What is Records Management?

Last updated: April 25, 2017 (v2.3)

Introduction

Information is one of Simon Fraser University’s key resources. Timely access to accurate and reliable information is essential to university decision-making and operations.

The quantity of information generated and received by academic and administrative departments is immense. Stored on a variety of media (paper, electronic, audio, graphic), the uncontrolled accumulation of information undermines the University’s ability to effectively use this resource.

All too often information that is needed cannot be located quickly or at all – because it is poorly organized and because too much information of short-term value has been kept too long, while much that is of long-term value has been destroyed too soon.

Records management is the development and application of systematic standards to the recorded information that is required to administer and operate the University, so that the right information gets to the right people at the right time for the right purposes.

Policies, procedures and standards cover the creation, receipt, distribution, use, retention, storage, retrieval, protection, preservation and final disposition of all types of recorded information throughout the University's administrative units, faculties, departments, schools, centres and institutes.

What are records?

Records contain information, but it is information linked to administrative action – information that is recorded (e.g. both on paper or electronically) in carrying out an activity or transaction, and furnishes evidence of that activity or transaction.

Departments create records whenever you retain the recorded information involved in your transactions (e.g. when you file a memo or save an email). The records you “create” include documents you made (e.g. copies of out-going letters, reports) as well as documents you received (e.g. in-coming letters).

Departments create records on a variety of media: paper, word-processing and multi-media documents; computer databases and electronic mail; audio and visual recordings, tapes and films; photographs, maps and drawings – in fact, anything on which information is recorded or stored.
Why worry about records?

There are many reasons for keeping and managing good records:

1. Access:
   - Good record-keeping makes it easy to locate, retrieve and produce records; poor record-keeping leads to frustration and despair.

2. Decision-making:
   - Complete, accurate, authentic and reliable records support the administration of policy and consistent decision-making, planning, evaluation and reporting.
   - With poor records, the original context in which policies, decisions and practices were undertaken is forgotten and the evidence that could be used to review and evaluate them disappears. This contributes to a “re-inventing the wheel” syndrome.
   - Poor record-keeping increases the danger that current decisions may be based on out-of-date, inaccurate, and unreliable information.

3. Continuity:
   - Good records minimize loss of knowledge and ensure business continuity despite staff turnover. Former staff take their memories with them, and without records new staff are unable to fully understand past practices. Memories, moreover, are notoriously unreliable with the passage of time and you need good records to recall your actions and to make good decisions.

4. Efficiency:
   - Good record-keeping increases administrative efficiency and promotes economical operations.
   - Poor record-keeping leads to the unnecessary retention of records long after their value has expired – making useful records difficult to find and taking up valuable space. Time and resources are misspent in labour-intensive searches for records which, for all staff know, may or may not exist, may or may not have been created.

5. Accountability:
   - Records are evidence of actions and decisions and provide the means by which to hold people accountable. Without records, university officials cannot adequately render account of their tenure.

6. Liability:
   - Well-managed records enable the university to defend its legal rights and minimize or eliminate legal liability. They ensure the University has the evidence it needs to defend itself in the event of disputes and to accurately reconstruct past events.
• Records Retention Schedules and Disposal Authorities facilitate compliance with applicable statutes. The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act for example mandates both the public’s right of access to information as well as the University’s obligation to protect privacy and sensitive information from unauthorized collection, access, use, disclosure, and retention.

• The unnecessary retention of records long after their usefulness has expired means that the University must continue to devote considerable resources to administering access to them under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

7. History:

• Well-kept records are more easily selected and processed into the Archives’ permanent holdings, ensuring the preservation of a valuable historical resource for all future members of the University community and researchers generally.

• Sloppy record-keeping today makes for poor archival holdings tomorrow, representing a substantial loss of accumulated knowledge and experience to the community.

Managing your records

There are three keys to sound records management:

1. *Files classification*: how are your records organized? Are you uncertain where to file some records? Can you easily find records you are looking for? How do you link your paper files with related records stored in electronic or other media?

2. *Records retention scheduling*: how long do you retain different kinds of records? Are you keeping some records for too long and others for too short a time? Which records should be destroyed and which retained for the long-term?

3. *Vital records program*: in the event of a disaster (e.g. flood, earthquake, fire) what records would be needed to start operations again? How do you identify such records? What measures can be taken to protect them?

The Archives and Records Management Department can offer you advice and training on each of these topics.

The Records Management Program at Simon Fraser University: Overview of Services

The Simon Fraser University Archives and Records Management Department provides campus departments with advice, services and tools relating to records and information management.

This includes:

• Maintenance of the on-line Directory of University Records (DUR), which contains information relating to records retention, personal information banks, file classification and records management generally.
• Developing and implementing Records Retention Schedules and Disposal Authorities (RRSDA) in consultation with departments; all approved schedules are accessible on the Archives web site.

• Operating the University Records Centre (URC) for storage of departmental semi-active records. Twice a year (January and April), we destroy records due for scheduled destruction and accession into our permanent archival holdings records due for transfer.

• Advising departments on records classification and office record-keeping systems.

• Delivering educational sessions on basic records management principles to university staff members.

• Managing the University Records Management Listserv, used to convey information about records management to departmental contacts.

• Developing information management policies and procedures.

• Advising on electronic records management strategies