit about what their colleagues do.

The project had no real downside; even with a few technology issues, overall the project was a success. However, the most important part of this project is the data received, not the form they were received in. Oral history is an important part of recording history, so do not be afraid to experiment with it.

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