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# A Newbie at the RDAP Summit, or How I Learned that the RDAP Summit is for Everyone

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## **Keywords**

professional development, conferences, research data services, data management, librarians

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## Commentary

### **A Newbie at the RDAP Summit, or How I Learned that the RDAP Summit is for Everyone**

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#### **Abstract**

This commentary describes the thoughts and perceptions of a first-time attendee to the Research Data Access and Preservation (RDAP) Summit in March 2018. The author describes her initial hesitations to attend this conference as a data librarian from a medium-sized institution. But after attending, she is convinced that the RDAP Summit is for anyone interested in data, including librarians that work at medium- and small-sized institutions.

After describing the format of the Summit, the highlights of attending are described, including gathering ideas related to all aspects of research data management, access, and preservation; hearing data management perspectives from outside of academic libraries; networking opportunities for the extrovert and introvert; and opportunities to connect with librarians at similar universities and with similar interests.

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## The RDAP Summit – “The Serious Data Conference”

The Research Data Access and Preservation (RDAP) Summit is an annual conference that “offers attendees the unique chance to interact with and learn from practitioners and researchers working in a variety of fields on research data management, access, and preservation issues” (Research Data Access and Preservation Summit n.d.). Unlike many other library-related conferences, attendees have a wide variety of roles: academic librarians (from full-time data curators to subject liaisons with nascent interests in offering data support), library administrators, researchers, data scientists, and industry representatives. Their disciplinary foci range from STEM to digital humanities. The RDAP Summit is a truly distinct professional development opportunity for several reasons, including its focus on research data issues, the national and international perspectives presented, and the opportunity to interact with stakeholders from a broad swath of sectors.

Sounds like an amazing conference for any librarian interested in data, right? Correct! But it also sounds like an intimidating experience for first time attendees, especially those from medium and small institutions, right? Also correct! In this commentary, I will relate my experience as a ‘newbie’ attendee at the RDAP Summit 2018, in the hopes of persuading that the RDAP Summit is for everyone.

First, let me tell you about myself. I am the Research Data and Science Librarian at Oakland University (OU) in Rochester, MI. With almost 19,000 students, OU is classified as a doctoral university with moderate research activity (previously classified as an R3 institution), but it is primarily known as a teaching university with an undergraduate focus. However, OU administration has developed an ambitious plan to increase the amount of research conducted on campus, as articulated in the University’s 2025 Strategic Plan (Oakland University 2016). Like many librarians at medium and small institutions, I fulfill multiple roles at OU Libraries: I provide research data support to all of OU’s campus and serve as the liaison to three science departments, so the amount of time I have to devote to my Research Data role ebbs and flows with the academic calendar.

I had heard about the RDAP Summit for several years. Being new to the profession and data librarianship (two years under my belt!), I was intimidated by the RDAP Summit. I thought it was for data librarians from large R1-type institutions, who had been working in this area for many years. In email correspondence with a librarian at a neighboring medium-size university (who is a major advocate of data literacy on her campus) about this conference, she felt the same way, saying “I am not attending [the] RDAP [Summit]—but I would like to hear what you think of it. I am somewhat intimidated by it - it sounds like the serious data conference.” I finally decided to take the plunge and attend in 2018. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the RDAP Summit is beneficial for anyone interested in research data issues, including those working outside of academic libraries. After this experience, I encourage any librarian with even an inkling of interest in research data management, access, or preservation to attend.

### Format of the Summit

The RDAP Summit has a different format from other conferences resulting in some distinct highlights. First and foremost, as expected from this conference’s name, it focuses on research data management, access, and preservation issues, from developing data literacy instruction

to curating datasets deposited into data repositories.

Usually, the conference does not have a theme. Rather, the planning committee selects topics for each breakout session. The 2018 session topics included defining the role of the library in research data management within an institution, the intersection of publishing and data, and research reproducibility and the involvement of research data librarians. (The full 2018 program can be found at: <https://www.asist.org/rdap/program-2018>.) For these pre-selected session topics, potential presenters are asked to propose a short 15-minute presentation within one topic. If selected, they present with two other speakers (for a total of three presentations during each hour-long breakout session), providing attendees an opportunity to hear multiple perspectives or about projects relating to a single overarching topic. In the spirit of openness and collaboration (a common thread throughout the RDAP Summit), all 2018 presentations and posters are available on an Open Science Framework site (<https://osf.io/view/rdap2018>).

Additionally, it is a single-track conference, meaning only one session occurs at a time. All attendees hear and engage with the same presentations, which I feel made the conference feel more intimate and less intimidating. Finally, their Code of Conduct (<https://www.asist.org/rdap/code-of-conduct>) ensures that all ideas and perspectives are heard and respected.

### Highlights of the Summit

One of the major benefits of attending is the unique opportunity to gather ideas related to all aspects of research data management, access, and preservation issues. At OU, I am solely responsible for creating and providing research data support. I knew that this conference would get me out of my university's bubble and see how other universities tackle the same research data issues that I struggle with. From the breakout sessions, I gathered practical ideas based on the various programs, projects, resources, and initiatives that I may not have heard about had I not attended the Summit. For example, my university does not have the infrastructure, budget, nor staff to create an institutional data repository. I learned that another approach to offering this service could be a consortial data repository like the Texas Data Repository, as discussed by Jessica Trelogan (University of Texas at Austin) and Anna Dabrowski (Texas A&M University) in their presentation entitled "Working Together in Texas: A Collaborative Approach in Scaling Research Data Services." In this presentation, they reported on the consortial effort of nine universities to share expertise, resources, and workload of the repository across the member institutions. While I may not be able to implement this idea immediately, it certainly will help me as I plan long-term goals for research data support at my university.

I thoroughly enjoyed hearing perspectives from outside academic libraries on research data management, access, and preservation issues. RDAP Summit attendees included people working in government libraries, cultural heritage institutions, industry, data science, and funding agencies. Opening the Summit was keynote presenter Tom Schenk, Chief Data Officer for the City of Chicago. He talked about the city's open data portal ([data.cityofchicago.org](http://data.cityofchicago.org)) and how these data are used (both internally and externally) to improve the lives of Chicago's citizens, such as one project that identified thirty-one factors to predict when and where rodent complaints were most likely to occur. Not a very flashy project but it definitely contributes to improving the health and safety of Chicago's citizens. To me, it was a good reminder of the impact of open data, and that proper management and preservation of the data is necessary

both before and after it is made available. During the lightning talk round, Jen Zhao, Ecological Data Manager at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, gave a fascinating overview of creating a data management pipeline for eMammal, a tool for preserving and sharing camera trap images and metadata. These are only two examples of the variety of perspectives that attendees and presenters brought to the RDAP Summit.

The opportunity to expand or re-connect with your professional network is another highlight of the Summit. It offers a networking opportunity for everyone (from formal to informal; both in person or online via Twitter). For the extroverts, in-person networking occurred via the usual conference avenues: session breaks, meal times, evening dine-arounds, and the pre-conference happy hour. At future RDAP Summits, I can imagine myself starting collaborative projects after connecting with other attendees during these networking opportunities.

Twitter provided an active playground for online networking during the Summit (check out #rdap18 to see these conversations). Attendees provided links to resources and tools mentioned during the presentations, added their own thoughts and comments, and shared pictures of important or interesting slides. Some people who were not able to attend in person even joined the Twitter conversation. For newbie attendees such as myself or even introverted attendees, adding your ‘two cents’ on Twitter can be a great way to ease into meeting new colleagues while sharing your thoughts, ideas, and perceptions on the research data issues being discussed. Another benefit of a single-track conference is that all attendees hear the same presentations and can then participate in all of these online conversations. There was even a crowd-sourced notes document created in Google Drive that was open for all attendees to edit. I have found these collaborative notes a useful complement to my own conference notes in writing this commentary and came across new thoughts and ideas I had overlooked or forgotten since the Summit. Overall, I found that the RDAP Summit was a highly collaborative conference.

I was delighted to find that my preconception of the Summit attendees was wrong: Many attendees were not full-time data librarians at R1 institutions. Many attendees were librarians—in a variety of roles from medium and small institutions—looking for ideas on how to create or expand data services within their libraries. Essentially, they came from a similar institutional setting and had similar goals for attending the Summit as I. As noted above, there were ample networking opportunities throughout the Summit, but one in particular allowed me to talk with attendees with similar interests and issues. As a short respite from the breakout sessions, a one-hour semi-structured discussion break offered attendees an opportunity to discuss a variety of crowdsourced topics relating to research data management, access, and preservation. One topic that I was particularly interested in was providing data services with few or no resources. The table discussing this topic was packed for the entire hour. We discussed getting administrator buy-in, directing researchers to vendor-supplied data curation services, and determining which data services to offer. At a future RDAP Summit, I would recommend a session or workshop on this topic, entitled something like Data Services 101: How to Build It from Scratch. Due to the fact that this table was packed, and discussion of this topic continued throughout the rest of the conference, there is obviously a considerable amount of interest in it.

## Conclusions

After attending, I agree with my colleague that the RDAP Summit is 'the serious data conference,' but only because it solely focuses on this issue. All librarians, within and outside of the academy, with even an inkling of interest in data and data management, access, or preservation can benefit from attending. Maybe this should be the RDAP Summit's tagline: "Join us! There's something for everyone." By attending, you will find that it is a supportive and collaborative space for learning and growing with like-minded colleagues.

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