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Blurring Lines — An Interview with Jon Cawthorne, Dean of Libraries at West Virginia University

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I met **Jon Cawthorne**, Dean of Libraries at **West Virginia University**, at **ALA Midwinter** in Chicago during a rare moment in which the snow fall had slackened and allowed us to connect. **Jon** shared with me a fundamental premise: the profit imperative and the mission of the university press are at odds. The driving logic of my column, blurring lines, is my effort to explore where we are heading by delving into examples of people and organizations that break down barriers and "blur lines" between roles, responsibilities, departments, companies, and industries. The merging or integration of the university press and the library is not new, though not very widespread. But **Jon** and his team are pushing very hard to not merely integrate the library and press, but to use the integration as a lever for innovation and to redefine the expectations of the past (old business models) that weighed on the potential and productivity of the university press. **Jon** agreed to an interview, which follows, about **WVA's** path to bringing the press and library together and into the future.

What do you think are the primary factors, internal and external, contributing to the financial pressure many university presses are facing?

I believe there are several factors leading to the financial pressure university presses face. First, university presses are deeply woven into the reward and recognition system within higher education. At many campuses the promotion and tenure process for faculty, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, requires publication by a university press. As university presses curate their lists or areas of scholarship, they bring prestige to individual faculty, to departments, to institutions, and to the press itself. Despite being so ingrained in the tenure process, university presses are often considered to be external, nonessential, profit-making entities. Recently, **Maria Bonn** and **Mike Furlough** explained in *Getting the Word Out: Libraries as Publishers* how university presses were established as a response to a publishing market that believed the academic market was too small. They also suggest libraries should become an active participant in publishing. Campus administrators generally assume and expect university presses to make a profit or break even every year because they sell scholarship (books, journals, eBooks, etc.). Due to this profit-making mentality, considerable pressure is brought to bear on the press each year to publish and sell titles. Acquisitions staff, university press directors, and editorial boards work hard and pay close attention to the viability of scholarship in the marketplace and to the bottom line. To complicate matters further, the reporting structures of university presses vary widely across different campuses,

and the marketplace is constantly changing. As presses navigate these changes, the reality, unfortunately, is that with the exception of a very few, the majority require some kind of subsidy from the institution.

You are a strong advocate for the merging of university press and library as the solution to the pain points you note above. Please elaborate.

Over the past year I have learned that of the 140 presses that belong to the **American Association of University Presses (AAUP)**, only 25 report to libraries — a number that appears to be growing. Although the operating models in libraries and presses differ, I believe deeply in the mission of the university press and look forward to the opportunity to support it within the library. **WVU Libraries and Press** work toward a sustainable model, and reporting to the library offers several distinct advantages: 1) libraries remove the pressure for university presses to make a profit; 2) changing the requirements, or success metrics, for university presses may allow more creative opportunities for innovative publishing options; and 3) as libraries redefine their services to support emerging scholarly communication, digital humanities, institutional repositories, and alternative forms of publishing, it makes sense to explore how libraries and presses can work together.

Longer term, I think we have a unique opportunity to redefine what success looks like for a university press in the twenty-first century. For instance, a partnership on dual

print/OA books allows **WVU Press** to continue publishing the excellent print books they've always published while also offering open and online editions that function differently, including through multimedia-based options. And, with the **Press** being in the **Library** now, we can also begin to offer collections in open-access ways. When we expand what counts as research collections, be it in monograph or artifact form, we can think more creatively about how to open those collections to everyone. This is not to say that university press operations could never make a profit. In fact, there is some very good thinking going into different funding models for scholarly publications. Yet I also believe, for all the reasons I have mentioned here, that the current university press model needs to be rethought. By 2017, the **WVU Press** will likely have public facing offices in one of the **WVU Libraries** on campus.

What would you say are the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of such an arrangement?

This is a great question. I have outlined the strengths at **WVU Libraries and Press**, such as funding, hiring a press director, defining a list, and pursuing innovative publishing initiatives. I feel strongly that university press operations can find a long-term, sustainable home in the library. In the years to come, **WVU Libraries and Press** can serve as a viable model for other university presses. There are challenges to gaining wider adoption, however. One of these is the ability and willingness to see beyond current practices to explore possibilities from both the library and press vantage points. Seeing these new options may need to begin with questions for each higher education environment, such as: To whom does the university press currently report? How does the university press director view reporting to libraries? To what extent does the library director understand press operations? Underlying each question are historical issues, personalities, and the culture of the institution. While these are potential threats to greater adoption among **AAUP** presses, they also present great opportunities for leaders who can champion a paradigm shift.

One of the biggest challenges of a press (which is usually designated as a profit center) reporting to a library (which is usually designated as a service center) is how to manage the business of the press — including revenue generation — within an organization that is designed to spend money rather than to generate income. How are you tackling this dilemma at WVU?

At **WVU Libraries and Press**, I believe it is time to seriously question the model of uni-

versity press as a profit center. I hope everyone understands the great value a press brings to a campus and to scholarship. Yet if the vast majority of these publishing operations do not make a profit and require a subsidy from the institution, why continue the practice of considering it as a profit-making entity? I believe most libraries have the resources to support a press. You correctly point out that libraries are designed to spend money on resources, but, more and more, library services must evolve. As libraries and presses find themselves in an ever-changing technological environment, our combined efforts to publish quality scholarship, define a publishing list for the press, and create an organizational structure that supports the emerging publishing opportunities in scholarship, it is important to think broadly about how the **Libraries** strengthen the **Press**. **WVU Libraries and Press** are asking questions such as: How are press operations supported under the 25 libraries represented in the **AAUP**? What would success look like if the press was not held to a standard of revenue generation? Are there innovative ways to publish via open access? Are there funding models that **WVU Libraries and Press** could explore that would help move the needle? This is still very much a work in progress; however, under the library, salaries are supported and university presses continue to do their important work. We have been given so much at **WVU**; I feel we have an obligation to push as long and as hard as we can on the library model of publishing.

Are there examples of library-press partnerships that you particularly like? What lessons can be learned from them? How does WVU look to adapt those? How will your partnership be different?

The press director and I are using this year to travel to several leading research libraries that have presses. We just returned from **New York University Press** and came away very impressed with the position shared between the **NYU Libraries** and **NYU Press** that works to coordinate publishing efforts and maximize resources of both organizations. This spring we will travel to **University of Michigan** and meet with the press director and university librarian. By year's end we will also visit the **University of Arizona Library and Press**. In each case, we are asking questions about how these libraries support the press. At the end of the process we hope to create a sustainable structure within the library and press at **WVU** that serves as a model. We will also look forward to working with **K/N Consulting** to determine strengths and opportunities at **WVU**, define a list, investigate open access options, building infrastructure and support for the **Digital Pub-**

lishing Institute, create a service publishing imprint, exploring innovative funding models, and recommend the appropriate staffing within a three-to-five-year timeframe.

Please tell us more about the service publishing imprint you refer to above.

This is an opportunity to explore how the **WVU Press** staff shares their expertise on publishing projects that don't require peer review. This assistance might come in the form of advice, design support, or access to a network of editors depending on the project. There are all kinds of publishing projects within colleges, departments, faculty on campus, and authors from across the state of West Virginia that might benefit from service publishing. For instance, in 2016 one of our colleges will celebrate its 150th year anniversary. They would like to publish a pictorial history of the college to coincide with the dedication of a new building. As this service publishing imprint grows, it might be a great project for graduate students to learn more about the publishing process.

Very few university presses have been able to consider open access as a viable model for their operations. How does WVU look to be a leader in open access publishing within its university press offering?

I have a great deal of respect for the work of university presses. With the help of **K/N Consulting**, I am thrilled to begin implementing strategies to support the press and also investigate sustainable OA initiatives. We are a small press not tied to long-standing series. I think this gives us an advantage. We also have the time to implement the right organizational structure, seek out partnerships, and hire the right people that will make the work of **WVU Libraries and Press** sustainable. We will likely fail many times on our way to a viable model, but we are going to establish a tolerance for failure, learn from it, and keep moving.

What do you think of the OA initiatives (Luminos) recently introduced by the UC Press?

I think open access experimentation of all kinds is good, and when it comes from as traditional a press as the **UC Press**, it's an encouraging sign that OA is considered the future for everyone. I especially admire that they are trying to establish a model to publish open monographs, while still maintaining a revenue stream.

Innovation in packaging, pricing, and distribution is the name of the game in print and eBook publishing. Can university presses and libraries grow in this regard? Any hints on your thinking in this regard for the WVU Press?

This is still a work in progress; however, the way we are thinking will lead to different results. We are currently asking questions about the broad relationship between scholarly communication librarian positions, digitization librarians, institutional repositories, and archives of special collections that may help generate published content through the **Library** and the **Press**. Do we have the right organizational structures to support these new directions? Are there positions, like at **NYU Press** that live and work across library and press operations? As we discuss the integration of the **Libraries** and **Press**, we also look forward to working very closely with **WVU's** new **Digital Publishing Institute**, which facilitates collaborations between research, teaching, and outreach into the university, local, and international communities in regards to scholarly communication. In addition, having regular course offerings in digital communication and publishing held in the space of the **Library** in conjunction with the **Press** will add a service learning, outreach, and pedagogical research component that expands on what the **Library** has served to the university community thus far.

In three years, where would you like the press to be in terms of list development and reputation? How about in five years?

I am hoping our work in the years to come will redefine what constitutes a successful university press in the twenty-first century, and that **WVU Libraries and Press** can serve as a successful operating example. This means building a strong reputation for our own list as well as being present during key policy discussions that affect future directions in publishing, and also pursuing grants that could stimulate innovative directions. I have met some very smart, dedicated people in university publishing, and I believe deeply in their place, purpose, and work in the scholarly process. We just need new models that will allow them to do their important work. I hope that **WVU** will offer a compelling example that inspires other library leaders and press directors to work closely together in the future.

What contribution do you hope to make at WVU to the larger conversation about presses and library as integrated units?

I look forward to **WVU** contributing to more university presses living successfully within the research library environment. Part of this will require new thinking not only on the part of my library dean and director colleagues, but also among press directors. Merging these cultures and figuring out how they work together will require a shift for sure, yet I hope that **WVU Libraries and Press** will elevate the conversation and demonstrate some potential ways forward. 🦃

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became an independent business in 2012. Students, faculty members, schools and publishers promptly embraced **SIPX's** simple solution for compiling, delivering and managing digital reading lists. Educators, librarians and support staff at leading schools — including the **University of Illinois**, the **University of Notre Dame**, **Stanford University**, the **University of** **Texas-Austin**, and others — use **SIPX** to set up course readings and immediately benefit from the system's automatic check for works that are available at no cost to students via library subscriptions or open sources. "We are thrilled