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The Rice University Press Initiative:
An Interview with Charles Henry
by Chad Trevitte and Charles Henry

In 1999, the Modern Language Association (MLA) established an ad-hoc committee to investigate the current state of academic publishing in the United States. The committee's report (Ryan et al. 2002) confirmed a troubling state of affairs that will be all too familiar to many of our readers: While universities continue to maintain the same expectations for publication from their nontenured faculty members, the steadily rising cost of printing—and the steadily dwindling funds for presses in university budgets—have created a situation in which fewer venues for academic scholarship are available. The same year the committee report was released, MLA President Stephen Greenblatt wrote an open letter to association members (2002) calling for their ideas for how to address this problem, and in 2003 the "crisis in academic publishing" became the main topic at the annual MLA convention. Since then, the University of Idaho Press has ceased operations, other presses such as the University of Georgia Press and the University of Iowa Press have experienced sharp budget cuts, and Northeastern University Press has become absorbed as a subsidiary of the University Press of New England (Monaghan 2004; University of Iowa News Services 2005; UPNE 2004).

More recently, the nonprofit group Ithaka has released a report entitled "University Publishing in a Digital Age" (Brown, Griffiths, and Raskoff 2006). That document concludes that while digital publishing remains a crucial means for university presses to continue their operations, too many university administrators have failed to understand or recognize this need at their own institutions (cf. Howard 2007; Jaschik 2007). Unfortunately, the creativity and insight of our academic scholars has not been met with the needed degree of innovation in the field of academic publishing.

It was with this concern in mind that I asked Charles Henry, president of the Council on Library and Information Resources and publisher of the Rice University Press (RUP), to discuss the recent rebirth of RUP as the nation's first entirely digital university press (Rice News and Media Relations 2006). Since the Rice initiative holds much potential as a model for other university publishers, I was interested to hear more about his experience as the key leader of this project.

Chad Trevitte (CT): Could you begin by telling us a bit about the circumstances that led to the decision to go digital at Rice University Press?

Charles Henry (CH): In my final years at Rice, I taught a course on medieval art and literature with an art historian. Through this collaboration I learned firsthand of the often dire circumstances in academic publishing pertaining to art history: Fewer and fewer university presses were publishing in the field; fewer and fewer titles appeared annually; and many of the presses chose to publish established scholars, further limiting the opportunity for younger scholars to publish. This in turn seriously constricted their chances for advancement since most schools weigh book publications when considering tenure and promotion. The business model of academic presses, in this instance, was locking out the next generation of scholars and in effect impeding the intellectual evolution of an important field. Over time, it became clear that most of the humanities disciplines are similarly constrained.

CT: What were the most significant obstacles or challenges you had to meet in the early stages of this initiative?

CH: Developing a convincing business plan. Since this was new and had not been tried, there were really no models to point to for comparison. We created a multi-tiered solution, which included publishing original

works and partnering with existing scholarly presses to republish their out-of-print books as well as new, original manuscripts that qualify for publishing but that the presses cannot afford to print. At some university presses, 40% or more of the rejected manuscripts would otherwise be published were it not for budgetary constraints. The flexible model we have adopted thus serves our own needs while allowing us to serve the needs of other presses as well.

I should also note that the step towards digitization has been very economical in terms of its start-up costs. Prior to launching this initiative, Rice University Press was no longer in business; the plan essentially required us to rebuild the organization from from the ground up. When I first announced the project last year, I anticipated that the initial cost of development would be ten times less than what it would be if we were adopting a traditional, print-based model of production (Rice News and Media Relations 2006). Since then my experience with the project has only confirmed this to be true. This relatively low start-up cost has been further reduced by a grant we recently received from Hewlett-Packard, which further confirmed the viability of our business plan (Dorsey 2006).

CT: What are the economic advantages for university presses that may be considering a similar step towards an electronic format?

CH: The traditional production model in academic publishing has put university presses in a very complex bind. On the one hand, they have expensive contracts with printers, high shipping costs, a large marketing operation, and staff who perform a variety of tasks—peer review coordination, editing, formatting, graphic design, and other functions necessary for bringing a book to press. On the other hand, they usually have large inventories of unsold books, and their incoming sales revenue is not nearly enough to meet their costs of production. Even in the best of circumstances, a university press that publishes books that pay for themselves will publish a substantially larger number of books that do not. This of course requires the presses to rely on university support in their financing, and in recent years it has become clear that such support is dwindling even as production costs are steadily rising.

The logic of what we have done is therefore intuitive: We have unbundled nearly every aspect of the print-based model and either automated it or outsourced it. First, we have adopted a technological infrastructure that has allowed us to streamline the peer review process while significantly reducing the amount of time and energy otherwise required for the editing, formatting, and design of the text in its digital form. Once the final version has been digitized and released, it will be available either in electronic format or in print format. In turn, all of our printing, mailing, and financial transactions with the buyer are done by QOOP , the print-on-demand company we have partnered with. This outsourcing of production and distribution allows us to devote our resources almost exclusively to editorial tasks. We essentially will retain all the advantages of the traditional publishing model—peer review by an editorial board and quality control by an in-house staff of copyeditors and designers—while minimizing the financial burdens of production.

The challenge for the academic presses is to develop a means to migrate from their current business model to one that can include digital objects and outsourced functions. We will announce next month a partnership with Stanford University Press in the hope that such a transitional process can be achieved and replicated, at a considerable savings of cost and effort. I would like at some point to see the Rice University Press as an agent that supports dozens of university presses.

CT: Could you say a bit more about your software infrastructure? What are the advantages of this system for meeting the larger goals of the press?

CH: Connexions is the platform we use. The best way to understand Connexions is to peruse its Web site. It was originally created for modular courseware creation and maintenance. It engages communities of researchers to build and then reconstitute the conceptual elements of a course into customized, unique offerings that take advantage of the pooled expertise. It is a highly flexible, powerful set of tools now used across the planet. We easily adopted this for the Rice University Press since books, or book-like objects, are

inherently modular (chapters). As importantly, Connexions is a multimedia content management system, so images, moving images, graphs, and audio files can be embedded. We felt this alone could have enormous effect on new kinds of scholarly argument and intellectual strategies that get lost or "flattened" in a printed volume. Connexions also allows us to automate the entire process chain from receipt of manuscript, to peer review, to mark-up and layout. Indices, chapter headings, tables of content—these are also automatically created.

In a digital publishing venture such as ours, the cost savings this software provides are considerable. For example, it can reduce production costs to such an extent that a hardback textbook in engineering can be published and sold at a price of $22 instead of $122 (Connexions n.d., "Connexions and Open Access Education," ¶ 20). In the case of art history—the current field of specialization at Rice University Press—we can expect comparable savings when publishing texts that contain color photographs and other illustrations. In turn, the software will also make it possible for published authors to revise their digital books for republication in subsequent editions; indeed, one of the many advantages of digital publishing is that it allows current scholarship to be updated much more easily and cost-effectively than is currently the case in print-based publishing.

CT: I see that Connexions is an open source software platform. Does this mean that other academic publishers that are considering digitization will be able to adopt this technology—and thus reduce their start-up costs? What sort of arrangements would the publisher need to make to use of this technology?

CH: Connexions is free for any publisher to use—and more or less usable without assistance—as far as publishing a digital version of a given book is concerned. When it comes to making a printed book from the Connexions version, a publisher would have to work out an agreement with Connexions regarding the distribution of revenues. Meanwhile, the digitized version would be on the Connexions server, accessible through a Connexions portal page that appears on the publisher's site. (For an example, see "Art History and Its Publications in an Electronic Age" [2006], a digital publication currently available at the Rice University Press Web site.) As far as rights are concerned, the publisher/author would have the copyright, but all work published on Connexions is licensed under Creative Commons, thus allowing free reuse and modification for noncommercial purposes as long as the original author or authors are given proper attribution. For more hands-on work from Connexions (for example, getting a programmer to fix something or to add a feature a publisher needs), the publisher would have to work out an agreement with Connexions, paying for that service. Another way to leverage Connexions to maximum advantage is to form a partnership with Rice University Press as a way of gaining better access to the platform while relying on the assistance and expertise of our staff.

CT: So if other publishers wanted to rely on Connexions as their platform—with or without a partnership with Rice University Press—they would need to allow some measure of free access to their publications. In your own digital publications, it seems that you do not anticipate too substantial a loss of sales revenue in this arrangement.

CH: Our thinking is that making the book freely available in digital form will actually raise rather than lower sales. But of course we don't know one way or the other at this point. It's basically an experiment. But the books will be available in printed form at prices reasonable enough, I think, to justify buying them. We're pretty sure that the best advertisement for the book is the book itself—that the more of it people can preview, the more copies we can sell. But as I noted earlier, our business model will take about three years to prove itself, so we'll see. Meanwhile, even for those publishers who are unwilling to take the step towards Creative Commons licensing, the step towards digitization still holds substantial advantages simply in terms of reducing the production costs associated with the traditional print-based model.

CT: I suspect that for many university presses, there still may be some hesitation to adopt an electronic format in light of the prestige that print-based publications continue to have for many

sectors of the academy. What measures do you believe are most important in addressing this concern?

CH: This is a long-standing, entrenched bias. As an academic culture we invest far too much weight and warrant in formats. It is widely held that a book published as a digital object (even with an option to print it) somehow lacks the credibility and authority of a printed work. I have reached a point where this argument makes no sense to me. Three conditions come to mind that might bring about a change of attitude. The first is to admit that the traditional business of printing monographs is strangling the intellectual vitality it is meant to foster and promote. The second is to recognize that as long as academic publishing is grounded in established processes of professional peer review and quality control, the final product holds the same value for its audience regardless of whether it is published in print form, digital form, or a digital form with print-on-demand. The third is to change the benchmarks of promotion and tenure to allow for more hybrid types of publication in response to this.

CT: What sort of reception or feedback has this project received so far from other members of the Rice University community—or from other sectors of the higher education community at large?

CH: The reception has been a mix of enthusiastic support and articulate skepticism. I appreciate both stances. We have yet to prove our business model, which will take about three more years. I spoke this summer at the Association of American University Presses (AAUP) national meeting and was very pleased at the high level of interest and thoughtful conversations that followed. Without question, everyone is aware of the problems bedeviling academic publishing. Rice University Press was established as an agent of change, not to compete with existing presses. Our future lies in collaboration.

CT: What lies ahead for the press at this stage? Are there any new developments or improvements planned for the future?

CH: While art history currently remains the primary focus at Rice University Press, we hope to incorporate a broader range of academic fields and subjects as we continue to expand and establish new partnerships. The collaboration with Stanford University press that I mentioned earlier is the most important development in this regard.

In turn, we are also working closely with the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), an umbrella organization of over 70 scholarly communities that will be affected by any substantive change in publishing models. Leading up to and following the publication of their report on the subject, *Our Cultural Commonwealth* (2006), ACLS has been engaged with the issue of cyberinfrastructure as it pertains to the humanities disciplines. My work with the Council focuses on the implications of new technology for traditional humanistic scholarship: the new methodologies that may emerge, new avenues of research, and new methods of scholarly communication. Rice University Press is seen as an instance of cyberinfrastructure that could have profound effects on the way scholarly information is obtained, queried against, and promulgated.

Meanwhile, we already have a project nearing completion that exemplifies how digital publishing can provide access to valuable scholarly work that would otherwise remain unavailable. Next month, Rice University Press will publish a book that could be a major contribution to medical diagnostics: *Images of Memorable Cases: 50 Years at the Bedside* (2007). (A brief note to your readers: The images in this digital book may not be for the squeamish!) This book, which was termed "groundbreaking" by many of the physicians who reviewed the draft, was reviewed positively for publication by a world-renowned press last summer but was then rejected because of its fundamental reliance on images—nearly 200 of them—which, in turn, need to be of fairly high resolution and good color to be useful. The press's business office said it was too expensive to publish. Since these issues are precisely the ones that constrain publishing in art history, we decided to take it on. It will be sold at a fraction of the cost of a traditionally printed book awash in color images—other publishers calculated that they could only sell the book for approximately $230 in a clothbound edition and $170 in a paperback edition whereas we will be able to publish these editions at half the price. The Press will

set aside a small percentage of the book's profits for its distribution in remote and developing parts of the world.

CT: How can our readers learn more about new developments at Rice University Press?

CH: The Rice University Press Web page is the best place to keep abreast. I also greatly appreciate your interest in the project and the opportunity to discuss its facets.

CT: We appreciate your time as well, Charles, and we hope that your leadership in this area inspires other university administrators to take similar steps to preserve their campus presses. Thank you for sharing your valuable experience with our readers.

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