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If You're Hot You're Hot

Publishing, Research and All That: One Faculty Perspective

by George C. Keller

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(Editor's note: This paper was delivered at the Society for Scholarly Publishing Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on Wednesday, May 22, 1991. It struck some sort of chord in me. Maybe it will in all of you, too.)

In the summer 1982 I finished a book, and in early fall I started calling publishers and (if any was encouraging) sending out the manuscript. It was an illuminating experience.

You need to know that I write about higher education — colleges and universities — how they are managed, structured, and changing. In my field there are very few big advances, and, many would say, few afterpayments also. It is a scholarly labor of devotion. My research support needs — as an individual — are quite small, though Penn's education school currently has about \$17 million in big-scale research.

I started trying to peddle my book with an old friend in NYC, an editor at a leading commercial publisher. (I had written a book which I had grandly and weirdly thought was the educational equivalent of the Peters and Waterman book *In Search of Excellence*, which had been published early in 1982 and was selling like a Jacqueline Susann novel.) He told me his prestigious house did not do education books. But he kindly recommended what Claude Rains in the film *Casablanca* called "the usual suspects." I called these other publishers who were known to publish some scholarly works in the social sciences. These five houses had various ways of saying no.

The most memorable was an editor who asked "Exactly what is this book about?" When I told him, I heard him peck at keys on his computer, and after 90 or 100 seconds of conversational silence, he reported, "Our computer shows that no book on higher education has sold more than two thousand copies in years. Sorry."

Two commercial publishers, Basic Books and Free Press of Macmillan, were quite interested, but finally said no after some long, thoughtful phone calls. At no point did a commercial publisher read the manuscript! Or ask to read it.

After several months of fruitless hawking, my research instincts were stimulated. So I started on the university presses. Two of them told me of their two-year backlogs. One let me know of her press's financial troubles. Two university presses whose quality of book printing I admire — Yale and Princeton — said they normally did not do education books, which I thought a bit queer for a university press.

Finally a perceptive and diligent social sciences editor at the Johns Hopkins University Press actually read the book — or portions of it — and accepted it. The book is now in sixth printing and still sells a few thousand copies a year.

Scholarly publishing in my rather new and unusual field was evidently not easy a decade ago. It is still not easy; and the tighter finances of the past couple of years have made both funding for research and publication still harder. In educational publishing, most persons thank the dieties fortnightly for the house of Jossey-Bass of San Francisco, which has saved numerous education researchers from oblivion.

Because my 1983 book was a tiny success, and because I write rather frequently, my recent encounters with a few scholarly publishers have been slightly more cordial. But what has become very difficult is getting funds for research in my field.

Part of the problem is with the funding agencies, part of it is with the field in which I try to publish.

With the funding agencies, research on higher education has never been a high priority. As you know, the Reagan administration tried to close down the U.S. Dept. of Education, and his aides choked the funds for research on education. What little there was has been reserved for very specifically targeted bits of research. The feds love to complain about the management of our schools and universities but fund relatively little research in these areas — somewhat the way they advocate research for Star Wars and urge American competitiveness without funding enough graduate fellowships in engineering and applied science so that we have trained intellects to carry on such work.

The last time I applied for a grant to do research from the OERI (Office of Educational Research and Improvement), a strange thing happened. I asked for about \$20,000 for an 18-month study on how colleges and universities were responding to the dramatic demographic, technological, economic, social, and lower educational changes taking place in our time. The grant request was denied. But

they sent me the three peer reviewers' comments. One reviewer thought it a well-crafted proposal and a possibly important piece of work; the second reviewer thought the proposal was o.k. but the

topic that was not pointed enough toward her own priorities of high school-college collaboration, access for minorities, science instruction, and the like; the third reviewer said the topic was too large and ambitious and without methodological

rigor. He suggested a smaller more manageable topic that lent itself to experimentation and quantitative rigor. I lost 2 to 1.

At the foundations, who once were generous to educational research and innovation, massive changes have taken place. The Exxon Foundation has reduced its giving by two-thirds, moved out of NYC, and funds small special projects. The Ford Foundation has decided, perhaps properly, to devote its hundreds of millions largely to the aid of minorities, as has the Sloan Foundation which used to fund management and science research. The Carnegie Corporation of N.Y., the leading U.S. supporter of educational research and educational change, has, under new leadership, reduced its grants for education research so that it can study things like nuclear disarmament — though I'm now completing a book on a Carnegie Corporation grant for the research.

Thus, at a historic moment, when U.S. education is said to be ailing and going through traumatic change, both the feds and the foundations have re-

treated in their support for research in my field. The three or four banks and corporations I have solicited claim retrenchment of funds and show little interest in educational research.

Part of the problem is with those of us in educational research. Our research is often mechanical, a feeble branch of survey research. Like other social scientists, we have too often been seduced into trying to be "scientific" and quantitative, and to forsake ideas and interpretation and larger subjects. We often write abominably. I edit a scholarly journal, and the article submissions are for the most part poorly written, and the editing chores are numerous and surgical.

But, in my little area, it seems that if we Americans regard trained intellect and artistic endeavors as a vital national resource, we ought to invest in some research on the subject. And publishers should try to solicit first-rate manuscripts on the human resources issue. Not just *Profscam* books that treat professors as if they were high-priced call girls, but real studies of U.S. learning, such as Knopf and Basic

Books have done with the late Lawrence Cremin's work, or Harper's has done with Ernest Boyer's books.

For the meantime, persons like me, and possibly other small-scale social researchers, will need to do four things:

— scramble more widely for assistance;

— tackle larger subjects that will be more attractive to scholarly publishers who, after all, need to sell books to survive;

— write in more vivid prose for a more general audience, without sacrificing our scholarly standing, as authors such as Richard Hofstadter, Stephen Jay Gould, David Lehman (*Signs of the Times: Deconstruction & the Fall of Paul de Man*, Poseidon Press), and others have done so brilliantly;

— and continue to plead for a small, fair share of research aid for work that could help improve the nation's culture a tiny bit, a smidgen, a mite, a fraction, a scintilla. ■

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