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# Lever Press: Why?

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Good morning! First, I want to say thank you to you to BethAnn for the invitation to come here, and to you all for showing up. My name is Becky Welzenbach. I am a librarian at the University of Michigan, where I work for Michigan Publishing. Michigan Publishing is a division of our University Library, and the primary publishing unit at U of M. This includes the University of Michigan Press, among other services and activities. My title there is Director, Strategic Integration and Partnerships--and one of those partnerships, the one I expect we'll talk most about today, is Lever Press.

We really only have a short window of time together today so, if you are willing, here's how I propose we spend our hour:

- Introductions--I would really like to know who you are and why you came this morning. I'm sorry this will be tedious for those who already know each other!
- Summary overview of Lever Press--how it came to be, what we're trying to do, what has already happened, and what comes next
- Discussion and questions: I am happy to answer or expand upon any of the topics related to Lever Press, I am also eager to hear from you about how this library is already supporting the digital scholarship efforts of its patrons.

Does this plan sound OK to everyone? OK!

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Can we start here? Would you please tell me your name, your title/area in the library, and one takeaway you hope to leave with today?

OK, great--thank you all. I'll try to bear all of this in mind. At this point, and before we kick off further discussion, I'd like to ensure we all have a common baseline understanding about Lever Press.

The idea for Lever Press emerged out of a combination of blue-sky thinking and market research undertaken by a handful of library deans and directors of liberal arts colleges in the Oberlin Group. To sum this up very much in brief, they were responding to a couple of interrelated problems that they observed in their libraries:

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1. Libraries are paying more for each book they purchase--and these prices are rising faster than their budgets. This table shows the average list price per year for University Press published books over about ten years. My colleague Mark Edington, the director of the Amherst College Press, likes to show these numbers against a graph of the

Consumer Price Index for the same period, to show that from 2002-2014, the Consumer Price Index rose 27.8% while average book price rose 53.7%.

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2. Not only that, we're paying more for books that are circulating less and that (when digital) are increasingly difficult and expensive to use. This table shows average "non-reserve borrowing" for Amherst college faculty/staff, students, and a Five Colleges user.

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3. Finally, and this is where things start to get interesting for Lever, is, the founding group suspected that this situation was especially dire for liberal arts colleges. There are a few distinctions:
  - a. One is simply financial--the idea that a smaller school = smaller library budget,
  - b. One is connected to mandate: unlike say, Michigan, these libraries are not expected to simply acquire everything published by scholarly presses, but to carefully select to meet the needs of the campus.
  - c. And finally, that in general the monographs being published by university presses today--while they serve the needs of faculty to seek promotion and tenure just fine--are not of use in an environment focused on learning and teaching. Other than faculty, whose research is of course published by university presses, the task force had a sense that liberal arts colleges were paying too much for books they couldn't use--and had no mechanism to shift the conversation, both toward better terms for books, \*and\* toward creating books that would be useful and usable on their campuses.

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I should note that while we're focused today on liberal arts college libraries and on Lever, the current monograph publishing environment is just not working well for anyone. Charles Watkinson, the director of the University of Michigan Press, is very open about the fact that university presses lose thousands of dollars on every book they publish. At the same time, librarians feel squeezed, and faculty research does not reach the broad audience that it could.

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Is there a better business model for academic monographs? Well, yes, probably: many programs and possibilities have appeared over the last, say, 3 years. Each of these offers a slightly different approach to funding and sustaining the creation and production of monographs that are freely available to everyone. Lever Press is one option in this paradigm--by no means a universal or be-all end-all solution.

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Lever Press officially launched just about one year ago, but it goes back farther than that. From 2013-2014, the library directors on the task force conducted a series of surveys and workshops with librarians and faculty on their campuses to better understand opportunities and needs. In fall 2014, they issued an RFP for partners in a publishing enterprise for a press that would be

entirely funded by liberal arts college libraries, to produce OA monographs that would actually get used, and that would give liberal arts colleges a strong voice in what gets published.

Amherst College Press and Michigan Publishing jointly responded to this call, with a plan for Amherst to take on editorial leadership--acquisitions--while Michigan Publishing would support the technical, production, and business infrastructure. We spent 2015 developing a business plan, policies, and began inviting pledges from colleges. In December 2015 we determined that we had gotten enough pledges to really make ago of it, and the project launched.

In 2016, we have convened our Oversight Committee, established an editorial board, and just published our editorial program. On the horizon are finalization of user-friendly author contract that addresses the different legal requirements of digital scholarship, and ongoing development of Michigan's new publishing platform, Fulcrum, about which more later.

To date, we have secured just under \$1.5 million dollars in commitments, which will support five years of Lever Press work, including the costs of producing a total of 60 titles by the end of calendar year 2020. These commitments come from more than 45 different libraries, of which Denison is one.

OK, so: what makes Lever Press unique? In this growing ecosystem of options, why bother?

Lever Press is uniquely defined by three commitments:

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Aligned with the mission and ethos of liberal arts colleges, platinum OA--meaning the author never pays--and digitally native: while these books will also be published in print, they are created for a digital life.

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What on earth do we mean by aligned with the mission and ethos of liberal arts colleges? Well, on a very practical level, Lever is the only press both created and entirely governed by representatives of liberal arts colleges. The Oversight committee, which is the body responsible for strategic direction, financial accountability, that kind of thing, consists of library directors nominated and elected from among the pledging institutions.

The editorial board consists of faculty members nominated from pledging institutions and selected by the Oversight Committee and Lever Press staff.

Pledging institutions have the opportunity to nominate folks from their campuses both for the Oversight Committee and for the editorial board.

This means that decisions about what Lever should do, how it should steward its resources, what kind of books we should publish, which projects we should accept, etc.--will all be driven

by people who deeply understand the liberal arts college, and the particular needs and opportunities there.

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How will this commitment to the values of the liberal arts college be reflected in what Lever publishes? This is exactly the challenge our editorial board has just been wrestling with.

When we first convened with the we proposed that a press reflecting the particular perspective of the liberal arts college would do three things:

- It would be committed to interdisciplinarity
- It would engage with major social issues
- And it would blur the lines between research and teaching, or support and draw attention to writing that does so.

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Last month we published the Lever Press Editorial program, which lays out in more detail how we expect to implement these guiding principles. To start, we are particularly interested in works that align somehow with the following topical areas (this is the Editorial Program that BethAnn has made copies of)

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Lever Press is also responding to the needs of liberal arts scholars and campuses with its business model. Many of the major OA opportunities--both in the journals world and the monographs world--require the author to pay a fee, sometimes thousands of dollars to publish their work. This is often impossible in the humanities, where funding is low, and especially on small campuses. While still recognizing that publishing is expensive work--thus the cost of participation--institutions who have pledged their support to Lever Press are basically saying, that, as we align ourselves with an increasingly OA ecosystem, the burden to absorb costs shouldn't and can't fall directly on authors, or their voices will be even more excluded! Through the commitments of this library and many others, we can provide a high-quality OA publishing outlet that doesn't ask authors to bear the cost.

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The final Lever Press commitment is to be a "digitally native" press. By this we mean:

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Lever will publish all of its books in print as well as online (print copies will be available for sale). Our perspective here is that, even if they don't self-identify as such, today all scholars become digital scholars the moment that pick up a camera (or their phone!), or work from digital audio and video sources and yet, most of the time, scholars are still forced to flatten their work: to use a limited number of color images; to drop multimedia or find a way to host it outside of the book, in a custom website that perhaps no one will ever see.

We will do something different with Lever. Works will be published on Fulcrum, a platform currently under development at Michigan (in fact, we're just about to announce our first beta launch). This platform enables presses to treat all their works as robust digital scholarship. The platform is flexible (modular; new formats can be added), durable (DOIs, hydra/fedora repository structure), discoverable (citable, metrics).

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We think of it as a press in the front--branding, presentation--and a library in the back--infrastructure, preservation.

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Example from Northwestern

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So, what actually do we hope to achieve? I want to make clear that Lever Press does not seek to simply reinvent or replace existing university presses. This, we really feel would be a fool's errand. If the University of Minnesota Press is \*the\* best place to publish books in a given area, that is exactly what the faculty member ought to do.

We're suggesting instead--and hopefully the Editorial Program makes this clear--that there is something else going on: work, research, leadership in pedagogy and experiential learning, new approaches to scholarship that are simply being left out of the conversation entirely right now. We aim to create a space for them.

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OK, so, that's essentially the overview of Lever--I'd like to turn now and have some conversation. When you to reflect on your own work, and the work of this library. What's going on here? What are you most excited about and most worried about?

Based on my overview--which was really quick--what questions do you have, or what topics would you like to discuss further?

**Possible Sticking points:**

- Don't assume that they're on board with libraries doing publishing!, Or with OA!
  - More than 40% of university presses now report to libraries
  - Journal articles vs. monographs