Electronic Records Program at Penn State University

by Lee Stout, University Archivist

Penn State is the Land Grant university for Pennsylvania with approximately 70,000 students, 4,000 faculty and 7,000 staff and technical employees at 23 campuses across the state. It began using data processing equipment in the 1930s to tabulate accounting and student information. It has a long tradition of administrative computing beginning in the 1950s. It should provide a useful testbed for archival preservation of computerized information in the higher education environment.

The electronic records program at Penn State is located in the University Archives and is a direct outgrowth of records management. As a part of the University Libraries' Special Collections Department, the Archives traces its origins back to 1904, but was only designated as the official repository of University records in 1985 and initiated the University's records management program in 1988. The Director of Information Resource Management was a charter member of the Records Management Advisory Committee, and office records surveys also gathered information on computer use and stored electronic information in offices. Thus from the outset of the program, it was our intention to manage electronic records along with all other forms of University records.

The Penn State Electronic Records Appraisal Project, funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and launched in September 1990, represents the first step in our electronic records initiative. The two-year project, extended to June 1993, allowed us to hire a data archivist to appraise more than 3,200 history datasets in the administrative computing area. These represented a wide variety of data from 14 different administrative offices including student, financial, planning, and research files, some more than 20 years old.

Over the course of the project, the data archivist checked the tapes containing these datasets for reliability, obtained sample dumps and verified the data by comparing it to available documentation, and appraised the datasets by archival standards for possible long-term retention. Those files judged worthy of retention have been written to new media and stewardship for them has passed to the Archives, where they will be cataloged in the Libraries' on-line catalog and access will be provided, subject to laws, regulations and University policies on confidentiality. A relatively small proportion of datasets have been designated as archival largely because of the inability to locate adequate documentation for so many of them.

What success the project has achieved is the result of several factors. Internally, there has been strong support within the library for this activity. It is seen as both furthering library technology initiatives and reinforcing relationships between the library and the Computer and Information Systems administration. We also had good fortune in recruiting two able data archivists with reasonably strong computing backgrounds. They were able to

easily engage people in administrative computing and be accepted as competent team players with something useful to contribute. Finally, placing this in the records management context and within our administrative policy that includes electronic records within its definition of "records" has provided a useful linkage to an established program that, although still new to the institution, is a known producer.

There have been obstacles to overcome as well. We are very much concerned about the resources which will be available for continuing these efforts in the future. The university is "rightsizing" and the library is seeking ways to realize 10% cuts in non-materials budgets. These seem to inevitably focus on services. Another possibly structural obstacle is the occasional difficulty of administrative computing not seeing us as something more than just another customer seeking services. Concurrently, the project has at times promoted a "tunnel vision" on our part as we emphasize the project and tend to lose sight of keeping updated on archiving issues related to current integrated database management systems. Finally, the organizational culture has had an effect as well. Penn State has a strong tradition of data security and "need to know" access only. In one case we've had a data owner refuse to cooperate in the project, denying the legitimacy of the Archives' interest in secondary use of the data. In addition, there is little experience in centralized information management other than hardware purchasing controls. Thus, each step the Archives takes in this direction breaks new ground.

Nevertheless, this project has set the stage for further archival involvement on the policy level. Virtually all of the history datasets reviewed over the last three years are products of earlier database management applications. Many of these activities have been folded into the development of large, integrated record-keeping systems. The Integrated Student and Business Information Systems (ISIS and IBIS) have been the focal point of a new generation of administrative computing over the last 12 years. Each contains millions of records, is accessible from all 23 University campuses, and is undergoing continual development and refinement.

The University Archives has become a partner with Data Administration and the data owners in developing archiving policies for these systems within the context of existing University archival and records management policies. Two principal challenges confront us in the immediate future: identifying data and views of data in ISIS and IBIS with enduring value for long-term preservation and developing strategies to accomplish those goals.

In the longer term, open systems, distributed computing, and information policies based on right to know rather than need to know will significantly influence our approach to archiving electronic records. We intend to begin studying the functions of data creation and use in a variety of offices to better understand the evolving record-keeping environment and how the Archives may be of service in the future.