

University Press or Teaching Press?

University of Missouri Proposes New Model for Its UP

After twenty years in the publishing business, I am at ease with and actively seek out new models: new production models (digital print replacing offset), new editorial models (taking risks with fiction and poetry rather than publishing solely for the backlist), new back-end models (it's mostly in the cloud not only on one hard-drive), and certainly new marketing models (social media versus paid advertising). The state of publishing today—when a customer can hear about a book on NPR, surf for further reviews, purchase a digital copy from her preferred outlet, and be reading on the same device within minutes—requires publishers to embrace new models.

That said, I started my career at a university press and maintain an affinity for the UP model, which starts and ends with its mission. According to the web site of the [Association of American University Presses](#), a university press acts like a publisher no different than Random House (the country's largest publisher) or Scholastic (think "Harry Potter" series), "but while commercial publishers focus on making money by publishing for popular audiences, the university press's mission is to publish work of scholarly, intellectual, or creative merit, often for a small audience of specialists or a regional community of interest."

Imagine how many books in your own library might have gone unpublished if it were not for such a mission.

Furthermore, university presses are an extension of their parent institutions and therefore contribute to the general academic network that makes scholarly work—and the dissemination of scholarship—possible. Therefore, due to this special mission, university presses are afforded nonprofit status, conduct rigorous peer reviews prior to publication, and many are subsidized by their parent institutions, just like the chemistry department and the football team.

I believe very much in new models of publishing and in the scholarly mission of university presses, so why am I so wary of the University of Missouri's decision to "reimagine" its fifty-four-year-old university press?

Because it will no longer be a "university press," at least not in the sense that made it eligible for membership in AAUP.

In late May, the university announced that it would cease to budget \$400,000 for press operations. The uproar in the AAUP and scholarly communities was captured by [Publishers Weekly](#), [Associated Press](#), and [Facebook](#), to name a few. In July, in a release that was posted on the university's web site, it announced a plan to restructure the ten-person press that publishes thirty books a year by folding operations into the English Department and laying off professional staff.

According to a report in [Publishers Weekly](#), "the press will have four paid employees, with assistance provided by graduate student interns. Besides {a director}, the paid employees will include an editor-in-chief, a managing editor, and a marketing director." Award-winning novelist and English professor Speer Morgan will take the reins and make new hires. Former press staffers are welcome to apply, but according to the *PW* report, they might seem ill-fitted since hires will also be English department appointments with, one suspects, other responsibilities and a teaching load. This model made sense, apparently, because the English department already housed the *Missouri Review* literary journal.

I see more red flags than at a Manchester United match.

How will such a model uphold the mission of a university press? The University of Missouri Press, with a backlist of some 2,000 titles, publishes books in fields as disparate as African American Studies and World War II history, from Political Science to Environmental Science. Will the new editor-in-chief possess the network of scholars or ability to cultivate a network of scholars required for the review process? Apparently, the review process will be spread out among scholars on Missouri's four campuses (a narrow sample, one would think, given the publishing credential scholars seek from university presses). Will they understand the nuances of other academic disciplines? Will they really be tapped into research enough to know how any given proposal presents new scholarship or fills a hole in present scholarship? A possible direction would be for the press to focus on a few key

strengths—literature, Native American studies, regional interest perhaps—and forego the review process. The university release suggests that the new press’s efforts will be aligned with other departments, “such as scholarly programs in English, creative writing, communications, journalism, and library and information science.” Such a scenario could turn the press into the university’s on-campus self-publisher, little more than a print shop, or lead to contentious matters such as why the press published Professor Y but not Professor Z. Depending on the type of titles such collaborations generate, and the thoroughness of the review process, the new model could lead the press to forfeit its AAUP membership. This consequence would not necessarily be a bad thing, but it would no longer be a “university press” thing. More importantly, how many artistically vital and scholarly significant books that could only find homes at university presses go unpublished? *Frog Gig and Other Stories*, a first collection of short stories by a thirty-year-old writer named Speer Morgan, was published by the University of Missouri Press.

How well will an artist direct a press? I just self-edited that previous line from reading “*scholarly press*,” which was not fair to Speer Morgan, whom I do not know and who might be an accomplished scholar. But my sense is that he is foremost an artist who is Director of Creative Writing in Missouri’s English Department and editor of the revered *Missouri Review*. While plenty of writers make for fine publishers, typically in the independent press world, I know of no university press directors who are by primary focus and scholarly discipline creative writers, and only a few directors who rose through the editorial acquisitions ranks. Most university press directors, like their commercial counterparts, emerge from the marketing and sales side of the business. To assume that the work of a university press can be integrated into a department that already executes similar functions (reviewing submissions; designing products; printing, promoting, and distributing merchandise to consumers) seems short-sighted. Notice my deliberate avoidance of words like “manuscript,” “book,” “literature,” and “readers”—words that make our hearts skip. However, sometimes publishers need to think beyond their passions to make sound publishing decisions. For some artists, this ability can be hard to hone. Then one day they realize that they have not been doing something: writing.

What’s the bottom-line? I would like to know what the actual cost savings are projected to be with this University of Missouri Press reincarnation. More importantly, what is the cost-benefit ratio? It seems like a lot of work to foist on a staff with divided responsibilities and expect the level of quality and scholarship to be sustained. Replacing professional staff with graduate student interns transforms a university press into a teaching press, a publishing model of which I am also fond. But no university’s teaching press, which also publishes serious literature, both creative and scholarly, would dare call itself a “university press;” they have very different missions and are proud of those missions. I have a suspicion that this teaching-press model is where the University of Missouri Press is headed. In fact, it is not a suspicion, since the university release states as much, and Speer Morgan was quoted in riverfronttimes.com: “There’s going to be teaching involved with all the positions because part of the idea of this press is to integrate it with the campus and integrate it with the teaching function of the college.” And that’s fine (save for the loss of jobs and certain books that will go unconsidered, of course). Unfortunately, university administration missed an opportunity to cast its decision in a positive light by calling it a “reimagining” rather than something altogether “other,” the end of one thing and the start of another (albeit an “other” with projects in the pipeline and a hefty backlist where the legalities of contracts may be at play).

(A bottom-line interesting aside: In reporting the University of Missouri’s restructuring plans, riverfronttimes.com mentioned that the university recently extended a \$2.6-million bailout to the athletic department, which had been running in the red. Such decisions speak to institutional priorities, which is a topic for another time.)

So while I lament the end of the University of Missouri Press, and the unprofessional dismissal of so many specifically talented professionals, I support the new model and wish the new team well. I just wish administration mustered the integrity to call the new entity Missouri Press, because these moves have ditched the “university” part of what it means to be a UP.

Postscript: [New Press Director Morgan Defends Changes](#)