FAQ: Body-Worn Cameras at UCI

What is a body-worn camera?
Body-worn cameras (BWCs) are relatively small devices that record interactions between community members (e.g., the public, suspects, and victims) and law enforcement officers. The video and audio recordings from BWCs can be used by law enforcement to demonstrate transparency to their communities; to document statements, observations, behaviors, and other evidence; and to deter unprofessional, illegal, and inappropriate behaviors by both law enforcement and the public. UCI uses the WatchGuard Vista XLT BWC. It is a two-piece system.

How does an officer body-worn camera work?
The technology consists of the camera, which is typically worn on the officer’s uniform with a forward-facing viewable area. There are a number of different types of cameras with differing options, including user controls such as push to record, touch-screen controls, video and audio feed, and playback in field. UCI’s WatchGuard video systems upload video from the officer-worn system through a docking station on a local storage device (e.g., server) and then save the video to cloud storage. The in-car system uploads through a wireless access point to the local storage server before it’s uploaded to the cloud storage.

How are body-worn cameras different from dashboard and CCTV systems?
Dashboard or in-car video camera systems are fixed to the law enforcement vehicle, therefore they can only capture video from the front of the vehicle or the direction the camera is facing. Body-worn cameras (BWCs) retain the strengths of the dashboard camera, but they allow the technology to accompany the officer wherever they go. BWCs are different from closed-circuit television systems (CCTV). CCTVs are stationary systems that record behavior in a given public space. BWCs and in-car systems move about wherever the officer is driving or walking.

How can law enforcement agencies benefit from a body-worn camera program?
Body-worn cameras (BWCs) are only one of the tools available to law enforcement for improving community trust, transparency, and accountability. There are several benefits for law enforcement officers who wear BWCs.

BWCs provide an additional layer of safety for the officer by capturing an event when the officer could have been incapacitated.

Adoption of a BWC program can represent a law enforcement department’s effort to demonstrate transparency and accountability.

In several studies, community member complaints against officers decreased following adoption of BWCs. The results from these studies are supported by in-person interviews with 40 law enforcement executives conducted by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF). In one study, use-of-force by law enforcement officers decreased following adoption of BWCs (Ariel, Farrar, & Sutherland, 2014). Continuing research seeks to identify the underlying cause of the benefits.

Additionally, video from BWCs may assist with prosecution of criminal cases or assist in the review of community members’ complaints against officers.
When will an officer activate a body-worn camera?
Subject to the exceptions contained in Department policy, officers are required to activate their BWC device prior to initiating any criminal investigative or enforcement activity involving a member of the public. There are exceptions to this that are also contained in the UC Policy.

Do officers using BWCs have to tell me they are recording?
Officers are not required by law or UC Policy to obtain consent from members of the public when the officer is lawfully in an area where the recording takes place. However, officers may inform individuals they are recording, when feasible to do so, particularly when the advisement may gain compliance or cooperation, or assist in an investigation.

In addition, officers entering into a private space, (e.g., residences, restrooms, locker rooms), must make a reasonable effort to notify the occupants that the BWC is present before entering the area, unless: the officer enters the area pursuant to a warrant; such notice would, in the officer’s judgment, jeopardize their safety or the safety of the public; such notice would compromise an investigation or tactics; or if other exigent circumstances exist.

Can the public review video captured by the officer BWCs or in-car camera systems?
Video from these systems is not a public record so video is not available for public review or viewing. If the video is part of the exception created by California Senate Bill 1421 or Assembly Bill 748 involving records related to specific incidents, complaints and investigations involving police officers and/or critical incidents (as defined by law), the law allows the public, through the Public Records Act, to obtain copies under certain conditions and with certain time limits. These are contained in the language of both bills and their subsequent changes to the law.

How long is the video retained?
Video is normally retained for two years under the University of California, Office of the President (UCOP) Records Retention policy. In cases where the video is part of a criminal case it would be retained as long as the case is open or can be appealed. Video determined to have no evidentiary value may be destroyed within 60 days.