

# THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

## PUBLISHING

# Proposed Cut of Stanford U. Press's Subsidy Sparks Outrage

By *Alexander C. Kafka* | APRIL 26, 2019

✓ PREMIUM



Stanford U. Press

Alan Harvey, director of Stanford U. Press

Stanford has the world's third-largest university endowment, valued in 2018 at \$26.5 billion. Yet it is crying poverty to explain why it can no longer provide yearly \$1.7-million subsidies to its acclaimed press. The announced cut, which became public in a Faculty Senate meeting on Thursday, has confounded and outraged faculty members and other press supporters, and is seen by many as a backhanded way of closing the scholarly publisher.

"This is a reprehensible moment for one of the richest universities in the world and a diminution of intellectual inquiry. It really boggles the mind," said Woody Powell, a Stanford sociology professor, a former member of the press's editorial board, and a current adviser to it.

Whether or not the Stanford administration intends to strike the press's death knell, said Peter Berkery, executive director of the Association of University Presses, "what's being proposed will have that effect. There's no right-sizing ... you're

eliminating the press."

A week ago, Stanford's provost, Persis Drell, presided over a meeting of the university's humanities and social-science chairs, said faculty members. She informed them that an advisory budget committee had decided to discontinue the \$1.7-million subsidy (really \$1.5 million in available funds, said the press's director, Alan Harvey) that the administration had allotted during each of the last three years. Drell asked those present if they thought the money would be better spent if it went instead to graduate fellowships, which have been limited in recent years.

## The Future of the University Press

Publishers, press directors, editors, scholars, and other insiders share their views on the state and future of academic publishing.

- What is the biggest challenge in university-press publishing?
- Do we need more university presses? Fewer? ✓ PREMIUM
- Acquisitions editors are overwhelmingly white. How does this affect what gets published? ✓ PREMIUM



The department chairs puzzled over what they saw as a non sequitur, which they said was like asking them to choose between campus security and the English department. Moreover, they observed, the amount would support only three fellowships.

Worried emails started circulating, and by Thursday hundreds of signatures had been gathered on letters in support of the press from the anthropology, English, history, and other departments, the law school, and other groups. The letters object

to the cut, to the abruptness and narrow circulation of the decision, and to ostensibly putting the decision in the hands of faculty members who lack experience in managing academic publishing.

At the Faculty Senate meeting on Thursday and in a written statement on Friday, Drell presented the cut as part of a general budget tightening. "While the full 2019-20 budget won't be presented to the Faculty Senate until next month," the statement reads, "the provost noted that it will be a very tight budget year, with an incremental payout of 2.1 percent on the endowment — which is below anticipated inflation."

"Three years ago," the statement says, "the budget group made a very significant allocation to the press of approximately \$1.7 million annually for three years in one-time funds, with the assurance from the press that this would be a bridge to a self-sustaining future."

### **'A Death Spiral'**

Harvey, the press director, and Richard Thompson Ford, a Stanford law professor and an editorial-board member, said they and others who guide the press would be happy to discuss alternative funding measures, and to have outside experts in academic publishing assess the press's operations.

But for years the administration has prohibited the most obvious solution: raising funds from major donors. The university's statement says that "modest philanthropy" can supplement general budget allocations and revenue, but it's unclear what "modest philanthropy" might entail.

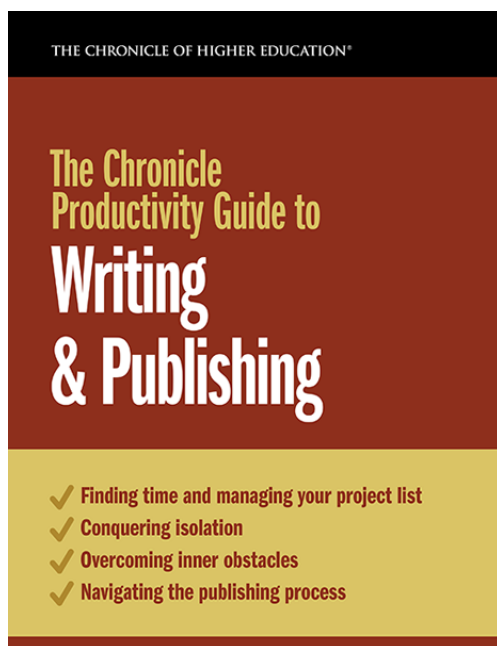
More to the point, say people in the industry, the press is run very well. "I would put it among the very best university presses in America," said Gregory M. Britton, editorial director of the Johns Hopkins University Press. "It's an incredible jewel. It's every bit the equal of its institution" in the quality and scope of its offerings.

Stanford's press, with a staff of 35, makes about \$5 million in overall revenue from the 130 to 135 books it releases each year in 14 disciplines, Harvey said, as well as other sources, such as its backlist. It was started in 1892, at the same time as the university, with scholarly publishing deemed by Stanford's first president as one of its founding missions. The \$1.7-million cut would be devastating, he said.

Ford, the law-school professor and editorial-board member, said the cut would begin "a death spiral" for the press.

Book publishing by university presses is not usually profitable and isn't meant to be, said Britton. Profitable university presses — Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and the University of Virginia, for example — have large endowments. The Hopkins press also earns money from its close to 100 journals and through Project Muse, a digital aggregator of journal content. Its books alone wouldn't sustain it, Britton said.

## The Chronicle Productivity Guide to Writing & Publishing



### The Chronicle Productivity Guide to Writing & Publishing

\$49.00

Print



ADD TO CART

The Stanford administration has gone after the press's funding before, in the 1990s and early 2000s. David Palumbo-Liu, a Stanford professor of comparative literature, said it was odd that as the university tries to fight a stereotype of being the STEM-obsessed "MIT of the West," it keeps bashing such a high-profile, prestigious embodiment of its work in, and attention to, the humanities and social sciences.

And, Palumbo-Liu wrote in an email, the stakes in the Stanford-press standoff are higher than the relative small dollar figures convey.

"If we follow the logic of the market and wish to use a financial metric," he wrote, "the academy is gone. Presses will publish only profitable books, graduate students will write only profitable dissertations, and tenure will be awarded based on scholarship that is profitable. Reforming a university press under the mandate that it be financially solvent and, by extension, awarding it value based on profit is a direct attack on academic freedom, free inquiry, free speech."

The cut sounds from the administration's statement like a done deal. But, said Ford, "I continue to hope that this is something that we can resolve in a productive way with the central administration."

*Alexander C. Kafka is a Chronicle senior editor. Follow him on Twitter @AlexanderKafka, or email him at alexander.kafka@chronicle.com.*

© 2019 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037