

Partners Needed:

The Relationship between the University Archives and Recordkeepers

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The University of Calgary is an institution of moderate size located in the province of Alberta, Canada. We are one of four universities in the province with a student population of around 29,000. Although the University Archives certainly interacts with students on a regular basis as they visit our Reference Room, we maintain a significantly closer relationship with the 5,000 support staff and faculty at the University. As of last year, we are fortunate to have four archivists serving this continually changing and rotating pool of staff, or the equivalent of one archivist partnering with 1,250 recordkeepers. To make this ratio slightly more manageable, the University Archives appoints a Records Coordinator for each faculty, department and administrative unit. The main responsibility of each Records Coordinator is to act as the primary liaison between their unit and the University Archives.

Evolution of the University Archives

The Board of Governors officially created the University Archives in 1981 with a mandate to preserve the institutional memory of the University. Two closely related programs began to emerge in the early 1990's. The *Archival Program* significantly expanded the initial mandate and now includes the acquisition of private records. The *Information Management Program* was formally established in 1995. While the Board of Governors had approved a records management policy in 1981 an actual program to support this policy did not exist until 14 years later.

Although originally conceived and operated as two distinct entities, the *Archival Program* and the *Information Management Program* have become integrally connected. The extensive collaboration between the two programs was overwhelmingly apparent by 2003. We found that archivists from both programs were continually working together in the areas of retention rules, records transfer, preservation, public programming and education.

This realization led us to adopt the 'records continuum' model in the University Archive's approach to records and archival management. The continuum of care model integrates recordkeeping, records management, and archival practice, is informed by archival science, and is unified by service to the creator and the user. The records continuum model has resulted in consistent interaction between the archivists and recordkeepers in all areas including records creation or acquisition, classification, maintenance and the ultimate disposition of the record. We are true partners with our recordkeepers and we are continually seeking ways to improve and enhance this partnership.

Archivists as Partners

This is not to imply that the transition has always been easy for the archivists while we learn to partner with recordkeepers. One prime example has been my own involvement

with the University Classification System or UCLASS. My colleague Bonnie Woelk, Manager of the *Information Management Program*, used the functional analysis approach to design UCLASS in 1995. We rolled out the classification system a year later to the Executive Suite, an area that comprises ten senior administrative offices including the President's Office, Vice-Presidents and Associate Vice-Presidents.

We discussed early in the process how a records conversion appeared to go against the grain of our archival training. The two basic archival principles of original order and *respect des fonds* seemed at odds with how heavily we were now involving ourselves with the creation and classification of active records and record series. A look back at some notes from ten years ago indicates how we were attempting to reconcile these issues:

'... keep the records management/archives continuum in mind...Original order is what we are now creating. Series are created naturally and we are not "intervening"...it's up to the creator (and we are co-partners with the creator) to file records in a way that they can logically be found.'

We referred back to these notes quite frequently during that initial conversion when we found ourselves 'exploding' a large number of files; in other words we assigned virtually every piece of paper in many files to a separate functional area in the classification system. We had to keep reminding ourselves that the conversion process was one of records and series creation, not of re-creation.

Recordkeepers are partners

As difficult as it has sometimes been for the archivists to adapt to a partnership which includes the creation and maintenance of active records, this partnership remains an on-going challenge for the recordkeepers. The blending of the *Information Management Program* and the *Archival Program* into the records continuum is *not* readily apparent to University staff. This fact became very obvious during a recent institutional audit.

The institutional audit involved personal visits to a total of sixty-four academic and administrative units. I had initially checked the Archives permanent holdings and had chosen these units as ones that were either not consistently represented in the permanent institutional record or they were units who had never sent permanent records to the Archives. One of the main purposes was to therefore clarify with units what constituted a permanent record and to notify them of their obligation to send these records to the Archives.

During these visits I uncovered a lack of understanding on the part of many recordkeepers regarding their vital role in the creation, maintenance and transfer of permanent records, or indeed of their role in the entire records continuum. When I informed recordkeepers that their unit had not sent permanent records to the Archives for a certain number of years, they insisted that they had. I was then shown evidence of the transfer of what we call *Limited Term Storage* records, or those records that are stored awaiting destruction in accordance with retention rules. Recordkeepers reacted with some surprise and consternation when informed that their unit was required to create, maintain and eventually transfer records for permanent retention.

As I discovered this discrepancy in our partnership, I began to explain the entire records continuum during my visits and to emphasize the importance of their role as recordkeepers. I gave instruction on university policies and procedures, government requirements and legislation, retention rules and the appropriate destruction of records, and the obligation of campus units to transfer permanent records to the Archives. Units were also encouraged to start building the archiving process into their business plans so that the burden of archiving would become a common administrative process in each office.

We should never lose sight of the fact that our recordkeeping partners are immersed in the *'here and now'*, whereas we as archivists are concerned with how the *'here and now'* will impact the *'what will be'*. Our partners are focused on the daily requirements and demands of recordkeeping. As archivists we are focused on the function or the activity represented by the record and its corresponding role in the preservation of the institutional memory. Our role in the partnership is therefore to bring the future into focus for recordkeepers while theirs is to ensure that the focus remains sharp in the present.

Reluctant Partners

The fact remains that recordkeepers are not always eager to partner with us. They are busy, stressed individuals who frequently do not take kindly to what they initially see as interference in the smooth running of their offices. Initially, recordkeepers tend not to see archivists as partners but rather as individuals who have come to *'mess with my files'*, or in one memorable instance, as the *'bulldozer of death'*. They view the records management and archival processes as yet more ways that the institution has imposed on them to make their life even harder. Recordkeepers express their fears that they will never again be able to find their records when they need them.

Financial reality at the University also conspires against a smooth partnership. Budget cuts have severely affected unit staff to the extent that recordkeeping is either a very low priority or completely non-existent. More importantly, the turnover of staff has resulted in a lack of unit continuity with the consequence that many staff express reluctance to part with their records. Staff do not have the contextual experience or background to achieve the comfort level required to know when a record series is no longer necessary for administrative purposes. Where there is no continuity of recordkeeping partners, maintaining the records continuum becomes a very real challenge for archivists.

University traditions can also conspire against a smooth partnership. The university culture is very different from a corporate entity in that the separate faculties and even some of the departments work in an autonomous manner. Many units have their own separate support and information technology areas. Some units are also physically removed from the main campus which fosters a sense of separateness and difference. The concept of *'academic freedom'* also lends itself to an awareness of independence. Trying to bring these independent thinkers back into the partnership can be challenging.

Tact, diplomacy and humor therefore become essential tools of the archivist. I've discovered during my work with recordkeepers that you must acknowledge these fears as legitimate and worthy of discussion while not becoming overly sympathetic to actual attitudes or complaints. Remain friendly and accessible while also appearing in

complete control – nothing gives recordkeepers more pause or discomfort than if you appear unsure of the process or the worth of the final outcome.

Emphasizing the Positive

Given this reality, how do you induce reluctant recordkeepers to participate in a partnership? At the University of Calgary, we do work hard to ensure that recordkeepers are aware of the key compliance components such as the policies and legislative drivers behind both the *Archival Program* and the *Information Management Program*. However we are also careful to stress how the 'value-adds' of a good partnership can easily address the common question or attitude 'What's in it for me?'

One of the more immediate 'value-adds' has been the establishment of better communication between units resulting from the standardized vocabulary inherent in a uniform classification system. Recordkeepers familiar with UCLASS are now so used to the naming conventions and the titles of individual Primaries and Blocks that they tend to ask other units for similar records by these names. Recordkeepers searching for supplemental information on a specific issue have found the knowledge invaluable that certain activities are common across campus and that other record series will reflect the same information across units. Since the University experiences continual movement of staff as individuals transfer from department to department, we have also found that the use of UCLASS lessens the learning curve for these recordkeepers as they move around campus.

While the introduction of the *Freedom of Information/Protection of Privacy Act* (or FOIP) created some feelings of trepidation among the recordkeepers, we are careful to frame this legislation as another 'value-add'. Post-secondary educational institutions became subject to this provincial legislation on 01 September 1999. The *Act* impacted the recordkeeping and records management practices on campus by granting any person the right of access to the records in the custody or under the control of the university, subject of course to limited and specific exceptions.

The *Act* has provided the University Archives with the proverbial 'big stick' to ensure compliance with rules and regulations. However, we try not to over-use this approach with our recordkeeping partners. We always frame the necessity of complying with legislation in a positive light. Rather than significantly changing recordkeeping on campus, we remind staff that in actuality the *Act* served only to reinforce the pre-existing concept of accountability to the public. We also emphasize the fact that partnering with the University Archives can ease recordkeeping responsibilities by reducing problems in the retrieval of records and providing expert guidance on the accessibility and protection of records.

A more immediate 'value-add' to the partnership is that some of the common recordkeeping problems on campus can be brought and kept under control. These common problems include the proliferation of records, office clutter, and the daily stress of not finding records when the need arises. Examples from prior experiences can underline this aspect of the partnership: the outcome of the full conversion in the Executive Suite resulted in 78 file drawers reduced to 26 or a reduction of 4,500 files down to 1,300. Partnerships are easier to maintain when you can demonstrate that your contribution to the relationship will help to create an easier recordkeeping and working environment.

Emphasizing the Continuum

The benefits or '*value-adds*' of the partnership can still fail to resonate as much as we would hope with recordkeepers. For those units who have never experienced the feeling of controlled panic that typically results after receiving an access request under the *Freedom of Information/Protection of Privacy Act*, the fact is lost on them that partnering with the University Archives programs can make their life easier.

To address this attitude, the University Archives constantly reiterates to recordkeepers that all components of the programs are inter-related. When we discuss the University Classification System, we explain that each Primary in UCLASS constitutes a record series and that each record series has, or will eventually have, a retention rule assigned to it. Recordkeepers then learn that these retention rules stipulate whether a record series is ultimately preserved in the Archives or destroyed via recycling or shredding. Retention rules also contain detailed instructions on who has a right to access certain records. These instructions can significantly alleviate the uncertainties of how to comply with policies or legislation.

Recordkeepers frequently experience what we call the '*a-ha*' or '*light-bulb*' moment when they come to understand that all these elements are tied together. Most recordkeepers on campus are too busy to distinguish the forest from the trees. They are so buried in their day-to-day work that they understandably cannot separate out their specific record issues from the long-term goal of the Archives: to accurately identify and ultimately preserve the institutional record. Providing recordkeepers with this light-bulb moment guarantees that the records continuum becomes real to them. The records in their file cabinets take on a global context. Partnering with the University Archives has the result of empowering recordkeepers by giving them the authority both to destroy records and to say '*no*' to senior administrators who may not have the right to access certain files.

Long-Term Benefits

While we are constantly working to show how our partnership can benefit the recordkeepers, there are also long-term benefits that have begun to accrue to the University Archives. The archivists did experience some initial unease when we introduced the classification system at the senior administration level in 1996 and found ourselves working extensively with active records. However, from our first foray into this non-traditional realm as archivists we are now seeing significant results. We have been able to identify the location of permanent series of records and we have greatly increased our understanding of the functional analysis process.

There has also been a noticeable expansion in clients using UCLASS in archival records retrieval. Records organized by UCLASS and transferred to the Archives tend to be filed in a more orderly fashion. This in turn makes it easier for Archives staff to retrieve them for clients and other users. In addition, with more records being transferred for permanent preservation in this orderly state, archivists are required to do less arrangement and description. The application of records retention rules at the office level and the subsequent shredding of records deemed unworthy of preservation results in less culling of records once they reach the Archives. By empowering recordkeepers in the partnership, only those records worth preserving are transferred to the Archives.

Training

Continual training is offered to the recordkeepers since we recognize that a good training program is essential to maintaining the necessary flow of communication in the partnership. Two modules are offered twice a year in our *'Keeping and Managing Records at the UofC'* training program. Training is initially opened up to any new Records Coordinators who may have been appointed since the last training session. The courses are then made available to all interested recordkeepers on campus. Offering these training modules twice a year is essential. The continually rotating and changing staff at the University necessitates the development of new relationships and partnerships with recordkeepers on a constant basis: 50 new individuals were trained over the course of seven years in one group of offices.

The first module *'Foundations'* covers all the recordkeeping and records management basics including definitions of records, non-records, and record series. We also include a fairly lengthy section on how to create and maintain complete, reliable and authentic records. The life cycle model is used extensively in the *Foundations* course as an easy visual concept for recordkeepers to grasp and as an illustration of how to recognize semi-active and inactive records. The *Foundations* course explains the procedures for transferring inactive records to the Archives for permanent storage or setting them aside for destruction. We also use the life cycle model in the second course on the *'Master Records Retention Schedule'* to demonstrate when and how retention rules apply to semi-active and inactive record series.

Besides the formal group training sessions we also try to offer individual training sessions for new recordkeepers. Individual sessions tend to be much shorter and specific to questions of the moment instead of the more rigid format represented by the two main modules. While structured group training is more cost and time effective when you have an organization with a small number of trainers and a vast number of trainees, the group training package must of necessity be created at a very general level. Group training tends to capture a number of recordkeepers from a number of units representing a number of different functions and activities. Where group training can succeed in offering the fundamentals of good recordkeeping practices, individual and personalized training sessions are able to capture those recordkeepers struggling with unit-specific questions: How does this partnership affect *my* office and *my* files and *my* records?

We are currently in the process of reviewing our training modules. At the University, the current buzzword and thinking is centered on *Inquiry Based Learning*. This essentially implies that involvement in learning leads to understanding. The concept of *Inquiry Based Learning* is easy to apply when partnering with recordkeepers. A major component that will be built into our group training package will be several opportunities for hands-on, client-specific learning experiences. Recordkeepers will be invited to bring copies of their own files and records to the training program. Participants will be able to apply the foundations of good recordkeeping practices to real documents, instead of passively following canned examples provided by the instructors.

Learning from Recordkeepers

Although we possess a certain body of knowledge as professional archivists, we often find ourselves in the role of the student. None of us should ever fall into the trap of issuing forth from our offices like Moses coming down from Mount Sinai armed with the *'Ten Commandments of Recordkeeping.'* While there are certain rules and standards

that enable a partnership to function appropriately across all units, we should always be aware of what we can learn every day from recordkeepers.

Many of the cues and clues that we have incorporated into good recordkeeping practices on campus actually came from our clients. While recordkeepers may not be aware of the definition of a record series, they do have awareness of the context in which they create and file records: they know which records should be placed together in order to create a body of files that can be accessed for the information they need. Documenting the natural flow of information as captured by recordkeepers has been invaluable in the creation of retention rules and in the identification of record series.

Our role as archivists is to discover the best practices already existing at the University, to document and trace the contextual bonds of existing record series, and suggest further refinements to working filing systems. Recordkeepers frequently have well-defined practices and processes that we would be foolish not to recognize and incorporate into the records continuum. Why reinvent the wheel if your partners have already done the work for you?

Conclusion

Every member of the recordkeeping partnership at the University of Calgary has their role to play in the records continuum. As archivists, we develop the policies and standards for the creation and maintenance of records and we build and deliver the training programs. We research and establish retention rules and develop procedures for transferring records and for destroying records. Our recordkeeping partners in turn ensure that complete, reliable and authentic records are created and maintained, transferred or destroyed as appropriate.

We are constantly aware that the best policies, procedures and standards are only so much paper without the partners required to carry them out. Our partnership with the recordkeepers at the University of Calgary is still very much a work in progress, but it is a partnership that is working.