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Book Pricing Update/ On the Bank of the Old Mainstream

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Book Pricing Update

By the Banks of the Old Mainstream —
by Celia Wagner (Blackwell)

Those "other" university press publications

Not long ago, academic libraries collected almost all university press publications in their areas of interest. Believing that any title published by a university press was worthy, academic librarians often designed two-tier approval plans: university press coverage was almost unlimited, while trade press coverage was more restricted. Academic book vendors found that almost all the university press books sent out "stuck" — the library return rates for university press books were negligible.

Those days are over. Academic libraries are rejecting a higher and higher number of university press titles. Is this phenomenon the inevitable result of book price inflation and library budget cuts? Has there been an explosion in university press publishing as an offshoot of the publish-or-perish menace? Are university press books changing, as their publishers strive to appeal to a wider market?

Yes and no. Over the past fifteen years (see chart below) total university press output has multiplied 2.3 times, from about 3,300 titles in 1977 to about 7,600 titles in 1992. At the same time, prices have multiplied 2.8 times, from a 1977 average of \$15.29 per title, to a 1992 average of \$42.08. The combination of more titles and higher prices means that imaginary Gotrocks U Library, which purchases one copy of every university press title, would have spent \$50,500 in 1977, versus \$320,000 in 1992.

Small wonder that library return rates have gone up. Even if university press titles had stayed unchanged, libraries simply could not afford all of them.

But **have** university press titles remained worthy, scholarly, and desirable? Again, yes and no. Many university presses have tried to capture bookstore sales, shifting their lists toward "general interest" titles, and away from the scholarly monograph with a limited readership. This has not

proven a publishing panacea — some now report **bookstore** return rates of 40% or more.

Academic libraries have been a more loyal market, with returns on university press titles usually 15% or lower. Even general interest books, if they fall into **academic subject areas**, still "stick." Other books, though, do not. An alternative title for this column was, "The University Press Books That Academic Libraries Don't Want", and what such libraries reject are not the mainstream books, but titles falling into categories on either side of the mainstream: popular non-academic book titles, and highly specialized "local interest" titles.

Despite anecdotal surmise, university presses are **not** publishing many completely non-academic titles. Coffee-table books, cookbooks, novels, self-help, recreation and travel guides constituted a steady 2% of total university press output over the last fifteen years. These titles may sell well in bookstores, and subsidize the publication of more sober brethren, but they do not pose a major annoyance to academic librarians. True, 53 such gnats would have troubled Gotrocks U fifteen years ago, versus 113 today, but that is

still fewer than ten titles a month.

Titles of very local interest (concerning only one state or city), constitute a steady 9-10% of university press output: 317 in 1977, and 655 in 1992. "Local interest" titles include biographies of little-known individuals, histories of small cities, movements, or incidents, and other miscellany. Some have regional bookstore appeal (e.g., a guide to the birds of Raritan Bay, the breweries of Wisconsin, historic underground Seattle, outdoor art in Honolulu), and might sell locally while being irrelevant to an academic library in Arizona. For other "local interest" books, it is hard to imagine even a medium-sized market: a guide to the liverworts of North Carolina, a history of several Kentucky counties in the mid-1800s, or a biographical survey of Princetonians graduating between 1748 and 1768, for instance. These must-have-been-a-dissertation titles have changed little in fifteen years; publish or perish is not a new problem.

The titles academic libraries don't want are a bargain, in a sense, costing much less than the average university

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Those "Other" University Press Publications
Non-Academic and Local-Interest Books

	1977 # of titles	1982 # of titles	1987 # of titles	1992 # of titles	Increase in # factor 1977-1992	1977 avg price	1992 avg price	Increase in price factor 1977-1992
Non-Academic Titles								
Recreation	5	11	8	12	2.4	\$7.60	\$24.67	3.2
"Coffee-Table" Books	11	22	19	12	1.1	\$16.00	\$39.50	2.5
Self-Help: Legal, Medical	1	4	9	3	3.0	\$3.95	\$38.33	9.7
Self-Help: Financial	3	4	6	10	3.3	\$17.33	\$42.80	3.5
Travel Guides	8	14	6	19	2.4	\$8.00	\$23.32	2.9
Novels (New, not Reprints)	25	28	53	50	2.0	\$12.32	\$28.06	2.3
Cookbooks	0	4	6	7	—	\$0.00	\$20.43	—
All Non-Academic:	53	87	107	113	2.1	\$11.85	\$29.20	2.5
Local-Interest Titles								
Local History	83	90	109	105	1.3	\$12.23	\$32.07	2.6
Local Biography	31	34	60	94	3.0	\$14.52	\$25.06	1.7
Other Local Interest	203	250	349	456	2.2	\$14.27	\$32.52	2.3
All Local Interest:	317	374	518	655	2.1	\$13.76	\$31.33	2.3
All University Press Titles	3,317	4,186	5,594	7,636	2.3	\$15.29	\$42.08	2.8

Percent Local Interest:	9.6%	8.9%	9.3%	8.6%
Percent Less-Academic:	1.6%	2.1%	1.9%	1.5%
Combined Percentage:	11.2%	11.0%	11.2%	10.1%

Acquiring Minds

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the end of this column is a bibliography of sources which may help illuminate the problem of the paradigm.

Read a few and then ask these questions of yourself:

- ... Can we reconcile Kuhn's vision

Chaos

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system? Do they have to build interfaces to the various VANs with their mixed bag of requests? OR, can they simply provide the basic business data elements that work with any one of the many off-the-shelf translation software packages libraries can buy?

Realizing that the ILS vendors, book wholesalers and serials subscription agents are the key to implementing EDI — BISAC and SISAC are holding a hands-on, invitation-only workshop for those folks at 2:30 p.m. on Friday, June 25th in New Orleans. Invitations are going out to those on our lists; if you are in one of these categories and don't receive one, please call me at 212-929-1393. We hope that this frank discussion of alternatives will provide a better understanding of the possibilities and expedite the implementation of EDI in the library community as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In the ever-chaotic world of standards, I hope that this article provided you with some insights into the problems so that you may help find the solutions. If you have ideas or suggestions stimulated by the Chaos described here, and want to air your concerns publicly, send a letter to Katina. Or, you can call me at 212-675-7804 or fax me at 212-989-7542. If you want to participate in a listserv devoted to the Quasi-SICI and other implications of publication patterns, contact Joyce McDonough, Chair of SISAC's Great Expectations Subcommittee at Internet — jm86@cunifx.cc.columbia.edu. Bitnet — jm86@cunifx. Voice (if you have a problem getting through) — 212-854-4764. As always, it won't work without your participation! Thanks.☺

with the practice of librarianship?

- ... What if we conceded that librarianship, as a social science, an applied field and service profession, could have a paradigm?
- ... What might the paradigm look like and how would it operate?
- ... Are changes in librarianship truly paradigmatic, or changes along a continuum?

The Kuhnian concept is so compelling that it begs to be read in the original works and this condensation does not do it justice. I urge you to read his works and then decide yourself. You may choose to reject Kuhn's definition of a paradigm and apply the paradigm concept to explain general changes and philosophies in librarianship. But ask yourself whether by rejecting Kuhn's concept we have gained or lost something in the process and whether

On The Road

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up and people are waiting for you to arrive."

Maybe I gulped. Maybe I sweated. Maybe my voice went up an octave. I don't remember. What I do remember is that then and there I had a problem. I had to go to the meeting as scheduled and I had no shoes. Talk about caught between a bare foot and a library.

So what happened? What did I do?

The final result was (to my best guess) the first ever extensive Approval Plan Profile review done by a salesperson wearing a blue pin-stripe suit, white button-down shirt, burgundy tie, blue sox, and — flip/flops. True story. No kidding. You heard it here.

There are hundreds (nay thousands; what? millions) of stories to be shared by the readers of *Against the Grain*. If I don't receive any I'll have to either continue telling tales on myself or resort to sharing something else. Readers, you really don't want that to happen. Write me☺

our power of explanation has been magnified or diminished.

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Book Pricing Update

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press title. A true bargain, though, must be wanted or needed, and at most academic libraries, these books are neither.

If titles don't sell, publishers cannot afford to produce them. In the February 24, 1993, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Harald Bakken and Mischa Richter have a cartoon depicting the rejection of a manuscript. Says the publisher to the hapless author, "Basically, we feel that it's too popular a treatment for the university presses and too scholarly a treatment for the mainstream presses. Our suggestion is that you add a little sex and violence and try Hollywood." Failing that, university presses may swing back toward the traditional scholarly monograph, for the traditional scholarly market.☺