

THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

PUBLISHING

Facing Blowback, Stanford Partly Reverses Course and Pledges Press Subsidy for One More Year

By *Alexander C. Kafka* | APRIL 30, 2019

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In the face of fierce criticism of its decision to discontinue a \$1.7-million annual subsidy for its renowned press, Stanford University on Tuesday partly reversed course, pledging up to that amount for the 2019-20 fiscal year and expressing willingness to consider requests for further funds in 2020-21. It also signaled that it might loosen rules that have prohibited the press from seeking support from major donors.



Photo Illustration by Ron Coddington

In a letter to the faculty, the provost, Persis Drell, said the funds would be allotted "to help ensure a smooth transition to a sustainable future."

Of the move to discontinue the subsidy, Drell wrote: "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."

"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," she went on. "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."

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.

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News last week of the discontinuation of the subsidy sparked vociferous protest, including open letters and petitions signed by more than a thousand within and outside the Stanford community. Besides the money, what angered and puzzled faculty members and the press's editorial staff and advisers is that they weren't consulted. The move was announced in a meeting with department chairs and only later publicly acknowledged in a Faculty Senate meeting.

Drell said in her Tuesday letter that Alan Harvey, the press's director, and Vice Provost Michael Keller, to whom Harvey reports, "are working to develop a sustainable financial model for the press, and they will be supported by a faculty committee ... that will ensure faculty input in the process and will help the press

position itself for a strong future. The committee will provide quarterly updates to me." That committee, Drell wrote, will be headed by Judith L. Goldstein, chair of the political-science department.

In the Faculty Senate meeting Drell cited budget concerns and suggested the press should be self-sustaining, even though most university presses — especially their book-publishing arms — are not. Critics scoffed at the assertion that financial concerns had driven the decision. The subsidy amounts to 0.027 percent of a \$6.3-billion 2017-18 budget at a university that has the third-largest endowment in the world, \$26.5 billion.

Critics also said they were mystified as to why Stanford would torpedo what outside observers call a gem in humanities and social-sciences publishing. The press, founded in 1892, has a staff of 35, spends roughly \$6.5 million yearly, and earns about \$5 million from, among other things, the publication of 130 to 135 new books a year in 14 disciplines. The subsidy has made up the difference.

Stanford faculty members said the administration had suggested the \$1.7 million might be better used for graduate fellowships, although the amount would fund only about three of the five-year fellowships. Alternatively, the administration suggested the money could go toward faculty raises.

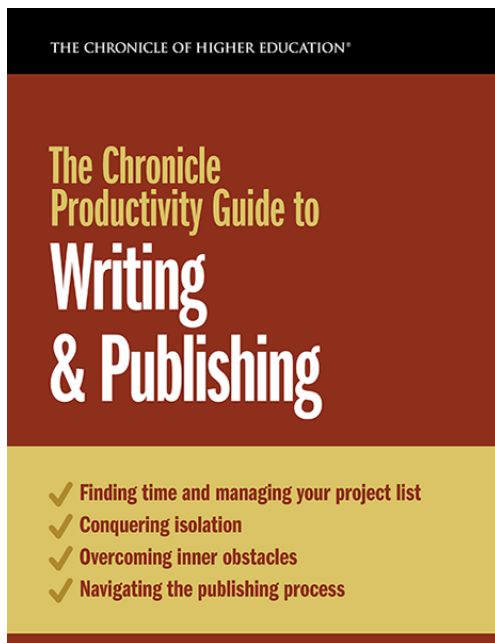
The Authors' Dismay

Stanford-press authors were dismayed by the announced cuts. Jennifer Garvey Berger, who has written books for the press on leadership, was worried. "It's dismaying," said Berger, reached in Lebanon, where she is teaching. "My most recent book was a few months ago. My first book is still selling really well. My second, too. I don't know what happens to authors' books" if a press goes under, she said, and "there must be hundreds of authors wondering about this exact question right now."

An author chooses a press, she said, because it "has a real history and isn't a fly-by-night proposition. And of course Stanford University Press has an extraordinarily long history, and it's a place you can feel confident in, so it is a little unsettling."

In an open letter, Michael Rothberg, a professor of English and comparative literature at the University of California at Los Angeles, wrote to Drell and to Marc Tessier-Lavigne, the president, about his experience as a two-time Stanford author. "I am writing," he said, "in the hope that you can still be convinced to reverse this misguided decision and save the reputation of your university."

The Chronicle Productivity Guide to Writing & Publishing



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ADD TO CART

Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, a professor of sociology and gender studies at the University of Southern California, has had opportunities to write for other prestigious academic publishers. But, she said, because of Stanford University Press's scholarly integrity she has stayed with it through two decades, three monographs, two anthologies that she edited and contributed to, and the launch of a new book series.

From her first book, *Servants of Globalization*, her editor, Laura Comay, assured her that "they were very committed to the intellectual project of the book."

"I like that," Parreñas said. "That's why I stayed with them." Editors at other presses urged her to tone down the theory and beef up the narrative. "My intellectual freedom was somewhat compromised" by what those editors suggested. But, she said, "I felt that with Stanford there was just more trust."

Judith Butler, the philosopher and gender theorist, published her book *The Psychic Life of Power* with Stanford and was an editor for a series, called Atopia, that it published. She has also contributed to co-written volumes from the press.

She wrote in an email to *The Chronicle* that "obviously, the problem is not that poverty has suddenly afflicted one of the wealthiest institutions of the world, but that the metric of value that they are using to make a catastrophic decision such as this one is a narrow version of cost-benefit.

"SUP is one of the most widely respected and influential university presses in the humanities and social sciences, including premiere series in Asian studies, literary and cultural theory, sociology, and Jewish studies, to name but a few," she continued. "It sets the standard for whole fields of study. ... The series it has sponsored have published some of the most innovative cross-disciplinary work in the humanities, establishing new paradigms for academic inquiry."

"The proposal to defund the press," she wrote, "reflects poorly on Stanford's understanding of the public value of the university, one that cannot be reduced to profit, and that we need now more than ever as we confront the devaluation of knowledge itself."

'Hit in the Solar Plexus'

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who has consulted on the press's publishing of work on Jacques Derrida and other literary theorists, said the fellowship suggestion was an "alibi." The announced defunding, she said by phone, left her feeling "gobsmacked — I really felt like I had been hit in the solar plexus." She said there is very likely more to the story, a mystery yet to be revealed. But what's not mysterious, she said, is that in the increasingly corporatized university, reverence for science and technology is coming to outweigh a counterbalancing appreciation for the humanities and social sciences. And that is reflected in turbulence like that at Stanford.

"The book," she said, "has lost its position in the world."

Fred Turner is a professor in and former chair of Stanford's department of communications as well as the former director of Stanford's program in science, technology, and society. He didn't entirely dismiss Drell's financial concerns, but said the proposed subsidy cut "looks to me like a misstep."

Turner cited the enormous pressure of Stanford's location at the heart of Silicon Valley, and intense student demand not only for the computer-science major (about 20 percent of students) but also for introductory classes in coding (at least 90 percent of students). In that environment, traditional book publishing, he said, can be seen as "an extravagance."

Instead, Turner said he hoped the university would see the bigger picture. Harvard has been at the forefront of American intellectual life for centuries because of its Puritan emphasis on scholarship. The University of Chicago, at the heart of the country's industrialization, became the locus of sociological thought and

pragmatism. Stanford, he said, has the opportunity to capitalize on its geography and its grounding in both cutting-edge technology and a rich tradition in the humanities "to lead American intellectual life" in years to come.

But for that to happen, its press will need stability. Loosening its fund-raising rules could be a step toward that. Presses like those at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and the University of Virginia have generous endowments. If there's one thing all parties might agree on, it is that, as Drell wrote in her letter on Tuesday, "numerous years of one-time funding bridges do not make for a compelling path for the press."

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A version of this article appeared in the May 10, 2019 issue.

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