Show Me the Money: Talking about Dollars in a Way that Makes More Sense

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A little background: when we met, we were an assistant editor and a Mellon Diversity Fellow at the same university press (UP). We had similar academic experience (master's degrees) and we both supplemented our income with additional work outside of our 9 to 5 jobs. We had an inkling then that we might not be the only two people in scholarly publishing who needed to keep a side hustle—or two—or three—to pay the bills. Based on this hunch, we launched a survey on early career pay equity and inclusivity to use as a jumping-off point in our session at the 2021 annual meeting of the Association of University Presses (AUPresses). We ultimately received nearly 200 responses from people in different departments and all career levels at university presses, from editorial assistants to directors.

We were able to draw some basic demographic data, largely focused on full-time university press employees:

- 55% of respondents have a master's degree or PhD.
- Only about 32% negotiated their starting salaries at their presses.
- 34% of respondents relocated for their positions,
- but only 32% of those who relocated received relocation funds.
- 34% had another source of income outside of their full-time press job at the time of response.
- Of those who did not have another source of income, 40% did at one point in their UP career.

While these are just a few snapshots of what our peers in the scholarly publishing industry were working with, we also provided space in the survey for respondents to add long-form responses, which gave us more insight into the circumstances behind these responses. For example, while 48% of respondents reported that they had asked for a raise at some point in their careers, about 50% of those who had asked had been denied (which is not to say that they were not successful later, only...
that they had been denied at least once). While many respondents reported that they did not have another source of income, they often presented the caveat that this was only sustainable because they lived in dual-income households or had mitigating circumstances, like family members who could provide regular childcare. Some respondents had a lower base salary but were given the opportunity to work overtime, creating a cycle of chronically working more than 40 hours a week in order to earn a liveable income. For those who relocated for their positions, which in the university press world often requires moving to another state, the majority of respondents who received relocation funds at all received $1,000 or less—which given the expenses for a typical cross-state move means the majority of the cost of relocating is paid by the employee, and early career people often go into debt to make the relocation happen.

An exciting by-product of soliciting information in the informal way that we have done is the community-building among early career professionals and mid-career folks who often feel left out of conversations regarding advancement. In addition, we have been surprised by and welcome the support of those who are senior- and management-level. Many have reached out and expressed an investment in doing their share. We hope this goes to show that few are interested in an adversarial relationship between management and staff. Despite these expressions of support, we would be remiss not to mention that initiatives to promote pay equity must address the fear of retaliation that many have if they speak out about their concerns regarding pay and work conditions in ways that do not promise anonymity. This fear came up again and again in the open-ended responses to our survey, a disturbing pattern to say the least. Retaliation ranged from being passed over for promotions or given fewer travel and professional development opportunities to being kept out of the loop informally out of fear that person is a liability. Whether this has happened or does happen was outside the scope of this survey, but we believe that the widespread concern that it might should be taken up at the AUPresses level as a problem that is facing the industry. Moreover, we should ask staff and managers how we hold presses accountable when retaliation happens and how we assuage the fears that keep employees from expressing their needs fully to management. Perhaps this problem can be addressed through required (or strongly recommended) management training for people who endeavor to lead departments and clearer channels for recourse for early- and mid-career folks.

As the circumstances surrounding the pandemic continue to evolve, it is clear that many once-accepted industry-wide norms around compensation are ripe for challenging. In the short term, though, respondents to our survey agreed that the pandemic proved to be a large roadblock in asking for raises, receiving annual cost-of-living increases, and promotions. There was a general sentiment of “why bother?” about asking for raises in 2020, which has led to stagnating salaries despite increased responsibility for employees across the board during the pandemic. This lack of change is especially noteworthy given that housing prices have on average increased more than 10% a year for the past two years nationally, and many employees are just now receiving a 2-3% cost-of-living bump from their 2019 salaries.

Certain trends also emerged among the responses to the open-ended survey questions. Many shared that employees up and down the food chain had been asked to absorb more into their workloads as a result of the pandemic, and that this increase was not expected to be temporary but rather a permanent reorganization of responsibility. Of the respondents who had fewer than five years of experience in UP publishing, many felt that superiors presented this increase in tasks as something
they had “earned” the right to have, though there was no corresponding increase in pay (and oftentimes no change in title) to reflect the increase in workload. Just as being given the “opportunity” for overtime as the only means to a livable salary, adding responsibilities with no increase in salary is neither fair nor sustainable. How do we combat cultures of unsustainable work expectations that so often lead to burnout and, in the most extreme conditions, force people to leave the industry?

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It's worth mentioning that while our survey did include data from different departments and levels of seniority, we did not ask the respondents to disclose gender, race, or other generally accepted markers of marginalization. We strongly feel that looking at the statistics above from the perspective of those who are proven to be marginalized in terms of pay and workplace equity would not paint an encouraging picture of current UP initiatives to support diversity and inclusivity in our workplaces. Furthermore, while departments such as acquisitions have clearer pathways to advancement, this is often not the case in inward-facing departments, like those housed under editorial, production, and design (EDP). We believe it is the responsibility of those in leadership positions to demystify the promotion process and provide clear pathways to advancement. Addressing these concerns should be of particular import in an industry committed to the apprenticeship model. By providing more explicit opportunities that address these gaps in knowledge, the UP world can build a better environment, hopefully one predicated on openness and free from fear to be honest about our needs.

Now that university press workers are talking more openly about pay equity and career development, what we are most excited about asking is, what’s next? We are eagerly waiting to see how the pandemic has inspired (and in many cases demanded) people to evaluate working conditions and push back against the status quo and business as usual. These are necessary steps to transforming workplaces in an industry that aspires to equity in practice and not just name.

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