The Hidden History of Women at OSU (HC 407)

Tiah Edmundson-Morton & Chris Petersen

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Women have been fundamental to OSU’s story since it was founded in 1868, but their achievements, struggles, and day-to-day experiences are often omitted from mainstream accounts of the university’s history.
Class Introduction

Our class uncovers the pieces of this rich but hidden narrative, focusing on the themes and individuals who have shaped the academic and social milieu for women at OSU for more than 150 years.

Students contribute to the historical record by conducting an oral history interview with a woman connected with OSU, describing and indexing the interview, and making it available on a web portal.

We take a combined approach to instruction, using lectures, historic images, film clips, discussion, and document analysis.
Class Goals

- Increase appreciation for OSU as a place
- Increase/complicate understanding of OSU’s history
- Build historical empathy for past women’s experiences
- Provide students opportunity to contribute to the historical record
- Bolster the historical record related to women at OSU
- Help students build interviewing skills and increase self-confidence
- Reflect on ethics of sharing a story, particularly in the digital age
- Provide students with the opportunity to get to know one another
Class History

Motivated by an interest in doing something to connect with the OSU 150 sesquicentennial and to talk about oral history.

After HC Learning Community experience, narrowed focus to women’s history at OSU.
Class History (Continued)

- Taught each winter term 2018 - 2021
- Class size has varied: 7 the first year, 4 the second year, 10 the third and fourth years.
- Always pass/no pass: we want them to focus on learning and engaging with the materials and doing their project without worrying about points.
- Gender breakdown: has always been heavily female class, but in 2021 had two male students.
Class History (Continued)

- First year there were more theory readings; evolved to shorter, OSU-specific readings.
- Students now turn in weekly writing before class; enables us to direct conversation based on their observations and facilitate student participation in discussion.
- Non-history readings that have stuck around:
  - Brittany Backen paper on Marriageability at OSC -- a student paper that used oral history as a primary research method
  - (Sir) Alistair Thomson’s article on memory and remembering
  - Oral History Association best practices
  - Nunn Center (University of Kentucky) best practices
Themes of Our Class

- The built environment for women
- Rules for women/in loco parentis
- The impact of Title IX
- The history of the Women and Gender Center, and women as activists on campus

- Academic spaces for women, especially Home Economics and Secretarial Science.
  - In recent years, this has expanded to include librarianship and Food Science.
Historical Resources We Use

- Student handbooks
- Etiquette primers
- Alumni magazine articles and other OSU publications
- Scrapbooks
- Memoirs, both published and unpublished
- Formal institutional reports and pamphlets
- Historic films and audio clips
- Oral history interview transcripts, abstracts and bio sketches
- Alumni group newsletters
Class Activities

- Discussion of thematic readings
- Practice interviews with one another
- Spotlights on pioneering women in OSU history
- Training on how to use recording equipment
- Discussion and reflection on interviewing ethics
- Write a haiku summarizing an oral history interview.

A student from 2020 listened to an interview (conducted by a student in 2018) with a female veterinarian and OSU alum from Southern Oregon.

As a little girl
I never thought possible
The things I do now
Class Activities (Continued)

- Picture time with Chris (most weeks) and historic film clips
- Research and preparation for a group interview with guest narrators
- Discussion and reflection on oral history issues: e.g. talking to women about gender and the value of video vs. audio recording
- Training on indexing an interview in the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer and how to write an interview abstract and biographical sketch
“Throughout my experience in this class and conducting an interview as an interviewer as well as a narrator, my appreciation for the art of oral history interviews has grown exponentially. At the beginning of the term, I could see why oral history interviews were useful in the long term, but didn’t quite understand the meaning it gave to people’s words.”
Outcomes for Students

“I now have a deeper appreciation for the fact that I am an HC student at OSU who is also queer and also non-binary and also Mexican-American. It is impossible to separate these various identities as they are all intertwined in who I am and I respond to things. I think oral history interviews really highlight the fact that everyone’s identity is intersectional. Not just one aspect contributes to how you respond to any given situation, but instead it is the culmination of all of you.”
Outcomes for Students

“Overall, I think that this class really taught me how to ‘drive the boat.’ I learned how to contact someone, set up a Zoom, and execute the meeting with a plan that I had to formulate. Of course I had so much help and reference material, but this really pushed to work on some of those more interpersonal and leadership skills.”
Outcomes for Students

“Overall the lessons I gained from this class and my interview were invaluable. As a freshman I didn’t feel connected to this university; however, as a result of taking this class I have learned so much about this institution as well as the influential women that have shaped Oregon State University into what it is today. During the majority of this class, I was campaigning for ASOSU Senate so reading a myriad of articles about amazing women at Oregon State was very inspiring and uplifting and was what I needed during the stressful campaign season. This class was a pivotal moment in my college career and I hope I can positively contribute to this university just as the women we studied accomplished.”
Outcomes for Instructors

● 2018 article: "Fostering Historical Empathy in Unusual Times: A Case Study of the Course 'OSU, Women and Oral History: An Exploration of 150 Years,'" in Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources, Society of American Archivists.
● Two HC thesis projects
● Honors College Course of the Year (2020)
● Women's Words, Women's Work digital exhibit
● Voices of OSU Women digital exhibit
Teaching / Learning Over Zoom: Pros

- Recording added flexibility (extra mini lecture when we ran long)
- No worries about snow day cancellations
- Chat was helpful
- More comfortable for some people; less distraction from one’s own physical body or crowded classroom spaces
- Shared Google docs worked well
- Covid-19 group interviews were really cool
  - Pets!
Teaching and Learning Over Zoom: Cons

- Chris’s family had to stay offline every Wednesday morning
- Some students had problems with their connections
- Needed to make sure that everyone was going to the right meeting
- Hard to “read the room” as far as understanding of concepts or points of confusion
- Communications regarding assignments was more difficult
  - In the past wrote on the board and went over things in detail
  - Tried the same in the online space and had more problems
- *Pets!*