

The Wisconsin Legislative Oral History Project

A presentation to:

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2006 Professional Development Seminar

By

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What is oral history?

Oral history is “tape-recorded historical information obtained in interviews concerning personal experiences and recollections.” *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed.*

What is the Wisconsin Legislative Oral History Project?

Vision statement:

1. The project will support the institution of the Wisconsin Legislature.
2. The record will be useful for historical purposes and as a learning tool for incoming legislators and staff.
3. The project will conduct interviews with former members and staff who had a substantial length of experience in the legislature and took a leadership role either within the institution or on a significant public policy issue.
4. The interviews will generally follow a biographical format.
5. The interviews will explore how the subject’s legislative service began and then trace the subject’s career, with a particular focus on the projects or issues on which the subject acted as a leader.

6. Each subject will be encouraged to make comparisons among the many settings in which he or she served in the legislature and the personalities of the individuals with whom he or she served.

Who makes up the working group?

Wisconsin’s senate chief clerk formed and chairs the working group, which consists of members of five state agencies and a retired radio reporter.

Format considerations

1. Video versus audio
2. Transcripts
3. Individual and group interviews

Who are the interview subjects?

Former legislators and legislative staff “who had a substantial length of experience in the legislature and took a leadership role either within the institution or on a significant public policy issue.”

Who will do the interviewing?

A key factor in a successful oral history interview is the person conducting the interview.

Themes for interviews

1. How did a typical day in the legislature go?
2. The legislator's personal background, what motivated him or her to run, what life experience he or she had prior to taking office, etc.
3. Exit interviews with retiring legislators and legislative staff.

Editing transcripts: protocol

1. Provide interview subjects with control over the information they provide yet maintain historical accuracy and interest.
2. Transcripts should read like an interview, rather than like a polished essay or speech.
3. Subjects may edit draft versions of interview transcripts to ensure accuracy.
4. Subjects should not append substantial information to transcripts or rewrite transcripts.
5. If an interview subject desires to share substantial additional information, the project will attempt to do an additional interview.
6. To the extent possible under law, subjects may determine the date on which their interview and transcript are released.

Preservation

The State Historical Society will keep the original tape-recorded interview. The LRB will keep the interview transcripts and photographs.

Legal issues

1. Review transcripts carefully *before* releasing them.
2. Open Records Law
3. Release of information (consent and release form)

Recording

Equipment for videotaping:

1. A studio or other place with appropriate acoustic setting
2. Two cameras with tripods
3. Two lapel mikes
4. An ambient mike
5. Studio lights
6. FireStore, or other digital backup
7. A Mac-mini or other computer
8. Final Cut Express, or other film editing software

Process:

1. Make the participants feel comfortable.
2. Film the interview and run FireStore, a digital backup for footage.
3. After filming, "plug" the FireStore into the Mac-mini and import it to Final Cut Express.
4. Edit the film and download a finished clip onto a flash memory card and download that to the PC.

Status of the project

Testing, testing... We hope to tape next year.

