

Why are We in the RUME?

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Academic disciplinary conferences are believed to be critical sites in academic trajectories (Henderson, 2015), yet the people who attend them likely have many different reasons for doing so. These roles and motivations remain under-researched. In this study, we examine both the intellectual and social community of the SIGMAA on RUME Annual Conference as part of people's decision to attend (or not), including barriers and issues of access to the community.

We developed a survey based on the work of (Fukawa-Connelly et al., 2025). The survey included demographic questions (about participants' conference attendance, home department, career stage, and research expectations), questions about their current and first reasons for attending the SIGMAA-RUME conference, and questions about the participants' experienced barriers to participation. Links to the survey were posted in various locations at the 2025 SIGMAA-RUME conference and via the RUME Google Group listserv. In total, 165 people completed all survey items, and five more completed at least two-thirds of the survey.

RUME participants reported a wide range of reasons as “most” or “very” important for attending the conference. The three reasons with the largest share rated as “most” important were “being part of a warm/welcoming community” (41%), feeling like the conference is their academic or intellectual home (38%) and networking (34%). When including ratings of “very important,” the most commonly reported reason is learning about other people's work because it's interesting (72%), although many other reasons were close behind. The two reasons participants were most likely to rate as either “somewhat” or not important were participation as a job expectation (84%) and advancing their career (54%). These reasons differed slightly depending on the career stage of the participant. For example, graduate students and new faculty members were much more likely to assign increased importance to “advancing their career,” while experienced faculty members were much less likely to do so. However, within each career stage, the relative importance of the various reasons stayed roughly consistent. Comparing participants' reasons for attending the conference to their reasons for *first* attending suggests modest shifts as participants become more experienced.

A total of 91 participants identified at least one barrier to their recent participation in the SIGMAA-RUME conference. These barriers included (in decreasing frequency) the feeling of a lack of belonging, financial barriers, the perceived relevance of conference topics, the feeling of “imposter syndrome,” scheduling and workload conflicts, accessibility, and the political climate.

These findings suggest that community—both intellectual and social—matters when people decide whether to attend the conference. These aspects bring people to the conference initially and lead them to return. The disciplinary focus, tightly connected research groups, and personal relationships mean that people can feel “at home” both as scholars and as people, but these same aspects can also pose barriers to participation.

References

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