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Commentary

A Small Liberal Arts College Librarian at RDAP: Observations on Translating our Work Between Institutions

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Abstract

This commentary describes the impressions of a first-time attendee from a small liberal arts college (SLAC) to the Research Data Access and Preservation (RDAP) Summit, in May 2019, and observations about the makeup of the conference in terms of types of jobs and types of institutions represented among the attendees. The author also outlines a more general difficulty librarians from any institution face in adapting lessons learned and examples given by research data management librarians at other institutions, due to differences in institutional structure. The commentary suggests ways data management professionals might make reuse of ideas and solutions easier for one another, by analyzing why solutions work at different types of institutions, and by developing our understanding of how to replicate successful projects and practices in different organizational structures. The author discusses the value of attending RDAP Summit for librarians from smaller institutions such as SLACs, and compares the RDAP experience with professional development opportunities regarding data librarianship that are available on a region-by-region basis.

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Disclosures: The substance of this article is based upon the author's experience at RDAP Summit 2019. Additional information at end of article.



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Introduction: A Science Librarian Goes to Miami

I am the Science Librarian, and an instructional technologist, at Mount Holyoke College. We're firmly in the small liberal arts college (SLAC) category, with around 2,200 students (Trustees of Mount Holyoke College 2012b) and 200 faculty (Trustees of Mount Holyoke College 2012a). While I've been involved in regional data librarianship groups and projects for almost a decade, this May was my first time at RDAP. I saw familiar faces there, people I know from my involvement in the New England Software Carpentry Library Consortium (NESCLiC), and in the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NNLM) New England Region programs and interest groups around research data management (RDM). I met new colleagues, including people whose work I had read and cited. I also heard about work at institutions across the country from my own, and made new connections.

As expected, most people there were from larger institutions than my own. Most of the presentations were given by people at larger, more research-focused institutions than my own, which was no surprise. Larger institutions have more and larger grants funding research and setting research data handling requirements; larger institutions field larger projects. There were many people at RDAP 2019 with jobs that are heavily or entirely focused on research data management, and a large presence from R1 institutions. But overall, my experiences were on track with what Joanna Thielen reported last year in her commentary on being a first-timer at RDAP 2018: "Many attendees were not full-time data librarians at R1 institutions." (Thielen 2018) I met people whose jobs also include other scholarly communication responsibilities. I met librarians with liaison responsibilities, library administrators, and non-librarian data managers. They shared their knowledge and encouraged each other, whether it was in scheduled presentations or in informal conversations over coffee or dinner.

But Things Work Differently At My Institution!

While some of the ideas and techniques I took home from these talks are easily applicable to my own setting, most require me to do reflection and analysis to determine how to adapt them to my needs. At RDAP and at general at RDM events, I found that I could use more presentations which talk about how to analyze one's own institution's culture, policies, and workflows. This issue affects all of us, not just those at SLACs. At RDAP 2019, I had a conversation early on the first day where it was clear that I had things to teach people at larger institutions about how the IT infrastructure staff and staff who deal with research data collaborate at my small college. If you were in that discussion, I promise to put out some sort of work about how cross-functional task forces in my own institution's merged Library/IT organization have created a memorandum of understanding process to help researchers who have network-attached storage devices understand how to care for their devices and turn to us for support. Please hold me to this, and let me explain how this is part of a larger issue.

At RDAP 2019 there were great presentations that addressed barriers to access to research data, and great presentations that addressed the saving of data at risk for loss. As I sat in the conference hall, I found myself wanting more presentations on analyzing the policies and power structures of institutions. I wanted presentations that identified and analyzed the barriers to collaboration and how to break them down, and presentations on adapting ideas from one institution's power structures to another. I've learned a great deal from surveys of existing practices and the presentations on successful projects that we've all produced in the last

decade. It's time to do more analyzing of the structures in which we work, structures which greatly influence what work we do and how we do it, and looking at how to change our structures for the better. This can be a risky thing to study. It will require not just analyzing the organizational behavior of our own libraries, but that of entire university structures. Shedding light on those structures may make players feel exposed, or may inspire them to take steps to criticize or block efforts at understanding them. But done well, it will be a tool with which we can encourage change in our institutions.

I had multiple conversations at RDAP, with colleagues new and old, which went like this:

Person A: Here's a thing my institution is doing.

Person B: Oh man, I wish my institution could do that, but we're experiencing [BARRIER].

Person A: Hmm, I think the reason we were able to do this at my institution was [STRUCTURE 1].

Person B: Oh! Yeah, at my institution it doesn't work like that, we have [STRUCTURE 2].

At this point, the conversation could go a few different ways. Sometimes the conversation ended, because the people detected that their organizations were different enough that an idea could not be adapted wholesale. Sometimes the conversation continued as the people in it began to figure out how to make that adaptation. I've had a lot of these conversations when giving posters about processes and programs at my institution. Once, a few years ago, a poster session attendee got angry with me, because it was clear from my poster that some of the things I was talking about were heavily dependent upon the unusual nature of my institution. (At my SLAC, Library and IT are merged, and a lot of actors have fewer barriers to collaboration than they would have where Library and IT are separate organizations.) I didn't have an answer for this attendee then, and I don't think I should have been expected to have one, in the moment. But I still want to find those answers.

These are anecdotes, but with them I begin to build a picture of how we struggle to adapt ideas from institution to institution, even though it is often far easier to imitate someone else's design than create a new one from whole cloth. We struggle because our institutions work differently: public universities are subject to different regulation and management requirements than private universities, and large universities work differently than SLACs like mine. We don't just differ in scale, we differ in structure, and in culture. Research data professionals need more in our toolkit for analyzing these differences between institutions: it will help us to collaborate too, in addition to adopting and adapting each other's practices. I have gotten into the habit of analyzing workplace situations in terms of French and Raven's work on a number of types of power people wield in institutions (Raven 1992), but this tool is better for analyzing individuals than for entire systems. I would like to see more of this analysis done on the systems we have spun up for research data management. I want to learn to do it myself, and I'm always looking for co-conspirators.

Why Should a SLAC Librarian Attend RDAP?

In the meantime, what can a SLAC librarian hope to get from RDAP? It's a great place for getting a nationwide—or better, depending on the number of international presentations in a given year—view of the field. It's also a focused view: research data access and preservation in a self-contained event, not as a track in a larger event. It is largely by and for librarians. Some of us will only want that every few years, or only when the conference happens to be an easier, shorter trip for us. In that case, I recommend finding your regional research data management community to attend programs with and recruit as your partners in crime. I am most familiar with the National Network of Libraries of Medicine's RD3 programs, which have regional contacts and events and have been a great resource for me over the last eight years or so (National Network of Libraries of Medicine).

When I asked on the LAReDaS (Liberal Arts Research Data Services) listserv what questions they thought SLAC librarians might have about RDAP, the only response I got was a strong recommendation to consider IASSIST as an alternative that talks more about the academic technology side of research data management. Good to know! The lack of response wasn't a surprise: LAReDaS is a low traffic list. I realized that I balance the value of a larger conference with the problem that at larger conferences, the content I need may be too diluted in a sea of presentations that are of less interest. This is the price of specificity: RDAP talks and posters were very much things I could use, even though they require some translation into my institution's structures.

Conclusion

From the list of resources I mention above, you can see that there are a lot of places to get advice and guidance, if you are a SLAC librarian for whom RDM is only one part of your job. Your experience and needs will vary with where you are working, what kind of communities have sprung up around you for support of RDM, and the combination of time and funding you may or may not have from your institution. RDAP is marvelous, and I absolutely do want to attend next year, if circumstances allow. But this bottom line is true for all sorts of data professionals at all sorts of institutions: if we in the RDM community can produce more publications and presentations analyzing the structures of our institutions and how they make our projects, services, and staffing models the way they are, we will be better able to use each other's advice. If we can do that, it will improve research data services at many institutions. So if you and I both go to RDAP Summit 2020 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I look forward to seeing you there.

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