Records Management in Canadian Universities:

The Present and the Future

By Shan Jin, MLIS, CRM, CIP

Introduction

This article presents findings from in-depth interviews with twenty-six records managers, archivists and privacy officers who work in twenty-one Canadian universities. It provides a comprehensive view on current records management practices in Canadian universities. The main topics include program staffing, program placement, records retention schedules and classification schemes, physical records storage and destruction, university records centre, Electronic Document and Records Management Systems (EDRMS), training, outreach and marketing. It also examines the relationships between the records management program and internal stakeholders and identifies the needs for knowledge sharing and collaboration in the academic records management community in Canada.

Literature Review

In both Canada and the United States, modern records management started from the federal government. Records management, as a professional management discipline, has been established for more than sixty years (Langemo 2; Fox 1). However, only a small number of scholarly articles were written on records management programs in the higher education environment in North America and even fewer focus on Canadian universities.

From early days, university archival programs often assumed responsibility for records management (Saffady 204). Until recently, many universities’ records management functions still largely resided with the archivist (Zach and Peri 106). From 1990 to 2010, several studies on academic records management programs were conducted by researchers using surveys and interviews. Some were large-scale studies, such as Skemer and William’s 1990 survey on the state of records management whose findings were based on responses from 449 four-year colleges and universities in the United States. Twenty years later, Zach and Peri conducted updated research on college and university electronic records management programs in the United States. Their article presented findings from their 2005 online survey of 193 institutions and interviews in 2006 with 22 academic archivists as well as their 2009 online survey of 126 institutions. Although the focus of these two studies was not on Canadian universities, they provided some comparable data that are referenced in this article.
There were some small-scale studies which complemented the Zach and Peri research. Schina and Wells’ 2002 survey of fifteen American institutions and fifteen Canadian institutions provided relevant information from more than a decade ago, which is cited in the findings section of the article. Furthermore, there were two comparative studies that presented historical information on the records management programs in the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University (Brown, et al. 1-20; Külçü 85-107).

Higher education institutions have unique organizational structures and institutional cultures and traditions, which affect how records management programs operate within a university. Since there is a lack of comprehensive studies on records management programs in Canadian higher education institutions, this study will help to fill a research gap.

**Research Scope and Methodology**

Universities Canada (formerly known as the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada) has ninety-seven member colleges and universities. Since it would be difficult to collect information from all of these universities over a short period of time, the author used a sampling method to decide the criteria for selecting participating universities for the study.

A quick email survey was sent to the records managers, archivists, or privacy officers of twenty Council of Ontario Universities (COU) members. The author asked these universities if they had a formal records management program with at least one employee who worked on records management for a minimum of fifty percent of his or her time. As demonstrated in the survey responses none of the small Ontario universities (with less than 10,000 students) had such a records management program (see table 1). Based on this finding, the author decided that eligible universities for this study would be those with an enrolment size of at least 10,000 students because those are more likely to have a formal records management program.

**Table 1**

| Ontario Universities with a Formal Records Management Program by Enrolment Size |
|---------------------------------|----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| Enrolment Size                  | <10K     | 10-20K | 20-30K | 30-40K | >40K   | Total   |
| COU Member Universities        | 6        | 4      | 5      | 2      | 3      | 20      |
| COU Member Universities with a | 0        | 1      | 3      | 2      | 3      | 9       |
| Formal Records Management Plan |          |        |        |        |        |         |
Due to limited resources for the study, the author chose to collect data using individual interviews instead of large-scale surveys. Between April 2015 and January 2016, thirty potential participants were contacted via email with a cover letter and a consent form and invited to participate in the study. Eventually, twenty-six records managers, archivists, and privacy officers from twenty-one publicly-assisted Canadian universities agreed to be interviewed. Table 2 lists the number of participating institutions by province.

Table 2
The Number of Participating Institutions by Province

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Alberta</th>
<th>British Columbia</th>
<th>Manitoba</th>
<th>Nova Scotia</th>
<th>Ontario</th>
<th>Québec</th>
<th>Saskatchewan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Universities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Upon receipt of the consent forms from participants, an in-depth 90-120 minute interview was scheduled with each participant. A questionnaire was sent to them ahead of the scheduled interview so they could prepare for it. Interviews were conducted with each participant in three ways: face to face, by telephone or using video conferencing technology. An audio recording was made with the permission of each participant. Eight site visits were also made during the same ten-month period. Additional information was gathered from email follow-ups and from the web sites of the participating institutions. To protect the anonymity of participants, findings of this study reflect group results and not information about specific individuals or universities, with the exception of publicly available information.

**Findings and Common Concerns**

**Program Staffing**

The study looked at the educational level of the persons responsible for the records management programs. Eighty-eight percent of the twenty-six participants have one or two master’s degrees in library and information studies, archival studies, or history. Thirty-eight percent of the twenty-six participants were hired or moved to their current records management related positions in the last three years. The data gathered from the interviews are listed in table 3. It is shown that the bigger the student enrolment size of the university, the higher the full time equivalent (FTE) number of its records management unit personnel.

Table 3
### FTE of RM Unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Enrolment</th>
<th>10-20K</th>
<th>20-30K</th>
<th>30-40K</th>
<th>&gt;40K</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Universities Participated in the Study</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average FTEs of RM Unit</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The author also asked the participants the percentage of their time that was devoted to records management related duties, the responses show that many of the participants of this study have responsibilities in areas other than records management. On average, they spend 67% of their time on records management.

### Records Management Program Administrative Placement

Unlike government agencies and private companies, Canadian universities often have a shared governance system. The academic side directly supports teaching, learning and research functions, and the non-academic side supports administrative functions. Early university records management programs often reported to university archives, an academic unit that is usually a part of the university libraries. Data collected from the interviews show records management programs established in the last decade are moving away from university archives and libraries, and report to a senior administrative department, such as University Secretariat and General Counsel.

Eighteen out of the twenty-one universities participated in this study each have a formal records management program. All five newer programs (<10 years) report to an administrative unit. Older records management programs (> =10 years) have a split, with six reporting to a senior administrative department, seven reporting to an academic department. In total, 61% of the eighteen records management programs report to a senior administrative unit, the rest report to an academic unit (see table 4).

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reporting Structure of RM Programs in Participating Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RM Program History</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All participants of the study shared their thoughts on the pros and cons of both placements. As summarized in Table 5, both reporting structures have their strengths and weaknesses. Archivist William Maher provided some interesting insights in a discussion on academic archives’ administrative location in his book - The Management of College and University Archives. Maher pointed out there was “no single location that is best for all purposes” (23). He continued to say that too often “attention to the question of location is driven by dissatisfaction with limits imposed by the current parent department and the hope that some other parent would provide better support” (23). Although Maher was talking about archivists’ opinions on academic archives’ administrative location in the hierarchy of the college or university, it seems participants of this study have a similar mentality when it comes to the discussion of records management program’s organizational placement. Regardless of where the records management program is located, the author believes that records managers must capitalize on the advantages and overcome the disadvantages of its organizational structure in order to seek ways to improve records management services. It is important to align efforts from the records management program with other strategic partners such as archives, Information Technology (IT) security, legal department, privacy and compliance office, etc.

Table 5
Pros and Cons of Two Types of RM Program Reporting Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reporting to an Academic Unit</th>
<th>Reporting to an Administrative Unit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pros</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cons</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good professional resources;</td>
<td>Records management is not a priority in the libraries;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archives is one of the destinations of final disposition;</td>
<td>Archives is not a logical place to look for records management advice on active records because archives are associated with inactive records;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make less biased, more neutral decision regarding records retention and disposition;</td>
<td>Archives are away from senior administration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access more resources located in libraries (such</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| <10 Years | 5 | >=10 Years | 6 | 7 |
as Library IT support, shared storage space, larger budget). Tied in with Privacy and Compliance function, which is traditionally located in the legal department.

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**Records Retention Schedule and Classification Schemes**

Records retention schedules and classification schemes are the basic component of a sound records management program (Kunde 190). All participating universities that have a formal records management program have established a classification scheme. According to participants of this study, developing records schedules is an ongoing task. Common records schedules are a priority because these schedules are used by all university departments.

Records retention schedules drafting processes in Canadian universities are very similar from one university to the other, but final approval processes vary dramatically. Records schedules are:

- Approved by a University Records Management Committee;
- Signed off by a records director, or the president of the university, or a non-records management specific senior committee;
- Not formally approved by any group in the university.

In Québec, the Archives Act requires that:

> every public body shall establish and keep up to date a retention schedule determining the periods of use and medium of retention of its active and semi-active documents and indicating which inactive documents are to be preserved permanently, and which are to be disposed of (3).

Also, the Act requires every public body to, “in accordance with the regulations, submit its retention schedule and every modification of the schedule to Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales for approval” (3). Such a process takes a long time; however, the biggest advantage is that the schedules become law. Going through the provincial government approval process gives the records schedules more validation, and compliance to schedules is mandatory in Québec.

In provinces outside Québec compliance to records retention schedules is the responsibility of individual offices and is voluntary. Based on the study findings university records managers often take on advisory or assistance roles. It is not their mandate to be the records management police, for instance, enforcing compliance to retention schedules at a departmental level, but university records managers can encourage compliance by:

- Defining roles for department/unit heads and staff in records management policy;
- Providing training and creating tools to assist employees with records management tasks;
• Using persuasion to encourage employees to use records retention schedules and classification schemes to manage records; and
• Setting up a departmental records management coordinators network for better communication.

**Physical Records Storage and Destruction Services**

Canadian universities often have a decentralized budget model. When it comes to records storage and destruction, each department or unit is likely to adopt a self-managed solution, but some universities still make an effort to provide a central or a hybrid solution.

Data collected from the interviews indicate that:

• Four universities have set up a University Records Centre or use a commercial facility for records storage. All activities are monitored by the records management program;
• Six universities have a hybrid solution whereby departments and units can choose from using a centrally managed storage service or managing records on their own;
• Many universities use policies and preferred vendors to regulate records storage and destruction activities on campus;
• Fifteen out of the twenty-one universities (71%) have developed records destruction procedures to formalize records destruction activities;
• Fourteen out of the twenty-one universities (67%) have preferred shredding service provider;
• Only two universities have total control of records destruction on campus, and destruction activities are carried out through their University Records Centre.

Most of the records destruction activities are self-managed by departments (see table 6).

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Solution</th>
<th>Records Storage</th>
<th>Records Destruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Solution</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Managed Solution</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid Solution</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The responses from the participants of this study indicate that managing physical records is still a major responsibility for university records managers. Despite the decentralised nature of a university’s organizational structure and budget model, the author believes records managers should seek an extent of central control over physical records storage and destruction.

**University Records Centre**

Building or creating a university records centre is one way to gain central control over storage of semi-active records and destruction of inactive records. In Skemer and Williams’ 1990 study, the percentage of American universities which provided records centre storage is 52% (542). Data collected from the interviews show eight out of the twenty-one (38%) universities that participated in this study have their own University records centre or records storage facility. Table 7 shows some of the services provided by these Canadian university records centres.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University Records Centre Services</th>
<th>Number of Universities</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free Storage</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Shredding</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-House Shredding</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EDRMS in Canadian Universities**

Most of the participants of this study did not feel confident to tackle the daunting task of managing electronic records without the right software tools. One of the best solutions to manage electronic records is EDRMS, which is designed to facilitate the creation, management, protection, security, use, storage and disposal of a range of both physical and electronic documents.

According to responses from the interviews, six out of the twenty-one universities (29%) are providing some degree of central software solution to manage electronic records. However, there are many challenges, especially for a highly decentralised organization like a university. Here are some common ones:

- Available solutions are too expensive;
• Lack of a central approach;
• Offices are more interested in business automation, so records retention and disposition are not their major concerns; and
• Records management functionality is often overlooked when records management staff only play an advisory role in an EDRMS project.

One successful EDRMS project is Concordia University’s eDocs project which has been ongoing since 2013. They were able to secure central funding through their Vice-President of Development and External Relations and Secretary-General (Peacock). The solution is free to all faculty and staff but adoption is voluntary. The key to the success is that the EDRMS project is co-led by their records management department and IT department. The project had five full time employees according to the Records Management and Archives department’s organizational chart from 2015:

• one Project Manager,
• two Business Process Analysts,
• one Change Management Lead
• and one Archivist / Records Officer.

Phase I of the e-Docs project was completed in 2015 with the application being installed in 300+ users’ desktop computers. Phase II will expand to 500+ users. The EDRMS replaces shared drives and it has a records classification plan embedded in the system. This success story reaffirms that a successful EDRMS project must have high-level support and cooperation from the office of IT or a unit of equivalent function (Zach and Peri 122).

As Kunde suggested, records managers need to engage in activities that position them to be more active partners in managing an institution’s information resources, particularly those that are in an electronic format (189). In order to gain a better control over electronic records, the author believes records managers, privacy officers, archivists and IT should work together to offer some central solutions. For example, this might involve:

• Standardizing processes for any future EDRMS projects;
• Establishing a cross-functional team approach to implementing an EDRMS mandatory; and
• Providing joint training programs with IT on best practices of managing electronic documents and records.

Training

Participants in this study are providing training using both traditional methods and new technologies. There are formal classroom training sessions and less formal information sessions, such as Lunch and Learn. University records managers usually have easy access to many learning management systems. Therefore, they can explore web-based training programs. Many
learners prefer this format because they can go online and learn at their own pace. Some of the participants mentioned they started to use multimedia technologies, such as YouTube, Webcast, and Podcast for training.

The content of records management training varies. Records managers choose the content according to the needs of the audience. It can be an introduction to records management, or advanced courses on implementing a file plan, email management, and managing shared drives. Records managers also target different audiences, including senior management, office administrators, records management coordinators, and new employees. Many participants talked about making training a joint effort of the records management program, privacy office and information security office.

Schina and Wells pointed out that systematic training is the key to the success of a records management program (48). The author believes that university records managers should try their best to allocate staff and time to train employees with records management duties.

**Outreach and Marketing**

A records management program hidden from public view is often misunderstood and forgotten by the very people on campus who rely on its services (Purcell 134). The records management program needs to raise awareness among employees and improve its visibility. To achieve this goal, records management staff need to utilize all resources available. This might include:

- Setting up a records management coordinators network;
- Having regular meetings with senior management;
- Generating good word-of-mouth through interactions with employees; and
- Providing useful tools on the records management web site.

Through this study, the author has learned some creative methods colleagues in other universities have adopted to market their records management programs, such as using records management-themed coasters, mouse pads, and fortune cookies with records management tips inside etc. A Records Management Day with free pizza turned out to be an effective way to boost employee morale and raise awareness about the records management program.

The author thinks records managers need to find ways to reach employees and promote the records management program, for example, establishing a records administrators group, attending campus events and putting articles in campus newspapers.

**Records Management Program and Internal Stakeholders**

**RM and Privacy**

The author learned from this study and work experience that Ontario’s Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) has had a great impact on records management programs
in Ontario universities because the basis of the Act is the right to access information held by public bodies, and the right of access depends on the appropriate management and preservation of records (“FIPPA and MFIPPA” 1). In Ontario, four out of the nine university records management programs were launched after Ontario universities were brought under the FIPPA legislation in June 2006. The newest records management program was the direct result of a change in FIPPA in December 2014, which requires every head of an institution take reasonable measures to preserve records in the custody or under the control of the institution.

Participants of the study from outside Ontario also mentioned the great impact of their provincial access and privacy legislation on their own records management programs. Similarly, Skemer and William’s 1990 survey revealed that state law and regulations were important reasons for the creation of records management programs in publicly supported institutions in the United States because legal pressure was probably more persuasive in colleges and universities that rely principally on public financing (537; 545).

Records management programs and privacy offices often have a collaborative relationship. According to data gathered in this study, seven out of the eighteen (39%) records management programs report to the same senior administrative office as their university’s privacy office. Twenty-seven percent of the participants have both records management and compliance support duties. Many participants of this study agreed that the FIPPA legislation was a strong driving force for records management programs. The records management program and the privacy office share the same goal of educating people on best records management practices, but with some different emphases.

RM and Archives

Many Canadian universities’ records management programs emerged from university archives. Data from this study show eleven out of the eighteen (61%) university records management programs are placed in the university archives or in the archives and records management joint department. Forty-two percent of the participants have both records management and archives duties.

University records management staff often seek input from archivists regarding records retention and disposition. Archivists understand the value of the records management program to their own program; records management staff act as advocates for the archives, and make sure archival records will be transferred to archives. In the author’s view, the records management and the archives programs are natural allies who share common interests. This is especially true when university archives have the mandate to collect institutional records. As Purcell pointed out a strong relationship between the records manager and the academic archivist is a sign of a successful records management program (134).

RM and IT
In their 2002 article, Schina and Wells stated both U.S. and Canadian university records managers wished to develop a closer relationship with their IT colleagues and participated in electronic records management decisions (43). Fourteen years later, it remained a concern for the participants of this study. During the interviews, many mentioned that there was a disconnect, and sometimes, miscommunication between the two departments. For example, IT staff and records managers may understand the word “archiving” very differently. Many participants said when IT was leading an EDRMS project, such a disconnect and miscommunication often led to exclusion of the records management staff from EDRMS initiatives on campus. Sometimes, records management became an afterthought.

In order to improve this situation, the author thinks record managers should try to build a mutually beneficial relationship with IT. The two units do have some common interests, including EDRMS, cloud computing, and information security. Records managers need to show what the records management team can bring to the table. For example, records management professionals are experts on data retention, advocate reducing server storage space and eliminating duplication. When IT sees the potential benefits of collaborating with the records management team, it is more likely that they will be willing to work with records management staff on EDRMS related projects. There is a need to align records management efforts with IT efforts.

In summary, experts from records management programs, archives, privacy offices and IT departments can bring their unique perspectives into conversation about managing a university’s information assets. It is important to create and maintain strong partnerships among all these internal stakeholders in order to achieve the university’s overall goals of information governance.

**Communication and Collaboration (External)**

Kunde pointed out that with the reality of small records management programs and low levels of staffing efforts to collaborate can benefit everyone (205). During the interviews, many participants expressed their interest in seeking collaborative opportunities with colleagues at other universities.

Universities in the same province are governed by the same laws and regulations. In the author’s opinion, there are opportunities for knowledge sharing and collaboration among university records managers. In British Columbia, four universities started to have monthly teleconference calls in 2015. In Ontario, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) provides a communication platform based on the existing Records Managers Group web portal and mailing list. Records managers of COU members also started to have regular teleconference in spring 2016. These activities indicated a good start.

Any collaboration initiative needs a strong leadership, funding and human resources. There are good examples from the academic library communities, such as the Ontario Council of University Libraries’ Collaborative Futures project. Collaborative Futures maximize the existing
expertise and resources among Ontario academic libraries. One of the projects is to manage and preserve print resources. Five Ontario universities (McMaster, Ottawa, Queen’s, Toronto and Western) undertook the project to consolidate physical library materials into one shared space at University of Toronto Libraries’ Downsview property. The Downsview facility implemented a High-Density Racking System and Mechanized Retrieval to ensure orderly retrieval of low-use print material (“Improving” 8). Access to the entire collections is provided by an online request service, supported by a daily courier (“Welcome”). Such a model can be used for storing physical university records as well. For example, the University of British Columbia’s Library PARC is a similar high-density storage facility, but it is used for both low-circulation library collections and university records (“Library Parc”).

University records managers can also learn from the collaborative efforts of Ontario municipalities. In the 1990s, Ontario’s Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA) came into effect. One company, the Information Professionals, worked in conjunction with The Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks & Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO) and developed TOMRMS (The Ontario Municipal Records Management System). TOMRMS is a model system for managing records with a classification and indexing scheme, retention schedules and citation tables which refer to applicable laws. As of 2016 TOMRMS has been used by about one hundred Ontario municipalities. Can smaller academic institutions with newly established records management programs collectively outsource the task of developing classification schemes and records retention schedules? Eventually it is up to the university community to seek common interests and start the conversation.

Conclusion

Canadian universities have been practicing records management for more than half a century. The University of Toronto was among the earliest English-language Canadian universities which established a records management programs. In 1989, the University of Toronto’s president passed the Presidential Regulations for the Management of Archives and Records, which marked the launch of its records management program (“About the Records Management Program & Services”). Today, larger institutions like University of Toronto generally have an established records management program, while smaller institutions only started to develop their own records management program in the last decade due to legal requirements. Provincial access and privacy legislations often have had a significant influence on academic records management programs because the right of access information depends on the appropriate management and preservation of records. (“FIPPA and MFIPPA” 1).

Although data were collected from only twenty-one academic institutions (a sample size of 21.6% of all Canadian colleges and universities), the results of this study can still reveal some general patterns in current recordkeeping practices in public Canadian universities such as: a clear trend of relocating the records management program outside an academic unit, such as the university libraries, which mainly supports teaching, learning and research. Among the records
management programs surveyed in this study, about 28% of them were established in the last decade, all of which are reporting to a senior administrative office. In total, 61% of the programs are located in a non-academic unit. Many believe that placing the records management program in a senior management unit can raise its profile as the university-wide records management decisions made by senior administration are often perceived as having more authority.

Most Canadian universities with limited resources can only provide basic records management services. Records management programs mainly play an advisory role in a highly decentralised university environment. None of the participating institutions’ records management programs have a mandate to carry out records management audits in order to ensure compliance with approved records retention schedules and other internal records management policies. Adoption of records retention schedules is often voluntary. However, the unique schedule approval process in Québec makes compliance to records retention schedules mandatory in that province.

Although universities often operate in a decentralized fashion, records managers are making an effort to provide a degree of central control by developing common records retention schedules and campus-wide records management policies and procedures, and providing centralised or semi-centralised records management solution for both physical and electronic records. However, implementation of EDRMS solutions is still in its infant stage. Many universities simply do not have the human and financial resources to run an effective, university-wide electronic records management program.

The study also shows there is an increasing need to build and enhance connections among records professionals within the academic records management community. Today’s academic records managers are facing the same challenges and working with limited resources. The future of continuous success in university records management programs requires records professionals to actively explore solutions to bring local records management expertise together for knowledge sharing and collaboration.
Works Cited


