

11-25-2019

## Alumni Oral Histories: A Collaboration Between the Libraries and Development and Alumni Relations

Rebecca Ciota  
Grinnell College, [ciotareb@grinnell.edu](mailto:ciotareb@grinnell.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Ciota, Rebecca (2019) "Alumni Oral Histories: A Collaboration Between the Libraries and Development and Alumni Relations," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol11/iss3/5>

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## Alumni Oral Histories: A Collaboration Between the Libraries and Development and Alumni Relations

### Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Jayn Chaney and Mark McFate for their help in the writing of this article.

*Peer Reviewed Article*

## Alumni Oral Histories: A Collaboration Between the Libraries and Development and Alumni Relations at Grinnell College

Rebecca Ciota ([ciotareb@grinnell.edu](mailto:ciotareb@grinnell.edu))

Assistant Professor and Discovery & Integrated Systems Librarian, Grinnell College

### Abstract

This article describes a collaboration between Grinnell College's libraries and its Office of Development and Alumni Relations on an oral history project in which college alumni are interviewed about their experiences at the college. Such close collaborations between development offices and libraries are rare. This collaboration was successful due to the equal participation of all parties.

Keywords: oral histories, institutional repository, accessibility, libraries, development, alumni

### Introduction

At Grinnell College, the libraries found themselves collaborating on an oral history project with the Office of Development and Alumni Relations (DAR). DAR sought to engage with alumni and collect college oral histories through interviews. Since the libraries, including the archives, held much of the institution's historical documents, DAR asked the libraries to house these oral histories. Out of this initial request to simply house a collection came a true collaboration in which the partners worked together on the entire project.

The Alumni Oral Histories collaboration between DAR and the libraries serves as a fascinating resource for analysis. The project fostered

collaboration between two offices that had not previously interacted closely on a project that produces and disseminates an important primary resource, one that is unique to Grinnell College – the experience of its alumni on campus. The project also serves as an example of a balanced and functional partnership where both parties provide equally valuable work in order to create an excellent product for current and former students as well as the public. The Alumni Oral Histories project continues to benefit the libraries in multiple important ways:

- The libraries are able to continually add new and popular content to the institutional repository;



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- The libraries have developed a relationship with interviewed alumni and their families which can aid in fundraising;
- The libraries have developed software that has enabled other collaborative partnerships on- and off-campus;
- The libraries continue to be the go-to place for DAR when handling website-based digital scholarship work.

Meanwhile, DAR benefits from the libraries' developer's and librarians' expertise, and both DAR and the libraries are able to provide Grinnell College's undergraduate students with experiential learning opportunities.

Historically, scholars have relied on libraries and archives to provide continuing access to oral histories. Libraries and archives have the facilities and systems for storing a variety of media formats. They also have knowledge of organization, cataloging, and metadata that make the oral history materials findable, not only by the original researchers but also by other scholars and the public. The expertise of the professionals of libraries and archives in these areas often makes them strong partners on oral history projects, though typically just at the tail end of these projects. Libraries have spaces, systems, and employ people with the skills and expertise that oral historians need to preserve and highlight their work; often, the spaces and systems are in the digital realm. And library professionals now have new, relevant skills in digital scholarship, web accessibility, and web development that can aid in discovery, accessibility, and preservation of oral histories. With their unique skillset and resources, librarians can partner with oral historians across the entire range of this type of project.

### Libraries and Oral Histories

The craft of interviewing individuals to obtain information is centuries old. Herodotus (c. 484 –

c. 425 BCE) studied the Persian War through interviews; the *griot* tradition originating in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in West Africa passed down knowledge verbally.<sup>1</sup> In more recent times, oral histories have grown in popularity. For example, in the United States, the Works Progress Administration performed extensive interviews with farmers, laborers, and former slaves in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

Libraries and librarians have been collaborators on modern-day oral histories for decades. In 1948, historian Allan Nevins and librarian Frederic Bancroft established an oral history project at Columbia University, initially producing written transcripts then pioneering wire recorders when the technology became available. When portable cassette recorders became available in the 1960s, oral history work expanded; several United States presidential libraries, such as the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri, undertook oral history work.<sup>3</sup> These oral history collaborators convened conferences where they debated how to preserve these oral histories. In the 1970s, librarians further increased their participation in oral history activities and conversations. The American Library Association produced a manual for newly established oral history programs. In that volume, *Oral History: From Tape to Type*, authors Cullom Davis, Kathryn Back, and Kay MacLean offer advice to oral historians on how to index and catalog their oral history collections.<sup>4</sup>

Due to these early library collaborators in oral history, present-day oral historians understand the importance of libraries in storing, preserving, and disseminating oral histories. When projects are sponsored by an institution such as a university, a museum, or a historical society, the oral history materials often have a designated final destination: the institution's library or archives. Researchers without a connection to such institutions are encouraged, by the literature, to seek out repositories such as libraries



and archives which will have an “ongoing curatorial responsibility” for each project’s products, including interviews, transcriptions, and associated media.<sup>5</sup>

When a library or archive is asked to serve as the permanent repository and curator for an oral history project, the library becomes a collaborator with the principal investigators. The principal investigators are experts in their research area. They have insights into the value of the project (academic or otherwise); they know the appropriate terminology to use in the metadata; they possess a variety of other information about the collection. The library’s expertise, derived from its librarians and staff, is in storage, preservation, discoverability, and accessibility. Traditionally, the transcripts and tape recordings are stored on library shelves, in restricted or unrestricted areas, depending on the nature of the documents. The materials are made discoverable through finding aids and/or the library’s online public access catalog (OPAC) or discovery system.

Oral histories created today are less likely to be stored on cassettes and paper; they are most often in digital formats. Online hosting has become one of the most cost-effective ways to make oral histories available to the most people.<sup>6</sup> Web hosting makes the display of oral histories dependent on many interworking systems and standards, such as video and audio software, the file format of the transcription (for example, PDF or WebVTT), the web server operating system, various programming languages (for example, PHP), and content management systems (for example, Drupal or Wordpress). Libraries have adapted to offer storage and discoverability, but now in digital form. Frequently, libraries have expertise in web publishing, as well as other technologies, making them better prepared than most units to handle the technological complexities of oral history. So, libraries, the traditional home for oral histories, continue to house them, though materials are

not stored in digital format. The oral history project sponsors and libraries often collaborate to ensure the oral histories and associated data are correct, enabling current and future users to access the data.

The literature surrounding libraries and oral history discusses the challenges and successes of libraries when managing oral histories. One case study looks at an oral history program that has been in progress since the 1970s. The Parchment Community Library in Parchment, Michigan has recorded 69 interviews with community members since 1974. Maintaining these oral histories has been a moving target due to technological shifts and changes. The Parchment Community Library’s oral histories have been transferred from records, cassettes, and films to MP3 files duplicated in the cloud and on USB drives. This case study highlights the short lifespan of oral history technologies which can cause the loss of these valuable records.<sup>7</sup>

The Parchment Community Library’s struggles with the rapid flux of information technology are not the only difficulties libraries face when handling oral histories. Librarians from the University of Alabama Huntsville and the University of Iowa, Reagan L. Grimsley and Susan C. Wynne, respectively, identified obstacles libraries need to overcome when making oral histories available.<sup>8</sup> These obstacles can include limited funding, lack of appropriate collaboration between oral historians and library staff, and preservation issues. Wynne also notes that cataloging slows the process of making oral histories accessible. Though there is an *Oral History Cataloging Manual*, oral history cataloging is not as standardized as other cataloging systems.<sup>9</sup> Privacy and sensitive information are also a concern. For example, oral history participants who provided narratives to Boston College’s Belfast Project were harmed when the U.S Department of State and the Police Service of Northern Ireland subpoenaed the oral histories of members



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of the Irish Socialist Republican Party and Ulster Defense Force.<sup>10</sup>

Even facing such issues, libraries and archives strive to collaborate and share their successes with others. The archives of Columbus State University (CSU) in Columbus, Georgia holds approximately 500 oral histories. Even with challenges – in funding, staffing, and providing access to multiple formats – CSU was able to make their oral histories discoverable through the library’s OPAC, eliminating the need for siloed searching. When they found that the OPAC was not sufficient, CSU provided records to OCLC and allowed users of the Digital Library of Georgia and the Alexander Street Press *In the First Person* collection to access CSU’s oral histories.<sup>11</sup> The Parchment Community Library, though challenged by ever-changing technologies, was able to continue recording new oral histories while also providing access to the oral histories through several streams, including a locally shared drive, circulating CDs, and a streaming service. With that success, they have also presented marketing and outreach advice surrounding the oral histories, such as creating a “greatest hits” compilation of quotes from interviews and connecting with businesses or persons mentioned in the histories.<sup>12</sup> Libraries have accepted the challenges of preserving and providing access to oral histories and succeed in making those oral histories more available to current and future researchers than could an individual oral historian. Libraries housing oral histories – or running their own oral history programs – allow oral histories to be valuable to many constituents including historians, community members, and others.

### Grinnell College’s Alumni Oral Histories

The existing literature on libraries and oral histories covers the history, techniques, and technological requirements of oral histories. It also highlights the successes and challenges inherent in managing oral histories. However, except for

a brief mention, the literature does not discuss *collaborations* between the oral history projects and libraries.<sup>13</sup> Since libraries are important contributors to oral history projects, it is meaningful to study library collaborations with these projects.

Examining the collaborative effort between Grinnell College’s DAR and its libraries is valuable for several reasons.<sup>14</sup> The partnership is unique. Often libraries collaborate with historians, anthropologists, or oral history projects; collaborating with a campus development office is less common. Most importantly, this oral history project did not position the library as just the recipient of a collection. Rather, the project has been an ongoing dialogue between DAR, who recruit and interview, and the libraries, who transcribe and process the collections. Each year, new processes suggested by both parties get incorporated into interviewing, transcribing, processing, and displaying for the project. Both units share the cost and labor associated with the Alumni Oral History Project, revealing one way in which campus units can share the cost of a collaborative project. This collaboration allowed the libraries to acquire a collection unique to Grinnell College, a series of oral histories sourced from the college’s alumni. These oral histories engage alumni and other interested parties in several ways, by interviewing alumni and then disseminating those interviews via one of the libraries’ web presences. Because of this collaboration, both DAR *and* the libraries can engage with former students and their families, fostering support among the alumni community for the college as well as for the libraries. The Alumni Oral Histories Project at Grinnell College serves as an interesting site of collaboration for study.

The Alumni Oral Histories Project did not begin as a collaborative initiative. It originated in DAR. In 2009, DAR began conducting interviews with former students. They capitalized on the annual alumni reunion, during which many



former students return to campus. According to Jayn Chaney, Director of Alumni and Donor Relations, DAR started their Alumni Oral Histories Project in order to collect a “compelling” and “fuller, more accurate depiction of Grinnell College’s history” and culture.<sup>15</sup> Current students employed by DAR interviewed alumni. It was an activity that engaged both alumni and current students, while also recording the history of the college from the perspectives of its former students. After starting in 2009, and interviewing alumni each year, DAR accumulated more than 200 oral histories by 2014.<sup>16</sup>

For several years, DAR held the oral histories without concrete plans for their preservation or for sharing them with the campus community and the public, though DAR’s goal during that time was to find a way to share these interviews with current students and alumni.<sup>17</sup> In the 2014-2015 academic year, DAR decided to work with a campus partner to make the oral histories discoverable by alumni across the globe. Since Special Collections and Archives was “the recognized set of curated materials which tell our institutional history. It felt appropriate to DAR that alumni stories should be preserved within that same infrastructure.”<sup>18</sup> The institutional repository, Digital Grinnell, held digital content from Special Collections and Archives and so adding the digital oral histories to Digital Grinnell made sense.

The libraries run the college’s institutional repository, Digital Grinnell, built on the Islandora platform. While Digital Grinnell had begun its life as a repository primarily meant for scholarship produced by the Grinnell College community, it seemed to strike a chord with alumni and other constituents.<sup>19</sup> So, Digital Grinnell began adding collections that were more varied than simply student and faculty scholarship. The Falconer Art Gallery, an early partner, began displaying images of its art on Digital Grinnell. The Poweshiek History Preservation Project emerged as a collaboration between the Grinnell

College libraries and the Drake Community Library as a way to showcase Poweshiek County history, which included the history of the town of Grinnell and historical figures important to the town and college. Grinnell College’s Special Collections and Archives began displaying their college-related materials via Digital Grinnell. Campus collections, such as the Geology and Ancient Coins collections, were also digitized and displayed. Thus, Digital Grinnell had already become a robust repository for many campus collections and a site of alumni engagement when DAR approached the libraries.

In their initial discussions, DAR and the libraries decided that the oral histories needed to be accessible to the public and determined that they would be displayed using the Islandora Oral Histories Solution Pack. The Solution Pack provides a content model to the base Islandora system for displaying timestamped text alongside audio as well as video content. The Oral Histories Solution Pack works with either XML transcripts or WebVTT transcripts.<sup>20</sup> The libraries decided to use XML transcripts.

Knowing how the oral histories would be disseminated was perhaps the least complicated piece of the process of collecting, transcribing, and making available the oral histories. The previously recorded histories needed to be transcribed or transformed into an XML format, and then ingested into Digital Grinnell. Other interviews were still being conducted, requiring that a process be developed, and at the same time serve as a site for collaboration.

### **A Collaborative Workflow**

The collaboration between the libraries and DAR on the Alumni Oral Histories Project, at first glance, can seem rather standard. The interviewers do the majority of the work at the beginning, and then they pass it off to the library for the final stages. However, a closer examination



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of the project's workflow reveals a more integrated approach, with the libraries taking a significant part in the oral history process.

The process originates with DAR, which runs the Alumni Oral Histories interviews each year during the college's reunion weekend. There is an open call for interviewees: all alumni in attendance can be interviewed and can choose to participate or not. Alumni are interviewed by current students, who are hired and funded by DAR and ask a standard set of questions about their decision to come to Grinnell and their experience on campus.<sup>21</sup>

The alumni are interviewed in a recording booth, with the student interviewer and an audio technician. At first, DAR set up the recording booth in a classroom building on campus.<sup>22</sup> When the classroom building became unavailable due to construction, the interviews moved to the Digital Liberal Arts Collaborative (DLAC)'s digital production studio, a space physically housed in the libraries.

During the early years of the project, DAR interviewed, hired, and supervised various students to manually transcribe the oral histories.<sup>23</sup> The Islandora Oral Histories Solution Pack had technical requirements for transcripts that did not fit the format in which DAR had originally transcribed the early oral histories.<sup>24</sup> The libraries also strive to make all online materials as accessible as possible. Simple PDF transcripts would meet the minimum requirements, but they would not be especially user-friendly or work with some of the Solution Pack's accessibility functions. The libraries developed an automated transcription process that was user-friendly, compliant with current accessibility regulations, and compatible with the Islandora Oral Histories Solution Pack. Thus, the libraries became an integral part of the transcription process.

The libraries oversaw the transcription process. The first step was to acquire a workstation for

both developing and running the transcription process. This was a Mac Mini with an Apple operating system which, while not the standard workstation on Grinnell College's campus, interfaces better with open source technologies like Islandora and the other software used for the Alumni Oral Histories Project. With the workstation available, the libraries took charge of the transcription process. Several librarians participated in various aspects of the project such as assuring appropriate metadata would be entered for each oral history and developing a process to make the oral histories accessible to users with hearing impairments. They began their transcriptions by using a tool called Transcriptinator. Developed by the Digital Scholarship Technology Librarian at Michigan State University, Megan Kudzia, Transcriptinator was developed to work in conjunction with the Islandora Oral Histories Solution Pack, which Grinnell College libraries was using. While this initially seemed like the right solution, Transcriptinator was not accurate enough for the workflow; the transcribers always had to perform massive cleanup. So, the libraries decided to try another software for transcribing.

Through contacting the developers for the Islandora Oral Histories Solution Pack and Transcriptinator, the libraries learned of a proprietary software, InqScribe, which aids in transcription and timestamping.<sup>25</sup> InqScribe is not designed specifically to work with Islandora or its oral histories Solution Pack, so the libraries transformed InqScribe's transcription into the XML format which Islandora Oral Histories Solution Pack uses by developing a Python 2 script with a graphical user interface (GUI).<sup>26</sup>

Student transcribers helped test and hammer out the transcription process. Grinnell College emphasizes experiential learning for its students, supporting "[v]aried forms of learning, in and out of the classroom" and "prepar[ing] students with critical career-readiness skills."<sup>27</sup>





Thus, many of the college's units and departments will hire students to do detailed and important work. The libraries are one of those departments. So, like DAR, the libraries hired student workers to transcribe the audio recordings collected during the alumni reunion. Even though the libraries had taken over the transcription process, DAR continued to collaborate. DAR continued to fund the student employees, while the Digital Library Applications Developer trained and supervised the transcribers.

DAR was also generous in their support for the peripherals and software required for the transcription, paying for the InqScribe license as well as the foot pedals, which are used to stop, start, rewind, and fast-forward the audio, leaving hands free for transcription cleanup. DAR's financial support along with the libraries' software development expertise enabled the transcription process to go from manual to semi-automatic and to produce transcriptions that worked with the Islandora Oral Histories Solution Pack in Digital Grinnell.

The transcription process was quicker and more efficient after DAR and the libraries collaborated. Still, there were challenges with some of the oral histories, due to the overly conversational behavior between interviewers and interviewees. Using input from the student transcribers, the libraries communicated with DAR about changing the interview process to create easier-to-transcribe and easier-to-understand interviews. These recommendations included naming the interviewer and the interviewee(s) at the beginning of the recording, so that the transcribers could more easily identify the speakers in the transcript. The libraries also recommended that the interviewers take notes on the names, places, and events that the alumni interviewees provided. If the names, events, or places were related to Grinnell College, additional information could be provided in the metadata; in the future, the libraries may use linked data to connect the oral histories to other collections in

the institutional repository. The libraries also recommended having the interviewees provide more historical and contextual information because the transcribers and users might not know the reference. Having the interviewee explain these references provided more associated data as well as helping the student workers more correctly transcribe the oral histories. Many of these suggestions might have seemed obvious to more experienced oral historians but for DAR, the libraries, and the student workers, the Alumni Oral Histories Project was their first experience doing oral history work. The libraries' feedback was crucial in producing better and easier-to-transcribe oral histories.

With the transcripts and recordings ready, the Alumni Oral Histories were described and given metadata. The libraries created descriptive metadata for each oral history, which allows discovery and enables the libraries to display the oral histories in order of class year in Digital Grinnell. A crucial part of the descriptive metadata is the abstract, which provides a brief explanation of the object and is used by screen readers to define it for visually impaired users. The Alumni Oral Histories, however, defied easy and brief explanations. Most of the oral histories covered multiple and disparate topics that could not be summarized in an abstract with the length restricted to one hundred words. Even the student transcribers, who were the most familiar with each individual interview, felt unable to provide an abstract. Instead, the libraries decided to pull an interesting and relevant quote from each interview to use as the abstract. The student transcribers would choose the quote, which was then added to a MODS extension field called "pull quote" that the libraries created.<sup>28</sup> The libraries have found that the pull quote serves as a "hook" for users, who find the quote interesting, want to hear more, and therefore decide to listen to the recording. The student transcribers were also tasked with finding images of the alumni interviewees, if possible.



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To find photographs of the alumni during their time as students, they would go to Special Collections and Archives, usually turning to year-books.

With the interview transcribed, the metadata created, and the corresponding images found, the oral histories are ready for ingest into Digital Grinnell. Ingesting the oral histories also uses specialized knowledge provided by the libraries. The libraries use the Islandora Multi-Importer to ingest objects. Standard objects in Islandora have only one content data stream, whereas the Alumni Oral Histories had at least two content data streams— the recording and the transcript. The Multi-Importer was originally built to only handle a single data stream, though subsequent versions are starting to allow for objects with multiple data streams. Also, when ingesting objects, the Islandora Multi-Importer will use the content model to determine which streams to ingest. One can create several derivative data streams for the recordings ingested; the Islandora Multi-Importer will prompt the person managing the ingest to decide which derivatives to use. Through trial and error, the libraries learned to ignore the prompt and let the Islandora Multi-Importer use the content model, without any further input from a human.

Once the oral history is ingested, the metadata librarian takes a final look to ensure the metadata is correct and displaying appropriately. Then, the libraries sends the oral histories to DAR for a final check. An alumni volunteer double checks the transcription and may provide additional information if needed. Once the alumni volunteer is finished, DAR approves the final product and the oral history is made public. The libraries host the Alumni Oral Histories online on Digital Grinnell, providing long-term preservation and access. On Digital Grinnell, the Alumni Oral Histories are available to anyone with an internet connection, allowing individuals on campus and alumni throughout the world

to access these oral histories. When Grinnell College's reunion weekend comes around each June, the collaborative process starts up again.

## Conclusion

The Alumni Oral Histories Project at Grinnell College allowed the libraries and the Office of Development and Alumni Relations to collaborate closely, while they both leveraged their expertise and resources in equally valuable ways. DAR collected the oral histories and provided funding for the transcription, while the libraries developed a transcription process and provided a platform on which to store and display the oral histories. Thus far, this collaboration has led to the creation, transcription, and ingestion of over 200 alumni oral histories, for viewing on Digital Grinnell. This collaboration has been successful because it meets the goals of both parties. DAR is able to connect with alumni and their families through the initial interview and then again once the oral histories come online. Family and friends can listen to their loved ones' voices and stories, in some cases even after the alumnus has passed on. These connections with alumni aid DAR in raising funds for the college. The Alumni Oral Histories collaboration has been equally successful for the libraries. Through this project, the libraries are able to continually acquire new materials on college history. Because the oral histories are displayed on the institutional repository, the libraries gain a new connection to alumni. The collaboration has allowed DAR and the libraries to become campus partners and to gain expertise in a form of scholarly inquiry, the oral history. Both parties have been able to fulfill Grinnell College's educational mission by providing experiential learning opportunities to students in the manner of interviewing as well as transcribing. This case study demonstrates how libraries can collaborate with administrative departments, in this case a development unit, on a large and important project. Such collaborations strengthen



ties between departments and also engage the wider campus and alumni communities.

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<sup>4</sup> Cullom Davis, Kathryn Back, and Kay MacLean, *Oral History: From Tape to Type* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1977).

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<sup>7</sup> Cal LaFountain, "Parchment Community Library: Digital oral histories and format's menacing eraser," *Computers in Libraries* 68, no. 6 (2018): 24.

<sup>8</sup> Reagan L. Grimsley and Susan C. Wynne, "Creating access to oral histories in academic libraries," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 16, no. 4 (2009): 278-299.

<sup>9</sup> Susan C. Wynne, "Cataloging oral histories: Creating MARC records for individual oral history interviews," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 47, no. 6 (2009): 567-582.

<sup>10</sup> Krista White, "Winding the gaps: Interprofessional communication and the stewardship of oral histories with sensitive information," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 43, (June 1, 2017): 354-363.

<sup>11</sup> Grimsley and Wynne, 291-293.

<sup>12</sup> LaFountain.

<sup>13</sup> Grimsley and Wynne, 278-299.

<sup>14</sup> For more information about Grinnell College's Office of Development and Alumni Relations (DAR), please see Grinnell College. "Office of Development and Alumni Relations," accessed November 5, 2018, <https://alumni.grinnell.edu/college-resources/dar>.

<sup>15</sup> Jayn Chaney, interview by Rebecca Ciota, December 13 & 17, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Mark McFate, interview by Rebecca Ciota, October 5, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Chaney.

<sup>18</sup> Chaney.

<sup>19</sup> "Digital Grinnell," Grinnell College Libraries. <http://digital.grinnell.edu/>. For more infor-



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<sup>20</sup> McFate.

<sup>21</sup> Marcus Barnes, Nat Kanthan, and Megan Kudzia, *Oral Histories Solution Pack*, Github Repository, accessed November 6, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Chaney; Grinnell College. "*Grinnell College Oral History Project Procedures*."

<sup>23</sup> Stacey Puls, personal communication email with Rebecca Ciota, January 2, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Chaney.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on the Islandora Oral Histories Solution Pack, see: Barnes et al. Inquir-

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<sup>26</sup> Mark McFate, "Transform\_inqscribe\_to\_ioh." GitHub, accessed December 7, 2018, [https://github.com/DigitalGrinnell/Transform\\_InqScribe\\_to\\_IOH](https://github.com/DigitalGrinnell/Transform_InqScribe_to_IOH).

<sup>27</sup> Grinnell College, "Mission and Values," accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.grinnell.edu/about/at-a-glance/mission>. Mark Peltz, "Special Campus Memo: Improving Student Experiential Learning," Grinnell College, accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.grinnell.edu/news/special-campus-memo-improving-student-experiential-learning>.

<sup>28</sup> McFate.

