

File Management: Guideline and Policies

Which files are considered records?

Files created or received pursuant to the transaction of university business or in the fulfillment of its educational, administrative, business, or legal obligations are records, regardless of format. Records are evidence of the activities of the university, and it is important to capture information about the record, such as author and date of creation. Please see “How do I know if my files have archival value?” and “What is a record copy and who is responsible for it?” for more information.

What are public records?

At MSU, all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, photographs, films, sound recordings, magnetic or other tapes, electronic data-processing records, artifacts, or other documentary material, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received pursuant to law or ordinance in connection with the transaction of university business by any unit are considered university records.

Personal materials are not considered university records.

What is records management?

Records management is “the systematic control of all records from their creation or receipt through their processing, distribution, organization, storage, and retrieval to their ultimate disposition.” –ARMA, Guidelines for Managing E-mail

Records and information are assets and should be managed in the same way the university manages its facilities, equipment, vehicles, and financial resources. Maintaining physical and intellectual control over records and information throughout their life cycle has many benefits. Records management:

- Improves efficiency in the management of information
- Permits the timely destruction of nonpermanent or transitory records
- Reduces the need for on-site records storage
- Enhances identification of permanent records for archival preservation
- Meets legal evidentiary requirements
- Provides evidence of fiscal and administrative transactions
- Reduces institutional risk by eliminating records after their useful lifespan

The management of university records in paper and electronic format at MSU is regulated through retention and disposition schedules written and approved by University Archives & Historical Collections (UAHC). These schedules are guidelines for determining how long records must be kept before destruction is permitted or before records worthy of permanent preservation can be transferred to the custody of UAHC.

The UAHC staff will work with your office to establish records retention guidelines that help staff manage paper and electronic files at the end of their life cycle.

What is a records retention schedule?

A retention schedule is a list of types of records, often called a record series, in your office that specifies the length of time the records need to be kept according to state or university requirements. The UAHC staff works with your office to identify these records and create this schedule. The schedule may include information regarding the retention of documents in active office areas and inactive storage areas and when and if such series may be destroyed or formally transferred to UAHC for preservation.

[MSU retention guidelines](#)

What is a record series?

“A record series is a group of similar or related records that are normally used and filed as a unit and that permit evaluation as a unit for retention scheduling purposes.” – ARMA, Guidelines for Managing E-mail

Examples of record series include:

- Correspondence files
- Inactive personnel files
- Accounts payable files
- Monthly reports
- Applications for employment (not hired)
- Motor vehicle maintenance files

What is a “record copy” and who is responsible for it?

“A record copy is the official copy of a record that is retained for legal, operational, or historical purposes.” –ARMA, Guidelines for Managing E-mail

While there may be many copies of a document, the record copy is the official copy. For example, although faculty members may receive reports while on a committee, it is the chair or other designated employee who maintains the official record copy of the reports group creates. It is this record that is maintained by the academic unit and must be preserved as a university record. The copies circulated to other committee members are reference copies and should be maintained according to records retention schedules.

What should I do if there is no record schedule established for my office?

The UAHC staff will work with your office to establish a records retention schedule that helps staff manage paper and electronic files at the end of their life cycle. Contact the UAHC staff at (517) 355-2330 or visit the [University Records Management Web site](#).

What do I do with electronic files that are considered records?

If you have electronic files that are records, you are responsible for maintaining that record throughout its established retention period. Your record retention schedule can guide you in determining how long those files must be kept. It is considered good practice to create files in a standard format, such as tif for images, or maintain or update them in the latest version of software, such as Microsoft Word, to ensure future access.

At this time, UAHC is collecting only a limited variety of electronic files. Please check with the UAHC staff about how to maintain your files in a structure that will allow potential transfer when appropriate university policies and technologies are established for handling electronic records.

What do I do with electronic files that are not considered records but have long-term value?

There are some electronic files, such as personal correspondence or scholarly publications, while potentially not official university records that may have long-term value. Although they may not be scheduled for transfer to UAHC, you should keep these records organized, maintained, and preserved for personal reference in the future. Use the best practices mentioned in the management section of the FAQs to ensure the longevity of these files.

Should I handle electronic documents differently than paper documents?

Electronic files should be managed by their content, not their format. Whether you keep a file depends on its value, subject, and function. Although the fact that the record is in an electronic format does not affect how long you retain the file, you should be aware of issues related to maintaining access to electronic files over time.

Electronic files are particularly fragile due to hardware and software obsolescence, unstable media formats, and the ease with which files can be erased knowingly or unknowingly. A consistent backup plan is essential to the preservation of digital materials. Long-term preservation requires migration across software versions and media formats. For more information on file retention and deletion, consult your office's records retention schedule.

How do I know if my electronic files have archival value?

A record's historical or archival value is determined not by the form of the record itself but by whether it contains information of enduring administrative, legal, fiscal, or historical value to the university or to researchers. Though these are only general

categories and by no means a comprehensive listing, the following are examples of the types of electronic materials that should be preserved for potential transfer to UAHC:

- Annual reports
- Meeting minutes
- Web sites
- Correspondence
- Photographs
- Self studies
- Policy and procedure files
- Curriculum development files
- Reports of committees, councils, and task forces
- Certain types of data sets

Some materials, including personal papers of faculty members, may have archival value in some cases and merit collection in a university manuscript repository. Because of this potential value, faculty members should maintain their most important electronic files according to best practices for digital preservation. See “Should I handle electronic documents differently than paper?” for more information about preserving electronic records.

The retention and disposition schedule for your office should have instructions regarding the transfer of certain record series to UAHC.

Visit <http://archives.msu.edu> or call (517) 355-2330 if you have questions concerning the transfer of permanently valuable records.

What should I know about student-related files and FERPA?

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education.

For more information see:

[U.S. Department of Education](#)

[UNC FERPA Information](#)

The policy regarding student records and FERPA is described in these [guidelines](#).