

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

ADVICE

Worried About the Future of the Monograph? So Are Publishers



Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By *Leonard Cassuto* | APRIL 02, 2019

"Publish or perish" used to apply purely to faculty members, but in recent years it also has turned into a question facing academic presses — one that has particular relevance for graduate students and first-book authors.

Jennifer Crewe has been thinking about the issue a lot. With the exception of a four-year sojourn in the adjacent world of trade publishing, she has worked for more than 30 years at Columbia University Press, where she is now associate provost and director. After writing and commenting for years as the

unofficial spokeswoman of her industry, Crewe last June became an official one: president of the Association of University Presses (AUP).

I caught up with her recently for an email conversation about the current state of scholarly publishing, and particularly what it bodes for early-career scholars. (What follows is an edited account of our exchange.)

From your perspective as the AUP's new president, what are the most important issues facing scholarly publishers?

Crewe: Our biggest challenge remains the low sales of scholarly monographs, such as revised dissertations or scholarly books with a narrow focus in a small field. Libraries share copies, and individuals don't purchase the new books in their fields as they did 20 years ago.

Get Fast Advice for Your Academic Life

Sign up to get our Quick Tip newsletter: Twice a week, we'll send you fast advice to help you thrive. It's free to receive, and you'll get a mix of small suggestions designed to help you succeed in your job and your academic life.

Sign Up Now

We want to publish these books. They are the building blocks of our own reputation and they are often groundbreaking, field-changing works. We're looking for publishing grants to support them, and we try each season to publish enough profitable books to cover the losses on monographs.

But today's model isn't sustainable. There are a number of experiments under way to figure out how to publish specialized monographs in a freely available open-access format.

But open access doesn't mean "free," except to the end user. Someone still has to pay the upfront costs of curation, peer review, editing, design, discoverability, publicity — plus promotion, to make sure people notice the book when its published. Those costs are actually much higher than the paper, printing, and binding costs that you save when you publish in digital format only.

Publishers need grants up front to cover those costs, and right now there is no established system for that. I should also point out that tenure committees, reviewers, and authors still prefer print books for the most part, so I don't see the system changing right away.

Your last point brings a related question to mind: What can scholarly presses do to encourage departments to rethink their focus on the monograph as the gold standard of tenure? The Modern Language Association published a task-force report in 2007 advocating for more varied and capacious tenure standards. What kind of movement have you seen on this issue?

Crewe: Some fields have moved to articles rather than books. There are some social-science departments that require articles and others that require books, for example. And many departments do accept work in the digital humanities. But in fields such as literature or philosophy, if you are doing work that necessitates a long-form argument, you still need to write a book.

What might that mean for graduate students and other first-time book authors?

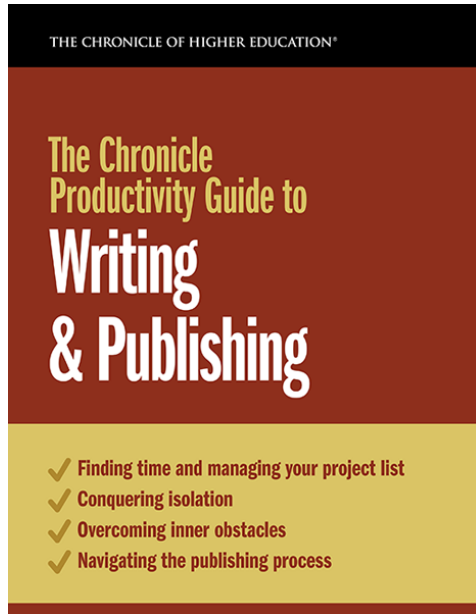
Crewe: Of course it's very important to pay attention to what your institution requires of you with regard to publications and to adhere to those requirements. If a book is what is required I would also try to think about audiences for that book beyond the tenure committee. What can you do to broaden your coverage so that the book is of interest to the biggest audience possible?

How do the economic pressures facing scholarly presses affect the aspirations of graduate students and other first-time authors?

Crewe: Even though they lose money, we continue to publish narrowly focused monographs, which are often authors' first books. We look for subsidies where we can find them, but even if we can't find funding, we want to publish a book that is clearly field-defining, has stellar peer reviews, or that we know will excite scholars in the field. That is our

mission.

The Chronicle Productivity Guide to Writing & Publishing



The Chronicle Productivity Guide to Writing & Publishing

\$49.00

Print



ADD TO CART

The most important thing for first-time scholarly authors to look for in a publisher is fit. How well does your book fit the current list of a particular publisher? That's half the battle.

Do you have any advice for Ph.D.s who don't succeed in getting their first monograph published?

Crewe: I don't hear much about people who cannot get their scholarly books published. It may be that you won't get your first choice of publisher, but there usually is a publisher out there for your book. There are very good commercial scholarly publishers, such as Bloomsbury, or Routledge, who have excellent programs. These days, I think that the opposite is more often true — I've heard of scholars who had their first book published by a reputable press but can't find a tenure-track job.

You suggest that the university-press market may be broken, with presses now trying to publish profitable commercial books with general-audience appeal to cover the cost of their scholarly monographs. Is the line between scholarly and commercial publishing blurring?

Crewe: The traditional cost-recovery model is not working for most monographs anymore, and yes, we publish other books that have larger audiences in order to cover losses incurred by monographs. But I don't think that means the line between scholarly and commercial publishing is blurring.

Most of the "trade" books (that is, those that will be stocked by Barnes & Noble and the independent stores) we publish are by scholars, and they contribute to scholarship. We designate them as "trade books" if they are written so that the educated general reader can understand them, if they are on a topic that would appeal to people who are not necessarily in the academy, and if the author has some name recognition outside his or her field.

Some of these books would be published by commercial publishers, but many wouldn't be considered by a commercial house because the sales potential is too small for them to bother with.

Many university presses also publish regional books — on general topics of interest to people living in their state. These are not all scholarly titles, but on the other hand, in many states — Nebraska, for instance — the press is just about the only publisher in that state, so the regional list is an important service no other publisher would take on.

Should the division between these different categories of books be sharper?

Crewe: Scholarly and trade books are only separate in terms of their audience size and sales prospects. For a university press, a scholarly book is as important to the list as a trade book is — it's a contribution to the field and a potential award-winner, building the press's reputation in that field. A strong trade book can be both of those things as well.

The only difference is that we expect the trade book to break even or earn a surplus. Sometimes that happens, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes we hope a book will be purchased in larger numbers by a wide audience, but it sells like a monograph. Sometimes a monograph pleasantly surprises us.

What advice do you have for graduate students and other aspiring authors?

Crewe: A few things come to mind:

- Try to choose a dissertation topic that can be broadened after the thesis is approved. Your dissertation is written for four or five people. Your book should try to reach many more.
- If possible, avoid specialized jargon and write so that people who are not in your immediate field can read and understand you.
- Can you describe your book in one sentence? Does that sentence include what is truly new and exciting about it? Your publicist will need to describe it in one sentence to book-review media, and your publisher's sales representatives will need to describe it in one sentence to booksellers. Your editor can help you craft that "elevator pitch," but it's helpful if you've thought about it ahead of time.

The Graduate Adviser

In this monthly column, Leonard Cassuto explores the ins and outs of doctoral training, with advice for both graduate students and their faculty mentors.

- How to Increase Graduate-School Diversity the Right Way
- Finally, a Model for Disciplines to Track Ph.D. Career Outcomes
- Can You Train Your Ph.D.s for Diverse Careers When You Don't Have One?



University press editors will always want to publish a book they think is a field-changing work, even if its focus is narrow. Many university presses offer short "how to publish" programs on their campuses. They're certainly worth attending.

What responsibility would you like to see authors take in getting out behind their books (i.e., marketing them)?

Crewe: The publisher and the author are partners in the promotion process. But you should do everything you can to get the word out about your book:

- Every time you give a talk, hand out fliers announcing your book — your publisher will be happy to supply you with heaps of them.
- Mention your book whenever and wherever you can. Even something as simple as a link to your publisher's web page for your book in your email signature file will help.

- If your book is on a topic of current interest, arrange to write an op-ed piece on that topic and place it in a newspaper.
- If you subscribe to any email discussion lists, post a notice when your book is available.
- Post about your book on Twitter, Facebook and any other social-media sites you use. And post a lot more than once.
- Notify the PR department at your university that your book is forthcoming.
- And fill out your publisher's author-marketing questionnaire as carefully as possible, listing all the journals, blogs, and other outlets that may be interested in reviewing your book.

Finishing your book is only the beginning of its life!

You've been in scholarly publishing for over three decades. What are the most important changes that you've seen over that time?

Crewe: Certainly the biggest change during the past 20 years has been the digital revolution. The advent of ebooks, reading devices, and digital collections of books purchased by libraries has had a profound impact on the book industry.

A little more than 11 years ago, when the first Kindle was released, many people thought that print books would disappear and that people would want to read everything digitally. But ebooks haven't pushed the other formats off the board. After skyrocketing for a few years, sales of ebooks have plateaued, and now the ebook is just another format, like hardcover and paperback.

In fact, plenty of recent evidence (such as [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) shows that students prefer print.

Most readers do, too — except in the case of genre fiction and some other categories. For scholarly work, electronic books have leveled out to about 15 percent of sales. In some fields in the humanities, e-book sales are far less — 5 to 8 percent.

What changes do you foresee in the world of scholarly publishing in the next 10 years?

Crewe: Publishing is a business in constant flux — it's impossible to project out even five years, in my view. Our strategic plans span three.

Having said that, I'd say we can expect to see continued push for open-access monograph publishing by libraries and other groups who want to see the fruits of publicly funded scholarly research available to the public for free. Library purchasing of scholarly monographs has been declining for the past 30 years, and that decline will likely continue. Some university presses are experimenting with open-access publishing now. Time will tell whether these experiments are scalable.

In the end, I think there will always be a market for scholarly books on topics with broad appeal that are accessible to general readers. The size and power of Amazon is also a big issue for us. I don't see any evidence that Amazon will stop growing, but there is evidence that independent bookstores are experiencing a bit of a resurgence. I hope that continues.

Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, writes regularly about graduate education in this space. His latest book is The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It, published by Harvard University Press. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories at lcassuto@erols.com. His Twitter handle is @LCassuto.

This article is part of:
The Graduate Adviser

© 2019 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037