

Marta Mestrovic Deyrup and Sarah Ponichtera

Community sourcing a response to COVID-19

A campus oral history project records the experiences of Seton Hall University's students, staff, and faculty during the pandemic

In February 2020, the Seton Hall University Archives and Special Collections Center began the largely uncharted process of collecting and archiving the experiences of the university's staff, students, and faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article describes the procedures put in place to crowdsource personal narratives and the decisions made to leverage the use of cell phones and social media—the new tools of oral history—to encourage participation by the community.

Background

Seton Hall, an R2, private, Catholic university, is located in South Orange, a town of just under 17,000 people in Essex County, New Jersey. As of April 22, 2020, 92,000 people in the state have been diagnosed with coronavirus, and New Jersey is currently under lockdown. The campus is now closed, and the students have returned home.

In February, as university life moved off-site, Karen Boroff, interim provost, proposed the idea of documenting the community's experience during this time. John Buschman, dean of Seton Hall University Libraries, asked his team to explore the project, and library faculty and administrators organized a small group to put the project together.

The design and implementation team consisted of Sarah Ponichtera, assistant dean for special collections and the gallery; Elizabeth Leonard, assistant dean for information technologies and collection services; Sharon

Ince, digital services librarian; Sheridan Sayles, technical services archivist; and Angela Kotsonis, faculty member from the Department of Communication served as an advisor to the project.

At the time of this writing, 2.5 million people have contracted coronavirus, and, as of April 21, 2020, there were more than 776,000 reported cases and more than 41,000 fatalities in the United States. Documenting the effects of the pandemic on our society has taken center stage for many archives and historical societies around the United States. Without access to the historic materials that usually center archivists' work, they have turned outward to document the historic moment we are all living through. Efforts include web archiving to document the shift of many activities to an online format, such as the Coronavirus Collection, a "collaboration between Archive-It and the International Internet Preservation Consortium's (IIPC) Content Development Group"¹ and the National Library of Medicine's Global Health Events Web Archive, "a selective collection of websites on global health events [that places] Coronavirus alongside its resources on the Ebola and Zika virus outbreaks."²

Marta Mestrovic Deyrup is humanities and outreach librarian, email: marta.deyrup@shu.edu, and Sarah Ponichtera is assistant dean for special collections and the gallery, email: sarah.ponichtera@shu.edu, at Seton Hall University

© 2020 Marta Mestrovic Deyrup and Sarah Ponichtera

There has also been a shift to crowdsourcing, asking volunteers to contribute to archival work, such as transcription and description. This is the case with the Library of Congress's By the People Project,³ which involves transcribing, tagging, and placing online historical documents from the Library's collections, and the University of Iowa Libraries DiY History Project,⁴ which began in 2011 as a project to transcribe its Civil War diaries and letters.

There are also many projects that attempt to capture people's stories of the experiences they are living through at this moment in time.

Building on people's capacity to record their own voices and tell their own stories using the powerful recording devices many of us carry daily in the form of our cell phones, these projects ask their constituencies, whether geographic or community-based, to narrate some aspect of their experience for future generations.

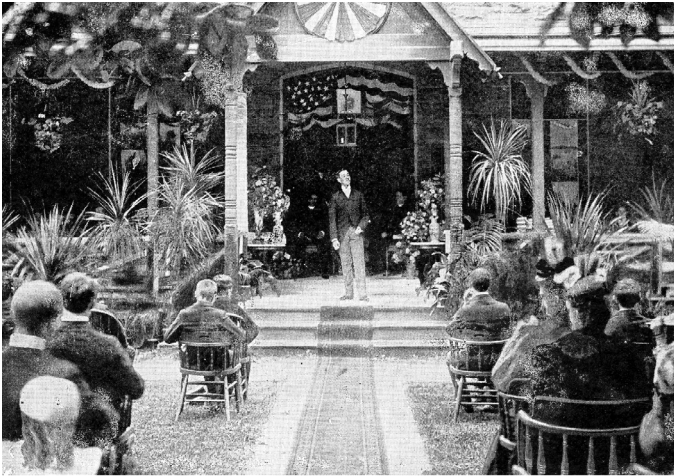
One iconic example is StoryCorps Connect, which was "developed in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic" and is a "first of its kind platform that enables [the user] to record an interview . . . remotely using video conference technology."⁵

Along similar lines, Seton Hall's project sought to capture the multi-layered experiences of its university community, broadly conceived, centering on the students who are at the heart of this enterprise, but also including the experiences of faculty and staff, as their lives changed as well. Kotsonis developed questions that asked respondents to reflect on their experiences, to analyze what they were

living through, and to examine their beliefs and hopes for the future. The immediate goal was to bring people back together in conversation in ways that had been taken from them due to the need to isolate the community from the virus. When they are able to return, they plan to use these stories as a touchstone and a guide, reflecting on them as they decide what they can take from these moments into the future.

In the long term, projects such as Seton Hall's will someday allow future historians to build digital humanities projects contextualizing and analyzing the history of this moment. We have in mind projects such as the National Archives Catalog's coverage of Spanish Influenza⁶ and the University of Michigan's Center for the History of Medicine's massive database, the American Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919: a Digital Encyclopedia.⁷

The implementation team also looked at the website, Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices,⁸ which focuses on accessibility and discoverability, as well as the guidelines for creating oral history projects posted on the website of the Society of American Archivists. Ultimately, however, they were guided by the needs of the community. The mission statement of Seton Hall's Archives and Special Collections is to serve as the "official repository for materials of enduring historical value documenting Seton Hall University." As Ponichtera commented, "Sometimes [collecting historical materials] looks like collecting the letters or photographs of someone at the



Seton Hall Commencement, 1885

story of Medicine's massive database, the American Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919: a Digital Encyclopedia.⁷

The implementation team also looked at the website, Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices,⁸ which focuses on accessibility and discoverability, as well as the guidelines for creating oral history projects posted on the website of the Society of American Archivists. Ultimately, however, they were guided by the needs of the community. The mission statement of Seton Hall's Archives and Special Collections is to serve as the "official repository for materials of enduring historical value documenting Seton Hall University." As Ponichtera commented, "Sometimes [collecting historical materials] looks like collecting the letters or photographs of someone at the

center of historic events. Other times—as with this project—it may be records that document the experiences of average people, which will show how people like ourselves navigated extreme circumstances in the past.”

Oral history projects generally consist of structured interviews overseen or conducted by a scholar using a traditional, history-centric methodology. Instead, Ponichtera proposed using crowdsourcing as the project’s principal means for collecting data. She also advocated making the layout of the future website as open and accessible as possible to encourage the community to upload and share its stories. As Kotsonis, one of the advisors to the project

those who do not have Digital Commons or another repository platform, Kotsonis suggests SoundCloud¹¹ as a good place to house materials intended for community-based projects with a public listening goal. It is easy to access, manage, and has an excellent embed feature.

Sharon Ince and Elizabeth Leonard decided to keep the submission form brief to encourage participation. Both the instructions¹² and submission form are accessible from the library homepage. The form asked for minimum information: title of the submission, name of the author, date recorded, date submitted, location of the story, and



noted, “Framing this as a space to negotiate the moment and to connect was crucial. People had to want to participate. They [need] it.” To acknowledge the importance of community, the Seton Hall project was named “Together Again: Personal Narratives of COVID-19.”⁹

The repository

Once the parameters of the project were clearly established, the implementation team looked at commercial and open-source platforms to determine whether they had the functionality to adequately support these community narratives. Ultimately, the team selected Digital Commons.¹⁰ There were several immediate advantages to this choice, the most important being that library staff was already familiar with the product, which had been used as Seton Hall’s institutional repository for many years. Customizations to the database, such as disabling downloads and creating an enhanced submission button, were undertaken by bepress, the parent company. For

keywords. Instead of a textual narrative, the form required that an audio or video file of one-to-three minutes be uploaded. The recording length was suggested by Kostonis, who requires similar recordings for short student projects in her oral history class. Lastly, in the long term, the team decided to store the files in Preservica, the library’s digital preservation system. The program would check the files for integrity on an automated basis, ensure that they were protected from accidental deletion or server failure, and automatically update the formats of the files, so that if, for example, mp3s are replaced with a new format, the files will still be readable and publicly accessible.

The introductory text was deliberately kept simple, emphasizing the bonds of community (see sidebar on page 283).

Marketing plan

Since the university’s physical campus was inaccessible for an indeterminate length of time, the implementation team needed

to come up with a marketing plan that could reach the community in virtual space. The marketing plan involved both the staff of the Univer-

sity Libraries and the Archives and Special Collections Center. Librarians contacted the community using email blasts and social media and sent email notices to their liaison departments. Librarians at the Inter-professional Health Science Library, which serves Seton Hall's medical and health professionals, approached students who were

We need you! Spread the word to others

- Share the submission form <https://scholarship.shu.edu/covid-19/>
- Only 1-3 minute clip of audio or video needed!
- Be creative if you want
 - An original song
 - Spoken word poetry
 - Creative writing
 - Narrative about work/volunteering done during this time
- Host a virtual event
 - Encourage your club or department to submit
 - Schedule an event for folks to share stories / creative work
 - Story hour or coffee house style events



involved with COVID-19 research. A marketing icon was placed prominently on the library homepage requesting personal narratives.

Conclusion

The “Together Again” project was conceived as community-driven archival repository in late winter 2020. It is showing great promise both as a platform for recording the experience of our community during the COVID-19 pandemic and as a means of bringing the community closer together through a shared

Introductory text from the repository

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted life at Seton Hall as it has for millions of others around the country and the world. In the name of saving lives, the social distancing needed to slow the spread of the virus has scattered us into our homes around the region and the country. Although we are now physically distant from one another, we remain united as Pirates through our connection to Seton Hall.

To reconnect as a community, we seek your stories of what this time has been like for you. How has it changed your experience at Seton Hall, as a student, faculty, staff member, or alum? We hope that sharing these stories with one another will bring us back together in a new way, through sharing our personal experiences of this moment. When we move forward, because there will be a time when we move forward, we plan to listen to these stories together as a community, reflect on what we have learned, and let them guide us into the future.

Questions to guide your response:

- What is your day-to-day life like? What would you want people in the future to know about what life is like for us now?
- What has been most challenging about this time? What do you miss about your life before COVID-19? Are there specific places or things on campus that you miss?
 - *Essential* is a word we are hearing a lot right now. What does essential mean to you? Who is essential? What are we learning about what is essential?
 - What is COVID-19 making possible that never existed before? What good do you see coming out of this moment? How can we reframe this moment as an opportunity?
 - What is it you want to remember about this time? What have you learned?
 - After this pandemic ends, will things go back to the way they were? What kinds of changes would you like to see? How will you contribute to rebuilding the world? What will you do differently?

common experience. Seton Hall's selection of video and audio files to record anecdotal events instead of textual narrative and the use of cellphones as personal assistant devices are part of a larger movement that has been accelerated by recent events to change the way history is recorded, particularly at educational institutions.¹³

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to thank Elizabeth Leonard, assistant dean for information technologies and collection services; Sharon Ince, digital services librarian; Sheridan Sayles, technical services archivist; and Angela Kotsonis, instructor, School of Communication and the Arts, for their contributions to this article. Graphic design of images and the project logo was done by Allison Piazza, health sciences librarian, Seton Hall University.

Notes

1. See <https://archive-it.org/collections/13529>.
2. See <https://archive-it.org/collections/4887>.
3. See <https://crowd.loc.gov/>.
4. See <http://diyhistory.lib.uiowa.edu/>.
5. See <https://storycorps.org/participate/storycorps-connect>.

6. See <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/influenza-epidemic/index.html>.

7. See <https://www.influenzaarchive.org>.

8. See <https://www.oralhistory.org/archives-principles-and-best-practices-complete-manual>.

9. See <https://scholarship.shu.edu/covid-19/>.

10. See <http://www.bepress.com/products/digital-commons/>.

11. See <https://creators.soundcloud.com/guide/videos/sharing-your-work>.

12. See <https://library.shu.edu/remotelibrary/narrativeinstructions>.

13. For more information on COVID-19 projects, see the *New York Times* article "What Historians Will See When They Look Back on the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020," <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/us/coronavirus-pandemic-historians-archive.html>; *A Journal of the Plague Year*, <https://covid19.omeka.net/>, run by historians and archivists from Arizona State, Fordham, Brown, Northeastern, and more; and Nicole Greenhouse's comprehensive list of archivists' efforts to capture and preserve websites documenting the history of this moment, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/122oyYEFrfhMxX7XgQJ14weTU0rTDIQLk38UqJ09qxSU/edit#g.7c>

New from ACRL

The Engaged Library

The Engaged Library:
High-Impact Educational Practices in Academic Libraries

edited by Joan D. Ruelle

Available at www.alastore.ala.org

The graphic features a dark teal background with a white and light teal box on the left containing the book's title and editor information. A stylized logo of four arrows pointing outwards is also present.