



A People's History of MDLS

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Session Outline

- Self-reflection and table discussion (15-20 min)
- Overview & preliminary results of our project (15-20 min)
- Group reflection and discussion (5-10 min)



Rules of the Road

- Much of this session will incorporate group- and self-reflection on experiences and perceptions of MDLS
 - Remember that your feelings and experiences may be quite different than others around you, and we want this to be a safe space for everyone to express themselves
 - We welcome everyone to engage with the reflections to the extent that they are comfortable, and we will provide an option for anonymous sharing toward the end of the session
- During group discussions and reflection, please make space and time for each group member to share so that everyone's voice can be heard
 - Please also respect individuals' decisions not to engage with the broader discussion

Table Reflections & Discussion

Self-reflection (5-7 min)

Draw, doodle, brainstorm, or just think quietly about...

**something that represents
MDLS to you**

It can be specific to this MDLS, to your MDLS experiences overall, or something else entirely.

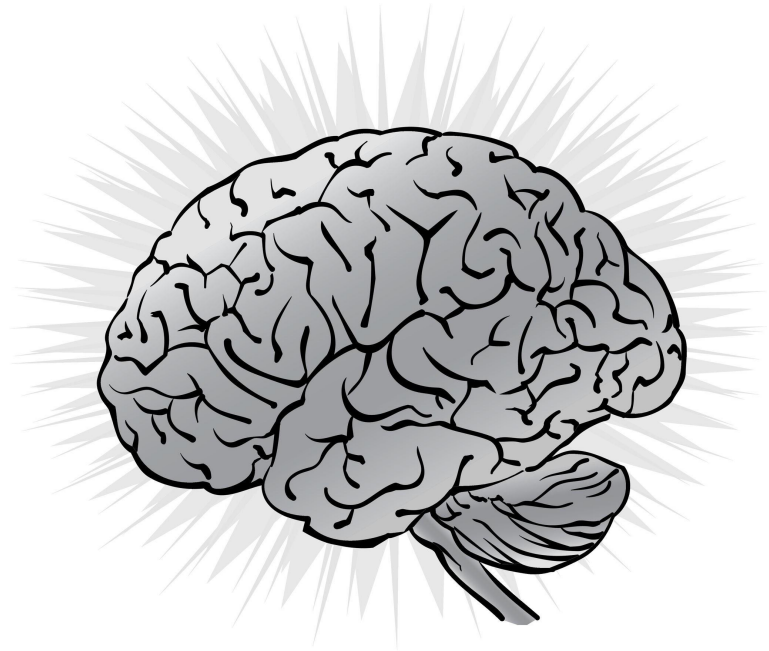


Table Discussion & Spider Chart (10 min)

- Distill your self-reflection into 1 or 2 words or short phrases that represent it
 - Share/discuss with your table!
- Work with your table to fit everyone's words on the blank spider chart
 - Each word should go at a node
- Each person at the table takes a few dot stickers and marks how relevant each word is to their MDLS experience
- Then connect your dots with marker lines and compare with your group



Image from [Stiltsoft User Guide on Radar \(Spider\) charts](#)

Gallery Walk! MDLS Participatory Data Viz

(3-5 min)



The Project

A People's History of MDLS: Reflections and Aspirations for a Regional Data Librarian Symposium

This research project has been reviewed and approved by the Oklahoma State University IRB (Study IRB-26-317)

Context: Why Are We Doing This?

- **MDLS 2025**

- Tracing Our Data Lineage (E.M. Durham)
- Discussions about disconnect between newer & established attendees (e.g., shared vocabulary, lineage of MDLS)

- **Create shared history**

- Reflections (will be deposited in Deep Blue Data Repository at UM)
- Oral History Interviews (Oklahoma Oral History Research Program archive)

- **What are we interested in?**

- How has MDLS contributed to individual professional development?
- How can perceptions and experiences be classified (e.g., positive/negative, professional/affective)?
- In what ways do participants describe or use the language of community when reflecting on their MDLS experience?

IRB Journey

- **Who has submitted an IRB application before?**
- **Why did we submit an IRB application?**
 - Err on the side of caution
 - Avoid prematurely limiting the context(s) in which we could use/share data
 - Potential for broadening scope to other data librarian symposia/conferences
- **Experiences throughout the process**
 - Committing to lots of things early on
 - Felt constrained in some ways (e.g., messaging), but modifications possible
 - OSU was main IRB (expedited review)
 - Notre Dame did not require any IRB oversight
 - UM required a ceding application, which was handled with SMART IRB
 - Took longer than expected (~ 7 weeks from initial submission to final approval)

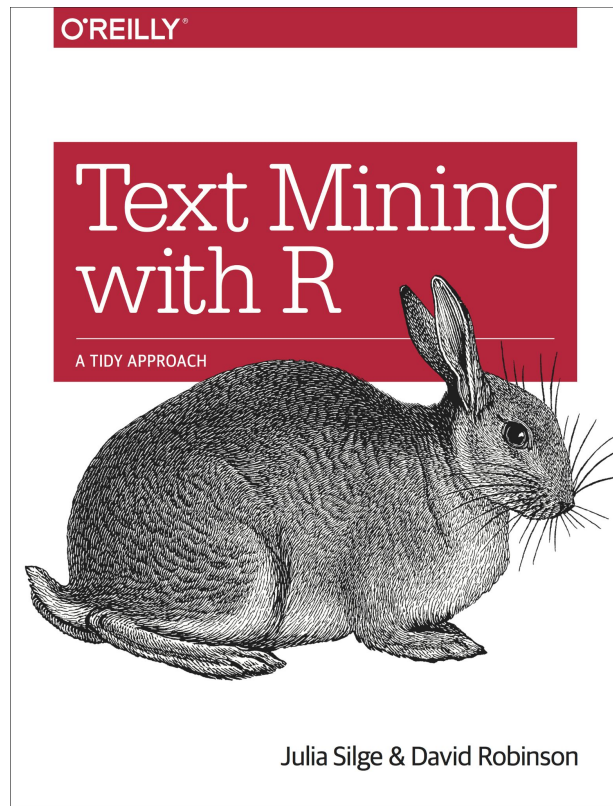
Reflection Survey

- Survey had 2 demographic questions and several optional, open-ended reflection questions
- Distributed survey to MDLS listserv, datacure Slack, and RDAP Discuss listserv
 - Separately emailed MDLS 2026 registrants who had previously attended MDLS
- Started recruitment August 18 and closed survey September 25 (38 days)
 - 10 responses as of 9/22/2026



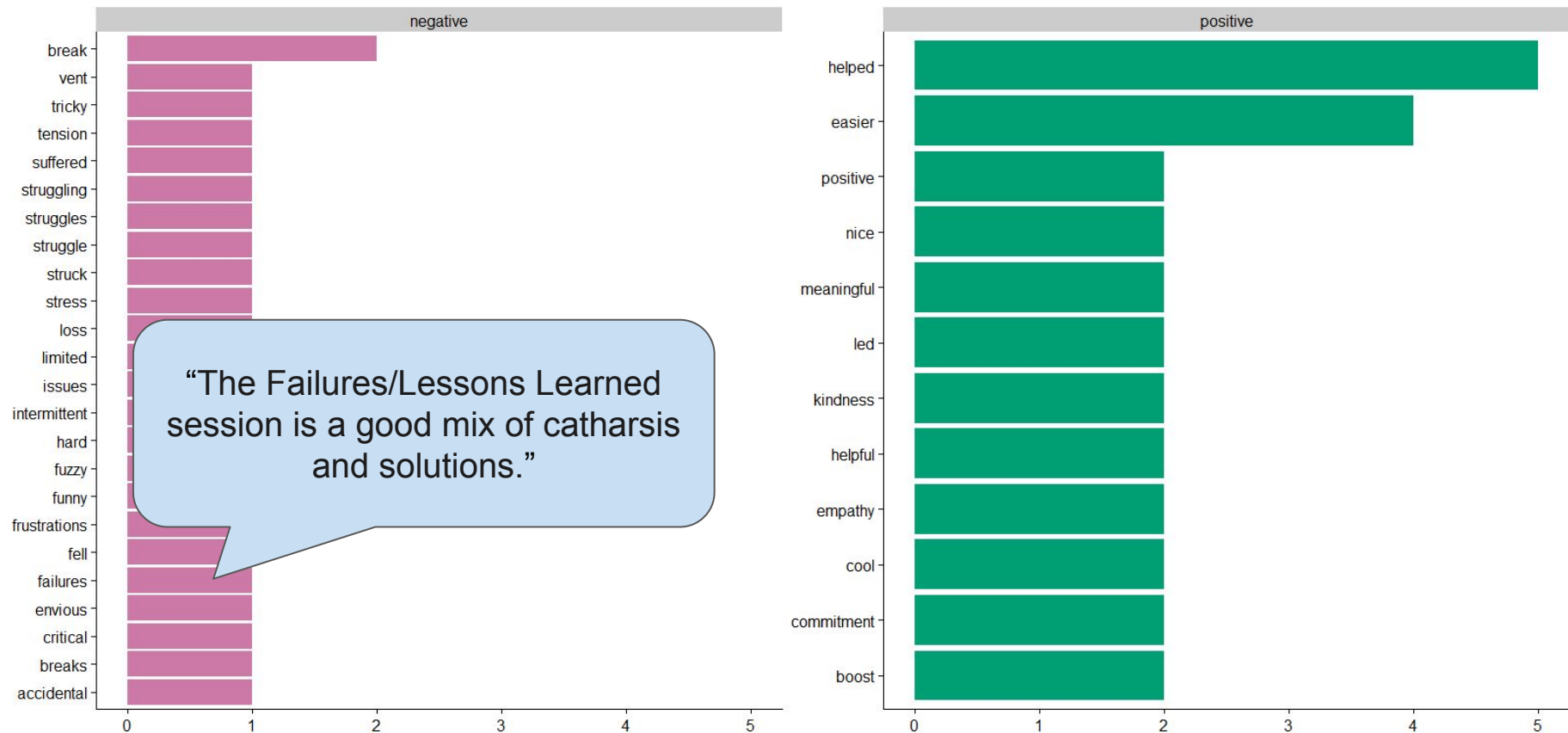
Text Mining

- Tools
 - R (tidyverse, tidytext, etc)
 - *Text Mining with R*
- Methods
 - Sentiment analysis 
 - Bigrams/relationships between words 
 - LDA topic modeling 
- Limitations
 - Relatively little data



“[Text Mining with R](#): A Tidy Approach” was written by Julia Silge and David Robinson. It was last built on 2025-04-07.

Sentiment Analysis: Preliminary Results



Bigrams Network: Preliminary Results



Thematic Analysis: 6 Steps

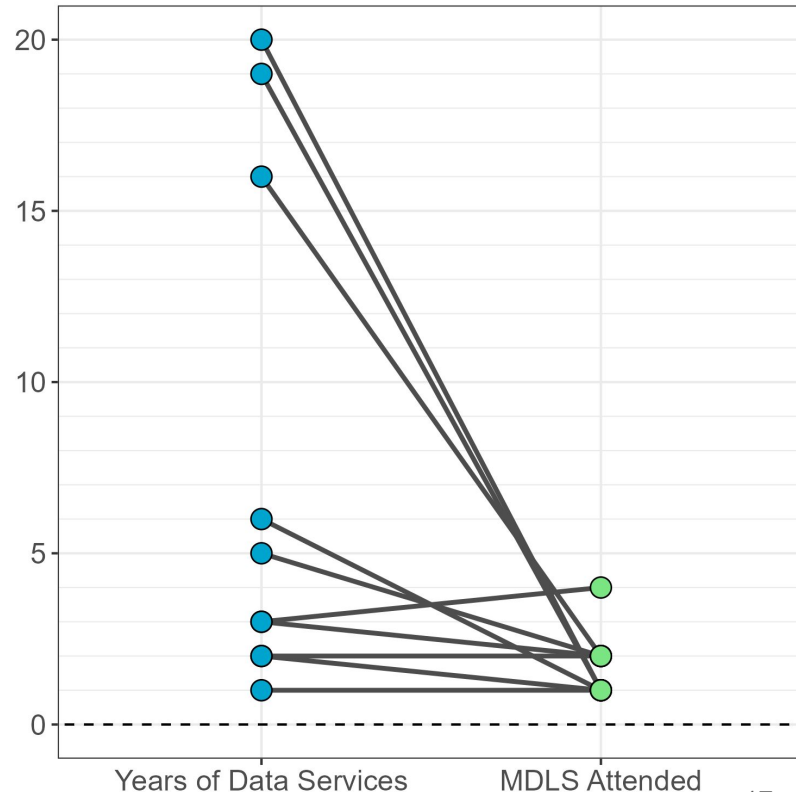
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). [Using thematic analysis in psychology](#). Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101.
- 6 steps
 - Familiarizing yourself with your data
 - Generating initial codes
 - Searching for themes
 - Reviewing themes
 - Defining and naming themes
 - Producing the report

Thematic Analysis: Methods

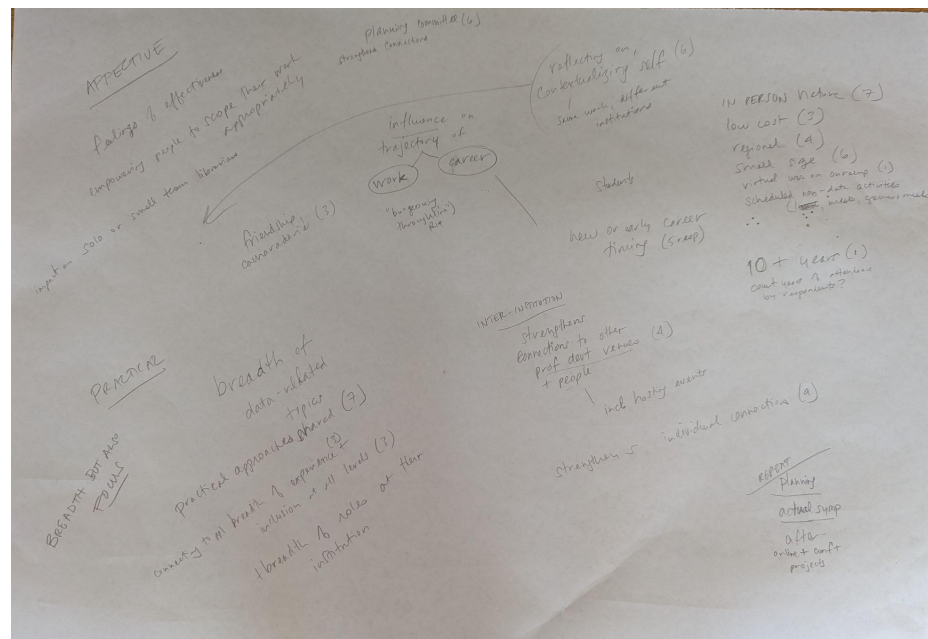
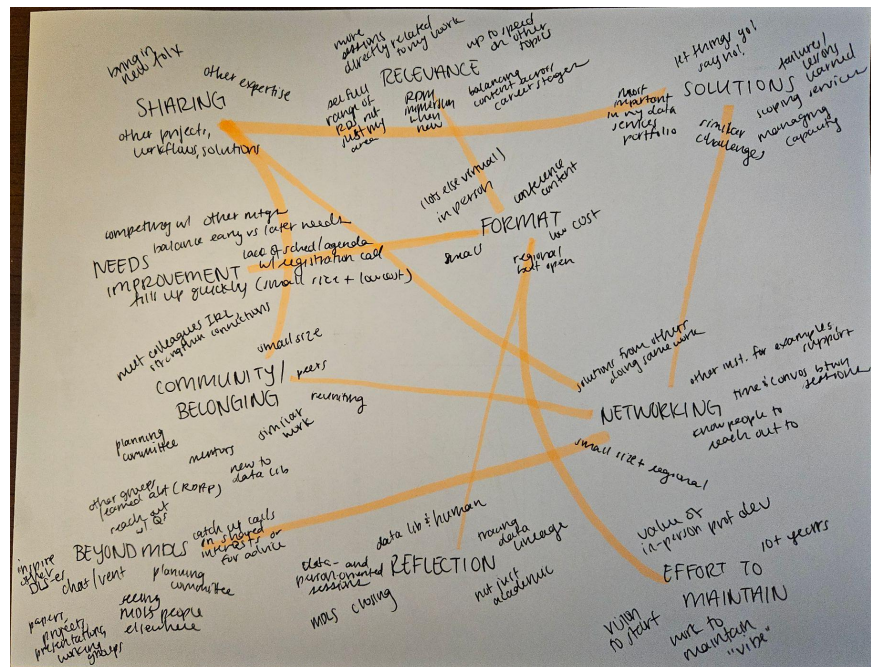
- **Values and biases we bring to the process**
 - Both previous MDLS attendees, but newer to MDLS (<5 times attended)
 - Dani newer to data services, Nicole more established
- **Using an inductive or “bottom up” approach**
 - Dani & Nicole each separately identified 28 initial categories/codes
 - Grouped iteratively into fewer themes & sub-themes
 - Coordinated to arrive at 4 major themes
- **Where we are**
 - Responses closed last Friday
 - Completed steps 1-3, and in the midst of reviewing preliminary themes (step 4)—likely a second round of coding coming soon
 - Both coders quite inexperienced with thematic analysis, so a fun learning opportunity

Preliminary Results: Thematic Analysis

- Coded 10 survey responses
- Also coded content from a published piece from MDLS 2023
 - Koshoffer, A., Badger, K., Adams, K., & Munandar, A. (2024). [Midwest Data Librarian Symposium: A Model for Regional Communities](#). College & Research Libraries News, 85(8), 332.
- **Survey demographic questions**
 - How many years has data services been a part of your work?
 - How many times have you attended MDLS?



Searching for themes involved several iterations (and lots of thinking about and reconfiguring codes)



but we eventually arrived on 4 major themes

Theme 1: Symposium Topical Programming

- MDLS programming is relevant for many data professionals who attend
 - Breadth of data-related topics & sharing of practical approaches
 - Keeping up to speed with topics not present in day-to-day work
 - Impactful for early career folks and students
- Attendees come from a variety of roles and bring many different levels of experience in data services and librarianship

“While I am a data services professional, very little of my work pertains to some major areas of data services...so MDLS has been a good avenue to stay more up-to-date on those aspects of the field.”

“The conference was shortly after starting my new position so it was a good chance for me to immerse myself into the RDM space.”

Theme 2: Symposium Affective Experiences

- Attendees benefit from reflecting on their work
 - Contextualizing self as both a professional and a human
 - Supported in scoping work appropriately (e.g., letting things go, saying no)
- Able to bring one's whole self to the symposium

“Like any professional conference, MDLS gives me new ideas and opportunities to learn. But it also allows me the rare opportunity to think deeply and critically about what is most important in my data services portfolio. Sometimes that even means learning to say no.”

“I appreciate that MDLS ends with a reflective closing session and has a more casual, introspective business meeting/feedback session on the last day. This conference helps me realize my role as a data librarian and as a human in the professional world and does not just focus on the structured, academic sessions like other data adjacent conferences do.”

Theme 3: Symposium Logistics & Practical Features

- Attendees appreciate the time built into the schedule for building camaraderie and friendships
- Symposium logistics identified as important
 - In-person format
 - Small size
 - Regional location
 - Low cost
- One downside is that small size and low cost means registration fills quickly

“Colleagues I’d seen on listservs, or perhaps chatted with on DataCure, were in the flesh! And it was easier to get to know them, which made it easier to follow up with them later.”

“The small size and being able to connect with colleagues regionally has helped me in my position where I am on a small team and often feel silo-ed in my work.”

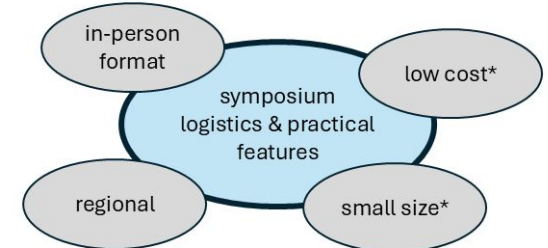
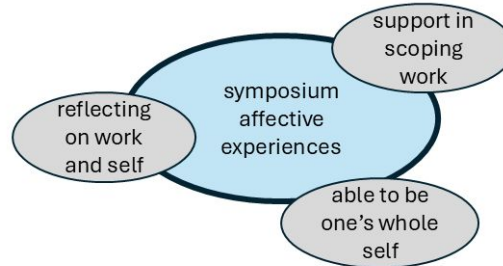
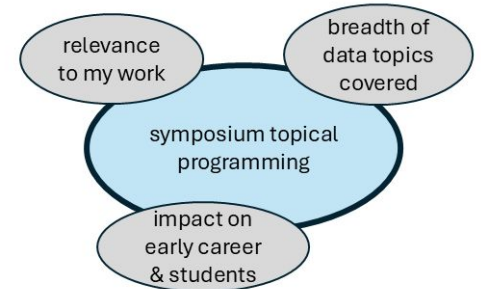
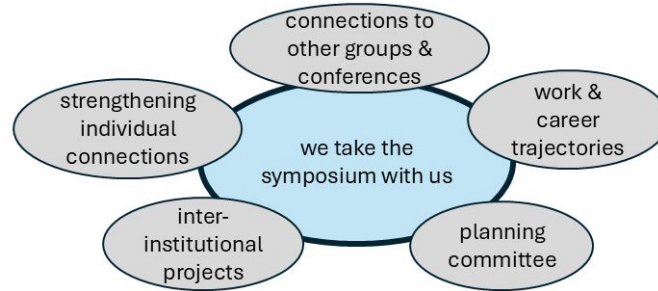
Theme 4: We Take the Symposium with Us

- Nearly all respondents mentioned strengthening new or existing connections through MDLS attendance
- MDLS experiences influence attendees' work and career trajectories
 - Some attendees learn about and connect with other groups and conferences
 - Symposium had led to inter-institutional projects and collaborations
- Planning committee identified as another way of strengthening connections

"Papers, projects, and conference presentations have been born directly out of connections made at MDLS."

"I have also served on the MDLS planning committee and that in itself has been a great way to meet people in similar roles and get service experience, which is a factor in my promotion and reappointment processes."

Side-by-side NLP & Thematic Analysis Summaries



*registration fills up quickly

Final Reflections

Consider your initial table discussions, the shared visualizations, and our preliminary results

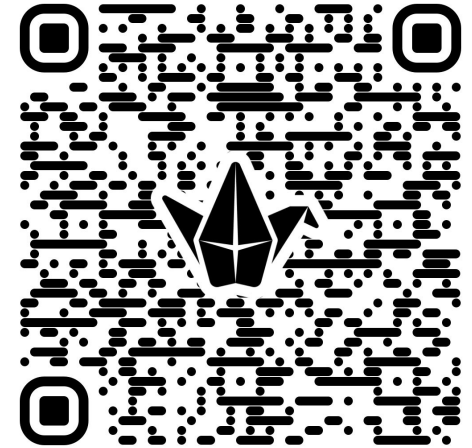
- **What are your thoughts and insights?**

- What differences and/or similarities do you see between our results and your table discussions?
- What themes stood out to you and why?
- What elements are missing?

- **What actionable steps can we take?**

- If you were a first-time attendee next year, what information/resources would you want in advance?
- What activities outside of MDLS do you do or could you do to strengthen the connections you've made here?

Provide anonymous responses through our Padlet!



tinyurl.com/mdls-reflections-padlet

or share out loud!

We want your nominations!

The next phase of this project involves recording oral history interviews with community-nominated individuals.

- Interview focus is on preserving history, impact, and trajectory of MDLS from multiple narrators' perspectives
- This oral history collection will be publicly available online through the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program's archive

**Nominate one or more people
using this link!**

Self-nominations are welcome and responses are anonymous.



tinyurl.com/mdls-nominations