Scholarly Publishing across the Disciplines: 
*Interviews with Geneseo Faculty*

**Part V: Faculty comments on peer review**
By Sue Ann Brainard

**Overview**
During our interviews with Geneseo faculty, we asked no direct questions about peer review, but the topic was mentioned by thirty of the eighty-seven faculty we interviewed (9 in the Sciences, 10 in the Social Sciences, and 11 in Humanities). Most often, peer review came up in responses to the questions we asked concerning how publishing output was valued in their disciplines and it also came up in responses to our questions about where and how faculty choose to publish. Many times, it was mentioned in relation to the tenure and promotion process.

**Quality Control**
Peer review exists as a way to ensure that the articles in academic journals are of the highest quality, and is therefore used by tenure and promotion committees across the nation to judge the quality of a scholar's work. It is not surprising, then, that our interviews at Geneseo are full of comments like, "To count, it must be peer reviewed," and, "To be valued, it must be peer reviewed." Many stated that publishing in a peer-review journal is always the top priority, in fact, some said that nothing else mattered. One noted, "The President and the Provost view peer review as the best evidence of scholarly activity."

**Cracks in the Peer Review System**
Our conversations with faculty also reveal dissatisfaction with peer review and how it works, as well as regrets that the tenure and promotion process relies so heavily on peer review instead of measuring the impact of a scholar’s research within the field. One Geneseo professor reflected a growing concern in academia by questioning the integrity of the peer review process, commenting, "Good researchers want critical reviewers to make their work better, reviewers who ask tough questions" about the research. Others complain at length about the slow turnaround for publishing articles in peer review journals, with huge backlogs of articles preventing them from sharing their research with people who need it. One reported that some peer review journals are "just unprofessional," with poor communication between authors, editors, and reviewers, and non-constructive reviewer’s notes. One interviewee was disturbed by the "high value placed on peer-reviewed journals that no one reads." These comments by Geneseo faculty reflect the growing national debate in academia about bias and other abuses in the venerable peer review process.

**A Hurdle to Jump**
One theme emerging from interviews with tenured faculty was that only after tenure did they have the freedom to pursue less-formal publishing venues that provide a wider readership than
peer review journals. Numerous professors mentioned the post-tenure freedom to pursue more “suitable” publishing options. Another mentioned getting a “wider readership” of their ideas in non-peer reviewed venues once tenure was achieved. There were numerous comments about waiting until after tenure to make research available to the right audience, “getting my research heard,” and reaching the general reader; these can be seen as criticisms of peer review as well as the tenure and promotion process. One professor mentioned that while non-peer reviewed online projects are great for sharing research with the world, the tenure and promotion committee does not value those. Several professors were excited about new digital projects they had been asked to participate in; one faculty member, invited to write a blog for a prestigious organization, says, “I am excited, but it is not peer review, so it will not help my reputation among my peers.” Another faculty member spoke of how important it was to share research with the general public, exposing readers to what humanities scholars are doing, saying, “This is a revolution I want to be a part of.” Indeed, open access and digital projects increase potential readership of a scholar’s ideas by leaps and bounds, but the pressure placed on scholars to publish in peer reviewed journals, as well as a failure to recognize that some of these new publishing avenues are peer reviewed, means that vulnerable new scholars shy away from these opportunities. In multiple interviews we saw excitement about digital projects dampened by the need to get published in peer reviewed journals.

Conclusion

New ways to improve the peer review process are being tested in academic publishing, especially in the sciences. Geneseo faculty, along with the President, the Provost, and the tenure and promotion committees, should be ready to discuss the value of crowd-sourced reviewing, post-publication open reviews, and the publishing of reviewer names alongside the authors’ names. While many argue that the peer review process is the best alternative academia has at present to ensure quality in publishing, it should be remembered that peer review evolved over time. We saw evidence that many Geneseo authors are ready to embrace and cultivate changes in scholarly publishing, resulting in faster publication times, less bias, more support for authors, and more rigor while increasing readership of scholars’ ideas.

There are several ways Milne Library can help faculty when it comes to the peer review process and the increased dissemination of a scholar’s ideas. Librarians can consult with un-tenured faculty who need to publish in peer-reviewed journals but who also fear that their work is not getting a wide-enough readership; there may be open access peer-review journals in the field which may accomplish both goals. Milne Library can also host discussions and workshops for new faculty on what to expect from their first foray into the peer review process, either as an author or as a reviewer. For Geneseo scholars who are interested in starting their own peer reviewed open access journal, Milne Library hosts several journals already and is ready to consult with faculty on future projects.

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