Introduction

Karlyn Forner

It’s one thing—I’m thinking from the university or institutional perspective—to consult with community people or movement veterans or activists. It’s another thing to have them actually participating in it in an equitable way on ownership and decision-making and content.

—Charlie Cobb, SNCC veteran

There were times when this project slowed down because [the SNCC veterans] did not respond quickly enough. Because [the university partners] would do nothing until we said what we had to say, commented on it, directed it, do whatever we had to do. When they said scholar activists, they mean that in the fullest sense of the word.

—Judy Richardson, SNCC veteran

What makes this unique is not just the relationships with each other but the telling the history from the inside out and bottom up. We all know that it is not the norm.

—Courtland Cox, SNCC veteran

While there exists a rich body of literature about public history and shared authority, this chapter does not cite it. Instead, the collaboration between SNCC veterans, scholars, and archivists grew out of lived experience, as well as a collective willingness to try something and see it through. As Naomi Nelson, director of Duke University’s Rubenstein Library, explained, “the ‘literature’ we consulted was not formal historiography, but the
lived history of the Movement, the transfer of informational wealth from community organizers, and the hard-earned insight of the movement veterans.” The experiences of the movement veterans, scholars of grassroots organizing, and archivists committed to accountability framed the collaboration and guided the project through the challenges and opportunities along the way.¹

In 2013 the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Legacy Project, the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University (CDS), and Duke University Libraries (DUL) formed a partnership to chronicle SNCC’s historic struggles for voting rights and to develop ongoing programs that could contribute to a more civil and inclusive democracy in the 21st century.

During the 1960s, SNCC (pronounced “snick”) became the cutting edge of the direct-action Civil Rights Movement, focusing on both political freedom and equal economic opportunity. SNCC was the only national, Southern-based civil rights organization begun and led primarily by young people. Its full-time student workers, “field secretaries,” worked with local Black communities to help them organize and take control of their own lives. As SNCC activist and SNCC Legacy Project (SLP) member, Charlie Cobb, explained:

At a deeper level than the immediate political concern with voter registration, SNCC’s work was also about cultivating new local leadership and reinforcing existing local leadership. SNCC field secretaries did not see themselves as community leaders but as community organizers, a distinction that empowered local participants by reinforcing the idea at the heart of SNCC’s work in every project that “local people” could and should take control of their own lives.

Movement veterans formed the SNCC Legacy Project in 2010 to preserve the history of SNCC’s grassroots organizing work and to assist today’s educators, activists, and students in ongoing struggles for self-determination, justice, and democracy. Three years later, SLP formed a partnership with Duke University that brought together SNCC veterans, noted civil rights scholars, library professionals, and students in a multi-faceted, multi-year project that sought to change the normative story of the Civil Rights Movement. The people sitting
at the table shared a common vision. They wanted to tell the story of SNCC’s organizing from the bottom up and inside out—exploring SNCC’s thinking and how their work at the grassroots affected how people organized to change history—and to make SNCC materials more widely accessible to students, teachers, activists, and citizens. “At the first meeting, we didn’t even know where it could lead and what it could be, but there was that willingness and that interest and the trust,” SNCC veteran Jennifer Lawson explained.

The collaboration’s pilot website, *One Person, One Vote: The Legacy of SNCC and the Fight for Voting Rights*, launched in March 2015, and thanks to support from a three-year grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the project partners were able to expand that work into the *SNCC Digital Gateway* website (snccdigital.org).

The *SNCC Digital Gateway* tells the story of how young activists in SNCC united with local people in the Deep South to build a grassroots movement for change. It unveils the inner workings and thinking of SNCC as an
organization by examining how it coordinated sit-ins and Freedom Schools, voter registration and economic cooperatives, and anti-draft protests and international solidarity struggles. Profiles highlight individuals’ contributions to the Movement; a timeline traces the evolution of SNCC’s organizing; “Inside SNCC” pages delve into SNCC’s internal organization; and a map highlights important sites of organizing.

Figure 1.2: Contemporary and veteran activists in conversation at the “Arts and Culture in the Movement” breakout session at the closing events of the SNCC Digital Gateway project at North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina, March 24, 2018. Photograph by Kim Johnson. Courtesy of the SNCC Digital Gateway Project.

During all phases of the project, SNCC partners have been central in shaping the telling of SNCC’s story. They have worked collaboratively with historians of the Movement, archivists, project staff, and students to weave together grassroots stories and primary source material and create new multimedia productions that illuminate this history for new generations. The perspectives of the activists are front and center throughout the website. In the “Our Voices” section (snccdigital.org/our-voices), veteran activists explain important themes and ideas from SNCC’s history in their own voices. The “Today” section (snccdigital.org/today) then ties this history to the present,
featuring contemporary activists’ reflections on how SNCC’s organizing informs their struggles today.

Beyond telling history from the inside out and the bottom up, the SNCC Legacy Project and Duke also sought to create a replicable model for partnerships between activists and scholars. Collaborations between activists and universities have a long, fraught history. “For SNCC, it’s not unusual for people to misuse what we have done for purposes that go in another direction,” SNCC veteran and SLP president Courtland Cox explained. A pattern of exploitive relationships with elite white institutions and scholars had created deep distrust among SNCC veterans.

To make their efforts transparent and of potential use to others, partners from SLP and Duke set out to formally document what made their collaboration between activists and the academy work. What follows is a working paper collaboratively written by sixteen partners of the SNCC Digital Gateway project. It lays out what project partners found to be the essential components for a successful partnership, one that’s built on equitable relationships, mutual respect, trust, and a common vision. Copies of this working paper, as well as the longer unabridged version, can be found in the “Resources” section of the SNCC Digital Gateway website.

Figure 1.3: SNCC Digital Gateway logo. Courtesy of the SNCC Digital Gateway Project.
Building Partnerships Between Activists & the Academy

This working paper was collaboratively written by the partners of the SNCC Digital Gateway project, including: Geri Augusto (SLP), Molly Bragg (DUL), Bill Chafe (CDS), Charles Cobb (SLP), Courtland Cox (SLP), Emilye Crosby (SUNY Geneseo), Kaley Deal (project coordinator), Karlyn Forner (project manager), John Gartell (DUL), Wesley Hogan (CDS), Hasan Kwame Jeffries (The Ohio State University), Jennifer Lawson (SLP), Naomi Nelson (DUL), Judy Richardson (SLP), Will Sexton (DUL), and Timothy Tyson (CDS)

Project Partners

It’s possible, with the right people and the right place, to make things happen that otherwise cannot happen.
—Bill Chafe, founder of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

Activist Partners

Are organized.

The SNCC Legacy Project was established in 2010, following the 50th anniversary conference celebrating SNCC’s founding. Within six months, the organization had a governing board, its own 501(c)(3) status, and the support of a significant number of SNCC veterans. Its mission was to preserve the history of SNCC’s work and to assist today’s scholars, activists, and organizers in continuing the struggle for human and civil rights. The SLP’s 501(c)(3) status gave it an institutional equivalency in the partnership with Duke University Libraries and the Center for Documentary Studies. SLP had established ways to solicit feedback from SNCC veterans and could make decisions as an organization. As a legal entity, SLP could enter into agreements with the university, own copyright, etc.
Have a clear purpose but are flexible on the means.

It was essential that the SNCC Legacy Project was clear and united regarding the purpose of and vision for the project. One of SLP’s major objectives was to create new works to interpret and provide fresh perspectives on SNCC’s ideas and experiences for a twenty-first century audience. Before entering into a partnership with Duke, the SLP Board had developed proposals for different ways to tell SNCC’s history from the perspective of the activists themselves and how to pass their “informational wealth” on to subsequent generations. They brought this prior work into partnership with Duke. While SLP was clear on vision, they were also flexible about the means of carrying it out and embraced new opportunities that presented themselves throughout the course of the project.

Have strong relationships around which to marshal support.

Many movement veterans distrusted scholars. Too many, they felt, had failed to include the perspectives of the activists and gotten the story of the Movement wrong. Elite universities also had a long history of exploitive relationships with activists. “There was a lot of suspicion among members of our [SLP] Board about Duke and this relationship and questions of ownership and all of this,” SNCC veteran Charlie Cobb explained. The SLP partners who were working with Duke needed to demonstrate to their board members, as well as the broader community of SNCC veterans, how the collaboration would be equitable and would get a more authentic telling of SNCC’s story to a wider audience. SLP partners drew on the strong relationships that had developed within SNCC to marshal support as well as to diligently represent the interests of SNCC veterans throughout the collaboration. These efforts became easier as the project produced tangible work that won the approval of SNCC veterans.
University Partners

Have a history of valuing the stories of everyday people.

Beginning in the 1970s, the Duke Oral History Program had trained a generation of scholars that valued the voices of ordinary people and pushed the boundaries of what kinds of stories could be told. Over four decades, it produced forty-five Ph.D.s. Nearly thirty of their dissertations on grassroots activism were published, and eighteen of these won national book prizes, helping to change, significantly, the way historians write about the Civil Rights Movement. The program’s commitment to everyday people in many ways paralleled SNCC’s approach to grassroots organizing. Over time, its success created leverage and support in the university, which eventually led to the founding of the Center for Documentary Studies in 1989. By the time the SNCC Legacy Project approached scholars and librarians at Duke about a partnership, there was a strong base of people and institutions committed to local movement studies, as well as a favorable environment within the university for a project of this kind.

Have institutional will.

The SNCC Legacy Project found institutional will within Duke University in the form of people who were willing to commit to the project. Support
from Naomi Nelson, the director of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library; Wesley Hogan, the director of the Center for Documentary Studies; and William Chafe, founder of the Duke Oral History Program and the Center for Documentary Studies, and a former dean of Duke’s Trinity College of Arts & Sciences, was essential in getting the project off the ground. They believed in the vision of the project, but more important, they were willing to put in the time and energy to bring that vision to fruition. Working together, they secured funds for the initial project and mobilized resources within their respective institutions, which was possible because the project aligned with the university’s mission and programmatic goals.

Are flexible.

By entering into the collaboration with activists, university partners demonstrated an openness to nontraditional ways of working and creating knowledge. Two concepts common to the library and academic world—objectivity and efficiency—had to take a back seat in the partnership. Content produced for the website met rigorous citation standards, but it told history from the point of view of those who created it. The premise was that the input and insights of the activists were absolutely essential to getting the story right. University partners needed to accept that working in an equitable relationship with activists sometimes required more work and lengthy, ongoing, small-“d” democratic conversations. University partners at Duke were also flexible in the day-to-day work and committed to finding a way when potential roadblocks emerged. They were willing to restructure the project as they learned by doing, to bring in new collaborators as opportunities arose, and to undertake simultaneous but distinct projects to further the broader vision of the collaboration.

Shared Mission, Shared Values

There is a common set of values that the activists and the academics shared in this project that helped make it work.

—Hasan Kwame Jeffries, historian at The Ohio State University
Part of the reason that the SNCC Digital Gateway was able to succeed was because project partners were committed to a common mission and held shared values. The veteran activists, archivists, scholars, and project staff were uniformly committed to telling SNCC’s and the Movement’s history from the bottom up and what they came to call “inside out”—that is, scholarship directed and created by those who lived it. Although there were disagreements about how to best implement this, there was never a question about what the primary purpose of the collaboration was and how the history needed to be framed.

Scholars whose work had earned the respect of the activists brought project partners together around a shared vision.

The civil rights scholars on the project were essential in forging the collaboration. Historians Emilye Crosby, Wesley Hogan, and Hasan Kwame Jeffries had a demonstrable track record of academic-and activist-approved scholarship. They had built trusting relationships with activists over the years. Throughout the collaboration, they mobilized this earned respect to bring the activist and university partners together around a shared vision.

SNCC’s history of organizing—taking ideas, putting them into action, and finding solutions—infused the day-to-day work of the SNCC Digital Gateway project. A shared belief in the importance of the project pushed project partners to engage, problem-solve, persist, and make things happen. In many ways, this approach paralleled how SNCC approached its work in the 1960s. SNCC veteran Courtland Cox explained:

When you think about SNCC at its essence, it was always trying to develop new ways and new methodologies of solving problems, and that’s what it was. Whether you’re talking about the Freedom Schools or whether you’re talking about the MFDP [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party], or things that didn’t exist, we created it. And as I keep telling people, the basis of genius is what? Making sh*t up. So that’s what we did.
Beyond holding a shared vision, project partners could take ideas and put them into action, and project staff could follow through and get the work done.

As a group, project partners were willing to problem-solve and figure out ways to make things happen. People were “prepared to think about whether there are ways to get around the problems, even if they’re outside of common practice,” as historian Emilye Crosby explained. This openness to thinking about things in new ways and trying new approaches was essential to the project’s success. The project regularly encountered new challenges and opportunities that weren’t anticipated, but project partners and staff were able to adapt the project based on experience and need, solving problems and responding with flexibility. The project adapted and evolved organically over its four years. The final SNCC Digital Gateway website holds true to the vision laid out in the original proposal, but nearly all the specifics have been reimagined and refashioned to fit the shifting circumstances and new ideas the project encountered along the way.

An Equal Partnership

The early and unwavering commitment by partners at Duke University to having movement veterans participate in an equitable manner in all aspects of the project was essential to the collaboration’s success. At the project’s first meeting, the SNCC Legacy Project, Duke University Libraries, and the Center for Documentary Studies agreed that movement veterans were to be equitable partners in terms of ownership, decision-making, and content. This commitment was made real in a number of ways:

Governance

SLP, DUL, CDS, and scholars had equal representation and an equal say on the Advisory Board that oversaw governance for the project and the Editorial Board that was in charge of content decisions.
Decision-Making

No decision was made without consulting the appropriate project partners, and most importantly, the movement veterans. The process could be slow and time-consuming, but it was critical to the project’s success. As Naomi Nelson of Duke Libraries explained, “We’ve all been able to hold this idea in our head that everybody owns this project.” At its core, it reflected SNCC’s own commitment to small-“d” democracy and building consensus.

Ownership

Ownership was a primary concern for SNCC partners, as they were the creators of the history to be told on the SNCC Digital Gateway. In the first meeting, Duke Libraries and the SNCC Legacy Project agreed that their common goal was to create access to SNCC materials and get them out in the world. They moved forward with an agreement to make the material as open as possible via Creative Commons licenses and contract language prohibiting future paywalls or similar requirements. Copyrights for attributed new works created for the SNCC Digital Gateway would belong to the authors, while copyrights for unattributed new content would be owned by the SNCC Legacy Project. The authors and SLP then granted Duke non-exclusive, perpetual licenses to publish and provide access to the content using Creative Commons licenses. This creator-centric approach reflected SNCC values regarding the value of work and respecting the rights of the creators who do the work.

Memorandum of Understanding

In the first six months of the partnership, Duke University and the SNCC Legacy Project wrote a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to document their commitment to equitable ownership and participation in decision-making, as well as to open access. This was an important step in building trust early in the collaboration. It was important that SLP came into drafting the MoU with clear terms of what it wanted, as well as experience working with large bureaucracies. On the other side, Naomi Nelson of Duke Libraries, who
was responsible for shepherding the agreement through the university’s legal department, saw SLP’s terms as reasonable and in alignment with Duke’s aims and values. Despite university pushback, she was able to preserve the statements of joint copyright between SLP and Duke. Meanwhile, SLP was understanding of the need for Duke to include complicated legal language. This agreement helped create a basis of trust early in the collaboration.

The commitment to equitable participation helped build strong relationships among project partners and fostered a respectful way of working together. Scholars, archivists, and project staff were dedicated to carrying out the SNCC partners’ vision. As John Gartrell of Duke Libraries explained to the SNCC partners, “We’re always accountable to you all.”

Figure 1.5: Charlie Cobb (right) in the SNCC Digital Gateway project room at Duke University Libraries working with Todd Christensen (left) and other members of the project team, November 2015. Photograph by Kaley Deal. Courtesy of the SNCC Digital Gateway Project.

Told from the Perspectives of the Activists

We were trying to make a very difficult conceptual switch and say that the people who made the history have vital insights, and we will not understand all of this other data that we have unless they’re able to narrate and explain.

—Wesley Hogan, director of the Center for Documentary Studies
From the project’s earliest conceptions, the SNCC Digital Gateway had two primary purposes: to tell the history of SNCC from the perspective of the activists themselves and to pass their “informational wealth” on to subsequent generations. As the SNCC veterans saw it, the essential “how-to’s” of the freedom movement had often been lost after each generation. The tactics and strategies of grassroots organizing have had to be found, discovered, and put together by each activist generation. The SNCC Digital Gateway would be a way to remedy this.

SNCC veterans’ knowledge and experiences were crucial to the work. Traditionally, scholars have been the primary tellers of activists’ stories. The name recognition of a handful of activists has given them the opportunity to tell their story in their own voices, but more often, scholars have been those who uncover the lesser-known stories and interpret them for the present day. While the makers of history appear as subjects, they rarely get to shape and interpret the story in a way that accurately reflects their experiences and understandings.

In the SNCC Digital Gateway Project, SNCC veterans took the lead in framing the story and shaping the content, both on the Editorial Board and as Visiting Activist Scholars (see below). The scholars on the Editorial Board were critical in determining content, but they played a supporting role in finding documentation, clarifying, and bringing to life the visions put forward by the SNCC veterans. The process for creating content ultimately drew on project partners’ three different realms of expertise: new content was led by the activists and informed by the scholars, and its presentation was structured by the librarians. Together, the partners saw themselves as true partners in the production of knowledge, with SNCC veterans leading the way.

Building Trust

The trust factor is gonna happen over time. It’s not gonna happen from jump. And it’s through the work.

—Judy Richardson, SNCC veteran

You’re gonna have to show me through actions.

—Courtland Cox, SNCC veteran
Activist partners are involved in and guide the day-to-day work of the project. One of the ways the project prioritized the knowledge and experiences of SNCC veterans was by creating the Visiting Activist Scholar position. In this capacity, SNCC veterans came to Duke’s campus to guide the project staff and student project team in creating content, work for which they were compensated. The SNCC veterans provided on-the-ground oversight in the work of writing history and were people that SNCC Legacy Project members trusted to get the story right. They also created new content for the website—including audio, video, and written narratives—that told the history from SNCC’s perspective.

The Visiting Activist Scholar position helped build trust between the activist and university partners. The first two Visiting Activist Scholars—journalist Charlie Cobb and filmmaker Judy Richardson—were SNCC veterans and members of the SLP Board and the project’s Editorial Board. This was a strategic decision. Both Charlie and Judy were involved in the earliest conceptualization of the project and were already invested in its success. Their physical presence on campus and direct interactions with the project staff and team shaped the project work and helped assuage the concerns of the SNCC Legacy Project. “Their being on the project was a big, important issue because I knew there were going to be ups and downs, and everything wasn’t going to be smooth,” SLP chairman Courtland Cox remembered. “But if they were involved, I could feel that things were going fine.”

Project staff are able to transform ideas into tangible outputs. The project staff needed to have a range of skills to carry out such an expansive project. These included knowing the content, listening to project partners’ wishes and ideas and incorporating them into the work, implementing tasks efficiently and effectively, problem-solving, and adapting to the shifting project needs. It was essential that the project manager and coordinator had the buy-in of the activist partners. They needed to prove that they could carry out project partners’ visions and create an atmosphere of accountability. This was central to earning the trust of the activist partners and Editorial Board.
Over time—and through the work—the project staff demonstrated that they could transform ideas into tangible outputs that accurately reflected project partners’ desires. They developed a process of asking targeted questions, listening closely, and creating concrete options for moving forward for the Editorial Board to choose from. Editorial Board members came to trust the project staff as good problem-solvers and synthesizers. They could feel confident that they could leave something unfinished or unsettled until the next time they got together and that the project staff would successfully pull together an option that everyone could agree on. The reliability and follow-through on the part of the project staff was important in building strong
working relationships and trust. They approached the work with sensitivity and accountability, making sure that project partners were heard and that their concerns were addressed.

Project partners use a variety of strategies to deal with conflict.

Regular communication was central to keeping project partners on the same page and addressing conflicts before they arose. “We follow up. We touch base. We follow up. And something gets done,” John Gartrell of Duke Libraries explained. Project partners were also adept at reading people and the nuances of situations. Many potential problems were averted because of ongoing side conversations between different project partners. Sometimes this involved one SLP member talking to another SLP member about a particular issue; or the project manager talking with a scholar and SLP member about how to best approach a pending decision; or the directors of Rubenstein Library and CDS consulting on how to manage conflicting expectations of activist partners and the broader university. These ongoing formal and informal conversations were instrumental in holding the project together.

Inevitably, conflicts arose in the work, and project partners discovered that sometimes the best way to move forward was to not deal with an issue head-on. It was a strategy of conflict avoidance as opposed to conflict resolution. Instead of insisting on complete agreement on vision or structure, project partners forged through impasses by focusing on the specifics of the work. “We started the work, and we came back to those sticking points in a piece-by-piece manner,” project manager Karlyn Forner explained. Avoiding direct confrontations by moving forward on what project partners could agree on kept the project on track and leaving disagreements to be settled at a future date actually helped mitigate the conflicts.

A foundation of respect and trust, as well as steady progress, also helped project partners overcome moments of disagreement. The tenants of equitable partnership and shared vision were always bigger than the current point of contention. One-on-one side conversations smoothed the waters. Tangible options that reflected project partners’ desires kept the work moving forward.
Project partners also did not get caught up in the drama of hurt feelings. Despite differing opinions, everyone around the table agreed that the most important thing was telling SNCC’s history. That shared vision of the project always took precedence.

As of this writing, the collaboration between the SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University continues its efforts to tell SNCC’s history from the bottom up and the inside out, and to develop programs that contribute to a more civil and inclusive democracy in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. For more information about the evolution of the collaboration, see Courtland Cox, Karlyn Forner, John Gartrell, Wesley Hogan, Jennifer Lawson, Isabell Moore, Naomi Nelson, “Archival Ties: The SNCC Digital Gateway” Zapruder 47 (September-December 2018).