

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS GUIDELINES FOR EMAIL RECORDS

Email is a Record

Despite the informal "feel" of email, electronic messages are records. Just like paper records, email messages and attachments serve to document the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, and other activities of your department. Thus, it is important to understand that the email messages you send and receive are records of the College and as such as subject to its Records Retention Policy

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/privacy-security/links/>

The College is not alone in recognizing email as a record. Federal and state courts, government regulatory agencies, and many corporate and academic entities view email as a record. In recent litigation, email has been treated as any other documentary source: it is discoverable and has been produced in court with dramatic results.

Email - Benefits & Risks

The potential liability of email can be minimized, and the benefits maximized by good records management practices. Poorly managed email records are those that are:

- Purged without regard for the valuable information being discarded or for College or federally mandated retention periods.
- Retained because it is too much trouble to evaluate them for destruction or for no particular reason beyond "just in case".
- Incomplete and a poor representation of an event or business transaction;
- Not in compliance with College requirements or professional standards for documentation of that type;

Well-managed email records are:

- Created, managed, and retained according to College requirements and professional best practices;
- Complete, and present a fair representation of events or transactions;
- Can be used to understand a past decision or serve as the basis for future decision-making.

College Guidelines on Retention of Email

One of the most important tools to manage your email is the College's Records Retention Policy. You can protect yourself and the College by using the Schedule to promptly destroy eligible records. You, and the College, can also profit by preserving records that are not yet eligible for destruction or are permanently valuable and will serve as the basis for future decisions.

The Records Retention Schedule lists by functional area all of the most common types of records produced in College departments. These include administration, finance, human resources, program management, public relations, faculty and departmental records. For each group of record types generated from an activity area, the Schedule assigns a retention period, the period of time the records must be retained. Most retention periods are six years or less; a small number of record types must be held for 10 years or longer. Retention periods apply to records in all media. The Schedule is available electronically - <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/privacy-security/links/>.

Retention

Transitory Information -- Delete
Substantive Information -- Retain

TRANSITORY INFORMATION

Many emails are transitory records that may be destroyed immediately. Some common types of transitory records sent as e-mail include:

- acknowledgements
- announcements
- arrangements inquiries
- courtesy correspondence
- declined invitations
- "for your information" copies on which no action is taken (including directives that are distributed widely)
- informational requests and responses
- meeting notices
- unsolicited resumes and inquiries.

SUBSTANTIVE INFORMATION

The College requires offices to transfer substantive messages, message transmission data, and attachments out of e-mail and into the appropriate paper or electronic files to be retained according to the retention schedule guidelines for those record series. Users should dispose of e-mail versions as soon as they are transferred to a more stable format and are no longer needed in the e-mail system. Some common types of substantive messages include:

- policy drafts and comments
- program development and review memoranda
- reports of official activities
- authorizations for expenditure
- agreement negotiations and finalization.

Generally speaking, e-mails that have substantive value are those that have future consequences, records that may be needed as the basis of future decisions or reports, or as part of an audit trail that documents and clarifies a decision. Widely distributed policies, such as directives and memoranda, should be considered of substantive value only in the

sending office. The many offices that receive such messages may consider them of shorter-term value, and may destroy them once their administrative usefulness expires.

Email Preservation

- Those e-mail records appraised as having long term, permanent, or historical value to the College must be retained in a medium that will be useable for future generations. Since there is no national standard for permanency of the e-mail medium, it is not considered acceptable for permanent record storage. Therefore, e-mail records that are of permanent value must be transferred to another acceptable medium for preservation. Print and file or save as .PDF/A and store on network. Please see Guidelines for Electronic Records Formats for further information -- <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/library/arch/gs/rules/erecords.shtml>.
- As noted under maintenance above, the envelope information must be retained with the e-mail record. This applies to long- term preservation as well.

Sources:

Managing the Digital Desktop <http://www.ils.unc.edu/digitaldesktop/>
Harvard University, Countway Library Archives and Records Management Program
<http://www.countway.harvard.edu/archives/index.shtml>
http://www.countway.harvard.edu/archives/email_tips.shtml

“E-Mail Policy and Best Practices“: A comprehensive guide from the College of Wisconsin, one of many available on the Web. <http://archives.library.wisc.edu/RM/ARMS/arms4.html>

Contact Archives and Special Collections Staff for help with any of these standards or to transfer records: archives@mtholyoke.edu