



University Policy: Records Retention and Disposal

Policy Category: Finance and Business

Subject: Retention, maintenance, and disposal of official university records

Responsible Executive: CFO, Vice President and Treasurer

Office Responsible for Review of this Policy: Office of Finance and Treasurer

Procedures: American University Records Retention Schedule, Enterprise Backup Procedures

Related University Policies:

I. SCOPE

This policy addresses the retention and disposal of the university's files and records, regardless of format, and applies to all university departments.

II. POLICY STATEMENT

American University requires records retention and disposal to be a standardized process. Staff in designated official repositories must follow access, maintenance, retention, and disposal procedures for university records.

In addition, duplicate or multiple copies of these records, retained in locations other than official repositories, must also be properly disposed of when they are outdated and no longer useful.

This policy is intended to ensure that the university:

- meets legal and regulatory standards;
- reduces risk by prioritizing the disposal of confidential data contained in inactive records;
- optimizes the use of electronic and physical storage space;
- minimizes the cost of record retention;
- preserves the history of the university; and
- destroys inactive records.

III. DEFINITIONS

Permanent (Archival) Record: A record that has permanent legal, institutional or historical value to the university.

Active Record: A record with current use for the unit that generated it. Records remain active for varying numbers of years, depending on the purpose for which they were created.

Inactive Record: A record with no current use for the unit that generated it and that has not yet reached the end of its retention period.

Non-Record: Records that are not considered university records include, but are not limited to, extra copies of original documents and publications kept only for convenience or reference, and blank forms.

Vital Record: Emergency operation record immediately necessary to begin recovery of business after a disaster.

Official Repository: The unit designated as having responsibility for retention and timely destruction of particular types of official university records. Such responsibility is assigned to the head of the unit or a designee.

Originating Department: The unit in which an original document was generated or received.

University Archives: A component of the University Library that promotes knowledge and understanding of the university's origins, aims, programs, and goals; and facilitates effective records management. This includes permanent retention of official records and reports of the university, its officers and component parts; maps and architectural records; audiovisual materials including still photographs and negatives, motion picture film, oral history interviews, audio and video tapes; and artifacts and ephemera documenting the university's history.

University Archivist: The individual responsible for 1) designating which official university records are archival; and 2) effecting the transfer of archival records from the unit in which they originated or were received to the university archives at such time and in the manner and form prescribed by the archives and subject to the appropriate retention and disposition schedules that are outlined in the university's records retention schedule.

University Record: Any form of recorded information, regardless of physical characteristics that is created, received, recorded, or filed in the course of University business or in the fulfillment of the University's legal obligations. University records serve as evidence of the University's organization functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, transactions or other activities.

NOTE: An official record can be in the form of original paper or may be a digital surrogate at the discretion of the official repository.

IV. POLICY

A. Managing Official University Records

Since no one person or unit can be directly responsible for all campus records and files, users throughout the community share in the task of adhering to the retention and disposal policy. Units that maintain university records are called "official repositories." They are responsible for establishing appropriate record retention management practices. Official records should be stored consistently within the unit in a manner that provides protection against misuse, misplacement, damage, destruction, unauthorized exposure, or theft. Each official repository's administrative manager or a designee must:

- implement the unit’s record management practices;
- ensure these management practices are consistent with the policy;
- educate the staff within the unit in understanding sound record management practices;
- ensure that records are retained in a readable format regardless of changes in technology or equipment obsolescence by 1) printing out archival or permanent documents and saving to a file system, 2) maintaining the old equipment and software applications, or 3) migrating the records to a new technology;
- preserve records of historic value, consult with university archivist and transfer those records to the university archives;
- preserve permanent records within unit;
- destroy inactive records that have no archival value upon passage of the applicable retention period;
- ensure access to confidential files is restricted to authorized users only;
- be aware of current timing standards for the disposal of long-term enterprise data backups kj do not rely on such processes for compliance with this policy. These standards are established by the Office of Information Technology (“OIT”) and are further defined in the OIT Enterprise Backup Procedures found on the OIT website at Custodians’ obligations for preserving records transcend and supersede any OIT policies, practices or procedures for long-term enterprise data backups; and
- ensure that outside vendors used for record storage follow the university’s record retention policy.

The university’s Records Retention Schedule lists the official repositories for university records as well as how long these records must be retained. Units that are not official repositories but retain duplicate or multiple copies of these university records should dispose of them when they are no longer useful.

[NOTE: In the event of a pending or expected lawsuit, claim, audit, program review or administrative charge, all relevant records, regardless of physical format, including e-mails, must be preserved and safeguarded until the litigation or proceeding has terminated and the time for all appeals has expired. You should contact the Office of General Counsel immediately if you have questions about this note.]

B. Preserving Official University Records

When University records, regardless of format, become inactive, consult with the University Archivist to determine if Permanent (Archival) Records should be transferred to the University Archives, or permanently maintained in the unit where it originated or was received.

Most University records which contain employment, personnel or legal information should be treated as confidential, non-archival records. Please contact the Office of General Counsel immediately if you have a question about the characterization of a record with this type of information.

Caution: Periodically review records that were generated and maintained in university information systems or equipment to ensure that these requirements are met.

C. Disposing of Official University Records

a. If you have determined that it is appropriate to dispose of the records, destroy them in one of the following ways:

- Paper Records: Non-confidential paper records may be recycled.
- Email: Delete all emails that are more than two years old, unless the record retention schedule specifies otherwise.
- Confidential Records: Shred or otherwise render unreadable records with confidential information, including social security numbers, credit card information, driver's license information, patient treatment information, or other information designated confidential. Appropriate measures need to be taken when disposing of records containing personal identifying information, such as a name, address, phone number, personal mark, or other identifier that can be used to identify a person, when coupled with one or more data elements including social security number, driver's license number, mother's maiden name, financial services or bank account number, etc., by 1) shredding the record, 2) destroying the personal identifying information contained in the record, 3) modifying the record to make the personal identifying information unreadable, or 4) taking reasonable actions consistent with commonly accepted industry practice.
- Electronic Records other than Email: The Office of Information Technology (OIT) IT Asset Management (ITAM) group arranges for the proper disposal of all electronic devices or media in a manner that prevents inadvertent loss or disclosure. Other AU policies and applicable law also govern proper disposal of AU information and licensed software on electronic devices and media. In addition, proprietary information may also be subject to the terms of sponsored research agreements, non-disclosure agreements, or license agreements. Unit administrators are responsible for contacting ITAM or the OIT HelpDesk. They will assist in ensuring that the guidelines below are followed.
 - The information on any computer hard drive, smart phone, or other electronic device must be erased and not recoverable before the equipment is reassigned within a unit. Contact the OIT HelpDesk for assistance.
 - Outdated or broken computer equipment or other electronic devices will be picked up by completing the AU Hardware Recycling request form. AU's contracted disposal vendor will properly erase any information contained within the equipment that cannot be erased by ITAM.

This policy and the associated retention schedule were developed after reviewing various record retention policies and schedules from leading universities and other authorities. They were then customized to reflect best practices at AU.

While the policy and schedule identify many of the records generated and retained throughout the university, they cannot cover every situation or anticipate future additions and modifications. Therefore, these are to be considered "living documents" that will be modified or changed as needed. When a record falls into more than one category, the longer retention period governs. Record retention periods may be increased by government regulation, judicial or administrative consent order, private or governmental contract, pending litigation, or audit requirements. Such modifications supersede the requirements listed in this policy. Suspension of record destruction required for any of these reasons will be accomplished by a notice sent out to affected units. You are encouraged to submit your suggestions for improvements and additions or modifications to the retention schedule to the Office of Finance and Treasurer "vpfin@american.edu"

V. EFFECTIVE DATE

This Policy is effective September 27, 2021.

Last reviewed January 2009; November 2010; May 2014; January 2015, September 2021