

Determining Current Practices for College and University Electronic Records Management Programs

1.0 Project Description

1.1 Summary

Based on a previous informal investigation of existing practices in e-records management, the researchers have identified a need for further study to determine what patterns, if any, exist in current practices among college and university archives and records management programs regarding their approaches to capturing, storing, managing, and making available the e-records associated with administrative functions, publications, web-based documents, and research materials. The goal of this study is to provide a snapshot of where colleges and universities stand in their development of e-records policies and practices and to identify not only what categories of 'best practices' would be most useful to archivists but also to determine what archivists believe should be the priorities in creating a set of 'best practices' recommendations that will meet institutional needs in developing policies and in sharing permanently valuable content and leveraging university resources for data storage, management, and delivery.

In recent years, more and more university administrative records are going digital only; this means that by-in-large, they are not coming into the archives because the transaction processing and information systems that universities have for managing business practices are not designed for record keeping. Often in systems, such as PeopleSoft, the capability of creating a print record is simply not available without months of modification, and so users do not print out and retain hard copies. This was the case with the budget for UMBC where it took nine months of modifications to PeopleSoft in order to get a usable budget report and even longer to prepare the print copy. In addition, many campus publications that were once printed are now being mounted on the web as part of an active page that is updated routinely or produced in a PDF format that is replaced periodically. In neither case is a copy captured for permanent storage. These and other campus records management issues result in a loss of institutional history and, in the case of state institutions, in a loss of state records.

To date, much of the theoretical research that has been done within the archival community has been to identify the data or functional requirements for metadata systems needed to support archival requirements, to define what constitutes an authentic and reliable record, and to determine the requirements for trustworthy recordkeeping systems. Significant projects such as *Managing the Digital University Desktop*, a project undertaken by UNC and Duke that has focused on the problems of records created by faculty on their desktops, the Indiana University Electronic Records Project, an implementation project intended to incorporate recordkeeping requirements on administrative transaction processing and information systems, and the work done by the Canadian National Data Archives Consultation, which has studied issues surrounding the preservation of research data, have all helped to define the problems we face. However, while this research is the essential foundation for the development of answers to the

problems of long term preservation of our digital resources, it is still far from providing practitioners in the trenches with a practical solution for capturing, organizing, accessing, and preserving electronic records.

1.2 Approach

The intention of the proposed project is to address the need of archivists at academic institutions for guidance in finding ways to begin to manage and preserve the mass of electronic documents produced by their institutions. This will be accomplished by determining where colleges and universities currently stand in the process of developing workable policies and implementing practical solutions for the management and preservation of digital resources. In addition, the project will provide working archivists and other stakeholders a baseline set of priorities arranged by category and based on identified institutional needs that could serve as a starting point for the development and promulgation of a set of best practices by either the SAA C & U Section, the SAA E-Records Section, or the ECURE working group.

To accomplish this, the study will be divided into two distinct parts: a survey phase and an interview phase. For the survey phase, a questionnaire that has been pre-tested with five practitioners [see Appendix A] will be sent to 643 university archivists and records managers identified from the membership of the College & University Archives Section of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), whose permission for using this list has already been sought and received. Members of the list will receive an e-mail explaining the goals of the study and requesting their participation in the survey; their response to the questionnaire will constitute their agreement to participate. The survey will be administered using surveymonkey.com; this will allow the researchers to track participation and send follow-up requests as necessary. Data will be collected and analyzed using the tools provided by the [surveymonkey](http://surveymonkey.com) software; open-ended questions will be analyzed manually. At the end of the questionnaire, participants will be asked if they would be willing to take part in the second phase of the study, which will be a series of interviews. Data collected in the survey phase of the study will be kept confidential and will be used primarily to identify the scope of current practices in the field and to identify participants for the interview phase of the study.

Participants for the second phase of the study will be chosen from those individuals who indicated on the questionnaire that they/their institutions are actively implementing an e-records program. Depending on the number of individuals who meet the selection criteria and who are willing to participate, it is anticipated that approximately ten to fifteen individuals will be selected for follow-up interviews. Selection criteria will include: size/type of institution, type of program being implemented, geographic location, and scheduling constraints. Use of selection criteria such as these is consistent with theoretical and/or purposive sampling techniques.

The interview phase of the study will be carried out using a multiple-case studies design (Yin, 1994). The multiple-case studies design will allow the researchers to use subsequent cases/interviews to confirm or disprove the patterns identified in earlier ones.

In practice, this means that the interview protocol may be revised during the course of the study in response to new information. The interviews will be sequenced so that the first group of interviewees will have as many characteristics (size/type of institution, type of program, etc.) in common (*literal replication*); these interviews will provide (as far as possible) a baseline of current practices and identified priorities. The remaining cases/interviews will be selected to explore and confirm or disprove the patterns identified in the initial interviews (*theoretical replication*)

Interviews will be conducted using a semi-structured Interview Protocol and will be audiotaped and transcribed for referential adequacy. Participants will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form, and data collected in the interview phase of the study will be kept confidential; interviewees will be identified by an alpha-numeric code, and data will be aggregated for reporting purposes. However, with the permission of the interviewees, a list of participating organizations will be included in the results.

Methods to ensure validity and reliability of the study will be built into the data collection and analysis plan from the very start of the design process. Key among the factors that will ensure credibility are the completeness of the data collection, the use of alternative analytical perspectives, and member checks to confirm the accuracy of the conclusions drawn. To provide a context for evaluating the transferability of the findings, the researchers will use theoretical and/or purposive sampling and develop a thick description of the data that can be reviewed by others. Finally, member checks will be used to confirm the essential facts and evidence presented in the findings as well as to solicit comments about the researcher's interpretations and conclusions.

1.3 Anticipated Results

From the data collected in the interviews, a list of categories of 'best practices' as well as a set of priorities based on current practice and identified institutional needs will be developed; a list of other findings, e.g., approaches being used in a limited number of institutions and/or approaches that have not been successfully implemented will also be compiled. Together, these results will provide practitioners and other researchers in this area with a compendium of current practices that may be used both to guide future practice in the management, preservation, and dissemination of electronic records and to serve as a baseline for further research.

Timely achievement of project goals will be measured against milestones set for the project [see Appendix B]. As in any exploratory study, the researchers will be responsive to new information received from practitioners and may need to adjust the study timeline accordingly.

This study is intended to be the first part in a two-part project, the second part of which would be a survey aimed at institutional executives such as Provosts and CIOs. The combination of the two surveys should result in an action agenda that could be brought to

a working group at the SAA C & U Section, the SAA E-Records Section, or ECURE for development into a formal set of best practices.

2.0 Contribution to the Field

Many practitioners working in the field today, particularly at small and medium sized academic institutions, find themselves in understaffed and under-funded environments. They cannot afford to be pioneers. For them, the opportunity to build on the work of those whose institutions have already made the commitment and provided the funds for e-records initiatives may be the best solution they have for dealing with the ever-growing problem of electronic records. This project is intended to provide the basis for just such a resource. Moreover it will allow all of us working in this area, whether as a practitioner or as a researcher, to have a clearer picture of where the field is now and what has yet to be done.

It is the intention of the researchers to present the results of this study at conferences such as SAA, ECURE, and CNI and in a published article. Additionally, it has been suggested that a website with links to existing university policy documents would be useful tool and is being considered.

3.0 Qualifications of Proposed Research Team

The proposed research team brings together a strong combination of appropriate skills and knowledge to conduct this project. Marcia Peri, Archivist, is a practitioner in the field who has spent the last seven years developing and implementing a records management and archives program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. It was her earlier investigations of existing practices at peer institutions that lead to the development of this research agenda. Lisl Zach is an assistant professor in the School of Library and Information Science at Louisiana State University, where she teaches in the areas of knowledge management, organization of information, and special librarianship. She has carried out numerous user studies, benchmarking studies, and information systems analyses and is familiar with many of the practical issues involved in qualitative research including various approaches to data collection, analysis, and presentation.

4.0 Reference List

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