Research & Experiential Learning Unit

Overview:

The Research & Experiential Learning (REL) offers dedicated spaces and services to U of I students, staff, and faculty to engage in curricular, research, or personal learning experiences. The REL Unit delivers services through four programs: the MILL, the Studio, the Data Hub, and VERSO. Unit personnel emphasizes excellence in service delivery, creative and innovative learning opportunities, and efficient management of its resources in support of the Library's strategic priorities.

Library KPIs:
- Geographic Information Systems
  - Usage via unique logins, # of items created, collections purchased
- Research Information Management
  - Records added via Smart Harvesting, Deposits, Other
- Building Usage
  - Space usage in Data Hub, Studio Bookings, MILL Door Counts
- Research and Reference Assistance
  - Questions answered in LibAnswers
- Workshops and Presentations
  - Tech Talks
  - MILL Workshops

Objectives (includes timebound goals and projects):

Maximize user engagement with program equipment and services
- **Why:**
  - To facilitate student and patron use of Library resources effectively
- **How:**
  - Providing spaces that allow students to engage in experiential learning activities, including using MILL equipment, Studio equipment, and Data Hub equipment.
  - Providing state of the art tools that enable research and academic work in making, rapid prototyping, audio/visual production, and GIS/data-intensive computing.
  - Providing trained, educated personnel to answer queries and provide support for using the tools and equipment.
  - Promoting the spaces, tools, and personnel offered across campus
- **Success looks like:**
  - Usage metrics that meet or exceed previous performance
  - Qualitative data that indicates patron satisfaction with resources
- **Fall Update**

- o MILL door counts exhibited an increase from 12650 in Fall 2024 vs. 9986 in Fall 2023. Annually, 2024 had higher door counts than 2023.
  - o Data Hub space usage (numbers of people observed during staffed times) was at its peak in Fall 2024 with an average of 9.3 people per day, up from 8.2 people in Fall 2023. The desk saw 79 questions asked, compared to 34 the previous Fall semester.
  - o Studio bookings were 141, which is down from 228 in Spring 24, but up from 104 in the Fall 23. We suspect a cyclical pattern with high spring usage and lower fall usage. Likewise, the hours the Studio was in use per week was 13, up from 10.75 in Fall 23, but down from Spring 24, which was 22.9 hours per week.
- **Spring Update[1]:**
  - o MILL door counts were slightly down from Fall 2024 (12650 people) to 11532 in Spring 2025. However, the Spring 2025 numbers were up from the previous Spring 2024 (8649) or Spring 2023 (9978).
  - o Data Hub space usage was consistent with the Fall 2024. In spring 2025, we recorded approximately 10 people per day on average during our staffed shifts (not including event participation). This is very modestly improved on Fall 2024 (9.3), and greatly improved on Spring 2024 (6.7). Interestingly, the Access Services review of the space (recorded differently than us) yielded about 217.6 people per month, which when measured similarly is pretty consistent. The desk saw 33 questions, compared to the previous Spring 2024 of 45 questions.
  - o Studio bookings were 213, which is down from 228 in Spring 24, but up from 141 in the Fall 24. The hours the Studio was in use per week was 21, up from 13 in Fall 24, but down from Spring 24, which was 22.9 hours per week.

Create effective learning and research experiences
- **Why:**
  - o To advance information and digital literacy while improving student and patron capacity to utilize a range of tools
- **How:**
  - o Producing instructional resources that allow asynchronous learning
  - o Developing workshops and learning events led by experts
  - o Providing services that support the curriculum directly
  - o Promoting the resources, workshops, events, and services offered across campus
- **Success looks like:**
  - o Consistent, well-attended workshops and events
  - o Course/class engagement with REL programs
  - o Research lab/group engagement with REL programs
- **Fall Update**

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[1] I edited the Fall 2024 Data Hub numbers to be our "Avg People w/o events" count of 9.3, which is different than the previously reported number of 12, which was the Fall 2024 "Avg People w/ events". This is because we started counting differently in 2025 and the Avg People w/ Events number is discontinued, so there is now no comparison. Now the Fall and Spring use the same number.

- o Data Hub Tech Talks declined this semester, both in numbers of talks given and in terms of attendance vs. Spring 2024.
- o MILL Workshops exhibited a decline in overall attendees from the of Fall 2023, but an increase in attendance vs the spring 2024. The trend of annual attendance (spring + fall) is still increasing.
- o Course and class engagement continued.
  - The Data Hub continued to be used by VTD 254, scheduled almost weekly throughout the semester. ENVS 497 and GEOG 385 had students visit us for help.
  - The MILL has several classes that work with it, including GERM 301, FOR 274, SPAN 306, and several campus groups.
  - The Studio engaged the School of Music directly, receiving feedback for enhancing the space for their use and is used frequently for coursework.
- **Spring Update:**
  - o Data Hub Tech Talks were held similarly with the Fall 2024, with 5 talks. Total, mean, and median attendees were down slightly from 43/8.6/7 to 38/7.6/5 respectively.
  - o MILL workshops grew in both number and attendance in Spring 2025, with 168 attendees in Spring 2025 vs. 136 in Fall 2024 or 98 in Spring 2024. This is partly due to 2 more workshops than the previous two semesters. Average attendance was about 18.6 in Spring 2025, compared to 19.4 in Fall 2024 and 14 in Spring 2024.
  - o Course and Class engagement continued:
    - Studio: About half of the bookings were class-related. The School of Music faculty have also requested new software (Logic Pro) installed and reserved the space for class use. For example, Prof. Dylan Champagne and Prof. Corbin Hohstadt have reserved the space 12 and one time, respectively.
    - The MILL interacts with several classes, including GERM 301, SOC404, SPAN 409 and several campus groups and individual students.
    - The Data Hub was used by VTD 254 again repeatedly throughout the semester. IIDS began using the Data Hub frequently for its various gatherings and brown bags. The Computer Science department began to use the Data Hub as a location to deliver its CSAC – computer science course assistance.

Manage research information and data collections efficiently and effectively
- **Why:**
  - o To support university and library goals of tracking and promoting university-generated research outputs
  - o To provide long-term, persistent, public archival support for university research information, including data and document deposits
- **How:**
  - o Provide support for research data management through data management plan assistance

- o Provide support for geospatial resources and services through the management of ArcGIS resources and platforms
- o Manage information streams through Esploro/VERSO
- o Work with the DSOS Unit and relevant teams to ensure the repository functions of Esploro/VERSO function well
- **Success looks like:**
  - o Continued high use of ArcGIS platforms
  - o Consistent updating of VERSO
  - o Engagement by at least one unit from each UI College with VERSO
  - o Use of data management support meeting or exceeding previous performance
- **Fall Update**
  - o GIS platforms continue to exhibit strong use patterns. Fall 2024 (August-December) unique users averaged 492 per month vs. 422 per month in Fall 2023.
  - o VERSO was continually updated throughout the fall, with Research Impacts Team members managing smart harvesting and the acquisition of several larger collections of content, namely UI Extension bulletins and the RCDS data repository.
  - o Based on Analytics reports (*[Esploro Updates - 2024](#)*), there is widespread updating of profile information. The reports make it difficult to verify but virtually all colleges appear to represented there.
  - o Data management support (in the form of DMP consultations was down in 2024 from 2023), however, there appeared to be more RDM-related questions at the Data Hub than in previous semesters.
- **Spring Update:**
  - o GIS platforms are doing well. We saw approx. 552 unique users per month in Spring 2025 compared to 492 per month in Fall 2024 or 443 per month in Spring 2024.
  - o VERSO was continually updated throughout the spring. The RCDS data collection was completed in Spring 2025 and regular updates and patron deposits continued to occur.
  - o Data management support continued on the same lines as the Fall 2024, with about 3 formal consultations.

Revamp the "License to MILL" program (2024-2025 project)
- **Why:**
  - o To create a system of validation/credentialing for students that have learned how to use various MILL equipment
- **How:**
  - o Refresh the tracking document for the current MILL equipment and services
  - o Establish a tracking tool internally for the MILL manager
- **Success Looks Like:**
  - o A small number of students starting the program each semester
  - o 100% completion by a subset of those students

- o Promotion of achievement through the MILL's communication channels
  - Fall Update
    - o The MILL Manager has started to outline the new achievements for the License to MILL program. We have not yet formalized the changes yet.
  - Spring Update
    - o The tracking document has been revamped/refreshed with updated information for the current capabilities of the MILL. Likewise, the tracking tool for internal use is prepared. We should be ready for the program in the Fall 2025.

Unit/Team Metrics:

All Programs

- *Qualitative information provided through follow-up surveys or anecdotal/testimonial information*
  - Fall Update: MILL feedback
  - Spring Update: MILL feedback
- *Total # of appointments booked to use a given space*
  - Fall Update: MILL – 154 bookings; Studio – 141 bookings
  - Spring update: MILL – 193 bookings; Studio – 215 bookings
- *Total # of visits to each program web site*
  - Fall Update: (Aug-Dec) VERSO – 44,852; GIS Pages – 30,699; Studio – 981; MILL – 2,846; Data Hub – 143; RDM Guide – 306
  - Spring Update (Jan-May): VERSO – 49,028; GIS Pages – 22,994; Studio – 779; MILL – 2,880; Data Hub – 196; RDM Guide - 367
- *# of consultations provided at each location*
  - Fall Update: Studio – 7; MILL – 762; Data Hub – 79 (LibAnswers)
  - Spring Update: Studio – 8; MILL – 1029; Data Hub 33 (LibAnswers)
- *# of instructional materials added online (e.g. pages or discrete tutorials) for each program*
  - Fall Update: Studio – 3; MILL – unknown; Data Hub – 0; VERSO – 0
  - Spring Update: Studio – 0; MILL – 0; Data Hub – 0; VERSO – 2.
- *# of appts specifically defined for class or research projects*
  - Fall Update: Studio – 73/141; MILL – 22/154; Data Hub – 79/79
  - Spring Update: Studio – 106/215 bookings; MILL – 37/193; Data Hub – 33/33.
- *# of workshops provided in each program (if relevant)*
  - Fall Update: MILL - 7 (Make), 15 (Learn); Tech Talks – 5
  - Spring Update: MILL – 9 (Make), 9 (Learn); Tech Talks - 5
- *# of campus partners involved in each program*
  - Fall Update: MILL – 6; Studio – 1 (Music); Data Hub – 3 (2 tech talks, 1 class reservation)
  - Spring Update: MILL – 3; Studio – 1 (Music); Data Hub – 3 (1 class, 1 tech talk/other events; 1 service partner)

Studio-specific

- *% of Studio bookings that are new (vs. previous years)*

- ○ Fall Update: 81%
  - ○ Spring Update: 89%
- *# of hours per week The Studio is in use, according to the bookings data.*
  - ○ Fall Update: 13.5 hours
  - ○ Spring Update: 21.76 hours
- *# of circulations of equipment associated with The Studio*
  - ○ Fall Update: 134
  - ○ Spring Update: 143

DataHub-specific
- *Usage of ArcGIS Online and/or other GIS platforms*
  - ○ Fall Update: Unique Users – 2460; New Users – 367; Items Created – 2500; Unique Creators – 525; Item Views: 625,683
  - ○ Spring Update: Unique Users – 952; New Users – 269; Items Created – 4503; Unique Creators – 375; Item Views: 684,297
- *Ratio of questions as GIS to non-GIS*
  - ○ Fall Update: Don't have a good method for this yet. Most questions were GIS.
  - ○ Spring Update: Still don't have a good method for this.
- *# of classes using the space*
  - ○ Fall Update: 1 (VTD)
  - ○ Spring Update: 1 (VTD)
- *# of people using the space, according to usage data*
  - ○ Fall Update: Count (incl. events): 889; Count (excl. events): 614, Avg (incl. events): 12, Avg (excl. events): 9.3
  - ○ Spring Update: Count (incl. events): 1223; Count (excl. events): 823, Avg (excl. events): 10.

MILL-specific
- *# of partnerships with programs outside of the library*
  - ○ Fall Update: 6
  - ○ Spring Update: 3
- *# of visitors at Mobile MILL events or other tabling events*
  - ○ Fall Update: 711
  - ○ Spring Update: 1,032
- *# of events attended to by the Mobile MILL or other programs in the unit*
  - ○ Fall Update: 3
  - ○ Spring Update: 7
- *MILL Door Count*
  - ○ Fall Update: 12,650
  - ○ Spring Update: 11,532

Membership:
- Jeremy Kenyon (lead)
- Bruce Godfrey
- Hanwen Dong

- Jessica Fleener
- Norm Lee
- Seth Thompson

Reporting to:
- Jeremy Kenyon (Unit Head)
- Devin Becker (Associate Dean)

Final Outcomes

In all, 2024-2025 was a year of transition for multiple programs within REL. The MILL's renovation was completed in the Fall and set up a great year with traffic up in this year, far beyond the 2023-2024 academic year. Workshops were also improved with an increase in workshops and an increase in attendance, including new records. The Studio followed suit with a major renovation – still ongoing – and a move to the first floor. We have initiated some new partnerships with Music, longer hours, and have new software and new resources available to students. We've seen bookings keep their pattern of higher in the Spring than the Fall, but with a minor decline against the previous year. We feel the completion of the renovation might help change that.

The Data Hub also saw mixed results, with an increase in general space usage, especially studying and research-related use. However, we've seen a decrease in questions asked – with some regular patrons shifting to individual consultation after coming to the desk, and a decrease in the attendance of the Tech Talks. Both will require reflection for the next year. GIS platform and collection use continues to be strong, with higher unique users counts than the previous year. Finally, the VERSO program has had its first full year in production, with a permanent Research Information Coordinator in place throughout the year. The results are difficult to judge as there are not prior years against which to compare, but we achieved our goals and projects for adding and improving content in the system and the result is a more robust institutional repository than a year ago.

Accomplishments include:
- More than 50% of patrons to the MILL require assistance and the MILL has over 1500 recorded visitors per semester (using our sign-in sheet). MILL staff and students handled each and every request for help.
- The Mobile MILL has never been more successful at reaching out to students through events. REL staff and faculty also successfully shared success with the Mobile MILL in an international conference.
- The MILL directly supported a number of class and research projects. We also continued our partnership with the Fortunato Lab to 3D print nontoxic parts that can be used in wet laboratory experiments. We worked with a CNR team to create plot flags for use in the

Arboretum. Students produced exhibit material for art shows, created replicas of real-world objects like the Chernobyl dome, and resources for hydroponics projects.
- Successful re-envisioning of the Studio by library faculty. We made clear choices regarding items to keep and grow – podcasting facilities – and items to remove – the eGlass equipment. While not yet complete, our traffic is on par with previous semesters.
- Successfully formed a partnership with Music to build the Studio's support for their Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) courses.
- The Data Hub combined with the Computer Science Assistance Center (CSAC) this year. This involved the introduction of staff and student work space and equipment, as well as new signage in the library.
- Successfully built a relationship with IIDS to host more of their networking, fellows, and AI events in the Data Hub space.
- VERSO collections have grown. We have successfully added the current UI Extension documents and taken over the data repository role from ORED and imported their previous collection.
- VERSO profiles and metadata are also more robust. We have successfully cleaned and improved profiles from every college and research unit in the university and are successfully managing the flow of deposits from researchers and harvest from our automated harvesters.

Challenges and Opportunities for Next Year

Challenges:
- The current Studio space lacks substantial soundproofing, which has resulted in occasional noise leakage. In some instances, patrons playing loud music prompted noise complaints from nearby areas. To mitigate this, we needed to develop a stronger response to both recording noise complaints and enforcing the rules, which entails documenting the issues and contacting the offending patrons. Thus far, it appears to be working.
- In all three patron-facing programs, there are continuing challenges in reaching out to faculty, building relationships, and growing volume of the service. In each case, we have several programs that work with us, but the potential ceiling (how many partnerships we have) is much higher than we have likely been able to attain.
- The Data Hub, specifically, hasn't been able to grow its question base consistently. We have ebbs and flows, without strong or consistent engagement. While other libraries have similar services, it is tough to know what the necessary factors are that we are possibly missing. For the staff who work the desk, the question is whether working a shift diminishes productivity. If so, we may need to rethink the time spent on the desk.
- The Tech Talks have proven to be a tough nut to crack. We have seen talk attendance be inconsistent, but also willingness to give talks. The only consistent thread is AI tech talks have been popular. Remains to be seen what the best approach is.

Opportunities:

- The completion of the Studio's renovation promises to enable a wide range of services depending on patron interest. With significant investment, we will have made a much better podcasting and audio production facility than elsewhere on campus. There is tremendous opportunity to turn this into a high-volume service.
- The growth and adjustment of our staff and faculty's activities in support of REL programs offer opportunities as well. Everyone in the unit will have been in place for over a year, each unit will be supported by multiple personnel, and they know their areas of responsibility and will be prepared to deliver for the unit.
- MILL workshops have not been formally documented and their learning outcomes not yet tied to library literacies or other broader outcomes. We have created some resources to begin this process and will result in improved pedagogical support for workshop activities.
- We have seen a few examples of students benefitting from our PCs in the Data Hub, especially to train geoprocessing models requiring the hardware of the PC. These often can take days and the students have few other options. This may be an area of growth.
- With the "License to MILL" program ready – we have an opportunity to revisit gamify-ing the process of learning creative technology skills. While we will need to market the program, it may be an area of positive engagement with students.