

## Memorandum

To: Professor Geraldo Gonzalez  
Dean of Graduate Studies and  
Professor Kathy Hayden  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

From: Jill Watts, Professor of History  
On Behalf of the Faculty, Department of History

Date: September 4, 2012

RE: MOU Regarding Oral History and IRB

The Memorandum of Understanding is to document the Department of History's agreement with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at California State University, San Marcos. While the oversight of oral history projects by universities in the United States is currently a debated issue given the specific nature of the oral history method, the CSUSM History Department agrees that such reviews as conducted at our institution, provide an important service to both our researchers and their interviewees. We understand the importance of bringing our projects to the board for review. The faculty of the department appreciate the board's willingness to work within the requirements that are mandated by our field and outlined by the Oral History Association (<http://www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/principles-and-practices/>).

### **Particulars of the Oral History Method**

Oral History is defined as the collection of memories and knowledge of the past, usually by film or voice recording, from eyewitnesses to history. The goal of oral history is to seek and record information from the past for use in historical studies. Historians regard oral history as one of many sources that can be used to interpret and understand the past. Oral history methods prohibit interviewers from any kind of manipulation of the interviewee and restrict interviewers to asking open-ended questions, allowing the interviewee to dictate the direction of the interview and share only the information they are willing to share. Since gathering of oral history is strictly informational and functions like any other historical source, it is important that information gathered from interviewees be identifiable so that other scholars may verify it. Thus within the historical field, it is necessary that interviewees:

1. Always be identified; there is no confidentiality. The field of history does not recognize or regard as valid information gathered from anonymous sources.

2. Always be fully informed of the nature of the research project and the goals of an interview. Interviews must be scheduled in advance.
3. Always be asked before the interview to sign a consent form. Oral historians always assure that interviewees understand their rights fully.
4. Be permitted to add information to their interview beyond questions prepared in advance by the interviewer. This allows the interviewee to share what they feel is important but also permits interviewees to take the interview into unanticipated yet fruitful directions.
5. Have their interview recorded either by audio or video.
6. Be provided with a copy of their interview and the resultant research project.
7. Understand that their interview will be archived in an institutional depository. (Note: The department has had discussions with the library regarding archiving future interviews. In the past, they have been archived in the department but the library is now willing to accept them.)
8. Receive proper acknowledgement for their contributions.

### **Institutional Review Board Compliance**

Oral History projects that the department will pursue will fall under three categories described by the IRB (<http://www.csusm.edu/gsr/irb/faqs.html> ). We understand that these projects will be subjected to different types of review in relationship to their goals and topics. These categories and appropriate review statuses are:

1. Archival projects which simply collect data without intent to synthesize results. Normally, such projects would be rare in that the purpose of oral history is to gather information for use in research. However, some historical projects do have the goal of collecting oral history only for the purpose of preserving them. These projects, as we understand, would not be subjected to review.
2. Recording of memories for use in research. We understand that the majority of oral history projects will fall under the category of "Expedited Review" defined on the CSUSM IRB website as "collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes." These projects would represent what is defined as "no more than minimal risk." However we understand that the IRB will recognize our field's standards, which require that interviewees be identified.
3. We also recognize that there may be some oral history projects may be carried out "involving sensitive topics and/or vulnerable populations." In these cases, we understand that the IRB will subject the project to full review.
4. While oral history does involve some risks, the literature on oral history methodology indicates that benefits far outweigh the risks and that with most projects the risks are very minimal. The major benefits accrued from participating

in an oral history project are best described by Patricia Leavy in her book, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford, 2011). In discussing oral history methodology, she writes, “oftentimes, educational benefits and feelings of empowerment will be experienced hand and hand . . . Sometimes the experience of empowerment results from having an opportunity to share personal experiences and perspectives and thereby, in a sense, have one’s experiences and knowledge validated.” (Leavy, 83) Leavy notes that most participants reveal a great sense of pride and accomplishment in participating in an oral history project.

In general the risks encountered by oral historians are low and infrequent. The standard practice is to address these in the pre-interview phase of collecting the oral history. We outline here the normal risks and safeguards that are practiced to minimize and address these risks:

1. **Risk:** Loss of time in participating in the pre-interview, interview, and reviewing the subsequent interview results. **Safeguard:** This is safeguarded at the pre-interview stage when the interviewer informs the interviewee of the expected length of participation in the project. Prospective interviewees may decline to participate.
2. **Risk:** The divulgence of information that is embarrassing and/or could result in legal action. **Safeguard:** This is safeguarded in the pre-interview when interviewee is informed of the conditions of consent and the public nature of the interview. The interviewee is fully informed of the topic of the project and that the historian is seeking to collect information about the past. The interviewee is clearly told that they will be allowed to stop the interview while in progress if they find that they do not want to continue to provide information. While normally the questions that will be posed for the interview are not supplied before the interview, the general areas of inquiry are made clear. An interviewee may decline to answer any question. It is important to note that in oral history, the interviewer’s role is to act as a “listener” and facilitator of storytelling. The interviewer does not correct or contradict the interviewee and encourages the interviewee to relate their historical memories from their perspective.
3. **Risk:** Emotional distress resulting from interview questions or difficult memories. (This is a more serious risk, although since oral historians avoid collecting information from emotionally distressed or unstable individuals because such information may not be reliable, it happens less frequently. The purpose of oral history is not to study generalizable emotional states, but to gather specific and individual information about the past.) **Safeguard:** The safeguard in the instance where an interviewee becomes distraught is to follow the safeguards described in #2 directly above (underscore in the pre-interview the public nature of the interview, fully inform the interviewee of the topic under investigation, and make them aware that the interview may be stopped at their will at any point and/or that they may decline to answer any question.) Oral history interviewees are really the authors of their interview and they decide whether or not the interview should recommence

- or end. Additionally, interviewers will have on hand a list of resources that can be shared with interviewees that exhibit distress during interviews.
4. **Risk:** Interviewing populations unable to give personal consent. **Safeguard:** Oral historians normally do not interview populations that are unable to supply consent because they are regarded as unsuitable informants of historical information. In the rare cases where this is necessary, such as I projects involving interviewing children or adults with cognitive disabilities, consent must be obtained from parent or guardian or legal conservator.
  5. **Risk:** Loss or theft of interview during process of collecting interviews for project. **Safeguard:** Normally, with IRB projects outside of oral history this is a concern since the informant identity is normally confidential. However, since oral histories are public, this is not an issue. However, it is important the original documentation and the original interview either on tape or on video be safeguarded from loss. This is prevented by storing original materials in a locked cabinet available in the History Department and/or faculty office. While materials are being processed, individuals involved in an oral history project and the interviewers make certain all raw audio and video materials are never left unattended in a public place and, when not stored in a locked cabinet, secured in a briefcase, backpack, or portfolio.

## **Departmental Protocol**

The Department of History has developed an internal protocol to insure that oral history practitioners are properly trained and assessed in regards to their understanding of both the IRB requirements and oral history methods. All faculty and students who will conduct oral history projects will follow the outlined approval process:

Department approval:

1. File an Oral History project description with the Department Chair or designee.
2. Obtain Oral History Certification from the department. This will be done in the following ways.
  - Faculty members may submit a memorandum stating their qualifications for oral history research. This may be formal training, training gained through research/teaching activities, and/or certification from another institution or body. All faculty members using oral history will be required to sign a statement acknowledging that they have read, understand, and will practice the oral history protocols outlined by the Oral History Association.
  - Students may petition for certification by either demonstrating that they have received training in one of their courses and/or completing an assessment assignment demonstrating their knowledge of the oral history method and protocols outlined by the Oral History Association. All students using oral history will be required to sign a statement acknowledging that

they have read, understand, and will practice the oral history protocols outlined by the Oral History Association.

After receiving departmental approval, then those practicing Oral History will proceed to seek IRB review through the appropriate processes outlined on the IRB website. (<http://www.csusm.edu/gsr/irb/index.html>)

### **Conclusion**

We appreciate the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research and the Institutional Review Board supportiveness as we have worked toward outlining a protocol that will satisfy both the requirements of our field as well as the IRB guidelines. We earnestly hope that this MOU reflects a common understanding that will encourage and enrich oral history research at CSUSM.