Memorandum to Presidents

Date: October 5, 1992

From: Office of the Senior Vice Chancellor
      Division of Administrative Affairs

Subject: Campus Records and Archives

To: Presidents, State-Operated Campuses
    Presidents, Community Colleges

As you know, the University has made a commitment to upgrading the management of the official records that document our operations and accountability to the public and that depict SUNY's history and development. This means obtaining better control over the vast quantities of paper records we generate and finding up-to-date ways to manage and, as necessary, preserve the growing volume of records that are created and maintained in electronic form. You are also aware of and, I am sure, share the Chancellor's interest in preserving the history of SUNY as a unique institution of higher education and documenting its importance to New York State. This concern takes on renewed importance as we approach the 50th anniversary of SUNY's founding in 1948.

Thus, as we move further into a new academic and fiscal year, I want to remind you briefly of the major requirements of the University's and the State's records management programs and outline some actions you can take to help improve both the records program and the archives function, which depends on good records management. I also ask your help in identifying the principal persons on your campus who are conducting records management and institutional archives activities. This information will be very useful to Jane Graham, Director of Archives and Records Management, in learning about existing campus needs and activities and to our Advisory Committee, which includes campus staff members having responsibilities for archives, records management and libraries.

Records Management

The State of New York's records management program, which deals with both State and local government records, is administered by the State Archives and Records Administration (SARA), located in the Education Department. SARA's program is intended to apply principles of good management to the voluminous records of State and local agencies and to preserve New York's history. Records and their management are
also an important part of internal controls as described in the Governmental Accountability, Audit and Internal Control Act.

The purpose of records management is to enhance accountability and efficiency by organizing and planning the retention, storage, and disposition of records, in order to provide more reliable access to needed records, to permit the timely destruction of records that are no longer needed, and to identify and preserve those that have lasting administrative, legal or historical value. The principal relevant statute, the Arts and Cultural Affairs Law, defines public records comprehensively to mean papers, photographs, microforms, computer tapes and disks, and other forms or media such as film and audio tapes, that are produced or received by a State agency or a local government that reflect its mission, operation, and organization. This statute also assigns broad responsibilities to the Commissioner of Education (and thus to SARA) to promote, and prescribe the basic standards for, records management programs in State and local governments.

State-operated Campus Records

State law prohibits destruction of State records, including SUNY records, except in accordance with State-approved plans, i.e., records retention schedules. There is a set of such plans for the State-operated campuses and Central Administration in the form of the 1977 SUNY Records Retention and Disposition Schedule, which sets out the minimum time periods that academic, fiscal, personnel, student, and other records must be retained.

Currently, the 1977 Schedule is the only approved set of plans or retention schedules for the State-operated campuses. It should continue to be used until we and you, together, have had an opportunity to develop new schedules that are acceptable to us and to the State Archives and Records Administration, an effort that inevitably will take some time and certainly will require consultation. The 1977 manual needs to be used with some caution, however. It does not speak specifically to the handling of electronic records and is in some other respects outdated, since obviously it does not treat records or programs created since 1977, nor any changes there may have been since then for certain records for which minimum retention periods are mandated by State or federal statutes.

Community College Records

State law prohibits the destruction of local government records without the consent of the Commissioner of Education, and authorizes him to develop and disseminate schedules establishing minimum legal retention periods.

The State Archives and Records Administration, through its local government section,
guides the retention and disposition of such records, including community college records. Use of Schedule CC-1, issued by SARA in 1988 specifically for public community colleges, should continue, but you should be aware that SARA intends to make some changes in the guidelines next year. Schedule CC-1 gives the minimum time periods that various kinds of institutional records must be retained before they may legally be disposed of.

For both State-operated and community college campuses, I would appreciate your reminding your staffs of the distinction between private and public records, the continuing need to utilize the authorized records schedule appropriate to your campus, and the role of records management in the internal control program (as appropriate to your campus) and in good management generally.

If you have questions about the schedules or about related matters, please call Jane Graham, Director of Archives and Records Management (518 443-5142). Ms. Graham can also supply a copy of the schedules if you need them.

Archives -- State-operated Campuses and Community Colleges

Several years ago Chancellor Johnstone’s concern for SUNY’s history led him to engage a consultant to advise on the University’s activities in archives and records management. The consultant’s report made it clear that SUNY is “in danger of losing its institutional memory.” Thus, he recommended the development of an archives program, supported by an improved records management program, first in Central Administration, then on the campuses. We have begun to pursue such a program this year, with attention to system records held in SUNY Plaza. (Saving records of enduring value is also a goal of SARA’s work with State and local agencies.)

I want to ask your attention to the preservation of your campus’s history as a part of this effort. While only a few campuses have a trained archivist or can afford to devote a full-time position to this function, others have someone -- a campus historian, a librarian, a staff member in the President’s office -- who, sometimes by part-time assignment, sometimes as a volunteer, carries out the function of identifying and preserving materials of enduring value.

Many records of historical interest will be found in your own offices. Both the 1977 SUNY Records Retention and Disposition Schedule and Schedule CC-1 for community colleges speak specifically to campus Presidents’ records and ask that certain documents be moved to a safe place and retained permanently when no longer needed on a daily basis. Records that should be retained include Presidents’ annual reports, the minutes of
In addition, you and the person performing the archival function may wish to retain certain other materials that originate in other offices, that are not mentioned in the 1977 SUNY Schedule or Schedule CC-1, or that are not assigned a "permanent" retention period in those schedules. These records may be of potential historical interest because of what they tell about the campus (e.g., records of unusual or well-known academic programs), for use in fund-raising efforts, or for their relevance to the history of the SUNY system's development.

I ask that you share the information above with the person or persons on your campus who may be performing an archival role and that you encourage campus efforts to retain documents of lasting historical interest.

Campus Contacts -- State-operated Campuses and Community Colleges

Finally, it would be extremely helpful to Ms. Graham and to me if we had a better idea of who is performing the archivist and records management functions on your campus. (There may be more than one person doing either or both of these functions, depending on how they are organized or how specialized they need to be, e.g., medical archives.) We would very much appreciate your response to the attached brief questionnaire, which should be returned to me. I would hope to have your reply no later than October 21.

Thank you for your cooperation. If you have questions, please call either me or Ms. Graham at 518-443-5142.

Harry K. Spindler

Attachment
copy: Archives and Records Management Advisory Committee

This memorandum for information to:
Deans, Statutory Colleges
President Coll
Provost Nesheim