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University Research Publishing or Distribution Strategies?

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I will focus my remarks on a narrow slice of *University Publishing in a Digital Age*, specifically on the paper's recommendation that universities develop research publishing strategies.

What will, or should, the future scholarly communications system look like? First, every university that produces research should have a publishing strategy, but that does not mean that it should have a "press."

—Laura Brown, Rebecca Griffiths, and Matthew Rascoff, *University Publishing in a Digital Age* (New York: Ithaka, 2007): 4,
<http://www.ithaka.org/strategic-services/university-publishing/>.

When I read the paper I was not familiar with any NASULGC university's formal research publishing strategy, so I inquired of 215 NASULGC provosts, primarily provosts of the nation's large, public, research universities, providing context and repeating the normative statement of Brown, et al.: "...every university that produces research should have a publishing strategy...."

My query to the provosts was:

Does your university have a formal, written research publishing strategy? If so, would you please email that document to me? If your university has a well understood but unwritten research publishing strategy, would you send me an email briefly outlining its elements? If your university has neither, would you simply reply with the words "No strategy"

The overwhelming majority of provosts who responded replied, "No strategy."

Of those responding affirmatively, all but a few submitted only faculty evaluation policies detailing the role of published research in evaluation.

Among the few exceptions are a couple of notable ones: one University of California provost, in addition to sending a faculty evaluation policy, appropriately suggested that their system's strategy may come to include the policy under consideration that requires submission of published work to an open access repository unless the faculty member specifically opts out.

Only MIT's provost responded with a reasonably formal strategy. "Collectively these elements sufficiently represent, in our minds, the essence of a research publishing strategy." The elements MIT submitted included (1) the university mission: "The Institute is committed to generating, *disseminating*, and preserving knowledge..."; (2) a

policy declaring that research funders may not restrict research publication unless an exception is granted; (3) a description of DSpace, a facility with the stated intention among other things of “disseminating” MIT research; and (4) a description of the MIT press.

Perhaps MIT’s submission stands out because MIT is unique in having developed a research publishing strategy. While I suspect this is partially true, I expect that the real reason MIT stood out in my small survey is because MIT’s provost was smart enough to refer my question to Ann Wolpert, MIT’s distinguished Director of Libraries, for an answer. But the word “disseminating,” a word that occurs twice in MIT’s submission, is a key word to which I will return.

Interestingly, while provosts of many universities with university presses answered my query, MIT’s provost mention of the university press as part of their strategy was also nearly unique.

What inferences do I draw from this survey?

First, the term “research publishing strategy” is not familiar to most provosts. (This is not entirely an inference as many of the respondents asked me to define it.)

Second, provosts don’t see institutional repositories as integral to their universities’ “research publishing strategies.” A significant number of the respondents have institutional repositories but only two university provosts mentioned them in their replies to me.

Third, university presses don’t spring to mind when considering such strategy. Instructive is the Ithaka paper’s finding that most university press publication lists had far less than 10 percent of content from their own university’s faculty. It appears to me that provosts do not regard presses as relating to their university’s publication strategy at all; rather, presses are regarded as relating to the publication strategy of the academy at large.

Fourth, to provosts the mysterious term “research publishing strategy” most frequently brings to mind only faculty evaluation criteria. This is the only realm in which provosts normally discuss research publication strategy. Finding appropriate outlets for research publication is viewed in these policies as the *duty* of individual faculty members and universities appear content for faculty careers to rise and fall on the basis of success in finding such outlets.

Now, the authors of *University Publishing in a Digital Age* did not intend that the term “research publishing strategy” encompass only faculty evaluation criteria. Thus their prescriptive “should” statement either describes a publication future so distant that myopic provosts of this day cannot resolve the vision or else the “should” statement describes a hoped-for world rather than the one in which universities live. I think it is the latter.

Why?

It appears that universities want to take little direct responsibility for ensuring that the research done by their faculties is “published.” Perhaps now is the time to define what I, as a long-time faculty member and former provost, mean by “published”; I mean research findings that have been vetted at least by competent editors, if not also by referees, and deemed through the vetting process to be sound and worthy of publication to the wider community. I believe this to approximate the definition used by the provosts responding to my survey. While there are more expansive definitions of “publication,” the relevant one for this conversation is the one used by this group of administrators.

It is not appropriate for university provosts or faculty outside the field to evaluate whether their colleagues’ research findings are publishable. On the other hand, I submit that they do have reasons to ensure that the faculty research that has been vetted and published is distributed broadly.

The call made for universities to have research publication strategies might be better received if it were instead a call for universities to develop and articulate research *distribution* strategies.

Let me tease out both the negative and positive reasons for the greater acceptability of the word *distribution*.

First the negative. The Brown paper makes the argument that libraries are well equipped to distribute material electronically but poorly equipped to decide what should be published. This observation is even truer of university central administrations than of libraries.

Libraries lack the disciplinary expertise to determine whether new work makes sufficient contributions to merit publishing. University central administrations clearly share this deficiency but, in addition, have a conflict of interest that makes them even less suited to determine what should be published. Central administrators are both the employers and evaluators of faculty. These dual roles make any picking and choosing among scholarly work particularly treacherous as choice of publishing one work and not another carries with it evaluation that affects the rewards they as employers allocate.

Universities have learned through hard experience to leave judgments about research publishability to those disciplinary experts who are at arm’s length from the researcher. Let me remind you of Utah’s cold fusion debacle. While Utah’s “publication” took the form of unveiling that research in an unvetted form at a press conference, it clearly was placing its evaluative stamp on this as-yet-untested work. I am sure that Utah had a much more satisfying event last Tuesday [October 9, 2007] when the Nobel Prize Committee announced the results of its vetting.

To replace “publication” with “distribution” eliminates for administrators both the disciplinary expertise and conflict of interest problems. Universities are free to proclaim that all faculty research should be distributed without becoming involved in the very fraught process of determining *whose* research is worthy of publication. With this

change, I heartily agree that universities *should* have research distribution strategies. Let me briefly describe what I think might be included therein.

First, a policy statement is required to set forth the rationale for the university's role in research distribution. Most frequently this statement would include a public acknowledgement of the importance of wide distribution of university faculty research. Such an acknowledgement would recognize that a scholarly work's value is multiplied as it becomes more widely available; that value is enhanced not only for students but for other researchers in the field as it becomes possible to learn from and build upon extant research rather than duplicate it. Most would recognize that value is increased even more as research passes through the sifting and winnowing of the refereeing process before distribution where that is possible.

I would hope that such policies acknowledge that both university and faculty self-interest are furthered by broad research distribution. Faculty self-interest is readily manifest in increased citation counts. University self-interest is advanced by the same mechanism and is manifest in improved national research council rankings and other markers of university prominence.

For public universities, the benefit of wide and open distribution may be most evident in additional political (and perhaps financial) support as ready access to faculty research causes citizens and legislators to realize that "their" university faculties are working on many of the very real problems that confront them.

The policy might also acknowledge the parsimony of having a unified research distribution policy as many grantors require that research results, including data generated by research, be made available for public access. Assigning responsibility to a single entity for such distribution would reduce the expensive duplication of effort that currently characterizes the response to such mandates.

Finally, and at the risk of sounding like a one-trick pony, I believe universities should acknowledge in their policy statement the public-goods nature of faculty work and proclaim that all work published by their faculties ultimately should be available to the public, for free. I have said much on this point on other occasions and will not make this case again here.

University research distribution policy statements would then be followed by the strategies that would bring to life their policy statements, i.e., the specifics about what research should be distributed, how, and to whom.

Probably universal among the distribution specifics would be the currently ubiquitous faculty evaluation policies with their specifications that faculty seek appropriate refereed publication outlets for their work. Thus scholarly journals would become incorporated in each university's strategy.

Most libraries have major research distribution ability; increasingly, it is formalized in an institutional repository. Some repositories are passive, merely storing and distributing material published by others. But many libraries include carefully refereed university-published journals in repositories and many universities now assign these

and dissertations to these facilities. Because of NIH and NSF policies on data retention, I would imagine that retention and distribution responsibilities for institutional repositories will soon include at least the smaller data sets. Similarly, taskforce reports, final grant reports, and other documents of value to scholarly colleagues, students, and citizens could be assigned here to ensure their availability and preservation.

Strategies would include university presses where they exist but I do not warm to the notion of building such strategies around university presses. Presses are relatively few in number and cannot therefore be a core element for all universities. In addition, the orientation of the presses, at least as judged by the positions taken by their association, the American Association of University Presses, is extremely hostile to the notions of open access that librarians embrace. Making the presses key to university research distribution strategy would involve convincing them to alter this stance. Further, presses will lose their scholarly cachet if they are perceived as house organs for their own faculties' research. I rather hope that this portion of university strategy would acknowledge the true purpose and mission of the press.

While I acknowledge that presses must remain independent arbiters in order to add value to the works they publish, let me emphasize that they nevertheless do belong to their home universities. It would seem appropriate for those universities to specify in their strategies that press books, once they lose the majority of their market value (perhaps after five years), would be made available electronically, for free, to benefit scholars everywhere. You, of course, recognize this as an undisguised plea for public access. Such a change could not be made retroactively but future author's agreements could reflect such codicils. Electronic distribution of such works could be made available through press facilities or through university institutional repositories.

A final word on presses. To make existing presses integral to their home institutions' strategies would be to replace them with something that more serves narrow institutional aims than the broad aims of scholarship. I believe it a mistake to try to "save" presses if the method of so doing destroys their function.

I am concerned about scholarly works of manuscript length that are worthy of publishing but find no "market." These orphan works often are greeted by university presses with an anguished rejection notice from the editor: "Professor Dumbarton, your manuscript is exquisite. I found it to be of highest quality and a significant advance of scholarly knowledge. Unfortunately, the market for such works is not sufficient to cover our publication costs." Faculties in fields like art history are accustomed to such letters. Universities do have the obligation to help such work get distributed if traditional mechanisms fail.

Unfortunately, distribution of such work without scholarly review diminishes its value to the faculty member and to the discipline. I renew a suggestion that I made at the CIC symposium on the scholarly monograph a few years ago. It would be most appropriate for scholarly societies to form peer review bodies to examine such work of minor pecuniary value and to certify their scholarly worth in a manner that might, in time, develop the cachet of the best presses. The works could be entered into a series distributed by institutional repositories but carry the imprimatur of the scholarly society that vetted them.

While I agree that, with the one word change, university research distribution strategies are desirable, I do not see a need for an inter-university infrastructure to help implement them. Institutional repositories using state-of-the-art systems are fully visible over the net and capable of presenting works in appealing ways to users. The added expense of supporting yet another new infrastructure simply does not appear to have adequate offsetting benefits.

The Ithaka report's argument that increased scale is necessary to mount this effort is based largely on the fact that commercial firms are rapidly increasing in size, largely through mergers and acquisitions. Their motivation for growing is less motivated by need to attain scale than by their desire to attain market power. Given that attaining market power is not a motivator for university expansion in research distribution capability, attaining scale should not be an important objective.

What probably is needed are cooperative agreements between universities that have institutional repositories and those that do not, which will permit the latter to place selected materials in existing repositories. Just as we do not appear to need a national infrastructure to support digital materials, we also do not need every university underwriting the cost of building, staffing, refreshing, and updating institutional repositories. University strategy ought to address whether building capacity or acquiring excess archival and distribution capacity from others is in the university's best interest.

My listing of strategic distribution elements clearly is not exhaustive. Creative universities would surely find additional novel and effective distribution strategies.

In conclusion, while each university's research distribution strategy would differ by reflecting unique missions, I can see real benefits to universities and the public of developing and implementing such strategies. This represents a shift from a passive role in research distribution to an active one. The effort to develop policy and strategies will undoubtedly cause greater appreciation of the value of university research within the university community and enhanced distribution will increase research value externally. *University Publishing in a Digital Age* does universities a great service by suggesting that universities create such strategies. I urge my provostial colleagues to set in motion on their campuses the appropriate process to have this important matter thoroughly considered.