

Editor's Note

Stepping in as a successor to someone else's effort—particularly when that someone has compiled a record of effectiveness and efficiency—is more than a little intimidating, more particularly when the setting is a professional publication. Departing editor Jennifer Sheehan has done a terrific job with *RBM* and its publication. Aided by the ACRL folks, the journal has continued its long tradition, first as *RBML* and then as *RBM* as a professional forum in special collections librarianship and occasionally in closely related fields.

Notice that *profession* and *professor* share *profess* as a root—to communicate or to speak forth. A profession thus can be identified as a group of people who speak together on a specific subject, and usually with a philosophy or theory as a foundation. By implication, a profession—and in particular, the profession we share—is only viable as you and I speak with peers about what we do. Each communication falls somewhere along the scale of professional interaction, between formal and informal. A telephone question to a colleague at a neighboring institution is informal, a personal interaction addressing an immediate need. The traffic on e-mail listservers takes a step toward formality, as queries are structured for broad but specific types of quick questions and responses. Newsletters take another step toward formality, imposing both structure and adding a bit of depth to the communication. Conference presentations are still more formal venues, opportunities to formulate and test ideas with feedback from peers. The most formal professional communication within a field is a journal. Every submission becomes a practiced voice speaking formally within the profession.

Succeeding to the *RBM* editor's chair has been an invitation for me to reflect in both personal and professional planes. In my case, the initial question must be “what can I contribute to the profession as an editor during my tenure?” (other than continuing to crank out journal issues on schedule, of course). That has invited another question: “what will be best maintained in the journal without change, and what, if anything, do I want to emphasize or change?”

Wish I had definitive answers to that. Instead, I have begun to ask myself those questions mentally every time I attend the *RBM* conference, talk to a colleague across the country, or communicate with a submitting author.

As a present *RBM* reader, I invite you to consider similar questions—and then act on them. What, from your own experience and thinking, can you contribute to the profession’s thought and practice? In essence, on what subjects can you participate *as a peer* in the discipline’s formal conversation? Perhaps the daily routine activity of special collections is common across institutions, but daily routine is itself the experimental lab of our humanist profession. Yes, there is merit in knowing “how I did it,” but there is more use in understanding how what you did can be generalized and applied to others’ issues, challenges, and settings. We all face similar issues and have common practices, not necessarily the same issues or identical practices.

Along with experience we need evidence. Case studies are interesting, but comparisons and critiques are more interesting, because the professional literature provides a basis for argument and action to those to whom we report. Back up your narrative by explaining how your experience fits in or diverges from others’ reports in the literature. Point out issues or applications not discussed elsewhere. Behind the comparison stands the theory that provides foundations for what we do. *RBM* has not published an ethical or theoretical article for a long while. Perhaps yours will be the first—or maybe second—but it is needed.

Keep in mind that writing is not the only contribution you might make. A scholarly journal like *RBM* thrives on peer review, which means that the editor needs a pool of working practitioners who read and provide comment and opinion on the pieces. Anyone can write and submit, but peer review provides a feedback loop; it formalizes professional comment into a substantive contribution to the profession’s literature. Elsewhere in the journal you will find a formal appeal for readers. The load is not heavy—reading and commenting on a submission once or twice a year—but this type of contribution is the essence of what a scholarly publication is.

As the incoming editor, please accept my invitation to think, to explore your field, and to write—to *be* and *act* like a professional. Please remember that a professional journal is only as informative, as viable, as engaging, as are the people who write for it. That’s you. This is our professional literature. This is not only a bellwether of our discipline’s current practice; it is also the reading of the generation that will come after us. There will always be a younger, new generation who come after us. Let’s leave them a record of thinking and of practice that will make our legacy worth maintaining.

Keep in mind that along the way I’ll be looking for *my* successor.