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Lifting All Boats: Fostering a Community of Practice for Student Publishers

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Abstract

Undergraduate and graduate students are increasingly being encouraged to work with faculty and researchers to generate traditional scholarship, as well as other types of projects that feature original content. Through this process, students are more frequently taking on roles as researchers, authors, and publishers. Student scholarship and student-run publications are valuable to the scholarly record, representing the nascent activities of the next generation of scholars, but also serving as an academic playground for emergent forms of publishing and media. Furthermore, students who manage publications gain practical skills that transfer to a variety of careers in academia and private industry. However, student publications are often struggling and are occasionally invisible. They face many of the same sustainability problems affecting the broader publishing industry, as well as unique problems inherent in student publications. These groups frequently need and often seek a combination of professional mentorship and a forum for peer group interactions to advance their publishing goals. At Georgetown University, Ohio University, and the University of Maryland, university presses and libraries have each leveraged their expertise and resources to research the student publishing landscape and develop a low-risk program to build a community of practice for student publications.

The Student Publishing Environment

Student publishers abound on college and university campuses (Metcalf, Gibson, & Lambert 2011). To accurately assess and serve these communities, we broadly define student publishing as continuing publications in print or electronic formats that are managed by undergraduate or graduate students. These publications may be scholarly or popular in nature, and the targeted audience may be the campus or a broader community. Such publications may be financially supported by student activity fees, academic department sponsorship, or completely self-sustaining. Ranging from student newspapers and yearbooks to academic journals and conference proceedings, student publications can carry decades of tradition or spring up overnight with four motivated students and a WordPress account.

Despite this diversity, many student publications face some common issues and can often toil in obscurity. They face many of the same sustainability problems affecting the publishing industry as a whole, as well as unique problems inherent in

student publications. Student publications inevitably suffer from regular turnover of the staff as students graduate and move on, taking valuable organizational memory, enthusiasm, and sometimes the literal or virtual keys to the operation with them. In addition, student publishers can operate in isolation from their academic community and their campus peers. This leads to challenges when soliciting submissions from limited potential author pools and limits the publication's ability to reach readers and recruit student staff. Finally, the long-term financial challenges of publishing are complicated by the variety of funding models for student publishers—whether the publication is supported through some degree of university funding or relies exclusively on revenue generated by sales, subscriptions, or advertising.

The value of student newspapers and publications has long been understood by archivists and librarians as an essential component of the historical and scholarly record of the university, and such activity confers several advantages on student publishers. Student scholarship and student-run publications are an important part of the scholarly record, representing the nascent activities of the

next generation of scholars. These students take an active role in vital aspects of scholarly publishing. Furthermore, students who manage a publication gain practical skills that can transfer to a variety of careers in academia and private industry, such as demonstrated abilities in project management, marketing, financial management, design and layout, and business development. Considering that many institutions are facing the competing goals of enriching the academic experience for students by providing them with active roles in the production of scholarship, as well as ensuring those students leave college with concrete job skills, student publishing presents a unique opportunity for engagement by libraries and university presses.

University presses and libraries often possess the very expertise, business knowledge, archival resources, and scholarly background from which many student publications may benefit. Furthermore, student publishers are in many ways prime candidates to take advantage of services such as open journal publishing, scholarly communication consulting, and institutional repository submissions, developing relationships with those communities raises the profile of these initiatives. University presses also stand to gain from engaging their campus's students in novel ways, with increased awareness of the press among students and faculty, prospective collaborations with compatible student publications, and a pool of students who may pursue a career in publishing. Most importantly, both librarians and scholarly publishers understand the intrinsic value of a professional network of peers for professional development, and with this in mind, fostering a local community of passionate student publishers may serve to elevate student publishing as a whole.

Institutional Perspectives

Georgetown University

Georgetown University (GU) boasts an impressive variety of student publications on campus. Among these publications are current affairs and public policy journals that reflect the traditional strengths of the university, an online peer-reviewed communications journal, a journal dedicated to publishing accessible science writing, and a literary magazine.

GU's Center for Student Engagement has a dedicated group of students, faculty, and staff who serve as an advisory and funding structure for many Georgetown University media organizations, known as the Media Board. To secure funding, media groups must be registered with the University's Student Activities Council as student clubs and must produce media primarily for GU's student community. Scholarly journals run by students are often supported by academic departments or schools or in campus administrative units.

Student journalists and undergraduate researchers receive some support on campus, as well as additional resources or formal associations. However, many student publications do not fit comfortably in either of those camps.

When the Georgetown University Press (GUP) and the Georgetown University Library (GU Library) worked together to complete an environmental scan of student publishers, there appeared to be an overall lack of connection between peer publishers on campus. In addition, while there were prominent resources for tenure-track faculty available via the Office of Scholarly Publications, the student research community does not have an office dedicated to publishing.

The publications on GU's campus are interdisciplinary, diverse, ambitious, and eager to contribute to the conversation in areas that range from scholarly research to creative writing, from pop culture to politics.

In response to this need, the GU Press and the GU Library developed a program called Hoyas Publish. The goals at the outset were modest:

- Chart the student publishing landscape at Georgetown University.
- Create a website for the program with a list of resources on campus and a directory of active student publications.
- Determine the format of events, invite student publishers to participate, and continuously assess the program's success based on student feedback and participation.
- Identify additional on-campus partners to help promote and grow the program.

Two complementary events make up Hoyas Publish: A roundtable of student publishers, librarians, and GU Press staff members, and a public, walkable fair for student publications. The roundtable discussion is an opportunity for student publishers to meet their peers and take part in an informal discussion of the practical tasks and challenges for any and all types of publishers. The publications fair enables student to showcase their publications, solicit contributions, and recruit new staff and readers. Over two years, this event has been most successful when it took place outside in one of the quads, weather permitting.

By offering a digital and physical space for student publishers to find each other and discover resources that help support their publishing goals, we hope to contribute to the overarching departmental and institutional goals. For GU Press, this program extends the experiential learning that the Press provides via internship positions that GU students can apply for annually. Both GU Press and GU Library seek to respond and contribute to GU's institutional goals of providing students with opportunities to acquire practical skills that prepare them for the job market and assisting undergraduates in proactive engagement with scholarly communications on campus and beyond. In addition, as members of the publishing ecosystem (both academic and trade), the GU Press and GU Library also share a common desire to teach copyright, publishing best practices, and scholarly communications methods and ethics to student publishers. Ultimately, inspiring students to consider how they might use their degrees and the practical expertise they have developed to pursue careers in a spectrum of jobs related to content, media, and communications.

Ohio University

Each semester, Ohio University Press offers a seminar aimed primarily at graduate students and new faculty that provides information for authors working on scholarly publications. These seminars have proven popular and successful, even drawing overflow audiences. However, they failed to reach undergraduate students involved in publishing, and the Press sought additional opportunities to encourage participation in student-run, student-directed publishing projects at the university.

In March 2016, Ohio University Press and the Ohio University Libraries cohosted the first annual

Bobcats Publish, a student-publishing roundtable and fair inspired by Hoyas Publish at Georgetown. The goal was to play a small but unique role in nurturing a new generation of responsible, informed, effective publishers. Students discussed their publishing experiences in a roundtable format, and the fair following the discussion highlighted publishing opportunities on the Ohio University campus. Students from regional campuses were encouraged to attend.

The event was not structured as a "how to" but rather as an opportunity to create a community of student publishers. Toward this end, a student publisher joined the Press and Libraries as a partner in hosting and planning the event. The Press promoted the event among faculty and students and contributed marketing materials such as formatted fliers and a poster. The library publicized the event to all campuses and provided a venue and refreshments. Campus-wide e-mails went out to faculty and students, though due to challenges with campus e-mail alerts and systems, students received duplicate messages, which may have affected attendance. Extended invitations were sent to those who responded to the informational e-mail.

Around 20 students attended the event, representing publications in the literary, political, and cultural fields, and the discussion at the roundtable did not flag. Student-driven discussion lasted for 90 minutes, with only a few copyright-related comments from the Press director.

Ohio University is home to the Scripps School of Journalism, where there is a robust system of funding and mentoring for student publications. Future forums would ideally include journalism students. One participant, the publisher of a student lifestyle magazine, speculated that students may have been unsure about what the forum had to offer them. He also suggested that the timing in the spring was not ideal, as journalism students would have made their decisions on what publications to work on in the fall. Next year, the Press plans to recruit representatives from some of the established or new publications affiliated with the Scripps School and other programs and is considering holding the event early in the fall semester.

Learning about the ways in which professionals compete and collaborate, show leadership, and contribute to a vibrant culture of sharing is a

valuable part of what the forum accomplished, one on which future meetings can build. The Press hopes that connections made at the initial forum can be sustained and that subgroups might reach out to one another and share information, but it has been suggested that meetings once a semester might be more effective in creating such a community.

Student Publisher Reflections From Ohio University. Ohio University hosts a lively but scattered landscape of student publications. Undergraduates produce journals, magazines, and websites on a breadth of subjects. However, dialogue rarely occurs across niches, which are often segregated by school or department, if the publication is formally affiliated with the University at all. Bobcats Publish attempted to unify these productions on the simple grounds that they are student-made work at a single university. Participants identified similarities regarding their challenges and ambitions in an era when the rules of publishing are still uncertain.

The need to present a subject from an individual perspective unique to time and place has motivated young publishers for decades. A concern for legitimacy accompanies this spirit, as categories like *ephemera* and *juvenilia* often swallow student publications. Bobcats Publish attendees largely agreed that a way to build legitimacy and permanence is to work in print. This is where mentorship between publications and university presses is beneficial. Presses can help students transcend the free library printer by providing educational sessions on fiscal printing and intellectual property.

Further, there can be greater collaboration between student publications and university libraries. One problem that innovative young publishers face is that publications die easily, new ones are difficult to find, and it is nearly impossible to revive deceased ones. If archivists could work with student publishers and devote library space to publications beyond old editions of the college newspaper, they would legitimize the early work of the next generation of cultural producers and provide a reference point for future publishers. Ultimately, though, presses and libraries should collaborate with publications only with the intent to foster a more autonomous and

collaborative student community that eventually mentors itself.

Digital developments have surely increased the number of student publications across the country. This increase has come with the price of alienation between publishers, as specialties gain significance while centralized hosts lose importance. Publishing fairs and the involvement of presses and libraries can foster a more collaborative student publishing environment, as students could exchange ideas that will shape 21st-century publishing.

University of Maryland

At the time of this writing, the University of Maryland (UMD) Libraries is in the early stages of planning for Terps Publish in the spring of 2017. Like Ohio and Georgetown, UMD has a robust yet decentralized student publishing community that could benefit from structural community support.

As at Georgetown and Ohio, the approximately 30 known and active student publications on campus produce content in a variety of categories. Interestingly, most student publishers at UMD seem to be undergraduates.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most student publications at UMD are publishing electronically, though a modest number do produce print publications as well.

The University of Maryland does not have a university press, so the Libraries must seek different campus and community partners as points of engagement. Taking lessons from the experiences of Georgetown and Ohio, the Libraries plans to approach student publications as active participants in the planning and organizing of the event. For the planning of the fair, UMD's McKeldin Library has the physical advantage of a central campus location and is already an established location for student groups to table and organize. The cross-departmental team at UMD encompasses the Digital Programs and Initiatives department, University Archives, and the Libraries' Communications group. Each of these groups brings respective strengths regarding services, technological tools, campus and community connections, and communications reach.

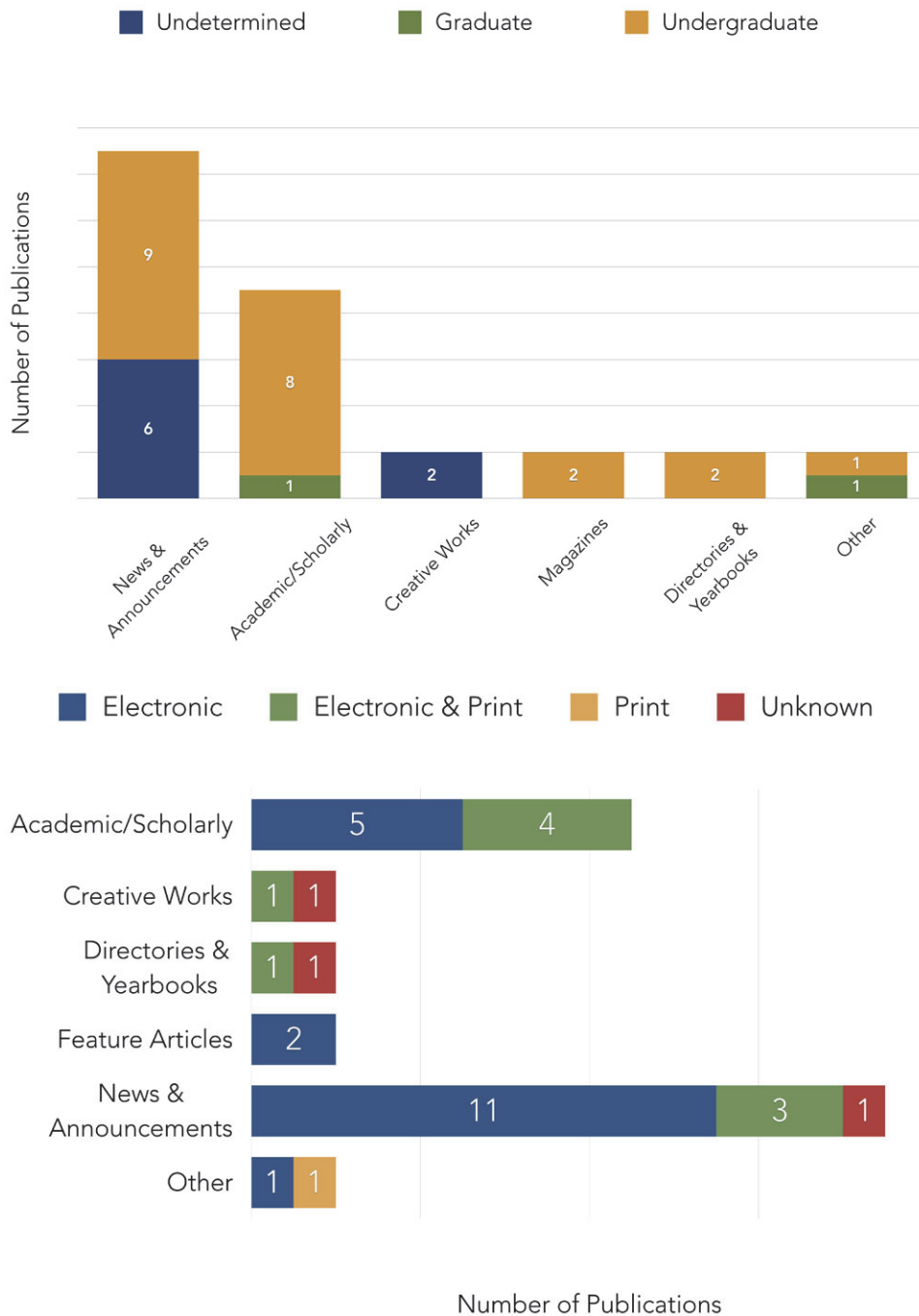


Figure 1. Categories of active student publications at the University of Maryland.

Opportunities and Areas of Further Development

There are many easily identified opportunities for further development of the student publishing program on university campuses, including all three described in detail here. These can be educational in

nature, such as through the development of formal workshops, hosted speaker series, or a special topics course in publishing. Each institution will have unique opportunities or challenges to implementing such a program, most notably the usual suspects of time, funding, available expertise, and bureaucracy.

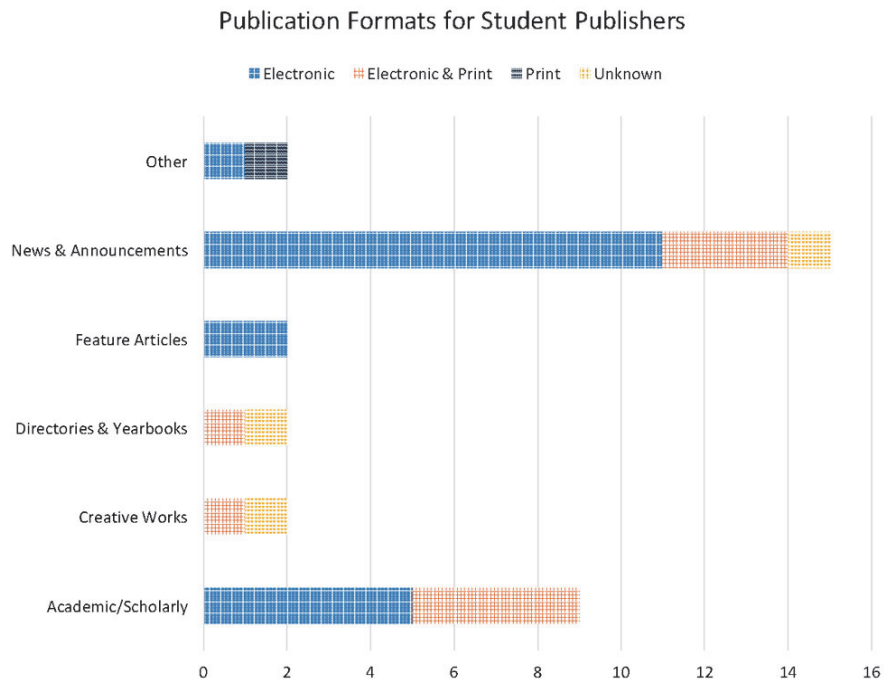


Figure 2. Print and electronic formats by categories of student publications at the University of Maryland.

However, libraries and publishers can also advance student publishing programs by strengthening the networks between students, the scholarly community, and the publishing industry, and these activities may take a variety of forms. These may be formal networks between student publications at multiple institutions, mentoring and internship programs designed to connect young publishers to their industries, sponsoring attendance at professional conferences, and much more.

Conclusion

Publishing is an integral part of the intellectual and creative activity of a university, from promotion,

tenure, and academic research to news, views, literature, culture, and politics. It's professional, intellectual, political, personal, and practical. It's about having a message, taking risks, having the courage of your convictions, and then finding your voice. Student publishing varies greatly. Some publications last for 100 years; some manage only one issue. At Georgetown, Ohio University, and the University of Maryland, these ongoing collaborations are a way to foster this work, through outreach and support, and serve our communities.

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