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## Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?

Submitted by Barbara Fister on May 2, 2019 - 3:24pm

**Blog:** [Library Babel Fish](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

Apparently Stanford's administration was publicly shamed enough to [walk back its announcement](#) <sup>[2]</sup> that they can't possibly afford to spend money on their university press anymore because its \$26 billion endowment isn't yielding enough cash and something's gotta give. (Those [bribes](#) <sup>[3]</sup> aren't helping the balance sheet, either, dammit.) Sharing scholarship is apparently too great a luxury for a university that has the [fourth largest endowment](#) <sup>[4]</sup> among US higher ed institutions. The press has been given a year's reprieve in hopes we will forget how angry we got when we heard about the plan.

We've been stressing about the fate of university presses for a while, now. Fifteen years ago I wrote [a snarky piece](#) <sup>[4]</sup> for for Library Journal about it. This Stanford debacle is just a deluxe edition of a long trend of deciding university presses aren't sufficiently important. It's part of a larger shift in higher ed brought on when we decided government was the problem and the solution was to end social welfare as we know it and replace it with lavish corporate welfare. Why would anyone publish books if they don't make money? Elsevier makes buckets of it, what's your problem? Why should we invest tax dollars in public education if we can turn it into a private personal investment financed by turning public dollars into poorly-managed high-interest loans? If the debt load crashes the economy, that will be a shame, but the only future that matters is next quarter's earnings report. What, are you a socialist?

There's a cascade of issues, here. Thanks to austerity, public higher ed has to pay for itself. Libraries can't afford books, so presses lose a market and scholars lose a chance to share their research widely. Individual faculty purchases can't make up for lost sales because they're paid piecemeal and aren't sure where they'll be living next semester. What's happening at

Stanford seems ridiculous, but destroying a long-term national commitment to higher education is the real absurdity. Scholarship should be a public good, an expression of the purpose of universities, not a money-maker, not a merit badge required to compete for the dwindling number of academic jobs that pay a steady wage.

Remember when people fought for an eight-hour day? That took a hell of a fight, but we got there – and then it . . . somehow vanished. I think of what the labor movement in the US accomplished when I see the rest of the world celebrating workers on Mayday. It's unimaginable here. Workers are losers who can't even get time off.

This brings to mind two articles I read this week about public libraries. Librarians have a bad case of vocational awe <sup>[5]</sup>. People are dying? Give me that Narcan, I'll save them! People need to apply for jobs online to keep their meager benefits but have no access to the internet and no computer skills? That's what we're here for. How about providing a warm place for people without shelter, or a tolerant place for people in crisis when there are no psychiatric beds available within the nearest six counties? Hey, everyone's welcome in the library. It's almost a matter of pride – the public library is the only place in the country where everyone is welcome and you don't have to pay just to be there or risk arrest for doing nothing in public.

The public library is a wonderful institution. It should not be the only public institution left standing. Librarians have left the profession <sup>[6]</sup> because they couldn't do the jobs of all the public servants whose jobs we have cut, not without literally losing their minds. Librarians have been murdered <sup>[7]</sup> because our social systems have been deliberately dismantled and when that happens, society's problems have only one place left to go.

That little spurt of rage at the anti-intellectual parsimony of Stanford administrators is part of the emotional fuel that makes social media platforms so profitable. It almost feels good. Stanford did what? That deeper rage at having squandered the public trust and our sense of care for one another, when all we can do for our neighbor is start Gofundme campaigns, that anger doesn't come in spurts. It's a disaster spreading through smoldering seams that run under our communities, invisible but destructive, a vast fire decades in the making, too costly to put out, too big to

comprehend. After a while, we assume this is how just how it works. We forget what we once built. We forget something better is possible.

[Barbara Fister](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

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[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/05/01/stanford-backs-down-year-ending-support-university-press>

[3] <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-college-admissions-scandal-stanford-20190501-story.html>

[4] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Which-Colleges-Have-the/245587>

[5] <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>

[6] [https://www.richmond.com/ap/commentary/amanda-oliver-working-as-a-librarian-gave-me-ptsd-symptoms/article\\_0a42509a-2ed5-5d5b-afc4-b7d27f88b6b5.html](https://www.richmond.com/ap/commentary/amanda-oliver-working-as-a-librarian-gave-me-ptsd-symptoms/article_0a42509a-2ed5-5d5b-afc4-b7d27f88b6b5.html)

[7] <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2019/04/23/keep-library-workers-safe/>

[8] <https://www.insidehighered.com/users/barbara-fister>