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Content and Collaboration I: A Case Study of Bringing an Institutional Repository and a University Press Together

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Content and Collaboration I: A Case Study of Bringing an Institutional Repository and a University Press Together

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Profile of a Merger: In 2009, the dean of libraries and the director of the university press at Utah State University proposed a departmental merger to their central administration. They argued that through restructuring reporting lines so that the press became a department of the library at least three important benefits could be achieved. First, the central administration was at the time hoping to cut costs by consolidating operations in various parts of the university; merging the staff reporting lines of the university press into the library offered an opportunity for consolidation. Secondly, integrating the press into the library promised it some relief from the structural vulnerability it had suffered historically as a department



among “other instructional activities” reporting directly to the provost. And for the university library, to move the press into a structural collaboration would bring an established publisher of e-books into the library, representing a steady source of book-length content for the digital institutional repository that the library was consciously building. In short order, and spurred by the impacts of the Great Recession on higher education, the merger was approved.

Goals, Resources, and Complications

The Utah State University library was an early adopter of the Digital Commons software published by bepress (originally Berkeley Electronic Press), and by 2008 it had committed long-term resources to developing an institutional repository. As part of its IR acquisitions strategy, the library invited the university press to submit copies of its published monographs to the IR for scanning and deposit. USU Press had been publishing electronic editions of its books routinely since the late 1990s, and had recently completed a project of scanning its earlier books. These electronic editions were targeted for the library market (very few personal e-readers were available in the 1990s), and were distributed through vendors such as ebrary, ebooks.com/EBL, netLibrary, and Questia. The format of those texts, of course, was often modified for delivery through the vendors’ proprietary platforms—always in flux. But the underlying files from the late 1990s forward were sturdy PDFs. (These had been “distilled,” in the early days, from postscript files, and later, as Adobe software developed, had been exported from typography directly to PDF as a routine part of the preprint production process.) Originally based on a handshake and good intentions, depositing these backlist e-books could become systematic with the reconfiguration of the university press as a division of the library.

The collaboration, however, faced a conundrum that pitted free and open circulation (one of the highest values of library culture) against the pragmatic reality of how university presses are funded—mostly through sales of what they publish. In the course of moving the press into the library, the university administration rescinded 40 percent of the press’s budget, yet did not adjust the library budget to balance that reduction. Sales revenue had been balancing the costs of book production and contributing to salaries for many years, but the central administration had funded a separate budget line since 1972 to support the primary salaries at the press. This is the typical arrangement for university press funding, and this is the budget that was reduced by USU administrators to help address cuts in state funding. Thus, simple arithmetic required that revenue from book sales be protected (or even increased) for support of the press and the new collaboration.

While the budget is always a concern at USU Libraries, generating self-support is normally *not* a concern. Moreover, the institutional repository is not conceived as a profit center. So a conundrum faced the USU libraries and press: the goal of enhancing the open-access IR with texts published by the press depended on protecting the sales revenue that financed creation of those texts. Accordingly, the library and press established a process of acquisition that would incrementally increase USU Press publications in the IR by focusing immediately on backlist titles (the older books) and gradually adding newer books.

In a normal year, a publisher's frontlist—books in their first 12 months of life—substantially over-represent themselves in a publisher's revenue and thus are critical to support of new books to be published in the following year. The backlist is also critical, but because it is a much larger group of books and each book contributes less and less individually to revenue over time, to move the backlist gradually into an open-access collection is a process with lower financial risk to the press. Accordingly, the USU library and press established an embargo period after the publication of a new book, during which time it would contribute its predictable best months of sales to support the press. After that period, the book would be deposited in the IR collection. Through this process, the collection of USU Press e-books began gradually growing within the IR.

The goal is to honor the traditional academic values of rigorous peer review and intellectual excellence, while particularly sponsoring work with a commitment to digital scholarship and expression.

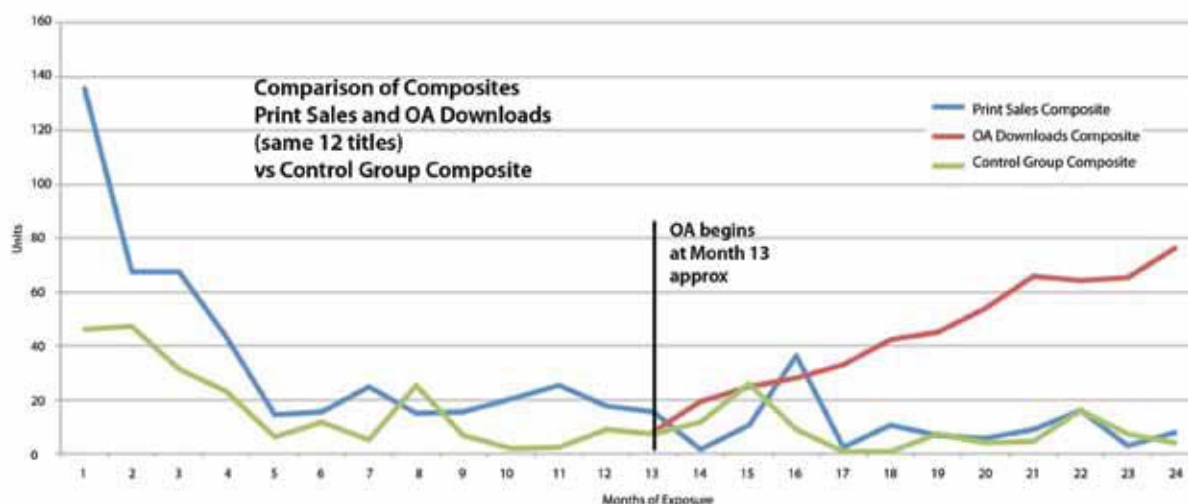
An additional acquisition for the IR was a series of born-digital publications published by USU Press under the imprint Computers and Composition Digital Press (CCDP). This series was established through collaborative efforts at a number of institutions, including University of Illinois, Ohio State, Miami University, and Illinois Institute of Technology. Committed to publishing innovative, multimodal digital projects, CCDP specializes in digital projects that cannot be printed on paper (they may include video, audio, database, and other elements not well suited for publication in print formats), but that have the same “intellectual heft” as a book. The goal is to honor the traditional academic values of rigorous peer review and intellectual excellence, while particularly sponsoring work with a commitment to digital scholarship and expression. In the context of traditional resistance among humanities faculty to granting tenure credit for digital publication (as was the case when the series was established), CCDP represents an important kind of scholarly activism—an effort to circulate the best work of digital media scholars in the field of English composition studies in a timely fashion and on the global scale made possible by digital distribution. These goals dovetail perfectly with the mission and ethos of the USU repository.

As the USU libraries integrated the USU press, library IT resources were found to establish a secure server to host the CCDP series. As an open access digital-only series, there was no revenue potential in these publications; thus, after initial expenses of IT development, of establishing referee, editorial, and production standards, and modest ongoing overhead expenses of monitoring the referee process, all work on CCDP volumes was handled by authors and volunteers from faculty at collaborating institutions. Accordingly, each CCDP volume is carefully reviewed by peer specialists in the field, with particular emphasis on the volume's

unique, original, and significant contribution to scholarship in literacy or digital literacy studies. This much is typical of university press publishing, and is especially important to authors whose career advancement depends on publication through a certified referee process. In addition, and of special interest to this series, is how well and to what extent a proposed volume exploits the potential of digital media to convey its content. Work that could easily be presented in print formats is discouraged, and priority is given to work that studies and depends in significant ways on video, audio, database, Web-based, or other digital content. The series editors negotiate a revision (or rejection) with the author, based on the referees' and the editors' own specific recommendations. With endorsements from the peer review process and from the editors, USU Press staff present the work to the USU Press faculty editorial board for approval, and then to the University Press of Colorado board of trustees for formal authorization of a contract for publication. The series, innovative in its own field, among repositories, and at university presses, now includes seven volumes—two of them award winners.

Early Metrics and Various Impacts

Response to the availability of USU Press books in the IR has affirmed both the value of the collaboration and the financial prudence of the strategy adopted. Usage reports generated by Digital Commons software show that full-text downloads from the accumulating content provided by USU Press since approximately the middle of 2010 now exceed 100,000. For a small library/press collaboration and experiment with an open access collection, we consider this a positive indicator of circulation and impact. At the same time, we feel it is important to monitor the reciprocity between this open access collection and the stream of retail publications that maintain it. There is obviously the potential for free downloads to overwhelm book sales and hence to collapse the financial support that is critical to the long-term existence of this part of the IR collection itself.



In late 2012, the authors of this article charted the individual download performance of several representative USU books in the IR collection and compared it to hard copy unit sales for the previous two years of those same books. What we conclude from this study is two-fold.

...we find no evidence that the open access presence of these books in the IR contributed to a decline in sales of the books measured.

First of all, we find no evidence that the open access presence of these books in the IR contributed to a decline in sales of the books measured. We attribute this lack of negative impact to our choice to embargo the books during their frontlist period. As implied above, the majority of sales for the typical scholarly monograph occur within its first year in the market; sales often drop dramatically through the second and third year, and then they plateau at a low level for the rest of the life of the book—this is the “long tail” that statisticians and marketing researchers discuss (e.g., Anderson, 2006). Our choice to begin the open access tenure of a book at the beginning of the book’s long tail was a strategy that we hypothesized would protect most of the book’s predictable revenue stream, yet still leave an impactful life for its later open-access circulation. Our study of these representative books seems to support our hypothesis.

The second major conclusion we draw from the study is that we see no evidence to support the prediction by some (and what seems a popular folk belief among librarians), that open access visibility will create increased demand and sales for the original book. (See especially Suber’s early thoughts on this—e.g., <http://bit.ly/oa-overview>.) In our study, although downloads through the IR were significant, ongoing, and international, no measurable increase occurred in book sales during the open access period we measured.

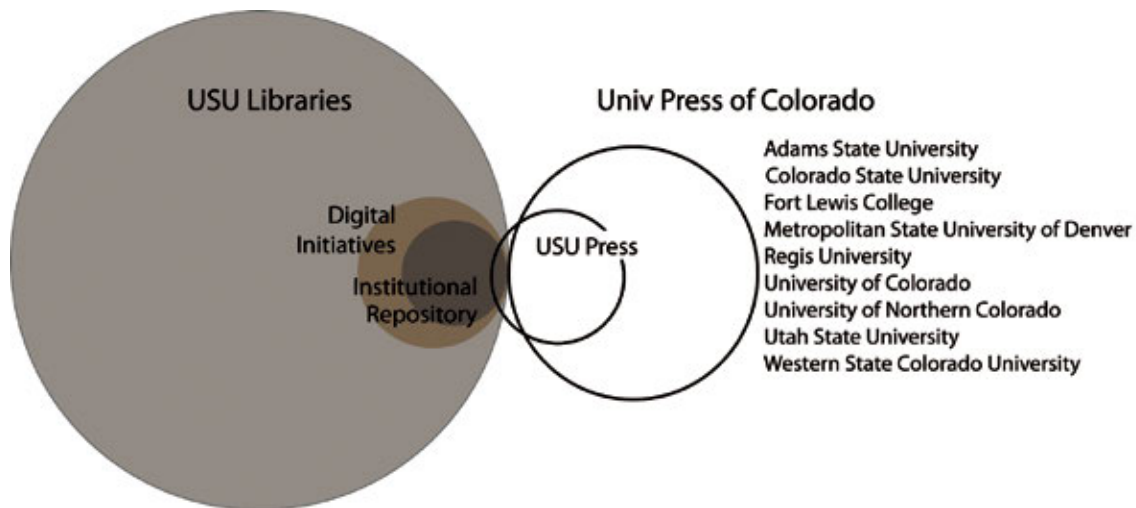
Our choice to begin the open access tenure of a book at the beginning of the book’s long tail was a strategy that we hypothesized would protect most of the book’s predictable revenue stream, yet still leave an impactful life for its later open-access circulation.

As for the digital series, the CCDP, where revenue is not critical, we are also achieving our goals. Metrics on hits for these volumes indicate a broad international audience, and the acceptance of digital publication for academic promotion credit seems to be well established at this point. In 2012, one of these volumes received a prestigious disciplinary book award, and in 2013, CCDP volumes garnered three more book awards. Of course, the series here is only one

contributor to a broad academic/cultural movement toward acceptance of refereed non-print publications, but for work like this to gain “book” awards—such traditional and conventional endorsements—from learned societies in the less than five years since the series was established, we feel indicates a watershed moment in the history of digital humanities publication.

The Once and Future Collaboration

The most recent chapter (one wouldn’t want to say the final chapter) in the case of the USU Libraries and USU Press collaboration brings a complication. By 2011, although the worst effects of the Great Recession were past, the USU central administration, in another cost-cutting move, elected to rescind the remaining budget that supported salaries at the university press—and again they chose not to balance this cut with an equivalent addition to the library budget. Thus, although the library could continue to provide office space and overhead, it did not have the budget to take on additional salaries. This is a complex narrative that has been described in another forum (Spooner, 2012), but, to our purposes here, we can report that the university press at USU was not ultimately shuttered as planned. Instead, the library and press found a new collaborator in the University Press of Colorado (UPC). In a multi-part agreement, UPC acquired copyrights to all USU Press content; remaining USU Press staff were terminated at USU and became employees of UPC; and all USU Press revenue was redirected to UPC. USU Press exists at this writing as an imprint of UPC, and publishes for the same disciplines in which it has long been established. UPC leadership has confirmed the relationship with USU Libraries and continues depositing USU Press titles into the USU repository.



As a consortium, UPC is not a division of one university but is collectively supported by nine separate institutions, now including USU. Thus, in a real sense, what began at USU as a relationship between one modest library and one small press at one land-grant university now represents a collaboration endorsed by a collective of institutions with a joint interest in seeing it succeed and evolve.

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