

# **Student Records in Higher Education**

---

*Recommendations for the  
Formulation and Implementation  
of Record-Keeping Policies  
in Colleges and Universities*

Report of a Conference  
Sponsored by Russell Sage Foundation  
at the Sterling Forest Conference Center,  
Tuxedo, New York  
June 12-14, 1972



## PUBLICATIONS OF RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION

Russell Sage Foundation was established in 1907 by Mrs. Russell Sage for the improvement of social and living conditions in the United States. In carrying out its purpose the Foundation conducts research under the direction of members of the staff or in close collaboration with other institutions, and supports programs designed to develop and demonstrate productive working relations between social scientists and other professional groups. As an integral part of its operations, the Foundation from time to time publishes books or pamphlets resulting from these activities. Publication under the imprint of the Foundation does not necessarily imply agreement by the Foundation, its Trustees, or its staff with the interpretations or conclusions of the authors.

Single copies of this report are available free of charge.

The cost of additional copies is \$.50 per copy.

Orders for multiple copies should be accompanied by a check or purchase order and sent to:

Russell Sage Foundation,  
230 Park Avenue,  
New York, N.Y. 10017

© 1973 Russell Sage Foundation  
Printed in the United States of America

# CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	1
David A. Goslin, <i>Conference Chairman</i> Peter B. Read Vivien Stewart	
Collection and Use of Student Records	5
Classification, Maintenance and Retention of Student Records	9
Access to Student Records	15
<i>List of Participants</i>	19







# INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning accumulate and maintain extensive records concerning the characteristics, activities and accomplishments of their students. These records pose special problems for those concerned with personal privacy; problems that derive from a basic tension between the rights and needs of individuals and legitimate demands of institutions in which they participate. In choosing to pursue a college education the student is often hopeful that this experience will contribute to the attainment of career objectives and is keenly aware that his or her performance will be viewed and evaluated by others. At the same time the right to privacy asserts that individuals have a legitimate interest in controlling what information about themselves they will reveal to others and what uses may be made of this information. For its part, the university or college has a legitimate interest in obtaining information necessary to carry out its functions and to fulfill its obligations to the student and agencies which have direct authority over it.

The problem

A long-standing concern with these issues led to the publication by Russell Sage Foundation in May, 1970 of *Guidelines for the Collection, Maintenance and Dissemination of Pupil Records*. This report was directed specifically to the problems of record keeping in public elementary and secondary schools, and attempted to formulate a set of relatively explicit principles and procedures for the management of pupil records. Although not intended for institutions of higher education, the salience of the issues involved for such institutions was made evident by the number of requests received from colleges and universities for copies of *Guidelines* and for assistance in interpreting its principles in the light of the different role of students in higher education. In response to these concerns Russell Sage Foundation took the initiative in bringing together in June, 1972, a group of experts in higher education and related fields to take a close look at applicability of the *Guidelines* to problems of record keeping in colleges and universities. The group was given the task of developing a comparable set of guidelines for institutions of higher education and of identifying areas of particular difficulty in their design and implementation across widely differing institutions.



The task proved to be a formidable one. The complexities which the structure of higher education imposes on the accumulation and use of student records makes the development and implementation of uniform policies extremely difficult, if not impossible. Certainly, the age of college students, their proximity to initial employment, their expanded extracurricular life away from home, and the fact that enrollment in college is a voluntary act are factors which influence both the content and use of student records. Moreover, the great organizational diversity among institutions of higher education, the variations in admissions practices and requirements, and the varying legal responsibilities of colleges and universities to both state and federal funding agencies have significant implications for record-keeping policies.

Specific problems confronted by the conferees in their attempt to formulate a set of principles which could guide the formulation of record-keeping policies in different institutions, included the following:

*The physical diffusion of records in most institutions.* Student records are typically maintained at many locations on campus; including administrative offices, faculty members' files, health and counseling centers, residence facilities, and security centers.

*Diffusion of responsibility for records.* Not only do records exist at various locations, but primary responsibility for their collection, maintenance, and use is widely dispersed among administrative officials, faculty members and other personnel on, and in some cases off, campus.

*Diversity of the student population.* Most colleges and universities serve a wide variety of students of differing ages; national origins; social backgrounds; educational, psychological and physical needs; and status within the academic community. This diversity makes the establishment of uniform policies applicable for all students in all circumstances very difficult.

*Variation in the form and content of records.* Student records typically include many different kinds of information ranging from data on mental and physical health to evaluations of academic performance and nonacademic activities and behavior.

*Variations in organizational structure and control.* Universities, two- and four-year colleges, technical schools and other forms of higher education vary greatly in organizational structure and governance, as do publicly supported as opposed to private institutions. Record-keeping policies appropriate for one type of institution may not easily be adopted by other institutions.

Solutions to these problems in the form of policies which could easily be implemented in all situations did not emerge from the



conference. Nor was there agreement among all of the conferees on each of the specific recommendations contained in the following sections of this report. There was, however, agreement on the need for the development, in all colleges and universities, of a systematic, comprehensive, enforceable and publicly stated set of policies regarding student records. In general, the conferees were characterized by a commitment to a philosophy of greater openness in relationships between the institution and its students and, at the same time, by a firm belief in the value of individual privacy. It was clearly recognized, however, that the protection of privacy may be a costly process, not only in terms of resources, but also in delays and impediments to important activities. On the one hand, the institution must accept and make allowances for necessary costs; on the other, members of the community, in particular students, must understand that total protection of their privacy cannot be achieved and in practice the protection of privacy must be balanced against the costs of providing it.

It is our hope that the following recommendations will be helpful to colleges and universities as they seek a reasonable balance between the legitimate claims of students and the necessary constraints imposed on these institutions by their responsibilities to society.

David A. Goslin  
*Conference Chairman*  
Peter B. Read  
Vivien Stewart







# COLLECTION AND USE OF STUDENT RECORDS

- 1.0 A college or university may collect and maintain information about students which information has a declared, clear, and justifiable purpose in education as determined and implemented in accordance with the principles set forth below.
- 1.1 Information which the institution may wish to collect directly from the student, whether prior to admission, at the time of entrance, or at any other time, should be viewed as falling into one of two categories: *mandatory information*, which the institution as a whole or any of its various divisions, schools, departments or offices believes to be essential to its proper functioning, and *voluntary information*, which is considered desirable but not essential to the functioning of the institution or any of its subdivisions.
  - 1.1.1 Authorization for all mandatory data collections should be obtained in advance from a broadly representative body composed of faculty, students and administrative officers of the institution. This body should review and approve all basic forms utilized for such mandatory data collections; specify intended uses of the information thereby obtained, conditions of access to the data and period of retention; and approve inclusion and form of any voluntary items incorporated in such data collection efforts. An inventory and approval or elimination of records currently maintained by the institution and its various subdivisions would be an appropriate first step for such body (see also 1.2 and 2.1).
  - 1.1.2 With regard to *any other information* which any official or office may wish to gather from students, for any purpose, the informed and freely given consent of the student should be required. The optional nature of all responses to forms utilized for such voluntary data collections should be clearly designated.



- 1.1.3 Collection of certain kinds of information identifying students, or other members of the academic community whether voluntary or not, should be prohibited. Specifically, data should not be collected on political activities or beliefs of students where the possibility of disclosure may well inhibit the free expression of these beliefs or opinions, both within and outside the classroom. Moreover, the willingness on the part of some students to provide information may lead to inferences disadvantageous to other students.
- 1.1.4 Where either mandatory or voluntary information is collected directly from a student, the intended uses of the information, conditions of the student's access, access of other parties to the data, and rules of retention should be specified, either on the form itself or in some other readily accessible manner (see 1.2.1), at the time of collection.
- 1.1.5 The collection of information concerning racial, ethnic or religious background of students is often mandated by government offices, sources of financial aid and other external agencies. In complying with such official request, the institution should take special precautions to ensure that the existence of data collected primarily for purposes of increasing equality of opportunities for minority group members does not violate rights to privacy of individual students.
- 1.2 With regard to accumulations of data about a student from sources other than the student himself (for example; police reports, health data, letters of reference, administrative actions), all students should be informed of the procedures by which additional information is added to their files, the potential sources of such information, its uses, conditions of access, and rules of retention.
  - 1.2.1 A handbook, issued to the student at the time of orientation, and annually revised to reflect changes in procedures and policies, would be an effective instrument for this purpose.
- 1.3 Records identifying students by name, regardless of their source or nature, should not be used for any purposes other than those specified at the time of their collection from the student or publicly stated by the institution if accumulated in some other manner, without (a) the informed, freely given consent, preferably in writing, of the student involved, or



(b) approval of a representative body having authority over record-keeping procedures (see 1.1.1 above).

- 1.4 Students are often involved in classroom activities or experiments in which they are asked to reveal, directly or indirectly, aspects of their private personalities. Often informed consent cannot be obtained without frustrating the goal of the activity or experiment. All such activities should be reviewed and approved in advance by a committee responsible for supervising experimentation with human subjects.







# CLASSIFICATION, MAINTENANCE AND RETENTION OF STUDENT RECORDS

- 2.0 A wide variety of information about students is maintained by most universities and colleges. This information may be classified in many ways; including, the initial source of the information, its location on campus, specific subject matter, intended use and degree of sensitivity. As a general principle, it should be recognized that different kinds of data may require different procedures for maintenance, retention, and access.
- 2.1 In considering alternative methods of classifying student data, it is unlikely that any single principle of classification can be identified that would be meaningful in all institutional settings or would be helpful in the development of all policies concerning student records. Each college and university is urged, however, to give special attention to the problem of identifying and organizing the various types of student data extant on its campus.
  - 2.1.1 As a first step in this process each institution should conduct a complete inventory of student records currently maintained; including: physical location, content and and uses, security arrangements, conditions of access both within and outside the institution, and period of retention.
  - 2.1.2 The results of this inventory should be made available to all members of the academic community on campus.
  - 2.1.3 Specific categories of information should be clearly distinguished from particular forms or files which often contain several different types of information pertaining to a student.
  - 2.1.4 The sensitivity of any particular data may change over time. Moreover, it may depend on the feelings of the students concerned, their background, culture, or other characteristics. Therefore, in establishing policies for record maintenance and retention, institutions should recognize that categorizations of student data based on the principle of sensitivity are inherently inadequate.



- 2.2 It is recommended that each institution establish formal mechanisms for the development, continuous review, and modification of policies regarding student records, and for the implementation of these policies once in effect. These should include:
- 2.2.1 A representative body similar to that outlined in 1.1.1 above which would be empowered to establish basic policies and guidelines for their implementation. This function could be undertaken by an existing university Senate or other legislative body, or its designee, so long as adequate student representation is provided for in such a process.
  - 2.2.2 A standing committee composed of student, faculty and administrative representatives empowered to supervise the implementation and enforcement of policies and procedures, and to adjudicate disputes, should be established in accordance with 2.2.1, including the administration of sanctions for violations. (Some institutions may wish to allocate the adjudicative function to a separate agency or individual, such as an ombudsman.)
  - 2.2.3 In addition to these mechanisms, it is recommended that each institution appoint an officer to assume responsibility for record-keeping policies and procedures on a day-to-day basis and to serve as a primary channel of communication within the institution for all problems concerning student records.
  - 2.2.4 All institutional personnel responsible for the maintenance and security of student records should be provided with written guidelines specifying institutional regulations concerning access to information, duplication of records, and security procedures, as well as periodic training appropriate to their task.
- 2.3 Procedures should be established within all offices responsible for maintaining student records for the regular and periodic review of all information for the purposes of ensuring its accuracy and continued usefulness, and eliminating unnecessary and unverified data. Steps should be taken to ensure that all such procedures conform to institution-wide policies developed in accordance with 2.2 above.
- 2.3.1 Student information that is potentially useful but as yet unverified or not clearly needed beyond the immediate present (e.g., legal or clinical findings including per-



sonality tests, unevaluated reports of faculty or other college personnel) should be reviewed periodically (preferably at least once a year). At this time the record should either be destroyed or a decision made to retain it until the student's graduation at which time it would be reviewed again. If the record is to be maintained, two conditions should be met: (1) Its accuracy should be verified by appropriate means; and (2) Its continuing usefulness should be clearly demonstrated.

2.3.2 Verified information of clear importance for the student during his full course of study at an institution should be reviewed upon his graduation from the institution to determine its disposal or preservation. This includes background data, financial information, health data and other information required either by the student or by the institution to maintain the active status of the student.

2.3.3. All records which survive these two reviews would be retained by the institution for a specified period of time (to be designated at the final review) or in perpetuity. Due consideration should be given to the needs of the archivist as well as to the rights of the individual student in determining the long-term retention of student information.

2.4 Many institutions are expanding the quantity and type of student information that is stored in computers. So far, studies\* indicate that the most sensitive and subjective information about students (e.g., psychiatric notes, discipline records, faculty evaluations) is *not* being automated, but remains on paper, in manual files. Given the present state of the art in designing and protecting computerized information systems, this is a salutary situation, and ought not lightly to be changed. However, some important bodies of personal information about students *are* being placed in computerized files, such as admission records, registration and scheduling records, financial-aid records, student-activity records, and alumni records. This trend raises both problems and opportunities. One problem is that automating records may carry into computerized files certain types of information that current notions of privacy in the university world would not accept if record-keeping

---

\**Databanks in a Free Society: A Report of the Computer Science and Engineering Board of the National Academy of Sciences.* Alan F. Westin, Project Director, and Michael A. Baker, Assistant Project Director, Quadrangle Books, New York, 1972.

practices were being freshly considered; automation may thus represent a transfer of inappropriate or even dangerous records from earlier eras of data collection. Another problem is that concepts of cost-effectiveness in using computer technology often call for the merger of separate files, or the creation of one central file from which various user offices and departments can obtain data, rather than each continuing to collect much identical information about the student. This could eliminate the physical compartmentalization of personal data on which administration of confidentiality rules has traditionally depended, and require new procedures for controlling access.

- 2.4.1 Because of such problems, an institution ought to move into the computerization of student records through an initial set of careful, deliberative procedures, and through some mechanism of continuing review for all subsequent decisions as to computer applications and management of computerized files.\*\* In general terms, this requires creation of a committee of representatives from administration, faculty, and students, with technical and legal specialists attached.
- 2.4.2 Each file being considered for automation should be examined to see (1) what present needs exist for collecting such information; (2) whether each item in the record is justified and does not intrude improperly into protected zones of personal or group privacy; (3) whether the rules as to the holding of such information and its sharing inside or outside the institution are adequate and can be implemented properly in the automated procedures; (4) whether items that are innocuous separately might create a profile that is troubling from a privacy standpoint; and (5) how opportunities for notice to students of the record and for review of record-content will be provided under the automated procedures.
- 2.4.3 Open hearings on the automation plan are a desirable mechanism, with opportunities for written submissions of criticisms and suggestions from various campus groups.

---

\*\*Several universities have conducted reviews of this kind, among them Stanford, MIT, and the University of California. Their procedures and reports are excellent models for other institutions to examine, and their generally favorable reception on campus and from those charged with implementing the recommendations in the automated systems suggests that they have been highly useful and practical efforts.



- 2.5 A distinction should be made between *official records* of the institution and *private records* kept by faculty or staff members regarding students, such as notes taken at meetings, during conversations with students, and copies of letters written about students. The latter records may well be regarded as extensions of the memory of the individual who keeps them, and as such his or her private property. In any case, it would be impractical either to forbid the keeping of such records or to expect that they be treated in the same manner as the official records of the institution. However, each individual should be held accountable for any consequences of keeping such private records. In particular, he or she should be responsible for preventing access to such private records on the part of any other person except, perhaps, his or her secretary.





## ACCESS TO STUDENT RECORDS

- 3.0 Whatever the content of a student's records, misuse of these records, violations of confidentiality, and potential invasions of privacy can only occur as a result of access to the records by persons on and off the campus; including students, parents, faculty members, administrators, researchers, potential employers, representatives of government agencies, and others who for varying reasons may seek or come into possession of information about individual students. For this reason it is strongly recommended that each institution develop clear policies, and enforceable procedures for their implementation, to govern access to each of the various categories of student information by all persons who may wish to know the content of records. The following principles are suggested as a basis for such policies and procedures.
- 3.1 With regard to a student's access to his or her own records, it is assumed that the major purpose of a student's record is to aid in the personal and academic growth of that student. The adoption of policies designed to increase substantially access on the part of a student to his or her own records is recommended for the following reasons: (a) discussion of the contents of evaluative records has important educational implications for the growth and self-development of the student and in aiding faculty and administrators to understand further the process of student development; (b) students should know the criteria which are used to evaluate them; (c) a student's awareness of the full contents of his or her own records aids in promoting an atmosphere of trust and confidence between the student and the faculty and administration of an institution; and (d) records should be accurate and the student should have the opportunity to correct any errors of fact.
- 3.1.1. There appear to be only two conditions where full disclosure of the contents of a student's record to the student might be undesirable: (a) when the disclosure of certain information would, in the judgment of qualified professionals, be detrimental to the student's mental

health, or (b) when there is a clear conflict of confidentiality rights; that is when an individual has furnished information concerning the student with the understanding that the information was furnished in confidence.

3.1.2 Access of students to letters of recommendation or evaluative comments of faculty or staff members that are normally considered as confidential is a subject of concern to many students, faculty and administrators. There are those who believe that the maintenance of such material as confidential tends to create distrust between students and faculty, limits opportunities for students to acquire knowledge of their academic strengths and weaknesses, and erodes the desirable process of student-faculty communication. There are others who believe that confidentiality promotes honesty, directness and fullness in communication among those responsible for selecting students for scarce educational or employment opportunities. In light of this disagreement it would be valuable for some institutions to experiment with procedures and policies designed to remove the cloak of confidentiality from such materials. In such cases, for example, faculty and staff who make subjective evaluations of students should be encouraged to discuss their evaluations with the student. Moreover, students should be given the opportunity to review critical opinions and to write an explanatory statement for inclusion in their file.

3.1.3 In connection with a policy of increased access of students to their own records, students should be given the opportunity to challenge the accuracy of information contained therein, to petition for the removal of specific items in the file, and to add written comments or explanations to the file. Procedures to facilitate such challenges or petitions should be established in accordance with 2.2.2 above.

3.2 Persons *within the institution* having a legitimate and demonstrable need for information concerning students as a result of their duties in the institution should be permitted access only to those records directly related to their duties and functions. Whenever possible, the information needed by such persons should be provided by the officials responsible for the records, without permitting direct access to the records themselves.

3.2.1 Files containing a variety of information about a student



- should be organized in such a way as to prevent inadvertent or illegitimate access by such persons to sensitive information peripheral to their concerns.
- 3.2.2 Separate and specific safeguards against unauthorized access should be developed for medical, disciplinary, financial, therapeutic and counseling records based on their unique characteristics and high level of sensitivity.
  - 3.2.3 Students should be informed periodically through a procedure such as that recommended in 1.2.1 above of those categories of persons within the institution having routine access to their records.
  - 3.2.4 Researchers, whether within or outside the institution, normally should be permitted access to identifiable student information only with the informed and freely given consent of the individual student involved. Exceptions to this practice should be made only with the approval of the responsible, representative body or its authorized standing committee (see 2.2), and with enforceable assurances from the researcher that the data will be maintained under conditions of complete confidentiality.
- 3.3 No identifiable information contained in student records may be released to any person or agency outside of the institution, for any purpose, without the written consent of the student, based on full knowledge of the intended uses of such information, with the following exceptions:
- 3.3.1 The institution, with approval of the responsible representative body, may designate certain categories of information about its student members as being public—for example, name, sex, age, dates of attendance, etc. Individual students should have the option, however, of refusing to be included in published directories listing addresses, phone numbers, and other personal information.
  - 3.3.2 External agencies providing scholarships or other direct assistance to individual students may require periodic reports of those students' progress as a condition of their grants. Students, however, should be fully informed, preferably by the external agency itself, of all such requirements, the kinds of information required, and the manner in which it is reported.
  - 3.3.3 The institution should make available to faculty, students, and staff current information concerning the

vulnerability of student records to subpoenas. Where a subpoena seeks information that is likely to chill freedom of expression and organization, the university has an obligation to seek to quash the subpoena by appeal to the court. Furthermore, the student should be informed immediately of the service of the subpoena so that such legal action as he or she deems appropriate may be taken.

- 3.4 A record should be kept of all requests for information contained in a student's files; including the name of the requesting individual or agency, date, purpose of request, and disposition of request. Students should have routine access to this record.



## PARTICIPANTS

Robert L. Arnstein, *Chief Psychiatrist, Division of Mental Hygiene, Yale University Health Services*

Paul H. Black, *Associate Director of Admissions and Records, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle*

Edward J. Bloustein, *President, Rutgers University*

K. Patricia Cross, *Senior Research Psychologist, Educational Testing Service, Berkeley, California*

Paul Doty, *Chairman, Privacy and the Security of Records; Professor of Chemistry, Harvard University*

Robert M. Fano, *Chairman, Ad Hoc Committee on the Privacy of Information at MIT; Ford Professor of Electrical Engineering, Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

David A. Goslin, *Sociologist, Russell Sage Foundation, New York City, (Conference Chairman)*

George T. Gregory, *Associate Staff Legal Counsel, Stanford University; Chairman, Ad Hoc Committee on Protection of Privacy of Information at Stanford (1969-1972)*

Samuel Hendel, *Chairman, Committee on Academic Freedom, American Civil Liberties Union; Chairman, Political Science Department, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut*

Michael A. Liethen, *Editor, College Law Bulletin, Madison, Wisconsin; Legal Assistant to the Chancellor, The University of Wisconsin, Madison*

Walter P. Metzger, *Professor of History, Columbia University*

Jane D. Moorman, *Assistant to the President, Barnard College*

Drew Olim, *Director, Legal Rights Program, United States National Student Association, Washington, D.C.*

Margaret E. Perry, *Associate Director, Office of Admissions, The College, The University of Chicago; Assistant Professorial Lecturer in English and Assistant Dean of Students, The University of Chicago*

Peter B. Read, *Assistant Professor of Sociology, Graduate Center, City University of New York*

Vivien Stewart, *Executive Assistant, Carnegie Corporation of New York*

Dyckman W. Vermilye, *Executive Director, American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.*

Alan F. Westin, *Professor of Public Law and Government, Columbia University; Chairman, American Civil Liberties Union Privacy Committee*