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Stanford community outraged at SU Press defunding, over 1,000 sign petitions



Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons



by Elise Miller — April 29, 2019 11 Comments

A flurry of critical letters, petitions and tweets came in the wake of the announcement of the University’s decision to discontinue funding for Stanford University Press, the University’s acclaimed publishing house.

Stanford University denied the request of the Press for an average of \$1.7 million in funds per year for the next five years, Provost Persis Drell told objecting department chairs in humanities and social sciences on Friday, April 19. At last Thursday’s Faculty Senate meeting, Drell **explained** that the decision comes as a result of increased budgetary constraints and poor performance from the endowment. The announcement was similarly met with objections from faculty members at the meeting.

University spokesperson E.J. Miranda noted that a “very significant allocation” was made three years ago, granting \$1.7 million per year for three years, as a series of “one-time funds” with the “assurance from the Press that this would be a bridge to a self-sustaining future.”

Miranda said that the Budget Group “has had to balance the Press’ request with other high-priority budget requests across the University.”

Leaders from Stanford Libraries and the Press are now in discussions about how to “develop a sustainable business model” supported by its revenue, modest philanthropy and general funds allocation, Miranda said.

The announcement sparked an outpouring of letters to the President’s and Provost’s office from a number of departments and programs, with combined signatures numbering in the hundreds, urging the University to support Stanford University Press and requesting that faculty and publishing experts be consulted in any financial decision.

Jessica Riskin, Vice Chair of the History Department and Chair of the Academic Senate’s Library Committee (C-LIB) circulated two of these letters: **one** on behalf of the history department, including 36 signatures, and **another** from C-LIB, which is the faculty committee that deals with the Press.

“A University Press is a Vital Part of Stanford’s Identity as a University. It is Not Meant to Be a Profit-Making Entity,” reads the title of the letter from C-LIB to the Provost and President. It states that the elimination of the “modest annual subsidy” will “cripple the press with likely fatal results” and send an “extremely unfortunate signal about Stanford’s commitment to scholarship in the arts, humanities and social sciences.”

The annual subsidy to Stanford University Press has been approximately \$1.7 million, corresponding to 0.027 percent of Stanford’s **\$6.3 billion** budget in the 2017-18 academic year. Founded in 1892, it publishes more than 130 books each year, spanning the humanities, natural sciences, law, education, business, art, social sciences and technology.

As of October 2018, Stanford **had** the world's third largest endowment, at \$26.5 billion. Interest from the endowment is responsible for one fifth of the university's annual funding. Sponsored research, student income and health care services are the other largest sources of funds, comprising in sum over half of the annual budget.

Comparative literature professor David Palumbo-Liu, a member of the Faculty Senate who also **spoke** to the Chronicle of Higher Education on the funding decision, said that neither C-LIB, nor the Editorial Board of Stanford University Press, nor the Faculty Senate were consulted before the decision was made.

“That is a huge repudiation of the idea of faculty governance,” he said to The Daily.

In an op-ed circulating on campus student organization and residential listservs, Palumbo-Liu wrote that in a country “awash with false statements,” attacks on the media are “essentially attacks on the ideas of facts [and] journalistic ethics demand fact-checking.” University presses verify knowledge used by policy-makers, citizens and students, he added.

“Where are they to turn for reliable and unbiased information on crucial issues?” he asked. “Plainly put — to destroy university presses is to further erode the public's access to truth.”

“If Stanford does this, other cost-cutting universities may do so themselves,” Palumbo-Liu told The Daily. “If we shut down university presses, that is a death sentence on reliably vetted, serious scholars ... And Stanford would have led the way.”

Since the Friday decision, Twitter and the Humanities, Arts, Science and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC, which bills itself the “world's first and oldest academic social network”) have been ablaze with “widespread consternation” over the proposed budget cuts, said Adrian Daub, a member of the Press's editorial board.

Academic publishing is “important to the work we do, and ... academics are assessed on our record of publication,” Daub told The Daily.

In a Sunday blog post outlining the Stanford origins of HASTAC and critiquing Stanford's decision, HASTAC co-founder and CUNY professor Cathy Davidson **said** for the wealthy university to declare “austerity ... as the rationale for cutting [a] subsidy to a distinguished scholarly press is ludicrous and hypocritical.”

Associate professor in the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (CCRMA) Ge Wang tweeted on Thursday, “I love you, @Stanford University — but I'd literally be ashamed of being faculty at an institution that, for budgetary reasons, hastens to dismantle its jewel of a university press. Please don't do this.”

Wang, who as author-in-residence at Stanford University Press spent three years writing his 488-page full-color photo comic book “Artful Design: Technology of the Sublime,” focused on the craft of shaping technology, told The Daily that “what we make, in turns, makes us.”

“I was guided and amply supported, at every turn, by the people at Stanford University Press,” he wrote.

“Make no mistake,” he continued. “If Stanford's administration goes through with defunding the press as announced, it would devastate the Press immediately ... [T]he proposed cut wouldn't just influence the quality of the research, it would be like taking a sledgehammer to its face.”

He noted that the decision coincides with the University's Long-Range Planning **process**, which involves setting priorities for the next decade and preparing for a substantial fundraising campaign. To remove the annual funding, he wrote, “would be a devastating statement that the Press — and everything it stands for — is not vital, is not a priority, and is not valued for our shared future.”

Wang joined 19 other Stanford writers on Friday's presentation of books, “A Company of Authors,” at which the threat to the Press was the main topic of discussion. Several speakers urged action to protest the decision.

University presses have “long been the defenders of academic integrity,” noted author Elena Danielson, Archivist Emerita and retired

associate director of the Hoover Institution. Danielson, who presented her recently-published “Hoover Tower at Stanford University” at the event, wrote in an email to The Daily that “the main misconception about the University Press ... has been the result of complacency, assuming the Press was somehow self-propelled.”

“I never felt that it had the institutional and financial support that it deserved,” she wrote. “This is not a new problem, nor is it limited to Stanford University.”

Given its “crucial role in scholarly communication at a stellar university,” she added, the Press should have “greater financial and institutional backing, not less.”

Education professor Walter “Woody” Powell concurred.

“I happen to think [The Stanford University Press] punches above its weight, and is the equal of its peers,” he wrote. “But suppose one thought the Mathematics or Philosophy department was underperforming. Would you try to cut its budget, and send a signal that would ... chase the best folks away, or would you use your considerable resources to improve it?”

Danielson added that one of David Starr Jordan’s requirements when he accepted the inaugural position of Stanford president was to have a university press.

“When you walk past Wallenberg Hall, look up,” she added. “There are four figures perched on the front facade of the Quad facing the Oval. One of the statues is Johannes Gutenberg. He was placed there to remind us of the importance of printing books.”

An **open letter** from Stanford faculty, students, staff and alumni, endorsing the recommendations of C-LIB, has collected over 700 signatures and is available for Stanford affiliates. It asks that “any decision about drastic restructuring at the Press be made only after full consultation and well-prepared discussion in the Academic Senate” and be based on the careful examinations of an “external committee of experts with experience in academic publishing.”

“If we use a purely financial metric to assess the value of academic books, the scholarly mission of the academy will be lost,” the petition reads. “Now more than ever, we should be sending the opposite

message: That scholarly research is essential to a thriving society and that we will never waver in our commitment to producing and disseminating it.”

An open letter for **non-Stanford affiliates** is also in circulation, with over 700 signatures.

Last Thursday’s Faculty Senate conversation on the funding cuts was “cut short,” Riskin said, as it was “not on the official agenda.” Currently, a number of Academic Senate members, including Daub and Palumbo-Liu, are working to put a resolution on the agenda of the next Faculty Senate, May 9, to have a full discussion of the topic.

Contact Elise Miller at [elisejl ‘at’ stanford.edu](mailto:elisejl@stanford.edu).

This article has been updated to reflect that the annual SUP subsidy corresponds to 0.027 percent of Stanford’s \$6.3 billion budget, not 0.27 percent. This article has been corrected to reflect that the Press is a publishing house, not a printing operation, and that it is not the primary printing operation for the works of Stanford professors and advanced students. The Daily regrets this error.

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