Guidance on University Records Retention and Destruction

Records enable and support the University’s day to day work in fulfilling its educational mission. Northeastern receives and generates a substantial amount of records on a regular basis, mainly in the format of paper documents and electronic files. The various University units seek to effectively manage and retain these materials until their business use expires and the materials may be disposed of (or transferred to the State Archives). The key to information management at Northeastern is to develop ongoing business processes so that records are properly stored, transferred, and destroyed of as a routine course of business, not merely when space runs out.

Records retention and destruction of University records are subject to the Illinois State Records Act (Records Act) and University policy. The Records Officer supports the compliance area of the proper retention and destruction of University records. The following provides practical guidance on records retention and destruction. If you have questions about Northeastern’s records policies, please contact the Records Officer:

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Records Retention

Most University records need not be retained forever. Typically, only a small percentage of a unit’s records have enduring historical value such that they must be retained indefinitely. The Records Act requires that State approval is received prior to disposing of University records for which destruction is appropriate. In addition, the University receives and generates many non-record materials which do not require State approval prior to disposal. Therefore, it is important to understand the difference between records, which are subject to the Records Act, and non-records, which are not.

Records are defined by the Records Act as: “books, papers, digitized electronic material, maps, photographs, databases, or other official documentary materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made, produced, executed or received by any agency in the State in pursuance of state law or in connection with the transaction of public business and preserved or appropriate for preservation by that agency or its successor as evidence of the organization, function, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities of the State or of the State Government, or because of the informational data contained therein.”

Non-records can take many forms. They may be duplicates of University records, materials used merely for reference purposes or materials that include information of short-term value. Most non-records may be destroyed as soon as possible after their primary usefulness has expired. State approval is not required prior to disposal of non-records. However, non-records should be
retained if they are valuable to the business processes of units. For example, a department may want to have ready access to reference copies of contracts for use when drafting new contracts for similar goods and services. For this reason, units of the University may intentionally retain these copies for specified periods of time, but they should plan to dispose of the materials as soon as their primary usefulness has expired.

**Records Retention Schedules**

The University has adopted extensive retention schedules for its main units, typically under VP areas, working in connection with the Illinois State Archives agency. These retention schedules list and describe various records and specify how long records in each category should be retained. They also give a “recommendation” which indicates the disposition of a record. The approved retention schedule grants continuing authority to dispose of the listed record in accordance with procedures established by the State. Please check with the Records Officer for a copy of the retention schedule covering your specific unit. Note that these retention schedules are currently under revision; however, the current schedules remain in effect during this revision period.

**Records Destruction**

Any University records not covered by the retention schedules require permission from the State prior to disposal. The Records Officer facilitates permission from the State for all units across the University. After receiving permission for destruction, the records should be disposed of properly as soon as possible. Units are responsible for the proper disposal of their records. Please consult the Records Officer and the appropriate retention schedule prior to any destruction of records.

**Records Destruction Process**

**Step 1: Categorize the files**

Perform an initial review of the files in order to classify them into broad categories (i.e., invoice vouchers, search and screen applicant materials, etc.).

**Step 2: Identify duplicates and non-records**

Identify any duplicate or non-record files. These materials do not require State approval for disposal. Sensitive information should be securely destroyed.

**Step 3: Determine the retention**

The Records Officer will identify the retention requirement for the categories of files. The current retention schedule will be paramount in this determination.
Step 4: Identify disposal volume and date range

Inventory the records eligible for disposal to determine the approximate volume (cubic feet or megabytes) and date range (month/year) for each category. For guidance, refer to this guidance.

Step 5: Submit disposal request to the State

Submit disposal request to the State seeking to destroy State records in connection with the appropriate retention schedule. You must submit a complete Records Disposal Certificate Form. Please consult the Records Officer prior to any destruction of records if you have questions.

Step 6: Disposal approval needed

State approval for disposal should be received within a month of when the request was submitted.

Step 7: Dispose of the files

Once approval has been received, the records may be disposed of. Sensitive information should be securely destroyed.

Adapted from University of Illinois, Guidance and Best Practice