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## Stanford backs down -- for a year -- on ending support for university press

Submitted by Scott Jaschik on May 1, 2019 - 3:00am

Stanford University provost Persis Drell late Tuesday indicated that the university was backing down -- at least for another year -- on plans to end financial support for the Stanford University Press [1].

She acted amid widespread anger among faculty members at the university -- and nationally -- over her plan announced last week to end university financial support for the press. The university has been giving the press \$1.7 million a year, while the press brings in \$5 million a year in book sales. Ending the support would effectively result in dozens of books not being published that would have been otherwise.

In an email sent to Stanford professors, Drell acknowledged how upset many scholars are at the planned cut.

"While I expected that this decision would be a difficult one for some of you to hear, I did not anticipate it would touch such a deep nerve in the community of our humanities and social sciences colleagues," Drell wrote. "I would especially like to thank those who have explained how this has been interpreted by some as 'a marginalization of the humanities at Stanford,' which is deeply regrettable and certainly not what was intended. My goal was, and continues to be, to find a financial model for the press that is sustainable, builds upon the strengths of the press, and ensures its success for years to come. Numerous years of one-time funding bridges do not make for a compelling path for the press."

Drell added, "I hope it will alleviate some of the concerns that have been expressed to clarify that I intend to make one-time funds available to the press for FY20, at an amount up to \$1.7 million, to help ensure a smooth transition to a sustainable future. Also, the press, once it has a model that is sustainable, may request incremental general funds in the FY21 budget process. Finally, we anticipate that additional philanthropy can be attracted, particularly as the press focuses on its considerable strengths. With these moves, our intent is to build a strong, sustainable press organization at Stanford that serves the institutional and community needs into the future."

While university presses periodically face threats of budget cuts from their universities, the news that Stanford's press was facing such a threat stunned scholars who publish with Stanford or value its books. Many have said they fear that if Stanford -- with a \$26 billion endowment -- stopped supporting its press, other universities could point to Stanford to justify similar cuts. Many also have objected to what they view as inappropriate financial measures being used to evaluate the press. University presses are generally known for the ideas they bring to the world, not the dollars they bring in.

Stanford publishes about 130 books a year. It is particularly well-known in the fields of Middle Eastern studies, Jewish studies, business, literature and philosophy. While much of the scholarship published by the press comes in traditional formats, the press has also been a leader in disseminating "born digital" scholarship [2].

Professors have been mobilizing petition drives, letter-writing campaigns and the use of graphic art to demand that Stanford back down on its plans to cut off the press.

Ge Wang, an associate professor of music at Stanford, is circulating online both the illustration above and a petition [3] opposing the changes. The image is adapted from one in a book by Wang, published by Stanford University Press, **Artful Design: Technology in Search of the Sublime** [4]. "If

we use a purely financial metric to assess the value of academic books, the scholarly mission of the academy will be lost. Presses will publish only profitable books, graduate students will write only profitable dissertations, and tenure will be awarded based on scholarship that is profitable," the petition says.

In an interview Tuesday night, Wang said that on matters related to the press, "slow action is preferable to fast, potentially hasty, action. In this regard, I see the [provost's letter] as a step in the right direction."

But Wang said he was concerned by the provost's continued focus on financial "sustainability," which suggests that she is applying a business approach to academic publishing. This focus, he said, "is unmistakably prevalent throughout the message, and remains ill defined and problematic, for it implies that 'sustainability' is still a goal and possibly a necessary condition for Stanford to support to the press."

Wang also asked why only parts of Stanford are judged this way. "I have to wonder, at this rate, if the argument of financial sustainability will eventually be applied to athletics," he asked.

Just prior to Drell releasing her letter, Peter Berkery, the executive director of the Association of University Presses, sent Stanford leaders a letter outlining reasons why people in academic publishing have become so concerned about the situation at Stanford.

"Eliminating all institutional funding precipitously will never right-size a publishing operation, but destroy it," Berkery wrote. "Successful press reconfigurations are planned, implemented and assessed over years, matching the demands of the university press mission. Every book, after all, proceeds from the prospective author's submission of a manuscript through the essential processes of peer reviewing, contracting, copyediting, designing, producing, promoting and distributing, a chain of events that also generally takes several years. Many books are now at each of those stages in the offices of SUP."

Berkery added, "The reverberating outcry from communities of scholars, alumni and communities often comes as a surprise to universities making decisions similar to what is being contemplated by Stanford. Internally, unilateral administrative decisions affecting university presses raise questions about university governance, including protest from faculty editorial boards already tasked with press engagement and oversight. Significantly, unexpected announcements which call into question a press's future viability can immediately harm ongoing acquisitions efforts, and may give rise to potential breach of contract claims for its new and forthcoming books."

### Books and Publishing <sup>[5]</sup>

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/05/01/stanford-backs-down-year-ending-support-university-press>

### **Links**

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/29/stanford-moves-stop-providing-funds-its-university-press>

[2] <https://www.sup.org/digital/faq/>

[3] <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfRfxLmj5UsQn8WNIYjxD0NX5u-bLdTIvoJjsRx5ZIQxtRANw/viewform>

[4] <https://artful.design/>

[5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/books>