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Research Data Management and University Records Management: Collaborative crossroads

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This post is the first in a series on research data management presented by the Records Management Roundtable.

One service area of the [University Library System \(ULS\)](#) I was not initially expecting to become involved with when I became University Records Manager at the University of Pittsburgh was research data management (RDM). However, my participation with a ULS specialist track focused on RDM quickly made it clear that this domain is one that records managers throughout higher education should be tuned into.

Research records and data output from various projects, studies, and trials are both created and managed by departments and disciplines across Universities in huge quantities. While RDM may conjure visions of statistical tables, sprawling spreadsheets, and raw computational models, research output is more often a hybrid of record types. Lab notebooks, clinical information and waivers, computational displays, large data sets, XML exports, artifacts, audio-visual materials, proprietary software output, field notes, and grant and administrative materials vary by discipline and format. Thus, records management is a clear fit with other RDM pursuits.

The ULS “tracks”, or groups of specialists, are charged with specific areas of responsibility, such as instructional design or scholarly communications. The ULS’s RDM track evolved out of a working group and over the past year began forming a three-tiered service delivery model for providing RDM resources and outreach to the University research community. Consisting of digital scholarship specialists, a metadata librarian, an archivist, several liaison librarians, and myself, the RDM track’s goal is to provide guidance, resources, and instruction to researchers on how to best manage their records and data throughout the research lifecycle.

The RDM track has tailored resources surrounding some of the following topics: how to create a data management plan using [DMPTool](#); understanding funder mandates; describing your data; choosing sustainable formats; locating data and disciplinary repositories; and open data sharing. Discussion is often framed by communicating the importance of RDM in terms of time, resources, funding agency and publisher mandates, and research integrity.

Service and outreach are conveyed through resources including a [Libguide](#), [website](#), and [FAQS](#) which outline service topics; consultations with faculty to better understand their needs; training sessions for ULS staff, academic departments, and research groups; advertisements throughout campus to promote said services; and a series of instructional modules focused on a specific facet of RDM, such as research records and data retention, freely available on the [ULS RDM Libguide](#).

My involvement with the RDM track has raised important questions: where do research records and data management fit into a higher education RM program? Certainly records management principles and policies apply to research records and data. Although somewhat dated, Pitt maintains a *Guidelines for Managing Research Data* policy on record, in addition to [general and financial retention schedules](#) that loosely address such record types. Furthermore, as a “state-related” University, *most* research conducted at the University is **not** subject to state or federal open record laws.

The question of just how effective records management outreach to the research community can be arises. Departments, research groups, and principle investigators often keep their research output close to the chest (read: attribution), storing it on personal websites, databases, external hard drives, or in departmental or personal storage. Management issues, migration and preservation challenges, and open data conundrums crop up. Additionally, the adoption of enterprise software like Electronic Lab Notebooks only increase issues of ownership, management, and preservation of University research content.

Researchers are advised to consider records management at all stages of the research lifecycle:

- What types and formats of research records will be created?
- How, and who, will manage those records throughout the course of the project?
- Is electronic research output being generated in proprietary systems?
- How can this data be migrated?
- What are the applicable research records retention periods?
- What University records retention policies should I be aware of?
- Where will I deposit research records following the end of my study?
- How will I preserve these records over time?

The RDM track’s mission provides the perfect platform for spotlighting how records management practices can and should positively support research data management in the research community at Pitt. As the RDM track moves forward with faculty consultations this summer, I’m interested to learn the ways (and formats) in which researchers are creating records, where they are being stored, what oversight and policies are governing their work, and how they perceive University records management affecting their workflows.

I’ll be working to determine the volume of research records – along with type and importance – that departments and research teams store at the University’s off-site storage vendor, examining how and when content should be exported from ELN’s and deposited or stored elsewhere, and potentially attempting to embed myself with a research group for a term to understand their methods, workflows, and records management considerations.

Records managers in higher education should definitely be engaged with the research community at their respective institutions. However, with limited time and resources (there is one of me!), it’s often difficult to consistently and successfully engage stakeholders. Finding collaborative commonalities with other service providers and information professionals, like the RDM track, is one way to make a records management program more visible to the research community.

