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Portals to the Past

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Portals to the Past

St. Mary's University library keeps a door open to history with a video record of its peace symposia
by Diane M. Duesterhoeft and Trish Keogh

When you think about archives, what do you visualize? Yellowing newspapers? Folders of 18th-century correspondence?

Wouldn't history seem more alive if, in addition to old yearbooks and ledgers, students and researchers could actually hear underclassmen of the 1920s at their alma mater grouse or laugh about Prohibition? Or be privy to a planning session for a student strike during the Vietnam War? What was the scene like at a Young Republicans meeting during the Reagan era?

English literature has been rendered more palatable and accessible because of videotapes and DVDs. What might the same technologies do for the study of history, including your own university's history? In these suddenly historic times, bear in mind that the current state and future direction of our institutions are being shaped by the acts of contemporary groups and individuals. In addition to printed conference proceedings and committee reports, what sources will future researchers value?

Preserving institutional memory

The task of preserving the institutional memory of any corporate body becomes a greater challenge as staff change and organizational boundaries become more fluid. While we have come to expect relatively high staff turnover in corporations, increasingly this has become the case among traditionally stable institutions as well. According to a study conducted in 1998 by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, one-third of the nation's full-time faculty members are 55 or older; in contrast, the results of a similar study conducted in 1989 found that only one-quarter of the faculty fell into this age group (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 3, 1999, p.

DIANE M. DUESTERHOEFT is reference and instruction coordinator at St. Mary's University's Louis J. Blume Library in San Antonio, Texas. TRISH KEOGH was bibliographic control librarian at St. Mary's until May 2003 and is now a cataloger at Goucher College library in Baltimore.



Jehan Sadat, widow of slain Egyptian president and Nobel Peace Prize winner Anwar Sadat, addresses the April 2, 2002, President's Peace Commission as St. Mary's University President Charles Cotrell looks on.

A18). One implication of this demographic phenomenon of "the graying professoriate" is potential loss of institutional memory.

Libraries are ideally situated to house institutional memory in various formats and to provide access to researchers interested in studying our parent institutions. Our effort to preserve institutional memory at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, demon-

strates the role libraries can play in advancing a mission to assemble and preserve records of local events.

The mission statement of St. Mary's University, the oldest Catholic university in the Southwest, includes a commitment to the promotion of social justice and peace. From a proposal developed by the faculty senate, then-University President David J. Paul approved the President's Peace Commission on December 21, 1984. According to its mission statement, "The President's Peace Commission fosters an ethical commitment to participate in the establishment of world peace and social justice. . . . The Commission annually hosts symposia that offer opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to grow in their active pursuit of peace and justice."

Each fall and spring semester, the commission holds at least one symposium, which typically runs for three days and consists of approximately 12 panels that focus on a central theme.

Initially, the programs consisted of a few sessions with invited speakers and screenings of one or more videos related to the theme. Over time, the programs have grown both in the number of panels and in attendance. Although the commission draws heavily on the participation of the university and local communities and lacks a large endowment, past speakers of state and national renown include:

- Betty Sue Flowers, poet, editor, TV host, and professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin;
- Robert Meerepol, who was 6 years old when his parents Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed in 1953;
- Jean Bethke Elshaint, University of Chicago professor, author, and editor of works on politics, feminism, and peace; and
- Jehan Sadat, women's rights activist and widow of former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat.

Videotapes as records

From early in the commission's history, presentations were recorded to enable absent students to share in what transpired. The university is fortunate to have a learning resources center that videotapes each session and, as publisher of record, supplies duplicate videos to those who request them. Signed release forms secured from participants before each panel session permit the university to broadcast the videos on San Antonio's higher-education channel. This TV coverage affords the local community access to selected programs and serves a public relations function for the university as well.

The videotapes are eventually included in the Louis J. Blume Library collection. Original cataloging of these videotapes may include lengthy session descriptions in the 520 summary field. Long, full descriptions and more varied and specific subject headings promote accessibility and generate interest in the presentations.

Access points for these records include institutional author, institutional author by program date, series title, particular session title, participants as contributors, and (as warranted) participants' institutions as contributors.

Libraries in Illinois, Oregon, and Tennessee have purchased copies of these videos for their collections. We speculate that requests received from other states are not the result of existing networks of acquaintance, but derive from users' discovery of the videos via shared bibliographic records and utilities. Access to cataloged holdings is available through our public access catalog (regina.stmarytx.edu) and through OCLC-based products such as WorldCat. The commission is currently developing a website to link session descriptions with catalog record information.

In addition to curricular and extra-curricular use by students and other users, these videos have become records of social history. For example, sessions taped more than 10 years ago, as the first Gulf War was building up, preserve contemporary dialogue and debate on issues of the day—data that might have been reinterpreted or forgotten with the passage of time and would not be otherwise available in the library.

Information preserved and made available to users through the cataloging of these videotapes may not be readily accessible in other formats. A session containing an analysis of Tejano music has circulated numerous times. Though due, in part, to local interest, we also attribute its popularity to a prior dearth of academic discussion of this unique blend of Texan-Mexican music in any format.

Finally, efforts of local peace workers are preserved and perpetuated through this format. Their influence can extend beyond the local community and their own span of time as their videotaped messages are shared.

Past, present, future

The videotaping and cataloging of these programs require a substantial investment of time and effort. The benefits are not immediately apparent. A long-term view is necessary to justify those efforts. Audiovisual records enhance any archive and can be promoted formally in collection development policies, library catalogs, and websites.

Librarians have a unique opportunity to preserve and catalog institutional and local history. By doing so, not only is the mission of the library advanced, but the scope of the institution's programs and accomplishments can be expanded.

We hope this account of our first steps at St. Mary's will inspire you to offer similar programs in your own libraries. After all, it's not enough to live in the present and think about the future—we have to plan and take action as well. ♦

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