

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Work in progress: Audit description

Safe Data Disposal at an Institution of Higher Education

Washington has 39 publicly funded institutions of higher education: two research and four comprehensive universities, and 33 community and technical colleges. Many of these schools have their own surplus programs, to help the schools reuse, repurpose and recycle as many items as possible, including information technology (IT) equipment. Staff must first ensure that any surplus equipment that can store or process data has had that data completely erased.

Our Office has conducted two audits evaluating how well state agencies removed sensitive or confidential data from IT devices before selling them through the surplus program operated by the Department of Enterprise Services (DES). However, because few schools use the DES program, we did not include most of them in those audits.

One of our safe data disposal audits found confidential information on items sent to the state surplus center from a community college. Additionally, in September 2020, a news outlet reported a student at one of the universities purchased two surplus computers from the university's surplus store and found an abundance of confidential information, including bank statements, student personal information and grades, on the hard drives of each machine. As ever more devices can store such data, we wanted to look more closely into safe data disposal practices at another school in the state.

Preliminary scope and objectives

This audit will assess effectiveness of one school's practices to ensure discarded IT equipment has been properly prepared for disposal. The audit will evaluate whether the school has adequate controls in place to ensure that surplus state-owned IT devices do not contain confidential data. We do not intend to name the audited school to help ensure we protect any sensitive data we might discover.

The audit seeks to answer the following question:

- Does the institution of higher education remove or destroy confidential information found on computers and other IT equipment before selling them as surplus?



Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
Pat McCarthy

**Director of
Performance and
IT Audit:
Scott Frank**

(564) 999-0809

Scott.Frank@sao.wa.gov

**Assistant Director of
Performance Audit:
Justin Stowe**

(564) 201-2970

Justin.Stowe@sao.wa.gov

**Lead Performance
Auditor:**

Olha Bilobran

(564) 999-0025

Olha.Bilobran@sao.wa.gov

Office of the
Washington State
Auditor

P.O. Box 40021

Olympia, WA

98504-0021

www.sao.wa.gov

[@WASStateAuditor](https://twitter.com/WASStateAuditor)

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