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Op-Ed: Graduate students on SUP's future



by Op Ed — May 2, 2019 0 Comments

Dear President Tessier-Lavigne and Provost Drell,

We are doctoral students in the humanities and social sciences, and we are writing to express our unwavering support for the continued, renewable funding of Stanford University Press and the establishment of a major endowment such as that of Harvard and Princeton University Presses. We strongly believe that SUP should be made a necessary item in Stanford's budget, just as our Ivy League peer institutions have done with their own academic presses.

We are glad that you have agreed to fund SUP for one more year, but we think it is crucial for you to hear from doctoral students, who are counting on SUP for our academic careers, now and in the future. We were heartened to learn that you value the humanities and social sciences, but if you do not want your decision to be taken as a lack of support for us and our futures, we urge you to allow SUP to fundraise — like Harvard and Princeton have been doing — and lend your name to the effort.

Stanford is sending an incredibly discouraging message to all of its humanities and social sciences graduate students who are either

writing their dissertations right now, will do so, or are preparing to defend their work. We have spent years training for careers in already precarious fields. We have known, from our very first day in our programs, that transforming our dissertations into tenure-worthy books could mean securing long-term employment. In addition, you are also setting a harmful example for universities across the country and their provosts, who will be emboldened to withdraw funding for their academic presses. If Stanford, a world-famous, prestigious institution with an untold abundance of resources, takes this step, you will set a dangerous precedent for others in the educational industry to do the same. Where will we be able to publish our books? Who will vet them to make sure they are scholarly sound? How will we publicly disseminate our scholarship beyond the classroom, academic conferences, or articles behind paywalls? Should we just give up on our research and start anew, this time with a marketable topic meant for a trade press? Are we expected to self-publish?

Based on reporting from “The Chronicle of Higher Education”, we also learned that we were used as justification for the budget cuts to the university press in exchange for graduate fellowships. Independently of the fact that the SUP modest base subsidy of \$1.5 million would only cover a few fellowships and that there are hundreds of us, we did not appreciate being pitted against the SUP. Choosing between graduate funding and the SUP is not a choice at all — it’s an existential threat to humanities and social science doctoral students, now added on top of our financial difficulties involving health care and costs of living, as you well know.

Stanford is, first and foremost, an educational institution. Books have been a primary vehicle to disseminate knowledge for hundreds of years. Students, including the doctoral candidates who hope to go on to become professors, are the primary beneficiaries of the publications that go through the kind of gold-standard editorial process like the one of SUP. To make the decision to cut the budget of SUP and then renew it only for one year without consulting any of the stakeholders — such as students and the Faculty Senate’s Committee on Libraries — goes against the core educational mission of this university.

We urge you to make a strong statement of support for doctoral students in the humanities and social sciences by granting permanent, renewable funding and leading the fundraising efforts to secure the future of the 127-year-old Stanford University Press for generations to come.

Signed,

Doctoral students from the School of Humanities and Sciences, the
Graduate School of Education and Stanford Law School

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