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The Cutting Edge Vs. the Status Quo at University Presses

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How do university presses decide what books to publish? What most influences their decisions, and under what constraints do they operate? Controversies erupt periodically about presses' acceptance or rejection of particular works, the most recent being that over the difficulties that University of Illinois philosophy professor Richard D. Mohr had in getting a publisher for his book *Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies* (*The Chronicle*, June 17 and July 15). Casting a little light upon the process may lessen the heat of the debates.

The editors of university presses have a considerable degree of decision-making autonomy compared with their counterparts in many commercial publishing houses, where the influence of business and marketing managers and even lawyers has grown relative to that of editors in recent years. Yet the editors' autonomy is far from complete. At the heart of university presses, in fact, lies the interaction between the editors and their editorial boards of scholars. Much of the interaction revolves around the tension between the cutting edge of scholarship and the pressures not to upset the academic status quo too much.

Would-be authors who are surprised, for example, when their manuscripts are rejected despite supportive reports from reviewers might not be so surprised if they had read Paul Parsons's *Getting Published: The Acquisition process at University Presses* (University of Tennessee Press, 1989). As Mr. Parsons notes, "University presses operate within a system that . . . balances the interests of received knowledge and emerging knowledge. They prefer works that challenge the status quo because these will be the books with the most potential for influencing intellectual currents. Yet the scholarly publishing enterprise also is biased toward the status quo. Peer reviewers and editorial committee members tend to be established scholars in a field—the very ones, in fact, who may have built their careers on what is now called the status quo in their disciplines. . . . But the editors, who get to select the peer reviewers, . . . look for scholars who would be open to new

directions within their disciplines as long as the work measures up to the standards of scholarship.”

As a generalization, Mr. Parsons’s summary of the process is right on target, but it doesn’t take into account the diversity that exists in the system. I can give two examples, both from my experience as an acquiring editor at Princeton University Press, that reveal the validity, but also the limits, of this generalization.

One concerns the review of a manuscript by a feminist philosopher that was rejected by Princeton but later was published by a commercial press and became recognized as one of the major books in the field. When this episode happened, in the 1970’s, feminist scholarship was about where gay and lesbian studies are today, still struggling to establish its academic credibility and credentials. The Princeton editorial board (then consisting entirely of male faculty members) was suspicious of the two reports that I had initially solicited on this manuscript from reviewers, because they were too enthusiastic (and, presumably for that reason, seemed to lack “objectivity”). The board recommended that a third report be commissioned from a member of the university’s own faculty who was known to be well versed in the literature of feminist political philosophy but was not thought to be so much a partisan for the cause herself. This scholar submitted a more critical, but still quite positive, report recommending that the press publish the book. The editorial board turned it down anyway—a decision that was the most blatant exercise of prejudice that I have ever witnessed in my 25 years of university press publishing.

In roughly the same period, though, the editorial board at Princeton also initiated a tradition of giving explicit recognition in its decision-making process to what were dubbed as “risk” books—works that in one way or another departed from the model of the standard scholarly monograph and were especially challenging to conventional wisdom. One such title was Julian Simon’s *The Ultimate Resource*, an economist’s frontal attack on the ecological doomsayers who were dominating the general media in those days. Publication of this book met with considerable disapproval within the university itself, among both students and faculty members, including a group of demographers at Princeton’s Office of Population Research who expressed their displeasure to university administrators.

These two stories reflect the limits and the possibilities that exist within university publishing, even within a single press. Considerable diversity also exists among presses in their structures and operations. At some presses, for example, the director has no say in who sits on the editorial board; at other presses the director can virtually hand-pick the members of the board. The boards of some presses are so large that they contain experts representing all the fields covered in the publishing program; members of these boards tend to be given veto power over what gets accepted in their fields. Other university presses have boards that are very small in relation to the size of their publishing programs, and members of these boards serve more as generalists, reaching their decisions largely by consensus.

Other constraints exist on what a university press can or will accept. They include the traditions, or “personality,” of a publishing house—the accumulated weight of past editorial decisions that have already given a distinctive character to the press’s list and make some types of books more appropriate for it than others. Just as a press’s image in a certain field serves as a signal to communicate with prospective authors looking for the right publisher, so too does it lead editors to look most favorably on manuscripts that complement what the press has already published—that fit its publishing “profile.”

Besides these more or less overt constraints, sometimes “political” problems arise in the decision-making process. An editor may want to reject a manuscript recommended by a member of the editorial board or one written by an author whose previous books the press has published or one solicited from an influential senior scholar that turns out to be disappointing. In such circumstances an editor—especially one without a long track record that provides him or her with some independent credibility—may choose to manipulate the review process so as to lead to the desired outcome without appearing to directly engineer it.

This might be done either by selecting readers not expected to be particularly sympathetic to the author’s work or by passing the buck to the editorial board, which can make the final decision on the basis of the editor’s recommendation and thus appear to the author to be the arbiter of his or her fate. Manipulation can also work in favor of an author. When an editor is predisposed to want a book published, choosing the right readers can make all the difference in the outcome, especially when the book has a strong ideological slant. Choosing readers likely to favor a book cannot be done too

blatantly, however, for any good editorial board rightly will raise questions about the choice of readers and, if bias appears to play too obvious a role, will ask for additional review by a less partisan reader or readers.

Disappointed authors may suggest, as Mr. Mohr has recently, that presses should rely on reviewers' recommendations instead of giving their advisory boards of scholars the final say about whether or not to publish a manuscript. The problem with that idea, though, is that it would a much freer hand to editors in determining the outcome of the decision-making process since, as Mr. Parsons notes, the editors are the ones who normally get to choose the peer reviewers.

Editors might enjoy this enhanced power, but would it really be the best way for presses to operate? Wouldn't it tend to make them more like trade presses? And shouldn't presses, anyway, reflect the "political" balance of power within universities? It seems to me that the tension between "received knowledge and emerging knowledge" that is already built into the system will serve the best interests of university publishing in the long run. And when, in the relatively few instances that the system doesn't work quite as one might hope, the existence of independent publishers will provide the safety valve to insure that the truly deserving book will still see the light of day.