

You're in Good Company: Unifying Campus Research Data Services

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Research Data Access and Preservation

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

With a focus that extends beyond library walls, promoting research data services must be a point of cooperation across an institution's units and departments. An RDAP 2015 panel explored the value of advisory committees or communities of practice established at three universities to build strong research data services. Though the several committees at the institutions have different primary focus areas, each functions as a community of practice with a unique set of shared interests and goals, mutual relationships and group identification. Each is challenged by its decentralized nature across the institution and must continually communicate its activities, services and resources. These communities of practice are working toward long-term goals through a common vision and strategic planning, sharing experiences and opportunities to promote their research data services.

KEYWORDS

data curation	colleges and universities
library technical services	collaboration
communities of practice	strategic planning
academic libraries	information sharing

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Research data services are a larger-than-library issue. Experience and scholarship have shown that, given the complex nature of research data services, various units and departments across an institution must work together to provide appropriate, seamless services [1]. One method to facilitate this type of collaboration within a university setting is to form a research data services advisory committee or communities of practice around research data services.

This panel summary, from the Research Data Access and Preservation Summit 2015, focuses on the various committees and groups in place across three institutions – the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW), Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL) and Columbia University (CU) – specifically addressing group composition, activities and challenges and opportunities.

A useful framework for understanding knowledge management, community development and roles for research data support in a university environment is through the lens of a community or linked communities of practice (CoP). According to Wenger, McDermott & Snyder [2, p. 4], “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”

In practice, a CoP can be made up of individuals with varying levels and areas of interest in research data. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison an interdisciplinary group of librarians, researchers, IT staff and graduate students constitute their group, called Research Data Services (RDS). Similarly, Washington University in St. Louis initiated a data translation group whose members encompass faculty, library staff, IT staff and other campus data service providers, including representatives from the Center for

Biomedical Informatics and the Institute for Public Health Data and Training Center. Columbia University's CoP, in contrast, consists of multiple groups, which similarly include faculty, librarians, data managers and representatives from university administrative offices such as information technology, sponsored projects, compliance and the Institutional Review Board (IRB). In comparing the practices across these three institutions, librarians, faculty and IT staff are consistently common members when considering CoP for research data services.

The specific activities the CoP undertakes is dependent upon their goals, but Wenger-Trayner [3] indicate typical work includes

- problem solving
- requests for information
- reusing assets
- coordination and strategy
- discussing developments.

The work of the CoP at UW, WUSTL and CU has some overlap, but also some variation, given the various purposes of the groups.

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, RDS activities include drafting and reviewing data management plans, consultations on data management policies and best practices, training and education, and referral services to other research data resources on and off campus. For WUSTL, the goal of the data translation group is to discuss integrated approaches for moving data to information for larger collective impact. Given this goal, many of the activities center on three main categories: research, curricular and experiential learning. A number of specific outcomes have developed from these categories, including a university-wide data challenge and a new group focused on developing data-related curriculum and training for undergraduates and graduate students. Good research data management (RDM) practices and data related skills are woven throughout each of these outcomes.

Columbia University supports three groups created from members with a variety of experiences and perspectives on managing research data and materials: Columbia University Libraries/Information Services Research Data Management Interest Group (CUL/IS-RDM-IG), CU RDM community and the Research Data Advisory Committee (RDAC). The object of this

variety is to develop CoP at different scales and levels, so that as they evolve there are points where their typical work and shared purposes may intersect and where they may benefit from the opportunities for interaction and support. The CUL/IS-RDM-IG focuses on knowledge sharing and skill-building. Adjacent in purpose to this group is the CU RDM community, which was founded on the basis of assembling those who are actively involved in managing data or research materials as part of a research or scholarship endeavor to find solutions for common challenges in RDM. RDAC is a newly established committee brought together to provide leadership in developing strategies, services and programs for the university to cultivate its already established investment in research data. The intent is that these groups will find compatible partners and rich sources of experience and resources in each other while engaging in fruitful correspondence and collaboration that will ultimately benefit the whole of the university community as it engages more deeply with the challenges of successfully working with research data and materials throughout the research life-cycle.

The success of a CoP is predicated on a number of factors according to Lee-Kelley, Turner and Ward [4] and Wenger [5]. They found that a successful, self-sustaining CoP includes "interaction, sharedness (of knowledge, interests and goals), ongoing participation, mutual relationships, personal identification of members with the group and the development of a continuous and conspicuous shared repertoire." [4, p. 48] While the CoP success factors are accurate for groups and committees focused on research data services and support, they do not address the challenges found in progressing toward the attainment of these success factors.

At each of the three institutions the decentralized nature of the universities provides some challenges to creating CoP sharedness. Negotiation takes place when bringing together individuals with various backgrounds, domain expertise and technical knowledge around everything from term definitions to desired outcomes. It is only through ongoing participation that a balance of the interests and needs of committee members emerges. Strategies to overcome this challenge have focused on developing strategic plans for the CoP and committees. By developing strategic plans,

VITALE, MARSHALL and NURNBERGER, continued

disparate group members create a shared vision of the committee, agree upon success factors, define roles, and take ownership of related strategic activities.

Another recurring challenge involves making CoP services and related activities known to the larger university community. Very often faculty members and research staff are surprised to learn of the services and resources that result from committee activities. To improve visibility of these services, university committees have initiated a cycle of assessment and re-branding or re-launching of the activities.

In comparing the composition, goals, activities and challenges of

research data services committees or CoP across universities, it is evident that there are a number of common experiences that may be found. By sharing these experiences, as well as the commonly developed strategies and approaches, the authors hope that creating an ongoing conversation around sharing experiences and opportunities will assist others in shaping support and providing seamless service to faculty at their own institutions. Establishing this practice of sharing and conversation in our own community may in turn lead to broader coordination that enables stronger partnerships with faculty as research data services continue to evolve in the academic landscape. ■

Resources Mentioned in the Article

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