



File Management : Guidelines & 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 as such 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 UNC, 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 public business by any agency of North Carolina government or its subdivisions are considered public records. Thus, any file involved in the business of the university could be considered both a record and a public record at UNC.

Personal materials are not considered to be public records. See the North Carolina General Statutes 132-1 for more information.

Since Duke is not a public university, provisions of the NC Public Records law generally are not applicable. At Duke all files created in the normal course of business may be considered a university record, and thus may be discoverable in a legal action.

What should I know about the NC Public Records Law?

At UNC, University employees need to know that there is a state law, General Statute 132, governing their actions with regard to public records, and they should be familiar with its basic concepts listed below:

- All paper and electronic documents created, processed, or maintained on state time at state expense are public records.
- Public records belong to the people of North Carolina and must be made available when requested either free or at minimal cost.

- Some public records such as student academic records; personnel records, medical records, etc. are protected by specific confidentiality laws and may not be made available.
- Public records may not be destroyed without an approved records retention and disposition schedule authorizing destruction.

Here are some of the specific types of items that qualify as public records (and would also qualify as records at any University, public or private):

- Academic Records (course listings, program descriptions, exam files, etc.)
- Administrative Records (mailing lists, event calendars, general correspondence, annual reports, etc.)
- Business/Financial Records (contracts, expenditure reports, telephone billings, etc.)
- Personnel Files (faculty, non-faculty, etc.)
- Grant/Research Records (proposals, research projects, award letters, etc.)
- Student files (applications, reference letters, etc.)
- Alumni files (names, addresses, etc.)

This finding aid, created by the University Archives at UNC for the Department of Botany, illustrates the types of documents that the archives collects.

At UNC, for help in determining appropriate retention periods or in locating your office's approved records retention and disposition schedule, contact the Records Service Coordinator at 962-6402.

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What is records management?

“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 Email

Records and information are assets and should be managed just as the University manages its facilities, equipment, vehicles, and financial resources. Maintaining physical and intellectual control over records and information throughout their entire life cycle has many benefits.

Records management:

- improves efficiency in the management of information
- permits the timely destruction of nonpermanent or transitory records,
- permits identification of permanent records for archival preservation
- meets legal evidentiary requirements
- reduces the need for on-site records storage
- enhances evidence of fiscal and administrative transactions
- reduces institutional risk by eliminating records after their useful lifespan

The management of public records in paper and electronic format at UNC Chapel Hill is regulated through retention and disposition schedules written and approved by University Archives and Records Service. 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 the University Archives.

At Duke, the University Records Manager 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 records series, in your office that specifies the length of time the records need to be kept according to state or university requirements. The University Records Manager or Coordinator 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, inactive storage areas, and when and if such series may be destroyed or formally transferred to the University Archives for preservation.

This sample records retention schedule, created by the UNC University Archives and Records Service for the Department of Classics, illustrates a typical schedule.

The retention guidelines for Duke University are located at:
http://www.lib.duke.edu/archives/rm/rm_page3.htm.

What is a record series?

"A records 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 Email.

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 Email. 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 that maintains the official record copy of the reports that group creates. It is this record which is maintained by the academic unit which 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?

At UNC, if you do not have a records liaison in your office and cannot locate a copy of your schedule, please contact the Records Service Coordinator at 962-6402. The University Archives has provided instructions for starting the process of records scheduling on their website.

At Duke, the University Records Manager 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. Contact the University Records Manager at 919-684-6181 or visit the records management website.

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 standardized 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 the University Archives is only collecting a limited variety of electronic files. Please check with the University Archivist 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 University Archives, 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 or not 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 with 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 either 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?

The determination that a record has historical or archival value rests not on the form of the record itself, but rather on whether or not 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 the Archives in the future.

- annual reports
- meeting minutes
- websites
- correspondence
- photographs
- self studies
- policy and procedure files
- curriculum development files
- reports of committees, councils, and task forces
- certain types of datasets

Some materials including the 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 endeavor to 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 the University Archives. At UNC, please contact the Records Service Coordinator at 962-6402 with any questions. Please see "What is the best way to preserve my department's website" for guidelines at UNC.

At Duke, visit <http://www.lib.duke.edu/archives/> or call 684-5637 with 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) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) 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:

- US Department of Education website
- UNC FERPA Information
 - Duke Information on Student Records and FERPA Information from the Registrar.