The future is plural. We see our present as a fulcrum, with a plethora of possible pivots, providing us with a chance to steer the futures of special collections libraries and archives. With the 2012 RBMS Preconference—Futures!—we endeavored to explore some of these possibilities, and we used the plural in our title to emphasize the many potential paths our libraries and archives might take.

The preconference’s plenary sessions focused on three components of special collections libraries and archives work: Matthew Kirschenbaum and Bethany Nowviskie explored how digital humanities and special collections inform the work of the other; Jon Voss and Michael Panzer advocated for a future of discovery and access to collections made possible with linked open data; and Johanna Drucker and Michael F. Suarez contemplated the potential future forms of the book as an object and our responsibilities therein. These three intertwined elements—use, object, and discovery—are inextricably linked to the very nature and purpose of libraries and archives. Every use needs its object and every object, its use. The bridge between them runs through the user’s process of discovering their object/objective.

The remaining preconference program was composed of smaller and more interactive sessions, including seminars, discussion sessions, and short paper panels. The RBMS Seminars Committee provided a diverse array of seminars: balancing security and services, collections assessment, collaborative collection development, metadata for digital projects, using linked data, relationships between librarians and antiquarian book dealers, managing audiovisual collections, researching artists’ books, and leveraging mobile technology. Discussion sessions ranged from professional development, preservation issues for noncodex materials, and the future of rare materials cataloging, to digital humanities, e-books in special collections, outreach to local cultural groups as donors, and even an unconference session, where attendees crafted their own topics for discussion. Short papers focused on the futures of instruction, outreach, tools, and collection materials. We followed our digital humanities plenary with a discussion session on the same topic and followed the linked open data plenary with a seminar on linked data in action, in both cases offering a chance for attendees to dig deeper into the plenary topics if they wished to do so.

A great number of our colleagues put a tremendous amount of their time and energies into the preconference’s programmatic and social elements and we are incredibly grateful to the committees, organizers, speakers, moderators, and re-
porters, as well as to the attendees, whose presence and questions give purpose to the entire enterprise.

At the beginning of the preconference, we posed a few questions to the audience, hoping that they would (and you, readers, will) ponder them and share your thoughts with our professional community. We asked: How are special collections materials being discovered and used today? How will they be discovered and used tomorrow? Who will our users be and what will they need? What forms will special collections materials take? What makes them “special” anyway? And how can we act as conduits to ensure our dual responsibility of stewardship and accessibility?

Five intrepid reporters have taken our call in these four essays, where they ruminate and share their thoughts on the potential futures of special collections. First, John Overholt offers a curator’s perspective in “Five Theses on the Future of Special Collections.” Next, Randal S. Brandt and Mary W. Elings discuss “The FUTURES of Technical Services.” Third, Howard M. Rootenberg provides “A Future Path of RBMS: A Bookseller’s Point of View.” And, finally, Kori B. Newboles offers the perspective of a first-time preconference attendee, 2012 scholarship winner, and newer professional in “The Beginning Is the Most Important Part of the Work: Discovering Professional Identity and Purpose at the 2012 RBMS Preconference.” These essays answer some of our questions, while raising others.

The preconference took place just weeks before the Library of Congress began testing a new bibliographic framework (or BIBFRAME, to replace MARC) that will transform cataloging, affecting not only those of us working in technical services departments in all types of libraries—not just special collections—but also those in public service, administration, and curatorial positions. Coupled with the new method of resource description (known as Resource Description and Access, or “RDA”), how will future cataloging practices affect use and scholarship? Undoubtedly, simultaneous changes for both description and display enable exciting possibilities for the materials entrusted to us. Will we take advantage of the potential flexibility of new ways to describe and contextualize collections? Can linked (and consistent) data pave the way to greater discoveries in our archives and libraries? Will physical materials become fetish objects to be paraded before potential library donors, wide-eyed youngsters, and visiting relatives, or can we enable new life and relevance for the cultural treasures we steward?

We encourage you to continue the conversations sparked by the preconference program and these essays. It has been said that the future is what we make of it. Our futures are ever-evolving, and where we go from here is up to all of us, including you. Especially you.

Attack the unknown! Be the stick, not the piñata.