

Rare Book and Special Collection Librarianship : RBMS Code of Ethics

Amelia Ishmael

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In response to a request from the Association of College and Research Libraries, the Rare Books and Manuscript Section of ALA established its first ethical standards document in 1987 in order to clarify the expected behaviours and conducts of special-collections professionals.¹ This document is not fixed; It is regularly reassessed every 7 years, in order to allow opportunities for enhancements and change. It was last revised in 2003, and was up for re-evaluation in 2010 and 2017 (though no changes were made).

While some may claim that this document is unnecessary or reiterates “common sense,” I would insist that this assumption is often problematic in practice due to its basis in the default notion that all participants share the same social-identity codes: cultural background, education, training, and life experiences. Though this might have been the case when the RBMS was comprised a smaller, more culturally homogenous, and exclusive group—in order to encourage a greater diversity within the field, a formal Ethical Conduct document can serve as a very useful tool to establish expectations and inspire confidence with one’s peers, protect individuals from accusations of unethical behavior, and also to set future goals and aspirations. Additionally, an established ethical code can help define RBMS professionals’ duties as distinct from those in other organizations (such as SAA)² which also have unifying ethics codes.

¹ “ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians,” *Rare Books and Manuscripts Section*, http://rbms.info/standards/code_of_ethics/

² See “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics,” *Society of American Archivists*, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>

The current Ethics Code states six expectations, that largely refers to situations of conflicts of interest and seeks to restrain the special-collections' librarian from making personal profits off of their employer. Indeed, many of the statements seem to focus on reiterating the librarians' loyalty to their employer. These particular tendencies emphasize the enormous wealth that is contained within special-collections libraries and the expectation that special-collections' librarians not compromise their employer's reserves.

I think that this code of ethics is a decent place to start, but that it has much room for improvement, if the RBMS would be an organization that I would want to participate in. One particular issue that I have with the RBMS's code is that I think the concept of "conflict of interests" requires a comprehensive clarification that encourages transparency and consistency. Within any specialized field the allegation could be responded to with "no conflict, no interest"; I think it is more ethical to proclaim conflicts of interest rather than to attempt to avoid them (or, in the case of RBMS's code, to avoid even the "appearance" of it), because in any specialized field an active professional will quickly accrue conflicts of interest simply by being involved in their field. Furthermore, the code's commentary section clarifies that this statement actually problematizes librarians' generous and informative participation in their community.³ Additionally, coming straight out of an Archival Management course, I was surprised that *only* one of the statements, #5, refers to the librarian's duty to provide access to researchers; None of the statements refer to ethical responsibilities regarding diversity or inclusion; None of the statements speak to international relations; None of the statements refer to the special

³ Sidney Berger, *Rare Books and Special Collections* (American Library Association, 2014), 26-27.

collections' responsibilities to its community or external colleagues;⁴ And, none of them refer to responsibilities of preservation or conservation. These would each be areas of improvement that I would like to see on future drafts.

⁴ I am thinking here specifically of SAA's inclusion that archivists should strive to balance competing interests, should act in the public's interest, should not acquire materials that they cannot wither steward responsibly or provide equitable access to in a timely manner. See "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics."