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From A University Press — The Twenty-First Century University Press: Assessing the Past, Envisioning the Future

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Column Editor's Note: *These two pieces were originally delivered as part of a plenary session at the 2012 Charleston Conference, and they are worth running in ATG because they eloquently highlight the evolution and current transformations of university press publishing. — LS*

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the **Association of American University Presses**, or the **AAUP**. Collaboration among university presses began as early as the 1920s, with discussions of a joint catalog, and an organized meeting in 1928 included representatives from **Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Johns Hopkins, North Carolina, Duke, Chicago, Pennsylvania, Stanford, and Oxford**. According to a recent history of the AAUP, at that meeting,

“Cooperation among university presses was born amongst the luxurious surroundings of the original Waldorf-Astoria. When the Hotel Pennsylvania and the Commodore proved too expensive, someone negotiated a rate of \$6/single or \$9/double at one of the world’s most famous hotels. The organizers were quite pleased — **University of Pennsylvania Press** director **Phelps Soule** confessed a long-held ‘ambition to lunch someday at the **Waldorf**, as it looks very grand from the top of the Fifth Avenue Bus.’”

I mention this to emphasize that the vast majority of modern university presses are nonprofit entities and have a long and illustrious history of thrift.

Fast forward to the year 2012, which finds university presses at a moment of scrutiny as well as exploration. Money and mission are both equally on our minds as press directors, as the former makes the fulfillment of the latter possible. Though our missions as scholarly publishers have not changed significantly in the last 75 years, the path to arrive at that nirvana known as “breakeven status” has changed significantly, and many would argue that they’re not even sure where that path is anymore, or that now there are different paths for different types of university presses.

So before our main speakers **Doug Armato** and **Alison Mudditt** examine university press publishing in the past, present, and future, there are a few things I’d like you to know about university presses. As I’ve mentioned, we are nonprofits, and very different from commercial academic publishers. (Though as a colleague of mine at another press will say when an author asks him for something really outside of the scope of his budget, “Hey, we’re not not-for-profit”). Most of us depend on our home universities for some sort of institutional allocation to get to breakeven. According to the February 2012 AAUP Operating Statistics

report, those presses with net sales in the \$1.5-6M range receive host institution support averaging 10-20% of net sales. Very small presses often receive more; larger presses receive significantly less. But what these numbers mean is that 80-90% of operating income for most university presses is generated primarily through sales and grants.

As is true of libraries, even though we are all university presses, we are not the same. What works well for one press may not easily translate for the rest of us. As my marketing director is fond of saying, turning **Tolstoy’s** famous pronouncement on its head: “Unhappy presses are all alike; every happy press is happy in its own way.” Though we may have each taken our own paths to getting there, nearly all university presses do publish electronic content and are making it a priority. The great majority of us are placing that content with the vendors and platforms you use in your libraries, and we are constantly reevaluating business strategies and avenues for content discovery and dissemination.

Countless articles and blogs have been written about the so-called crisis in scholarly communication. Some of these writers portray university presses as antiquated operations that are resistant to change and that don’t care about — or are unable to meet the needs of — modern users. I have two immediate responses to this. First, I believe this happens, in part, because we as university presses haven’t always done a good job of explaining our value and promoting that message to our stakeholders, which include our campuses, libraries, scholarly societies, authors, administrators, and faculty. Truly connecting with your constituents is a very powerful thing and should be done at every possible opportunity. I was fortunate enough to recently spend an hour with one of the Mississippi university presidents, talking about our press’s work and exploring the many ways in which the press’s challenges were similar to the challenges he faced in formulating plans for the growth and success of his own campus. At the end of the meeting he said that the press should be getting more money to further fund our thriving program and allow us to make additional technological and infrastructure invest-

ments. You will not hear the words “I want to give you more money” very often on a campus these days, and I took this as a potent example of the importance of dialog and of finding commonalities with your stakeholders.

Second, I believe university presses are consistently labeled “in crisis” because we cannot predict exactly what scholarly communication or publishing (and there is an increasing difference between these two things) will look like in five years, or even two. University presses are in the very same boat as libraries, administrators of campus textbook and course management systems, faculty, and campus IT managers. We are firmly in the middle of a period of highly disruptive technological change. The issue is this: old systems no longer work well, there is a new system introduced every 3-6 months, and we simply have no way of guaranteeing that the systems in which we do choose to invest will be the ones that will still serve us well in two years. We are all well acquainted with the effects of this disruptive change, but it does not mean that university presses are inherently broken or irrelevant. It merely means that my crystal ball is just as foggy as yours, and we have to experiment, innovate, listen to our users and customers, and then ultimately make it up as we go along.

This is actually deeply reassuring to me. If the real issue were that no one cares about scholarly content, then university press directors and staff should be lying awake nights. The issue instead is that we are charged with finding *new* ways to fulfill our longtime mission of selecting, developing, editing, producing, marketing, and disseminating high-quality, peer-reviewed scholarship. We as presses can today learn a great deal from academic libraries about the new paths on which scholarship may travel. So I hope this conference, and the official AAUP-sponsored University Press Week that will run November 11-17 and that we’re kicking off here, will foster the greater mutual understanding and dialog that will help us find and navigate those future paths. Please take some time to visit www.universitypressweek.org and look at what university presses across the country are doing to connect with their places and their readers.

What Was a University Press?

by **Doug Armato** (Director, University of Minnesota Press)



I’m going to take this occasion of the **Association of American University Presses’** 75th anniversary and of the 36th University Press Week to speak a little more personally than I usually would about our joint enterprise of university press publishing — its past, present, and potential futures.

What was a university press? The first book published at an American university was at **Harvard** in 1636, and the first formal American university press was established at **Cornell** in 1869 — heralding a familiar phenomenon of university publishing operations

continued on page 59