

Emerging Models in Humanities Publishing: Institutional Implications
Remarks on the Subject of Publisher Eligibility
Delivered by Meredith Kahn
ARL Fall Forum
October 8, 2015

Having discussed the scholarly object to be funded and the faculty authors who might receive subvention funds, let's consider the question of which publishers might be eligible to benefit from such support. At the close of our joint investigation¹ at Michigan and Indiana, we made the following recommendation regarding publisher eligibility:

*We recommend that the non-profit publishers who are full members of the Association of American University Presses qualify to receive subvention support through this program. Individual campuses may want to discuss the eligibility of other publishers. Any qualified publisher should be **demonstrably committed to a rigorous peer review process and be required to supply comprehensive expenditure information** for the monographs supported by this program.*

But the path we took to arrive there is worth exploring, as it allows us to consider a number of questions regarding the role of university presses, administration and assessment of a subvention program, and the implicit and explicit goals (and consequences) of a flipped model for funding humanities publishing.

Across all three campuses represented here today and the AAU/ARL prospectus we hear a common refrain: in order for a system of subvention for scholarly objects to be successful and widely adopted by individual faculty authors, their home institutions, and the university press community, works supported by subvention must not be deemed “vanity publishing,” and must retain the same signaling and credentialing function humanities monographs now fulfill. The work of acquiring editors in finding and developing manuscripts and facilitating a rigorous peer review process are perhaps the most important contributions publishers can make to assuage concerns about vanity publishing.

The requirement that eligible publishers demonstrate rigorous peer review might first seem so obvious as to be assumed. But given the frequency with which questions regarding peer review surfaced in our conversations with faculty participants, it quickly became clear that such assumptions would need to be explicitly stated in order to assuage concerns and properly socialize/educate faculty stakeholders.

The emphasis on peer review as a basic requirement of eligibility appears in the Emory team's recommendations as well, and again because it is central to work that university presses do. If I may quote briefly from their report: “...one of the key values that the university press brings to the dissemination of scholarship is a shared assumption that the

¹ Hilton, James and Carolyn Walters, et al. “A Study of Direct Author Subvention for Publishing Humanities Books at Two Universities: A Report to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation by Indiana University and University of Michigan.” October 6, 2015. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/113671>

press is conducting a thorough and fair review of that scholarship by qualified, disinterested scholars.” [footnote 6 on page 12 from the Emory report]

But while we at Michigan and Indiana focused on university presses as the recipients of subvention funds, our colleagues at Emory asked the very astute question who else beyond presses might be productive partners in a new model for humanities publishing. In their study of the future of humanistic scholarship and the digital transition, they addressed whether digital scholarship centers might be considered eligible recipients of subvention funds, finding:

*Digital scholarship centers are eligible to receive subvention funds provided that the center could **demonstrate a rigorous peer review process**, and that scholars could articulate the value of their works as similar in scope and impact to monographs. We would also expect the digital scholarship center to **answer questions about the marketing and distribution of the scholarly work.***

In addition to demonstrating a commitment to robust peer review, the Michigan and Indiana teams assert that eligible publishers must be able to supply a detailed accounting of the costs required to produce and distribute an openly accessible version of the scholarly object, what might commonly be termed the first copy or perhaps more accurately the “zero-th” copy cost. Many universities (including Indiana and Michigan) have existing subvention programs which already require documentation of budgets and expenditures. Even though the accounting of costs under this new system will likely be more detailed, this should not present an unexpected burden for university presses. As our work and the investigation conducted by ITHAKA S+R have demonstrated, academic institutions, university presses, faculty authors, and other stakeholders need to know more about the costs of humanities publishing. This information will be critical for the near-term administration of a subvention program, as well as the longer-term assessment of such efforts. As one of our faculty participants at Michigan noted, “We are dealing with the map as it is now, but this will change the map.” Accurate financial data will become even more important over time as we move into the brave new future of humanities publishing we seek to create, which will presumably bring with it changes in the way university presses are supported as the free rider problem is gradually remedied. (We hope!)

So in looking at recommendations for publisher eligibility across the work of teams at Michigan, Indiana, Emory, and AAU/ARL, we do not see guidance that is in conflict or mutually exclusive. In fact, taken together we see a holistic understanding of various bodies that might receive and benefit from subvention funds, including university presses, digital scholarship centers, library/press partnerships, and scholarly societies. However, the Indiana and Michigan teams spent a considerable amount of time and effort on the question of university presses and academic publishers, both for profit and nonprofit. This is likely because both of our campuses have university presses (reporting to the university library), and among our research teams there was a strong desire to explore this question in great depth. And as I’ll explain in a moment, there is no equivalent for Cambridge or Oxford university presses in the world of digital scholarship centers.

As we considered the issue of publisher eligibility, we were repeatedly drawn back to the question of which publishers was our system of subventions meant to sustain—nonprofit university presses, commercial academic publishers, or perhaps both? While the goal of the AAU/ARL proposal that preceded our study was to preserve and sustain the nonprofit university press system that currently forms the core of humanistic scholarship, our faculty publish in an incredible range of venues, spanning the divide between nonprofit and for-profit publishers.

The question of what to do about Cambridge and Oxford university presses emerged as a lens through which to consider how a subvention program might work on the ground, and the complications of eligibility determinations. Cambridge and Oxford are both AAUP members, and nominally nonprofit publishers. However, when we think of university presses imperiled by market forces and in need of a new model to sustain themselves, we do not necessarily think of Cambridge and Oxford university presses. One could make the argument that Cambridge and Oxford perhaps do not need the “zero-th” copy costs of a subvention program in order to survive. But given that a significant number of our faculty publish their work with these two presses, one could just as easily make the argument that their participation in a subvention program would help legitimize and normalize its adoption.

In the end, we did not recommend that Cambridge and Oxford be excluded. Rather, both teams agreed that individual campuses will need to make decisions regarding eligibility, and to develop processes to consider exceptions, additions, and modifications to the list of eligible publishers over time. There is no one list of publishers that could accommodate all humanities scholars at all institutions. While we recommend AAUP member presses as a starting point, we fully expect implementation of a subvention program will bring future opportunities to discuss publisher eligibility at length. In this sense, our recommendations dovetail nicely with those of both Emory and AAU/ARL, which leave room for and even encourage experimentation and change.