Supporting Preservation of Veteran Personal Archives: Development & Use of the Virtual Footlocker Project Curricula

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Introduction

For generations, soldiers documented their wartime experiences in personal diaries, photographs, and correspondence. Often veterans kept these treasured personal collections long after their service and handed them down to family members, with some eventually donated to archives and museums. These personal military service accounts are vital to humanize wartime sacrifices and experiences. The contemporary 21st-century soldier no longer creates and maintains the same analog personal archives because of the shift towards digital technologies over the past twenty years, thereby creating a critical future gap in the record [1].

The Virtual Footlocker Project (VFP) is an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant-funded project whose primary goal is to support active-duty military and veterans in preserving their personal military records [2]. Based on in-depth focus groups, the VFP developed a set of curricula providing veterans with the tools and training needed to identify important records, organize, store, and preserve their collections. Contemporary veterans utilize a broader array of platforms to document their time in service, incorporating both analog and digital worlds. As such, the VFP curricula support both analog and digital materials.

This poster focuses on the digital preservation aspect of the curricula design and implementation. The poster will present the key issues and challenges of personal military records, best practices for working with military members, and the adaptability of the curriculum for broader personal digital archival training and outreach projects.

Curricular Development

The VFP team conducted 22 focus groups with 99 members of the different branches of the U.S. military who served during the past 15 years. Open coding analysis of the focus group findings identified 14 major headings and 225 sub-headings with over 3,000 unique codes. The data included concerns over preserving both analog and digital objects, privacy, storage, record loss, and other concerns. The VFP team utilized the findings to create two sets of online curricula—one for active-duty military and veterans and the second for archivists and other cultural heritage workers who wish to work with veterans.

The curricula each include four individual modules that can be completed entirely online or implemented in an in-person workshop format with a combination of audiovisual and textual content. In addition to the provided content, each module includes opportunities for participants to apply their knowledge through applied exercises.

The veteran's curriculum includes the following modules: (1) Introduction to the preservation of personal military records; (2) Organization & storage of personal military records; (3) Preservation of analog and digital personal military records; and (4) Additional resources and donation of personal military records.

The archivist's curriculum includes the following modules: (1) Introduction to personal military records; (2) Working with active-duty military and veterans; (3) VFP Curriculum for active-duty military and veterans; and (4) Creating and implementing outreach projects

Learning Objectives

Military

1. Plan for the storage & preservation of their personal military records.
2. Prioritize & select items for long-term preservation.
3. Apply basic strategies & practices for organization, storage, & preservation.
4. Locate additional related resources & potential donor institutions.

Cultural Heritage

1. Discuss the key issues & challenges of personal military records.
2. Implement best practices for working with military members.
3. Deliver the VFP curriculum for the military.
4. Design & implement participatory projects with military members.

Curricula Timeline

Active Duty & Veteran Focus Groups
22 Focus Groups with a total of 99 participants in 2020.

Data Analysis
Identified 14 major themes with additional 225 sub-themes in data.

Curricula Design
Utilize backward design to create two curricula for online & in-person delivery.

Curricula Creation
Create content for each module with combination of text & audiovisual elements. Include knowledge check-in points & activities.

Website Building (September)
Upload curricula to website & run user tests with small groups.

Launch Curricula (October)
Launch curricula on website & begin offering in-person & zoom-based workshops.

Digital Preservation in VFP Curricula

While the focus group data indicated veteran records include both analog and digital materials, the participants indicated significant concerns with preserving the latter. Storing digital materials remains a significant challenge for most veterans, with many noting they retained old hard drives, cell phones, and other storage devices without the ability to access the data due to missing passwords, lack of proper hardware, and other issues. Additional challenges included cloud-storage companies going out of business, social media account hacking, and privacy concerns over potentially classified information.

The VFP curricula address these concerns by introducing fundamental digital preservation approaches throughout all four modules. This includes, but is not limited to: digital storage challenges, local and cloud-based storage options, format migration, file naming conventions, IPTC social media testing, best practices for digitizing analog material, downloading and archiving email, app-based chats, and social media accounts, and locating additional resources or professional assistance.

Outreach & Adaptability

As noted earlier, participants may complete the VFP curricula entirely online; however, a series of in-person workshops with each curriculum will be offered in 2023. Additionally, the veteran curriculum is provided as a downloadable package with PowerPoint decks, scripts, video files, PDF handouts and worksheets, and sample exercise files. The archivist's curriculum also includes a module focused on adapting the veteran's curriculum for outreach and community-based projects utilizing the example of an event supporting the digitization of service members' paper-based records. The poster presents workflows for using the veteran's curriculum in the example community event.

Although the VFP curricula remain focused on supporting military members, elements of both curricula can be easily adapted for use with non-military audiences interested in personal digital archiving. In addition to the curricula, the VFP provides access to the transcripts from all of its focus groups for future use in other projects.

References

[1] E. Benoit, III, "Digital V-Mail & the 21st century soldier: preliminary findings from the Virtual Footlocker Project," *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2017, pp.17-31.
[2] https://www.virtualfootlocker.com/

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