



**ORAL HISTORY  
ASSOCIATION**

# GUIDELINES FOR THE EVALUATION OF **PROFESSIONAL OR ACADEMIC ORAL HISTORIANS** FOR PROMOTION, TENURE, OR OTHER REVIEW<sup>1</sup>

## Executive Summary

The first purpose of this document is to inform and assist college and university administrators, department chairs, promotion and tenure committees, and/or other employers by: 1) developing an appreciation for the intellectual effort, research, expertise, and time required for conducting successful oral history projects; 2) demonstrating the value and unique work that oral historians do and the scholarly contributions that they make; and 3) providing points to consider when evaluating professional or academic oral historians for promotion, tenure, or other review purposes. The second purpose of this document is to assist oral historians in understanding how they can better contextualize their contributions within their organizations' or employers' rubrics for evaluation.

**Definition:** A pop culture understanding of “oral history” is very different from one grounded in academic standards. In scholarly contexts, oral history is a recorded, in-depth interview, based on considerable preliminary research and can also include Indigenous ways of knowing. The recording is preserved, made accessible to others, and interpreted. “Oral history” refers both to the interview process and the recorded product. Oral history practitioners seek knowledge about the past from the perspective of the narrator and constitute personal and community constructions of the past, of memories. It is a scholarly and interpretive act to both co-create an interview and give meaning and context to what is shared, and the practice of oral history is closely aligned with current discussions in the academy about public humanities and community engagement.

**Evaluation:** The work of oral historians extends across a broad continuum of practice, and at all stages of the oral history process there exist principles and best practices that have been codified by the Oral History Association. Being guided by these principles and best practices is fundamental. Many oral historians may hold multi-part appointments at academic institutions with workloads that weigh a combination of instruction, research, service, and/or outreach, depending on the campus and the role the individual plays within that entity. Depending on the institution, the following may be considered under different categories. Here are specific points to note for each area:

- Instruction – It is important to recognize (and reward) the pedagogical work that oral historians do outside of normal campus classrooms. Their workshops for outside groups can be included in institutions’ community engagement efforts, and invited lectures are a recognition of expertise.
- Research – Along with the preparatory research they conduct and the new knowledge that is created as a result of their efforts, oral historians produce both traditional and non-traditional outputs such as archival materials, monographs, book chapters, and journal articles but also exhibitions, digital history or storytelling projects, collaborative community work, publicly oriented products, and curated collections.
- Service/Outreach – We outline criteria related to administrative contributions (including grant writing), contributions to the profession, and outreach/contributions to the general public (including community engaged collaborations and public scholarship). Be aware that building trust with communities takes time, and that should be taken into consideration in evaluations.

Criteria for promotion to the rank of full professor may vary from place to place but could involve creating activities that fall outside traditional academic departments and include collaborations with museums, historic sites, and local history groups in creating curated exhibits or being reviewed by peers familiar with community engagement.

## Introduction

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The past two decades have seen a great expansion of oral history within American colleges and universities, as manifested by numerous markers. Major academic presses have introduced oral history series in recent years or published extensively in the field. Oral historians are well-represented professionally across a wide range of disciplines. Some of their research is situated within traditional modes and expectations of scholarly production, while other work directly engages the particular attributes of oral historical sources, for example public scholarship, community engaged project outputs, and creative multimedia products. In addition to conventional scholarship (i.e. books, articles, and transcripts), oral historians have been involved in an ever-expanding assortment of projects and activities, including, but not limited to, work with libraries and archives, museum and online exhibitions, podcasts, archival collections, documentaries, performance pieces, public policy initiatives, and a range of community collaborations.

Another measure of oral history's ubiquity is an emphasis on oral history at both undergraduate and graduate levels. As of 2022, more than half of the 136 graduate programs and approximately one-third of the 111 undergraduate programs listed in the National Council of Public History's (NCPH) online guide to public history programs delineate oral history as a specific strength. In 2008, Columbia University established its interdisciplinary Oral History Master of Arts program, the first and still only master's program in the country explicitly dedicated to the methodology. In addition, many professors include oral history-based assignments in classes not specifically designated as oral history courses. Often these assignments and courses serve to foster community-engaged research, experiential learning, and service learning among students.

Despite this proliferation of work across the continuum of oral history practice, oral history often remains overlooked and undervalued in tenure and review processes which frequently still emphasize single-authored monographs and articles. To help address this disconnect, and to encourage high-quality oral history work, this document provides an overview of the types of work oral historians do, along with associated best practices and evaluative criteria. It is designed both for practitioners themselves as well as colleagues, chairs, tenure and evaluation committees, university administrators, and other potential employers. It is intended for scholars across a range of disciplines in addition to history and for usage at multiple tiers of colleges and universities as well as other institutions.

The document joins an ongoing and evolving discussion about what constitutes scholarship. In recent years both the American Historical Association (AHA) and the Modern Language Association (MLA) have developed and approved more expansive definitions of scholarship. In 2017, the AHA, along with the NCPH and the Organization of American Historians updated the report, "Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian," the AHA has published its "Guidelines for the Professional Evaluation of Digital Scholarship," and the National Council on the Humanities recently developed a working paper on "Public Humanities and Publication."<sup>2</sup> The document also joins a larger conversation about the role of the university itself, in particular with regard to the greater community, which includes such works as the 2008 report by Imagining America on "Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University" and the online Daedalus collection, *The Humanities in American Life: Transforming the Relationship with the Public*.<sup>3</sup>

## What Is Oral History?

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The term “oral history” has multiple popular meanings, as well as a more specific scholarly connotation. In everyday parlance, oral history can refer to any orally transmitted first-person narrative and is often used to describe a collage of spoken accounts about a given historical event. Most commonly, it refers to first-person stories about the past, perhaps epitomized by the recent phenomenon of StoryCorps. Frequently the term suggests a celebration of the ordinary, an authenticity, and a strong emotional connection between storytellers and their audiences.

For scholars, however, the term generally contains a more precise meaning, which can also include Indigenous oral practices and ways of knowing. In standard academic practice, oral history is above all else a recorded interview, an exchange between two parties, one of whom asks questions and one of whom answers them. Oral history is recorded, preserved, made accessible to others, and interpreted (although not necessarily all by the same individuals). As the *OHA Principles and Best Practices* state, “Oral history refers to both the interview process and the products that result from a recorded spoken interview (whether audio, video, or other formats).” Oral history interviewing is historical in purpose. It seeks information about and insights into the past from the perspective of the narrator. It is grounded in historical questions deemed of some significance by the parties involved. Oral history recognizes an element of subjectivity.

Interviews constitute a personal construction of the past, of memories, not merely the factual itemizing of what happened. As Lynn Abrams writes in *Oral History Theory*, “It is the combination of oral history as an interactive process (the doing), and the engagement of the historian with the meanings that people ascribe to the past (the interpretation), that marks it out as a peculiar historical practice.”<sup>4</sup> Oral history stands apart, then, as a unique historical practice that is as much the negotiated intellectual exchange between narrator and interviewer as it is an interpretive act to give meaning and context to what is shared. As such, an oral history interview is an in-depth inquiry. It is not a casual conversation but rather a purposeful exchange that seeks to shed light on the past in a significant manner. Oral history stands at the intersection of numerous disciplines in addition to history: folklore, anthropology, and other fieldwork-based disciplines; communication, linguistics, rhetoric, and performance studies; archival, museum, and curatorial studies; documentary studies, public history, and digital humanities<sup>3</sup>; memory studies and gerontology. Last but not least, oral history reflects people’s use of language and its expressive dimensions.

## What Do Oral Historians Do?

The work of oral historians extends across a broad continuum of practice and entails both process and product. At all stages of the oral history process—before, during and after the interview—there exist principles and best practices that have been codified by the Oral History Association, the national professional organization for the methodology. In whatever institutional setting a scholar is located, guidance by these principles and best practices is fundamental, and they largely inform the following sections.

### Before the Interview

Scholars conduct oral history interviews for multiple purposes. They may be seeking to augment their research in other sources. They might be interested in a particular figure of historical significance or a broader historical topic, for which oral history interviews are essential. They may be embarking upon a documentary project. They may be working with an archive or other entity within their institution to develop or increase a collection of interviews around a particular subject. They may be collaborating with a community group to chronicle the stories of people who may have been historically marginalized. They may be considering an oral history-based performance or digital production, or they may be generating a research collection of primary sources for other scholars to use.

Whatever the purpose of an interview or set of interviews, proper preparation is in order. If possible, practitioners should receive some training before conducting interviews. At the outset, prospective interviewers should try to be as clear as possible about their goals and objectives. What is the historical subject I am investigating? What is already known about the subject through other primary sources as well as the secondary literature? Why am I selecting these particular narrators and not others, and how is my selection consistent with my goals and objectives? How will my selection impact the documentary record? How will the oral history interviews qualitatively add to historical knowledge? Moreover, what are the potential usages of the interviews either by myself or others? Where will the interviews be deposited, archived, and how will they be made accessible?

In addition, prospective interviewers should select and become familiar with the best recording equipment within their means (including the use of remote technology) as well as a format (audio or visual) consistent not only with their goals and objectives but in formats acceptable to the archive or institution where they will be deposited. They should develop a line of inquiry and interview topics in advance. They also should develop, with prospective narrators, the purpose, general subject matter, and the anticipated or potential usages of the interview, as well as the rights of the narrator, and should prepare a legal release form as well as a consent form if required. The principle of informed consent is crucial to ethical oral history interviewing and best practices, whether or not such consent is documented in a paper format.

### During the Interview

Throughout the interview process, interviewers endeavor to attain rapport, trust, equality, and mutuality. Going into an interview, interviewers should be cognizant of their own cultural assumptions, values, privileges, and biases. While an interview does not demand an impossible neutrality, it does require special awareness and selfdiscipline, which oral historians cultivate as part of their training.

Interviewers should frame their questions within a language and context understood by the narrator. They should avoid asking leading, manipulative, or prejudicial questions. They should seek a balance between the objectives of the project and the perspectives of the narrator. They should not be satisfied with superficial answers but should ask clarifying questions and be open to using a variety of types of questions. Interviewers should attempt to extend the inquiry beyond the specific focus of the project to create as complete a record as possible for the benefit of others. Above all, interviewers should listen carefully, recognizing the importance of silence and keeping in mind both what has been said and how it has been said.

Interviewers must respect the rights of narrators to refuse to discuss certain topics, to end the interview at any time, and to restrict access to the interview, given legal limitations. They should also obtain a signed release form upon the completion of the interview.

### After the Interview

Despite all of the work done in preparing for and conducting oral history interviews, as a rule, far more time is spent after the interview is completed. Digital copies of the recording should be made until it can be properly archived and preserved. Full transcripts, detailed summaries, or indexes need to be completed, along with a context statement and any follow-up commitments completed, if required. The repository will need to accession the recording and file the informed consent statement and/or deed of gift, along with any other documents, metadata, or photographs archived along with the oral history. Previous agreements regarding details of accessibility need to be implemented, and materials must be made discoverable unless otherwise restricted. This may involve cataloging or making the files digitally available through finding aids or websites. Curatorial and archival efforts and expertise are required at this stage of the process and in maintaining collections.

Oral historians and others can then begin to use the interview material in a number of ways, being cautious to avoid stereotyping and misrepresenting or manipulating the chronicler's words. Oral historians strive to retain the integrity of the narrator's perspective, verify information presented as factual, interpret and contextualize the narrative, appropriately frame any oral history excerpts, and provide correct citations to the location of the full oral history interview.

### Funding

For many oral historians who work with communities (as well as for those who do not), seeking outside funding to sponsor projects is almost always necessary. Oral historians usually spend a great deal of time applying for funding to see projects through, therefore grant writing can take a large amount of the oral historian's time. Depending on institutional guidelines, the collaborative nature of a project, and proposed project results, grant-writing activity could qualify under research, service/outreach, or instruction areas.

Many oral historians work with communities on oral history projects, and often the collaboration begins before the start of the actual project, as the oral historian may solely, or collaboratively, write grants to fund the project and be named as the Principal Investigator (PI) on the grant. Oftentimes oral historians will be the lead writer of grants where someone from the community organization is the PI. In almost all cases, these types of collaborations require a significant amount of time (sometimes years) to develop a relationship of trust, respect, and accountability. This time commitment by the oral historian may not be adequately rewarded if they are the grant writer and not the PI, but this work still needs to be recognized in a candidate's file put forward for review.

Please find additional information on funding in service and outreach sections below.

## Tenure and Promotion

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[Note: While the following sections specifically address tenure and promotion requirements, they may also provide helpful information to non-tenure track faculty for contextualizing their own work.]

Many oral historians may hold multi-part appointments at academic institutions with workloads that vary on weighting between instruction, research, service, and/or outreach, depending on the campus and the role the individual plays within that entity. Recognizing that many colleges and universities have widely varying requirements, we advise oral historians to follow the guidelines of their institutions and units first. One of the purposes of this document is to help oral historians understand how they can better contextualize their contributions within their organization's rubrics, especially at a time when the national scrutiny of tenure makes the legibility of public and organizational contributions of oral historians all the more important. At the same time, this statement aims to assist administrators and promotion and tenure committees in developing an appreciation for the effort, research, and expertise required for conducting successful oral history projects.

**Instruction/Teaching:** Some institutions have developed criteria for instruction, and oral historians should advocate for this process to include not just instruction to academic students but also to other audiences, as instruction/teaching for oral historians typically extends beyond the classroom and demands additional time and effort. This is particularly important as academic institutions focus more heavily on community engagement, and this is a specific area where faculty can use their instructional outreach to the public to help university goals. Along with providing pedagogical resources for



discipline-based courses and serving as guest lecturers, oral historians frequently conduct instructional workshops and seminars for communities and organizations and prepare course modules for broad distribution, to both academics and the general public. Evaluation of instruction may include the following: narrative self-evaluation; peer/department chair classroom observation; peer/department chair evaluation of course materials; forms designed by the oral historian or granting agencies for the evaluation of workshops, seminars, or guest lectures; and testimonials from students and other audiences. Requirements will vary by institution, but oral historians should be cognizant of the role that public-facing instruction plays in an institution's outreach and mission and should look at opportunities to highlight that along with their regular classroom instruction.

At many colleges and universities, instructional criteria for promotion to the rank of full professor may also include: the development or adaptation of new methods or pedagogical approaches in the discipline; receipt of university, state, or national teaching awards; student or other audience reviews; teaching evaluations that are constantly above average; and invitations as an instructor or speaker. Many institutions focus particularly on national reputation for promotion to full professor, so oral historians should pay attention to the specific requirements for their institution's process.

**Research:** Oral historians bring their disciplined, learned practice to the exercise of their craft while interacting with various individuals and communities. They are ambassadors for their institutions and conduct research that results in the development of archived primary sources, thus creating the possibility of having a dual impact through the potential use of oral histories by both present and future scholars. Oral historians may use the interviews they collaboratively generate in their own works, but their research should be considered equally valid when they are producing collections of interviews for use and interpretation by others. (For thoughts on how curation features into the promotion and tenure process, please see "Service/Outreach" below.) The criteria for scholarly research may include both traditional and non-traditional outputs, such as monographs, book chapters, journal articles, edited transcripts, presentations or posters at professional meetings, exhibitions, interdisciplinary and digital history or storytelling projects, collaborative community-engaged projects, and publicly oriented projects and products. Many universities have begun adding language regarding creative components, digital projects, and collaborative and interdisciplinary work into their promotion and tenure guidelines in order to be able to capture these types of research outputs within their rubrics.

Research criteria for promotion to the rank of full professor will, again, depend upon one's institution and the emphasis put on national (or state or regional) reputation. Examples of achievements or accomplishments that could be considered in this category may include, but not be limited to: being invited to make presentations at the state, regional, national, or international levels; receiving relevant research or project awards (generally from outside the state or university, for full professor); ongoing contributions to published research, creating or collaborating in creating a curated exhibit; being reviewed by peers familiar with community engagement that may fall outside of traditional academic departments including museums, historic sites, local history groups as well as with the professional standards as set out by Oral History Association.

**Service/Outreach:** Some institutions will consider this as one category while others will separate the two aspects. While “service” may focus on contributions to administration, professional societies, one's institution, or society as a whole, “outreach” will usually be much more specific in denoting work done for or with the general public.

Universities with strong land-grant or extension missions may address outreach through a separate set of criteria, but the points below should be relevant regardless.

- **Administrative contributions** – Because oral historians often create connections to communities, their collaborative work can lead to many more administrative tasks, such as writing additional grant applications (beyond a scholar's individual research), drafting or negotiating memoranda of understanding between organizations, serving on local boards, or acting as a liaison between communities and outside institutions (at state, regional, or federal levels). These are considerable time commitments that are often required to build rapport with communities and show that an oral historian is willing to contribute their efforts for a longer, non-extractive relationship, so the impact of this work should not be undervalued. Oral historians whose institutions are involved with the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification process could reference their work from that perspective. The care, management, and contextualization of formally recognized collections may also fall under the administrative area of “service” activities, although in some institutions the curation of these collections could equally be considered under research or outreach or under a separate primary assignment. In whichever category this work falls, oral historians should take care to make a case for the amount of time and expertise required for curating collections that serve students, researchers, and communities at university, state, national or international levels. A wide variety of

tasks may be involved with curation: maintaining, enhancing and enlarging collections via digital reformatting, archival upgrades, conservation, identification, or reparative description; adding to existing collections or creating new ones; interacting with state, federal, and community agencies on collection-related issues; promoting the use of collections via traditional and innovative means; creating exhibits, educational activities, and community outreach programs with collections; pursuing funding for curatorial work; developing new approaches to or theoretical perspectives on curation; and producing curatorial or collections-related publications, reports, or manuals.

- **Contributions to the profession** – This category generally takes account of efforts made on behalf of professional organizations as well as scholarship or work that contributes to one’s field more broadly. Depending upon how an individual’s job description is written, those latter efforts may overlap with “Research,” but they could also include methodological contributions, such as technological advances, work on principles and best practices guidelines, or recommendations on processing or workflow. Service to the profession is often demonstrated through participation on committees or through election or appointment to leadership positions within related scholarly or professional organizations. For promotion to full professor, many institutions require contributions at national or international levels, and some will make an additional distinction between volunteer, appointed, or elected roles. It may be helpful for oral historians to specifically note elected or appointed positions because of the extra status conveyed.
- **Outreach/contributions to the general public** – Community-driven and community-engaged projects are becoming increasingly important to institutional profiles as attention focuses more on how colleges and universities “give back” on local, state, and national levels. While land-grant universities have long had this expectation written into their founding missions, other public and private campuses have also been active in community outreach. As noted above under “Administrative contributions,” oral historians should take note of their institution’s possible participation in the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification and highlight any public collaborations accordingly. It has always been common for oral historians to be engaged in community-based work, and this category is one area where individuals can expressly show how their efforts have contributed to larger institutional missions. “Outreach” could cover everything from public interpretation of research and scholarship, to collaborative community projects, to outward-facing exhibits, websites, and publications, to documentaries, podcasts, or blogs intended for the general public. This area will have significant overlaps with “Research,” “Instruction,” and curation (wherever that falls in a particular campus rubric).

In addition to the points noted above, promotion to the rank of full professor may often require, among other contributions: a record of active leadership in institutional, professional, and community spheres; receipt of awards (including OHA awards), fellowships, or other recognitions (generally at a national level or above) invitations to consult or speak at state, national, or international levels; demonstrated evidence of continuing growth and currency in the field; and a record of ongoing, sustained, and increasing contributions in all areas.

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<sup>1</sup> This document is meant to be used in conjunction with the OHA Principles and Best Practices | Oral History Association and Archiving Oral History | Oral History Association.

<sup>2</sup> See also the guidelines provided by the Broadcast Education Association for vetting documentary and other digital projects for tenure: <https://www.beaweb.org/wp/guidelines-for-promotion-and-tenure-for-electronic-media-faculty-involved-increative-work/>.

<sup>3</sup> See particularly the essay by Susan Smulyan, “Why Public Humanities?”

<sup>4</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 18.

<sup>5</sup> <https://carnegieelectiveclassifications.org/the-2024-elective-classification-for-community-engagement/>

The OHA’s Guidelines for Evaluating and Valuing Oral History Task Force (Mary Larson and Leslie McCartney co-chairs with Michael Franklin) developed this document based on the earlier work of former Executive Director Cliff Kuhn and the Oral History as Scholarship Task Force.

These guidelines were adopted by OHA Council on January 9, 2023.

