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Abstract
This article discusses a recent oral history project conducted by the University Archives, Iowa State University Library, which documents students' campus experience and concentrates on the university's annual celebration, VEISHEA. By focusing on current students, the University Archives has been able to actively document student life and become better aware of the numerous student activities on campus. The project has enabled the archives to build bridges to previously undocumented student groups. The contact through these interviews has led to the donation of records from these groups, and has made these students more conscious of their role in the university's history and their responsibility to document it.

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DOCUMENTING STUDENT LIFE:
THE USE OF ORAL HISTORIES IN
UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

BY MICHELE CHRISTIAN

ABSTRACT: This article discusses a recent oral history project conducted by the University Archives, Iowa State University Library, which documents students' campus experience and concentrates on the university’s annual celebration, VEISHEA. By focusing on current students, the University Archives has been able to actively document student life and become better aware of the numerous student activities on campus. The project has enabled the archives to build bridges to previously undocumented student groups. The contact through these interviews has led to the donation of records from these groups, and has made these students more conscious of their role in the university’s history and their responsibility to document it.

Documenting student life is one of the greatest challenges faced by college and university archives in developing their collections. The history of any institution of higher education is incomplete without the history of the student body. Surprisingly, despite the fact that students constitute the largest group of any college or university community, very few records and papers of students generally exist outside of the registrar’s office. As keepers of college and university histories, archivists must make greater efforts in procuring these materials. As John Straw states in his 1994 article on documenting student life, “there is a wide range of important research in this area yet to be undertaken. Hopefully, we can find the documentation to meet these needs.” However, many factors contribute to the difficulty in documenting student life, including the fact that most student activities are seldom recorded or saved. Even if records are created and preserved, the chances of these materials coming to the archives are low.

One reason for this problem is the continuous turnover of students in membership and leadership positions, particularly in campus organizations. The frequent turnover makes conventional methods of transferring records from university offices ineffective. Each year, students are faced with choosing leaders for their organizations; this lack of continuity creates instability in the way the organization’s records are created and stored, and forces archivists to reestablish relationships with these groups each year. Another difficulty with documenting student life is recording the lives of those students who avoid traditional or mainstream student groups and activities.
Of the documentation that does exist, the materials that find their way to the archives often come irregularly and unexpectedly. Since most students have no idea that the archives exists at all, let alone what the archives does, it should not be surprising that this is the case. Without a concerted effort on the part of the college or university archives to include and inform students, many aspects of campus life will remain undocumented.

Oral history interviews are one method of documenting the student experience. Speaking with the students directly captures their personal perspectives on varied aspects of student life, such as courses, campus activities, student organizations, and interpersonal relationships. Oral histories complement many of the traditional records that may already be available in the archives, since they often provide greater context to events described in other records. The interviews offer a deeper and, arguably, more subjective layer of understanding to a college or university’s history. Sometimes an oral history will capture an event that would not be found in traditional sources.

For example, in a recent oral history interview conducted at Iowa State University, Dr. Barbara Forker described the events surrounding the formation of a Physical Education and Leisure Studies Department, which combined the Men’s and Women’s Physical Education Departments at the university. Amid some protest from the members of the Men’s Physical Education Department and the Athletic Department, the university named her head of the new department. In the interview, Dr. Forker related an incident that occurred after the first staff meeting: she asked the male staff members to remain and told them that she knew they did not want her as the head of the department. Dr. Forker proposed that the staff give her a year to prove that they could work together and reminded them that it would require effort on their part as well as her own. During the rest of the impromptu meeting the staff explained to her what they liked and disliked and she told them what could be changed and what could not. Dr. Forker was proud of all of her staff for making the department a success and demonstrating that they could cooperate.

The University Archives has no other documentation on this event. Nothing in Dr. Forker’s papers or the papers of the staff members even hint that this meeting occurred.

The University Archives, a division of the Special Collections Department of the Iowa State University Library, has been conducting oral history interviews since the early 1970s. Most of the interviews are with prominent members of the Iowa State faculty, administration, and alumni. In fact, very few of the interviews have focused on current students or their activities. In an attempt to fill in these gaps, the Iowa State University Oral History Project has made the capturing of student life a high priority. This ongoing effort attempts to record the personal perspectives of current students on a variety of activities from course work to life in the residence halls or in the Greek system. Since 2001, a major focus of the interviews has been on the students’ perception of the university’s somewhat controversial annual celebration, VEISHEA.

VEISHEA is an acronym for the five original divisions of Iowa State: Veterinary Medicine, Engineering, Industrial Science, Home Economics, and Agriculture. Each spring, Iowa State University hosts VEISHEA, the largest student-run celebration in the United States. Every year VEISHEA, Inc., an association consisting of over 350 students, organizes this extraordinary three-day event. The students design and implement
every aspect of the celebration; VEISHEA is one of the few activities on campus that is truly student organized. Due to the size and complexity of initiating an oral history project centered on students, the University Archives felt it was important to capture the evolution of one of Iowa State University’s most revered and contentious traditions. The archives staff determined that it should focus on this particular event because of VEISHEA’s unique position on campus, recent history, and the fact that in one way or another it affects the lives of every student.

First celebrated in 1922, Frank “Shorty” Paine, Professor of Engineering and an alumnus, gave the event its name as a symbol of harmony. According to the VEISHEA program for 1922, the purpose of the celebration is “To develop a spirit of unity, unity between Iowa State College and Iowa people, unity between Ames and High School Students, unity between alumni and students, unity between the students of the five divisions.” In order to gather support from the administration, VEISHEA had to showcase the school for the citizens of Iowa, particularly high school students.

Prior to VEISHEA, several of Iowa State University’s divisions hosted celebrations each spring that were held only weeks apart. The interruption of schoolwork generated by the multiple celebrations was a cause of great concern for the faculty and the administration. The main incentive behind the creation of VEISHEA was to combine all of the divisional celebrations into one all-school celebration that would prove to be less disruptive to the students’ studies. It would also be a larger and, therefore, more effective advertisement for the school and provide students with an opportunity to learn how to coordinate a major event. In order to gather support from the administration, VEISHEA had to be seen as an exposition that would invite citizens of Iowa, particularly high school students, to visit the campus. The founders made exhibits and open houses essential to the celebration. This sense of duty to bring the university and the people of Iowa together is deeply ingrained in Iowa State’s culture. It reflects the school’s strong commitment to the ideals of its land-grant heritage, particularly the principle of extension. Since the inception of Iowa State University in 1858, there has been a drive to spread the knowledge gained at the school throughout the entire state. From the farmers’ institutes first taught in 1869 to the establishment of the first county extension offices in 1904 to the development of VEISHEA in 1922, Iowa State University has made outreach essential to its mission. It is the university’s dedication to extension that underlines the foundation of VEISHEA.

As the popularity of this event grew, the original purposes of VEISHEA began to be overshadowed by the unofficial parties that started to dominate the weekend. Young people from all over flocked to Iowa State University in an effort to participate in what became known as the “largest party in the Midwest.” VEISHEA carried on as usual, but each year it became less about the celebration of excellence it was originally intended to be and more about drunken revelry. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, minor disturbances and altercations between partygoers and the police escalated into riots. Community members, both residents and business owners, were upset with the celebration because they no longer felt it was a safe event.

The defining moment for VEISHEA came in 1997, when a man was fatally stabbed on the lawn of one of the fraternity houses. Neither the two men convicted of the crime nor the victim were local to Ames, Iowa, or connected to Iowa State University in any
way: they were all part of the crowd drawn to VEISHEA’s “after hours” activities. In response, the university immediately created a task force to examine the event. The task force concluded that the problems were related to the binge drinking associated with VEISHEA and decided the celebration would go alcohol free or permanently end. The students were asked to choose which option they preferred. Reluctantly, the student body voted to support an alcohol-free event and the celebration continued. Many students were unhappy with the change, some because they associated VEISHEA with alcohol-related activities; others felt that the new policies were overly restrictive to student liberties.9

Although other events have divided the Iowa State campus in its nearly 150-year history, it is often difficult to find evidence of student reactions within traditional records of the University Archives. The archives maintains the records of VEISHEA, Inc., including programs, photographs, correspondence, histories, reports, and news clippings. These materials cover its founding in 1922 to the present and reflect the activities and sentiments of those involved in the planning of VEISHEA. The records allude to the amount of work and preparation that is needed to produce a successful event and the issues that concern the committees each year. For example, the records of VEISHEA, 1970, reflect the campus’s reaction to the Vietnam War and the tragedy at Kent State University, which occurred only days before the celebration was held. The VEISHEA Central Committee determined that the celebration must go on, but changes needed to be made in order to reflect the gravity of the situation. They decided that no weapons would be carried by anyone during the parade, including the military. They also decided to create a platform for public discussion of current events that would be accessible at all hours, and to add a “March of Concern” to the parade.10

VEISHEA has become part of the fabric of Iowa State University and the controversy that has recently clouded the 80-year-old event calls for a concerted effort to investigate the celebration from the student perspective. While we can be reasonably sure that VEISHEA, Inc.’s and the administration’s point of view will be presented through correspondence and reports, these records tell only half of the story; only by seeking out students and recording their versions of events can the archives begin to hope for an accurate portrayal.

When starting the oral history project in 2001, the staff decided that the project must achieve two goals. First, it should focus on current students, including those that were active in the planning of VEISHEA, active members of other student organizations, unaffiliated students, nontraditional students, and international students. It was decided that all students, regardless of prominence and level of participation on campus, have a story to tell. Sometimes, students with lower campus profiles have more to say about how the university has influenced their lives. The University Archives staff sought to learn and record the various perceptions of life at Iowa State and VEISHEA. Although the primary focus is on current students, this does not imply that the University Archives has abandoned plans to interview the faculty, university administration, and alumni. The project focuses on students for two reasons: the staff wished to capture the memories of students prior to graduation, allowing the students very little time to forget or alter their memories. Whereas the effects of time may still occur, chances are that the memories may not be altered to the same degree as they would if more time had passed.
The second reason is the students’ proximity. The staff would have, potentially, thousands of prospective students in the interview pool, relying on a continuous stream of students.

The second goal of the oral history project was to create an undertaking that could be ongoing. The project had to be manageable enough to not interfere with the regular work flow of the University Archives. The staff decided that approximately 10 to 15 students per academic year could be interviewed without interrupting the routine workload. In addition, the limited number of interviews will not overly tax the department’s resources when it is time to duplicate the tapes and transcribe interviews. The Special Collections Department employs three professional staff members, three support staff members, and four to five part-time student assistants. Normally, the department’s policy has been to outsource the transcription of oral history interviews, however, student assistants have been assigned to this task in the past.

In light of the fact that the project is being conducted through the university and is focusing on students, the University Archives needed permission from the university’s Human Subjects Review Committee, which reviews any research done involving human subjects and assures that the research is within the guidelines of the Code of Federal Regulations Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. Over the past few years, this practice has increasingly come to the attention of historians and other social scientists. Each institution is charged with the duty of creating policies to govern research on human subjects and to create an internal review board (IRB) to regulate these policies. Given that each institution develops its own research policies, there is no one way in which IRBs review oral history. Generally, IRBs rate research projects in three review categories. Certain projects can be considered exempt from review, such as those that include taste testing of United States Department of Agriculture approved foods and research involving records and specimens already in existence. Research projects that pose a minimal risk to its subjects may be eligible for expedited review and promptly accepted by the head of the IRB or a committee of the IRB formed for this purpose. The last review category is the full review, which includes all other types of research and may require extensive adjustments to the project, or denial. The American Association of University Professors, recognizing the limitations this occasionally places upon academic freedom, has recommended that IRBs look into creating general exemptions for certain research projects, including oral history interviews.

Fortunately for the Special Collections Department, the Human Subjects Review Committee readily approved the project. The department was simply required to complete the necessary forms and create an informed consent form, which is a form that lets the interviewee know the purpose of the project and the benefits and risks involved in participation (Appendix A). The form also notifies the interviewees that the interview will be made available to the public. It explains that by signing the deed of gift the interviewee transfers ownership of the interview to the university. The only obstacle the department faced in the approval process was the deed of gift. The review committee required that the form be approved by the University Legal Services. After a brief discussion with the university’s lawyers, a document was created that would transfer the ownership of the interviews from the interviewees to the Special Collections Depart-
ment to the satisfaction of the department, the university’s lawyers, and the review committee (Appendix B).

After the project was approved by the university, the next step was to find candidates for interviewing. Since the University Archives wanted to talk to a variety of students, the staff chose not to solicit the assistance of faculty advisers to the various student organizations. The archives wanted to capture the perspectives of more than the very active and very pro-ISU students. Therefore, the project director relied upon the recommendations provided by students employed by the University Archives. Two student employees were interviewed for the project. Both students, feeling that the project had merit and that several of their friends would enjoy participating, gave the archives a list of names. This referral approach worked out well: of the people contacted, approximately 70 percent agreed to be interviewed. These students were from a variety of backgrounds, majors, and activity levels, including members of fraternities and sororities, leaders of the resident hall organizations, student government, and students with no involvement in any of these groups.

Before the interview, the students were asked to fill out a form that would provide basic biographical details (Appendix C), allowing the interviewer to tailor the questions to fit each person. During the interview, each student was asked several standard questions regarding their background, family, course work, activities, and their views on VEISHEA and Iowa State University (Appendix D). Most of the additional questions the interviewer asks flow from answers the students have given. By letting the students talk freely, without interrupting or inserting the interviewer’s opinions, they quickly forget about the tape recorder and focus their attention on telling their stories. The relaxed atmosphere encourages the students to speak their minds and not worry about the interviewer’s reaction, resulting in a more truthful interview.

Each interview is recorded on a normal bias 60-minute TDK audiotape and will be copied on another TDK audiotape, making an archival master tape and an access reference copy of the interview. A transcription of the interview will also be created to allow for both an audio and paper copy. As is the practice with other oral history projects initiated by the Special Collections Department, the transcripts will be sent to the interviewee for review and minor editing, if necessary. After the interviewees have seen the transcripts and the editorial remarks are added, the interviewer will add footnotes to provide further context. The interviews will then be cataloged as one collection of interviews. To offer better access to the information within the transcripts, the archives will create an index to each transcription and a master index to all of the interviews. Whole interviews or sections may be made available through the Special Collections Department’s Web site.

It is interesting to note that all of the students interviewed thus far have had different opinions about VEISHEA and the university. Some were very involved in the celebration and some were not. One student was so irritated by the treatment of students in the residence halls during VEISHEA that he and another student worked to have the event canceled unless the university began to treat VEISHEA like any other weekend. According to him, the students in the residence halls were treated like prisoners and they were tired of it. One of the General Co-Chairs for VEISHEA, Inc. had nothing but positive things to say about the event and felt that the administration’s restrictions were
welcome and made VEISHEA a friendlier and less unruly event. It is through the oral history project that we are able to capture all sides of the story, including those from individuals that would otherwise not be heard.

Since the oral history project began, most of the students who remember the recent tragedy and changes made to the event have graduated. The more recent students have not experienced a "wet" VEISHEA, nor have they pledged to keep the campus free of alcohol during the celebration; therefore, they cannot comment on the alterations made to the celebration. Due to this change, questions regarding the "Pledge" or changes in residence hall policies during VEISHEA have been dropped from the interview question list for more recent students. Students are still asked to talk about VEISHEA, their experiences with the celebration, and their views regarding the event.

Although this project is still in its infancy, it has great potential for outreach to the student population by exposing them to the Special Collections Department and showing the students what we can do for them, both as researchers and as record keepers. An unexpected benefit of this project has been the opportunity to approach student organizations about transferring their records to the University Archives. Through talking to the students, the archives has been able to encourage campus groups to discuss the advantages of having their records in a repository rather than with the members of their groups. In little over a year, the Iowa State University Archives has accessioned 10 times the number of linear feet of student organizations' records that the archives had accessioned in the previous three years combined. The archives has added the records of two social fraternities, one social sorority, and one professional fraternity. The most interesting of the new accessions are the records of the residence hall associations.

The residence halls at Iowa State University are divided into three associations based upon their locations: Richardson Court Residence Hall Association, Union Drive Residence Hall Association, and Towers Residence Hall Association. These associations are governed by the Inter-Residence Hall Association (IRHA), which consists of representatives from the three associations. The three residence hall associations and the IRHA have discussed adding a line in their by-laws directing the transfer of association records to the University Archives, thereby circumventing the traditional turnover problem. The archives has recently received the records of the Union Drive Residence Hall Association and the Inter-Residence Hall Association, and the department is expecting the records of the other associations when the students return from summer break. Prior to the project, the archives contained few records for these organizations. These materials consisted mostly of newspaper articles that the Special Collections Department had clipped over the years. The University Archives has now received over 30 years worth of meeting minutes, reports, enactments, correspondence, and photographs. Part of this accession also included the records of the Men’s Residence Hall Association, the predecessor of the Union Drive Residence Hall Association, and the Committee on Alternative Living, which was created to assist with the residence halls in the creation of coeducational housing.

By simply contacting students and asking them to tell their life stories, we have educated them about archives and encouraged them to find a permanent home for their organizations’ records. They have added another important part of the university’s history to the archives. Several of these students expressed their gratitude in the fact that
they do not have to throw away their organization's records in order to make room for new records.

While this project has had many benefits such as outreach to the public and raising the profile of the archives on campus, the most important aspect of doing these oral histories is being able to capture and record history as it happens from an underdocumented community. Active documentation in a university and college setting is essential to ensure that we record what it means to be a student, otherwise, the history of the university will remain the story of the administration without regard to the student population the university was created to serve.

College and university archivists must employ more creative methods to document the lives of students. Oral history interviews are one of the best approaches for this, especially with students, who are often willing to share their experiences orally and less likely to write them down. The Iowa State University Oral History Project reflects a commitment on the part of not only the University Archives, but also of the university as a whole to preserve the rich history of the campus from a multitude of perspectives. The University Archives hopes to improve the previous effort in how the archives had documented student life in the past and, thereby, provide a more comprehensive understanding of campus life at Iowa State University.
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Iowa State University Library
Special Collections Department
Oral History Projects

PURPOSE

The oral history project will document the careers, lives, and/or certain events of those affiliated with Iowa State University, those engaged in agriculture or science and technology, and American women involved in science and engineering. The oral histories will be used to provide prospectives and details of history that are often not apparent in other records, and when used with other research material, they will help to provide a more accurate picture of history. The oral histories gathered by the Special Collections Department will complement other records in the department and will help to further aid the Iowa State University research community.

PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and a deed of gift; you will receive copies of each form. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions regarding general biographical information, educational background, career, professional affiliation(s), and/or level of involvement in certain activities (such as clubs, athletics, and events). You will have the right to not answer any questions you feel uncomfortable answering and you may terminate the interview at any time. The interview will be recorded on audiotape or videotape and it will be transcribed. The transcript and the recording(s) of your interview will be available to the public at the Special Collections Department of the Iowa State University Library.

RISKS

Participation is voluntary and there are no foreseeable risks involved in taking part in this project.

BENEFITS

Aside from having the satisfaction that you have contributed to history and that your ideas and accomplishments will be preserved indefinitely, there is no personal benefit for participating in this project.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about the Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department Oral History Project, please contact Tanya Zanish-Belcher at 515-294-6648.
PARTICIPATION

Participation in the project is voluntary and you may end the interview at anytime without discrimination or retribution towards you.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your interview will contain your name and other personal identifiable information. In addition, your interview will be available to the public at the Special Collections Department of the Iowa State University Library.

TIME

The average length of an interview is approximately an hour. However, the interview may be longer or shorter, and may require more than one session.

DEED OF GIFT

As a participant in the project you will be asked to sign a deed of gift. This form gives authority over your interview to the Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department. This means that you relinquish any claim to legal title, literary property, and copyright for your interview to the department. You will have the right to review the transcript. You will also have the right to copy, use, or publish all or part of your interview; this right is good only until the time of your death; your heirs will have to obtain permission from the department to use, copy, or publish your interview. If you wish, you may place reasonable restrictions upon the deed of gift.

Your signature signifies that your questions have been answered, that you understand the purpose and procedures used for the interview, and that you agree to take part in this project.

Interviewee Name (print): __________________________________________

(Signature of Interviewee) ________________________________ (Date)

INTERVIEWER STATEMENT

I have explained the above points with the interviewee and I believe he/she understands the purpose and procedures involved in participating in the Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department Oral History Projects.

(Signature of Interviewer) ________________________________ (Date)
Appendix B

Deed of Gift Agreement
Special Collections Dept./University Archives
Iowa State University Library

I, _____________, hereby give, convey, donate and assign to Iowa State University (ISU), my oral history memoir, to have and to hold the same absolutely and forever. I understand that Iowa State University will use my oral history memoir for such historical, research and scholarly purposes as they see fit and that by this conveyance I relinquish:

1. All legal title and literary property rights which I have or may be deemed to have in my oral history memoir.

2. All my rights, title and interest in the copyrights which I have or may be deemed to have in my oral history memoir and more particularly the exclusive rights of reproduction, distribution, preparation of derivative works, public performance, and display of my oral history memoir.

I also state that I have not assigned, or in any manner encumbered or impaired, any of the aforementioned rights in my oral history memoir to another person or organization. The only conditions which I place on this unrestricted gift are:

1. The right to review the transcript of the oral history memoir and suggest minor editing changes if necessary.

2. The right to copy, use or publish my oral memoir in part or full until my death.

Dated this __________ day of __________________, 20__. 

______________________________
(Signature of Donor)

As agent for or as the duly appointed representative of Iowa State University, I accept the oral history memoir of ___________ for inclusion in the ISU Archives.
Appendix C

Oral History Information Sheet

Name________________________________________

Birthdate____________________________________

Home Town____________________________________

Major/Minor___________________________________

____________________________________________

Date/Expected Date of Graduation________________

Associations, Clubs and Activities________________

____________________________________________

____________________________________________

____________________________________________

____________________________________________
Appendix D

General Topics of Discussion:
Hometown and family life:
- Describe your hometown.
- What do your parents do?
- Why did you decide to come to Iowa State University?
- Did your family influence your decision?

Iowa State University:
Coursework:
- What is your major and what are your thoughts on the classes you attended?
- Which courses/professors did you find most helpful?

Student activities:
- In what activities or organizations are/were you involved?
  - For each group:
    - How did you become involved?
    - What is the purpose of the group?
    - In which duties/activities does the group participate?
    - What was your role in the group?
  - Do you have a job during the school year? If so, please describe where and what you do at this job.

Housing:
- Did you live in the residence halls, in a fraternity/sorority, or off campus?
- Why did you choose to live in [residence halls, a fraternity/sorority, or off campus]?
- Describe what you enjoyed the most/least about living there.

VEISHEA:
- When did you first learn about VEISHEA?
- What were your perceptions of the activities? How has this perception changed?
- Did you have any personal involvement in VEISHEA? If so, what did you do for the celebration?
- If so, describe your involvement in VEISHEA.
- What do you like/dislike about your involvement in the celebration?
- How did you feel about the changes made to VEISHEA?*
- Do you feel the administration made the right decision? Why/why not?*
- What do you think should have changed that did not?*
- What do you think should have remained unchanged?*
- How did you feel about having to make the "Pledge"?*
- What was your reaction to the ending of the "Pledge"?*
- How did you feel about VEISHEA and will you go back as an alumnus?

General reflections about Iowa State University:
- Describe one of the best/worst experiences of attending Iowa State University.

*Questions asked students who started Iowa State University prior to 1998.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michele Christian is the University Records Analyst at the University Archives, Iowa State University Library. She received her M.A. in History and M.L.I.S. from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. Previous versions of this paper were presented at the October 2001 meeting of the Midwest Archives Conference and the 2002 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists.

NOTES

9. VEISHEA, Inc., Records, RS 22/12, Special Collections Department, Iowa State University Library, Ames, Iowa.