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# Library Circulation of University Press Publications

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For more than two decades university presses have lived in a declining market for their principle product, the scholarly book. Declining purchases by libraries and individual scholars have forced these presses to do smaller runs. This phenomenon has generally been explained by two facts: the changing economics of publishing and the small specialized audience for many scholarly books. The economics can not be denied: the costs of production continue to climb and the budgets for academic libraries continue to decline in absolute dollars. But what about the scholarly nature of the materials treated? Do not commercial houses continue to produce a serious midlist? The purpose of this article is to examine the readership of university press titles and of the serious titles from non-university presses within the academic setting.

Academic titles published by university presses and by commercial houses are similar in that the output of both become the titles which academic libraries purchase. The serious titles published by commercial houses, however, will have larger sales outside the academic library market. They will benefit from sales campaigns, and their audience appeal may be broader than that of many of the narrow monographs published by university presses. Commercial houses will simply not publish the more specialized monograph for lack of enough sales. While university presses may publish some titles which would easily fit the midlist of a commercial house, it is also their mission to publish specialized scholarly monographs which not even every academic library will purchase. These titles are published with little publicity and the principle market is the academic library.

In the world at large the serious midlist of the commercial houses will find many more readers than will the scholarly books published by university presses. But how does readership compare in the more restricted world of academe where readers are students, graduate students, and faculty? In this more restricted world one would hope that university press titles would fare relatively better in readership. On the other hand, undergraduate students are a big part of the academic population and their tastes or needs may weigh in on the side of the commercial houses. Few sophomores are interested in the **Marxism of Regis Debray**.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s several studies on the use of books in academic libraries challenged the notion that libraries were purchasing only those titles which would be used. A study done at the University of Pittsburgh(1) claimed that 40% of the titles acquired in 1969 never circulated even once in the first seven years after their acquisition by the University of Pittsburgh Library. While this study never pointed a finger at university presses as the main culprit of unused books, several people so interpreted it. Edward Tripp stated, "A main purpose of the Pittsburgh study was, in fact, the search for guidelines libraries might use to avoid purchasing such books. If that search is successful, the effect on the sales of university press books will be immense - and hard to argue against."(2) A number of researchers have attacked the inconsistent use of statistics in the Pittsburgh study(3), but the impression remains that many books in our research libraries simply go unused or under used. All university administrators have

to hear is that not only is the cost of academic publishing too high but that readers from academe are not reading the products.

A case for the use of university press titles was made by Broadus in a study of the library requests of the fellows at the National Humanities Center. Broadus analyzed the requests placed for library materials by the forty fellows of the Center during 1983/84. He found that 34.8% of the 2,796 English language monographs requested were university press publications and that 19.0% of the 1,958 English language journal articles were from university presses.(4) These figures, while encouraging, may only reflect the relative proportion of university press materials in the universe of scholarly materials. They also represent the use patterns of professional scholars, which will differ from that of university students.

In an attempt to obtain a clearer notion of the readership for university press publications, this current study compares the circulation figures of 147 university press titles with 146 non-university press titles. With but a few exceptions the non-university press titles were published by the major commercial houses. In order to have a fair comparison, all of the titles selected are in some sense scholarly in that they were reviewed by **Choice**. Each year **Choice** reviews over 6,000 titles which by definition of inclusion are scholarly books suitable for an academic library. From a sampling point of view I have tried to represent the universe of scholarly books with equal numbers for both the university presses and non-university presses. The sample came from books reviewed in the 1978/79 issues of **Choice**. They were acquired by the Purdue University Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education Library in the same year. Circulation figures for each book were obtained in the summer of 1991 from circulation pockets and cover approximately 13 years of library use. Purdue University has a School of Liberal Arts as well as faculties of engineering, science, and agriculture. The School of Liberal Arts has just under 400 full-time faculty members, around 6,000 undergraduate majors, and just over 1,000 graduate students. The Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education Library, which serves this School, had between 450,000 and 500,000 books during the period when the circulation of the sample titles occurred.

In this particular sample non-university press titles did circulate slightly better than did the university press titles (see Table I below). Although the difference is statistically significant, it is far less than one might expect: university press publications performed quite respectably.

TABLE I

Type of Publisher	Number of Titles	Average Circulation per Title
University Press Publications	147	5.109
Non-University Press Publications (Mostly Commercial Houses)	146	6.404

Traditionally university presses have tended to favor titles in the humanities over those in the social sciences. Conversely, commercial houses favor social science titles over those in the humanities. In order to see whether this distinction has any significance for our conclusions, I have subdivided the sample into humanities and social science titles and given the average circulation by type of press. The average circulation figures for each category are given in Table II below. The difference in average circulation between university and non-university presses diminished when we consider only titles in the humanities; the difference increased for titles in the social sciences. One might infer that university presses do slightly better in selecting titles for publication when working in their preferred arena of the humanities.

TABLE II

Type of Publisher	Humanities Titles		Social Science Titles	
	Number of Titles	Average Circulation	Number of Titles	Average Circulation
University Press Publications	92	5.120	55	5.091
Non-University Press Publications	49	5.714	97	6.753

While university presses do relatively well when average circulation figures are compared with those of the non-university presses, their performance appears less favorable when we look at those titles which never circulated even once. Of the 147 university press titles, 19 titles, or 13%, never circulated in the 13 years covered by the study. Of the 146 non-university press titles, 8 titles, or 5.5%, never circulated. Both figures are significantly below the 40% which never circulated in the Pittsburgh Study, but it is apparent that university press titles are more likely to be ignored by the entire Purdue University population. These figures may reflect the higher number of narrowly specialized monographs in the university press list.

## Conclusions

The university press enterprise has always been justified in part on the premise that a number of scholarly monographs which are worthy of publication have too select an audience for publication by a commercial house. Given this premise, one could quite logically assume that the average readership for university press scholarly titles, even in an academic community, would be less than would be that for non-university press serious titles. While the statistics from this study do show university press titles to have more never-circulating titles, it is perhaps surprising and encouraging to see that the differences in average circulation are rather small. The difference in average circulation is more noticeable in social science titles, but this is to be expected given the tendency of commercial houses to specialize in this area. In sum university presses should feel reassured that their publications are not just for a select few, but have a readership within the academic community that includes other interested scholars and students. Their ability to select for publication titles which have a good potential for academic use compares favorably with the commercial houses.

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