13.3: Public Records and Information Contributors

While the actual “public records” are, by definition, those documents and materials generated by public sector institutions, the other contributors of information have important roles to play in helping you understand and use public records. Here are some key facts to understand about public records and information contributors:

- **Public-sector institutions** that generate public records include:
  - municipal and county governments
  - state government
  - federal government
  - international agencies

- **Private-sector institutions** generate much of the information that becomes a matter of public record once it is submitted to public-sector institutions. For instance, non-profit organizations must submit financial information to the IRS, which then becomes publicly available. Private-sector institutions such as businesses that sell stock to shareholders must submit financial information to the Securities and Exchange Commission (a public-sector government agency) which then becomes public.

- **Scholarly sources** generate information that becomes a matter of public record once submitted to public-sector agencies. For example, if a scholar is conducting research that is funded by a grant from a national agency (the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Transportation, etc.), the scholar and his/her institution must file information about how that money is being allocated, and that report becomes a public record. Public universities must reveal information about their financial circumstances to legislatures and other agencies that oversee those
institutions and again, that information is considered public.

- **Journalistic sources** gather huge amounts of information from public records and publish that information or prepare news reports, analyses, documentaries or databases based on what they collect. They often provide easier-to-use interfaces for searching public records than the agencies that generate the information.

- **Informal sources** are the subject of huge amounts of public record data. Every person leaves a public record trail that we will explore in more detail as we move forward.