

Oral History Collections in North Carolina's cultural heritage institutions

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Abstract

Reports the results of an online survey conducted by the NC ECHO Oral History Working Group in January 2007. The survey consisted of 13 questions directed at assessing the presence, size, content, and condition of oral history collections in North Carolina cultural heritage institutions. Other questions focused on methods of access currently provided to these collections and a needs assessment provided by the staff responsible for the care of those collections. A final question sought to draw out future directions institutions were interested in heading. Analysis of the information gleaned from the survey is provided and suggestions for future efforts by the NC ECHO Oral History Working Group are explored.

Introduction

Oral histories have their roots in ancient traditions. Until very recently, the oral tradition provided connections between the past and the present. Modern "scientific" scholarship diminished the validity of oral traditions. However, the twentieth century saw a re-emergence of the value of oral history as a reaction to the written tradition. Large-scale projects such as the Federal Writers' Project, a component of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, took on the specific task of seeking out and recording the oral histories of a variety of populations in the United States, including the American South.¹

Along with this attention to non-traditional actors reflected in oral histories came the issue of disposition. Cultural heritage institutions were automatically considered the sensible place to deposit the materials generated from various projects. While some oral history initiatives were instigated by the cultural heritage institutions, many were either connected to academic coursework, or created by an academic unit or a community-led project.

Oral history collections provide a wide variety of challenges and opportunities for cultural heritage institutions. For those repositories that do not have an oral history program such as the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, often oral history materials are acquired through mysterious processes. Additionally, many institutions are not well prepared for their curation. Oral histories themselves are complex because they constitute a wide variety of formats, often consisting of more than one object related to an interchange between interviewer and interviewee. For example, recording technology has evolved over the past century. Oral histories have been collected over approximately that same century, and recorded through a variety of formats, from reel to reel

¹ Rebecca Sharpless. (2006) "The History of Oral History" in Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds. *Handbook of Oral History*. (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press), pp. 19-21.

tape, cassette to digital. Each individual format has its own preservation, migration, and access requirements. Many oral history recordings are also accompanied by photographs, transcriptions, research notes, interview documentation, release or consent forms, and any other number of materials related to an individual oral history events. Complicating factors for the curation of oral histories include project-driven collection, oral history production outside of the curation environment, and the wide variety of uses of oral histories that impact the way in which cultural heritage professionals respond to the needs of these materials.

In Fall 2006 a small group of North Carolina archivists and librarians responsible for oral history collections came together as the North Carolina *Exploring Cultural Heritage Online* (NC ECHO) Oral History Working Group to discuss the needs of oral history curators. The group came together with a base set of assumptions about the state of oral history collections in North Carolina. Namely, that there are a great number of oral history collections in the state whose access is limited because curators of these collections have limited resources, both human and financial, to make them known to researchers and more widely available. Additionally, the group felt that while there were ample resources on the collection of oral history interviews there were few resources to help curators charged with preserving interviews and making them accessible. The group's goals were twofold, to create an accessible metadata standard and accompanying tools for North Carolina oral history collections that could be used to provide better access to interviews and to pull together or develop informational resources that could help curators responsible for oral histories.

Nancy McKay, in her *Curating Oral Histories*, asserts that the best place to start to meet the challenges of oral history collections is through self-study. Through the framework she provides, an institution is encouraged to consider themselves at an organizational level, to consider available resources, and to assess the collection itself.² The NC ECHO Oral History Working Group took a similar approach in trying to discern the landscape of oral history collections in cultural heritage institutions in order to assess the types of services that the Oral History Working Group should provide. While the group had some ideas, the decision to administer a survey was directly related to the kind of self-study that McKay promotes. The Oral History Working Group decided that while they had suspicions about the situation of oral history collections in North Carolina's cultural heritage institutions, a first step in tackling a consortial approach to oral history materials was to gather information from those institutions that would serve the core of institutions the group could assist.

To this end, a survey was constructed and administered online at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (IRB Protocol # = 06-12-22) in January-February 2007. NC ECHO email lists were used to encourage NC ECHO partner institutions to take part in the survey. The survey, included in the appendix, sought to obtain a broad understanding of the parameters of oral history collections in cultural institutions, the resources available for sustaining those collections, and the perceived needs of institutions in order to care for those collections. This document reports the results of that survey. The first section covers the demographics of institutions holding oral history collections; the second section discusses the shape of those collections, including such aspects as size, format, and topics

² Nancy McKay (2007). *Curating oral histories*. (Walnut Creek, Calif.: West Coast Press), p.14.

represented. A third section addresses the resources available for curation of those oral histories. This focuses primarily on staffing available for the work done for the oral history collection. A fourth section details access considerations. This section includes information about discovery but also addresses the presence of consent and release forms for the oral histories within a collection. A final section then discusses the present challenges and needs, based on the final two questions of the survey.

The survey solicited a total of 81 responses. Of the 81 respondents, 65 (80.25%) responded that they had oral histories in their collection. 14 responded that they did not, and two responded that they did not know whether they had oral histories. Of these 16 respondents, four indicated that they did not anticipate receiving oral histories in the future. Of the remaining twelve, four indicated that they did anticipate receiving oral histories, while the other eight were unsure. The 65 respondents with oral histories in their collections form the basis for all subsequent results analyzed here. The Working Group was pleased by the response to the survey. At the time of this article, NC ECHO has identified 947 cultural institutions in North Carolina. Therefore almost 9% of the cultural institutions answered the survey.

Demographics of institutions holding oral history collections

Question 1 addresses the demographics of the institutions answering the survey by asking respondents to identify an institution type. The chart below demonstrates the spread of oral history collections across institution types. Universities and public libraries present the most prevalent institution type (30% and 28.4% respectively) accounting for over 50% of all institutions responding to the survey.

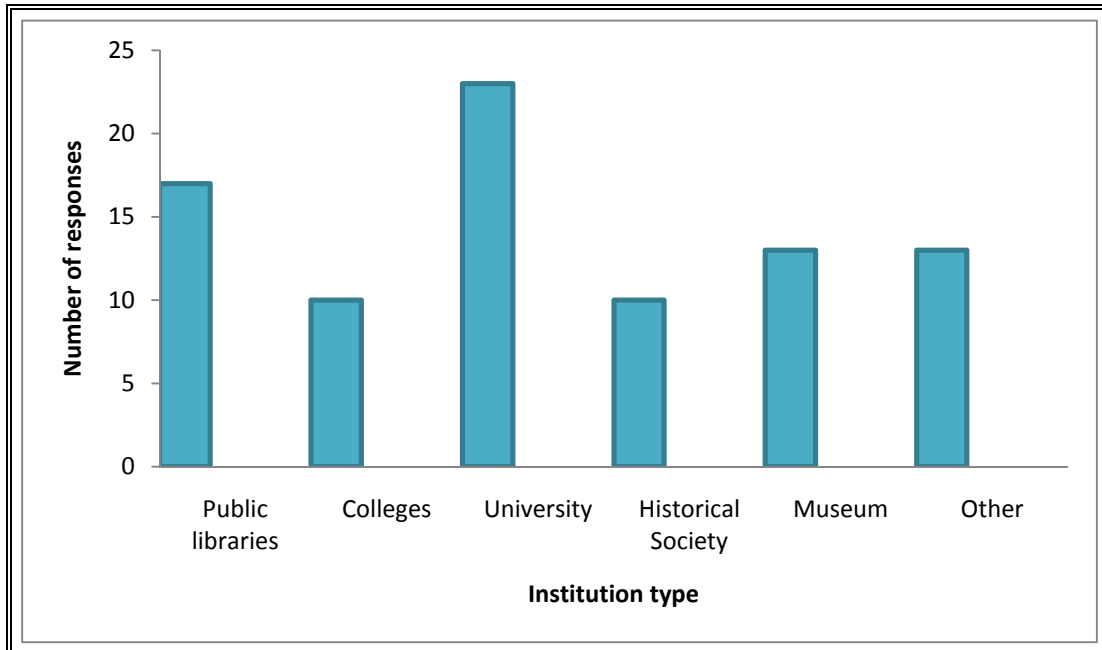


Figure 1: Institution type of survey respondents

In comparing this data with that collected by the NC ECHO project in the “Survey of N.C. Repositories”³ conducted from 2001 through 2007, the distribution of institution types within North Carolina is slightly different than what is represented above. 57.3% (435 of 759) of the institutions surveyed were museums and almost one third (235 of 759 or 31.0%) were identified as libraries. This provides some interesting contrasts with the oral history survey data. For example, museums were the third largest category to respond to the survey; but if public libraries, colleges, and universities are combined into a single category, this institution type comprises 76.9% (50) of the survey respondents. The “other” category includes such institution types as folk schools, park services, historic sites, local history libraries, governmental and non-governmental archives, churches, and community colleges.

The Working Group suspects that the different institution types will face different collection purposes and curation challenges. Follow up work with institutions responding to the survey and targeting specific groups is intended as a next step by the Working Group.

The shape of oral history collections in North Carolina

Size

Question four sought to assess the size of the existing oral history collections. Of the 65 institutions that indicated that they currently retain oral history collections, only 12.5% (8 of 65) indicated owning over 500 individual oral histories. In fact, almost half of the respondents (29 or 44.5%) held less than 50 oral histories. For less than 100 oral histories, the percentage rises to almost two-thirds of the survey respondents.

Range	Number of oral histories	Percentage	Aggregated
Under 25	14	21.5	50 or fewer, 44.5%
26-50	15	23	
51-100	13	20	100 or fewer, 64.5%
101-500	15	23	Over 100, 35.5%
501-1,000	5	8	Over 500, 12.3%
Over 1,000	3	4.5	
Total	65	100%	

Table 1: Oral history collection size

The three institutions that reported having the largest oral history collections (over 1,000) were two universities and a public library. Of the second tier of large collections, holders include the governmental archives, a historical society, two universities, and a folk school with a targeted oral history program. It appears from the data that what is suspected regarding the accumulation of oral history collections is true: oral history collections often end up in institutions from small oral history projects that focus on

³ These numbers are derived from the NC ECHO “Survey of N.C. Repositories” database. A fully published document of these and other statistics discovered through the survey is anticipated to be published in Spring 2008.

the accumulation and creation rather than a full-fledged program that considers disposition as well. That may explain why nearly two-thirds of the respondents indicate that their collections are less than 100 in count. These small collections were distributed across the all institution types identified in question 1. For example, four universities indicated that they had less than 50 oral histories in their collection. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that institution type is a determinant of the readiness of that institution or the size of a collection. Institutions across the spectrum are receiving small installations of collections and are facing many of the same challenges in curating those collections.

Formats

Question 5 asked what physical or media carrier made up oral history collections. A majority of interviews are in analog formats, such as Reel to Reel tape (15 of 65 or 23% of respondents), cassette tape (57 of 65 or 88% of respondents), or VHS (25 of 65 or 38% of respondents). Twenty (30.8%) collections also contain digital formats, such as mini disc, CD, Digital Video, Digital Audio Tape, and Compact Flash Drives. Seven respondents (10.8%) noted that they have only transcripts with no audio or video of their interviews.

Twenty (30.8%) respondents have collections that are comprised of more than three different formats of materials, often a combination of analog and digital formats. Cassette tapes are the most common format in the collections surveyed (57 of 65 or 87.7%). In fact, for 22 of the 57 (38.6%) institutions who indicated their collections contained cassette tapes, those cassettes tapes are the *only* format in those collections.

Topics

The responses to question six reveal the wide variety of topics that are covered in the collections of oral histories within North Carolina's institutions. In analyzing the data, 17 different categories were created to demonstrate both the variety and the commonalities among topics represented in the collections.

Topic	Number of institutions
Regional, County, or Local History	25
College/University/School History	24
War and Veterans	10
African American Experience	8
Business	8
Women	6
Civil Rights	6
Family History	5
Religious or Church History	5
Authors, Writers, and Artists	5

Topic	Number of institutions
Environment or Nature	5
Health Care	4
Politics & Government	3
Agriculture	3
Specific Institution, Event or Person	3
Native American Environment	2
Sports & Sportspersons	1

Table 2: Topics in oral history collections

The above table illustrates that regional, county and local history and college, university, and school history dominate the topic categories that respondents reported. Other dominant categories include war and veterans, the African American experience, and business, which includes local industry interests such mill workers and forestry industry. The above table also illustrates some of the less well represented areas of oral history collections and areas for potential growth by oral history projects in North Carolina.

Resources for curation

Staffing

Question 8 sought to determine if collections have designated curators (someone with designated responsibility for interviews and related materials). Surprisingly, the responses were fairly evenly split. 35 respondents (54%) indicated that there is someone with designated responsibility for oral history interviews within their collections. In contrast, 22 of 65 (34%) indicated that there was no one specifically designated responsibility for the interviews. 3 respondents indicated they did not know and 5 respondents provided other responses, indicating shared responsibility, developing collections, or one person that does it all.

Consent and release forms

Consent and release forms are particularly important for legal and ethical curation of oral histories but this documentation can often be the easiest to overlook when creating an oral history collection. Question 7 addressed the possession of consent and release forms or recorded verbal consent for the disposition of the interviews. Again the data was fairly evenly split: 43.1% (28 of 65) said they had no consent forms, some consent forms, or did not know while 38.5% (24 of 65) indicated they had consent forms for many of the interviews in their collections. 15% (10 of 65) indicated they had consent/release documentation for all of their interviews. This wide range of responses reflects some of the difficulties oral history collections can present for cultural heritage institutions. For example, one respondent indicated they had consent forms for over 90% of their interviews while another respondent noted that they have an email confirming the tapes belong to the college.

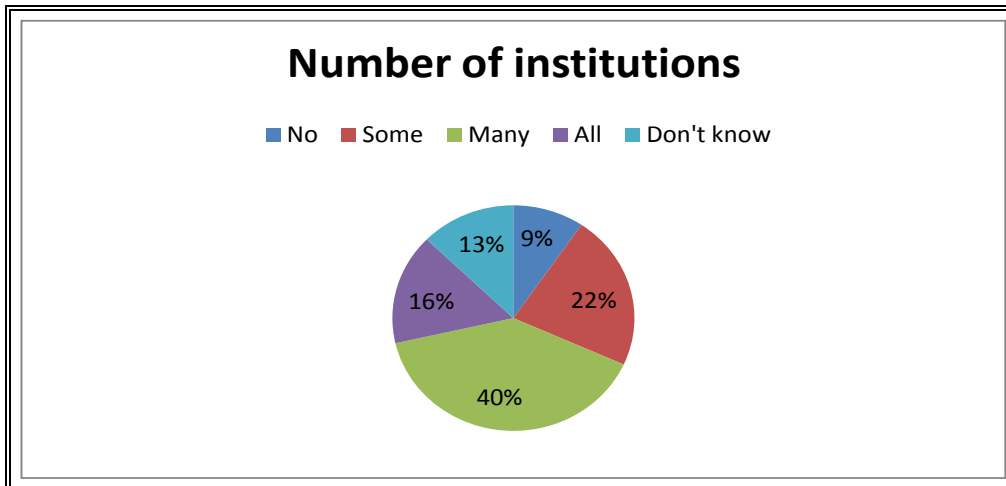


Figure 2: Consent/Release form documentation

Figure two demonstrates that a clear majority of collections contain at least some interviews for which there is no consent of release form, creating long-term issues for access. There appears to be a correlation between the size of the collection and the availability of consent and release documentation. Those institutions that responded that they had comprehensive consent/release documentation held collections under 500 interviews. This correlation between collection size and the presence of consent/release documentation could indicate that it is easier to gather and retain consent documentation for smaller collections. If this proves true, it may be easier to retrospectively obtain that documentation which is currently non-existent for those collections.

Access to the collections

Questions 9 and 10 focused on discovery and access to oral history collections. The questions asked about existing systematic representations to aid in discovery as well as individual ability to use materials once patrons are aware that they exist.

Discovery

Question 9 looked at how people discover what interviews are in a collection. It focused on the various ways which repositories provide discovery mechanisms for any materials within their collections. The range offered in the survey included electronic discovery mechanisms to analog versions and staff collection knowledge. Respondents were given the option to choose more than one answer for this question.

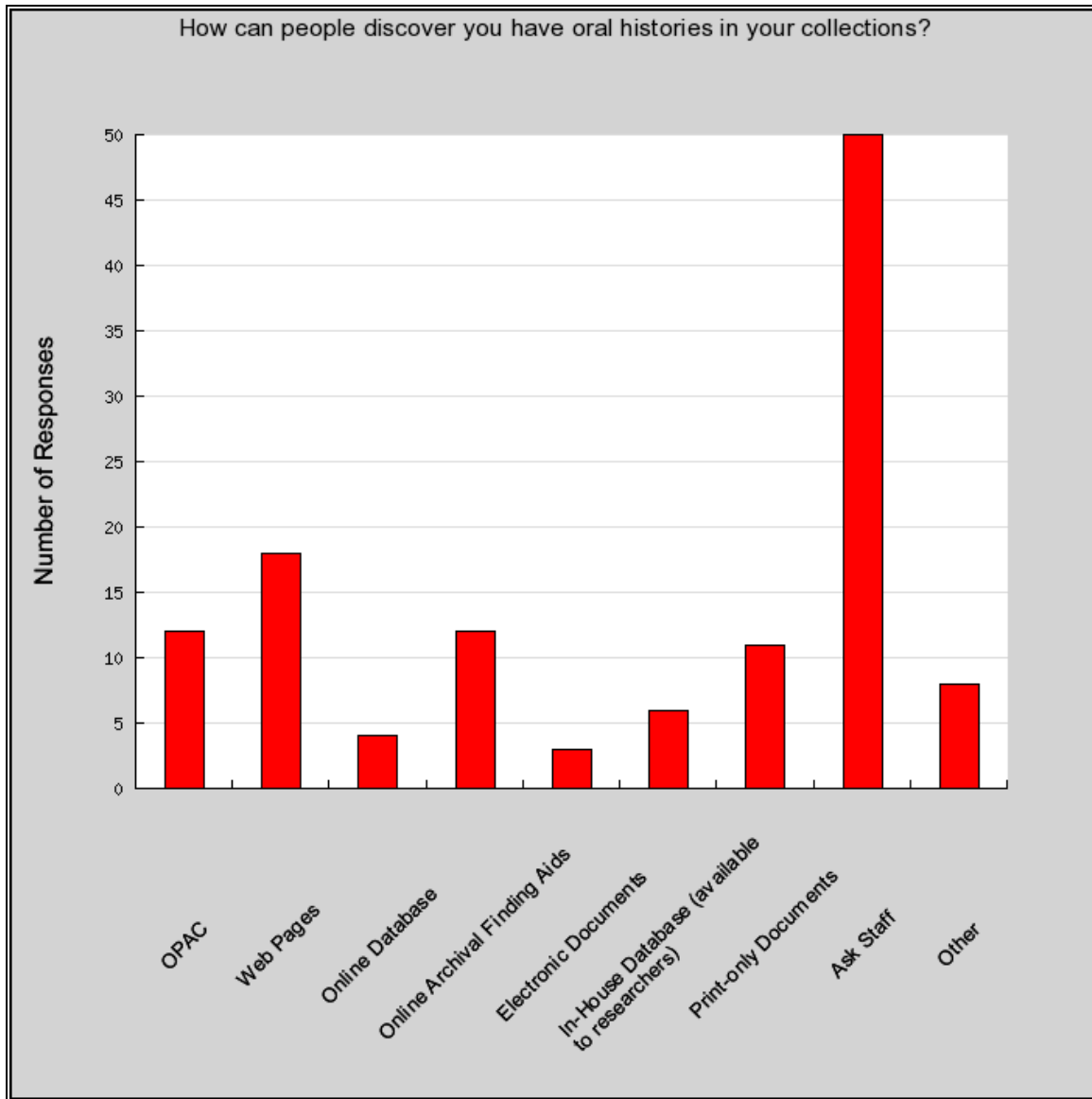


Figure 3: Discovery mechanisms

The above chart demonstrates the trends for discovery mechanisms. Most notable is the 76.9% (50 of 65) of respondents that indicated that some portion of their collections, if not all, can only be found through staff. In fact, for 22 of those 50 (44.0%), asking staff is the *only* means of access to the oral history collections. While not surprising, this result highlights one of the most critical areas of work that the Oral History Working Group will be seeking to remedy.

While the survey confirmed some fears about discovery mechanisms, it also indicated the variety of discovery mechanisms in use. For example, 12 respondents (18.5%) indicated that interviews have been cataloged and can be found in the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC). Follow-up information about what is cataloged (individual interviews or collections of interviews) would further clarify the use of the OPAC as a discovery mechanism for oral histories. Similarly, 49 (75.4%) respondents have some form of

electronic or online information about their interviews. It will be beneficial to determine the nature of the electronic or online information. Similarly, 17 respondents (26.1%) indicated that have an in-house database or print-only documents and further information on the nature of those tools will help to provide conversion advice for electronic access.

Not surprisingly, almost all of the respondents indicated a mixture of discovery tools available. This is similar to all kinds of materials available in cultural heritage institutions. Over time, we continue to construct new mechanisms for discovery and inevitably there is material in “old” or “legacy” systems. Follow up information on these discovery mechanisms should include information about the degree to which one discovery system is depended upon. In particular, the “Ask Staff” category provides an area of concern in terms of consistent and long-term discovery to the collections.

Access

Question 10 focused on the use of interviews once they have been discovered. This question solicited information about the various formats that interviews are represented in collections (audio, video, transcripts, or indexes) and whether the use of any available formats can occur in house or online. As suspected, the primary access occurs in-house, although for each of the categories, a percentage admitted that specific formats were not available (5 audio, 15 video, 6 transcripts, and 13 indexes). Online access to these formats appears to be limited, with transcripts (arguably the easiest to present online) dominating with a response of 10 (15.4%).

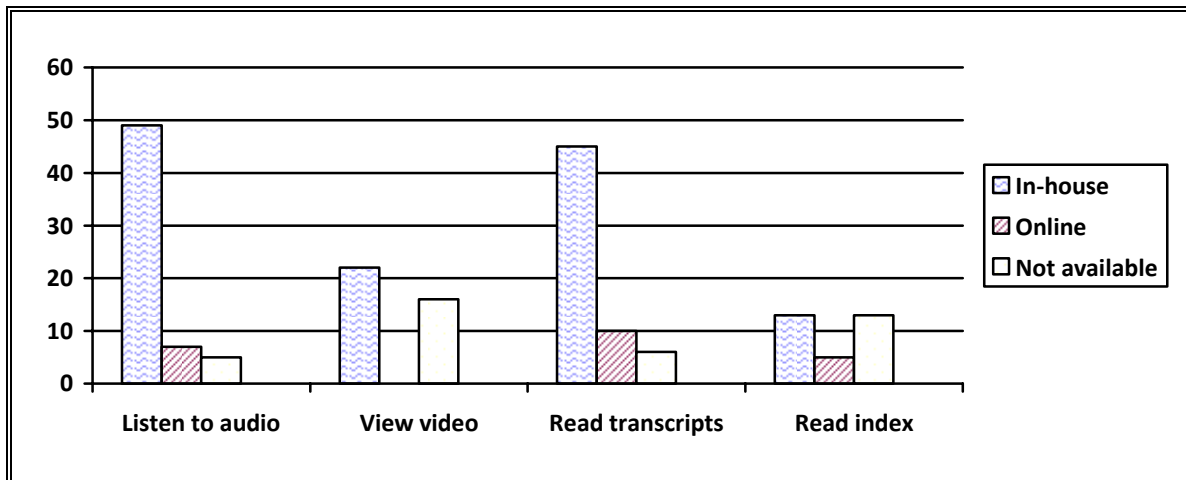


Figure 4: Format and access

It is more useful to understand the data as a combination of format and mode of access. A majority of collections (68.2%) are available in house, with availability of audio and transcripts. 11.0% of collections have audio, indices, and transcripts available online, but 20.0% of interviews are not available (these interviews tended to be in video format).

When you compare this information with that from question 9, it becomes clear that a majority of the oral history web pages providing informational access do not provide online access to the actual

interviews themselves. This is not surprising, as audio and audio-visual digitization presents unique challenges both in digitization procedures and storage of digital media. As demonstrated below, though, institutions are interested in increasing their oral history online presence. These two obstacles need to be addressed in order to make that happen

Present challenges and needs

Questions 11 and 12 focus on institution’s goals and objectives for the collections and a self-assessment of needs. Question 11 asked survey respondents what they would like to do with their oral history collections. The answers have been grouped according to theme. Many respondents included more than one and have been included in each theme as appropriate. The most prevalent objective was to provide online access to original oral histories (25 of 65, 38.5%). Transcription was the second most often noted objective (21 of 65, 32.3%), digitization or reformatting came in third (16 of 65, 24.6%), with access in the context of description or cataloging fourth (13 of 65, 20.0%). Other objectives mentioned included permanent storage media, collection development strategies, organize or gain control over the collection as a whole, incorporate oral histories into other initiatives, and publicize the existence of oral histories in the collection. No one objective received less than four respondents and that category was to “keep as is.” Note that two of those four respondents that noted that they would like to keep their oral histories collection as is have the largest number of oral history interviews.

Question 12 follows on the information asked for in question ten. It asked what are the perceived obstacles preventing the institution from achieving those goals. Respondents could select all that apply and the results demonstrate some of the challenges that repositories are facing, not just for oral histories but for collections in general.

Obstacle	Rounded Percentage (of 62)
Limited staff	92%
Not enough time	55%
Lack of funding	55%
Not a Priority	35%
Lack of equipment	32%
Lack of training	24%
Quality of recordings in	13%
Privacy or Legal	11%
Quality of transcriptions	6%
Other*	13%

Obstacles noted in the other category included: lack of transcriptions, in old technology format (want to digitize them), need to be sanitized of classified or sensitive information, comments, and discussions;

difficulty in getting targeted people to schedule the interview, collection level access decreases the priority of item-level cataloging, just found the oral histories among some other stuff, and lone arranger challenges.

Future directions for the Oral History Metadata Working Group

Each one of the questions in this initial survey has highlighted additional information that needs to be sought in order to develop an effective strategy. The Oral History Working Group concluded the survey by asking respondents if they may contact someone from the institution regarding their survey answers and the oral history collection they are reporting. Of the 81 total respondents to the survey, 76.5% (62) indicated that a follow-up would be welcome and provided name and contact information. The Oral History Working Group would like to take the opportunity to interview these individuals to gather more in-depth information and a wider involvement in the work being done.

Other initiatives that will be investigated by the group include:

- Develop metadata recommendations that may be implemented at the item- and collection-level
- Develop easy implementation tools
- Training for those responsible for the curation of oral history projects
- Partnerships with academic programs and existing resources

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Oral History Working Group would like to provide resources that will be useful for North Carolina institutions that are struggling with oral history collections. In order to assess what kinds of information we should be focusing on providing, question 13 asked respondents to indicate what information would be helpful. Responses mirrored many of the challenges experienced by repositories regardless of the collection type. These included conventional practices, preservation considerations, outreach, funding, access, and current trends. It is clear from the survey that basic and advanced oral history curating is an education need in the state of North Carolina. There were also some suggestions for resources to help with oral histories that may be characteristic to that format. These include: integrating oral histories into other activities of the repository; the curation of student created projects; legal considerations for collections without proper documentation and signed releases; and specific software options that will assist in the curation and use of oral histories.

While oral histories present some interesting challenges for collection curators, they are an important piece of our historical record. They can document the un-documented, seeking information from cultures that rely on both written and oral traditions to retain information about its past. They also present an elusive view of the past through the words of its actors. Despite the debates surrounding the veracity and validity of oral history testimony, it has become a crucial aspect of twentieth century experience and has increased in popularity since the social history movements of the 1960s. Projects such as the Southern Oral History Project, the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Testimonies, and

smaller projects springing up around the country demonstrate that oral history on a local, regional, national, and international level are here to stay. Curators should prepare for their long-term responsibilities towards these collections and the Oral History Metadata Working Group seeks to help in that endeavor.

Appendix

Oral History Working Group Survey

1) Do you work for a:

Public library

College

University

Historical society

Museum

Other: _____

2) Do you have oral histories in your collection?

Yes

No

Don't Know

3) Do you anticipate receiving oral histories into your collections?

Yes

No

Don't Know

4) How many interviews are in your collections?

5) What formats are the interviews in?

Reel to reel tape

Cassette tape

Mini disc

CD

VHS

DV cam or Mini-DV

DVD

Other: _____

6) What topics/subjects do the oral histories cover?

7) Do you have consent/release forms or recorded verbal consent for the interviews?

No

Some

Many

Yes, we have consent/release documentation for ALL interviews.

I don't know

Other: _____

8) Does someone have designated responsibility for oral history interviews in your collections?

Yes

No

I don't know

Other: _____

9) How can people discover you have oral histories in your collections?

OPAC

Web pages

Online database

Online archival finding aids

Electronic documents

In-house Database (available to researchers)

Print only documents

Ask staff

Other: _____

10) How do people access the interviews in your collections?

	In house	Online	Not Available
Listen to audio			
View video			
Read transcripts			
Read index			

11) What would you like to do with your oral histories?

12) What is keeping you from achieving your goals for the oral history collections?

Lack of funding

Lack of training

Not a priority

Not enough time

Limited staff

Lack of equipment

Quality of recordings in collection

Quality of transcriptions

Privacy/Legal considerations

Other: _____

13) What other information about oral histories would you find helpful?

14) May we contact you for further information? If so, please provide your name, institution, position title, and email address.