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

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The Plan:

The Problem

Investigation and Planning (2013-2014)

Implementation (2015)

Launch -- Now What? (2016)

One Solution (of many!)

What's the problem?

Prologue

The Scholarly Communications
Ecosystem

What could possibly be wrong?

Scholarly communications timeline

Scholarly communications - *dramatis personae*





Beyond the Big Ditch: Politics, Ecology, and Infrastructure at the Panama Canal (MIT Press, 2014)

Omg! A ship passing thru the Panama Canal uses 52 MILLION gallons of water!
[Twitter]

Environmental impact Panama Canal Watershed - UNESCO report

"Nature as Infrastructure: Making and Managing the Panama Canal Watershed"
Social Studies of Science 42(4)

"The Machete and the Freighter: Making the Panama Canal Watershed, 1977-1999"
4S 2009 Conference paper, posted [SSRN]

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

2013-2014: Lever Initiative: an Oberlin Group Study

- Melinda Kenneway, Director, TBI Communications
- Mark Christel, Director of Libraries, College of Wooster
- Barbara Fister, Academic Librarian, Gustavus Adolphus College
- Richard C Fyffe, Librarian of the College, Grinnell College
- Bryn Geffert, Librarian of the College, Amherst College
- Neil McElroy, Dean of Libraries, Lafayette College
- Lisa Norberg, Dean of the Barnard Library and Academic Information Services, Barnard College
- Pamela Snelson, College Librarian, Franklin and Marshall College
- Terry Synder, Librarian of the College, Haverford College
- Mike Roy, Dean of Library and Information Services, Chief Information Officer and Librarian at Middlebury
- Pat Tully, University Librarian, Wesleyan University

September 2013: The Idea and the Investigation

Phase I of the Lever Initiative is established to investigate needs and opportunities for collaborative publishing in a liberal arts college environment:

“A lever amplifies an input force to provide greater output force. This is exactly what this project is designed to do. By focusing our energies as a collection of institutions, we are better able to bring about positive change. Lever will help us assess the best way to support authors and readers in producing and accessing high quality content.”

Lever Initiative August 2013 Newsletter

September 2013-April 2014: The Idea and the Investigation

Research into opportunities, needs, and challenges that librarians and faculty on liberal arts college campuses see in the book publishing landscape.

- Virtual Workshops: six one-hour sessions with more than 50 library directors
- OA Books Landscape review (of course, the landscape has changed drastically since then!)
- Two faculty surveys (within Oberlin Group and outside of it)

September 2013-April 2014: The Idea and the Investigation

Findings, loosely summarized:

- 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 ethos”--maybe a thing?

November-December 2014: The RFP and Response

Some of the questions we addressed:

- Should Lever hire its own publishing team, or leverage (ha) an existing one?
- What, exactly, should Lever publish?
- How much (\$) and how many (books) and how fast?

A loose summary of our response:

- Please use our staff and infrastructure.
- Need an editorial board to decide develop that idea
- More, fewer, slower--no books in year 1, for example (but still: lots, efficiently, quickly!)

January-March 2015: Building the Team

- Michigan/Amherst team selected as the Lever Initiative Partner
- Initial Business plan published
- Task force met at ACRL 2015
- A smaller team convened for Spring 2015 “implementation sprint”: turning ideas into reality

April-July 2015: Implementation Sprint (Make it real!)

- Bi-Weekly meetings, ending with in-person “retreat” in Ann Arbor
- Development of building blocks:
 - Governance: Oversight Committee, Editorial Board, Operations
 - Business model: Acceptable fee structure = how many books?
 - Establishing reasonable timelines: When will we start publishing?
 - Writing core documents (MOU, Pledge agreements, Governance Statement, promotional copy)
- Refining our message through faculty interviews
- Presentation to Annapolis Group

“Press-in-a-box”

What's Our Story?

Three Commitments:

- Digitally Native
- Platinum Open Access
- Alignment with the mission and ethos of the liberal arts college.

What does that mean? We suggest:

- Interdisciplinary
- Engagement with major social issues
- At the intersection of teaching and research

August-December 2015: Getting Buy-In

- Schools pledge \$2K, \$4K, \$6K, or \$8K per year for five years (i.e. \$10K, \$20K, \$30K, \$40K total), depending on collections budget
- Implementation group led on getting commitments. Most, but not all, Oberlin Group schools. Partners must have liberal arts alignment/mission.
- Minimum total threshold to proceed: \$500 K (Actual goal: ~\$1.3 M)
- December: Elected Inaugural Oversight Committee (this replaced implementation group, though there's a good amount of overlap between the two)

Estimated cost to produce: \$22,000/title*

**Estimated cost to pledging libraries:
\$167.00-\$667.00/title**

Including everything. This is the roughest possible math: the total amount of money we've raised / how many titles we aim to produce. So, includes overhead costs like travel, administration, accounting, etc. that don't really map onto a per-book production cost

Table 1. Full cost of a High-Quality Digital Monograph (Excluding In-Kind Cost)

Group	Group Average	Group Median	95 th Percentile	5 th Percentile	Highest Cost Title	Lowest Cost Title
1	\$30,091	\$27,955	\$57,991	\$18,678	\$65,921	\$16,401
2	\$44,906	\$42,851	\$69,417	\$26,292	\$129,909	\$19,516
3	\$34,098	\$33,199	\$53,084	\$18,149	\$76,537	\$15,140
4	\$49,155	\$48,547	\$73,885	\$31,760	\$99,144	\$24,234

Maron, Nancy et al. “*The Costs of Publishing Monographs: Toward a Transparent Methodology.*” *Ithaca S&R* February 6, 2016. <http://sr.ithaka.org/?p=276785>

August-December 2015: Getting Buy-In



January 2016: LAUNCH!