

Topics of Discussion: An Analysis of the RBMS Conference 2009–2021

This paper examines both the presentation content and institutional representation of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) of the American Library Association (ALA) conference from 2009 to 2021. An analysis of types of presentations and presentation topics reveals that types of sessions and session topics are consistent throughout the years. Presentations with a diversity focus remain low, despite an RBMS commitment to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the section. Multiple presenters from a single institution are common at the conference. There are few local presenters at the RBMS conference, but non-academic institutions are represented at all of the conferences studied. Taken together, these all have an influence on how RBMS creates and thinks about important work, standards, and best practices in the special collections field.

Introduction

Since its founding in 1958,¹ the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) of the American Library Association (ALA) has been a reflective and self-reflective organization. This has included membership surveys and publications about their results,² articles on the history of the section,³ analyses of the section journal,⁴ a keepsake volume documenting the first fifty years of the RBMS conference,⁵ and a recent opening

1. "Introduction," RBMS Manual, revised June 2002, https://rbms.info/rbms_manual/introduction/#history.

2. Elspeth Healey and Melissa Nykanen, "Channeling Janus: Past, Present, and Future in the RBMS Membership Survey," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 17 no. 1 (2016): 70–1, <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.17.1.461>.

3. Anna Lou Ashby, "RBMS: An Overview," *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* I (1986), 7–9; Alice Schreyer, "RBMS at 30: Growing Along with the Profession," *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* III (1988), 3–7.

4. Melanie Griffin, "The Past, Present, and Future of Special Collections Library Literature," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 21 no. 2 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.21.2.63>.

5. R. Arvid Nelsen with Terry Belanger, *A Commemorative Keepsake Volume Celebrating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries* (RBMS: 2009).

keynote explicitly framed around a previous one.⁶ Looking back at the past dozen years of the RBMS conference provides us with an opportunity to see “where we have been, who we are, and perhaps where we are going.”⁷

In this study, we examine the content and institutional representation of the past twelve years of RBMS conferences. We consider both content and institutional representation to be important indicators of the state of the field and the range of perspectives available at the RBMS conference. First, we seek to determine what trends exist in the types and topics of presentations. Given RBMS’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, we also looked for presentations which include diverse topics. Second, we sought to determine what types of institutions were represented by presenters. We wanted to see if institutions appeared on the program multiple times, how closely speakers were connected with the local community where the conference was held, and whether there were many types of institutions represented by presenters at the conference. Conference presentations, which often have a lower barrier of entry than published scholarship, offer a window into both who is working in the rare books and manuscripts field and what they consider worthy of study.⁸

RBMS Conference Background

The first RBMS preconference was held in 1959, and RBMS has held an annual conference since 1961.⁹ Other ACRL sections have held preconferences, but RBMS’s has been described as “most notable in this area,” and is the only one that is directly mentioned in its history section of ACRL.org.¹⁰ While there are various types of sessions that often happen at RBMS conferences, including plenaries, seminars, papers/panels, workshops, participant-driven sessions, and posters,¹¹ none are required and some have changed over time. The RBMS Conference Program

6. Tamar Evangelista-Dougherty, “Reflection: The Changing Field” (Opening Plenary, RBMS Conference, June 21, 2022).

7. Edward A. Goedeken, “What We Wrote about and Who We Were: Historical Writings in ‘JLH’/‘L&C,’” 1966–2000,” *Libraries & Culture* 38 no. 3 (2003): 250–65.

8. Dorothy J. Berry (@dorothyjberry), “Another hot take as this site is in flames: in a field like LIS where most folks are doing practical vs. theoretical work, it has always been interesting to me how folks in professorial/faculty/doctoral positions get cited as the leaders in certain areas because they publish,” Tweet, Nov. 11, 2022, <https://twitter.com/dorothyjberry/status/1591084373730033665>, and Berry, “For most folks doing an innovative processing project or a field expanding program, the best case is to present at a regional conference and share steps with other working colleagues, but that work is never cited on par with someone who publishes on work they theorized,” Tweet, Nov. 11, 2022, <https://twitter.com/dorothyjberry/status/1591084375097024512>.

9. “Past RBMS Conferences / Preconferences,” <https://rbms.info/conferences/#past>.

10. Mary Ellen Davis and Mary Jane Petrowski, “ACRL History,” <https://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/history/history>.

11. Appendix 1, “RBMS Conference Planning Manual,” revised January 2019, https://rbms.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Conference_Planning_Manual-2022.pdf.

Planning Committee has often made changes to the conference structure.¹²

Different aspects of the RBMS conference are overseen by different parts of the organization. The conference location is selected by the Conference Development Committee and approved by the Executive Committee. Traditionally the site is designed to be geographically near the ALA annual conference so that members can attend both. Conference themes are selected by the conference program planning chair(s) and do not have to be related to the location of the conference. Conference program planning chair(s) are selected to chair a specific conference; they have been selected in different ways, but in recent years the RBMS chair has generally issued a call for proposals. The Conference Program Planning Committee, which changes for each conference, oversees all programming except for seminars and workshops, which are overseen by their respective committees and are not required to be associated with the theme of the conference. This provides another method of distributing the work of conference planning and session review. This committee-led selection process, incorporating many volunteer committee chairs and members, ensures that a wide range of library workers are involved in the organization of one of the major research distribution methods of special collections scholarship in the United States.

Literature Review

Content analysis is used fairly widely in library literature for a variety of purposes.¹³ Conference proceedings can be a valuable way of learning about new areas of interest and development for a profession as well as learning from the experience of others.¹⁴ Garner, Davidson, and Williams analyzed how conference topics changed over time in the proceedings of The North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) from 1986 to 2005. They found that the conference had various types of presentations. There were a number of consistently frequent topics across the conferences, but their popularity varied from year to year. They also noted that conference analysis tends to focus on presenters rather than topics.¹⁵

Despite the self-reflective nature of RBMS discussed above, there has never been a content or speaker analysis of the RBMS conference. The 2009 keepsake listed titles of

12. RBMS Conference Planning Manual, revised 2019, https://rbms.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Conference_Planning_Manual-2022.pdf; Richenda Brim and Athena N. Jackson, "Refitting a Name: The New RBMS Conference, Leaving the 'Pre' in the Past" *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 16 no. 1 (2015): 17.

13. Kelly Blessinger and Michele Frasier, "Analysis of a Decade in Library Literature: 1994–2004," *College & Research Libraries* 68 no. 2 (2007): 155–69, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.68.2.155>.

14. John C. Rowley, "The Conference Literature: Savory or Acid?" in *Conference Literature, Its Role in the Distribution of Information: Proceedings of the Workshop on Conference Literature in Science and Technology May 1–3, 1980*, ed. Gloria J. Zamora (Marlton, N.J.: Learned Information, 1981): 11–20.

15. June Garner, Karen Davidson, and Virginia Kay Williams, "Identifying Serials Trends through Twenty Years of NASIG Conference Proceedings: A Content Analysis," *Serials Review* 34 no. 2 (2008): 88–103.

presentations and speaker names and affiliations but did not offer any analysis of the conference itself. In reflecting on the name change from the RBMS Preconference to the RBMS Conference, Brim and Jackson discussed the importance of hearing from new members and the types of sessions but did not discuss particular presentation topics.¹⁶

The content of articles in the RBMS journal, *RBM*, has been studied. Griffin noted that 84 percent of articles in *RBM* are single-author studies, while 70.5 percent were from some type of academic institution.¹⁷ She also noted that the most frequent institutional affiliations represented are large research institutions and members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).¹⁸

Because there are written documents, it is easier, and thus more frequent, for analyses of literature in a field to focus on scholarly journals or published conference proceedings rather than conference presentations. Select RBMS conference papers are published in *RBM*, and some sessions are recorded, but RBMS does not issue proceedings. Conferences are important, however, because they are one place where professional standards are set. Thomas noted that

of 145 listed presenters [for RBMS 2016], 80 (55%) were from ARL member libraries. Of the 65 remaining presenters from non-ARL libraries and organizations, 11—about 17%—were from institutions within the state of Florida (that is, within driving distance), which means that only 37 percent of presenters were from non-ARL libraries not within driving distance.”¹⁹

Presentations at RBMS help to set standards for the profession,²⁰ and not having smaller institutions represented may impact the scalability and sustainability of profession-wide discussions, work, and guidelines.

Methodology

Our dataset ran from the 2009 RBMS preconference to the 2021 conference. We chose to begin in 2009 for several reasons. First, the fiftieth anniversary RBMS conference was held in 2009. As part of that conference, a keepsake detailing all presentations at previous conferences was produced. Nothing has been done to colocate information on RBMS conferences since then. Second, RBMS approved

16. Brim and Jackson, 17.

17. Griffin, 71.

18. Griffin, 73.

19. Lynne Thomas, “Special Collections on a Shoestring: A Survey of Non-ARL Libraries Servicing Rare Book Collections,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 23 no. 2 (2022): 88.

20. Thomas, 88–89.

the change of name from “preconference” to “conference” in 2015, meaning we had roughly equal data on both sides of this change. While part of the idea behind the name change was to recognize the size and scope that the preconference had already achieved,²¹ we wanted to see if there were any obvious changes following this transition. The 2021 conference was included in the set since it was originally conceived as an in-person conference in 2020, but we omitted the 2022 conference as we collected the data before it occurred.

We chose to focus on the RBMS conference alone because it is the main conference devoted to rare books and manuscripts librarianship in the United States. While many RBMS attendees may also attend and present at related professional conferences such as the Society of American Archivists (SAA) or The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing (SHARP), or more general library conferences such as ACRL or ALA, we focused on RBMS because of its specialized nature.

To collect our data, we used the conference websites linked from the RBMS website and one printed conference program.²² We submitted a request for Institutional Review Board (IRB) consideration at the University of Kentucky on March 28, 2022, and received notice on April 7, 2022, that this project did not require IRB review.

In reviewing the conference websites, we first gathered a dataset for each conference year of the session type, as described by the program (e.g., “plenary,” “seminar,” “paper,” with an occasional additional title for the entire session type, such as an overall papers description), presentation title, and the name of each institution affiliated with that presentation. We did not track individual participant names or any identifying information about them other than the institution that they designated as their affiliation.²³ We did not include sessions which required extra payment beyond the conference registration fee (such as workshops), or things that were “off-site,” or in which limited numbers of attendees could participate (such as tours or hands-on activities).

For the sake of analysis, two different sets of total data points were considered related: sessions and presentations. Session numbers indicate time slots filled in the program, not named presentations that comprise the different parts of a session, such as a titled paper within a paper panel or a poster title in a poster session. In other parts of the analysis, we look at specific named presentations when available, for instance, coding topics of each paper or poster if that information is available. Therefore, the total

21. Brim and Jackson, 15.

22. “Past Conferences,” <https://rbms.info/conferences/#past>. The printed program was for 2015 as the conference website was no longer entirely functional, as of this writing. This served to further show the importance of data management, archiving of conference content, and future planning for section history.

23. The authors acknowledge that affiliations of presenters may change between the time of their proposal and their presentation at RBMS conference.

numbers for “sessions” and “presentations” are different throughout this analysis, as they represent different things.

First, we condensed the session types into smaller categories for data analysis. For data analysis, we determined the most regular categories of session types to be plenaries, seminars, short papers, discussion groups, poster sessions, unconferences, case studies, participant-driven sessions, and “other.” Short papers were sometimes listed on conference websites as “short papers,” “papers,” or “paper panels,” but were all counted here as short papers. Discussion groups were also described as “discussion sessions” or just “discussion.” We included in “other” anything that did not fit into one of the previous categories. For example, in 2019 the other sessions were “pop-up sessions,” and in 2021 they were “people’s choice.” All remaining types of sessions were described as such on the dataset’s conferences’ websites. We adhered to the category listed on the conference program even if the title of the session had a different description another year, such as the “unconference” in 2012 that was listed as a “discussion session” on the conference website.

We coded presentation topics as one of the following: technical services, public services, curation and collection development, management and administration, book history and bibliography, conservation and preservation, digital scholarship and digitization, bookselling, instruction, security, archives, self-reflection, and other. Each presentation was coded for only one topic; if a presentation seemed to cover multiple topics, we either coded it as the one that seemed to be the true primary topic or used “other” to indicate multiple topics of equal importance. We used only the information from the session and presentation title when coding. “Technical services” encompassed presentations that focused on processing, cataloging, and metadata. “Public services” included research assistance, scholarly engagement, outreach, social media, exhibitions, community partnerships, and discussions of access; “instruction” was coded separately due to its status as a recently emerging topic in the special collections discourse. In addition to what and how to collect, “curation and collection development” included acquisitions, work with donors gifting materials, and collection appraisal considerations. “Management” included administration topics, leadership, fundraising, and budget discussions. “Book history and bibliography” included textual studies, publishing history, or literary scholarship. “Conservation” included discussions of both conservation and preservation work or activities. Discussions of digitization and digitization projects were included as part of “digital scholarship and digitization.” Discussions of manuscripts, records, and archival collections as well as working with these materials under the title of archivist were coded as “archives.” “Self-reflection” included sessions with metacommentary on RBMS and its history, the special collections and library profession, and labor issues. In addition to presentations spanning multiple categories, things that we coded in “other” were presenta-

tions where the topic was not clear or involved building renovations, interlibrary loan, and assessment.

For a session to be coded as having a diversity focus, we sought awareness from the session or presentation title of this concept. Though we recognize that much of rare books scholarship is Anglo-American or European-centric, we did not code a session as diverse only for engaging with a certain type of collection. Presentations coded as engaging with diversity in some way included those that talked about bringing marginalized groups into the field; projects working to benefit underrepresented communities; those focused on authority sharing/decentering of the information professional; explicit discussions of power dynamics; reparative, welcoming, and inclusive description; liberation; and bringing collections back to their originating communities. Some topics, such as labor practices and the gig economy, were not necessarily coded as diverse since they may only deal with the struggles of majority groups. We did not consider community partnerships as inherently diverse for the same reason.

In a separate process, we also gathered each institution represented from each year into a list and determined which ones had more than one—but fewer than five—presentation slots, and which institutions had more than five.²⁴ When counting institutions for institutional representation, we defined anyone with any role at a particular institution as being from that institution, regardless of their self-classification. For instance, presenters from both the Beinecke Library and Sterling Memorial Library at Yale were counted as “Yale University.” There is no standardization in the way that people define their affiliation, with some people giving a specific library and others simply the larger institution. For the sake of data clarity, we used the larger designation. Presenters who listed themselves as independent scholars or who did not provide an affiliation were each counted as a separate institution in this data, as they each represent a unique point of view.

We also coded the institutional affiliation with each presentation as “local” or not, and if there was a non-academic institution present. We defined “local” as approximately a one-hour drive from the conference location, not accounting for traffic, and used Google Maps to estimate this time and distance. We selected this driving time as a way to have a standard but recognized that this plays very differently in different parts of the U.S., where there may be more traffic (e.g., San Diego, California), or people are used to driving longer distances (e.g., Iowa City, Iowa).

Anyone with a college or university affiliation was designated as “academic” in our coding. This held regardless of what type of academic institution, from a community

24. We chose five as the number in question because it was large enough that it would not just gather data such as two people from an institution presenting together or the same person presenting two or three times at a conference.

college to members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), what department the presenter worked in on campus (something that was not consistently reported), or what their role was at the institution, if reported. Institutional members of ARL or the Independent Research Libraries Association (IRLA) such as the New York Public Library or the Library Company of Philadelphia were also coded as academic. Non-academic affiliations included cases when no affiliation was given, independent researchers, vendors (such as Atlas Systems or booksellers), digital libraries, historical societies, public libraries, and museums. While many public libraries or museums might be considered academic research libraries, we did not want to impose value judgments about which public libraries or museums “count” as research institutions beyond those belonging to the networks mentioned above.

TABLE 1
Conference Locations, Titles, and Number of Sessions

Year	Location	Conference Title	Number of Sessions
2009	Charlottesville, VA	“Seas of Change: Navigating the Cultural and Institutional Contexts of Special Collections”	24
2010	Philadelphia, PA	“Join or Die: Collaboration in Special Collections”	24
2011	Baton Rouge, LA	“In the Hurricane’s Eye: Challenges of Collecting in the 21st Century”	23
2012	San Diego, CA	“FUTURES!”	24
2013	Minneapolis, MN	“O Rare! Performance in Special Collections”	40
2014	Las Vegas, NV	“Retrofit: Exploring Space, Place, and the Artifact in Special Collections”	34
2015	Oakland, CA	“Preserve the Humanities! Special Collections as Liberal Arts Laboratory”	32
2016	Coral Gables, FL	“Opening Doors to Collaboration, Outreach and Diversity”	30
2017	Iowa City, IA	“The Stories We Tell”	29
2018	New Orleans, LA	“Convergence”	38
2019	Baltimore, MD	“Response & Responsibility: Special Collections and Climate Change”	36
2021	Virtual*	“Power. Resistance. Leadership”	27
*The 2021 conference was, in part, based on the originally scheduled 2020 conference, which was to be held in Bloomington, Indiana, but which was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some sessions were the same, while others were newly added; presenters of sessions accepted for 2020 were given the opportunity to present in 2021.			

TABLE 2 Types of Sessions									
Year	Plenary	Seminars	Short papers	Discussion groups	Poster sessions	Unconference	Case studies	Participant-driven	Other
2009	5	9	3	5	0	0	0	0	2
2010	3	12	0	5	0	0	4	0	0
2011	4	8	2	5	0	0	4	0	0
2012	3	10	4	7	0	0	0	0	0
2013	3	9	10	9	2	7	0	0	0
2014	3	9	10	9	2	0	0	0	1
2015	3	13	10	0	1	0	0	5	0
2016	3	11	6	0	2	0	0	8	0
2017	3	10	7	6	1	0	0	0	2
2018	3	9	15	0	3	0	0	8	0
2019	3	9	12	0	3	0	0	6	3
2021	2	7	7	0	1	0	0	4	6

During the coding process, each of the authors coded the dataset on their own. We then compared these coding decisions, discussed any discrepancies, and decided about how we would code a specific field. All data presented here is a result of this reconciliation process.

Results and Analysis
Overall Conference Data

It is important to first document the locations and themes of the conferences in this dataset, as this influenced what is “local” and what were the content and topics with which the conference engaged (see table 1).

We counted the number of sessions in order to look at whether the conference was growing. The number of sessions has increased somewhat, even as the general length of the conference has remained the same (2.5 days). An increase in the number of sessions should offer more slots for speakers and professional development options for special collections librarians.

Session Breakdown by Type

There are several types of sessions that have consistently been part of the conference over the years (see table 2). These include plenaries, seminars, some kind of short papers/panels (in various forms), and sessions with some kind of participatory component, such as discussion groups and participant-driven sessions. In general, these

types of sessions correspond fairly well with the common types of sessions described in the conference manual.²⁵ There are also types of sessions that have been added more recently and then continued over many years, such as poster sessions.

RBMS has also experimented with certain types of sessions that did not ultimately remain part of regularly planned conference offerings. For instance, there were seven unconference sessions in 2013, but none in subsequent years. An unconference is when there is no set agenda for the conference/session, and it is set by those attending. In recent years, there have been pop-up sessions as well as “people’s choice” sessions, which had a later proposal due date. These sessions are sometimes designed to address more “timely topics,” and thus may provide an opportunity similar to the unconference to address pressing issues of importance to the RBMS community.

Planning a variety of sessions offers more RBMS attendees the chance to participate as speakers, given that different session types require different time commitments. Poster sessions allow for the presentation of work that may not rise to the level of a paper, or recent work where the presenter may not have had time to develop a full paper. Because of the number of posters which can be presented in one session, poster sessions also increase the number of people who can present in some form at RBMS. Seminars, with their required educational outcomes,²⁶ may also provide opportunities for presenters to speak about the work they have been doing beyond research projects. More participatory sessions, such as discussion groups and participant-driven sessions, provide opportunities for people from institutions of any size to articulate their views even if they are not formal presenters at the conference. The terminology used for these participatory sessions has changed over the years, but there are either discussion groups or participant-driven sessions at each of the conferences in our dataset, although they never both occur at a conference.

Presentation Topics

There are no obvious trends in this section of the data beyond showcasing the wide-ranging topics covered at the RBMS conference (see table 3). Most topics fluctuate up and down over the years, but there are no consistent upward or downward trends to reflect the changing state of the field. There is more balance in the presentation topics than we initially supposed, as comments about the RBMS conference experience often indicate that there is “no programming on ‘x’” or “there always used to be ‘y,’ but now no one presents on it.” These data show that sessions have been fairly well distributed across the topics we identified in recent years.

25. RBMS Conference Planning Manual.

26. “Proposing, Organizing, and Selecting RBMS Conference Seminars: Procedures and Guidelines,” revised January 2008, <https://rbms.info/committees/seminars/procedures/>.

TABLE 3 Presentations by Topic													
Year	Tech Services	Public Services	Curation And Collection Development	Management & Admin	Book History/ Bibliography	Conservation & Preservation	Digital Scholarship & Digitization	Bookselling	Instruction	Security	Archives	Self-Reflection	Other
2009	4	6	2	1	1	3	2	1	0	0	0	6	8
2010	2	9	0	2	2	0	3	0	3	0	3	4	4
2011	2	2	7	2	1	2	3	0	1	1	0	7	5
2012	5	2	1	0	3	1	2	1	2	1	2	3	7
2013	5	8	2	0	6	1	5	1	4	0	6	0	17
2014	5	5	3	0	7	2	4	0	4	0	4	4	24
2015	4	8	2	1	0	0	9	1	11	0	1	7	15
2016	5	11	3	2	4	1	2	1	4	1	8	5	17
2017	9	11	3	2	3	0	1	0	5	1	1	5	9
2018	6	4	6	1	0	3	4	0	4	1	3	11	16
2019	0	9	3	2	0	7	3	1	4	1	7	6	23
2021	6	10	3	1	2	1	0	0	5	0	2	4	8

Over the entirety of the dataset, there are more public services presentations than those on technical services or curation and collection development, which is interesting since special collections directors are currently more likely to come from a background in curation or technical services.²⁷ It is possible that this may be related to the perception that it is easier for public services workers to present rather than to write an article, although we might also speculate that attending a conference is hard for public services staff, since they need people to remain behind to keep front line access points operating. It may also be the case that people working in technical services or curatorship who are interested in leadership positions focus on writing articles rather than presenting, as these publications are often given more weight than conference presentations in pro-

27. Sarah M. Horowitz and Colleen W. Barrett, “So You Want to Be a Leader? Examining Pathways to Special Collections Administration,” *College & Research Libraries*, 84, no. 5 (Sept. 2023), <https://crli.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/26025/33939>.

motional contexts. It is also interesting to note that—except for 2009, when there were none—there are presentations on instruction throughout our dataset. Since instruction is still a relatively new aspect of the special collections field, we might have expected to see a continual increase in this number. However, the number is relatively steady, except for a spike in 2015, when the conference theme centered special collections as liberal arts laboratory, a topic which lends itself particularly well to instruction.

The numbers for presentations on archives, book history, and bibliography are also relatively steady over the years. However, there are more presentations on archives than on book history and bibliography in the overall dataset (thirty-seven versus twenty-nine), which is interesting given that RBMS as a section is defined by its inclusion of rare books *and* manuscripts (as opposed to SAA, which only includes archives). While Griffin notes that security-related topics frequently appear in *RBMS*,²⁸ this is not the case in our dataset, where there is, at most, one presentation related to security each year.

It is unsurprising that some themes only occur in relatively small numbers due to other opportunities for engagement beyond the RBMS conference. There are few presentations coded as management and administration; this may be due to the fact that there are resources for learning about management and administration in larger library arenas (such as ACRL or ALA), or in non-library settings, while many of the other topics listed are only available at specialized conferences like RBMS. Although conservators have their own conference, sponsored by the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), there are some conservation and preservation presentations during most of the years represented in our dataset. The Digital Library Federation (DLF) annual forum provides a venue for such programming, but the number of presentations on digitization and digital scholarship at RBMS has also remained fairly steady, with a small increase in 2015. Again, this may be related to the fact that the theme that year revolved around special collections as a laboratory for the humanities, in which digital scholarship holds a large role. The steadiness of this interest, however, also shows that RBMS has consistently been considering digital work and digital materials over the course of the studied period. Bookselling presentations may be low throughout our dataset because the main audience for this conference is library workers rather than booksellers (although many booksellers attend and exhibit at the ABAA booksellers' showcase hosted at the conference). Presenting may be viewed as an additional task and cost for booksellers that may not pay off in the same way that it would for a librarian or archivist.

Self-reflection was also a consistent topic across the conferences, except in 2013 when no presentations were coded as such. As noted above, RBMS is a relatively

28. Griffin, 76.

TABLE 4 Diversity-Focused Presentations		
Year	# Of Presentations	% Of Presentations
2009	1	3
2010	2	6
2011	2	5
2012	1	3
2013	2	4
2014	2	3
2015	3	5
2016	11	17
2017	6	12
2018	11	19
2019	10	15
2021	14	33

self-reflective organization, and continued interest in the history and future of special collections librarianship is borne out in the presentations coded here. When the conference theme was related to a very specific topic, such as climate change, the number of “other” designations was likely to be high, indicating a number of presentations specifically related to that theme, rather than to any of our coding categories.

Presentations with a Diversity Focus

BIPOC library workers and people of diverse backgrounds and experiences speak on many topics, not just diversity issues, so the number of presentations with diverse content is in no way a representation of the diversity of the speakers at the RBMS conference (see table 4).

RBMS created a diversity action plan in 2003 and has had a Diversity Committee since 2005.²⁹ In the last few years,³⁰ the Diversity Committee has been involved in the review and evaluation of conference proposals, but that had not consistently been the case in prior years. The Diversity Action Plan mentions the possibility of conference programs as one way to promote diversity as a value to RBMS members and to encourage the collecting of diverse materials.³¹

29. “RBMS Diversity Action Plan,” adopted May 23, 2003, https://rbms.info/diversity/rbms_diversity_action_plan/; “Diversity Committee,” RBMS Manual, revised June 2002, https://rbms.info/rbms_manual/standing_committees/#diversity.

30. For the 2020/2021 conference.

31. RBMS Diversity Action Plan.

The expansion of the number of sessions offered at the conference beginning in 2013 did not lead to more presentations focused on diversity. While the numbers fluctuate slightly, before 2016, presentations that had a diverse element were 6 percent or less of the total number of presentations. There is an increase in the percentage of presentations that have a diverse topic starting in 2016, although they remain in the teens. While this change began soon after RBMS became a conference rather than a preconference, there is no reason to suppose any particular connection between the two. However, given that one-third of the 2016 conference theme was Diversity (the conference title was “Opening Doors to Collaboration, Outreach and Diversity”), one might have expected even more presentations with diversity as a component. It is only in 2021, when the conference theme was “Power. Resistance. Leadership.” that 33 percent of the presentations had a diverse component. We cannot directly connect the 2021 increase in presentations with a diversity focus to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, or the virtual format of the conference, as many of the conference presentations were originally accepted for the canceled June 2020 conference and were submitted before the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Number of Individual Institutions Represented

The number of individual institutions represented and how many appear on a program multiple times has larger implications for special collections librarianship in the United States (see table 5). Presenting at RBMS often confers a sense of endorsement

TABLE 5				
Individual Institution Representation				
Year	# Of Presenters	# Of Individual Institutions Represented	# Of The Same Institution Listed More Than Once But Fewer Than Five Times	# Of The Same Institution Listed More Than Five Times
2009	66	52	8	0
2010	79	55	17	0
2011	79	61	14	0
2012	82	51	13	2
2013	135	72	26	4
2014	111	66	20	3
2015	146	85	22	4
2016	120	77	21	2
2017	114	69	26	1
2018	158	96	33	2
2019	163	104	32	3
2021	177	101	29	5

and prestige. Institutions represented on the program more than once have an outsize influence on what kinds of projects and programs are seen as shareable, groundbreaking, or important in the field.

As the number of presentation slots held at RBMS increases, so too does the number of institutions represented. Throughout the conferences studied, the number of institutions represented more than once but fewer than five times varies but remains generally between 23 and 38 percent, with an outlier of 15 percent in 2009 (the fiftieth anniversary conference). The number of institutions represented more than five times remains relatively small, never reaching more than 6 percent of individual institutions represented across the years. At all the conferences studied, over half the speakers came from institutions who were not otherwise represented on the program, ensuring a diversity of perspectives.

There are several possible explanations for the repetition of institutions. It is not uncommon for people to copresent at RBMS, so it is possible that multiple people from the same institution are speaking on a single panel, perhaps about different aspects of a project. Of course, this requires that the institution be willing and able to pay for more than one person to attend RBMS, or for the individuals to cover the cost themselves. In some years, this number also indicated the same person speaking more than once; given that we did not include names in our dataset, we could not account for these instances specifically. In the past few years,³² RBMS has adopted a rule that someone may speak at the conference only once, in an effort to make room in the program for new and different voices. Further discussion of how institutions are represented at the conference may also be helpful in considering this goal, given that between a quarter and a third of presentations are from institutions that are represented more than once on the program.

Many of the institutions which are represented multiple times at the conference are large research libraries, several of them ARL institutions. This is unsurprising, as large institutions have more staff to send and (often but not always) more money to send them. This is problematic for many smaller institutions, which do not have the same staffing levels or resources as larger institutions, and which may be left behind in the crafting of best practices or trends that are not scalable or sustainable and that may be dependent on specialized systems or large amounts of staff time.

Local Institutions Represented

Presentations by local library workers allow some who might not otherwise be able to engage with RBMS to highlight their work (see table 6). Participation of local institu-

32. Formally introduced in the call for proposals in 2019 for the 2020 conference.

TABLE 6
Local Institution Representation

Year	#	%
2009	5	15
2010	6	19
2011	4	12
2012	5	17
2013	3	5
2014	1	2
2015	11	19
2016	5	8
2017	4	8
2018	7	12
2019	10	15
2021	N/A	N/A

tions is important because library workers at smaller or less-resourced workplaces may not have the ability to fly to a conference, and may only be able to participate when it is within driving distance or online. Some conference locations have many institutions in the nearby area, while others have far fewer.

The table above shows the number of presentations by local participants.³³ The number of local presenters was quite small at all of the conferences studied, but the data do suggest that the East and West coasts produce more local presenters than those in the Midwest. This may be related to the fact that East and West coast institutions often exist in clusters around densely populated areas, while Midwestern cities and institutions are often quite spread out; library workers may thus be willing to drive further to present at a conference than is represented in the distance we chose as “local.”

Non-Academic or Research Institutions Represented

Although RBMS exists within an association designed to support specifically college and research libraries (ACRL), bringing in different institutional viewpoints to professional development can only benefit the profession (see table 7). While much

33. This is not a full representation of how much local representation is present at RBMS conference, as there are likely local attendees who are not presenters and the dataset did not include events such as tours, in which local library workers are more likely to be involved. Local library workers may also be involved in the Local Arrangements Committee, which works with the Conference Program Planning Committee on local site issues, planning tours, and organizing social events such as dinner meet-ups or recommending local restaurants. Being deeply involved in planning local arrangements may mean that library workers do not have time to present at the conference.

TABLE 7		
Non-Academic Institution Representation		
Year	# Of Presentations with a Presenter Who Is from a Non-Academic Institution	%
2009	10	29
2010	14	44
2011	9	27
2012	12	40
2013	13	24
2014	15	24
2015	12	20
2016	17	27
2017	8	16
2018	15	25
2019	24	36
2021	18	43

of what is often considered the “rare books and manuscripts profession” is from an ARL perspective, there are important voices in smaller academic institutions, non-ARL libraries, HBCUs, and those beyond the academy.³⁴ We were especially interested in knowing how often views from outside “traditional” academic institutions were included in the RBMS conference. Museum workers, historical society workers, booksellers, technology vendors, and independent scholars have some representation as presenters at each conference. Bookseller involvement in the conference is relatively recent.³⁵ The general number of presentations by those from outside academia has varied over time, with anywhere from 16 to 44 percent of presentations being by those outside the “traditional” academy. We might speculate that having the conference online enlarged the pool of possible presenters, but since some of these sessions were carryovers from the canceled 2020 conference, we cannot say for sure.

Conclusion and Ways Forward

We are in a period of change for the RBMS conference. After two virtual conferences due to the COVID-19 pandemic, RBMS held its first hybrid conference in summer 2023. As fewer RBMS committees meet in-person at the ALA annual conference,

34. For examples of why it is important to look beyond the ARL experience, see Melanie Griffin, “The Rare Book Librarian’s Day, Revisited,” in *New Directions for Special Collections: An Anthology of Practice*, eds. Lynne M. Thomas and Beth M. Whittaker (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2017); Thomas; and Horowitz & Barrett.

35. Brim and Jackson, 17.

there is less reason to couple the RBMS conference in time and space with it.³⁶ The Climate Readiness Task Force has also recommended that RBMS consider climate costs when planning conferences and alternate in-person and virtual conferences on a regular basis.³⁷ Concerns about affordability of conferences are also driving conversations about whether to incorporate virtual or hybrid conferences into the planning process. Other similar groups are also exploring these possibilities.³⁸ As the RBMS conference incorporates more virtual components, it may also benefit from greater engagement with the local community and local library workers when the conference has a physical location.

This article, then, is an examination of the RBMS conference in a time before an era of disruptive change. There are many possibilities for future research, including how virtual conferences affect the types of institutions presenting at RBMS, and whether there continues to be discussion of diverse topics. It will also be interesting to see whether there are changes in the topics discussed at the conference, given that discussions about work in general have been realigned by the pandemic. Further research might break down more individually the types of institutions represented at the RBMS conference (for instance, Oberlin Group libraries, HBCUs, public versus private institutions) to see how different types of institutions are represented—and change—over time, as we move into this new era. Additionally, the institution type and geographic makeup of the Conference Program Planning Committee could be studied. Future discussions of the conference might also reach out to presenters more directly to see how many people are first-time presenters, how often people have presented at past conferences, and the impact of geographical considerations on their interest in presenting, which was out of scope for this study.

We hope that this study has given members of RBMS an opportunity to critically review the RBMS conference and think about ways forward in our changing world.

36. The RBMS Task Force on RBMS Meetings and Conferences made recommendations about when, where, and how RBMS should conduct business meetings going forward in summer 2023.

37. “Final Report of the RBMS Climate Readiness Task Force” June 3, 2022, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GIeo7BWQ-6X_jHIQwU65VElskXZ9Uqj5lkTqR49gF6Q/edit#.

38. See, e.g., Matthew Kirschenbaum, reply to “Virtual vs in person meetings,” Society for the History of Authorship, Reading & Publishing, August 7, 2022, <https://list.indiana.edu/sympa/arc/sharp-l/2022-08/msg00021.html>.