

[#AUPresses20 What Booksellers Wish University Presses Knew](#)

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A post from [Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications](#)

Friday afternoon three booksellers—Kim Hooyboer of Seattle’s Third Place Books (Seward Park), Jeff Deutsch of Chicago’s Seminary Co-op Bookstores, and David Goldberg of the MIT Press Bookstore—joined with Andrew Berzanskis, senior acquisitions editor at the University of Washington Press, to talk about what university press folks ought to know about the realities of retail book sales. TCU Press assistant editor Molly Spain moderated.

Berzanskis led off by advising editors who acquire trade books (especially regional trade and crossover academic titles) to get to know the buyers at their local independent bookstores. Usually such relationships are the domain of marketing folks, but he noted that indie bookstore staff have deep, intimate knowledge of regional publishing, from the contents of press backlists to the books customers are looking for. Booksellers may be able to tell acquisitions editors there’s a market for a reprint of an older title, or that there’s a need for books on a topic of particular interest locally.

Hooyboer emphasized that many of the books her customers want right now are university press titles—works on racism and police brutality and how to combat them—and she recognized the commitment of UPs to publishing works by and about marginalized people. Unfortunately, it’s difficult for her to make these books available while keeping her store in the black. She listed three crucial things bookstores need from publishers: easy availability, trade discounts, and returnability. If they are to bring university press books into their stores, buyers need to be able to find them at Ingram, the dominant book wholesaler. Booksellers also need a deep discount off the list price so that their markup (enabling the store to make a profit on the sale) does not raise the price so much that customers can’t afford to buy or turn to Amazon. Finally, the store needs to be able to return books that don’t sell.

Unfortunately, university presses are, like indie bookstores, low-margin enterprises. With the ongoing shrinkage of library sales, UPs struggle to sell enough volumes to cover the costs of production. Selling books at a deeper discount further undercuts their ability to break even. Returnability is also a problem, because for presses it means that no sale is ever final—no dollar earned is ever sure. Lowering prices is a risky strategy—will sales rise enough to make up for the lower price?—that has often not panned out. And the size of the audience outside of academia is difficult to predict.

Given these difficult circumstances, Jeff Deutsch called on indie bookstores and nonprofit presses, as mission-driven businesses, to reimagine the entire publishing and bookselling ecosystem. He emphasized that there is a significant market for serious nonfiction, the kind of books university presses specialize in. He also stressed that it may take a while for a book to reach the reader who wants it. A key metric for his bookstore, he said, is the number of single-title sales—in other words, only one person bought that book—relative to the number of distinct titles sold. University press books, he pointed out, do not expire; they aren’t today’s self-help fad or trendy cookbook. He

encouraged presses to bring older titles back in print at lower prices and to extend the terms they offer to bookstores—not net 30 or net 60, but net 365 or even net 720 (referring to the length of time the buyer has to pay the bill). Like the easy returns Hooyboer called for, this suggestion poses a serious challenge for publishers, who cover the costs of their forthcoming titles with the money they earn from sales. If they aren't receiving that money for months or years, they won't have the funds to continue publishing.

David Goldberg endorsed the points made by Hooyboer and Deutsch, and added that publishers should make more use of tools to make their books easy to find, such as Edelweiss (an online platform for publishers' catalogs), digital galleys, and rich metadata. He also encouraged university presses to strengthen their relationships with indie bookstores by offering special terms during the American Booksellers Association's University Press Week and partnering with their local indies as showrooms.

In short, this session offered a lot of good advice but underscored the difficult economic situation both indie bookstores and university presses face right now. Our mutual values and commitments jostle uneasily with the structural conflicts in our interests. Figuring how we can work together to continue to make serious, challenging nonfiction on urgent topics available to everyone who wants it won't be easy.

Have something to say on this topic? Please reply to this post or [email the Elephant](#) about writing for us. We welcome submissions from stakeholders on all sides of scholarly publishing.