

Vitae: The Last Word



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People may wonder why UMass Medical School decided that now was the time to start building a historical archive—we seem like such a young institution. We are relatively young, but a lot has happened over the 37 years since we opened our doors, and it's a history that's worth preserving.

Most of the pioneers who were instrumental in founding this institution have begun to retire after their long and successful careers here. From a school with only sixteen students operating in a converted warehouse, we have become a world-class institution. UMMS is no longer in its infancy. It's a young adult and can afford to take stock of its beginnings. We grew concerned that if we didn't capture firsthand the idealism, determination and, of course, political drama that characterized the institution's early years, this primary source material would be lost forever. And that led to the realization that future generations at UMMS would feel this way, too. We needed to find a way to preserve our history systematically and into the future.

Established in 2006, the Office of Medical History and Archives (OMHA), which is part of the Lamar Soutter Library, has two missions: 1) to collect and securely maintain materials relevant to the history of UMMS; and 2) to make the materials available for scholarly research in a timely and appropriate

manner. The archives—everything from correspondence, departmental reports and meeting agendas to scientific reports, photographs, news clippings and oral histories—will also help document important institutional celebrations and anniversaries and foster history of medicine activities, publications and exhibits. The Library has proposed that materials be housed in the Rare Book Room by renovating the space to incorporate suitable, temperature-controlled archival storage and processing space, in addition to administrative and meeting areas. The OMHA has already received rich collections from founding Chair of Surgery H. Brownell Wheeler, MD, from the former Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology, the Department of Family Medicine & Community Health and others. As part of its collection strategy, OMHA staff also plan to attend future alumni reunions in the hope of capturing valuable oral histories. We will also work with the Records Retention Program to ensure an orderly transfer of selected items (official records that are no longer required by law to be held) to the archives, as well as seeking donations of papers from individuals.

In some ways, the best part of this work is the opportunity to learn how our history can illuminate the broader history of American medical education and health care. For example, early in the process

of collecting materials, a colleague and I attended the 30-year reunion of the Family Medicine residency. While recording oral histories, I learned from one early resident about their labor concerns in the 1970s at Worcester City Hospital, a struggle to be treated fairly as employees and to improve patient care. After an additional donation of relevant supporting documents—including a newsletter called “The Blunt Probe”—I now can add an important chapter to the story of family medicine's emergence as a specialty in the 1970s, the evolution of residency in American medical education and the importance of primary care to our own institutional mission. In sharing his own story, this alumnus helped illuminate an area of medical history much larger than himself.

Our archive, like the archives of other rising institutions, is a project without perceivable end. As a historian of medicine, I am excited about the opportunity to help build the foundation for capturing and preserving the history of UMass Medical School. I hope that members of the institutional community will grow as excited about the archives as we are and will find their way to our door with donations of papers, photographs, lab records—anything that reflects the history of the institution. 