Keep UP: University Press Week Celebrates Ten Years

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A guest post from Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications.

By Fred Nachbaur, director, Fordham University Press

This week is the 10th annual celebration of University Press Week, with the timely theme of “Keep UP.” UPs across the country and around the world are highlighting the ways their presses have been forces to keep up with over the past decade, especially in light of the changes in the broader publishing world and in our reading culture. We spoke with Fordham University Press director Fred Nachbaur about how his press has grown, adapted, and succeeded in these past ten years and aims to be a force to Keep UP with in the future. There are a lot of ideas here that other UPs will identify with.

Q: In your time in university press publishing, what have been some of the biggest changes you've seen overall to the way UPs publish?

A: That's a question that needs more space than this column allows to explain. A lot has changed during my 30-plus years in book publishing, 17 of which have been at UPs. I'll focus on a few things.

Digital scholarship has transformed the way people read and research. Project MUSE, JSTOR, De Gruyter UPL, UPSO, and other digital platforms have made content discoverability and citation tremendously easier. Students and scholars can now find information on a myriad of disciplines at their fingertips in a fraction of the time it took to peruse the stacks of libraries and search for data in print books. UPs have streamlined the dissemination of content by partnering with digital institutional platforms to meet the demands of the readers and researchers, which I believe is a good thing. Sales of print books to libraries have suffered, but the exposure of the scholarly content has increased significantly. Getting our books to the widest possible audience, whether in print or digital format, is the mission of university presses. This kind of collaboration is a crucial factor in making UPs a force to Keep UP with.

Acquisitions via social media have become more popular and amplified because of the pandemic. Editors are on social media seeing what discussions are taking place and attending virtual events that have proliferated over the past 18 months. I can use a recent Fordham book as an example. Richard Morrison, editorial director at the press, followed Micah Bucey, Minister of Judson Memorial Church, on social media. Bucey posted Tiny Prayers entries on social media, and Richard wanted to collect and publish them in book form. Morrison felt that, although these prayers originated as occasional pieces, collectively they could offer a powerful document bearing witness to our spectacularly tricky times in the pandemic and ongoing struggles for racial justice. They could also serve as models of forward thinking about our lives and ongoing commitments to justice. Seven months later, we
Q: What is one book or author experience in your time in UPs that stands out as an example of the work that UPs aspire to put into the world?

A: Looking at our member-suggested gallery of titles for this year's UP celebration inspires me to talk up the incredibly diverse and creative nature of university presses. This year, the UP Week Task Force, of which I've been a member or chair for the past eight years, also curated several "top 10" lists in honor of the week's 10th anniversary, reflecting the excellence and innovation of university presses over the past decade. The lists showcase everything from young-adult titles to graphic content to cookbooks and creative collaboration and podcasts. It would be impossible to choose one title from this deep well of content that inspires readers and listeners and gives voice to many authors. I leave it to readers of this exchange to select their favorite(s).

Q: What do you think will be the greatest challenges for UPs in the decade ahead?

A: Managing the workplace and what that looks like will be a significant challenge for us. Working remotely for two years has changed the culture and attitude of many people. We've successfully run presses and published books in a virtual environment. A lot is lost not having human interaction, but real estate and overhead are expensive, especially in major cities like New York, Boston, and San Francisco. Many young people who have started their careers during the pandemic don't want to go into the office. Some others who've spent their entire careers in an office miss the camaraderie and serendipitous creativity of chatting with office mates face-to-face. There will have to be a balance. I think we will see lots of challenges in figuring out workplace culture. Right now, it's still up in the air.

Q: What do you think are some of the most exciting changes that are on the verge for UP publishing?

A: Publishing all the great content that deserves to see the light of day will continue to be one of our most exciting challenges, as we build on our successes and further develop our commitment to innovative publishing. Commercial presses will continue to pursue mergers (as referenced in the recent NYT and PW articles), making it harder for authors to get contracts and books published, but UPs will continue publishing exciting work that would otherwise be ignored. We've seen examples of breakout successes in recent publications like the Secret Lives of Church Ladies published by West Virginia University Press, which got excellent reviews, was a finalist for the National Book Award, and sold well. I think we will see more of this coming from UPs in the future. Penn State's Graphic Mundi imprint, Rutgers Comics Culture, and Fordham's New York: ReLit are just a few examples of the UP work that invites all to Keep UP.
I look forward to seeing more of this creative work from UPs. Read more as other UPs look back and ahead as part of the UP Week 2021 Blog Tour.

Fred Nachbaur has over 30 years of experience in book publishing, ranging from marketing to sales to editorial. Previously he worked at Wiley, Routledge, and NYU Press. Since becoming director of Fordham University Press in 2009, he has launched two imprints, Empire State Editions and ReLit NY. Fred has served as a board member of the Association of University Presses and currently sits on the board of New Village Press and Paulist Press.

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