

University administrations should reconsider the old policy of deleting email accounts of retiring professors in an increasingly digitalized society

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University administrations often treat email accounts as purely functional tools tied to employment status. Once a professor retires, the account is typically deactivated or deleted as part of standard IT policy. That approach made sense in a more analog era, when institutional memory lived in filing cabinets and personal correspondence was largely separate from official records. In today's deeply digital academic environment, however, automatically deleting retiring professors' email accounts is increasingly outdated and can create unnecessary losses—for individuals, institutions, and the broader scholarly community.

First, email accounts are no longer just communication tools; they serve as archives of intellectual activity. Over decades, professors accumulate correspondence with collaborators, students, journals, and funding bodies. These emails often contain unpublished ideas, data discussions, peer feedback, and historical context for research projects. Deleting such accounts can erase valuable academic history and disrupt ongoing work, especially in fields where long-term collaborations are common. Retired professors frequently remain active as emeritus scholars, continuing to publish, mentor, and contribute to research networks. Removing their institutional email can sever important lines of communication at precisely the moment when continuity is most valuable.

Second, institutional email addresses carry credibility and identity. A university-affiliated email signals legitimacy, which matters for peer review, grant participation, and professional engagement. For retired faculty, losing that address can make it harder to stay integrated in academic circles. It may also create confusion among colleagues who continue to reach out using outdated contact information, leading to missed opportunities and weakened professional ties. From the university's perspective, maintaining these connections can enhance its reputation and extend its intellectual footprint through the ongoing contributions of emeritus faculty.

There are also practical and ethical considerations. Professors often use their institutional email for services tied to research infrastructure—journal accounts, datasets, professional memberships, and collaborative platforms. Abrupt deletion can lock them out of these systems, complicating access to their own work or shared resources. Additionally, some correspondence may be relevant to institutional memory, legal compliance, or historical research. A blanket deletion policy risks discarding records that could be valuable for future scholarship or administrative reference.

That said, universities are not wrong to be concerned about costs, security, and data management. Maintaining inactive accounts indefinitely can increase storage demands and potential vulnerabilities. However, these challenges are manageable with more nuanced policies. For example, institutions could transition retiring professors to a limited “emeritus account” status with reduced storage, enhanced security controls, and clear usage guidelines. Alternatively, they could offer structured archiving solutions, allowing faculty to preserve and export their correspondence while maintaining a forwarding address for continuity.

A more flexible approach would recognize that retirement is not an abrupt end to academic life but a transition. Universities benefit when they treat retired professors as ongoing members of the intellectual community rather than former employees to be administratively closed out. By rethinking email policies to reflect the realities of digital scholarship, institutions can preserve knowledge, maintain valuable networks, and support the continued contributions of their faculty.

In an increasingly digitalized society, deleting retiring professors’ email accounts is less a matter of efficiency and more a missed opportunity. Thoughtful reform—balancing access, security, and sustainability—would better serve both individuals and the academic institutions they helped build.