



Engaging Researchers with Data Management The Cookbook

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6.2. Cultural Change Happens One Person at a Time: Informatics Lab at Virginia Tech

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Virginia Tech employs researcher-consultants to provide expert support within specific domains and build good practice through ongoing partnerships with researchers.

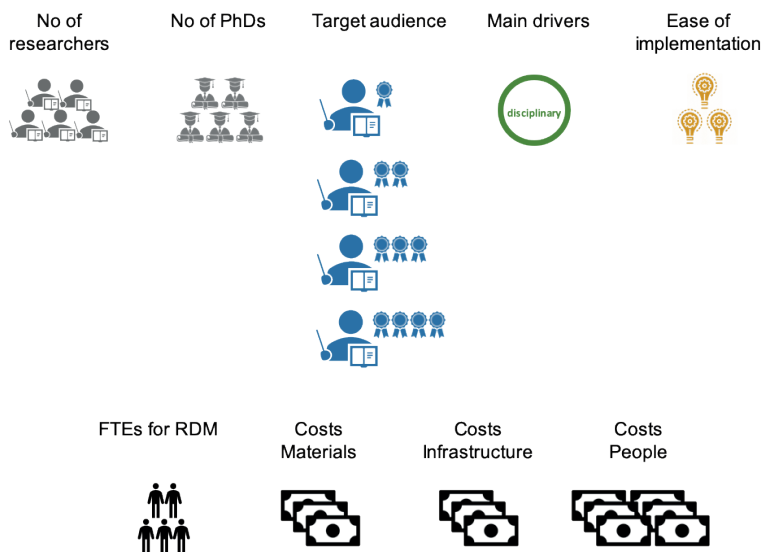


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‘To a large extent, researchers are not interested in data management planning. Apart from the fact that they have to do it for grant proposals, they’re generally not interested in sharing data. They want their problems to be solved: “my workflow is really inefficient and I wish it were better”, or, “I would really love to use this new software, but I can’t figure out how to get it to work”. So our aim with the Informatics Lab is to help researchers where they want help. While helping them we have the opportunity to talk to them about data management planning and data sharing,’ explains Jonathan Petters, Data Management Consultant and Curation Services Coordinator at Virginia Tech.



Fig. 6.2.1 Jonathan Petters, Data Management Consultant and Curation Services Coordinator at Virginia Tech © Jonathan Petters, CC BY 4.0.

Domain-Specific Consultants at the Informatics Lab

The Informatics Lab was established as part of the Data Services unit with the goal of helping researchers across all disciplines to deal efficiently with their data. The team consists of five people: four consultants and one coordinator.¹ All consultants have domain knowledge to help them

¹ Informatics Lab at Virginia Tech, <https://informaticslib.lib.vt.edu/>

develop deeper interactions and relationships with researchers. 'Finding the right person for the position is a challenge,' says Jonathan. 'You need people who have a good understanding of the research lifecycle and of data management, but also the ability to think at a higher level than just one research project. You want a combination of both depth and a higher, broader view.'

Jonathan also explains that in addition to all the research requirements, it is crucial for the consultants to have a genuine interest in offering support: 'If you're not interested in helping out other people, you're not the right person. A good way to test this is to make sure that people to which the services will be provided are involved in the hiring committee.'

Research Background — A Double-Edged Sword?

The informatics consultants are employed as permanent faculty members, meaning that they are researchers in their own right. They are expected to maintain a research portfolio and to publish. 'Actively doing research is not in direct opposition to being a good service provider, but I think that there's a bit of tension. Some of our consultants feel they are here to help. Others focus more on their research and do some consultancy on the side,' reflects Jonathan. 'But the benefit is that by doing their own research, it's even easier for them to get out and talk to other researchers. They form organic networks through shared interests and connections, and that's how mutual awareness and trust is created. I could talk to a biomedical researcher about human subjects' data because I know these issues pretty well. But if I say that my background is meteorology, they may say, okay, so you know something about research, but that's from a different domain. Having somebody who's got that background brings credence.'

Five Full-Time Employees Are Expensive — Are They Worth the Investment?

The group has had over 200 consultations so far. They have a big body of evidence that they will eventually look into, but Jonathan prefers not to rely solely on quantitative feedback: 'Everybody was saying



Fig. 6.2.2 Informatics Lab at work. © Ann Brown/Virginia Tech, CC BY 4.0.2.

they were really happy. So unless people are willing to be upfront and critical with you, you're not likely to receive helpful feedback. Nobody is going to say: "I know you tried to help me for 6 hours, but in fact you made it worse".² Jonathan prefers to focus on long-term effects. 'When our consultants talk to researchers about the kind of data they produce, about all those different proteins and complex molecules, for example, they help researchers realise that it's actually all data. They get them to think about their research in a different way. This opens up an opportunity to have a conversation about changing their practice.' Jonathan reflects that when they help a researcher, they get a recurring client who views the library as a partner. 'It's a one person to one person thing and it leads to slow cultural change. We also help research students and that's going to have an impact on them moving forward. Whether they are all going to become tenure-track professors or not, it does contribute to cultural change.'

2 Virginia Tech News, 'University Libraries Has Expertise, Resources to Help Faculty Overcome Data Challenges', where the photo was originally published, <https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2019/05/univlib-datasalvage-miller.html>