

LGBT Religious Archives Network

RESTRICTED ACCESS TO ARCHIVAL RECORDS Recommended Policies and Procedures

Archival records are preserved to provide reliable data to historians and writers, both professional and amateur, including every sort of interested individual. Without this original source material, history cannot be written. As LGBT-RAN's slogan says, "History is Written from the Perspective of Those Who Preserve their Records."

Because archival records are preserved to encourage accurate history of our past, the best policy is equal access to all with no restrictions.

However, it may be necessary to place restrictions on personal or confidential records to protect the privacy of individual persons. Examples include personal correspondence and membership records of those persons who would not want those documents made public. Privacy is an individual right, defined in part as intrusion, or making public embarrassing, personal facts. Embarrassment and injury often diminishes with time and the legal right to privacy ends at the conclusion of the individual's life. To balance access with privacy, restrictions are for the shortest period of time and the smallest amount of the collection possible.

In the case of personal papers, the person involved is usually the one to decide what records may invade the privacy of the donor or others. If that person is deceased, then this responsibility may fall to an executor or trusted friend or partner. In the case of organizational records, it is also the donor, in this case organizational leaders, that makes decisions regarding restrictions on behalf of individuals whose personal correspondence or records are included in the organizational records.

If restrictions are necessary, there are two important principles:

1. There should be a definite year range for such restrictions, such as 10 years, 20 years, 30 years, to a maximum of 75 years. Restrictions beyond 75 years are rarely necessary because by then individuals concerned are very likely no longer with us. As a general rule, privacy concerns end with a person's death.
2. There must be a reliable contact person or group who can grant exceptions to restrictions to persons who agree, in writing, to any confidentiality restrictions (such as no photocopies and no mention of individual names without their personal permission). Sometimes institutions housing archives are willing to take on responsibility for applying such a policy, but often they are not. In this case, the donating person or group should provide a method for granting access to restricted records. The donating person or organization should designate a contact person who can administer the policy. This may mean conveying requests to leaders or boards of organizations, along with the requestor's reasons for wishing to see the restricted records. This process should not be long or complicated; it should be possible to forward the request quickly, via email or fax.

Remember that archives are for history, and to serve this purpose, there must be access, even if restricted. For the sake of history, the fewer restrictions the better, but when restrictions are considered necessary for personal privacy, they should be for as short a stated period as possible and there should be an easy way for responsible individuals to grant access to restricted materials under stated conditions.

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