



Commentary

This is my First One: Finding and Building Community at RDAP Summit 2019

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Abstract

This commentary depicts the experiences and thoughts of both a first-time attendee to the Research Data Access and Preservation (RDAP) Summit held May 2019 and of a library/data-related conference. The author describes her decision in choosing the RDAP Summit as the first-ever conference she would attend in her growing librarianship career and how she was initially reluctant in attending, due to her not being a full-time data practitioner. But after attending, she came to the realization that the RDAP Summit is for anyone interested in data, including those who are new to the profession or have been working with data for a number of years. This commentary will also include a common thread in the format of the Summit, highlights of attending, and takeaways that will prove useful to the author professionally and personally.

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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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Intimate, Inclusive, and Communal – Attending the RDAP Summit

I honestly wasn't sure what to expect in attending the Research Data Access and Preservation (RDAP) Summit. This was my first time attending the Summit *and* this was my first professional conference; I didn't know anything outside of what co-workers relayed to me from their conference experiences. Filled with trepidation, doubtful because of "impostor syndrome," and a little lost because I'm horrible with directions, I made my way to the conference space in the Shalala Center where the Summit would be held. After being warmly welcomed, I settled into a space far enough away from others to come up with a game plan in tackling the day, but had been shortly joined by another practitioner. We made small talk about our jobs—where each of us was from, where we worked, and what we did. She had asked me if I had attended the previous Summit and I replied sheepishly, "This is my first one." Instead of taking a chance to brag about how many Summits she had attended, she welcomed me and told me about how the Summit would be a great entry into the data practitioner community because of a) the wealth of knowledge available via the attendees, and b) the inclusivity of this community. Another attendee joined our conversation and I was assured that I was in the right place for professional growth and that I belonged.

"Participants will have multiple opportunities to expand professional networks and acquire practical knowledge and skills that can be applied to their own work and projects" (Research Data Access and Preservation Summit n.d.). I understood this in the generic way of coming together and "talking shop" or talking about what we do professionally, but at the RDAP Summit, it is so much more than that. Yes, we are "talking shop," but we are also building community; we are identifying and dissecting the ways in which our work, whatever that may be, can be of use to our patrons and the larger community; and we are taking a critical look at the spaces we occupy in research and data services and asking the question: "Who are our research data services supporting, and more importantly, who are they not supporting?" (Research Data Access and Preservation Association 2019).

Reconsidering What Was Already Considered – RDAP Panels

When attendees entered the main meeting space, there was a slide deck on a loop that provided a bit of housekeeping information, including the Summit Code of Conduct and reception location. What jumped out to me the most was a slide titled "Land Acknowledgement." It read, in full, as follows:

We acknowledge that we are on indigenous land. The land at which we gather for 2019 RDAP Summit belongs to the Tequesta, Miccosukee, and the Seminole peoples. As data professionals we need to actively be aware of where the data is collected, who the data belongs, and the ethical implications the data may have. We are *stewards* [emphasis added] of these materials and need to respect their provenance (Welcome 2019).

I had never encountered this kind of recognition of privilege and responsible networking that would inform me as to what would be discussed and explored over the two days of the Summit. Beginning with our keynote speaker, Kristin Briney (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), attendees should understand that in order to do the work, we must understand why we're here at the conference. Before we can build communities at our own institutions and

data centers, we must understand and build this community that gathers each year at RDAP and other conferences like it. In saying “You have community here. The job doesn’t matter, the work does” (Briney 2019), this removes silos and barriers in defining who we are, as data practitioners, and what we do. It also gives us an understanding that we are all here to help each other help our communities.

Many of the presentations spoke to the work of revisiting systems and structures that currently exist in data services and taking a critical look as to how helpful our work as data practitioners are to our community and the larger world. In Megan O’Donnell’s (Iowa State University Library) “Using Information Architecture to Combat Biases in Information Systems” (<https://osf.io/ahp7y>), she gives practitioners the framework and insight to question and reconsider the ways in which information systems are created and maintained, particularly through the lens of intersectional feminism (read: more inclusive and equal). Joanna Thielen (Oakland University) with Amy Neeser (University of California-Berkeley) examine in their presentation “Advocating for Change: Understanding the Landscape of Academic Data Professionals” (<https://osf.io/pgv5f>) hiring practices for data professionals and how biases and power structures can keep out communities—students and current/potential staff; for example—with diverse input and needs. In taking the time to edit and update job postings to include real diversity and inclusivity, job postings are broadened to potential employees that may have felt shut out based on dated language.

The presentations in the fourth panel, “Community in the data world,” really shift the dynamic of data gathering and sharing in that the community studied have more of an active role in the related data. Traditional research is more transactional: researchers study and take from a community and the community gives with little to no input to the process. The presentations highlight a better method for research expressed in Nora Mattem (University of Chicago Library) and Aaron Brenner’s (University of Pittsburgh Library System) talk “Responding to Data Sharing Dynamics in Community-Based Research” (<https://osf.io/mw793>): “Not research *on* communities, but research *with* communities.” By involving and engaging a community, researchers are able to get better buy-in from the community and the data collected is more valuable and makes more sense to the community.

In addition to the main panels and discussions, attendees had the opportunity to learn, discuss, and explore through the poster sessions and topic tables. It was amazing to see attendees pick each other’s brain and ask questions to figure out how to implement a service at their institution or center or how they feel about a topic of importance in the data practitioner community. The walls of number of years of experience, location, and responsibilities disappear and attendees can feel comfortable broaching topics and ideas with others.

Highlights of RDAP

Beside all of the awesome ideas I have in my notes app (many thanks to everyone who presented) that could possibly be implemented at my institution, the highlight for me was the closing keynote made by Valencia Gunder (<http://valenciagunder.com>), founder of the nonprofit Make the Homeless Smile. With her talk, “Low Income, High Ground: Climate Gentrification in Weather-safe Neighborhoods,” I’d learned a) about “climate gentrification” and the real-life consequences for residents that affect their ability to find or live in affordable housing, b) Valencia is my new favorite person, c) she cares so much about Miami and its

residents, and d) I may have been unsure before but was reaffirmed about my professional trajectory after her talk. There is so much power in what we do and if done so responsibly, we can influence much needed change. Valencia's story shows how important it is to build community, especially when traditional resources and outlets fail, and involve those directly impacted.

Conclusion

At the end of the second day, I found myself surrounded by so much potential. Potential in the newly independent RDAP Association, potential in the work the attendees have started or will start at their institutions, and potential in myself. I left the Summit with a plan to revamp and add more to our data management plan resources, the events/tools/resources I can bring my institution's research community that provide support and helps with answering their questions, and future opportunities to develop professionally. I may not be working as a full-time practitioner but I'm on my way—whether at my current institution or elsewhere, now or later—and I have the support of the RDAP community behind me.

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