



FOIA Requests/Public Records

One of the most powerful tools available to journalists is the right to access public records. Documents like budgets, contracts, emails, and meeting minutes can turn speculation into proof. As a student reporter, knowing how to request these records gives you authority. The key thing to understand is that **state and federal public records laws cover public universities. Private universities are not covered.** That difference shapes everything about what you can request and how you ask for it.

What Records Can You Request?

At Public Universities: Public institutions are funded by taxpayers, so their documents are considered the public's property.

- **Budgets and financial records** (how much money is allocated to athletics, dining, or construction).
- **Contracts** (with food service companies, bookstore vendors, or donors).
- **Emails** (between administrators on a specific topic or during a certain timeframe).
- **Meeting minutes and agendas** (trustees, regents, committees).
- **Campus police reports** (crime logs are often required to be public).
- **Employee salaries** (many states require disclosure of public employee pay).



At Private Universities: At private schools, lean on student governments — they are often bound by their own transparency bylaws, even when the administration isn't.

- FOIA doesn't apply.
- But you still have access to:
 - **IRS Form 990s** (annual nonprofit tax filings — reveal budgets, top salaries, contractors).
 - **Accreditation reports** (often public via accrediting bodies).
 - **Department of Education stats** (enrollment, graduation rates, financial aid).
 - Anything voluntarily disclosed, including meeting minutes, student government budgets, and press releases.

How to File a FOIA / Right-to-Know Request

Each state has its own public records law. At the federal level, you can file a **FOIA** (Freedom of Information Act) request for federal agencies. Still, for universities, you **typically file at the state level (known as Right-to-Know, Sunshine, Open Records, or FOIA, depending on the state).**

Steps to File:

1. **Identify the right office.** Usually, the university's "Records Officer" or "General Counsel" office. Some states have a central portal.



2. **Be specific.** Requests should target a timeframe, office, and topic. (“All emails sent between the President and the Athletics Director between March 1 and May 30, 2025, containing the word ‘stadium.’”)
3. **Submit in writing.** Email is fine, but save a copy. Some states require official portals.
4. **Track deadlines.** Laws usually require a response within 5–20 business days.
5. **Follow up.** If denied, you can appeal. If delayed, check in politely—persistence matters.

Common Pitfalls

Delays: Schools often stall, citing “time needed to compile records.” Know your state’s deadlines and hold them accountable.

Broad requests: If you ask for “all emails ever,” expect rejection. Narrow by date, subject, and sender.

Fees: Institutions can charge for staff time or copying costs. Always ask for an estimate before agreeing.

Exemptions: Some records (FERPA-protected student info, sensitive personnel files, certain legal communications) are legitimately withheld. Learn what’s exempt so you know what to fight.

Private loopholes: Even at public schools, some quasi-private foundations (like athletic associations or endowments) may argue they’re exempt. Sometimes courts disagree.



Sample FOIA Request Letter

Here's a template you can copy, paste, and adapt for your campus:

Subject: Public Records Request under [State FOIA / Right-to-Know Law]

Dear [Records Officer / Custodian of Records],

Pursuant to the [Your State's Public Records Law], I request access to and a copy of the following records:

- The complete budget* for [University Name] for the fiscal year [Year], including all allocations for athletics, dining services, academic departments, and student activities.

I request that the records be provided electronically to avoid duplication fees. If fulfilling this request incurs costs, please provide an estimate in advance.

As required by law, I look forward to your response within [X business days — insert state requirement].

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Your Position, e.g., Reporter, The Bi-College News]

[Your Contact Information]

***Swap “budget” for contracts, emails, or meeting minutes, depending on your story.**



Why FOIA Matters for Students

Public records are one of the few tools that put student journalists on equal footing with professional reporters. Administrators can dodge interviews or issue bland statements, but they can't legally ignore the law. Learning to file and follow up on FOIA requests will strengthen your reporting, make your stories harder to dismiss, and increase the respect for your newsroom.