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# Three Challenges of Pubrarianship

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# Three Challenges of Pubrarianship

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Since the “positions vacant” advertisements from the last year and it is clear that an interesting new type of job is emerging in libraries — combining directorship of a university press with senior responsibilities for other scholarly communication activity on campus. Such titles include Executive Director of **Temple University Press** and the Library Officer for Scholarly Communication, Director of **Purdue University Press** and Head of Scholarly Publishing Services (**Purdue Libraries**), Director of **Indiana University Press** and Digital Publishing, and Director of **University of Michigan Press** and Associate University Librarian for Publishing. In an extreme example (not from the jobs list) the University Librarian at **Oregon State University** has for a number of years also been Director of **Oregon State University Press**.

What these new positions exemplify is a movement not only toward more university presses reporting to libraries (from 14 AAUP members in 2009 to 21 in 2014), but also a trend toward increasing integration of the two entities. Physical collocation of staff with both library and press backgrounds, joint strategic planning exercises, and shared support infrastructure are other characteristics of the most integrated press/library collaborations. Even where the heads of university presses exploring these opportunities for integration do not hold the sort of joint titles listed above (as at Northwestern, North Texas, Georgia, and Arizona for example) their roles are changing as they assume greater responsibilities in library administration.

Such integration presents great opportunities (as described elsewhere in this issue of *Against the Grain*), but it also creates challenges for the leaders of these merged entities — exemplars of the new role of “pubrarian” so named by **John Unsworth** (now occupying the equally merged role of Vice Provost, University Librarian, and CIO at **Brandeis University**). Having occupied two of the positions above over the last few years, first at **Purdue University** and now at the **University of Michigan**, three particular areas of challenge have emerged for me.

## Challenge 1: Articulating the Value of Publishing to Library Colleagues

You must know the scene, whether it’s the red carpet on the night of the Academy Awards or Market Street in the Palmetto City as dusk falls. An apparently mismatched couple walks by, one short one tall, one ugly one beautiful, one nicely dressed one a mess, and we wonder... “What’s (s)he getting out of *that* relationship?”

As both a university press director and a member of the library leadership team, I often sense that my colleagues in libraries may be having the same question about press/library collaborations. It is pretty obvious to them

what university presses are getting out of the relationship because the benefits are so tangible. The more integrated presses benefit from greater financial security, nicer space, access to better technology, and higher profiles in their parent institutions. But what benefits does a close collaboration with a university press bring to the library, financially at least usually the better endowed party in the match?

In addressing this question, it helps to examine the ways in which press publishers can help academic librarians collaborate in, firstly, the research and, secondly, the teaching activities of disciplinary faculty.

On the research side, having a university press “in house” promises a library enriched opportunities to engage with, and understand, the needs of faculty members as authors, as well as users of information. We all know that there are real asymmetries in the ways that the same scholars behave when they are creators rather than consumers. For example, an advocate for the value of reusable open data may become peculiarly cagey when it comes to sharing her own research findings. University presses understand the care and feeding of authors, contributing perspectives and skills that early on can provide an advantage to libraries that identify the similarities between imbedded subject liaisons and acquisitions editors, and are willing to explore them further. Publishers also appreciate the systems of reward and prestige that motivate authors, and if given the opportunity to do so can usefully inform the design of services and systems, such as data repositories or author identification schema, that rely on enthusiastic academic opt in rather than grudging conformity to really take off.

On the learning and teaching side, university presses offer libraries new opportunities for demonstrating relevance with administrations that are increasingly focused on creating an undergraduate student experience that is both more engaging and affordable. Most well-publicized are several initiatives to create open or inexpensive textbooks based on library/press collaboration, although the particular conventions of that complex type of publishing make success elusive. Textbook authors still generally expect a level of silver-platter service and gourmet financial incentive that is difficult to deliver economically. Emerging opportunities to engage students in the publishing process, as authors and editors, seem more promising. As our parent institutions move to more engaged, experiential styles of teaching and learning, the press in the library offers the opportunity for students to not only research a real-world topic but also publish about it, whether in an undergraduate research journal or edited book. That is a rich way to incentivize student engagement, combines several high impact learning practices, and offers a tangible outcome from the experience for them to use in graduate school and job

interviews. By working together to leverage publishing as pedagogy, presses and libraries may also help educate the next generation of scholars in more progressive attitudes to scholarly communication — a worthwhile long-term play in changing reactionary academic cultures that will benefit us all.

## Challenge 2: Shaping the Merged Publishing Program

University presses without the scale of the multinationals are often advised to focus their attentions on a few types of publication in a select number of disciplines rather than trying to be generalists. Such targeted strategies allow presses to maximize the use of their limited resources. A press publishing in a few subject areas can send acquisitions editors to almost all the relevant conferences, can reuse mailing lists for almost every book produced, and can adopt efficient, template-driven approaches to design and production since most products geared for a particular discipline are similar to each other. Oriented toward a manageable number of areas of study, the editors will generally have a clear idea of what manuscripts to pursue and what topics to commission in. The processes of selection that are essential to university press publishing provide an additional filter, while the need to recover revenue from sales imposes the discipline of the market on the whole process.

Broaden the mission to require relevance to the parent institution as well as key disciplines, and the question of what to prioritize becomes more complex. A publishing director challenged to provide services to the entire campus community may initially feel flush with opportunities to publish, especially if situated in a large comprehensive university. But facing such choice can feel like drinking from the fire hose, with the risks of ending up flailing in a large pool of freezing water all too real. Where does one even start in building a publishing program that is relevant across a large research university as well as trans-institutionally valuable to a few key disciplines?

The reality, of course, is that most potential projects suggested by institutional stakeholders are unrealistic in terms of the types of capacity needed to accomplish them well. The skills and resources needed to launch a major scientific journal, for example, are different from those used to create excellent books. Also, while technology has leveled the playing field to a certain extent, the design and marketing of a major introductory textbook requires an infrastructure and Web of relationships that takes years to develop. This is why most library publishers (working either with or without a university press partner) currently focus on the production of niche open access journals, conference proceedings, technical reports, and upper-level course companions. In these

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areas they can meet important areas of faculty and student needs which may have dropped through the cracks, without having to engage in unwinnable competition with established and better funded specialist publishers outside the institution.

And, while the university might boast comprehensive coverage, it is usually fairly clear internally where the areas of institutional pride and attention lie. Those are also often the places where there is the most money available to support publication, relieving the library of sole financial responsibility for open access publishing strategies. Even if initially not apparent, these sweet spots can be identified through trial and error. As products appear and gain less or more recognition, the broad spray of solutions gradually narrows to a more focused and powerful stream. And opportunities may emerge for working up the value chain from areas where trust has been achieved in servicing informal needs to create more formal, university press, products. Achieving disciplinary and institutional alignment are not necessarily contradictory goals.

### Challenge 3: Protecting Existing Brands While Embracing New Opportunities

Most university presses rely on well-established credentialing processes to build their brands as book publishers: First, a promising manuscript is identified by an acquisitions or series editor and developed into a product that can be reviewed. Second, paid reviewers provide detailed reports. Third, an editorial board discusses and decides whether to pursue the project or not (and after how much further author revision). Fourth, a copyeditor works through the manuscript looking for errors of consistency and fact and the book is designed in a way that maximizes the look of authority. Fifth, the book is promoted to external reviewers so that other expert opinions confirm its excellence. These processes are immensely time and resource intensive, and the end product represents an extreme of formality and elegance; top hat, tails, shined shoes, and crisp white shirt.

For someone from a university press tradition, whose publishing focus has usually been on producing top end books, there is something very freeing in being able to operate in a campus environment where not every project needs such formal treatment. If visualized as a spectrum from informal to formal, the formal book (or journal) occupies a narrow space at the right-hand end of the continuum. To its left lie the many other types of publishing and dissemination needs that a campus community may have. There may be the proceedings of a symposium, for example, with papers already selected by the organizing committee. This needs moderate clean-up and speedy dissemination rather than a formal review process, laborious quality assurance, and embargo until the next publishing season. Sometimes taking too much care over sartorial elegance prevents the work needed to fit the purpose getting done.

Pursuing projects characterized by a range of formality presents a risk for a publisher whose responsibilities still include the university press imprint. How does one avoid undermining the hard-earned university press brand through association with lighter-weight publishing products? How might the publication of student scholarship affect the willingness of their professors to be published by the same organization? How can titles that have undergone careful peer review be distinguished from those that have been selected through less formal processes?

Reserving the university press ISBN prefix and colophon for traditional, formal books and distinguishing the appearance of non-press books both physically and online contributes to preserving the distinction. A faculty governance mechanism separate from the university press's editorial board helps preserve a degree of oversight for publications that are still going to be associated with the university, but avoids confusion. Using different production and distribution workflows can relieve staff concerns about pressure of work as well as help to maintain the separation. All these are strategies for ring fencing the university press brand, and many are already familiar to university presses that publish regional or trade books. They don't remove all the possibilities for confusion, but they reduce them.

Despite the importance of protecting the brand, constant attention must be paid to the risk of keeping it too separate and reducing the opportunities for innovation and efficiency that the mixing of different types of publishing can bring. One thinks particularly of opportunities to more economically publish the revised dissertations which may start a scholar's academic progression, in a way that is informed by streamlined journal workflows. And the dangers of fossilizing the "university press" brand so that it remains associated with print books and their electronic facsimiles rather than becoming the home of innovative digital scholarship that an increasing number of scholars are searching for.

### Managing Two Identities

The word "pubrarian" may conjure up images of OPACs in an English bar rather than a merger of two great information professions. And traveling with two different business cards, one for the university press and another for the library, can make for a fat wallet. However, as libraries move to engage with the inputs as well as outputs of scholarship, and as publishers migrate from processing content to also providing the tools through which is it created, our joint capacity to serve the needs of scholars at all stages of their professional lives grow exponentially. The new pubrarians, whether they arrive in their roles through press/library collaboration or the organic growth of library publishing, may be at the forefront of creating such solutions. And that's an opportunity worth minting a new word for. 