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From A University Press — Scenes from an Annual Meeting

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The annual meeting of the **Association of American University Presses (AAUP)** was held on June 19-21, 2012 in Chicago with the theme, “Igniting the Future!” This annual gathering brings together staff from the some 130 member presses to discuss common issues, new technologies, and in the past few years, the vast changes remaking the landscape of scholarly communication.

Annual meeting program committee chair **Becky Clark** of **Johns Hopkins University Press** noted, “While university presses are occasionally criticized as being slow to change, the reality is that **AAUP** member presses are champions of innovation. Amid sea changes in the publishing industry and a persistent economic downturn that has significantly eroded subvention, university presses are taking control of their own destinies, a process that is palpable with creative energy.”

Organizers wanted to reflect the positive energy and forward momentum, while acknowledging that significant change is also a process of what **Clark** calls “creative destruction.” Many traditional practices in university press publishing have been abandoned for reasons of practicality and the need to economize where possible, but such changes have opened up space for creative problem solving (I have no doubt that those in the library community are also familiar with how this process works!).

Program committee member **Jane Bunker** of **Northwestern University Press** said that the program was crafted “with a focus on two things: how our industry is doing change and innovation (as opposed to ‘withstanding change’) and publishing fundamentals. We can’t just utterly reinvent our business; we all must start where we are, and then focus on where we’re trying to go, one day at a time.” Digital publishing emerged again and again as a focus, and for good reason. As our marketing director and I tell our board (a lot), digital publishing has not simply replaced some of the activities we have traditionally undertaken to publish print books. It has overlaid a second, and often independent, structure and workflow on top of our existing infrastructure, during a time when staffs — and sometimes revenues — are not expanding. The session “Is This Really My Job? (Or, How Digital Publishing Changed the Workflow at the Scholarly Press)” perfectly captured the internal questions, and sometimes tensions, that arise when print publishers must also be adept digital publishers. I would posit that the question “Is this really my

job?” has also been uttered in many a library as job descriptions become more fluid in response to changing patron needs and types of scholarly content acquired and made accessible.

“University presses, like libraries, exist in the service of scholarship, whatever its form” said **Clark**. The program sessions included new explorations of the core elements of publishing, including financial management, list building, and marketing, but many other sessions focused on emerging topics, such as content “chunking” (why can’t we find a more elegant word for this? Suggestions, please!), metadata, app development, international sales in the age of electronic content, and DIY ePub. Panelists from **YBP**, **ebrary**, **JSTOR**, and **UPCC/MUSE** served on an “Update from the Library Aggregators” session and talked to publishers about digital reference, PDA, and data chunking and also shared library feedback about content offerings and publishing models.

A plenary talk and several sessions addressed wider issues in the relationships of university presses and their parent institutions, including OA mandates (including the delightfully titled session, “Free, but Not Easy”), the question of publications in tenure and promotion decisions, and how to take sides (or not)

when policy wars over proposed legislation such as the **Research Works Act**, **SOPA**, and **PIPA** ignite. A panel on this last topic included **Ivy Anderson** of the **California Digital Library**, **Ellen Faran** of the **MIT Press**, and **Janet Rabinowich** of **Indiana University**

Press (which in July was moved under the newly-created Office of Scholarly Publishing, which will also oversee IU Libraries’ digital publishing program). The panelists discussed the tricky waters they must navigate when their university takes a particular position but the press needs to remain neutral or even act in opposition (if quietly) to proposed mandates.

Chat in the back halls and during a directors’ meeting prior to the opening reception focused on change and several developments that will affect the **AAUP** and many of its member presses. In 2013, **AAUP** executive director **Peter Givler** will retire, and press directors gathered to talk about the future of their professional organization and what activities would best strengthen university presses in the future. Several themes for focus emerged, as press directors wanted to place emphasis on the following activities: advocacy (articulating value — in front of university administra-

tors; informational — press directors talking about value of university presses); research (establishing metrics to quantify the value of university presses); education/information to the membership (policy updates; regional meetings; Webinars); and facilitating collaboration (with libraries; among university presses; fostering networking).

Also on the minds of many was the closure of the **University of Missouri Press**. Members of the **AAUP** central office had been working with university officials to talk about the situation, and longtime sales representative **Bruce Miller** started an active grassroots and social media “save the press” campaign. The situation at Missouri had many attendees wondering about the nature of their relationship with their own home institutions. In a plenary talk, **Tom Allen** of the **AAP** said something that resonated as another emergent theme of the meeting, particularly in light of the **Missouri Press** situation. **Allen** argued that publishers have deliberately maintained a sense of mystery and are now paying the price. Publishers, he said, are lousy at explaining what we do and why it’s so important. Amen, **Tom**. Maybe it’s because one of my early jobs was as a university press publicist, so the publicist in me never dies, but I think this observation is absolutely true and does none of us any good. Gone are the days when the superior mission and work in which we are engaged are enough to ensure adequate and ongoing funding and support. Like other university units, we publishers must now actively educate and advocate. We have to ensure that administrators, faculty, students, and general readers know what we do and care enough to make sure we can continue to do the work we love.

When I asked **Northwestern’s Bunker** for her observations on the meeting, she replied, “The most interesting thing to me about how university presses are in transition is perhaps the least surprising: it’s that individuals in organizations drive change. University presses employ some of the smartest people in the scholarly ecosystem, and we’re going to figure this thing out. And the change agents among our colleagues will lead us.” I couldn’t have said it better. So many of the men and women I count as friends in the **AAUP** are among the very smartest and most inspiring people I know. They are passionate, driven, creative, mission-oriented, and understand the bottom line. They are also incredibly generous with their time and their expertise, so much so that no one in university press publishing need ever reinvent the wheel. So yes, this is still a time of great change that feels unsettling, but thanks to the talents of the people who were gathered at this year’s **AAUP** annual meeting, we’ll figure it out. Of that I have no doubt. 🍷