

COMMENTARY

Creating a Library Publishing Program for Scholarly Books: Your Options Are Limited

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Publishing programs in academic libraries vary in their scope, offerings, and business models (Schlosser, Hamilton, Neds-Fox, Bielavitz, & Hoff, 2017). Despite the many forms that these programs take, I have argued in the past that various factors constrain the design of a start-up publishing operation (Hawkins, 2016a). In this commentary, I discuss in greater depth the key questions to be addressed before establishing a library publishing program for scholarly books, arguing that the viable options are in fact quite limited.

REASONS TO CREATE A PROGRAM

Why would an academic library create a publishing program in the first place? While the earliest library publishing programs were created to respond to a perceived need among researchers for an alternative to conventional publishers (Hahn, 2008), library staff at institutions today might be motivated to launch a publishing program for ideological reasons—in order to make a statement about supporting an alternative to conventional publishing—without evidence that there will be demand for such a service. I. Gilman warns against “publishing into the void for the sake of offering a service” (personal communication, January 30, 2017, as cited in Lippincott, 2017), and I agree with his view.

How should you determine if there is need for a publishing program? A needs assessment of potential users (see, for example, Craigle, Herbert, Morrow, & Mower, 2013) is naturally a more solid foundation on which to create a set of services than anecdotes, but as we all know,

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surveying busy researchers is a challenge. At the same time, we should not deny, as is often said, that there is sometimes a role for libraries to take the lead in offering services rather than simply responding to demand. A library might start small, perhaps by offering training related to publishing and hosting of digital publications, thereby building credibility that could lead to greater interest in publishing services (H. Green, personal communication, January 31, 2017, as cited in Lippincott, 2017). Hosting an open-access journal is a common place to start: the editors of the journal are likely to feel that they can handle the entire production process and need support only for publishing the journal—a minimal commitment of resources from the library, which also has the opportunity to support open-access publishing. However, publishing a journal is an ongoing commitment, for both the editors and the library. I recommend instead beginning by publishing books, which are one-time commitments for the author and library. Prospective journal editors could be steered toward a model of “occasional papers” until it is clear that there is enough momentum to launch a journal.

Another reason to create a publishing program is to provide an opportunity for students to learn about the process of academic publishing (Bonn & Furlough, 2015), either by authoring works (perhaps as a class project in collaboration with instructors) (Buckland, 2015), conducting or managing peer review (Buckland, 2015; Spiro, 2015), or by contributing to the production process (O’Donnell et al., 2015). These are all worthwhile goals, though they should be coordinated with any other outreach efforts by library staff to educate students and researchers about scholarly communication so as not to establish competing programming.

WHO SHOULD BE ELIGIBLE TO USE THE LIBRARY PUBLISHING PROGRAM?

Should a library serve only local authors? Academic libraries sometimes create a publishing operation designed largely to replicate the conventional university press model, including by publishing quality work regardless of author affiliation, but perhaps improving upon it in some way, such as by making all works free to read online. Examples include Amherst College Press (Howard, 2013), Concordia University Press, and Pacific University Press. However, in many cases the goal for the library is simply to make scholarship produced *at* the institution more widely available, perhaps invoking a return to the missions of the earliest American university presses, as chronicled by C. Kerr and G. Hawes (as cited in Courant & Jones, 2015). If the library commits to this mission, it would make sense to publish *only* work with a connection to the institution.

SHOULD THE PROGRAM CONDUCT PEER REVIEW?

Peer review is widely considered the cornerstone of conventional scholarly publishing. While journal editors generally manage peer review with minimal support from their pub-

lisher, in the case of books, the publisher manages the peer review process.

If a library is to serve as the publisher for scholarly books—not simply disseminating a copy of each in an institutional repository but actually shaping the content and providing “a level of certification to the content published” (Library Publishing Coalition, n.d.)—should the library facilitate peer review? Doing so would help establish the library as a reputable scholarly publisher and potentially attract authors seeking credibility in a publisher. It would also allow the library to participate in many laudable initiatives related to open access, like the Directory of Open Books (DOAB) and MUSE Open, that require all included publications to be peer reviewed. Despite this, I believe that not conducting peer review frees the library from the very difficult path of competing directly with established publishers and in fact allows the library to focus the publishing program instead on disseminating the research of the institution.

Let’s start with the last point—disseminating the research of the institution. I’m not the first to say that libraries have evolved, in the age of information abundance and accessibility, from bringing the world to the local community to bringing the local community to the world (see, for example, Neiburger 2012 and Dempsey 2016). This new mission can take forms ranging from the obvious—making digitized special collections available online—to those that push the boundaries of what it means to be a library, such as providing publishing services for local authors. If a library publishing program in an academic library serves only affiliated authors, as argued above, then the author’s affiliation could serve as their credential, and it becomes less clear why peer review would be needed in addition.

Furthermore, if a library publisher at a college or university has a broad mandate to publish research from the institution, the research will come from many different fields, and the staff of the publishing operation will not be in a good position to assess quality. While they could involve subject specialists in the library and teaching faculty outside it to attempt to find suitable peer reviewers (without relying on reviewers suggested by the author), the library will probably be less successful in finding the best reviewers than would a university press or other publisher with acquisitions editors who know the experts in their fields of specialty.

Indeed, conventional publishers acquire a reputation for publishing quality work in certain topics. Such a reputation is cultivated over time; it’s hard to build and easy to lose. A faculty member seeking recognition for their research will seek out venues in their field recognized for their selectiveness, and those faculty are therefore unlikely to choose a library publisher unless it is well established in their discipline. Those who are ideologically minded to support new models of scholarship but want a peer-reviewed publication will find an increasing number of conventional publishers offering support for open publishing and other new models.

In short, I believe that it's foolish to think that a library, without a significant investment of resources, can create a publishing program that will be able to compete with conventional publishers—let alone well-established unconventional publishers like Open Book Publishers, Punctum Books, and Open Humanities Press—in offering the reputable peer review required by many academic authors. I believe that it's better for libraries to address their users' unmet needs in publishing, much as libraries help their users with their unmet information needs. Some examples of unmet needs are finding a publisher for a festschrift for a retiring faculty member, selected papers from a one-time conference held on campus, or niche projects that a faculty member wants to see published even though they will have a small audience. In fact, festschriften and conference volumes generally don't need peer review at all (because contributions were invited or have already been reviewed), and the author of a passion project with a niche audience generally doesn't seek peer review. This makes them all the better a fit for a library publisher.

SHOULD THE PROGRAM CHARGE FEES?

Should the library publishing program charge fees to users? As argued previously (Hawkins, 2016b), in order to answer that question, you must first ask whether the library publishing program will be seen as an essential service for users, comparable to other services that libraries provide for free. More generally, is there a desire to limit obstacles to authors making use of the public service? If the publishing program will be seen as essential, and disincentives to use it are to be avoided, the service should be made entirely free to all eligible authors. (This does not need to mean that every eligible author's manuscript must be accepted for publication: a library publishing program could require potential authors to apply for selection, with the library choosing only the worthiest publishing projects.) Alternatively, if the publishing program is not seen as an essential service of the library, it should consider charging for the services, drawing on the business models of other for-fee services offered in the library.

A free service for which users apply for selection creates challenges for effective operation. As discussed above, library staff must create mechanisms to assess quality, whether involving subject specialists on the library staff or suitable outside peer reviewers. In addition, if the library has ambitions of recovering some of its costs after publication through sales of print or electronic editions, the library staff may not have the expertise to assess the market potential of a proposal, even if they deem it worthy of publishing.

Assuming the library will fully recover costs by charging for its publishing services and publish works in any field, I recommend offering a cafeteria menu of services for authors rather than a standard fee for publishing projects (either a flat fee or a fee per word). Cafeteria options allow authors to pay for the level of service that they feel the project deserves (and which their

budget allows), and they have the side benefit of making authors aware of the actual costs of publishing that are usually invisible to them. While legacy publishers might be afraid to allow authors to skimp on editorial or design services for fear that their portfolio of products would have uneven quality, if a library publishing program publishes research in any field, its readers are unlikely to be interested in more than one of its products (that is, are unlikely to follow its “list”), so brand reputation isn’t so important for such a library publisher. If authors are willing to have their work disseminated in unpolished form, why interfere with that?

SHOULD THE PROGRAM HIRE STAFF?

How many staff should be hired for a publishing program? It’s hard to know up front how much demand there will be for a service, so programs shouldn’t dedicate staff to the service prematurely. While U.S. universities often have options for hiring students at below-market rates (such as through federally subsidized work-study positions for undergrads or research assistantships for grad students), the administrative costs to be borne by the institution when hiring even subsidized student employees are not trivial.

An approach that allows for a service to scale based on demand is to use freelancers, vendors, or both to provide production services (editing and design). In a sense, this is not so different from outsourcing printing, distribution, and fulfillment services, as nearly every publisher does. Outsourcing production services leaves just project management—coordinating between authors and production freelancers and vendors—to be done in house. In my experience, this work requires a staff member both knowledgeable about publishing and skilled in managing projects that move in fits and starts. While a library employee with competing job responsibilities may find it challenging to find time to manage publishing projects, I find that managing outsourced work rarely requires long, sustained concentration, so it is easier to schedule around other job duties than it would be to actually carry out editing and design in house.

It is best if the library, with staff who will become experienced in the publishing process, contracts for the editing and design services rather than having the author do so directly. For example, if a book manuscript requires mechanical editing and typesetting, a library staff member would arrange for the editing and liaise between the author and the hired editor. Once that work is finished, the library staff member would arrange for the typesetting, liaising between the author and typesetter. Liaising is important because authors don’t know what to expect of editors and designers, who sometimes use publishing jargon unfamiliar to authors. It’s important that the library staff member stay involved to ensure that the work proceeds according to the terms of the contract and that the freelancer or vendor is paid promptly by the institution once the work has been completed.

IN BRIEF

If you agree with my suppositions, I hope you will agree with my conclusions that the most viable path for a publishing program for scholarly books in an academic library is one in which peer review is not conducted, a cafeteria menu of for-fee services is offered, and most work is outsourced.

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