

Building bridges, building experience

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As the recipient of the 2019 John Merriman Award, I had the pleasure and privilege of attending both UKSG in Telford and NASIG in Pittsburgh, USA. I am an American who has lived in England since 2002, working in a variety of library settings during this time. Having said that, this was my first conference stateside and I was keen to make the most of the experience, and Pittsburgh was also a new place to me. I was deposited a mere five-minute walk from the Omni Hotel, after having spent 6½ hours on a Megabus from Washington, DC (not as arduous as one might think!). In my short walk, I was taken by its stunning architecture, reminiscent of the Chicago of my childhood and the Liverpool of my present. Beautiful detail and early 20th century cityscapes had me texting my husband in the UK, “You should be here!”.



To my mind, there are numerous bits from various sessions I could reflect on, far too many to cover in this short editorial. Instead, I will focus on a few aspects that I found myself thinking about, long after the conference was completed.

The Opening Session, and the Vision Speaker and Town Hall portions of the conference were interesting and thought provoking. In particular, I loved that the Opening Session featured someone from the local community, Charlene Foggie-Barnett, the Archive Specialist for the [Charles ‘Teenie’ Harris Archive](#). To be specific, I really enjoyed and appreciated getting to know a little bit more about someone who was culturally significant to Pittsburgh and photography. Within that, I also reflected on my own [university’s archive](#) and the difficulty and cost involved in archiving and promoting collections. I would welcome a talk linking the host city to the conference at other events, too.

I was particularly impressed by [DeEtta Jones](#)’ talk, ‘Courageous leadership: walking your talk from wherever you are’. As someone who does not line manage anyone directly, I identified with her message that we all have opportunities to lead by our consistency, to be culturally competent on a daily basis. She inspired me to think about how opting out of situations can be a privilege, to think about how to challenge the status quo. Her messages about teamwork and being helpful were particularly powerful, and I embraced the idea that tiny shifts in our behaviour can make big changes.

As someone relatively new to the scholarly communications/research support landscape, I presumed I would need to 'catch-up' with others and was pleasantly surprised at my own knowledge base, but perhaps more importantly, at how forward-thinking and progressive the open research agenda in the United Kingdom is (or at least my experience of it). I reflected on UKSG often while I was at NASIG, and the mixture of publishing / research support / e-resources, and how lucky I am to be part of a community that values sharing, not as per a mandate for the next REF but as part of the research lifecycle. I think I was surprised to find that although this is on the USA agenda, it is not to the same extent as in the UK. I was reminded that there is so much more learning / sharing that could be going on between scholarly communications / research support librarians – just a shame that we have an ocean between us that makes partaking a little more difficult. Having said that, it made me want to think about what sort of sharing we could do via webinars, virtual exchange of experiences, etc. “How can we help our USA colleagues’ experience in developing a scholarly communications unit within the library?” and “What can we learn from them?” sprang to mind often. My session attendance reflected my interest in scholarly communications – it was fantastic to learn about open education resources, predatory journals, integrating repositories, up-cycling a scholarly communications unit, and so much more!

My final thought on NASIG – and this matches my UKSG experience – was to appreciate the openness and kindness of attendees at NASIG. I was thoroughly impressed with the comments, questions and curiosity in other participants, and there was always someone friendly popping over to say hello or ask how I was. One of my favourite moments was finding myself invited to lunch at a local Venezuelan café after a conversation started following a session. I found myself wandering past the lovely, big, beautiful buildings of Pittsburgh to an unknown café with a few strangers and bonding over new food, political grumblings and libraries. It was spontaneous and fantastic.

On a very personal level, I found the experience of attending NASIG somewhat revelatory. My background is public libraries and my foray into academia was more down to a personal change of circumstances and less about a newfound career in research support. My time in Liverpool was meant to coincide with my maternity leave and my husband’s recent appointment to his first research role. As it happened, nearly eight years later, we are still in Liverpool. My move into academic libraries always felt slightly fraudulent – I was a children’s librarian! – and my lateral move into research support in 2015 made me feel even more like an interloper in a strange world with new acronyms and policies. Yet here I am four years later, attending my first conference in the USA, after having won the Merriman Award. So in that sense, attending NASIG was a bit of a revelation – I was there not just as an observer, but as a keen participant in the future of scholarly communications and research support. I felt emboldened enough to give my opinion, speak up in a few sessions, and even made a point via the microphone (not quite ready to speak in front of the entire conference yet, but in a small session, so there’s a start!).

I lost my voice during NASIG. My trip to the conference followed meeting up with family and friends in the Midwest and Washington, DC and perhaps my vocal cords had enough. Ironically, though, I found my voice at NASIG, too. The voice that tells me that as a librarian, I am there to learn, support and advocate for open research and scholarship and to learn and work with others, too. For a moment, one that I hope continues, the imposter syndrome was put to the wayside and I was the librarian I want to be now and continually developing into the professional I want to be in the future.

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.





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