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Space for Listening: using a library unConference as an alternative method of communication

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Abstract

As part of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas' (UNLV) "Top Tier Initiative," the University Libraries contributes to the development of campus infrastructure and services to support research data management (RDM) and data preservation. Positioning the Libraries within the UNLV community as both partner and site for this development, we organized a faculty-oriented Research Data Management unConference during UNLV's Research Week.

The unConference attracted researchers and high-level administration from across campus and provided a forum for engagement: It was also a means for the Libraries to learn about researcher needs related to RDM, identifying potential partners, problems, and areas of support. Bridging disciplinary silos, invited speakers from academic and administrative units gave short presentations on different aspects of data management, which were followed by in-depth discussions of participant-selected topics relevant to RDM. The unConference succeeded in creating a space for meaningful interaction, with participants expressing interest in ongoing dialogue around RDM facilitated by the Libraries. Furthermore, the interactions we facilitated and the feedback we received helped inform the Libraries' next steps as we move the RDM conversation forward.

This paper outlines the process of organizing and facilitating an unconference, lessons learned regarding outreach and researcher engagement, and potential pitfalls to avoid for library staff seeking to diversify their information-gathering strategies.

Introduction

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) has set a goal of becoming a "Top Tier" research university by 2025. Among the "Top Tier Goals" supporting this institutional project, as laid out in the Top Tier Vision, Mission, Goals, and Strategies[1], is one related to "Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity," specifying that UNLV will "produce high-quality, widely disseminated, and influential research". To support this goal, the Libraries launched an investigation into potential Research Data services that the Libraries could offer to their user community. This investigation examined research data services offered by other academic institutions, and expectations and attitudes of UNLV researchers regarding research data services.

Each year in October, the University holds a Research Week, which "celebrates the research, scholarly, and creative activities of our faculty and students through events that educate, engage, and inspire attendees."[2] Hoping to use this campus-wide event to help position the Libraries as a partner in and space for the development of research data services, we organized a faculty-oriented unConference during Research Week.

The Research Data Management unConference provided space for researchers interested in learning about the research data management (RDM) landscape to connect with each other and UNLV partners and engage in discussions about data management needs and practices, while allowing the Libraries to learn about the challenges and needs faced by the research community.

What is an unConference?

An unconference is a participant-oriented event where attendees choose the topics and structure the interactions, emphasizing conversations over formal presentations. This is the core of the unconference idea: they can be days or hours long, with structures ranging from the entirely spontaneous to the more carefully designed, but the emphasis is on interaction between attendees and the discussions which emerge when participants are given a space to engage on topics which interest them[3]. The UNLV Libraries unConference was a three-hour long event intended to foster networking and connection building, ending with a group follow-up and feedback session.

Why an unConference?

We looked into the information-gathering tools commonly used for gauging the attitudes of and soliciting feedback from campus researchers, but found that they were unlikely to suit our needs. Surveys, for instance, are frequently used by the Libraries and the University to gather information from faculty and staff. However, there was major concern over "survey fatigue," as a large number of surveys had been sent out in the previous year and there was fear that

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1 Executive Summary: Top Tier Vision, Mission, Goals, and Strategies. Las Vegas, NV: University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2015.
   https://www.unlv.edu/sites/default/files/assets/toptier/docs/Final-Executive-Summary-Top-Tier-11.15.17.pdf

2 University of Nevada, Las Vegas. *Research Week*. https://www.unlv.edu/research/researchweek

3 Budd, Aidan, et al. 2015. "Ten Simple Rules for Organizing an Unconference." *PLOS Computational Biology* 11 (1): e1003905. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1003905

without an immediate effect or incentive, people would be less inclined to respond to another survey. One-on-one interviews with faculty were also considered (and later organized), but at that stage, we were unsure what such interviews should cover.

While an unconference was an untried method for the Libraries, major benefits—such as participant-driven relevant topics, an emphasis on contributions from many participants, and the potential development of a community surrounding RDM[4]—made it an exciting project. It required less domain-specific knowledge on the part of the organizers, allowed for representatives from many disciplines to participate, provided an opportunity for participants to learn from each other while the Libraries learned from them, and invited more candid responses than a presentation or interview session.

Goals

We created two sets of goals for the unConference: one for the Libraries and one for attendees. We wanted to position the Libraries as a partner in and space for research data management, create a forum for faculty from across campus to engage with each other and librarians, and learn about faculty needs and concerns regarding research data management. Our goals for attendees complemented these institutional goals: that attendees would talk with other researchers on campus, share best practices and solutions around research data management, and make meaningful connections; and that, at the end of the unConference, attendees would view the Libraries as a space that cares about research data management.

Organization

Scheduling

The unConference was part of the campus-wide Research Week, and while we worked to find a good time to hold our event, we had to be conscious of other events happening both within the Libraries and across campus. We envisioned the unConference as a multi-hour event and chose to serve lunch in the hopes of making the event more appealing. Planning for between 20 and 50 participants, we wanted to use a library space large enough to promote an open atmosphere, both of which requirements helped determine the room we needed: selecting the day for the event was then a question of when that room was available. Given the scheduling constraints imposed by other Research Week events, space was at a premium, but working with the Libraries Research Week Task Force, we settled on that Friday.

Structure

There is no one way to organize an unconference; however, many leave the decisions about what specific sessions will happen until the day of the event[5]. This can lead to long sessions discussing scheduling (which sessions participants want to hold, how long they will be, etc.) or participants feeling their voices were not heard[6]. This was one of several factors which influenced our event design.

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4   Budd et al. "Ten Simple Rules"
5   Budd et al. "Ten Simple Rules"
6   Carpenter, Jeffrey Paul. 2016. "Unconference Professional Development: Edcamp Participant Perceptions and Motivations for Attendance." *Professional Development in Education* 42(1): 78-99.
    https://doi.org/doi:10.1080/19415257.2015.1036303

At the outset, we expected that participants would have limited familiarity with unconferences. Accordingly, we decided that for the event to succeed, we should give attendees a schedule and establish some basic expectations. First, we sent out a registration form and survey, asking participants to rank and suggest topics to be discussed at the unConference. This preliminary feedback gave us a list of six topics of identified interest to participants: Security and Privacy, RDM Tools and Techniques, Research Data Management Plans, Storage and Preservation, Teaching Research Data Management, and Sharing and Reuse of Data.

To highlight work already being done on campus, and to give participants time to eat lunch, we opened with topic voting and lightning talks. We reached out to experts on campus and found five who presented on different aspects of research data management[7]. Since participant familiarity with and knowledge of RDM would vary, we felt that beginning the day with concrete examples of resources currently available on campus—such as data storage and DMP support—and how data management was used within research, would be beneficial.

Given our time constraints, we used a "speed-dating" approach. The bulk of the unConference was divided into three discussion sessions of 25 minutes each. We set up four tables, each of which covered a different topic. Attendees voted for four of the top six topics as reported in the registration: those with the most votes became the discussion topics. Participants were free to move to a new table topic at any time, or stay with one for the whole session. Following the discussion periods, we scheduled a wrap-up and sharing session.

Facilitation

Before the event, we organized the layout of the tables, seating, and food to allow for ease of movement throughout the room, reserving the front as a "stage" for lightning talks. A check-in table near the door allowed us to sign participants in and distribute handouts. These included orientation materials with the definitions we were using for "unConference," "Research Data," and "Data Management," explanations of discussion topics and voting procedure, bios and contact information for those giving lightning talks, a "What I learned" sheet, and an evaluation form.

To facilitate the discussions, we recruited volunteers from the Libraries: one at each table, these volunteers stayed with the same topic over all three discussion periods, identified themselves as note takers for documents that would be shared with participants after the event, kept conversations on track, and provided discussion prompts from lists we had prepared for each of the six initial topics. Another volunteer stayed at the check-in table throughout the event, providing latecomers and walk-ins with orientation materials and collecting evaluation forms.

Assessment

Overall, the event went well: we gathered useful information about research data management interests and concerns on campus. The unConference succeeded in providing an opportunity for researchers to network, learn about research data management techniques, and share their own ideas. Feedback from participants was generally positive and will be used to create improved events in the future.

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7   For a list of lighting talk titles and presenters see Table 1 or the supplemental file.

Table 1: unConference Schedule

Time	Activity
11:00 - 11:30	Food; voting on discussion topics
11:30 - 12:00	Introductions and lightning talks: Sue Wainscott, Engineering Librarian/Associate Professor (University Libraries); *A Graded Approach to Data Management Planning* Lori Olafson, Associate Vice President for Research, Executive Director, Office of Research Integrity; *DMPs and Federal Agencies* Rebecca Gill, Associate Professor (Political Science), Director, Women's Research Institute of Nevada; *Learn to Play with Data: Some Practical Resources at UNLV* Thomas Padilla, Visiting Digital Research Librarian; *Data Curation in the Humanities* Joe Lombardo, Executive Director, National Supercomputing Institute; *National Supercomputing Institute Overview*
12:00 - 12:25	Roundtable discussion slot one
12:30 - 12:55	Roundtable discussion slot two
1:00 - 1:25	Roundtable discussion slot three
1:30 - 2:00	Wrap up: Takeaways and evaluation

Assessment was built into our program design: for the attendees, we provided an evaluation form (created in consultation with the Director, Planning & Assessment) in addition to the feedback session. The assessment form asked about what participants wish had been discussed during the event, the most important thing they learned, the biggest RDM problems at UNLV, and desired follow-up. For us as facilitators, it was important to critically reflect at each stage of planning, execution, and evaluation, particularly since this was UNLV Libraries' first unConference.

The unConference attracted over two dozen attendees including researchers and administrative staff from Community Health Sciences, Educational Psychology, the Libraries, Mathematical Science, the National Supercomputing Institute, Nursing, the Office of Research Integrity, Political Science, Research and Economic Development, Sociology, and the Women's Research Institute of Nevada. Participants were very positive about the event, as reflected in the evaluations and follow-up contacts we pursued. It was positively regarded within the Libraries, resulting in new or strengthened relationships and providing useful guidance as we move forward with RDM planning. Attracting a larger group, however, with participants from additional departments, should be a priority for any future unconference.

To improve attendance, three areas of improvement became clear as we wrapped up the project. First was scheduling. The 2017 Research Week calendar was ambitious: with over 50 events scheduled across campus, and 11 within the Libraries, many were overwhelmed by Friday and less inclined to attend another event. With the number of events scheduled, it was easy for events to be lost in the shuffle, and several suffered from limited participation. This overscheduling became obvious to many on campus, and the 2018 Research Week calendar had limited each academic unit on campus to one event.

Secondly, we could have done more to promote the unConference itself. While we created promotional material for the event, we relied on other library staff to communicate with the researchers they worked with. While some library staff did effectively promote the event, we might have reached a wider audience by contacting faculty directly.

The third area also concerns communication: enlisting the Dean of University Libraries sooner. While this was complicated by the Libraries hiring a new Dean immediately prior to Research Week, we could have asked for her help. Email sent by the Dean resulted in faster responses than those we sent, which would have allowed us to recruit and confirm lightning speakers earlier in the process and more effectively promote the event overall.

Conclusion

The unconference model offers a unique way for libraries to connect with their user communities and exchange information in an organic setting, establishing dialogue, and receiving feedback in real time. The success of the Research Data Management unConference, as a first-of-its-kind project at UNLV, may influence other sections of the Libraries to either host their own unconference or use unconference-style elements in their events. Feedback from participants indicates that it had a positive effect on how they view the Libraries; internally, the things we learned from the unConference—including specific needs related to storage, security, and privacy for data—have influenced a series of follow-up faculty research data interviews and a Libraries-internal RDM services needs and next steps report; and as a result of our outreach, partnerships with other campus units are currently in process.

Outside of UNLV, this method of inviting researcher participation and input into library services, by first listening to the concerns of the community, is a low-cost, high-impact means of positioning libraries to succeed. While we used it as a preliminary investigation into RDM needs and practices on our campus, other libraries should look beyond this one example and consider how the unconference model can expand their information-gathering toolkits and add flexibility to their participatory programming.

Supplemental Content

Supplemental File
An online supplement to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.7191/jeslib.2018.1153 under "Additional Files".

Disclosures

The substance of this article is based upon poster presentations at RDAP Summit 2018[8] and the ALA Annual Conference and Exhibition 2018[9].

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9   Murray, Matthew, and A.L. Carson. 2018. "The (UN)LV Libraries (un)Conference (un)Poster." *ALA Annual*. 2018-06-24. http://www.eventscribe.com/2018/posters/ALA-Annual/SplitViewer.asp?PID=MjM1Mjg0OTIxMDA