2015

From a University Press: What's Working?

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Recommended Citation

Salisbury, Leila W. (2015) "From a University Press: What's Working?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 29.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7011>

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From A University Press — What's Working?

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I am often asked to talk and write about the challenges facing scholarly publishing. I'm used to thinking about the issues in a very broad sense as I try to explain the environmental factors and technology evolutions that have brought us to the exciting if uneasy predicament we in scholarly communications perceive today. For a recent questionnaire, however, I was asked more specifically about how my own operation is working to meet these challenges. This was a very useful exercise and a reminder of the fact that while university presses share many things in common, we are also each the product of our own particular place, conditions, and values. Those shaping factors may not always be universal, but they help us create our own responses. We incorporate them into the fabric of our operations and use them to best advantage.

The **University Press of Mississippi (UPM)** is very fortunate in several respects. We are a consortium press, which means that we are aligned with all of our eight state universities, and our institutional allocation is split among them. This has proven to be a sustainable solution for our campuses, taking our press through the rocky recession with the necessary support as we weathered poor sales and an ecosystem in chaos. I am a staunch advocate of this type of consortial

arrangement for university presses, especially those located in states with small populations and limited resources. Collaboration seems to be the buzzword du jour, but I give a hearty (and daily) thanks to those individuals who had the foresight 45 years ago to structure our operation in this way.

University presses and their staff should regularly look to their campuses for ideas and relationships, and we at **UPM** have not one but eight centers of learning from which to draw. Since we are not on any one of the campuses but in a central location within the state, sometimes it is a bit of a juggling act to be on each campus at least once a year for a formal visit (and at other times for lectures or conferences or more informal meetings). The benefits, however, far outweigh the logistical challenges. Each of our campuses offers different strengths, and we are able to learn about the guiding principles and challenges of campuses of very different sizes (ranging in enrollments of 2,000 to more than 20,000). This in itself has been a reminder that "one size fits all" thinking about content and its access and use is insufficient. Each campus has its own approach to course material, and acquisitions specialists handle things differently for each library.

We also have a very cohesive editorial program, which allows us to

dig deeply in certain fields and to work in a concentrated way to create an identity for ourselves and relationships with scholars in those disciplines. The **Press** also works consistently to cultivate our regional publications, which include Mississippi and Louisiana and sometimes the South more broadly. This is part of our service mission to our state and region, but these books also have appeal to a more general audience. We are careful, though, to maintain a balance of the general interest and scholarly books. Our marketing director sometimes jokingly refers to ours as a well-diversified portfolio, but it's an apt analogy. Operational stability for **UPM** stems in large part from the tuning and maintenance of this delicate balance. Each type of book has its role to play as part of our larger list, and the wider portfolio provides some cushioning when sales in certain disciplines fall off.

Finally, my staff and I spend a lot of time thinking, in essence, about the money that sustains our mission. Where will we get the best and most meaningful return on investment, whether that investment is one of staff time or cash spent? What are the most promising book projects that fall within our areas of strength, and do they make sense for us financially? What efficiencies can we find in inventory management, printing, and electronic workflow and distribution solutions? What pricing strategies are both sustainable and attractive even as we make our books as accessible as possible?

A coaching professional recently pointed out to me that the way in which our organi-

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one factor that needs to be considered as we want to be conscientious money managers with the funds dedicated to purchasing eBooks. One of the obstacles to gathering and evaluating the data is the disparity in what vendors offer. Some vendors are able to provide very detailed usage data along with **COUNTER**-compliant statistics. Others only provide one or the other. Because we recognize that vendors are evolving in their thinking about how and what statistical data they are able to provide, each year we try to evaluate our data needs and determine what we should be doing.

eBook Web Page

In order to assist users with, and keep track of, the variety of eBook vendors, platforms, and means of access, we created a Webpage <http://lib.guides.umbc.edu/ebooks>. We've included information on downloading eBooks to readers, how to borrow eBooks, with instructions for each vendors' materials, and explained the philosophy of DDA purchasing.

Ongoing Issues

There are still a few problem issues, notably getting all eBooks to display in discovery systems. As discovery implementations become more the norm the ability to connect seamlessly to eBooks via discovery services will have a major impact on their complete acceptance in academic libraries. A smaller, but no less minor issue is when the vendors pull e-titles from the DDA listing without notifying us or when there is significant lag time between when the title was pulled and when the notification is received. The record is still in the catalog and/or in the discovery tool, which creates a problem for users. Several librarians may be in on the conversation to determine if the eBooks have been pulled or if the catalog record is incorrect; an inconvenience and frustration to the user and a problem for the librarians, who expect, regardless of method of discovery, the collections to be accurately represented. Part of maintaining our various eBook collections means continuing to have an open dialogue with the publishers regarding issues such as this so that local workflows are

sustainable and our users can consistently access the titles we say we have available.

Conclusion

At **UMBC** we continue to strive to smartly use the funds that we are able to dedicate to eBook purchases. The DDA programs have been successful. We have not depleted those accounts so quickly that we ran out of funds to continue the programs. The specific collections and the reference titles that we have purchased have been thoughtfully selected to meet the needs of our faculty, staff, and students. Those of us in the library recognized that there is still a learning curve for using eBooks, but use seems to be increasing. As we do more to promote the use of eBooks and provide information to address issues when they are encountered, we expect this to be the norm. On the administrative side of things, having multiple platforms and programs does mean we need to devote extra effort to monitor and store information for those involved. However, perhaps in this case, the end does outweigh the means. 🌱

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zation seems to think about these questions is guided by the philosophy of "Appreciative Inquiry," a set of principles and behaviors identified by faculty at **Case Western University**. This approach focuses on the strengths of an organization — a purposeful discussion of what is working and what processes would be successful in the future — and puts energy towards what is currently successful and what could work down the road, rather than simply focusing discussions around problems or broken systems. This forms the basis of a positive approach to experimentation (something required in our era of ever-changing technologies) and keeps the focus, even during simultaneous experiments, on nurturing projects and systems that yield desired results.

The author of the recent questionnaire I completed closed with the final question: "What can our university presses do to assure the survival of the printed book?"

In so many ways, I think our day-to-day work is already doing just that. We live in a market economy, and we need to publish the things that people want and need to read in the formats in which they want to use them. We are tastemakers to a certain extent, but more of the time we are the publishers of books that people didn't know they needed — until they desperately do. University presses develop

and publish the books that explain what is behind the daily headlines in areas as diverse as terrorism, environmental preservation and policy, political leadership, folklore, and social and gender issues. Immediately after the September 11 attacks, the media was looking for sources about the then-little studied terrorist group al-Qaeda and the student jihadists that made up the Taliban. University presses had published most of what scholarship was available (notably a book from **Yale University Press**), and **Rutgers University Press** was the publisher of one of the only books on the Twin Towers.

I'll close by illustrating what it is that we and only a handful of commercial publishers also do so well these days: produce beautiful physical objects. Many people want books for the information they contain; they're format

agnostic, and that's just fine. But there are those who still value the book as an object, an object designed with consideration for type and color and the look and feel of a deckle-edged paper. I was browsing in our local independent bookstore during the holidays when I came across the most remarkably designed publication, *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings: A 21st Century Bestiary*. It was not only smart and funny, but it was just gorgeous to look at and hold. I turned to the spine and smiled; it was published by the **University of Chicago Press**. Of course. This is the kind of book that we as a community, joined with great authors, still manage to create. These books not only work for us but they also help define us as publishers, and there will always be a place for that, even in our digital age. 🐉

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example, was interested to see a note on **LibLicense** that the **National Association of the Deaf** has sued **Harvard** and **MIT** alleging that the institutions violate the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990* by not captioning all of the source content they make available online.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/quick-takes/2015/02/13/national-association-deaf-sues-harvard-mit>

Tony Ferguson has retired from **Back Talk** for a while but this is not a problem because **Ann Okerson** and **Jim O'Donnell** will alternate writing **Back Talk** every other issue. We have the first installment this month by **Ann**. It's about November 2014 *Liblicense Model License* (this issue, p.86).

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