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Midwest Data Librarian Symposium: A Model for Regional Communities

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Comments

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Midwest Data Librarian Symposium

A Model for Regional Communities

T he Midwest Data Librarian Symposium (MDLS) is an annual unconference covering data and data librarianship. The symposium aims to provide a venue for librarians and others interested in the topics to network, discuss issues related to research data management, and learn from each other. While most of the attendees are from the Midwest area, the symposium is open to all.

MDLS is a community-led effort and has no governing body. In this article, we share our experiences in contributing to MDLS, including the recent MDLS 2023. Coming up on its tenth year in 2024, we believe MDLS offers a valuable model for low-cost, regional professional development.

Reflections
Amy Koshoffer, University of Cincinnati
Perspective from a "later career" research data services librarian

From the first symposium held in 2015 at the University of Wisconsin to the present symposium, the desire for community has been a strong motivator for organizing a regional conference. Even in our national data services professional societies, there is much discussion about supporting research data information professionals through regional gatherings and community building. MDLS is one of several regional conferences that fill this niche. Focused on the Midwest and Plains states, this conference brings together information professionals that want to talk about the nuts and bolts of research data management support as well as build collaborations and learning opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic drove home how valuable face-to-face interactions are to a community and how much our community missed such interactions. For MDLS 2023, we made the decision to focus on the in-person experience with some hybrid sessions available. Technology and health risks make the hybrid experience an attractive option, but it takes a large team and really good technology to make a hybrid conference equitable for all attendees. Focusing on a few sessions such as the keynote and the future directions meeting made it possible for us to involve our community members who could not attend in person but still have good experiences for in-person attendees.

The more hands-on and day-to-day nature of the content may not support the needs of participants who have been in their jobs for longer terms. Later career information

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MDLS 2023

Hosts and Date

- University of Cincinnati
- Miami University
- The Ohio State University

October 9-11, 2023
On-site at the University of Cincinnati, Ohio
Select sessions were live streamed.

Chairs and Planning Committee

- Amy Koshoffer
  Assistant Director of Research & Data, University of Cincinnati
- Kelsey Badger
  Research Data Librarian, Ohio State University
- Kristen Adams
  Science & Engineering Librarian, Miami University

17 members; 15 institutions

Registration and Attendees

- Free!
- 56 total attendees
  24 data librarians, 24 non-data librarians, and 8 students
- 16 states, 41 institutions

Keynote

When data is people:
Ethics and ownership in research and AI uses of public data
Casey Fiesler, University of Colorado, Boulder

Topics

- AI Ethics
- Instruction
- Curating and Archiving Data
- Research Data Management
- Resources & Operations in Data Services
- Inclusivity and Mentorship

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MDLS 2023: Statistics and Facts

professionals are looking for more policy and strategy support as well as advocacy training. The nuts-and-bolts approach can also be beyond the understanding of students and very early career information professionals who have not yet had experience with a broad range of data management issues. Striking the balance on the spectrum of knowledge and experience is both a challenge and opportunity for the community. At our most recent MDLS, many people expressed the need for more content at both ends of the spectrum. The co-chairs shared this feedback with the 2024 MDLS organizers so they can consider how the content and the schedule of sessions will best serve these specific needs.

I have served on three organizing committees and attended seven of the nine MDLS conferences. Every conference provides a unique experience and good memories. I especially enjoyed the 2023 conference. It was immensely satisfying to host a conference and to bring MDLS to Cincinnati. I really appreciated how the 2023 planning committee worked very well together, and we were able to organize a successful conference with minimal stress and within the confines of our scheduled meetings. Many hands make light work. And I have much gratitude for the other co-chairs and the committee members.

Kelsey Badger, The Ohio State University

Perspective from an early career data librarian

I joined my first MDLS planning committee in spring of 2022 while I was still a student. By the time we convened in October, I was a new data librarian at Ohio State. While I was not new to working professionally with data, I felt new to the culture of libraries and was grateful to have the support of the MDLS community during those early months in a new role.

Of course, being new, I was also nervous. Would I fit in with a community that seemed to all know each other already? Could I contribute anything useful while I was still figuring out how libraries and their communities work? The anxieties of being new are a universal experience, but not all communities work so hard to welcome newcomers as MDLS does. Some of this is about scale: MDLS is intentionally small, capped at around 50 to ensure the entire group has an opportunity to interact. Just as important, MDLS creates continual opportunities for individual and group reflection. Whereas most conferences are fast-paced and energized, MDLS is surprisingly slow, measured, intentional.

My sister once claimed her young children loved the public library because it was a "yes place." Unlike other public spaces, most questions could be answered with a yes. Can they take that home? Yes. Can they sign up for this? Yes. Can they play with that toy? Yes. While my patrons at a research-intensive university ask different questions, I find that I am still often in the role of creating the magic of a "yes place." Like any professional conference, MDLS gives me new ideas and opportunities to learn. But it also allows me the rare opportunity to think deeply and critically about what is most important in my data services portfolio. Sometimes that even means learning to say no.

Lest you get the wrong idea, I want to end by saying that MDLS is also just plain fun. In addition to all the regular programming and discussions, there are tours of collections, group dine-arounds, and board games galore. After cleaning up at the end of the 2023 symposium, I swung by the hotel to pick-up my bag. The receptionist asked me, "Were you part of that group that stayed up late playing games in the lobby? You all have such great energy!"

Kristen Adams, Miami University

Perspective from a mid-career science and engineering librarian

When I started in my position as a science and engineering liaison librarian, data services and data literacy quickly became part of my role as we didn't have a data librarian. The STEM librarians formed the unofficial data services team, mainly focused on data literacy. Recently, my library created and filled a new position for data librarian, but I continue to be part of the data team.

I was aware when I started in my position that my library had volunteered to co-host MDLS 2023. I hadn't attended before, so to get to know the community and planning

process I joined the 2021 planning committee; that year it was completely virtual. It then shifted to hybrid in 2022, so there were new, in-person planning considerations that hadn't been part of the previous year. Many community members were excited to begin the return to an in-person event, however attendance was mostly virtual, myself included. This past year, 2023, I served as co-chair and the event was entirely in-person, with some live streamed sessions; so once again there were modifications in terms of planning. The symposium itself was refreshing in that I got to meet people in-person that I'd worked with virtually or communicated with for the past few years. It felt like getting to know your neighbors better even though we'd been living side by side for a while. I'm serving again on the 2024 committee, in an advising capacity, and it feels like passing the torch.

As I mentioned, I'm not a data librarian, I'm a STEM librarian with some data responsibilities. I'll admit I wondered for a while: if this conference is for data librarians and I'm not one by title, is this conference for me? After being at an in-person MDLS, it was easy to see the variety of roles and responsibilities among the attendees, and there were other liaison librarians there. I discovered what I'd heard others say before, that MDLS isn't just about the presentations, it's the time and conversations between them that seems to matter most. What was also clear at the in-person event, is that a number of attendees felt new to librarianship, but there were quite a few students and people with one to two years of experience. Experience with data and experience as a librarian are different, so really everyone can contribute something, and be a mentee or mentor in some way. I'd like to end with the message that regardless of your job title, or level of data services you support, we welcome you to join the MDLS community.

Ana Munandar, Chapman University
Perspective from a mid-career reference and education liaison librarian
I work in California, and the first MDLS I experienced was in 2020, when it shifted to a virtual format. Since the symposium was online and registration was free, I jumped on this opportunity. The name says "Midwest," but it is open to all, not just those in the area. There has been a mix of those who are experienced data librarians, those with institutions where they have established data services, and those who are new in the field. Even though librarians have long been involved with finding, managing, and providing access to information, which is also data, working with raw data and data as a product of research takes on more knowledge and skill sets. The MDLSs have provided me with opportunities to learn about library data services, available tools for working with data, and librarians' attitudes in addressing the need for data services in academic libraries.

Through presentations and workshops, I have learned of some available tools for working with data, such as the DMPTool for creating research data management plans, programming languages (R and Python) for data analysis, data visualization software, such as Tableau and GIS, and data sharing repositories, such as OSF and Zenodo.

Although knowledge and skills are essential, I am amazed that librarians have embraced changes, learned new skills, and are inventive in offering new library services. Some are the first data librarians at their institutions, some have morphed to become data librarians, and others have incorporated data services into their roles. In many instances, they have been self-guided in building knowledge and competencies to provide these developing areas of services.

In 2023, though not attending, I had the privilege of serving on the Planning Committee. For librarians and students looking for service opportunities, I am glad to share that MDLS does not require membership fees to serve. There was a lot of communication and collaboration, and it was particularly heartwarming to see that the Committee also took time to discuss and consider the needs of students who would be attending.

MDLS 2024

MDLS is usually held in October, and this year it will be held October 14–16 in Lawrence, Kansas, hosted by the University of Kansas. Please visit the MDLS website (https://mwdatalibrariansymposium.wordpress.com) for past schedules, session descrip-2tion. ✎