

[Doth Academic Publishing Never Prosper?](#)

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

by Stephen Shapiro, acquisitions editor, University of Toronto Press

It happens often enough that you can set your watch to it. Someone in academia writes about how appallingly expensive scholarly books are. Numerous voices chime in to agree, calling prices unreasonable, exploitative, or immoral. Sometimes all three! Then a well-meaning editor or other publishing professional [jumps in to explain](#) how those prices are a consequence of the small market for most academic books. These high-priced academic books are written to appeal to specialists, who are relatively few in number. Most are purchased by libraries who see themselves as having an institutional responsibility to serve those specialists. But a gradual increase in the numbers of titles published each year and [flat or declining book-buying budgets](#) mean that libraries are buying a smaller and smaller selection of books and that individual titles sell fewer copies. Since many of the costs of publication, like editing and marketing, are the same regardless of how many copies are sold, fewer sales mean higher per unit costs and thus higher prices in order to break-even. Assuming price affects some purchasing decisions, higher prices mean fewer copies are sold, which means increased per unit costs, which means higher prices, and so on.

How high? Ithaka S+R completed [a study in 2016](#) which estimated that [Association of University Presses](#) member publishers spent an average \$28,747 US on each published monograph, excluding printing costs and press-level overhead. Other studies of AUPresses members have generated similar results, though the publishers surveyed represent a particular type of non-profit press, not the entire academic publishing industry.

There's very little disagreement about the cycle of high prices-fewer sales-higher costs-higher prices. So why doesn't explaining it lead to fewer repetitions of the original complaint? Because, the explanation doesn't make prices any lower. They're still *high*.

In a grim sense, academic publishing's situation is defined by the double-bind in Sir John [Harington's pithy aphorism](#):

Treason doth never prosper, what's the reason?

For if it prosper, none dare call it treason.

Books get described as "academic" because they are intended to serve academics, who are a small enough community that sales are limited and per unit costs are high. Those which sell widely to non-academics, and therefore have lower per unit costs, often also have lower prices even when they are still seen as "academic." But stating this truth doesn't satisfy the original complaint either. We're talking about those books which have higher rather than lower prices.

So, rather than repeat either the complaint or the explanation, can we look at what publishers of academic books – especially non-profit publishers such as university presses – are doing to try to improve the situation without abandoning the mission that led them to publish these books in the first place?

Cutting Down

The most obvious solution is to reduce some of the costs of publication mentioned above. The best-publicized initiative in recent years is the [Sustainable History Monograph Pilot](#) (SHMP), in which nineteen university presses experimented for three years with outsourcing editorial, design, and production (EDP) work to the non-profit [Longleaf Services](#). Longleaf used a digital-first, standardized workflow and tools like automated typesetting and a cover design template to cut EDP costs down to \$4,000 US. In the Ithaka S+R report, EDP costs totalled on average between \$10,846 US and \$11,643 US, combining \$7,140 US in staff costs and \$3,724–4,503 US for direct costs.

It's important to note that SHMP is not just a cost-cutting experiment but also an Open Access pilot, funded by the the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#), in which participating presses received a \$7,000 US per book payment in exchange for making electronic versions of each title available for free under a [Creative Commons](#) license. (The presses also made print editions available for sale.) There's no inherent reason the streamlined digital-first workflow in the SHMP couldn't combine with a traditional sales model which lacked a \$7,000 US overhead payment. According to the [latest SHMP updates](#), sales of print books derived from the streamlined workflow were not substantially reduced compared to the pre-SHMP workflow. Interestingly, when [Open Book Publishers](#) calculated its per title costs in 2020 before printing (including overhead), about \$3,800 US per book could be categorized (loosely) as EDP. That's quite close to SHMP's \$4,000 US. (OBP's estimated total cost, at late 2021 exchange rates, was about \$7,245 US.)

Both SHMP and Open Book Publishers position their workflows as fundamental, if not sufficient, for making books Open Access. However, they are also examples of making careful choices about what and what not to spend money on, whether that means production, publicity, or editorial expenses. (I exclude cutting back on inventory – how many books are printed – because while it saves money it can lead to higher per unit costs unless it also involves switching to a cheaper type of printing.) That's not new either. Academic publishers have long made indexing and providing interior permissions responsibilities of the author, not the press. In recent years, some publishers have also begun providing electronic instead of print copies of books for journal reviews. The logic is simple: e-books don't have per unit printing or mailing costs.

How these cost-cutting measures are received by authors and other stakeholders depends. Abandoning print review copies seems to be universally unpopular. Switching to new, lower-cost printers, POD or short-run digital rather than offset, can be close to invisible. Other decisions, like template covers or choosing not to purchase exhibit space at conferences, seem to fall somewhere in between. The situation is made more perverse, though, when those features of a book's publication – cover art, display at conferences, physical copies for publicity – get treated as proxies for the validity of work.

In a simpler world, academic publishers would be trying to satisfy authors and readers. In practice, the readers are not necessarily the buyers and the buyers not necessarily the readers. For authors who are also faculty, the opinions of their colleagues and university's administration can have more impact on their lives than who actually buys their books. Reviewers, review venues like journals or websites, and wholesalers and retailers are also affected by how books are published. The production and editorial decisions mentioned above have different impacts on these people and organizations.

Building Up

The opposite of cutting costs is trying to boost sales, with a higher number of copies sold making up for a lower price. Books [marketed in this fashion by academic presses](#) are often described as "trade" (which means they are intended for sale to bookstores, rather than libraries or other more specialized customers), or more often as "academic trade" and "crossover" titles. Some university presses are already [linchpins of their regional interest markets](#), taking advantage of their local name-recognition and non-New York addresses. Others have launched separate imprints, without the "University" name, to publish books they consider general interest.

The effort to boost sales, though, is not exclusive to crossover books. Every acquisitions editor has their list of suggestions on how to make a book more attractive to non-specialists: avoid jargon, use compelling real-world examples, reduce or eliminate footnotes, don't use too many caveats or qualifiers or cite other writers just to demonstrate they've been referred to. Every year, a few books find themselves readers outside an academic, or at least their anticipated specialized, audience. Sometimes you can figure out why, sometimes it seems like serendipity. The dependence of publishers on wholesalers who don't share much, if any, market information, means it's hard to tell exactly who buys what.

The publishers most successful at boosting sales are those who aren't intending to publish academic books in the first place: trade publishers. That market is dominated in North America by publishers associated with or owned by one of five, soon perhaps to be four, major conglomerates: Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon and Schuster. The Big Five offer scale undreamed of by even big academic publishers. Indeed, many academics publish their work with those presses, although those books are sometimes themselves criticized for not passing through peer review. In the process they are usually excluded from the entire calculus of "the price of academic books." What the Big Five publish reflects their expectations of what a wide audience will want to read, which has never been identical to what scholars think is worth studying

Is there more which can be done to cut the price of academic books? Absolutely. But the problem of academic book prices is insoluble if it excludes works that escape the boundaries of high unit cost/low unit sales. That problem will continue to demand serious thinking about what trade-offs meet the need for durable, accessible, informative books.

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