Pay in Scholarly Publishing

Discussion published by Dawn Durante on Wednesday, August 18, 2021
A post from Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications.

Guest post by Amy Sherman, managing editor, University of Pittsburgh Press

Every so often an academic job ad with ludicrously high demands and low pay makes the rounds on Twitter—for example, one posted in May for a lecturer of German and Spanish, with a 4/4 teaching load, a one-year appointment with no possibility of renewal, requiring two years’ experience, PhD preferred, and a salary of $32–36K. It's prevalent enough that McSweeney's has done a satire of this genre of job ad.

These salaries are low by any standards, but what makes them particularly egregious is how out of step they are with the salaries of full-time, tenured faculty, which presumably set the expectations for those who enter PhD programs. According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) 2021 salary survey, the average full-time salary for an assistant professor, across public, private-independent, and religiously affiliated schools, is $83,362. Meanwhile, the average salary for a full professor is $140,543.

With the academic job market no longer offering the pay and security that it once did, new PhDs have been increasingly seeking careers beyond the traditional academic path; one often suggested by advisors is working at a university press. Scholarly publishing has always welcomed scholars into the fold, and certainly, working as an acquiring editor is better-paying and more stable than working as an adjunct hopping between multiple colleges in order to cobble together full employment. But someone considering this field as a second choice, after undertaking a PhD with the expectation of a professor’s salary, may benefit from some candid talk about the pay.

At the 2021 Association of University Presses (AUPresses) meeting, Dominique Moore and Becca Bostock led a collaborative session on pay equity, informed by data they collected via survey that addressed such topics as whether participants had ever asked for or received a raise and whether respondents worked a second job to make ends meet while working full-time in publishing. Without disclosing exact figures from Dom and Becca’s survey or individual responses in the discussion and in response on Twitter, it seems clear that many of us have been struggling.

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.
Speaking personally, I’ve been freelancing on top of my publishing day job for my whole career. I want to acknowledge here that the need for a side hustle seems to be generational, not unique to publishing. Knowing that, I feel conditionally fortunate that freelance editing is work that I can do at home and on my own schedule, in contrast to shift work or other kinds of gig work like rideshare driving. I’ve also benefited in that my side hustle has been a way for me to be paid for professional development. But it is still work, and I’ve been working many more hours than “full time” for my entire working life out of necessity, not choice.

I know other people in the field who are or have been supplementing their income through freelance work or a side business, but that isn’t possible for everyone, especially parents. I’m unmarried and don’t have kids, so my time outside of work is on my own, but by the same token the demands of this workload perpetuate that situation. Some people have made a publishing career work thanks to a double-income partnership. Laura Sell, at Duke University Press, has said, “Honestly, the only reason I’ve been able to stay in publishing is because my husband makes so much more than I do.”

Any generalized discussion of pay in publishing is tricky, because pay varies WIDELY across the industry and its different segments, as evidenced by a crowdsourced salary-sharing spreadsheet that was created in November 2019. Publishers Weekly does an annual Publishing Industry Salary Survey, but it skews to New York pay, in contrast to the geographically diffuse distribution of university presses. That geographic distribution, in turn, makes generalization about pay within scholarly publishing tricky as well—an acquiring editor at SUNY Press may make half of what an acquiring editor at California does, for instance. And salaries sometimes even range widely within a single press. At the University of Nebraska Press, for example, which has 47 employees whose salaries are listed publicly, salaries range from $205,565 all the way down to $14,464. The average is $48,364.74, but only 15 people at the press make that amount or more—the other 32 make less, for a median salary of $38,964.

Pay also varies across departments. Speaking generally, Sales > Marketing > Acquisitions > Production > Manuscript Editorial. While this scale isn’t empirically supported—credit goes to industry colleague John Hussey, who offered it with the caveat that there are always variations and exceptions—it’s a pattern that can be observed in job postings and in open salary data for presses at publicly funded universities. I didn’t know this when I started, and to get personal here, it stings to know that I’m a member of the least-valued department in my workplace. Someone thinking about a career in publishing, then, might be well advised to take pay differentials into account when considering which career track to pursue.

Nevertheless, if the entry-level industry salaries that have been shared on social media are anything to go by, they’ve been pretty stagnant since the late 1990s. Moreover, when I started about a decade ago, publishing internships were almost universally unpaid, and you had to get an internship to get a job in trade publishing, which is concentrated in metropolitan areas with higher costs of living. You can of course extrapolate to how much of a problem this becomes for the industry: if jobs in publishing are only available to people who have other kinds of financial support, then the industry both filters out people from backgrounds without that support (especially from marginalized populations that have suffered disparities in generational wealth), and removes the incentive to raise salaries, resulting in depressed pay over time. (For a discussion of how this then extends to disparities in book advances to authors of color, see this LA Times op-ed.)
On top of the broader issues of pay in publishing more generally, pay at university presses has its own specific problems. A big part of the conversations surrounding not only Becca and Dom’s session but also the panel on midcareer strategies at the same AUPresses meeting was how difficult it is to be recognized for your work, compensated appropriately, and advance. This is partly because of the bureaucracy of universities, and partly because turnover at university presses is often low. That people stay where they are could be seen as an endorsement of the job, but it may speak more to the lack of opportunities. With a few exceptions, most university presses are small to midsized, and often in locations where it’s the biggest or only publisher in town—the University of Pittsburgh Press, where I work, for example, has a staff of 14. We are the largest, oldest book publisher in the city. To move up in the field, I’d likely have to relocate. For people with families or other roots where they are, that’s a problem. And of course, academia’s two-body problem still applies to the academics working in scholarly publishing.

On the more hopeful side, it seems that problems of pay in publishing are being more openly addressed. I am hearing more talk about making positions permanently remote, which would increase advancement opportunities, although a glance at the AUPresses jobs board at the time of this writing doesn’t reflect that yet. More internship positions are paid, and we are seeing more resources such as funded fellowships and internship grants intended to increase diversity in the field. Some trade publishers have begun to pledge entry-level salaries that are closer to a living wage, which I hope will ripple out to other segments of the industry. And we may see more changes if unionization efforts continue, in the wake of recent organization by Duke UP Workers, Oxford UP Union USA, and the University of Washington Libraries Union (which includes press staff).

An unquestionable upside to working an in-house job at a university press is the stability—which there’s reason to appreciate during times of economic uncertainty (which is...all times now?). While university presses are often at the mercy of institutional budgets, for many of us at UPs, continued employment isn’t dependent on sales revenue. And as a full-time university staff member I have an excellent healthcare plan and retirement benefits, plus free public transportation, reduced tuition, and library access to scholarly resources and The Chicago Manual of Style. I recognize that for those who have been on the contingent faculty circuit, these things can’t be overstated. Another upside, of course, is that the university press community is full of talented, smart people (with and without graduate degrees), who all love smart books.

So, advice to someone interested in scholarly publishing as a career: Check out open salary data from publicly funded universities and job postings that list salaries. Give some thought to the department you would work in. Remember to take into account the cost of living. Know that you may have to relocate to advance. And be ready to advocate for change.

Amy Sherman is the managing editor at the University of Pittsburgh Press and a freelance developmental editor and copyeditor. She maintains a list of resources for those interested in careers in publishing, which you can find at a link in her Twitter bio @andcleverness.

Have something to say on this topic? Reply to this post! Or email the Elephant about writing for us; we welcome submissions from stakeholders on all sides of scholarly publishing. Find us on...
Twitter @HNetBookChannel and use the hashtag #FeedingTheElephant.