



The Association of American University Presses, Inc.

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AAUP ANNUAL MEETING, JUNE 1977

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A few weeks ago I was chatting with one of my close friends in this Association who is undergoing that now familiar ordeal, the budgetary review; and I said to him that I was somewhat surprised that the scrutiny to which his press was being subjected was of such stringency since it had just survived an equally rigorous zero-based fiscal analysis within the past couple of years. He replied--with, I thought, remarkable good cheer--that he guessed that the budgetary crisis has become a way of life in our profession; and I must suppose that he is right.

When I allude to our profession, I include the entire academic establishment of which we are a part; for I think that it is to this entire institution--that complex of teaching, research, and publication--that very serious problems are being posed at the present time.

Students of higher education--those social and behavioral scientists that make the system and institution of what they tend to call post-secondary education the object of their study and research--predict another major economic crunch in about four years' time, as shrinking enrollments, decreased revenues, and mounting costs combine, yet again, to produce that particular set of problems that have become so commonplace and that so very few of us were able to foresee in the 1950s and 60s, when it seemed that college enrollments must continue to increase exponentially if society's rapacious need for trained citizens was to be met, and that society would and must somehow find the way to finance what it could not do without. The arguments heard then were not unlike the ones being offered today by those who insist that society will discover new sources of energy simply because it cannot do with less than it now has but will not much longer have.

The universities that are prudent and that believe what they are told by these behaviorist prophets are preparing themselves for the crunch and seeking the efficient means of meeting it systematically. The search is under way for even more precise definitions of necessity, more exacting measures of satisfactory performance, more refined statements of purpose, and more exacting standards of excellence. They do so--these prudent and cautious institutions of higher education--in anticipation of that time, perhaps less than a half-decade ahead, when another round of tough decisions will inevitably have to be reached on what is, in fact, necessary, efficient, excellent, and consonant with the purposes and objectives of higher education--decisions, in essence, on what is eligible to survive, and what is not.

It is perhaps unfortunately true that the attempts of our universities to meet the crisis that has confronted them for the past half-dozen years have often only exacerbated what they sought to resolve, simply because the crisis was not fully anticipated and was, therefore, not adequately prepared for. For a crisis not expected inevitably induces a response that is, to a degree, arbitrary and that betrays a tendency to adopt a procrustean measure to decide what lines will be deleted from the budget: that which no longer fits is lopped off or is painfully stretched until it does. Urgency mandates such measures and obviates reflection. Decisions are summarily executed, and there is no appeal. Exigency is all.

Another unpleasantness certain to follow a crisis largely unforeseen, and confronted, therefore, without ordered thought and organized procedures, and with reliance placed almost solely on quantitative and not qualitative bases on which to make instant decisions, is that it puts each of the parties likely to be affected by whatever decisions are made immediately in an adversary position with regard to every other, as each is forced (or thinks he is) to compete for what have become limited institutional resources. Needless to say, the reduction of a university to an internecine contest among adversaries works to destroy collegiality, as the field of vision of each instant adversary is narrowed to the point that shared objectives informing the common enterprise are lost sight of or deliberately abandoned. Indeed, in the end, even the notion that there is a commonality of purpose and function can be in effect denied.

In view, then, of what can be the unfortunate consequences of a crisis poorly prepared for, we must be heartened that so many of the colleges and universities of the nation have embarked upon an effort, not yet fully concerted and developed perhaps, but designed to evaluate themselves in order to change themselves in response to an altered economy and an evolving society. If there is any cause for misgiving on the part of the university presses that a program of self-examination is under way, it is perhaps that we are as yet playing too small a part in it.

In the past, I fear, too many presses have too often become familiar with the process by which budgetary decisions are reached largely by suffering the consequences of those decisions after they have been reached. What we need to become familiar with, and what we need to take part in shaping, is the process itself, when it is being shaped by considerations less crude than the panic produced by the realization that if the money no longer comes from where it once did, it must ineluctably come from somewhere else. If we are not to be doomed always to endure the consequences of decisions that we do not make, then we must become participants in the decision-making process. And I would submit to you that we are, as scholarly publishers, superbly well qualified to do just that, and to render incomparable service thereby to our parent institutions in this extremely difficult period of self-assessment.

Accountability is the chic term used in the jargon of higher education to identify the explanation of, and justification for, its existence that a university offers its constituencies: the board of trustees that adopts its policies, the alumni that endow it, the legislators that subvent it, the students that attend it, and the faculty that operates it. If the

term itself is of fairly recent coinage, the process it identifies, and the responsibility it recognizes, are deeply ingrained in the practice of scholarly publishers; for we have long been accustomed to fully documenting our decisions--often in the absence of any externally imposed requirement that we do so. Behind every book that is published is a large file of scholarly readers' reports, editorial evaluations, cost estimates, and marketing projections, usually with several alternative formulations that have been devised to broaden the basis of judgement by covering different sets of contingencies, and so further explain and justify the judgement finally made. I suppose that we cannot claim to be unique among academic institutions in this regard, but it does seem to me that our habits in making ourselves accountable are, at the same time, more deeply ingrained and more constantly reappraised.

Because the records of our decision-making are replete, because the practice by which we hope to be accountable for our actions has been tested and re-tested and tested again, because the goals that have conditioned our habits have been so unremittingly scrutinized in the long series of our annual and regional meetings--because, in short, self-examination and self-criticism have become the way of our corporate life, and we have become so used to them and so good at them--we are extraordinarily well-equipped to assist our parent institutions in enunciating those policies and devising those procedures that will regulate the process by which the larger organization explains and justifies itself and all of its manifold parts, as an economic entity, to its several constituencies and to itself.

We must, then, I think, insinuate ourselves into whatever bodies, committees, or boards are charged with defining, in terms of the institutional budget and program, what are the objectives of the parent university, and by what qualitative criteria, consistent with these objectives, any child of the parent may be found deserving of material support. The theme is a commonplace: integrate the press with the institution whose name it bears. There was a time when it could be argued that the degree to which a press had gained independence from its university was the surest measure of its success. I suppose that to the extent that it ever was valid, the argument is still tenable. What is no longer credible, however, is that economic independence could ever satisfy us as our highest aspiration. For it seems, our present austerity aside, too radical and too mean a reduction of what is most complex and generous in our relations with our parent institutions and the spirit of interdependence should animate them.

The personnel of our university presses are schooled in the marketplace, in the techniques by which supply is made a function of demand ascertained in advance. They are skilled in communication, in the making public of information to a public previously identified and demographically understood. And most important of all, they are members of an international industry who have successfully organized themselves in order to assure their being provided with certain essential services beyond their individual means, and who, in having thus brought a dimension of international cooperation to their common enterprise have transcended parochial limitations, and have gained an understanding of scholarship as an institution, a system, and a process that not all of their academic colleagues can claim.

What are the dangers if we fail to successfully intrude ourselves into the decision-making process that will prescribe our universities' response to the impending crisis? The greatest, surely, is that we shall thereby incur the risk of seeing our fate pass into the hands of those who do not share our notions of what are the purposes of scholarly publishing and what are the standards of acceptable performance in serving those purposes.

And what are the criteria that might be established, whose rigorous if uninformed application could work against us? They could well derive, it seems to me, from certain attitudes that reflect, in turn, some set of fallacious assumptions about the nature and purpose of scholarly publishing. These range from the unexamined and easily dismissed (by us, at any rate) supposition that the press is an expensive luxury, whose existence is defensible in times of affluence when it serves as a symbol of the institution's standing as a first-class university but which must be dispensed with when times are hard, to the equally unexamined but not so easily dismissed notion that the press is, after all, a business, pure and simple, and should therefore be judged solely on the basis of its performance as a commercial enterprise. (It has often been pointed out, of course, in this latter connection, that the university presses have unwittingly promoted whatever tendency there is to judge them exclusively as financial institutions by their own scrupulosity in the maintenance of fiscal records and their insistence on sound business practice. Accountability, it seems, is not without its penalties.)

As of now, these attitudes toward scholarly publishing, and the rather imprecise and flaccid conceptions that inspire them, are just that--attitudes and conceptions. They have not yet been dignified, in any case that I know of, into institutional policy, though they have occasionally been invoked, or at least expressed, as a kind of instant policy, fabricated on the spot in order to defend a particular decision to take immediate if unwelcome action in circumstances of sufficient difficulty as to effectively resist any adduction of principle. But that they have not, in their present dynamic and unformed state, been so dignified affords no assurance that they will not eventually congeal into positions firmly held and stoutly defended; for they are attitudes that are commonly and widely held among our constituencies, though it is difficult to assess what are the generality and density of their distribution.

One position that seems to be becoming of increasing prevalence, perhaps only because its adherents are so vocal in promulgating their views and so militant in intent, is found among those who claim that the university press performs what is largely a service function, and that the presses collectively (and the emphasis is always on the collectivity) constitute (and the metaphor is virtually invariable) a conduit for the transmission of knowledge from one study, one carrel, or one laboratory into other studies, carrels, and laboratories. Proponents of this view of the presses and their function hold generally the opinion that the knowledge that the presses are charged with transmitting should pass through the conduit without any intervention on the part of the presses, which should limit their efforts to facilitating

and expediting the passage. (When the presses complain that what is consigned to the conduit in this metaphorical model is less knowledge than information, they are charged, not surprisingly, with being guilty, in yet another instance, of excessive meddling that serves only to slow the progress of the transmission.)

That the presses do intervene in the process, do tamper with the knowledge entrusted to their care, reshaping it, altering its substance, declining it, rejecting it, leads some who told this view of scholarly publishing to allege that, contrary to their assigned function and responsibility, the presses actually act to impede the flow of knowledge through the conduit whose volume is reduced thereby to a trickle. By his endless editorial fussing with commas, his eternal preoccupation with appearance over substance, the scholarly publisher, it is charged, perpetuates a disastrously compulsive pattern of behavior that requires him to produce ever more punctiliously edited books of elaborate and elegant design and costly materials that take inordinate amounts of time to produce and are priced far beyond the means of the users for whom they are intended. The familiar side-effects of this obsessive behavior are the marked (and lamented) reduction in the volume of published knowledge and the denial of publication to countless worthy books and monographs that are consigned to an undeserved oblivion.

I recognize that I have merely sketched in one combination what are articles of faith and tenets of belief that cohere in other syntheses. Perhaps only a professional behaviorist could isolate in schematic form what are the smallest units of ideation at work in the attitudes we encounter, and could combine and compound them into the near infinity of variations of which they are susceptible.

I recognize, too, that in the inchoate and dynamic and undifferentiated state in which they exist, they cannot be said to constitute a coherent critique of the scholarly presses that is based on a systematic examination of their operation; for much of what is alleged as deficient in our performance is based on mere impressions fostered by personal disappointment and disaffection. Much is patently contradictory, even within the compass of a single sentence. But I submit that there is the very grave possibility that these varying views, untenable as they are, will coalesce into a semblance of unity, and amalgamation that by some alchemy of determination can accommodate whatever is contradictory within it, and that this jerry-built consensus will dictate the criteria against which we, as scholarly publishers, will be measured and judged.

To prevent this we must work very hard to disabuse our detractors of the notion that our contribution to knowledge is not substantive, and must persuade them that we are more than mere purveyors and distributors of information, but are in fact originators and sharpeners of knowledge. That we are has only recently attracted the attention of science; and we find that we are the subject and object of a rapidly developing sociology of publishing that may require editors henceforth to regard themselves as "gatekeepers of knowledge." I suppose that such sustained and systematic study of our profession is long overdue, for the methods of scholarly

inquiry have not often been trained upon the publishers of scholarship; and I would hope that it will result in some remedy for that oversimplification from which we have suffered that tends to relegate our function to that of passive recipients of the products of the labors of others, who deliver it in finished form into our hands that it may be made public through operation of a process essentially mechanical, and that ignores, or is ignorant of, the amount of revision, restructuring, and reorganization that takes place within the scholarly publishing house. It must be brought to the attention of those who have forgotten or who somehow never knew that decisions to publish result from exchanges between the publisher and selected scholarly advisers, and between the author and his editor, and that in the reports that are filed and the letters that are written are debated, each time anew, what are the proper methods and objects of scholarly inquiry and what is society's need of its products. And these are precisely the questions that our universities must answer and that we must assist in answering--questions that we deliberate daily as preliminary to the making public of new knowledge whose substance is shaped and altered in the very process of its evaluation.

Knowledge as we know it as scholarly publishers is not information poured indiscriminately into a conduit that is metaphorical. It may not even turn out to be data that pass through an equally metaphorical gate that is symbolically kept. It is, certainly, what is issued to a public after evaluative procedures (themselves constantly monitored) have been duly observed by men and women of good conscience and abundant humility.

It is a convention of our language and culture to refer to a period of impending crisis as an exciting time. The custom may result from fidelity to our predominantly puritan ethic or from good aesthetics, depending upon one's temperament. I think that we are and have been in a trying time, and may well be in for a more demanding one. Our capacity for being excited by both our present condition and future prospect (and not to be merely disheartened and demoralized by them) will depend, I suspect, not only on what comes along to galvanize our emotions and shatter our nerves, but also on our acuity in identifying the larger dimensions and subtler complexities of the situation in which we do and shall find ourselves, and on our ability to seize for ourselves the means by which we can, to the extent necessary, control our own destinies.

We are called, I believe, to become partners in a major reevaluation of the form and content, system and process, means and ends, of what has been called higher education but which may no longer be adequately designated by that term. We cannot afford to stand outside the process, impatiently awaiting its outcome; for we are integral to it. We are richly possessed, I believe, in our individual talents and collective endowments, to exercise this responsibility. I hope that we shall discover also the will to seize the initiative that awaits the taking.