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The people, the money, the books: Inside Stanford University Press

Faculty Senate to consider resolution on Press restructuring



Courtesy of Ge Wang



by Elise Miller — June 5, 2019 18 Comments

Faculty and community members are gearing up for the next installment of the clash over Stanford University Press.

“It’s a showdown,” said history professor Thomas Mullaney.

Mullaney, editor of a digital Stanford University Press publication, “The Chinese Deathscape” unveiled this spring, will represent the Faculty Senate’s Committee on Libraries (C-LIB) at their June 13 meeting in the absence of committee chair and history professor Jessica Riskin.

Stanford University Press director Alan Harvey will give a presentation on the Press, and the Senate will vote on a C-LIB resolution proposing the establishment of an external review committee and the involvement of the Faculty Senate in any restructuring of the Press.

It’s expected to be one of the most widely attended Faculty Senate meetings in the University’s history according to Mullaney, with attendance requests surpassing 150 and a change of venue unprecedented in recent history to accommodate the audience. Meetings are open to any members of the Stanford community provided they first contact Assistant Academic Secretary Adrienne Emory, and non-Stanford affiliates are also able to inquire about attending. Emory has now created an automated form to handle the high number of requests.

A number of faculty and students have also built an educational website, save-sup.org, that features information about academic presses, an ever-growing collection of [open letters](#) and petitions signed by thousands about the Stanford Press, graphic novel-style portraits of Stanford University Press staff members and potential action items for motivated community members.

These initiatives respond to the [decision](#) of the Budget Group to turn down a Stanford University Press subsidy request, announced in April and since [amended](#) to provide a one-year subsidy, and the Provost’s call to determine a sustainable model for the Press. Paraphrasing the Budget Group’s response to the Press, Drell said during her Office Hours in early May, “You presented a vision for the next five years that wasn’t compelling. Come back with a request and a vision that can be compelling.”

Not a commercial press

The guests at the June 13 meeting are in for a primer on the inner workings and economy of the Press. As a first-generation college student, Mullaney says he's used to explaining the value of what he does, "but it's strange to have to explain these sorts of things to provosts."

Academic presses are completely different from commercial presses, Mullaney says.

"Has anyone ever asked whether or not the book that made that person's tenure case or the book that changed the way we thought about X, Y or Z made money on Amazon.com?" he said. "No, no one asks that."

The Provost's charge to her appointed University Press faculty committee says that the Press serves the "essential function of publishing scholarly works that commercial presses will not consider because the profit margins are small or non-existent."

The two systems have different goals as well. Comparative literature professor David Palumbo-Liu says that in commercial publishing, selling copies is a primary goal.

"When Malcolm Gladwell publishes a book ... he'll sell a million books," he said. "That's fine. But we professors ... if we wrote the way Malcolm Gladwell did, we would never get tenure."

However, prestige and social capital are an important part of the economic picture in their own right, since they influence rankings, grants and donations, Mullaney said. And the biggest factor: "When [a student] decides to go to [a] more prestigious place, they bring their tuition dollars with them."

Dean of Humanities and Sciences Debra Satz wrote to The Daily that while she rejects "any implicit assumption that we should be indifferent to costs," she "absolutely recognize[s] the value and importance of a robust book publishing ecosystem for scholars in the humanities and social sciences." Satz noted that she has in her own scholarship been

attentive to non-economic costs and benefits of economic decisions and is “certainly not for overlooking these.”

While many Stanford faculty members publish with the Press, most of the 120 to 130 books published annually are authored by scholars outside of the University. Mubbashir Rizvi, cultural anthropology assistant professor at Georgetown University, is one such scholar. His May 2019 book “The Ethics of Staying” is a part of the Press’s thematic series “South Asia in Motion.”

News abounds on issues like religious extremist terrorism, but there is “very little written about everyday life for people in their struggle ... [for] basic survival,” Rizvi said. This struggle is a key theme of his book, which details a peasant farmer movement in rural Pakistan fighting the Pakistani army attempting to evict them.

Rizvi said he sees parallels between lessons of his research and the climate at Stanford surrounding the Press. “When market forces are applied” to complex ecologies of peasant farmers by forcing eviction on long-time residents for “short-term profits,” he said there is a “generational level of damage” including thousands of families who are dispossessed. Where “market logic” is applied to academic presses, Rizvi continued, “you will have a kind of impoverishment of knowledge.”

As an assistant professor going through tenure process, Rizvi said the decrease of funding for Stanford University Press was “a very big concern” in his mind.

“I see the attack on Stanford University Press as ... an attack on academic freedom,” he said. “It is coming from a place which ... does not understand the quality of what scholarship is, even at a wealthy university.”

As a summation of his years of research, the book is an important element in Rizvi’s tenure review process. “When you are publishing

your manuscript, your ... home institution has particular ... standards” in terms of rigor and quality of scholarship, he said.

The publishing process

Harvey gave The Daily a “60,000-foot view” of what a rigorous publishing process means in practice for Stanford University Press: 32 full-time staff, three contract staff in the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-funded digital publishing program and “a really amazing group of ... highly skilled people ... who are absolutely dedicated to what they do.”

Publishing is not just taking a manuscript someone has written and making it available, Harvey said. The acquisitions team is “on the lookout for good book ideas and people who ought to be writing books,” and the manuscripts the Press receives result from “several years’ worth of conversations” between the acquisitions editor and the author. By the time it arrives, the project has been specifically shaped for Stanford University Press.

Every year, the Press receives thousands of submitted proposals, and the rejection rate is over 95 percent, according to Harvey.

Six subject specialists work to “keep their finger on the pulse of the field” and “keep ahead of trends within the discipline” so that publications can remain relevant in the one to two years it takes from when the Press first acquires a manuscript to its final publication.

The production team then takes over for copy editing, setting the type and creating a design. After it’s put into print, the marketing department advertises, sends review copies and attends conferences to publicize the book.

“I really wish people were able to see ... the people that we have here because I think they’d get a very different impression of what we do, how we do it and why we do it,” Harvey said.

Dafna Zur, assistant professor of East Asian languages and cultures, says that “a university press’s commitment to publishing” comes with three guarantees: that her work will be reviewed “by the best minds” in her field to make it “as intellectually compelling as possible,” published in a timely manner with her career goals and interests in mind and will

“reach an audience that will read it to push the boundaries of their own intellectual endeavors.”

Zur’s first book, “Figuring Korean Futures: Children’s Literature in Modern Korea,” involved ten years of research and was the “single most impactful task” she says has undertaken as a scholar.

“In conversations with peers who published with other presses I learned that my SUP experience was indeed very unique,” Zur wrote in an email to The Daily. “The partnership with the editor and other staff was deep — they were truly interested in my success, not just as another author on their list but as a scholar with a significant contribution to the intellectual community. Very few peers with published books in university presses enjoyed the same degree of involvement of editors that I had.”

“Not only [does the Press] have extremely strong print publication series,” Mullaney said, but it is also “way ahead of most presses in thinking about digital publishing.” Mullaney’s **digital edited volume** incorporates research-based essays cross-linked with multi-layered, exportable maps and involved the work of seven peer reviewers.

“University presses are the backbone of humanistic scholarship and ... arts and social sciences” at “every stage” of the “life cycle of a scholar,” from first-year course readings to first monograph to work as an established scholar, he said.

Funding the Press

Harvey says that when scholarly publishing is performed with the mission of a university press, “It is difficult, if not impossible, to do so and break even or make a profit.” In the last five weeks, Harvey said he’s been in touch with “most of the directors of ... significant university presses within the U.S.” and has “yet to hear of one that makes a profit on their books program.” The Association of University Presses notes in an **open letter** that even for “the rare university presses” that regularly generate an operating surplus, these are not generated through book publishing programs, but rather through a combination of other avenues that require “an investment of capital and time.”

Debates of how to fund the Press are nothing new, Harvey said. In digging through the University archives, the Press staff uncovered documents from the 1920s with “exactly the same conversation that we have right now.” The first editor of Stanford University Press, William

Hawley Davis, **presented** on the value of academic publishing in 1929. Neither is one-time funding a recent phenomenon.

“The Press has always been temporarily funded ... at every single point in our history,” he said, whether in increments of one year, five years or six months. “We’ve never been permanently funded.”

Because the publishing timeline takes at least a year from start to finish, Riskin, who is also the history department vice chair, says the temporary funding model is hard on the process.

“You don’t even get one generation of books out,” she said. Her hope is that faculty governance and an external review committee composed of publishing experts could help the Press find a “stable, long-term solution” that is “well-informed.”

If the resolution passes, Riskin says she is hoping that the external review committee would work together with the faculty committee appointed by the Provost as well as bring transparency to the process. The Provost’s committee is to work with Harvey and Press publisher and Vice Provost for University Libraries and the University Press Michael Keller to determine the “right size” for the Press based on “fiscally sound and academically motivated advice,” according to her April 30 **charge**. The charge notes that the Press “is an essential part of the academic ecosystem that ensures intellectual independence and free dissemination of new ideas.”

Drell explained at her early May office hours that there are three sources of funding available to the Press: the university base subsidy, philanthropy and revenue the press brings in.

Drell said the base subsidy to the Press is approximately \$1 million and will continue to be provided to the Press. The Press will have the opportunity at the fall Budget Group meeting to submit a request for an increase in base funds, which Drell noted are “limited.”

Other prestigious presses, such as Harvard and Princeton University Presses, she noted, have “quite significant endowments, which is very helpful ... so it’s an easier model for them.” Princeton University Press, for example, has **endowment funds** of approximately \$100 million.

Patricia Gerber, Assistant Vice President of the Development Office, told The Daily that the Press has a smaller endowment of \$6 million, which pays \$300,000 per year. Harvey says up until a few years ago the Press was specifically barred from fundraising. Those constraints have since been “loosened,” and the Press is now able to receive philanthropic donations.

Drell told the students at Office Hours that affordability is her primary goal.

“One always has to set priorities ... no matter how rich your university is,” Drell said. “Honestly I think I still feel like the grad[uate financial] aid in those fields is probably the highest priority ... for the humanities and social sciences at Stanford.”

Satz wrote to The Daily that a “strong environment” for humanities faculty and staff is “vital,” and that it is critical to be able to “recruit and retain talent” in these fields. She said her focus on this front has been raising graduate fellowships and additional chairs, and she is encouraged about Long-Range Planning initiatives that center the humanities and social sciences.

In an interview with The Daily, Palumbo-Liu challenged the idea that funds for graduate aid or the Press come at the expense of the other.

“It’s Kafkaesque ... in what moral universe is it okay to pit humanities faculty against their very own students?”

Palumbo-Liu continued, “I would say to the Provost and the President and the Deans you have a golden opportunity here, you could turn this around and really be leaders.” The consequences of the outcome, he said, are grave. “It’s really the wrestling for the soul of the university.”

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marcus · a day ago

Stanford University press needs to re-invent themselves and think more like a commercial press. (Harvard and Princeton are the past and not

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forward thinking universities and not something I would look to emulate -
fact is the ives are emulating Stanford with their new emphasis on
engineering and tech).

this is an opportunity to grow and make the Stanford University Press
something great, something innovative, something forward thinking.
promote the humanities as part of integrated studies and the digital age.
become a digital platform for the university with distance learning,
executive programs, etc.

think like a startup and see this as a great opportunity. that's the Stanford
ethos

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How about we get capitalism out of the academy? I can understand
a profits first model at a private university, but unfortunately, private
university press sets the standard for the rest and by no means
should public university press follow a profits first model. University
press is one of the last bastions of intellectualism left in the United
States, to force it to shill out in order to survive would eventually
lead it to become another platform dominated by sensationalists
and pseudo-intellectuals.

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you could have made the same argument about Stanford
starting an industrial park. that was the genesis of Silicon
Valley... and Stanford reaped the benefits in spades along
with humanities I might add. the university press needs a
new model, not an endowment. look forward not back

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Stanford UP is already something great and they publish innovative
work. And, as far as your "digital platforms" idea, degree ideas like
distance learning and (frankly worthless) executive programs are
pedagogical by nature, so that's squarely in the purview of the
university, not the Press. Thinking "like a startup" isn't necessarily
applicable to all situations, and profit doesn't equal quality of
scholarship.

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and why can't you combine teaching with scholarship? the
printed word is being replaced by digital. get out of the ways
of old thinking. think forward.. not how the world was but
how the world will be and the role of the Stanford press in
that world.

the challenge is to develop a new model that is more
commercial and produces scholarship. let's not forget
Stanford has an IP/Patent office that has been the gold
standard and emulated the world over. those funds have
helped the university and the Humanities immensely. they
are not mutually exclusive. Stanford in comparison to other
universities has been a trail blazer and initially earned for

The people, the money, the books: Inside Stanford University Press - The Stanford Daily universiues has been a trail blazer and initially scorned for such practices that were not "scholarly". now they are all copying the Stanford model.

the university press needs a new model, not an endowment.

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