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A Collaborative Solution to Scholarly Publishing's Challenges: Building the Lever Press

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Slide 1:

Good morning, my name is Rebecca Welzenbach. I am Director of Strategic Integration and Partnerships at Michigan Publishing in the University of Michigan Library. Reflecting the “partnerships” part of that title, I am also the Program Manager for Lever Press, a scholarly publishing initiative launched in January 2016 by a collaboration of more than 40 participating liberal arts college libraries, and committed to publishing digital-first long-form scholarship that reflects the particular interests, values, and needs of liberal arts colleges, all with no cost to the author (we’ve coined this “platinum open access”). I am here with my colleague Margy Avery, who is senior acquiring editor at Amherst College Press and Lever Press, and also Allegra Swift from the Claremont Colleges Library, who will present the perspective of one of our participating colleges.

In this session, we’ll describe how the Lever Press came to be, what the team has learned in nearly three years of planning and investigation, and how the initial concept has evolved into, we believe, a truly distinctive option that contributes to the rapidly growing, open monograph landscape.

Slide 2:

Today, we’ll speak first a little bit about the problem that gave rise to the original Lever Initiative, and then the Lever Press. Then, we’ll talk through the investigation, planning, and ultimately implementation phases that brought us to where we are today: just launched! Finally, we’ll address how we see Lever Press fitting into an increasingly crowded landscape for open access scholarly publishing. Does the world really need another press? We’ll see!

[I’ll turn it over to Margy to frame the situation for us a bit]

Slide 3:

So, how did we get here? Well.....

[To the tune of Alexander Hamilton, from Hamilton]

How does a small, selective, private school
for undergraduates, dropped in the middle of
Vermont or Pennsylvania, a typical,
liberal arts college
get involved in the production of new knowledge?

A five-year pilot project with an object
to get a lot farther
by working a lot harder
by publishing a lot smarter
In 2013 an Oberlin Group task force was first chartered

Well the word got around saying, Platinum OA, man!
Took up a collection to fund our collaborative business plan!
Got a board together and tried to establish our brand
And the world's gonna know our game plan! We've got..

Lafayette and Hamilton
Macalester and Oberlin
Middlebury Rollins Knox
Whitman, Coe, Denison....

[ok, ok I'll stop there....]

Slide 4:

Right: in Fall 2013, the Oberlin Group, an organization of selective liberal arts college, formed an initial task force to investigate whether and how a group of liberal arts colleges could team up to make an intervention in the scholarly publishing ecosystem. The team, listed here, hired Melinda Kenneway of TBI Communications, and they embarked on a year of studies.

If scholarly publishing is broken, they reasoned, it's *especially* broken for liberal arts colleges, where the faculty publish with presses built around large research institutions, where libraries have less money to spend on specialized monographs that are of no interest or use to their largely undergraduate populations. Very few of these schools had a press or publishing operation of their own (though a few do), and most felt that alone, they lacked the power to do much to change how things worked.

Slide 5:

The initiative was established on this ancient idea from Archimedes that, given a lever long enough, and a place to stand, one could move the world.

Slide 6:

In the following year, the team conducted a number of studies, including workshops with more than 50 library directors, a review of the current landscape for OA monograph publishing (it's changed a lot since then), and a survey distributed to faculty both within and outside of the Oberlin Group.

Slide 7:

What came out of it?

- Libraries concerned about economics and meeting student needs
- Faculty concerned about speed, quality, prestige, credit
- Frustrations all around with the current system

- Enthusiasm for the new idea! But no consensus about the best way to fix it
- Agreement that any new initiative needs to be a “first choice”--not a last resort for folks who can't get published elsewhere. How to distinguish a brand new press?
- Delicate distinction to be made between “liberal arts scholarship”--not a thing--and “liberal arts mission”--maybe a thing?

Slide 8: Finally! In November 2014 an RFP was issued to a small number of publishers identified as potential partners for this initiative. Michigan Publishing and Amherst College Press teamed up to prepare a joint response

- Michigan Publishing brings technical infrastructure and longstanding reputation
- Amherst College Press brings liberal arts orientation, digital-first focus, and OA emphasis

Slide 9: Early in 2015, Amherst and Michigan were selected as the partners, and our RFP response was integrated into the Lever Initiative's existing research and plans to form a business plan.

Slide 10: Time to get real. The Oberlin Group task force met with Amherst and Michigan Staff at ACRL 2015. This was an important moment to all see each other face-to-face and kick off our new venture. It also revealed how large and unwieldy the group was, and how much work we had to do to transform two years of research and brainstorming into, basically, a new business.

Out of that meeting, we convened a smaller group of representatives from the original task force. Along with selected Michigan and Amherst staff, we launched an Implementation Sprint: over the next quarter we met, basically, all the time to create the foundation of our new venture.

Decisions we made:

- Governance needs to balance many things: representation of the institutions fronting the money, appropriate scholarly prestige and credibility in selecting and approving titles, appropriate freedom for the publishing staff to do what they need to do to acquire and produce new work.
- No books in year 1!!!!
- How many books can we *really* do in five years, for X dollars? Settled on about 60.
- What should the books be? We're circling in on it. Key development? Our commitments:

Slide 11:

Slide 12: What's our story?

Slide 13: Started generating work for our business office at UM: pledge agreements to sign, countersign, return. This is the stuff I do. Coordinating with our accountants and central financial

office to set up each new customer in our system. Sometimes, confusion: the oversight committee was responsible for securing pledges, but we discovered (the hard way!) that the pledging library was not always clear about what tier they belonged to!

[Slide 14] What does this mean, overall, as business model?

Given the money we have pledged so far, and our aspirations, if we distribute all of our costs (including travel, outreach, promotion, etc.) across