Essay calls for the preservation of presidential email

Submitted by Glenn C. Altschuler on July 14, 2014 - 3:00am

For decades now, email has been the preferred form of communication for individuals in large and small organizations, including colleges and universities. The impact of the use of email on the need for vital primary sources for institutional histories, however, has been little noticed, let alone addressed. And the clock is ticking.

David Skorton, president of Cornell University (where I have taught and served as an administrator for 30 years), receives between 150 and 200 emails each day. He replies to virtually all of them. The volume of email traffic (perhaps 100,000 notes a year per person) is about the same for the provost and many of the vice presidents and deans at Cornell. Like telephone conversations, which are often informal and irreverent, with a mix of the personal and the professional, their emails can be more important – and more candid – than snail mail letters.

It is not entirely clear who owns emails. Lawyers at private colleges and universities claim that all business records and communications, including correspondence conducted on computers, iPads or iPhones purchased and maintained by the employer, are the property of the institution. In many states, email records at public colleges and universities are covered by open records laws, and can become public as a result. Many experts acknowledge, however, that few colleges and universities have policies that explicitly engage this issue with reference to email.

Past practice, moreover, has permitted presidents, provosts and deans (and, for that matter, faculty and staff) to review their own correspondence, be it in the form of hard copy or emails, before deciding what material is personal and what “documents,” if any, should be housed in library archives. It should not be surprising, then, that many college and university officials routinely delete their incoming and outgoing emails, rendering them difficult to recover and doomed to extinction when the computer that houses them is discarded.

Given the volume – and the sometimes sensitive content – of email exchanges, it seems likely that few, if any, academic leaders will have sufficient time or be inclined to conduct a comprehensive review of their “files.” Nor, I suspect, will they choose to allow a third party to make decisions about what items to include or exclude. Absent a formal policy governing this correspondence, which may or may not resemble the preserve everything that has “documentary or evidential value” approach taken by the litigation and freedom of information-conscious federal government and applied to many state employees, it may well be that in the 21st century, the official “papers” of college and university officials will lack vitally important information about decisions made during their tenure.
In my view, boards of trustees should act – with a sense of urgency. They might begin by appointing a task force, composed of professional historians, lawyers, board members, and administrators, to recommend procedures for an independent review of the correspondence of presidents and provosts. Although a mandate that all communications should reside in library archives might have a chilling effect on email exchanges (and boost the telephone bills of academic leaders), it should be considered as well. Equally important, boards of trustees should set aside funds for the review – and for cataloging presidential and provostial papers (having just completed a history of Cornell from 1940 to the present, [1] co-authored with my colleague Isaac Kramnick, I can attest to the massive challenges posed by uncataloged collections, which contain millions of documents).

In addition to making possible more accurate institutional histories, complete and accessible presidential "papers" might well help sitting presidents facing tough decisions, by allowing them to understand what their predecessors considered, said and did in similar situations.

Such an approach will cost a considerable amount of money, but even at a time in which resources are tight, the alternative – a less complete, more sanitized, and impoverished account of the history of colleges and universities – is far too steep a price to pay. Emails are, in a sense, an endangered species: it's in our interest to design a practical plan to preserve and protect them.

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