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Submitted by Greg Britton on November 6, 2019 - 3:00am

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Last Thursday, on the eve of University Press Week, Stanford University's Office of the Provost delivered its [much-anticipated report](#) ^[2] on the future of Stanford University Press. The report says much about the elite university's priorities. It also reveals how little the committee understands scholarly publishing.

In a surprise move last April, the university's provost, [Persis Drell, announced](#) ^[3] that the university (one of the nation's wealthiest) would no longer provide \$1.7 million (out of its nearly \$28 billion in endowment) to supplement the press's \$5 million in annual sales. This would essentially shutter the scholarly publisher. Bowing to faculty outrage and media pressure, [Drell offered a one-year stay](#) ^[4] and formed a faculty committee to make recommendations on the press's future.

The committee's report recommends the provost take several steps to "fix" the university press, which has been losing money, although it recognizes that university presses usually publish scholarly books at a loss. Presses that break even or earn profits do so through a variety of activities like journal publishing, book distribution for other presses and digital aggregation and licensing (like Johns Hopkins's Project MUSE.) Only a very few large university presses lucky enough to have large endowments are able to achieve the scale needed to run modestly profitable book publishing programs. Stanford University Press, like all books-only operations, subsists on its earned income from book sales and on a very small but essential budget allocation from its university.

What is clear from the report is that the administration does not think the press has achieved the same excellence as the university: “While the relationship between Stanford and its Press has some elements of *the most successful presses*, both the University and the Press have failed systematically to aspire to, and reach, this standard” (emphasis my own). Or later: “Yet, reaching the goal of a press that is equal to the status of Stanford University has been difficult.”

Perhaps typical of the contemporary university, the report expresses this goal of excellence in quantifiable terms: book sales, number of units published, use metrics and impact factors. The logic of the report is that scholarly books that sell well must be better books and that Stanford’s press just doesn’t publish enough of those.

Most remarkable about the report, however, is the committee’s preoccupation with the press’s status compared with its elite peers. The committee relied on a research assistant to search webpages of other academic presses to calculate the percentage of authors from elite institutions, although the exact methodology of this research isn’t described. They assumed that faculty at “the top 10 or 20 universities” must write better books, which presumably would sell better. The committee also admonishes the press to publish more senior faculty and fewer books by new scholars. The assumption, again, is that these will sell better, and, if not, at least bring luster to the operation. This ignores a core mission of a university -- to foster, assess and support the work of junior scholars. Further, it ignores a truth that every editor knows: that that excellent work comes from scholars in every corner of higher education regardless of faculty rank or institutional ranking.

This status obsession runs throughout higher education. In one sense, universities and their diplomas are Veblen goods -- luxury products whose demand increases as their prices go up. (How else does one understand the Varsity Blues admissions scandal?) Because of this, universities are fiercely protective of their place in the rankings. Anything that detracts from that perceived status must be dealt with, including a university press.

The Stanford report says nothing about the books the press publishes, the recognition these books receive in the form of awards and citations, the

noteworthy titles and authors the press has championed, nor the press's stature and reputation in the fields in which it publishes. These are the real markers of prestige and status in a knowledge economy. Did the committee talk with any scholars in the fields the press is so well-known in to gauge the quality of the press or its books? If not, this seems like an easy stone to overturn.

Sadly, the committee's recommendations are what you might expect from a modern bureaucracy: change the reporting structure, benchmark performance, establish not one but two boards to oversee the press, do some strategic planning, submit annual reports, fundraise, maybe even publish fewer scholarly books. These are not bad ideas on their own, but they further burden the staff with work that will not lead to publishing better books, and collectively they miss the point of scholarly publishing.

University presses are an integral part of the scholarly ecosystem, a system imperiled in this current climate. There was a time when the system mostly worked. To oversimplify: universities subsidized their libraries sufficiently to fill their shelves with books and journals. Those sales helped support university presses, who published the work of scholars. Being published by a university press gave scholars a credential the university could use as a measure of quality in awarding tenure and promotion. All of that worked when there was enough capital in the system to facilitate that flow between university, library and scholar. The result was a rich body of scholarship across the humanities, social sciences and even the sciences.

So much has frayed in that system -- and the report is silent on this, too -- libraries, with budgets strained by pricing by science journals, became more efficient in tracking usage and sharing resources. They pulled back from book purchasing. With lower sales, university presses trimmed their monograph programs and exited entire fields of study -- solutions the Stanford report recommends exploring -- and shifted to more robust trade or professional publishing programs. For faculty, already threatened with positions shifting from tenure track to contingent, publishing a book became an even harder at the very time it became essential for entry into a faculty position. The Stanford report's solution is to demand that university press book programs be self-

supporting. In light of the current situation in higher education, this just seems like passing the buck (or not passing the buck, as it were).

Lost in the recommendations for how to fix the Stanford situation is any recognition that university presses have continued to innovate their way out of this. University presses publish books that extend the reach of scholars beyond the gates of their universities. Yes, they produce field-specific monographs, but they also publish deeply thoughtful books that inform the human condition, solve problems and extend knowledge far and wide. Stanford University Press is no exception.

Stanford has a great university press. It's not clear the Stanford committee believes this. If they're committed to making it even better, then they should invest in the press, help it innovate and support it in building an endowment. This financial and moral support will enable the press to continue to publish the books that reflect the brand identity of Stanford University and to realize the scale that can make its operations sustainable, now and in the future.

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[2] <https://provost.stanford.edu/2019/10/31/report-on-the-stanford-university-press/>

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