

News

# Chicago organization brings oral histories of African-Americans to colleges



Dionti Davis, assistant to the executive director at The HistoryMakers, a Chicago organization that collects oral histories of African-Americans, is seen in their office on South Michigan Avenue in Chicago on April 7, 2016. The HistoryMakers is launching a subscription service for universities to access their archives. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

By **Dawn Rhodes · Contact Reporter**  
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**T**he HistoryMakers, a Chicago non-profit organization that collects oral histories of African-Americans, is opening its digital archive to 10 major universities throughout the country, company leaders announced Friday.

The catalog of video interviews featuring people in art, law, politics, sports and other fields will be offered to universities through subscriptions, allowing schools to make the archives available through their library systems. Students and professors will be able to access the materials from their campuses as they conduct academic research.

Northwestern University, University of Chicago, Boston University, [Harvard University](#), [Yale University](#), [Princeton University](#), Howard University, Emory University, Carnegie Mellon University and [Cornell University](#) all have signed up for the service.

Librarians and historians said this expansion will help increase institutional knowledge about black history, as well as incorporate stories and contributions of African-Americans into broader historical narratives.

"We hope that what people learn is how much more inclusive they have to be when they start studying these subjects," said Sarah Pritchard, dean of libraries at Northwestern. "They have to include a much wider range than they might have previously been aware of, and we have the tools now to do that."

Julieanna Richardson launched The HistoryMakers from her South Loop office in 1999. From the first rounds of interviews in 2000,

Richardson and her staff have built an inventory of about 2,700 on-camera interviews, totaling 9,000 hours of footage. Those tapes gradually are being digitized, creating a higher-tech, searchable database for educators and students.

Richardson is partnering with her alma mater, Brandeis University, to upgrade The HistoryMakers video archives.

University subscribers will be able to access raw interview footage as well as biographies and transcripts, making it easier to scan the oral histories for particular topics.

The schools began their subscriptions in 2016, agreeing to between one- and seven-year terms, Richardson said. Richardson's staff also provides some training as part of the service.

"We really believe that we're at a very exciting place for the unlocking of these stories that have not been heard," Richardson said. "We also believe that we will be the leaders in unlocking other lost American stories."

Oral histories are a frequent feature in higher education. Some prominent examples include the Southern Oral History Program at [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#), the [Columbia Center for Oral History](#) at Columbia University in New York and the Oral History Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

Annie Valk, president of the Oral History Association, said the discipline helps fill voids left by conventional tellings of history.

"Typically, the kinds of materials collected by archives have favored the experiences and the perspectives of the powerful: people who are notable, literate and whose accomplishments are seen as historically important," Valk said. "Oral history is a way to give insight into the experiences and the perspectives of other populations. It also provides insight into social history, everyday experiences that may not be represented in other kinds of sources. As people say, it is a way to study 'history from the ground up.'"

Libraries frequently partner with outside organizations to adopt primary-source materials into their collections, according to James Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association. Indeed, library directors said one attractive feature of The HistoryMakers collaboration was to tap into information their institutions ordinarily would not have had the time to create or gather.

Marilyn Dunn, executive director at the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, said The HistoryMakers subscription will enable students and professors to explore materials focusing on black women.

"We want to make certain that we are documenting the widest possible swath of experiences of American women in the country," Dunn said. "I don't think anyone can any longer write without acknowledging or can do much research without acknowledging the intersection of race, class and gender."

Experts said oral histories make a versatile research tool because they feature people in different disciplines discussing a variety of topics.

"Everything has a history," said Grossman of the American Historical Association. "No matter what someone is interested in — music, biology, chemistry — they can know it better and do it better if they understand the context in which they're doing the work that they're doing."

HistoryMakers also is working with Yale, Harvard and Emory to start a fellowship for minority archivists. The fellows will have their master's degree in library science and will be placed at one of the institutions for an intensive training program. Yale and Harvard each will offer a one-year position and Emory will offer a two-year fellowship, all starting in the fall.

Richardson said bringing more minorities into this field of expertise is an important factor in helping an institution build its acquisitions.

"All of this fits together," Richardson said. "You need to have an inside view of the community. People, when they're collecting, they want to give to (someplace) where they feel they'll be treated well."

Richardson said she wants to bring on dozens of universities as she and her staff continue to add to their stock of oral histories. Grossman said one outcome of popularizing these stories could be that blacks receive more recognition for their specific accomplishments, rather than for simply being a minority.

"Is Harold Washington important as a mayor of Chicago because he restored the city's bond rating and brought back fiscal stability, or because he was the first black mayor?" Grossman asked. "The first one of those things gets lost. You have all of these people in these interviews in just about every discipline one could imagine and it doesn't matter whether they're black or white. They are important to their discipline."

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