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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — The Book & the Scholar: Celebrating the Year of the University Press

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Column Editor: Bob Nardini (Senior Vice President & Head Bibliographer, YBP Library Services, 999 Maple Street, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 800-258-3774 x. 3251; Fax: 603-746-5628) <nardini@ybp.com>

In celebration of the “Year of the University Press,” a year-long campaign of the Association of American University Presses (AAUP) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the University of Tennessee Libraries and the University of Tennessee Press co-sponsored a two-day public symposium September 23-24, 2005, at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

“The Book & the Scholar,” held in John C. Hodges Library, was designed to emphasize the relevance of the university press to the academic community and to focus attention on its importance in faculty publishing and scholarly communication. Barbara Dewey, Dean of the University of Tennessee Libraries, and Jennifer Siler, Director of the University of Tennessee Press, welcomed attendees, who included University of Tennessee faculty, staff, and students; UT Press personnel; and other interested persons from the book and publishing world and from the community.

Day one of the symposium focused on the relationship between university presses and universities. Bob Levy, Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs, served as moderator. Loren Crabtree, Chancellor of the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, introduced the keynote speakers and stressed the importance of scholarly communication and scholarly publishing, stating, “University presses are critical to sharing scholarly information.” Crabtree, himself a scholar, said he couldn’t imagine the book going away.

Peter Givler, Executive Director of the American Association of University Presses, and Sandra Yee, Dean of Libraries at Wayne State University, addressed the importance of a university press, expectations of the university regarding the press, and strategies for ensuring the vitality of the press in a program on “The University Press on the Campus and in the Academic Community.”

Givler gave a historical overview of university presses, which were started in the United States around 1870-1875 to disseminate the work being done in university laboratories. In order to share the very specialized work they were doing, the university presses subsidized their presses. According to Givler, there are approximately ninety to ninety-five university presses in the United States and Canada today. Total membership of the AAUP is 124, including associate members such as research institutions, scholarly societies, and museums.

Characteristics of university presses are that they are nonprofit scholarly publishers, their imprint is under the control of some faculty or university body, an editorial board and peer review ensures the quality of their publications. The mission of university presses is to publish scholarship, with the decision to publish based on whether a work will make a significant contribution. University presses help knowledge advance, Givler said, and, despite tight finances and a small readership, are freed from the necessity of making publishing decisions based on purely financial reasons. They can publish on subjects with a limited market and often, by publishing books of regional interest, are the means of cementing a good relationship between the university and the local community.

Sandra Yee, Dean of Libraries at Wayne State University, talked about “The Value of a University Press in Academia.” University presses, she said, provide an opportunity for young scholars to share their knowledge. Other reasons she cited for the existence of university presses are to publish works of specialists interested in concentrated fields of research and to publish important authors from around the world in translation. Some university presses have created niches or specialty areas for which they are well known. Yee mentioned Africana Studies, Jewish Studies, Labor and Urban studies, and the Great Lakes of Michigan series as specialties of the Wayne State University Press. At Wayne State, the university press relaunched the University Library system until 2001, when it was transferred to the Provost’s office. Among the issues facing scholarly publishing that Yee highlighted are radical changes in higher education, declining budgets in academic libraries, the importance of faculty research and the dissemination of newly discovered or created knowledge, and the need to preserve scholarly work.

Saying that she sees university presses in transition, Yee cited modern innovations in scholarly communication such as institutional repositories, MIT’s Cognet collaboration, and DSpace, Internet-first University Press, EScholarship at the University of California, BiblioVault, and Project MUSE, a joint university press and library project. Yee concluded...
with a description of Wayne State University’s Book and Author series, a collaborative effort of the University Libraries and Wayne State University Press.

University of Tennessee Professors Benita Howell, Anthropology, Michael Lofaro, English, and Bruce Wheeler, History, spoke on “The University Press and the Academic Career.” As professors who have published with university presses, they commented on the significance of the university press to an academic career.

Linda Phillips, Head of Collection Development & Management for the University of Tennessee Libraries, moderated a panel on “Book Publishing Trends in the Digital Age.” Panelists, who presented demographics and trends in the academic disciplines, were Sara Williams, Collection Management Coordinator; Molly Royse, Humanities Coordinator; Jane Row, Social Sciences Coordinator; Ron Gilmour, Science & Technology Coordinator; and Jennifer Siler, Director, UT Press. Publishing trends addressed by the panel ranged from economic issues, including shrinking library budgets and the rising cost of materials, especially journal subscriptions; the proliferation of chain bookstores, globalization of the market, mergers among publishers, and the use of the Internet for book marketing; the rapid rate of technological change, an increasingly wide range of media types, poorer print quality, smaller print runs, and more out-of-print books; the rapid growth of electronic publishing and the need for ways to access and preserve electronic publications; BiblioVault, PLoS (Public Library of Science), costs associated with print-on-demand, page charges, author submissions, and electronic publishing issues related to author recognition and requirements for peer-review and tenure.

“Charting Our Vision,” a question and answer discussion with Givler, Vee, Williams, and Stephen M. Wrinn, Director of the University Press of Kentucky, focused on ways that a university can support its press. The discussion covered a wide variety of topics including fundraising, endowments, editorial and advisory boards, the “value added” by publication with a university press, “one book, one city” programs, joint university press and library events, partnerships between presses and professional societies, scholarly book reviews, quantity vs. quality in publishing, print-on-demand, electronic publishing, digitization of traditional publications (books, journals, etc.) vs. “born digital” items, and university press areas of specialization.


The second day of the symposium was a Writers Workshop, moderated by Jennifer Siler, Steve Wrinn, representing university presses, and Dan Pierce, representing authors who want to find a publisher for their dissertation, presented a session entitled “What’s the Difference: The Dissertation Becomes the Book.” Pierce told how he turned his dissertation into a book, and Wrinn detailed what presses look for in an author. Suggestions and advice that Pierce gave for future dissertation writers were to: (1) select a dissertation topic that a university press would be interested in publishing; (2) attend professional meetings, contact early with publishers, present at conferences and professional meetings, research which presses publish what subjects; (3) listen to your committee, ask their advice, enlist people in your field to read your manuscript and give feedback; (4) be patient, don’t rush your project; (5) listen to your friends and the press and keep working on your manuscript. Wrinn’s advice to new authors, from the perspective of an acquisitions editor, was to attend professional conferences and meetings, don’t submit an unreviewed dissertation, make your book readable, put it away for a time (e.g., six months) to let it get “cold” before working on it again, send a proposal rather than a full manuscript, and view your editor as a friend and teammate.

“Finding a Publisher: Research and Presentation” featured Peter Givler, formerly director of the Ohio State University Press, and Wrinn. Givler contrasted the relatively lonely activity of writing and the extremely social process of finding a publisher and marketing your book. His suggestions for finding a publisher included making a list of the publishers of books you are reading, looking at publishers’ websites, searching the subject area guide of the AUP membership directory, attending professional conferences and making personal contacts, and meeting with editors. Wrinn provided information about submitting a book proposal and book contracts. Copyright issues, subsidiary rights, translation rights, and the influence of reviews of your book were also covered in the discussion.

The final session, “The Author’s Role in the Publication Process,” led by Tom Post, UT Press publicity and Promotions Manager, and Cheryl Carson, Marketing Manager, presented tips to successful marketing. Among the topics discussed were book contracts, the book summary and marketing questionnaire, advertising, book signings, appearances at scholarly meetings, book reviews, and prizes and awards.

Suggestions for Further Reading:


Endnotes