

# University Presses: Balancing Academic and Market Values

by [Mary M. Case](#), Director, Office of Scholarly Communications

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Recent stories in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *New York Times* [\[1\]](#) relate stories of young scholars confronting the latest reality on the road to tenure. The manuscripts of their 'tenure books' rejected by university presses, not because of quality, but because of their limited sales potential. These young scholars have come face to face with one of the most troubling issues facing higher education today--the values of the market are clashing with the values of the academy. University presses, faced with eroding markets and declining subsidies, conclude that they can no longer afford to publish specialized scholarly research which is central to their mission. This situation does not bode well for the long term health of education and scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences.

## Stresses on the System

Numerous factors contribute to the current state of university presses. Libraries know well the effects on their own budgets of the increasing costs of library materials. The extraordinary price increases for serial publications, especially those in science, technology, and medicine, have resulted in shifts in expenditures from monographs to serials. Between 1986 and 1987, a combination of steep serials price increases and a sharp decrease in the value of the dollar caused a dramatic decline in the number of monographs purchased, a situation from which libraries will not likely recover. In that year, forced to encroach upon the monograph budget to help cover some of the cost of subscriptions, the typical ARL library ended up purchasing 18% fewer monograph titles. Despite a subsequent decade of serial cancellation projects, research libraries are still purchasing 21% fewer books in 1996 than they did in 1986.

Since libraries are the main market for scholarly monographs, the decline in the number of books purchased triggered university presses to reduce print runs. While print-runs of 1,000 to 1,500 copies were standard ten years ago, presses are now confronting sales of 400-500 copies. While sales do vary across disciplines and sub-disciplines, these low numbers hold true for even award-winning books in the less "popular" fields. Meanwhile, university support for presses has declined and subventions for publishers from such agencies as the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have virtually disappeared. These factors, combined with the increase in the cost of paper and other publishing expenses, have brought the system to the point where the unit price to recoup the first copy costs of a printed scholarly monograph makes most books too expensive for the academic market (both libraries and individual faculty) for which they are intended. These patterns are borne out by the ARL statistics which show the increase in per unit cost of monographs rising by 63% between 1986 and 1996. While fewer monographs have been purchased, as noted above, ARL libraries spent 29% more money on monographs in 1996 than they did in 1986.

## University Press Response

In response to these trends, university presses have altered their lists--moving away from the scholarly monograph targeted for libraries and toward materials attractive to broader markets such as bookstores. Presses are now publishing more reference works, local history, and upper-level textbooks. At the same time, as a result of the tenuous status of smaller publishing houses owned by media conglomerates, presses are beginning to move into this new market, which offers potential sales of 5,000 to 10,000 copies per title. Presses had also hoped that the eagerness of the chain bookstores to stock their titles would result in increased sales. But the initial promise has quickly evaporated with deep discounts and

large numbers of returns.

With such strong market forces working against the scholarly monograph, discussion has begun to focus on the value of the form itself and on the academic culture that sustains it. Has the academy abrogated its responsibility for evaluating a young scholar to the fickleness of the market, if, as reported, university presses are openly acknowledging that sales potential is a primary factor in publishing decisions? While market forces play an important role in limiting the number of new titles published, the limiting of publications in currently low selling fields may be damaging to the long term health of some disciplines. If scholars in low sales fields cannot get published and tenured, there may come a time when there are no faculty to teach in these fields. James Shapiro, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia, in discussing this issue notes that "It can hardly be a good thing ... when the knowledge that we value is determined by market forces rather than by intellectual exchange."[\[2\]](#) Shapiro and many others believe it is time for the university community to reassert its values and seriously address solutions to this problem.

### **Strategies for the Future**

Over the past several years, publishers and scholars have offered a number of possible strategies for dealing with this threat to the specialized scholarly monograph. Included among them are the retooling of promotion and tenure requirements, the retooling of the publishing process, and the retooling of the overall funding base for scholarly publishing. In addition, the continuing trend toward shorter journal length articles, as well as the new technology that provides new modes of research and dissemination, may contribute to a decline in the monograph as the format of choice for scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.

Shapiro proposes that the tenure requirement to have a book published or a contract in hand be changed. He believes that for a young scholar to turn his or her dissertation into a book that has broad enough appeal to be accepted by a university press, takes more "intellectual guidance and time" than is available in the tenure cycle. He suggests that a department consider the unpublished manuscript for tenure, evaluating it for "intellectual promise" and then guide the young scholar toward future publication. On the other hand, others have suggested that better mentoring of graduate students and young scholars is needed to lead them to broader more popular topics. These varying points of view are closely tied to broader discussions in the university community where the market realities of decreasing numbers of tenured positions is leading to a reconsideration of the numbers of Ph.D. students admitted and to the kind of training that they should receive--for example, basic or applied research skills. Where do the academic and market values strike a balance?

In terms of the publishing process, some relief may come from new technologies that are beginning to be developed that will make short press runs far more economical. These systems are being designed to include the ability for print-on-demand at dispersed locations. It will, however, be several more years before such systems are ready for widespread use.

Other suggestions for confronting the problem with the endangered monograph include a change in the overall funding of scholarly publishing. Sandy Thatcher, Director of the Pennsylvania State University Press, suggests that the costs of the publishing system should be spread out among all the universities that rely on it. Thatcher believes that "... universities that do not have presses of their own, but whose faculty members now benefit from presses on other campuses" should contribute "their fair share." Furthermore, all universities should consider "a joint scheme to cover all the up-front costs of publishing in fields with low sales. University presses could then opt to deliver monographs electronically over the Internet, without worrying about recovering costs through sales of copyrighted material."[\[3\]](#)

In 1992, Kenneth Arnold, then Director of the Rutgers University Press, proclaimed that "the scholarly

monograph is dead." [4] The scholarly monograph, as we know it, is "an unnecessary mental construct." Arnold believes that the monograph "evolved to meet the requirements of book publishers, not the needs of scholars," [5] and encouraged the entire scholarly community to rethink what was needed in a new electronically-based system of scholarly communication rather than attempt to replicate the current print system on the network. Arnold characterized the monograph as "a symbol for the serious situation we face." Whether one believes, as he does, that "we do not need to resuscitate the monograph," it is likely we would agree that "we do need to re-imagine scholarly communication systems." [6]

Re-imagining the monograph will be the topic of the upcoming conference, [The Specialized Scholarly Monograph in Crisis or How Can I Get Tenure If You Won't Publish My Book?](#) Co-sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies, the Association of American University Presses, and the Association of Research Libraries, the conference will bring together faculty, administrators, publishers, and librarians to examine the current state of scholarly communication as it particularly concerns the monograph and to explore the potential of new technologies to provide both new means of dissemination and new models for conducting research and communicating the results. The conference is being held on September 11 and 12, 1997, at the Marriott at Metro Center Hotel in Washington, DC. Registrations will be accepted through September 5.

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[1] James Shapiro, "Saving 'Tenure Books' From a Painful Demise," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 1, 1996, p. B6; and Peter Applebome, "Profit Squeeze for Publishers Makes Tenure More Elusive" *New York Times*, November 18, 1996, p. A1, B11.

[2] Shapiro.

[3] Sanford G. Thatcher, "The Crisis in Scholarly Communication," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 3, 1995, p. B1.

[4] Kenneth Arnold, "The Scholarly Monograph is Dead, Long Live the Scholarly Monograph" in [Scholarly Publishing on the Electronic Networks, The New Generation: Visions and Opportunities in Not-for-Profit Publishing](#), ed. Ann Okerson, Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, Office of Scientific and Academic Publishing, March 1993, pp. 73-79.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

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