

Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 5

January 2013

Scholarly Publishing and State Comprehensive Universities: An Interview with Charles T. Myers

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Recommended Citation

Leuschner, Eric (2013) "Scholarly Publishing and State Comprehensive Universities: An Interview with Charles T. Myers," *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*. Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: 10.58809/LBEP1795

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol5/iss1/5>

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Scholarly Publishing and State Comprehensive Universities

An Interview with Charles T. Myers

Charles T. Myers is the Director of the University of Kansas Press. Before arriving in September 2013, he was an editor at Princeton University Press for more than thirteen years, and before that at the University of Michigan Press. He holds a PhD in political science and a law degree, both from the University of Michigan. This interview was conducted by Eric Leuschner, editor of *Teacher-Scholar*, via e-mail following a visit and talk given by Myers at Fort Hays State University in November 2013. My sincere thanks to Dr. Myers for taking the time to thoughtfully respond to my questions.

Eric Leuschner (*Teacher-Scholar*): *Dating back at least to the 1990s, there have been repeated jeremiads about a “crisis in scholarly publishing,” including many articles and editorials in The Chronicle of Higher Education and books like Lindsay Waters’ [executive editor at Harvard University Press] Enemies of Promise: Publishing, Perishing, and the Eclipse of Scholarship (2004). In the last decade, several university presses did indeed go out of business. Part of this was intertwined with the perennial death knell of the book, part of it was changing economies of library acquisitions, and another part was an apparent shift in higher education and a view of faculty, a shift that continues today. Do you agree that there was a “crisis in scholarly publishing”? Do you see it continuing today? In other words, what is the state of scholarly publishing today?*

Charles T. Myers: The crisis is chronic and is grounded in several different issues. First, changes in technology mean that people are communicating in different ways and presses must change to accommodate new forms of publication and changes in the way we promote and sell books. Second, the increasing specialization of scholarship means that much scholarly work is of interest to a smaller audience, and the books the scholars produce sell in small numbers. Third, library sales, which implicitly subsidized the publication of scholarly books, have been declining for many years. The increasing price of scientific journals, the need to purchase new technologies, and declining government support for higher education have put librarians in a bind. Fourth, we are seeing increasing demands for open access or free access to scholarship beyond that available through lending libraries. All these combine to create a financial crisis for presses and raise the question of who is going to pay for the dissemination of scholarship. The new technologies do not translate into cost-free dissemination of scholarship.

EL: *One case in particular is the University of Missouri Press. Last year (spring 2012), the university planned to cut its \$400,000 subsidy, effectively closing the press. The backlash to that decision, however, was such that it was reversed by the fall. And they just hired David Rosenbaum as director in September 2013. Rosenbaum came from the American Heart Association, where he managed their publishing branches; before that, he was acquisitions editor at Elsevier, Cengage, and production manager at Iowa State Press. How do you see this situation as emblematic of the state of scholarly publishing? Is there any connection to KU other than contiguity?*

CTM: One of the challenges of scholarly publishing is to demonstrate a press's value to a university at a time when universities are faced with grave budgetary pressures and the humanities and some social sciences, which form the bedrock of most of our publishing programs, are under attack. Supporting a university press is in part supporting a public good as we publish work by scholars from a variety of schools all over the world. This makes us different from many university service functions, which mostly focus on serving only the university's needs. We must show how supporting this public good is important for the university. The presses support the network of scholarship that is critical to the academic community in our schools and state and critical to the outreach activities of the university system. Without going into the details of the Missouri situation one thing that I think is remarkable is the broad support that the press received from faculty at the university and from authors and scholars all over the country. This demonstrates recognition of the important role played by university presses in the scholarly infrastructure.

EL: *One of the biggest factors that is affecting scholarly publishing seems to be the rise of e-books. Yet, you mention that the digital move in publishing has been slower than you had expected. In what ways has the rise of e-books affected scholarly publishing? What do you see as the realities of e-books now that the initial excitement has waned that are affecting their growth?*

CTM: The costs of the initial printing of an e-book are only marginally less than the initial publication of the print version because we still incur the costs of acquiring, reviewing, copyediting, designing and typesetting, and marketing of the book, including the overhead costs, whether we publish it in electronic or print forms. The only costs we don't incur—printing, paper, binding, and warehousing—are a fraction of the cost of the book. Indeed, we incur additional costs with the e-book in preparing files for the different formats that e-retailers require. The rise of e-books as yet has not significantly changed the fortunes of scholarly publishing. E-books have grown in market share but still generate for most specialized scholarly books less than 5% of net revenue for most presses. The share goes up with more popular books, but we're still at 10-15% of overall sales. Scholars and students have not in large numbers switched to e-books even when they are available and cost less than print. What has changed is that scholars find books online.

EL: Do you see similar pressures with Print on Demand technology? Is that or will that be a factor in how university presses are run?

CTM: Print on demand is simply another way to print books that is being utilized to print books for which the demand is small or to keep older books with modest sales in print. As the unit costs decline (it is still more expensive to use POD than traditional printing in most cases), it offers a more cost effective way to print books with small audiences because you do not need to invest in an inventory that might take years to sell nor must we hold warehouse space for slow selling copies.

EL: In a somewhat related question, are people buying fewer books today? Are university libraries buying fewer books? (You mentioned that at one time a scholarly monograph had a guaranteed sales figure due to library purchases.) In terms of academic publishing, is it a matter of hyperspecialization that is affecting sales? Is it a matter of price? It seems that the average price of an academic monograph has increased dramatically in the last decade or so.

CTM: Libraries are buying fewer books. I don't have data to show whether people are reading fewer books or not, but I know that libraries are under pressure to spend more of their resources on specialized journals. At some university presses book prices have gone up; however, at Kansas we price our books at levels that are reasonable and competitive with popular titles. One problem is that as fewer libraries buy books the print runs decline. As print runs decline, the unit cost of each copy increases, putting pressure on the price. If you consider that about 80% of the cost of a book is incurred with the first copy printed and you can only sell 500 copies instead of 1,000 copies, then you indeed must charge more for each book. Also, because of the specialized nature of the majority of scholarly books, price elasticity really doesn't work, and lowering prices won't increase demand enough to make up the revenue lost by lowering the price. In other words, if only 500 people are interested in the topic and can understand the author's language and argument, the audience for the book is not going to be changed in material ways by lowering the price. Finally, if the books are too specialized in their topic and too technical in their execution, they can't be used in undergraduate courses or even in graduate courses.

EL: To continue with the issue of specialization, are you seeing this as continuing to be a problem of PhD production that is affecting scholarly publishing? That is, as new PhDs continue to hyper specialize, are they producing work that is of interest to an increasingly smaller readership. Is there a need or even desire for the generalist anymore — was there ever? Or are we talking about a need for writing for a more general audience?

CTM: If we are to sell more books we must either reach a general audience or publish books that can be used in classes. So, yes, we need to publish books

that are intended to educate either in the classroom or among the interested public. However junior scholars generally do not write for these audiences because they do not advance in their careers by writing general interest books. Rather they get ahead by writing for their scholarly peers. This means that the question they choose to ask, the way that they ask that question, and the methods and language they employ will be aimed solely at the (too often) small group of interested scholars.

EL: Another aspect of scholarly publishing that relates more to the faculty member is the “publish or perish” problem—of the need for a published monograph for tenure—of what John Guillory called “preprofessionalism” of graduate students (with pressure to publish even before graduating)—of the need for that first book to even be hired for a tenure-track position. Critics of this issue often contend that these pressures lead to either the hyperspecialization mentioned earlier, a glut of worthwhile, but unread academic books, or, worse, a glut of half-baked books that probably should not have been published in the first place. How do you see this issue affecting university presses? How do you balance the needs of both the reader who deserves a well-conceived book and a faculty author who needs the publication to keep a job (not to say those two aren’t mutually exclusive)? Do university presses have a role in developing meaningful criteria for such things as tenure?

CTM: This question could take pages to answer and there are others who need to address it such as university administrators. Suffice it to say that the criteria a press uses to evaluate a book overlaps but is not identical to the criteria applied (as I understand it) to tenure and promotion cases because a press must determine whether there is a sufficient audience for a book in addition to deciding whether the book offers the reader the fruits of excellent scholarship. This means that we might decline to publish an excellent scholarly book because we do not believe that we can sell enough copies to pay our bills.

EL: On a general note, how does the University Press of Kansas fit in with the general configuration of university presses? You’re not a Harvard or Yale UP, and you’re not a Routledge. Does that give you an advantage? Are there disadvantages?

CTM: In order to answer this question I must explain how presses develop their publishing program and their reputation of excellent publishing. Most university presses specialize in certain subjects. We do this so that we can focus our acquisition, promotion, and marketing resources on building a reputation for publishing excellent books on particular topics. At Kansas we have focused on areas such as military history, the American presidency, legal history and constitutional thought, western history, Kansas and plains states topics, American political thought, and popular culture, among a few other areas. These are areas in which we can do a better job of publishing than presses that are much larger. For example, many presses publish in political theory but few focus, like Kansas, on American political thought. In the areas in which

we cover we publish authors who are widely recognized as the top of their fields by both academics and by interested readers and experts outside the academy. So when you think about the universe of publishers you need to break it down by field in order to see that there is not only one hierarchy but many hierarchies.

The big university and trade presses are not always the best place to publish for several reasons besides the question of focus. At smaller presses that emphasize the area in which the author is writing, the author is more likely to get individual attention and the book is likely to get better marketing. The book will matter more to a small press than it is likely to matter to one of the big publishing houses. A few of these large presses publish thousands of titles each year. Also at large university and trade presses that publish a lot of broadly recognized “big” name authors, their focus will be on the care and feeding of these celebrity authors, not so much on authors who do not fit that profile, even though they do publish junior scholars. Finally, with the possible exception of Oxford and Cambridge, the big presses can publish only a few of the many proposals they are offered, and must decline many worthy projects that fit better with small presses.

Unlike commercial presses such as Routledge, we are not focused on returning a profit to our owners which enables us to publish books that commercial presses are simply not going to do or will do only by charging high prices for the book.

In looking for presses for your work, you should look at a range of presses including smaller presses that specialize in the topics about which you are writing.

EL: Part of the mission of the University Press of Kansas is in direct relation not only with Research I-level schools like KU, but the rest of the Regent's schools in the state, which include state comprehensive universities (SCUs). Part of this relationship is financial. Is this a common part of university presses in America, or is it unique to Kansas?

CTM: Most university presses are tied to one university; however, there are others that are supported by a consortium of schools. These include Colorado, Kentucky, and Florida, which are supported by groups of state schools. The University Press of New England operates on behalf of a group of private schools.

EL: Related to that question, how do you see the relationship between the press and the smaller, regional schools? You have visited the schools since you assumed the position of director. Do you foresee any changes to this relationship? What can the press offer SCUs and what can SCUs offer the press?

CTM: We publish authors from all of the Kansas schools so we are an outlet for scholars at the schools in areas in which we publish; our authors do not only come from the research universities. We are also a source of information and advice about scholarly publishing for faculty and staff at the schools. We are part of the schools' collective outreach to the national and international scholarly communities and to the public in Kansas and elsewhere in the areas in which we publish.

Another way to look at the relationship of the Press to the faculty at all of the schools is not to focus on the differences between the major research universities and the smaller state schools but to recognize that the Press publishes authors from schools ranging from large research universities to small state and private colleges in the United States and abroad in the areas in which we publish. What is important is that the author is doing excellent scholarly work on an interesting topic in these areas.

EL: What advice would you give specifically to faculty at SCUs about publishing, either with KU or other university presses? Authors of course have to submit a CV when they approach the press with a proposal; is it harder for an author from a regional school to get their foot in the door? Are they necessarily at a disadvantage?

CTM: Where you teach and where you got your degree does matter to presses, as this is part of establishing your credibility as a scholar and author. Some larger, particularly Ivy League presses, might look closely at where you are teaching as a signal of the likely acceptance of your work by their editorial board and by the audience for the book. What is most important is finding presses that focus on your area of scholarship. For these presses whether your work is respected in the area in which you work matters more than the general prestige of your current affiliation. For example, Kansas publishes work from a wide range of schools in military history, including independent scholars, based on the reputation of the scholar on the topic and the quality of the scholarship as demonstrated by peer review.

EL: You recently started at the University Press of Kansas (September 2013), succeeding Fred Woodward who had served as director for over thirty years. Woodward obviously has had a major role in shaping the press. What did Woodward do to make the press what it is today? Do you feel a sense of tradition with the press, or is there a different direction or vision you would have? Are there any new fields that you would like to develop or enhance?

CTM: Fred, and those who have worked with him over the years, have made many important contributions to the success of this Press. A key contribution that Fred made to the Press was developing a publishing program that focused on a few areas in which the Press could be a top rated publisher. So rather than publish a few books here and there across many fields, he focused our pub-

lishing on building a small number of excellent lists in which we could attract top authors and market aggressively. This made us a top publisher in fields like presidential studies, military history, law and the judiciary, American history and popular culture, as well as in regional publishing. I plan to continue that kind of focused publishing, keeping an eye out for other underserved areas I think we can do an excellent job of publishing in. I am spending time now on making the press digital (so that we will publish electronic editions of our books) and doing more to engage with social media in promoting our books.

EL: You have a PhD in political science and a law degree, both from the University of Michigan, and you practiced law before starting your career in publishing. Did you initially intend a career in law? How (and why) did you change to publishing? Many times a publishing career takes one through the ranks, working stints in various parts of the publishing process. Is that your story? Coming from a political science and law background, what prepared you for this career? Obviously, you have the content expertise in the fields you handle (e.g., history of law), but what about the other aspects of publishing? Where do you learn about style, for instance? How do you learn to recognize a good book?

CTM: I entered publishing from graduate school. I practiced law for thirteen years (both in private and government practice, mostly on international trade law) before going to graduate school to work on my PhD in political science at the University of Michigan (where I also got my law degree). While writing my dissertation I was hired as the political science and law editor at the University of Michigan Press. I thus skipped some of the normal stages in a publishing career. I learned about publishing while on the job. I think I brought to the job knowledge of and enthusiasm for the study of politics, political science, and law that enabled me to talk to scholars as an informed interlocutor. I demonstrated a genuine interest in and curiosity about their work. I acquired a sense of style and what works in a book from a lifetime of reading serious nonfiction and a long engagement with scholarly work. As my publishing career proceeded I developed a better sense of what made a book work by reading reviews, looking at sales, and talking to readers. After four years at Michigan I was hired at Princeton University Press where I spent more than thirteen years as the editor responsible for acquiring books in political science, law, and for a time American political history and classics. I finished my PhD but chose to remain in scholarly publishing.

EL: You published an article, "A Short Tour of Book Publishing for Political Scientists," in 2004 that traces the steps a political scientist would go through in publishing a book. One of the issues you mention there is the dissertation into a book. Could you comment more on this from your perspective as director of a press?

CTM: I think publishing first books, which typically but not always start as dissertations, is important for university presses. We get fresh new ideas from

these works and help launch careers. However dissertations are almost never ready to be published as books without significant revisions. In part this is because a dissertation serves a different purpose. It is written for an audience of four or five people (your committee) to demonstrate your abilities as a scholar. It includes a lot of discussion of methods and the literature that needs to be radically recast for a successful book. For the book you are speaking to a larger (one hopes) and more varied audience. In writing a book keeping your audience in mind at every stage beginning with the selection of your question is of critical importance. In revising your dissertation you have to think of how best to persuade your audience of the importance of your question and the merits of your argument in terms they can understand. For more on this please see the article you mentioned and an essay I co-authored with Peter Dougherty in a book edited by Beth Leuey *Revising Your Dissertation*.

One challenge to publishing first books that is widely debated in scholarly publishing is whether the availability of dissertations electronically through libraries in open access affects the willingness of publishers to publish books based on these dissertations because, some argue, libraries will not buy books that are identified by the library wholesalers as being based on a dissertation. I don't know what the answer to this question is as I get different responses from librarians, but I think it is an issue that librarians and graduate school administrators need to discuss. My feeling is that the first book will be so heavily revised as to be completely transformed from the dissertation. Thus the dissertation won't compete with the book especially for the larger audience that we hope to reach. But others in publishing are less sanguine than I am about this.

EL: I'd like to ask a few nuts and bolts questions about publishing. What do you look for when you receive a proposal? Do trendy topics necessarily have a better chance? Any turn-offs, such as someone sending in their complete 1,200-page manuscript over the transom?

CTM: I look for a clearly articulated argument about a question that is clearly important. We are looking for books that address questions that are of enduring importance and are not simply the topic of the moment. We publish for the long term. Poor writing, overly narrow and obscure arguments, and treatment of minor topics are turn-offs. Never send the full manuscript until the editor asks for it.

EL: What are the biggest misconceptions faculty authors have about the editing process? You mentioned royalties, rights, and agents, for instance.

CTM: Let me separate out the contract from the process of editing and production. In negotiating a contract for a scholarly book, an emphasis on a big financial payoff by seeking higher royalties is a mistake. That might be appropriate for a textbook or a book that is truly for a large audience, but even there

you need to be realistic about what the press and you, the author, might earn from the book. Agents are rarely involved in negotiations for a scholarly book because the sales potential and thus the revenue potential is too small for them to make money. In the editing process, which is the process of producing the book, perhaps the biggest misconception is what is involved in copyediting. Copyediting involves editing for grammar, clarity, and “house” style. It does not include developmental editing. To the extent you need advice about the structure and flow of the book, the framing of the argument, and the length of the book, you need to consult with your acquiring editor.

EL: Some publishers tend to accept very few unsolicited proposals, preferring instead to solicit projects directly, perhaps through professional association meetings or conferences. What percentage of your books begin as unsolicited proposals? Is it actually better for a faculty member to network with editors at meetings?

CTM: One of the problems is that we can usually only publish a small percentage of the projects we are offered. In part this is because of limited capacity and in part because we are offered a large number of projects that simply don't fit with our publishing programs. Networking with editors can be helpful if only to get an early indication of whether a book might fit with the editor's list. Also, checking with editors of specialized series at presses can be helpful. We solicit proposals directly because we identify people who we think could write a book that we can do well with. We spend a lot of time finding out about good potential authors through social networks, reading journals and books, and going to conferences. We also pay attention to what is being published and what people tell us should be published in order to find topics that merit books.

EL: You also talk about books, even or especially academic books, needing a narrative. Historians, you suggest, still have that narrative impulse due to their relation to chronology, but some other disciplines have lost that element essential to a good book. Could you elaborate on what you mean by narrative?

CTM: By narrative I mean two things. First, the book overall should tell a story even if it is a fairly abstract story. Start with the problem or puzzle, tell why it is important, and outline the different ways of solving and understanding the problem, giving the reader a preview of your solution. Then lead the reader through the different aspects of your argument, including why you dismiss other explanations, arriving at your conclusion. This is a process of discovery for the reader of both why a problem or puzzle has not been solved before and how the author solves it.

Second, the author should use concrete stories when possible to illustrate the nature of the puzzle and aspects of the argument. If you are talking about income inequality in the United States you might use income statistics, but you

might also illustrate the problem with stories of people who illustrate some aspect of the problem.

EL: Could you talk about the role an editor has, both in the production of a specific book and in the academic community at large. William Germano (former publishing director at Routledge) described an editor as being part of the conversation about the ideas within a discipline, almost as a catalyst of ideas.

CTM: This is a very big question that I will only begin to answer. I think that an editor helps authors clarify their ideas and how they make their argument. One of my more frequent comments is “What is your argument here” or “I don’t understand what you mean.” I think of myself as the educated lay reader so many scholars want to reach.

The other role we play is connecting an author’s arguments with other work in related areas. Editors do that because we read widely and talk to people who work in a number of areas. So I frequently find that I tell people about work that they have not heard of. Or I suggest an application of their argument to a different topic that suggests a broader appeal for their work. To some extent we can break down some of the “silos” that increasingly specialized scholars find themselves in.