



Policy Statement

Maintenance and Retention of Commission Records

This statement outlines the policies, objectives, and procedures of the Commission pertaining to the retention and disposition of all records maintained in the Commission office and in off-site storage facilities.

The objectives of the records retention program are to :

- 1) establish retention periods for all Commission records;
- 2) periodically dispose of records that no longer have an enduring administrative, historical, operational, and/or legal value to the organization;
- 3) retain and preserve records that have continuing historical, operational, research, or legal value;
- 4) reduce the need to purchase additional filing equipment or provide additional disk and/or floor space for file storage;
- 5) provide rapid retrieval of records that may be required for reference purposes;
- 6) reduce the cost and increase the efficiency of Commission record-keeping.

Records are identified as any paper, book, photograph, microfilm, optical disk, map, drawing, chart, card or magnetic tape or disk or digital copy; and includes reports, institutional self-studies, correspondence, minutes of formal meetings, memoranda, institutional publications, evaluators' records, and other materials which are generated or received by the Commission and its staff in connection with the Commission's accrediting function. Records retention periods apply only to the designated "official" copy of the record, i.e., the one copy of the record established as the official file copy; not duplicate copies which are made for informational or convenience purposes.

Duplicate copies, or materials such as card and notebook indices, brochures, newspaper, magazine, or journal articles, and other publications; and miscellaneous correspondence and memoranda such as confirming dates for staff visits, invitations to attend conferences, etc., and other incidental or personal business of Commissioners and/or staff are retained only for so long as they serve any useful purpose. The Commission staff is responsible for taking the time to review and purge these types of records at least once every two years.

Inactive hardcopy records, i.e., those whose reference frequency is so low that their removal from the office area would not hamper operations at all, are transferred to storage locations until scheduled for destruction.

All data stored on magnetic media or disk (computer records) are retained on a current basis, or until superseded. Computer records on network servers are archived via the Internet to an off-site server each night. Retention, storage, and disposition of Commission computer records stored on magnetic media or disk are the responsibility of Commission personnel, in accordance with the retention periods specified in the records retention schedule.

Member institutions are given the option of having their original self-study reports and periodic review reports returned rather than having them destroyed by the Commission in accordance with the records retention schedule. Reports submitted electronically are destroyed in accordance with the Commission's retention schedule.

Records may be subject to subpoena by private litigants and governmental agencies. Generally, the destruction of records pursuant to a normal policy of records retention creates no legal or ethical problems. However, in the following situations, the destruction of records must be suspended in the area of question at least until the matter is resolved:

- 1) After a formal request requiring the production of documents;
- 2) During the course of alleged voluntary cooperation with governmental authorities; or
- 3) After learning of a relevant inquiry but before being contacted by the authorities.

Subject to lawful court order, or by decision of the Commission or its Executive Committee, the records of the Commission relating to the evaluation or accreditation of any present, prospective, or former institutional member shall be confidential and shall not be disclosed outside the Commission without the prior written consent of the governing authority of the institution concerned, except in a case where the institution's own release of information distorts or otherwise creates a misleading impression of its accredited status or its relation to the Commission. The Commission's policy entitled "Collegiality and Public Communication in the Accrediting Process" is intended to protect the confidentiality and promote the effectiveness of evaluation and accreditation processes.

The specific guidelines for the retention of Commission records are set forth in the Commission's records retention schedule (attached).

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