

Schedler Honors College Oral History Project Spring 2022

Introduction to the Project

Background: The Class

The Schedler Honors College Oral History Project was the product of a class "Living History: The Schedler Honors College Oral History Project." The class was cross-listed to both sophomores and juniors as a Core IV and Junior Seminar, respectively. The project goal was to collect alumni interviews in advance of the 40th anniversary of the Schedler Honors College (1982-2022). While the goal of the class was to collect these oral histories, students were expected to be oral historians, not just interviewers.

The class was divided into three different phases: "theory," "praxis," and "analysis." To begin, we read about the theory of oral history, and we read and discussed examples of oral histories. Entering the second phase, students developed a list of common questions and used those questions to interview at least two current students for practice (these interviews are not included in the archive). After testing the questions with current students and fine-tuning the approach, we then we moved on to our main "narrators" - that is, our alumni interviewees. Juniors were required to interview four alumni; sophomores were required to interview three alumni. After students finished the interviewing process, they wrote a paper drawing their preliminary conclusions from the interviews they conducted and other oral histories collected by classmates.

The interview process included the following steps:

1. Scheduling both a "pre-interview" and the actual oral history interview.
2. During the pre-interview (30 minutes), conducting introductions and going over informed consent.
3. Getting the informed consent before proceeding with the interview.
4. Conducting the oral history (between one and two hours).
5. Transcribing the interview.
6. Getting the transcription approved.
7. Submitting the transcription and any other materials, including video and/or audio, to the archive.

The Art of Oral History

What exactly is oral history, and how did we use it in this project? From the syllabus, written in Spring 2022:

When we say the word "history," the first image that comes to mind is probably a history book, likely about people long gone and researched by a historian who spent years hunched over barely-legible documents.

While "history" as a field includes the long-gone people and the fragile artifacts they leave behind, it also includes the living, their memories, and the narratives they tell about themselves. The field of history in which people narrate their lives and understandings of the past is called "oral history," and the people who conduct, preserve, and analyze those narratives are called "oral historians."

Oral history is many things - a discipline, a method, a skill, and an experience - wherein two people, a narrator and an interviewer, collaborate and co-create a dialogue, often for a particular purpose or with a particular focus.

While the word "interview" is used in oral history, it differs from how most people conceive of "interviewing." Whereas an interview can explore a certain subject, or a person's life, oral history as a field works to collect different perspectives and to use the overlap between and among those perspectives to understand the shape of what ties them together - here, the Honors College. It can also show what not everyone sees, and the differences in people's experiences become valuable information that deepens and textures of the object at the center of the inquiry.

Take the question, "What is the Honors College?" If I was interviewing an alumni narrator and asked that, the question cuts through a lot of the feelings and memories attached to the Honors College and requests that the narrator just tell me the facts. While they might feel all sorts of ways about the Honors College, the standard answer to that question might be very institutional, static. But to interview as an oral historian means that I have to approach this question differently and from multiple directions. To find out what the Honors College is, we need to talk to quite a few people, and each person needs to put the Honors College in context of their lives. And while I can still ask a direct question like "What is the Honors College?" I can also find multiple ways to get at that question that asks the narrator to think differently about what the "Honors College" is - what it was before they were accepted, what it was while they were there, what it is in the rearview mirror, what all of those things mean, and how they have deal with those meanings in their lives, what it did and did not change for them, what they did and did not love about it, what hope or grief or other emotions that they experienced in their time there, among dozens of other questions.

While a lot of time can be spent exploring "context," the questions the students developed naturally gravitated towards the meaning of education in their lives and how family, friends, institutions, and teachers affected that meaning. Asking alumni what education meant to their families and what it meant to them, and how education could be transformational, is one of the main dividends of the project, and helps to place the questions about the Honors College's importance in their lives: How did alumni come to the Honors College? What did it mean to them to step through the doors? What did "education" mean to alumni, before and after stepping through that door? What were the experiences that defined the Honors College in their lives? Who were the people that made the Honors College what it was? How did it affect your life after you left?

Because of this approach, the image of the Honors College that emerges is multi-faceted, deep, rich, and rooted in lived experience and memory, in ways that a purely institutional history could not access nor convey. The perspectives contained within this project are many-layered, wonderful, funny, sad, hopeful, studied, and powerful. I hope they are read and used, discussed, and built upon. May the conversation continue.

-Whit Barringer
SHCOHP Director
11/28/22

A note on the transcripts

All interviews were held over Zoom and recorded. The SHCOHP used Trint software to automatically transcribe from Zoom recordings of the interviews, which students then corrected. After correcting the interviews, students set the transcripts to the narrator for corrections, redactions, or approval. Narrators had the right to redact any portion of the interview; however, due to time constraints, any redactions on the transcript meant that the video could not be archived, as we would not be able to edit the video.

The transcripts are not perfect, due to both technological issues and skill levels, but they represent the best product we could produce within the time limits of the class. Students were instructed to format the interviews in particular ways, though there's still quite a bit of variation amongst them. There are notes in transcripts about known issues. If you see a transcript that has issues that are not noted, please notify us and we will add a note. If the transcript is not redacted, the video is available, which may provide future iterations of the project the tools to construct better transcripts. It is my hope that the SHCOHP archive continues to develop and grow, and in a future iteration of the project, students can work on correcting transcripts and formatting them more uniformly.

Contents of the SHCOHP Archive (As of 11/28/22)

"Introduction to the Project" (this document)

"The Schedler Honors College Oral history Project - Introduction and Overview" (video and audio)

Interviews from 39 alumni, spanning the Honors College's history from 1982 to 2021 and including various artifacts submitted by alumni to the project for archiving, including photos, scans, and theses
Project Documents, including interview questions, the class syllabus, the blank deed of gift and informed consent forms, and transcription guidance