

## *How long should we keep our records?*

Unfortunately, there is no universal guide to record retention periods and disposition methods. Each record series needs to be examined individually in regard to usage patterns, departmental needs, historic value and legal issues.

Records Management currently holds material anywhere from 1 to 75 years, depending on a variety of factors. Even records that may appear similar between two departments often have very different usage patterns, and thus require very different retention strategies. However, the following two approaches may help you to formulate proper retention policies.

### *The “HALF-Life” Model*

Many Records Custodians have found it helpful to evaluate each record series based on the “HALF-Life” Model. In this model, a record typically displays value in each of four categories:

**Historic:** Does the record document an important part of Dartmouth’s history? Will it be a valuable resource to researchers many years from now?

**Administrative:** How often do you actually use the material? What is the value of the information to your daily operation? At what point would not having the material available cease to be a serious hardship?

**Legal:** Are there any external requirements to maintain the information, either from governmental or granting agencies? Does the record help to prevent a legal liability? Or does it perhaps pose a liability, even after the administrative value has disappeared?

**Fiscal:** Is the information necessary for tax or audit purposes? Is it helpful in future budget and fiscal planning?

After evaluating a record series in each of these four categories, in most cases you will have a good sense of how long the series should be kept.

It is also important to keep in mind that a record need not have lost all value in order to be disposed. There are many cases where a record still has some minor administrative value, but it is not enough to offset the storage and maintenance costs associated with keeping the record. (This is most often true with very large sets, with very low access frequencies.) In these cases, it may be appropriate to dispose of the record, despite the continuing administrative value.

If you would like more guidance in determining record retention times and disposition methods, contact the Records Manager.

### *The Robek Model*

A more “textbook” approach is provided by Robek, Brown and Stephens, recognized authorities in the area of Records Retention:

1. Avoid the “Every Conceivable Contingency” syndrome.
2. Information should be retained if there is a reasonable probability that it will be needed in some future time to support some legitimate legal or business objective, and the consequences of its absence would be substantial.
3. Retention policies should generally be conservative, in the sense that they should not expose the organization to an inordinate degree of risk.
4. Remember, the presence or absence of information can be either helpful or harmful; therefore the best way to minimize the risks is to provide for systematic disposal immediately after the expiration of a document’s value for legal and business purposes.
5. A retention period is most likely to be valid if it is based on a consensus of the opinions of persons most knowledgeable about the value of the information and the costs, risks, and benefits of its disposal.

—Robek, Mary F.; Brown, Gerald F.;  
and Stephens, David O.;  
*Information and Records Management*  
(New York: McGraw Hill, 1995)