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ATG Interviews Peter C. Froehlich, Director, Purdue University Press

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Director, Purdue University Press

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ATG: *Peter you are fairly new to Purdue University Press. What in your prior experience prepared you for the responsibility of running a university press? Has being the director of a university press always been a career ambition?*

PF: First, yes, over the last few years, it has been an objective of mine to contribute to change in Higher Education and Communications/Media, or what is called Publishing, at a higher level, and **Purdue** is great place for it. I have been in and around scholarly publishing for the last nine years or so; I have learned a lot from everyone and wanted to give back. I completed undergraduate work in the humanities (comparative literature) at **UC Berkeley**, so along the way I have been able to work with seasoned acquisitions editors and scholars and make sense of things, as they helped me to develop publishing chops in a scholarly setting. But, I saw early on that we need leaders with new toolboxes and knowledge, in addition to these skills. So, what was I going to do about it?

I sought out professional training and mentors, and I “preyed on the strong” around me. I plagued everyone with questions. I sought out leaders in the industry: librarians, consultants, and even library consultants; I found scores of publishing pros from across the **AAUP** and **SSP**; I found business consultants to publishers across STEM and the humanities, commercials and nonprofits; and of course I found myself at one of the leading humanities presses in the U.S., **Indiana University Press**; so, I fought to train under the best editors and leaders we had, like **Dee Mortensen**, **Janet Rabinowitch**, **Kate Carass**, **Bob Sloan**, **Dave Hulsey**, and briefly with **Gary Dunham**. I learned a great deal from everyone at **IUP**, colleagues, peers and interns too, and from everyone across the **AAUP** for that matter.

To get up-to-date skills in other areas; you know, what else can I do? I went after an MBA at the **Kelley School of Business** (Indiana). In 2015, I finished completing three majors, beyond the general-management MBA, in Entrepreneurship, Marketing, and Supply Chain Management. Interestingly, I believe that the last of those, Supply Chain, has yielded the most practical insights, when looking at the ecosystem: libraries, public, scholars, presses, and higher ed’s role. That said, studying best practices and hundreds of case studies across a host of industries, and analyzing the trends in those industries, and working with other students and faculty, (all of whom had years of business and consulting experience), while going through what’s happening in scholarly publishing, post 2011/12, is what brought it all together: it complicated my understanding,

in a good way. As I said, my early academic training had been in the humanities, so technical training in hard analytics, current tools, and data-driven decision making brought “balance to the force,” as it were. I could point to some early leadership opportunities as well, prior to recent adventures, but the above really captures it. People go about training a lot of ways. This worked for me.

ATG: *What was so compelling about the opportunity at Purdue UP? What most attracted you to the position? What do you see as the most pressing challenges for the Press going forward?*

PF: **Purdue UP** has slain dragons. I know, because I have their heads on the wall in my office, staring down at me. Kind of creepy, late at night, but inspiring. What was so compelling about the opportunity at **Purdue UP**, and what is so compelling about the opportunity, are the empty plaques next to them and the support we have to find new dragons to slay and new partners to work with to slay them.

What most attracted me to the position was several-fold: the chance to work with the **Purdue UP** team’s notoriously nimble publishing talents; the chance to learn from the Libraries’ leadership, the rest of the Scholarly Publishing team, and the Libraries’ faculty (all new for me, up close and personal); and the chance to work for **Jim Mullins**. **Jim** is our Dean and one of the most innovative thinkers and leaders in our community.

The most “pressing” challenge for the Press is overhauling our communications and branding. Our strengths and vision are understated and obscured among the various fits and starts of messaging that have gathered over the last few years on our various sites. We are more than “the sum of our sites,” currently. This happens when you innovate ahead of the curve, e.g., pulling together library publishing, open repository, and the Press (I’m leading all three); sometimes messaging needs to catch up.

The next most pressing challenges for us, in rough order, are: reviewing technology to prepare us for next-generation fully open digital publishing; continuing to evolve models and workflows to build out our network of coordinated collaborative public publishing units and projects; and buying more empty plaques.

ATG: *Where do you see university presses fitting in to the current publishing environment? In this day of decreasing print sales, increasing digital content, and open access are university presses still viable?*

PF: University Presses are a part of a viable future for university-based public publishing, i.e., there’s less of a chance for one without them. Print/digital questions and sales

questions, really, are endemic to last century thinking. You have to cling to traumas of past disruption to see them as challenges rather than opportunities, and to see them as centrally relevant to questions of what publishing will be for us in the next century, i.e., you also have to cling to “container thinking” and old models *not* to see the value to be created in the next century, with all we have at our disposal.

Next questions will turn on trenchancy of message-presentation and celerity of understanding, engagement, and impact; therefore, on principles of *communications* as in mass communications. Print/digital and sales/Open are all old-world plumbing questions, not architectural ones.

ATG: *Speaking of digital content, what do you think is the most sustainable approach to eBook publishing? Where does the print fit into the overall equation? Does it have a future at Purdue UP?*

PF: “Best” is an interesting question. Traditionally, Presses have at least partially self-funded overhead through revenues from sales and licensing of scholarly and other texts. Our **Purdue Model** is to treat overhead and infrastructure as a cost of doing business, provided by the libraries. We don’t seek profits to keep the lights on. We use them to bring ideas to greater light.

We, in fact, employ a variety of models at **Purdue**, currently — always experimenting. We are proud to have participated in both rounds of **Knowledge Unlatched (KU)**; we have a diversified publishing program, and leverage grant funding from a variety of sources.

One of our titles from the first round in **Knowledge Unlatched**, *Understanding the Global Energy Crisis*, has led all other titles in total downloads — nearly three times as many as the average title. Titles were competitively selected by libraries, so we’re excited to be participating and that our titles are faring so well. As **ATG** readers likely know, **KU** has an exciting model that allows Libraries to bid on and crowd fund a portion of the publication costs of monographs. Publishers set their overhead price, and if it is selected, the libraries all agree to pay to have it “unlatched” for gold OA publication to libraries. Print and PDF or eBook versions are also available for sale to individuals.

Interestingly, we have some trade print titles that generate sufficient revenues for us to begin to consider pushing more of our scholarly monographs to gold OA as well. It’s better for the scholarly market if these are just Open from the hop. We’re still reviewing that approach,

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but early signs are positive. This opportunity is unique to **Purdue**, because we just happen to have a healthy spate of technical handbooks and trade titles at present, in addition to our scholarly monographs. This may be an interim solution, but one that allows us to continue to experiment with more models, test the waters, and see what we need to have to best support and develop projects for the global marketplace of ideas.

We also developed *HABRICentral*, which is an entirely Open research and collaboration hub, for scholars, practitioners, libraries, and the public. In its early development, much of the aggregating content is linked and some of that rests behind paywalls; however, we're linking to archived Green OA content, as much as possible, and in the new rounds of funding, we're beginning to publish original content. All collaborators are also able to generate and contribute content. We also contribute free versions of our related eBooks to visitors to the site. An interesting model, because it is funded by a private research foundation and therefore not by students' tuition or scholars' research dollars.

So those are a few models where costs for OA publication of monographs are shared by research libraries or offset by contributions from a professional and trade audience, for other titles. There are of course others where taxpayers or students' families are asked to fund publication of scholarly monographs similarly, i.e., in cloud fashion, with author publishing fees (pre-publication funding) or institutional publishing fees (or so-called mid-publishing-funding). There are a great many exciting projects underway.

Sustainability is really more of an institutional or organizational question, maybe an ecosystem and society question, not really a product question. eBooks are products. (And they are containers of products.) My eating peanuts is not sustainable. I need a healthy diet. Likewise, I need a breadth of nutritious inputs and outputs for a strong publishing unit and a healthy organization (university/higher education/society). Peanuts and eBooks may just be a treat with respect to the whole diet.

Our business is to provide what works best to communicate ideas (to readers) and enable collaboration (between authors and press, and readers and authors, and readers and the press, and so on) for developing the expression of ideas in an accessible, interactive, and communicative a means as possible.

As such, that business, *in a nutshell*, can be seen as the diegetic space between scholars and the public and the success and excellence that can be had from the use and behavior of elements in that space. That includes using variegated strategies or platforms, and even *multiple expressions of messages to be conveyed*, in order to advance the cause.

As for the question of print fitting in, specifically, we publish everything digitally. Digital is a growth area, especially Digital Humanities and other born-digital. Our readership for regional titles and select trade and technical handbooks, however, have less need for all that digital has to offer. To serve them and to reach them best, we'll also offer print versions of some texts. We'll respect our mission as a land-grant university and regional press and our mission as a professional service to the research academy as we balance our readers' needs with our own near-term hotspots for growth.

ATG: *Purdue University Press is affiliated with the university library. Can you explain that relationship?*

PF: We are one. The Press is part of the larger whole. We're not just "affiliated" with, we are *deeply integrated* into the Libraries' culture and structure, and we all report to one Dean. I am part of the Libraries' executive leadership, in fact, and serve in that capacity among others to the University. The Press is also only one of three units that I lead; I am director of the Scholarly Publishing Division of the **Purdue University Libraries**, and Scholarly Publishing comprises our institutional repository, **Purdue ePubs (PEP)**, our library publishing imprint, Scholarly Publishing Service (SPS), and our university press, **Purdue University Press (PUP)**, the Press being the largest and most well-established of the three. The Libraries and Press are all part of Purdue's contribution to Scholarly Communications, from research to practice. The support we enjoy from the Libraries and the Leadership on campus, not to mention the contribution we enjoy for our Libraries faculty and staff, all allow us to experiment and innovate.

ATG: *What are the pros and cons of such an arrangement? Is it a viable model long term?*

PF: It's one model. And that's important to note. The model doesn't matter; the mission does. The core of what we do matters. The "who" and "what" never changes. The model is a means to a mission. Nothing more.

The cons are singular, so a con, really. We are small. By comparison, we are refugees from one of a string of balkanized island nations plopped down in the middle of a richly interdependent first-world global economy. (I think someone smart said that.) Libraries are deeply collaborative, they have publishing faculty researching their practices and the world around them and updating their pedagogy for training next generations of staff and faculty continually. Libraries at most research universities have gargantuan budgets and staff relative to their Press, as well. Small units must be protected, so a leader like **Jim** is key to success.

The pros are many...not the least of which being that together we might increase the

viability of the whole enterprise/one another, i.e., each provides an element missing from the long-term viability of the other.

ATG: *You recently attended your first Charleston Conference. What did you think? Did it live up to your expectations? What were your biggest takeaways? Did anything surprise you?*

PF: Yes, it did live up, and I wish I had attended sooner! I was surprised by how many conversations were going on at the meeting, away from sessions. Discussions in and around the sessions are duly impressive; however, the volume and heft of the sidebar conversations are what's so valuable about the meeting. Not to be missed. I'm hooked.

ATG: *Speaking of the Charleston Conference, Purdue UP is now publishing a series of books on library and information science that is inspired by the Charleston Conference called "Charleston Insights." Can you tell us more about that?*

PF: It is a new series, started in the last few years, and it is one of my greatest honors to take over as its publisher. Like its namesake, the series provides a forum for exploring leading issues of interest across the ecosystem, i.e., to Libraries, Presses/Publishers, and Vendors. It does a "deep dive" into the most trenchant and future-facing topics that arise in discussions at the **Charleston Conference** — and its related venues, such as the **Fiesole Retreats**. Early volumes have done quite well. We doubled the title output in the series with the new titles offered in 2015.

ATG: *If any of our readers have an idea for a possible book proposal, what should they do?*

PF: If it fits with the *Charleston Insights* series, or if it might fit, they should email the mighty **Katina Strauch** or the equally mighty **Tom Gilson**, as they are the editors of the series. They can also email me with ideas that may or may not be a fit with Charleston, like ones in information literacy. None should call me, unless you have my cell number.

ATG: *Going forward, what can the library community expect from the "Charleston Insights" series? What do you hope the series will contribute to the library science literature?*

PF: More. I expect that we will see more works coming to the fore, from Fiesole and the other related venues. We're speaking with many of our best voices in library science in the U.S. and EU to contribute. I'm quite pleased with our additional discussions, thus far, of possibly including short single-author works on high-level topics — most of the works in the series are edited volumes. We have a few more skunkworks type projects underway. Folks will need to "stay tuned" for more on those fronts. 🐼