ESTABLISHING A UNIVERSITY RECORDS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM FROM THE INSIDE OUT

BY JOANNE KACZMAREK

ABSTRACT: Records management and archives have shared common ground throughout history. Records-related concepts like authenticity and provenance have gained considerable attention in recent times, particularly since the dialog has expanded to include electronic records and digital preservation. Regardless of renewed interests in these age-old issues, records management in higher education is often poorly funded and not a high priority. During a climate of budget cuts, the Archives of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign reframed its approach to records management by launching an initiative using an “inside-out” approach, emphasizing information needs rather than mandates, and embedding information professionals inside departments and units. This article explains how this approach gained traction through early projects with the campus power plant and facilities departments, how these projects created momentum for other projects, and how they garnered support for records and information management in a more formalized and financially sound way. Concluding remarks include an overview of the elements that made the projects successful, and describe current efforts to extend the program to a university-wide, permanently funded entity.

Background

By some measure, records management is as old as civilization itself. Luciana Duranti, in her two-part history of records management, takes the reader on an abbreviated journey back to 4000 BC to a place where, “... remembrancers and interpreters had the fundamental function of modern records managers of preserving information about actions and transactions for the interests of their creators and the functioning and development of their society.” Throughout history, record-keeping activities have been intertwined with activities that may more closely look like those performed by an archivist. In modern times, records management maintains a relationship to the archives profession across all sectors of society. This relationship can be seen even
within the business world, where one may think to find little interest in archives. The responsibilities of the records managers and archivists and the confusion over their roles is described by William Beneden. In his seminal book, Records Management, Beneden writes, “Where no specific purpose is announced for a company history, it is still incumbent upon the records manager to provide for the retention of records which may have value.” Beneden further encourages us to consider the overlap of the records manager and the archivist, “I, for one, have always been concerned about the split in concept, theory and understanding between archivists and records managers. I believe they are one.”

In the last decade, as the challenges of electronic records have come front and center, the records and information management literature has done well to continue to emphasize the interrelated roles of archivist and records manager, despite their sometimes competing frameworks. In Closing an Era: Historical Perspectives on Modern Archives and Records Management, Richard Cox provides a thorough review of the history of both professions. As Cox brings to our attention the complexities of the electronic environment, questions immediately arise: “... [S]hould everything be printed out on paper or maintained in electronic form? ... [H]ow do we account for rapidly changing hardware and software?” These questions have renewed the call to reframe the roles and responsibilities of archivists and records managers and how they engage in the management of our institutions’ information resources.

Margaret Hedstrom points out that emerging models for electronic record-keeping systems include both archival and records management roles at the conceptual phase of the records life cycle. The topics of authenticity, provenance, and long-term preservation and access have spurred on many national and international research initiatives. These initiatives have focused attention on the creator of the record, suggesting archivists and records managers must be involved early in the life cycle process to ensure proper care of records of enduring value. While archivists and records managers debate such details as the philosophical and practical differences between the continuum model and the records life cycle model, engagement with the records creators has yet to be realized in a significant way.

It is hard to dispute that a necessary component of a good records management program is strong support from upper management. This is equally true in business, government, and higher education. William Saffady suggests support is demonstrated by the development and dissemination of policy statements. But true support beyond an occasional cursory public statement seems difficult to gain in the academic environment. Without a good records management program, an institution creates unneeded risk for itself when it carries out inconsistent oversight of records creation, storage, and dissemination. The absence of a good records management program also bears on the quality and integrity of the institutional archives.

Even in the presence of legal mandates, institutional policies, actual or threatened litigation, and frequent news stories involving improper destruction or unauthorized release of records, minimal support for records management continues to be the norm in colleges and universities. Several surveys of college and university archivists have been undertaken to document how and where records management activities occur within the institutional structure. In her summary of these surveys, Nancy Kunde calls
on records professionals to be "... attuned to their own institutions to know what might make the most effective case for their records programs."\textsuperscript{15}

In an attempt to address a long-standing need to develop a records management program at the University of Illinois, the Archives has taken an approach of reframing records and information management toward a needs-based rather than a mandate-based perspective. As a state university, all campus departments are subject to the State Records Act of Illinois.\textsuperscript{16} Any reframing of the approach to records management cannot lose sight of these mandates. Nonetheless, by focusing first on the information management needs of departments rather than on the state and institutional mandates, the Archives has been able to gain more continuing support from all levels of administration. This in turn makes records management efforts more effective and sustainable. Perhaps more importantly, the success of any approach to records management will help secure the documentary evidence necessary for a healthy archives program.

**Records Management from the Inside Out**

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has never had a true records management program. Since the inception of the University Archives, in the absence of a records management program, efforts have focused solely on records-disposition activities. Understandably, this has hindered the Archives' ability to secure university records of enduring value. This hindrance has been magnified by the records management issues introduced by electronic records.

In 2003, in an attempt to build a much-needed records management infrastructure, the Archives launched an initiative informally called Strategic Information Management Services (SIMS). This initiative was designed to invoke a supportive climate for records management. The SIMS initiative focuses first on immediate departmental information needs and only after that on meeting records management mandates. The belief is that this approach will help the Archives obtain better university-wide involvement and compliance with the records management obligations. And this, in turn, will give the Archives a better opportunity to secure records of enduring value.

SIMS seeks project-based funding that supports hiring project specialists who are embedded within departments but still report to the Archives. In a sense, SIMS approaches records management from the inside out, not just top-down or bottom-up. It is true that the program works both from the top and the bottom, initiating conversations with staff to identify their immediate perceived needs, and gaining support from management to fund initiatives on a project-by-project basis. But operationally, the program works from the inside, embedding project staff to work alongside departmental staff while still reporting to the Archives. The primary aim is to identify the most pressing information needs of the department and propose a solution to meet those needs, regardless of how well meeting those needs initially helps to address the legal mandates of record keeping. Engaging university departments in projects focused on their immediate information needs will eventually result in better records and information management. This improvement occurs by developing more of a partnership relationship between the records creators and the University Archives, encouraging
them to work together toward compliance and records disposition or transfer. While it is true that garnering support from the administrators of these units is essential, having archival representatives working closely alongside departmental staff is a key component to the success of the SIMS initiative.

Good records and information management by default must have a strategic component to it.17 Calling the services offered through SIMS "strategic," and focusing on the word "information" rather than "records," are mainly attempts to shift perceptions beyond the hackneyed regulatory view of records management often conjured up by the RM and RIM acronyms.

The SIMS initiative emerged from a convergence of factors: (1) a long-standing lack of support for a regularized records management program, (2) the recent creation of an archivist for electronic records position in an attempt to address the complexities and quagmires of such materials, and (3) an opportunity for funding a project to address an immediate information need at Abbott, the campus power plant. Early success of the power plant project opened an opportunity for a simultaneous project with the campus Facilities and Services division, which oversees management of many aspects of the physical environment of the university.

As previously noted, the Archives does not yet have a recognized records management program. It also does not promulgate general records schedules, and relies on one-fifth of the time of one full-time employee to oversee the process of securing approved Records Disposal Authorizations (RDAs) for any department or unit that has an inclination to destroy records and remembers to call the Archives. The RDA approval process is exhaustive, inefficient, and has limited capacity to be responsive and proactive, thereby leaving vast numbers of departmental records of potentially enduring value outside the purview of the Archives.

In 2002, the University established a new position, archivist for electronic records, in part as a response to the increasing rate of institutional records produced in digital or electronic format. Among other things, the archivist for electronic records was expected to investigate issues related to university records with the deployment of an enterprise-wide system using the Banner SCT software18 that promised to provide integrated information systems for personnel, student, and financial affairs. Early discussions with persons involved in this initiative highlighted the enormity and impossibility of the task of addressing electronic records management during deployment of the system. Backtracking was not an option, as it would have required redesigning the system to include records management components when these had originally been left out of the scope of the project. This led the Archives to focus instead on projects that would build sustainable support for a records management program through which electronic records concerns could then be addressed. The Archives decided to approach the matter by focusing on specific and carefully scoped projects that addressed immediate information needs of departmental staff rather than focusing on regulatory compliance of the institution.

Through informal conversations between the Archives and the campus power plant manager, the Archives learned that daily operational needs of information for the staff were not being met. The regulatory nature of power plant operations made a compelling argument for the development and maintenance of good information-management
practices. If such practices could be put in place by the Archives staff, with minimal effort on the part of the power plant staff and with minimal impact on daily operations, the SIMS initiative would be successfully launched.

**Abbott Power Plant Project**

In June 2003, the Archives undertook the first year of a projected three-year project with Abbott, the campus power plant. Abbott was built as a coal-burning facility in 1939 and was upgraded in the late 1960s to accommodate the use of fuel oil, but the plant went through numerous other retrofits, reconversions, modifications, and repairs over the years. More than 160 campus buildings are heated and cooled by Abbott, which also produces about one third of the campus’s electrical demand. The growing energy needs of the campus, coupled with regularly shifting energy costs and tighter state budgets provide an ongoing challenge for the power plant. The staff oversees regular maintenance, emergency repairs, and additions to the plant’s energy producing capabilities, all without interruption to daily operations. Easy and timely access to accurate information resources and the ability to produce appropriate documentation on demand to assure compliance with state and federal regulations are essential for its operation.

The Archives proposed the Abbott project in response to an interest expressed by the plant manager to standardize information resources necessary for efficient and safe operations. Finding appropriate or essential information had often become difficult and inefficient, requiring plant operators and engineers to make best guesses as to where any particular resource could be found. These inefficiencies were in part a result of the compounding effects of staffing shortages, coupled with the lack of a clear filing system. This inattention to information and records management created operational challenges. Through a series of meetings and visits to the power plant, the Archives staff established a brief scope-of-work statement with enough detail to convey the need for long-term support. The project scope included an inventory of paper and electronic records and documents, the creation and approval of an RDA, and the development of a master equipment list and a list linking daily operations tasks to mandated maintenance schedules and inspections.

Once the Archives received final approval of the first-year project plan and budget, it hired a full-time person to oversee the project. It is no understatement to note that the nature of the person chosen for this position would be a key element in the project’s success. Prior to hiring the project specialist, the Archives assessed what skill set the successful candidate would need to execute the project plan. The successful candidate would need the knowledge base and an understanding of information systems that generally comes with an MLS degree. Because the power plant is a dirty, noisy environment, often with maintenance or construction projects underway, he or she would also need to have a high degree of tolerance for an unconventional office environment, a pleasant disposition, an ability to develop a collaborative work environment, and be comfortable working both with blue collar workers as well as administrators. The candidate would be expected to execute a complex and extensive inventory of records,
establish a technical reference library, and set up information management processes based on work flow and the daily information needs of plant engineers and operators more attuned to the operation of coal bins, boilers, steam turbines, and scrubbers than indexing systems and disposition schedules.

Abbott Project Plan Specifics
The project proposal was brief and somewhat informal. The proposal explained that the work was substantial and would likely require three years to complete. Funding was requested only for the first year, with funding for the subsequent years contingent on success of the first. Funds supported the salary of the full-time project specialist, plus 20 percent. The 20 percent was used to cover unforeseen miscellaneous expenses, professional development, and compensation for administrative time spent overseeing the project. Compensation for the Archives’ administrative time was spent to support various processing projects within the Archives. While it was clear the project would require more than one year for noticeable success, not insisting on the full three-year funding commitment up-front made approving the project easier and worked better with the power plant’s budget planning.

The Abbott project was multifaceted and complex. It involved executing a comprehensive inventory of all records, drawings, and documentation located in the plant manager and engineers’ offices, developing an RDA and securing approval for it from the State of Illinois State Records Commission,\(^1\) creating a Web portal for disseminating information to plant operators, compiling an on-line master inventory of electronic records and documents, training staff in using the information systems, and coordinating the scanning and indexing of thousands of plant and equipment drawings and manuals. For the duration of the project, the plan proposed to support the information needs of daily operations, such as locating specific drawings for technicians tasked with equipment repairs, as well as tending to specific records management needs. Daily operational information needs resulting from an unscheduled event, such as a boiler breakdown, were categorized as “unexpected,” and regularly scheduled events, like a maintenance task related to the ash handling system, were labeled “expected.” To provide support for these information needs, the project specialist had to become familiar with the basic operations and business functions of the plant at a level of intensity significantly greater than the usual external involvement of the Archives in office operations. An analysis and documentation of the plant’s work processes provided some background for this purpose and helped identify, as part of the overall inventory of activities, where records were being created and maintained.

Once the inventory was nearly completed, materials were gathered and organized to become the core elements of a technical library. The project specialist provided on-line access to scanned drawings and manuals through the power plant Web portal. Another key outcome of the project was the creation of a records management plan that included an approved RDA. After year one, the Abbott project demonstrated enough success to garner sufficient support for funding the second and third years.
Facilities and Services Project

Based on the success of the first year of the Abbott project, the Archives negotiated a related one-year project for the campus Facilities and Services department (F&S), again with the option to approve continued support for a second year. This project focused more specifically on several large records-inventory projects, one of which was the inventory of planning documents for all campus buildings, which included as-built architectural drawings, specifications, and project manuals. The project also included an assessment of how information needs are expressed and subsequently met by various department staff, and it provided some support for daily information needs.

Facilities and Services is an umbrella department for the university. Within the time period of these projects, F&S underwent several mergers that resulted in increased oversight responsibilities for multiple campuswide services. The full scope of F&S now combines the functions of capital planning and construction as well as maintenance and space use of buildings, the operations of the campus stores, parking, printing and photocopying services, and safety compliance. The inventory component of this project focused solely on materials related to the construction, planning, and maintenance divisions of F&S.

Funding for both years of the project was in line with that of the Abbott project, including sufficient funds for one full-time project specialist, plus 20 percent. F&S underwrote the first year of the project, in part because of the positive feedback about the information management systems set up for the Abbott Power Plant. Abbott traditionally relies on many of the F&S support services, such as oversight of plant construction projects, information technology support for desktop computing, and the management of power plant, utility, and construction documents and drawings. Ties between Abbott and F&S made the benefits of the power plant project evident to F&S management.

The Archives sought a full-time project specialist for the F&S project but was unable to hire one within the time frame required for the work. Instead, the first year of the project relied on several half-time project specialists augmented with student help. While these circumstances were not ideal, the project was still successful and able to benefit from coordination with the ongoing project at Abbott. Having two projects underway simultaneously with two campus units that worked closely together was a benefit to the Archives’ administration of the projects as well as to the projects themselves. For instance, the file-naming conventions and access mechanisms for electronic images of architectural drawings developed for Abbott could be applied to the F&S project.

F&S Project Plan Specifics

The Facilities and Services project also started with an informal proposal document. The focus of the work was on a large detailed inventory of the campus planning department’s construction drawings, specifications, operations and maintenance manuals, and building project manuals. When F&S extended the project for a second year, activities expanded to include assisting with negotiating naming conventions for electronic files; developing an on-line search tool for the inventoried materials; assist-
ing with requests for information; continuing the inventory projects; and supporting project documentation logging practices.

It is important to note that the project plan was written explicitly to make clear that the project was only a subset of what would be needed for a comprehensive document and information management plan similar to that of Abbott Power Plant. Due to the extensive breadth and complexity of the F&S department, the Archives wanted to avoid accidental expansion of the original project scope. By expressly stating that the work was only a subset of a much larger project, the Archives helped point out the need for an entire systematic approach for good records and information management. Making this distinction explicit helped win support for the creation of a full-time records and information management specialist position at the end of the second year of the F&S project. While that position resides under the administration and budget of F&S rather than the Archives, it is a great advantage to the Archives to have a contact at F&S who has a full-time focus on records and information management.

Recap and Observations

The Strategic Information Management Services initiative was launched during one of the most fiscally restrictive periods in the university’s recent history, including consecutive budget cuts and a university-wide freeze on hiring. Early success of the program has earned it continued project-based support for five consecutive years. Institutional funding is now being secured to create the infrastructure for a permanent program. However, even as a permanent program, the expectation is that these services will continue to seek project funding to support specific immediate departmental needs. The Archives believes this approach will improve the likelihood that university and state records mandates can be met as records scheduling and disposition approval is worked into funded project activities.

Success in building a records and information management program depends on several factors. Understandably, a key factor is having the right personnel. Staff with equally well-developed people and information skills is absolutely essential, but organizational skills and an ability to be self-directed are also needed. The background provided by an MLS degree or equivalent experience, an outgoing, extroverted personality, and an interest in helping others are also very important. Embedding a project specialist in a unit or department, or requiring him or her to work closely with unit staff is also an important ingredient for success. It is worth noting that establishing support for these projects began through informal channels, and by focusing on the perceived needs of the staff. The informalities of early discussions and E-mail exchanges helped to establish support from management, both in principle and for the necessary funding.

The successful Abbott Power Plant and F&S projects indicate that good records and information management is of value to institutions of higher education. Both projects resulted in the creation of positions to provide ongoing support for the systems and activities set up by the project specialists. F&S created a full-time records and information management specialist position, and Abbott established a quarter-time position to
sustain the systems set up for the power plant. These outcomes demonstrate how the shift by records managers to emphasizing immediate needs created a shift in perception about the value of information management. This in turn resulted in a shift in business organization and operations, culminating in the creation of new positions.

The Abbott and F&S projects have also led the way to propose and receive nearly $2,000 to complete a records inventory and subsequent RDA for the College of Business. This was the first time the Archives received financial support to create a records schedule for an entire college. In turn, the RDA for the College of Business marks a beginning step toward formulating general schedules for the University. Tangent to this collegewide RDA, the Archives was able to demonstrate a financial savings of over $26,000 to the College of Business by offering convenient, accessible storage for graduate admissions files that were on the brink of being scanned for access purposes. Since access is needed only infrequently (one or two files pulled from a total of about two thousand files every two or three months), the Archives recommended instead that the records be reboxed, indexed, and securely stored in the Library’s remote storage facility. The cost to the College of Business to prepare these records was $839 for approximately 120 cubic feet. It took one month and several part-time persons to complete preparation of the records. Currently there are no storage costs charged to the college for these records, but the Library expects to charge a competitive fee for this service in the future. Such simple projects demonstrate how the Library and Archives can support the general operations of the campus as well as its research, teaching, and scholarship. This in turn may build broader continuing support for the Library and Archives over time.

All of these information management projects have helped the Archives gain approval and funding for a three-part proposal to work with the Office of Business and Financial Services (OBFS), a central administration unit of the University of Illinois. The OBFS is responsible for coordinating business and financial transactions across all three campuses. This work started with funding for a two-year records survey project. The expected project outcome is an approved RDA that should facilitate the scheduling of business records management throughout the University. Once that is completed, the second phase of this project will develop a process for keeping the RDA up-to-date. The third phase is designed to work closely with University Archives to promulgate best practices for information and records management across all three campuses and central administration units. The cumulative outcomes of all these projects provide the underpinnings of what we hope will become a fully supported records and information management program.

**Conclusion**

The records management and archives professions share a long and intertwined relationship. Working in concert, professionals in these fields help render a trustworthy historical record for institutions and society. In light of the complexities of electronic records, there must be a renewed focus on the interdependency and relationships between the two professions. Both groups express concerns over managing attributes,
such as authenticity and provenance, ascribed to records. These concerns, among others, have brought attention to the records-creation process itself and the need for information professionals to engage directly with the records creators early in the records’ life cycle. But such engagement remains difficult.

Records management issues are present in colleges and universities just as they are in businesses and governments. At the same time, records management programs continue to lack strong or consistent support in higher education. This lack of support may be due in part to the academic priorities of institutions of higher education. Refocusing the institution’s records and information management services on meeting the information needs of departments, rather than focusing on state and local records management mandates, can help earn support that might otherwise be lost by the big stick approach. This kind of focus can also create an opportunity for the Archives to become engaged directly with the records creators, thereby resulting in a better likelihood of good records management and compliance with regulatory mandates. Direct engagement with records creators is also seen as a necessary component for good stewardship of permanently valuable content that should flow to the Archives.

If records and information management services have not yet been formally established, gaining support for these services can be encouraged by developing a strategy that looks at records management from the inside out, situating project staff directly in the unit rather than working from the outside and relying solely on external mandates. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Archives used this approach by responding to the needs of the staff at the campus power plant, getting their records in order and making them more easily accessible. From the power plant project, opportunities for other projects have arisen, building momentum and a campus constituency. Permanent funding for a records management program is now in sight.

Perhaps it’s time to stop wielding the weight of state mandates and university rules, and focus instead on immediate departmental information-management needs. By doing this, our records management programs may have a renewed opportunity to gain momentum. These programs can then better support our archival programs, ensuring good stewardship of our institutional history.

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NOTES

7. Ibid., 120.
15. Kunde, “Re-Framing Records Management.”