

The Need for a Records Retention and Disposition Policy at Illinois Wesleyan University

The issue

Tate Archives & Special Collections receives material that is not related to its purpose of preserving and providing access to aggregate information documenting Illinois Wesleyan University history. Conversely, there are gaps in the documentary record of the University because the archives does not receive some material it should from campus units.

I am proposing the University make a formal declaration of its records retention policy because of the variety of ways I have seen people dealing with different types of records across campus. An appendix is attached with definitions of just a few different types of records. The law requires some records to be destroyed periodically, and some are of a more enduring nature and provide evidence of an institution's growth and development.

The purpose of the proposed records retention policy is to provide a written resource for stakeholders to consult in determining whether or not something they have custody of should be kept, destroyed, or transferred to the archives. The policy will provide continuity throughout personnel changes and alleviate misunderstandings of what can and cannot be accessioned to the archives' holdings.

Why now?

The process of assessing new material and fielding requests to accession material has led me to wonder what types of documents campus units retain or destroy and the types of decision-making processes used across campus to employ records retention and control.

One of the goals of an archivist is to understand her "institution and its documentary problems."¹ To that end, I have undertaken an informal survey of a few campus units in order to assess the current status of the life of our documentary history. Two of the offices that I have contacted thus far have formal plans for record retention and disposal: the Business Office (dated 1988) and the President's Office (dated 2002).

Several people I spoke with have expressed a desire for written guidance on what they should keep and what it is safe to dispose of or reformat, either digitally or onto microfilm.

Anecdotes indicative of need for policy

- several offices are retaining files with private information on employees and students and may be out of compliance with privacy laws

¹ Surveying the kinds of records available throughout an institution can lead to a plan for managing them, but "to meet the challenges posed by modern documentation, archivists and their colleagues must become active participants in the creation, analysis and selection of the documentary record." (Samuels 12-13)

- School of Nursing student records storage area is at capacity and contains files that have personal information; the same is true for their faculty records and there is a question about whether these files are duplicated in other offices
- student records used to be microfilmed periodically but no formal arrangement has been agreed to for making pre-FERPA records available to researchers in the archives or for setting up periodic transfer as records pass beyond privacy rules' timeframe
 - Note: I have an additional concern with these records: duplicate copies of the microfiche don't appear to exist. The most recent hard copies of files and their microfiche counterparts are stored in the same building which puts them at risk if the building is damaged.
- CUPP chair was looking for white paper compiled by a previous committee; the archives has almost no documents related to this committee
- first campus no smoking policy not found when sought for consultation by original task force member
- former professor's personnel files unavailable for researcher documenting his work
- approximately half of the 40 boxes of material sent from former President Myers' office and home files were of a non-permanent nature

An added concern I have is with our increasing reliance on documents that only exist electronically. Who is responsible for collecting them? Where will they "live" and how will they be retrieved for day-to-day purposes as well as in the future?

Records management elements

The archives has neither the space nor the personnel to house or administer a formal records management program. This problem is not unique and professional guidelines have been established for institutions where professional records management programs are impractical or undesired.² The solution is likewise not unique: establishing and implementing both a policy and an operational component would create an IWU-tailored records management program and would help address some of the problems people have encountered. Similar-sized institutions have accomplished this.

Elements of a records management program include but are not limited to records inventories and disposition schedules. Resources needed include administrative authorization and policy support, records storage center for material not immediately being destroyed or made publicly available, and funds for supplies and micrographic services (Maher 288). Many elements of a records management program are taking place across campus, storage and reformatting are being done by individual units, but without a formal plan these efforts are not consistently applied.

² "In universities lacking a formal records management program the normal operation of the archives will provide rudimentary service in this area." (III. A. 3. *Guidelines for College and University Archives*, Society of American Archivists (1979), quoted in Maher 383)

Timeline

- Immediately – Seek administrative approval for the general idea of a formalized, campus-wide records disposition program.
- Within nine months – receive approval for records policy language from chief financial, legal and academic officers; and identify representative campus constituencies to determine current practices and needs for different types of units.
- Within one year – formalize records scheduling procedures and forms for implementation.

Conclusion

The archivist does not seek to remove control of day-to-day operations from campus units that have historically managed their own records. Furthermore, the University Archives does not and should not keep every type of record created across the campus. Rather, I am interested in standardizing records retention and disposal practices across all levels of the University to assist with information management as a whole. Such a plan will relieve offices of the burden of deciding on an *ad hoc* basis what they should keep, what they should destroy, and what should be transferred to the archives for permanent retention.

It is important to note that not everything that is transferred to the archives has to become publicly accessible. Agreements detailing restrictions on access can be determined as part of the transfer schedule.

By collaborating with campus units throughout this process, I hope to gain a better understanding of the output of their offices and, ultimately, provide a consistent chain of documentary evidence for University history.

Works consulted

Barritt, Marjorie Rabe. “Adopting and Adapting Records Management to College and University Archives.” *The Midwestern Archivist*. 14.1 (1989): 5-12.

Maher, William J. *The Management of College and University Archives*. Metuchen, NJ: The Society of American Archivists and The Scarecrow Press, 1992.

Samuels, Helen Willa. *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities*. Metuchen, NJ: The Society of American Archivists and The Scarecrow Press, 1992.

Society of American Archivists (SAA) *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*
<<http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp>>

Appendix

Definitions

Administrative records are documents that have been preserved because they facilitate the operations and management of an agency, but which do not relate directly to programs that help the agency achieve its mission. (SAA Glossary)

Noncurrent records are ones that are no longer used in the day-to-day course of business, but which are preserved and occasionally used for legal, historical, or operational purposes. (SAA Glossary)

Office records are manuscript or typescript copies of incoming and outgoing correspondence, file and field notes, internal reports, statistical tables, and supporting publications. (Maher 26)

Operational records: 1. Records that relate to the substantive activities an organization undertakes to accomplish its mission or mandate; program records. – 2. Information documenting the performance and use (operation) of a piece of equipment. (SAA Glossary)

Program records relate to the substantive activities an organization undertakes to accomplish its mission or mandate; operational records. (SAA Glossary)

Records management is the systematic and administrative control of records throughout their life cycle to ensure efficiency and economy in their creation, use, handling, control, maintenance, and disposition. (SAA Glossary)

Vital records include emergency operation records immediately necessary to begin recovery of business after a disaster, as well as rights-and-interests records necessary to protect the assets, obligations, and resources of the organization, as well as its employees and customers or citizens; essential records. (SAA Glossary)