The Carolina Story Virtual Museum is an online museum of university history produced by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Launched in 2006, it has continued to grow in content over the past seven years, but has not undergone any major redesign. This paper is intended to explore the history and purpose of the site as well as the possibilities for its future. The study, which includes a survey of potential users and interviews with current users of the Virtual Museum, provides a better understanding of how the site is used and illuminates areas of concern in terms of organization, navigation, visual design, and content.
TELLING THE CAROLINA STORY: AN ASSESSMENT OF UNC’S VIRTUAL MUSEUM OF UNIVERSITY HISTORY

by
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Approved by

_______________________________________
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I. The Origins of the Carolina Story Virtual Museum

On October 12, 2006, University of North Carolina Chancellor James Moeser announced the launching of the Carolina Story Virtual Museum (museum.unc.edu)—an online museum of UNC history. It was University Day, an annual celebration of the University’s founding, and the year that the University celebrated the 250th birthday of its founder, William Richardson Davie. But perhaps most relevantly, it was also two years after controversy had forced the University to reflect on its complicated past and seek out ways to better document its history.

At the center of the controversy was the Cornelia Phillips Spencer Bell Award, an award established in 1994 to recognize the contributions of women to the University. The award’s namesake, Cornelia Phillips Spencer, was a 19th century supporter of the University, education activist, and local journalist who famously rang the South Building bell in celebration of the re-opening of the University in 1874. However, she was also a white supremacist who opposed suffrage for blacks and women and fiercely protested Reconstruction reforms. In February 2004, citing this side of Spencer’s legacy, a group of campus and local leaders called on Chancellor Moeser to retire the award and facilitate a campus-wide discussion of “the true history of Cornelia Phillips Spencer and the implications of giving an award to honor women in her name.”1  Over the following
months, a committee was formed to lead the campus in discussion, and several campus
events—including a symposium sponsored by the committee—were held. By the end of
the year, Moeser retired the award. In 2006, the Bell Award was replaced by the Awards
for the Advancement of Women, awarded to three women each year.

The discussion highlighted the need for more thorough and more public
documentation of the University’s history—documentation that would focus not only on
the accomplishments of the University but also recognize the shameful injustices in its
past. At the launch of the Carolina Story Virtual Museum on University Day (October
12), 2006, Dr. Harry Watson—a UNC history professor and the director of the Center for
the Study of the American South who was instrumental in the development of the Virtual
Museum—explained this aspect of the project’s mission:

…Silence implies a cover-up or a denial of the truth, and the university must
always side with truth. … past injuries can never begin to heal unless victims and
perpetrators come together and try to create a common public memory of what
happened, based on full disclosure and acknowledgement of the facts, without
exaggeration or dismissal on any side. Absent that reckoning, injuries fester and
never heal, leaving us all crippled and less able to move forward.2

The project was a move toward healing, but it was also a defensive public relations move
on the part of the University. In a November 2006 article in the Chronicle of Higher
Education, Watson explained, "We want to lay out the story so no one would accuse us
of covering up or not telling the truth."

But in his speech at the launch of the Museum, Watson also explained that the
Virtual Museum was not intended just to address the difficult aspects of the University’s

1 Yonni Chapman, “Call for a Moratorium and Dialogue on the Bell Award,” 24 February
2 Harry Watson. Speech delivered at the release of the Virtual Museum of UNC History.
history, but also “to tell all aspects of [the UNC] story, the proud moments and the painful ones, and those that are simply fun to know, so that the great body of university experience, which has done so much to shape our contemporary experience at Carolina, will be available to everyone.” Among the first exhibits released in the Virtual Museum were “Davie and the University’s Founding,” “Women in the Early Years,” “Slavery and the University,” and “Architectural Highlights of Carolina’s Historic Campus.”

The Virtual Museum was not just a reaction to local concerns; it was part of an international trend in university history. Fien Danniau, Ruben Mantels, and Cristophe Verbruggen explain:

> From the 1970s onwards, university history managed to transform itself into a historical subdiscipline with a scientific approach and an autonomous historical interest. The one-sided institutional approach made way for an integrated history of the ‘academic life,’ which pays attention to all aspects of the university, including social and cultural features, and which is eager to seek for comparative and transnational perspectives instead of focusing on the own institution. That is, an integrated history willing to explore new themes such as transnational networks of universities, university architecture, gender and the university, city life, laboratory life and so on. At the same time, the universities themselves discovered public relations, which again reshaped the commemoration component of university history. Armchair books with lots of nice pictures replaced the previous dense and detailed studies. To university communicators, university history became a matter of highlights, to be told in a fashionable way.³

The Carolina Story Virtual Museum was intended to present an “integrated history” rather than a “one-sided institutional approach,” and covers many of the topics listed above. In some ways, it is also representative of the trend toward the public relations approach to university history. Part of its mission is to explore and shape institutional identity and to project that identity publicly. A departure from the tomes written about the

university’s history in the first half of the 20th century (e.g. Kemp Plummer Battle’s two-volume *History of the University of North Carolina* and Louis Round Wilson’s *The University of North Carolina, 1900-1930*), the Virtual Museum does, like the “coffee table books” mentioned above, present university history through images and short, easy to digest paragraphs. However, a major difference is that the Virtual Museum is explicitly intended *not* to focus on just the “highlights,” but also the many problematic and disturbing aspects of the university’s history.

Today, there are thirty exhibits in the Virtual Museum, on topics ranging from “American Indians and Chapel Hill” to “Carolina Athletics.” The structure and design of the Museum has remained the same since its launch in 2006. Visitors select an exhibit topic from the Exhibits page (museum.unc.edu/exhibits), and then click “Enter the Exhibit” to start with the first slide of the selected exhibit. They may also select a specific slide within the exhibit from a table of contents. From an individual slide, the visitor may click “Previous” or “Next” to navigate within the exhibit, or “Up” to return to the table of contents. The entire Virtual Museum is also keyword-searchable, so a user looking for information on a particular person, building, or event can identify relevant slides without navigating exhibits.
Figure 1: Carolina Story Virtual Museum Exhibits page

Figure 2: Exhibit table of contents

Figure 3: An individual slide within an exhibit
The Virtual Museum is a rich and valuable history resource with the potential to
serve a variety of audiences on campus, throughout the state, and beyond. Between
October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013 the site received 42,432 unique visitors.\textsuperscript{4}
Visitors viewed an average of 3.10 pages each, and the top pages on the site were the
campus map (14,766 unique pageviews), the Exhibits page (4,160 unique pageviews), the
“Frequently Asked Questions” page (4,479 unique pageviews), and the timeline (1,749
unique pageviews).\textsuperscript{5}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page of the Carolina Story</th>
<th>Unique pageviews, October 1, 2012 – September 30, 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campus map (<a href="http://museum.unc.edu/campusmap">http://museum.unc.edu/campusmap</a>)</td>
<td>14,766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits list (<a href="http://museum.unc.edu/exhibits">http://museum.unc.edu/exhibits</a>)</td>
<td>4,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently asked questions (<a href="http://museum.unc.edu/faq">http://museum.unc.edu/faq</a>)</td>
<td>4,479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline (<a href="http://museum.unc.edu/timeline">http://museum.unc.edu/timeline</a>)</td>
<td>1,749</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: The four top-viewed pages on the Virtual Museum site (by unique pageviews).\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{5} “Audience Overview” and “Pages,” Google Analytics Report for the Carolina Story Virtual Museum, October 10, 2013.
II. Virtual Museums: Opportunities and Limitations

Cultural heritage institutions are increasingly turning to online virtual exhibits—defined by Schubert Foo as “online Web-based hyper-textual dynamic collections devoted to a specific theme, topic, concept or idea”—to broaden the reach of their collections.7 Werner Schweibenz explains that to create online virtual exhibits—and virtual museums of such exhibits—is to “build a digital extension of the museum on the Internet, a museum without walls.”8 He says that a virtual museum is a logically related collection of digital objects composed in a variety of media which, because of its capacity to provide connectedness and various points of access, lends itself to transcending traditional methods of communicating and interacting with visitors.9

The opportunities presented by virtual museums are rooted in their transcendence of the limitations of physical institutions. Exhibits that are hosted online are not bound by time, distance or space—anyone with an Internet connection may access them regardless of the time of day or their distance from the host institution. Online, institutions can present more exhibits at one time and include more items from their collections than is feasible in a physical space. For educators, the documents and artifacts featured in the exhibit can easily be brought into the classroom, unlike materials displayed in physical exhibits.10

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9 Ibid., 3.
Online exhibits are typically much less costly to prepare than physical exhibits, and can be maintained much longer. There is no need to dismantle and re-build exhibits, and exhibit developers can make changes or additions to existing exhibits relatively easily.\(^\text{11}\) Fragile items can be spared the strain of physical exhibition by being digitized and displayed online instead.\(^\text{12}\) By presenting exhibits to a global audience online, institutions can promote their collections and demonstrate their continuing relevance. This can raise the profile of cultural heritage institutions and result in increased funding, new opportunities for collaboration, and greater public awareness and support.\(^\text{13}\)

What is perhaps most exciting, however—both for users and institutions—is the flexibility of online exhibits. Visitors come to an exhibit with very different informational needs, levels of interest, and technical abilities. Online exhibits can allow for multiple experiences or views, accommodating a variety of users.\(^\text{14}\) Users’ experiences in virtual museums are largely self-directed, and their paths through an online space may be linear or circuitous—or perhaps direct and short, if the user is looking for a specific fact or image. While visitors to a physical exhibit are often passive consumers of the information, items, and images before them, visitors to an online exhibit must be active participants in the experience, making choices about where and when to click that determine their individual path. Some institutions may include interactive, collaborative elements, allowing visitors to comment on, tag, or share exhibit content. This increased engagement with objects can help to reinforce the knowledge that visitors

\(^{11}\) Khoon and Ramaiah, 9.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{13}\) Peter Lester, “Is the Virtual Exhibition the Natural Successor to the Physical?,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 27:1 (2006): 86; Foo, 23.
\(^{14}\) Khoon and Ramaiah, 9; Foo, 23; Lester, 95.
gain from exhibits, helping to maximize the educational impact of the institution and its collections.\textsuperscript{15}

Virtual museums also allow for the presentation of parallel, intersecting, and contradictory narratives. By linking together multiple perspectives, this kind of complex storytelling can give voice to those whose stories have been silenced in favor of privileged narratives. This “polyphonic version of history” can provide visitors with a richer understanding of history by allowing them to view events from a variety of perspectives.\textsuperscript{16}

Considering the many opportunities presented by the virtual museum medium, the intentions of the Carolina Story Virtual Museum, and the challenge of making the Virtual Museum a more widely-used, relevant, and meaningful resource, I have investigated the ways the Virtual Museum is used and the expectations its target users have for online history resources. I have suggested areas in which the Museum can increase its flexibility and functionality to better serve the needs of its users.

\textsuperscript{16} Danniau, Mantels, and Verbruggen, 190.
III. Methodology and Results

A challenge of this study was that I hoped to better understand not just current users of the site, but also potential users—those who would be likely to encounter and interact with the site in the future. However, I also wanted to gather specific information about current users’ experiences with the site. With this in mind, I collected data in two ways—through a survey targeted at those most likely to interact with the site (“potential users”) and individual interviews with known current users. The survey focused on general opinions about online history resource and university history, while the interviews focused on users’ experiences with the Carolina Story Virtual Museum specifically.

The Survey

The survey, administered through Qualtrics, was open to anyone but was sent via e-mail to groups thought to fit within the site’s main audiences—UNC-affiliated individuals and those with an interest in history. I sent the survey to the email lists of the following groups: master’s students in the School of Information and Library Science at UNC, the University History Council, the Order of the Bell Tower (a student group for the promotion of university history and traditions), the History Club, the UNC chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (a history honor society), and Students Engaging in Oral History (SEOH).
The 11-question survey aimed to assess participants’ level of interest in history, their information needs in regard to university history specifically, and their expectations of an online exhibit or museum experience. It consisted of the following questions:

1. Which of the following best describes you?
   - Current UNC Chapel Hill undergraduate student
   - Current UNC Chapel Hill graduate student
   - Current student -- other university or college
   - UNC Chapel Hill faculty member
   - UNC Chapel Hill staff member
   - Faculty or staff -- other university or college
   - UNC Chapel Hill alumnus/alumnae
   - None of the above

2. Please rate the following statements according to the provided scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Only a little</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy reading online about historical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>events, places, and people.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am interested in the history of UNC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapel Hill.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. In the past 6 months, about how many times have you looked up information related to the history of UNC Chapel Hill?

   - 0 times
   - 1-5 times
   - 5-10 times
   - 10 times or more
4. For what reasons did you seek information related to the history of UNC Chapel Hill? Select all answers that are applicable.

☐ Curiosity about an aspect of the University's history
☐ Academic research (as a student for an assignment or presentation)
☐ Work-related research (as a staff or faculty member for a presentation, lecture, tour, project, publication, etc.)
☐ Research for a campus organization or event
☐ General interest in UNC Chapel Hill
☐ Research on universities as a prospective student
☐ Other (please specify): ______________________

5. Please rank the following features of an online history source in order of importance to you—1 being most important, and 8 being least important. (Click and drag the items to reorder them.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual attractiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of information (accuracy, thoroughness, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease with which one can find something specific/ease of searching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease with which one can browse interesting information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to share content via social media or email</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary source materials (i.e., documents, images, video and or audio from the time period being discussed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio and video features</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed citations and suggestions for further reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. On the webpage below, where would you click if you were interested in finding information about slavery in the history of the University of North Carolina? (Click on the image as you would on a live webpage.)
Demographics of Respondents

The survey garnered 109 total responses, though not all respondents answered every question. All respondents were affiliated with UNC Chapel Hill. Seventy percent were current graduate students, 15% were current undergraduate students, 8% were staff, 2% were faculty, and 6% were alumni. It is possible that some who identified themselves as alumni are also faculty or staff members and vice versa. It is also possible that some who identified as graduate or undergraduate students are also employed by the university as student workers.
Respondents’ Interest in UNC History

Overall, the survey respondents reported a high level of interest in reading online about historical topics—only 15 respondents out of 105 (14%) reported enjoying that activity “only a little” or “not at all.” Ninety reported enjoying it “somewhat” or “very” much (39 and 50 respondents, respectively).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Only a little</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% respondents</td>
<td>2.86%</td>
<td>11.43%</td>
<td>37.14%</td>
<td>48.57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Responses to survey question 2.

Overall, the survey respondents were less interested in UNC history specifically. Forty-one respondents (40%) reported that they were interested in UNC history “only a little” or “not at all.” Sixty-four (61%) reported being “somewhat” or “very” interested (42 and 22 respondents, respectively). However, all but 23 respondents (of the 106 who responded to this follow-up question) reported having looked up information about UNC history at least once in the last six months. Sixty respondents (57%) reported having looked up information related to UNC history 1-5 times in the past 6 months, while 13 (12%) reported having done so 5-10 times. Ten respondents (9%) reported having done so 10 or more times. Of these 10 respondents, five were graduate students, three were staff members, one was a faculty member, and one was an undergraduate student. One of the graduate students in this category reported in the open comment section that she/he is also a student worker in Wilson Special Collections Library. It is likely that this is true of some of the other students who reported frequently looking up information about UNC history.
Of the 83 respondents who reported having looked up information related to UNC history in the last six months, 80 answered the follow-up question asking for the reasons they sought such information. Seventy-four percent reported seeking information out of curiosity about an aspect of University history, 43% for work-related research (faculty and staff), 38% out of general interest in UNC, 24% for academic research (students), 11% for a campus organization or event, 4% for research as a prospective student, and 3% other. The two “other” reasons specified were to inform visiting relatives and to find facts for “an argument with a friend who is a UVA fan.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“For what reasons did you seek information related to the history of UNC Chapel Hill? Select all answers that are applicable.”</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity about an aspect of the University’s history</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic research (as a student for an assignment or presentation)</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-related research (as a faculty or staff member for a presentation, lecture, tour, project, publication, etc.)</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research for a campus organization or event</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General interest in UNC Chapel Hill</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on universities as a prospective student</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Responses to survey question 4.

Respondents’ Priorities for Online History Resources

The respondents were asked to rank eight features of online history sources in order of importance, one being most important and eight least important. The features were ranked thusly:

1. Quality of information (accuracy, thoroughness, etc.)
2. Ease with which one can find something specific/ease of searching
3. Ease with which one can browse interesting information
4. Primary source materials (i.e. documents, images, video and/or audio from the
time period being discussed)
5. Visual attractiveness
6. Detailed citations and suggestions for further reading
7. Audio and video features
8. Ability to share content via social media or email

While citations and further reading ranked sixth in importance, respondents’ suggested rankings for this feature varied widely. The differences in ranking for this feature, however, did not seem correlated to the respondents’ status, frequency of seeking UNC history information, or reasons for seeking such information. One respondent who ranked citations and further reading as most important (number 1) commented that as someone who works at a UNC special collections reference desk, it is frustrating that some of UNC’s online history resources, including the Virtual Museum, do not have very specific citations. The respondent said:

…if a researcher finds something they would be interested in investigating further, there is no way to pin it down to an individual folder, box, or even a collection. This is very frustrating for both the librarian and the researcher, who then has to wait until the item can be traced before they can access it.

Another respondent commented that she or he considered detailed citations part of the overall quality of the information—not as a separate aspect of the resource.

**Respondents’ Navigation of the Virtual Museum Home Page**

The respondents were presented with a screenshot of the Virtual Museum home page (museum.unc.edu), and were asked where they would click if they were looking for
information about slavery in the history of the University. Information related to slavery can be found in several of the Museum’s exhibits, and can be accessed either through a keyword search or by clicking through to the Exhibits page and selecting a relevant exhibit. Of the 96 respondents who completed the exercise, 32 (34%) clicked on one of two entry points to the Exhibits page—14 clicked on the “Exhibits” link in the menu on the left, and 18 clicked on the “Enter the Exhibits” link in the center of the page. Twenty-one percent of respondents clicked on the link to a resource outside of the Virtual Museum, “The First Century of the First State University” collection from *Documenting the American South*. Nineteen percent of respondents clicked on the search input box to search the site by keyword, and 11% clicked on images in the banner. Seven percent clicked on the “Further Reading” link in the menu, 4% clicked on the “Timeline” link, and 4% clicked on other, undefined areas of the page.

**The Interviews**

I interviewed six current users of the Virtual Museum, five of whom are members of the University History Council. I sought out users of the site through the University History Council listserv, asking if members were willing to discuss their experiences with the site or if they knew of other users whom I could interview. I arranged interviews with users representing a wide variety of use contexts—a student who uses the site as part of club activities and classes; faculty members who use it in academic research and teaching; University library staff members who rely on it to answer reference questions, fact-check other resources, and locate primary sources; and UNC staff who use the site in the development of University communications. Through these interviews, I hoped to
gain a better understanding of the different contexts in which the Virtual Museum is used, the ways that users typically navigate the site, and users’ understandings of the site’s purpose. It was important to collect this data from current users in order to determine what functions of the site are most important to preserve and what functions could benefit from redesign.

The interviews took between 15 and 40 minutes each. In the first half of each interview, I talked with the interviewee about his or her experiences as a user of the Virtual Museum, then moved into a discussion of his or her thoughts about the purpose and future of the site. I asked each interviewee the following questions:

**User Experience**

- *How many times do you estimate you have accessed the Virtual Museum?* \(^{17}\)

- *For what reasons you have used the Virtual Museum?*

- *Which statement describes your primary method of navigating the Virtual Museum?*
  - I click on an exhibit and browse through the slides in order.
  - I click on an exhibit, then click on the slide titles that interest me.
  - I search the Museum by keyword and click on the most relevant search result.
  - Other pattern of navigation

- *For your purposes, is it more important to be able to browse information by theme, or to be able to search for and retrieve specific information?*

- *Based on your experiences, how would you describe the Virtual Museum in terms of:*
  - Organization
  - Ease of navigation
  - Attractiveness of design/aesthetics
  - Quality of information

\(^{17}\) For very frequent users, I altered this question to “how many times in an average month” or “how many times in an average week.”
• Are there other online history resources that you use for similar purposes?

**The Mission and Future of the Virtual Museum**

• What do you see as the primary mission(s) of the Virtual Museum?

• If the Museum were to be updated or redesigned sometime in the next few years, what do you think should be the top priorities? (Things that must stay the same? Things that should change?)

• Challenges that you anticipate in updating the site?

**Interviewees’ Use of the Virtual Museum**

All interviewees indicated that the Virtual Museum is a useful and important resource. When asked to name purposes of the Museum, interviewees identified the following: to promote discussion of University identity, to provide access to accurate information to the public, to establish the University’s historical presence, to provide access to campus history and culture, and to “acknowledge the unsavory” aspects of UNC history.

The frequency of use reported by those interviewed ranged from 2-4 times a year to multiple times a day. Two interviewees reported that their use of the site occurred in “bursts” as they used it in preparation for specific projects.\(^\text{18}\) Interviewees reported using the Virtual Museum for academic research; research for University communications; teaching; providing reference help; and planning exhibits, tours, and events. Two interviewees described the Museum as a “starting point” for research, providing “background information” and directing users to more in-depth sources.\(^\text{19}\) Four described

\(^\text{18}\) Interviews B and F.

\(^\text{19}\) Interviews A and E.
it as a source of “quick facts” like names and dates.\textsuperscript{20} One interviewee noted, however, that despite sometimes functioning as a quick reference source, the site is “a museum, not an encyclopedia.”\textsuperscript{21} Another interviewee who uses the site for quick reference said he “didn’t use it like a Museum,” and felt that made him an atypical user of the site.\textsuperscript{22} Two interviewees also reported using the site to find specific images, particularly digitized images of primary source documents.\textsuperscript{23} While five interviewees focused on using the site for work purposes, one interviewee noted that he found it “fun to look through” and spent time looking at exhibits out of general curiosity and desire to gain more background knowledge about the University’s history.\textsuperscript{24}

**Navigation**

Interviewees reported varying navigation strategies when using the site. Three reported that they most frequently choose an exhibit from the Exhibits page and browse through it from beginning to end in order, whether they are looking for specific information or a general overview of a topic.\textsuperscript{25} Two interviewees reported that they frequently choose an exhibit from the Exhibits page, then select the most relevant slide from the table of contents.\textsuperscript{26} Four interviewees, including the two who reported using the table of contents, also reported frequent use of keyword searching—both using the

\textsuperscript{20} Interviews B, C, D, and E.
\textsuperscript{21} Interview C.
\textsuperscript{22} Interview B.
\textsuperscript{23} Interviews A and E.
\textsuperscript{24} Interview A.
\textsuperscript{25} Interviews A, D, and F.
\textsuperscript{26} Interviews B and E.
Virtual Museum’s internal keyword search feature and using Google searches to navigate to a relevant exhibit slide within the Museum.27

Interviewees were generally satisfied with the navigability of the site, though as frequent users, two expressed the feeling that they were too “used to” the site to evaluate its navigability.28 Two noted that navigation from the Exhibits page onward was easy, but that navigating from the home page might be more difficult.29 One said that a new user arriving at the home page might not be sure where to look for the information he or she seeks.30 One interviewee suggested that a more dynamic way of moving through exhibits might improve the navigation experience, saying that the current navigation scheme (i.e., the “previous slide” and “next slide” links) “gets the job done but isn’t fun in the way that I think going to a museum can be.”31

Two interviewees suggested that thorough cross-referencing between overlapping exhibit slides would make for easier navigation.32 Many exhibits include slides featuring the same historical figure, campus landmark, or event, but in different contexts. This can make it difficult for a user to know which exhibit will include the information he or she is looking for. Two interviewees also suggested that the exhibits should allow for more parallel and intersecting narratives and perspectives—for example, juxtaposing first-person narratives by individuals with different perspectives on the same era or event at the University.33

27 Interviews B, C, D, and E.
28 Interviews B and E.
29 Interviews A and B.
30 Interview B.
31 Interview A.
32 Interviews A and D.
33 Interviews C and D.
Organization and Visual Design

Overall, the users interviewed were pleased with the organization of the site, but pointed out a few areas of concern. Two noted that the exhibits are not listed in a logical order on the Exhibits page—they are listed in order of their creation, which may not be helpful for many users.\(^{34}\) Two interviewees also suggested that the exhibits being in a “long list” on the Exhibits page could be overwhelming or uninviting.\(^{35}\) Visitors to the site have to scroll down to see all the exhibits, and might miss exhibits that are lower on the page. One interviewee suggested that instead of a long list, a more “map-like” design would be more inviting.\(^{36}\) Two others suggested grouping the exhibits somehow, perhaps by theme, in order to break up the list.\(^{37}\)

Interviewees described the visual design of the site as “looking a little dated” and “kind of plain.”\(^{38}\) Some suggested that it could be “more inviting,” and “more visually appealing.”\(^{39}\) Overall, interviewees seemed to agree that the visual design of the site was not a distraction or deterrent to users, but it “could use a refresher.”\(^{40}\)

Content

In general, the interviewees agreed that the Museum is intended to provide only brief overviews of topics rather than in-depth explorations. One interviewee did suggest,

\(^{34}\) Interviews C and D.
\(^{35}\) Interviews D and F.
\(^{36}\) Interview D.
\(^{37}\) Interviews C and F.
\(^{38}\) Interviews A, B, and C.
\(^{39}\) Interviews C and F.
\(^{40}\) Interview E.
however, that some earlier exhibits might be revised to include more information.41 All six agreed that the brevity of the exhibit text is a strength of the Museum—one interviewee compared the shortness of the exhibit slides to “a good tour” that provides enough information but does not wear visitors out.42

Two interviewees suggested that the Museum would benefit from more thorough citations, which would make it easier for library staff members and other users to locate images and documents featured in the Museum in UNC collections.43 Three interviewees said that more links to external sources (e.g., the more in-depth online exhibits produced by the University library, Documenting the American South, and DigitalNC) would improve the research value of the site.44 One interviewee also suggested that more links to Wilson Library web pages and guidance on how to use UNC’s special collections would be helpful to users hoping to dig deeper into topics featured in the Museum.45

Three suggested broadening the scope of the Museum to include more contemporary history (1950-present) and one suggested including exhibits on the many professional schools on the UNC Chapel Hill campus.46 One interviewee noted that it could be difficult to include very recent history due to the politics involved. 47

41 Interview B.
42 Interview F.
43 Interviews A and E.
44 Interviews C, D, and F.
45 Interview F.
46 Interviews A, C and D.
47 Interview D.
IV. Conclusions

The results of the survey and the input of those interviewed provide insight into the needs of both current and potential users and allow us to identify aspects of the site that are of greatest concern. These aspects fall into three categories: organization and navigation, visual design, and content.

Organization and Navigation

The data suggests that changes to the site’s organization and navigation should be high priorities in an update of the site. Particular areas of concern highlighted by the survey and interview results are the Exhibits page and the need for cross-referencing between related exhibit slides.

The Exhibits Page

Three interviewees commented on the organization of the Exhibits page, pointing out that the long list of exhibits, ordered by the date of addition to the site, could be daunting to users. This organization displays the great number and variety of exhibits included in the Virtual Museum, but users often must scroll and scan through a long list to find the exhibits that interest them. This is especially relevant considering that five out of six interviewees reported that they frequently start their search for information from the Exhibits page, and that survey respondents, on average, ranked browsability the third
most important aspect of an online history resource (behind only quality of information and searchability).

**Cross-Referencing**

Two interviewees noted the problem of overlapping slides—slides in different exhibits both addressing the same topic, but in a different context. These slides are currently disconnected from each other, and one interviewee explained that when looking for a fact about a specific person who is covered in multiple exhibits it can be difficult to decide which exhibit will have the information he seeks. Using the Museum’s internal keyword search feature will bring up all slides on a specific topic, but requires the user to open each link separately and pulls slides out of their context within exhibits. Cross-reference links between slides would allow users to navigate between all slides on a given topic whether they approach exhibits from the Exhibits page or through a keyword search. Another possibility is to create central, unified slides for these topics that can be linked to from multiple exhibits. This, however, could limit the Museum’s ability to present multiple narratives, encouraging exhibit creators to instead settle on one “official story” on each person, place, or event featured in the exhibit.

**Visual Design**

On average, survey respondents ranked “visual design” as the fifth most important aspect of an online history resource (out of eight aspects listed). It ranked above the ability to share resources via social media and email (eighth), audio and visual features (seventh), and even thorough citations and recommended reading (sixth). On average,

48 Interviews A and D.
49 Interview D.
respondents ranked visual design as less important than aspects related to content quality and accessibility (accuracy/thoroughness, searchability, browsability, and inclusion of primary sources). One survey respondent commented that “many sources contain good information but suffer from outdated presentation,” presaging the comments made by interviewees about the Virtual Museum appearing outdated in comparison to more recent university websites and needing a visual “refresher.”

**Images as Entry Points to Exhibits**

The survey and interview results also suggest that users connect strongly with visual images. In the part of the survey in which respondents were presented with a screenshot of the Virtual Museum home page and asked to click where they would click if looking for information about slavery and the University, 11% of respondents clicked on the images in the homepage banner. These are not links, but given the image-heavy design of many newer website, these users likely expected that clicking on an image would take them to information related to that image. (As the exercise asked them to consider where they would look for information related to slavery, many of those who clicked on banner images clicked on the image of Wilson Caldwell, a man born into slavery at the University.) This, along with the wide range of places clicked in the screenshot exercise and interviewees’ concerns about whether new users would readily know how to find the main content of the site from the home page, suggests that it would benefit users to have entry points to exhibit content on the home page, rather than just links to the Exhibits page. Perhaps this could be done by featuring images from exhibits

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50 Interviews A, B, C, and E.
on the home page, linked to their respective exhibits, or by linking to the Museum’s newest exhibits on the home page.

Content

The survey and interview results also highlight ways that the content of the Virtual Museum might be improved to better serve users.

Incorporation of Multiple Narratives

Related to the issue of overlapping slides and the need for cross references is the issue of incorporating multiple voices and narratives—whether parallel, intersecting, or contradictory—as part of the “Carolina Story.” While Harry Watson spoke of creating a “common public memory” of events in UNC history, that common memory must not necessarily be a singular, linear, and “official” version of the University’s story. Two interviewees emphasized the importance of including more perspectives.51

As a flexible online space, the Virtual Museum has a great opportunity to present the University’s history in a complex, rich way—putting a variety of voices from throughout UNC’s past and present in conversation with one another, presenting a collection of intersecting and sometimes competing stories that together, make up the “Carolina Story.”

51 Interviews C and D.
Citations and Links to External Resources

While “citations and further reading” was, on average, ranked only sixth in importance by survey respondents, two interviewees expressed concern that the Virtual Museum did not have thorough enough citations.\(^52\) Three interviewees suggested that the site would benefit from more links to external, in-depth resources.\(^53\) This is especially important for frequent users of the Virtual Museum—those who work in a reference or research capacity for the University. More thorough citations also demonstrate to users that the information contained in exhibits is well-researched and accurate, bolstering the trustworthiness of the Museum as a resource. Both citations and links to more in-depth resources could help users to continue their research beyond the overview provided by the Museum.

Multimedia

Survey respondents, on average, ranked audio and video features near the bottom of the list in terms of importance—seventh out of eight. However, they ranked primary sources, including audio and video, much higher—fourth most important out of eight. One interviewee mentioned the importance of including resources other than visual images in the Museum.\(^54\) While this data does not suggest that including more audio and video materials in exhibits is a high priority, the addition of more primary source audio and video from UNC’s collections could certainly enrich exhibits, making them livelier and more engaging.

\(^{52}\) Interviews A and E.
\(^{53}\) Interviews C, D, and F.
\(^{54}\) Interview C.
Limitations and Future Research

The data collected in this study provide insight into the expectations and needs of current and potential users of the Virtual Museum, and allow us to draw some conclusions about how the site might be improved. However, the study is not representative of all current and potential users of the site. The survey was sent to campus groups specifically chosen for their interest in history, information resources, or UNC, meaning that many of the site’s potential users—especially those not affiliated with UNC—were not included. Future research could focus on the use of online university history resources by those unaffiliated with the university.

Likewise, not all types of current users of the site were represented in the study—those interviewed were identified through the University History Council and referrals, resulting in a sample that included more faculty and staff than students and more frequent users of the site than infrequent users. It would be useful to conduct an assessment focused on identifying current users and better understanding the make-up of the site’s user population. Future research could also focus more on the needs of student users and those who use the site infrequently and casually (i.e., to satisfy curiosity rather than to complete an academic or work assignment).

The Future of the Virtual Museum

The Carolina Story Virtual Museum is an invaluable resource with great potential for growth. As an online resource, it provides opportunities to share the University’s complex history in creative, lively ways to a global audience. It serves as a starting point for research and a quick reference resource, promotes transparency regarding the
shameful aspects of the University’s history, encourages exploration of institutional identity, and establishes the University as a historical space. It is a project worth cultivating, and one worth investing effort and resources into.

Any update or redesign of the Museum should make the space inviting, easily navigable, and useful for new and infrequent users, but without interrupting the work of current, frequent users. With the data collected through this study, it has been possible to identify several areas of concern for both these constituencies, which can provide guidance as the University History Council considers the future of the Virtual Museum.
Bibliography


