



Book Review

Review of *Data Culture in Academic Libraries: A Practical Guide to Building Communities, Partnerships, and Collaborations*

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ABSTRACT

Review of *Data culture in academic libraries: A practical guide to building communities, partnerships, and collaborations*, edited by Marcela Y. Isuster and Alisa Beth Rod. Association of College and Research Libraries, 2025. 338 pp. ISBN 9798892556156.

KEYWORDS

Data literacy, data services, outreach

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As academic libraries have evolved through the years, demands for new services and expertise have also evolved. One area that has seen growth is data services and collections. In the book *Data Culture in Academic Libraries: A Practical Guide to Building Communities, Partnerships, and Collaborations*, editors Marcela Isuster and Alisa Beth Rod showcase a dynamic collection of chapters on all things data related. The editors' goal is to help academic librarians and data specialists cultivate data culture, defined as the "norms, values, skills, and behaviors that shape how data is produced, shared, and used in a given content" (p.ix). The editors have identified chapter contributors who represent a broad geographical scope of institutions and can showcase a variety of case studies. The chapters offer a good mix of narratives, lessons learned, techniques, and outcomes. Reflections provide a different perspective beyond what is purely theoretical. The book is organized into 21 chapters within five sections.

Section 1, "Data at All Levels," looks at embedding data practices across undergraduate, graduate, faculty, and institutional contexts. Chapters in this section showcase how data literacy, data management, and data services can become part of the whole academic institution. The first chapter begins by providing a short history of open data sharing and its impact on academic libraries. The authors discuss work done within special collections and showcase items that would be considered data sets, like archival lighthouse records from the 1870s. The chapter highlights the value of data within these types of digitized collections. Other chapters in this section highlight using collections to teach students, data used in academic accreditation, and the skills and proficiencies needed to engage with students regarding data literacy.

Section 2, "Data Services and Instruction," addresses how academic libraries can design, deliver, and sustain services and instructional programs that center around data. Beginning with Chapter 6, the authors share their experiences in the creation and delivery of an online professional development program aimed at library professionals. They share the course learning objectives and the pedagogical approach of this program. The focus on pedagogy carries through other chapters in the section, including a chapter that describes the evolution of a data literacy program at Carnegie Mellon University. Also included in this section are chapters that focus on data visualization and pedagogy. The authors highlight the importance of how critical reflection feeds into data visualization, and that pedagogy is simply not just "how to make charts."

Section 3, "Data Outreach," focuses on how academic libraries can proactively engage their institutional communities around data. The chapters in this section provide great examples that extend beyond library services and showcase how libraries are engaging their campus communities by designing events, activities, and outreach initiatives that highlight awareness of data and build literacy around it and help to embed data services and practices into institutional culture. Chapter 11, for example, focuses on International Love Data Week and provides practical suggestions around scalability and what may or may not be possible to host during that

week. It offers some great examples of in-person and either passive or asynchronous models. All chapters in this section highlight examples of engagement in their effort to shed light on data culture at their institution. They share successes and challenges and provide food for thought for future planning.

Section 4, “Data Communities,” consists of chapters that explore how academic libraries can pivot beyond the traditional workshop model or one-off session and instead build long lasting communities of practice around data. Each chapter highlights different models and case studies. Chapter 14 showcases examples of creating instances that can help both data culture and data communities through activities like book and video discussions, panels, and student-led programming. Chapter 15 highlights the creation and organization of data squads that engage researchers on campus. This chapter shares working models from both Carleton College and UCLA and provides examples of some of the work these data squads provide to researchers, including one project that analyzed autopsy reports stemming from law enforcement encounters (p. 217).

Section 5, “Data Partnerships,” highlights several case studies that illustrate how academic libraries form and retain partnerships with external stakeholders. The entire section sheds light on how libraries can act as proactive agents in the research-data ecosystem, rather than passive service providers. For example, in Chapter 18, a case study describes how a library engaged with its user community and partners to develop services that created a mutually beneficial model when resources were limited. Other chapters, such as Chapter 21, offer a glimpse into what a consortia model of data partnerships can look like by showcasing the creation of a Canadian dataverse through a community of practice, and how that data structure model evolved as a consortia effort.

Throughout the book there are several examples of case studies that highlight how practical and useful the use of data practices can be when working with various types of collections. Examples include analyzing records of a historic Black cemetery and partnering with researchers working with a Mandarin Chinese audio database. Many of the case studies are presented in ways that can spark ideas about one’s own institution. While many of the chapters share lessons learned, the overarching theme of these stories is that of evolution and refinement to advance data culture within academic communities that include the library.

This book differs from others that focus on research data or the “how to” of teaching data literacy or setting up a repository. Rather, this book dives into how we can build communities, partnerships, and values that appreciate and utilize data. There are examples throughout the book that highlight areas of diversity, anti-racism, inclusive data practices, and even biases that may be generated by data collection. There are, however, some limitations to this book. This book does not offer step-by-step guidance for establishing a data repository or curating data collections, but rather focuses on culture, partnership, and programming. Another limitation

may be the size of the institutions featured in the cases. Some are larger institutions that may have dedicated data librarians or staff, rather than smaller institutions where there may not be dedicated roles or sufficient resources.

Of the many takeaways throughout this book, one common theme is the willingness to engage and learn from experiences. The book shares that for many of the programs showcased, it is valuable to learn from what may not have worked well and to revise and refine from these experiences. For example, Chapter 14 shares the experience that many of us have had when attendance was low for a program that we spent a lot of time developing. The author shares a quote from Peter Block, “social capital is created one room at a time, the one we are in at the moment” (p. 205). The author goes on to explain that events may not have turned out as many people as we had hoped but nonetheless may result in better interactions that can help data communities develop over time.

In terms of recommended audiences, this book is a great read for any library professional looking to develop or expand data services and has an interest in developing data culture and partnerships at their institution. Administrators might find this book helpful to build or supplement strategic initiatives around data that could involve stakeholders who may be external to the library. Even if you have been involved with data services for a while, this book can serve as inspiration from peer institutions with programmatic examples. Overall, this book presents a robust and forward-thinking approach for practical and comprehensible data engagement that also promotes data culture.