

Failure to support presses is a betrayal of the academic mission

Stanford University's insistence that its press break even is another bleak milestone in corporatisation, says David Palumbo-Liu

May 15, 2019



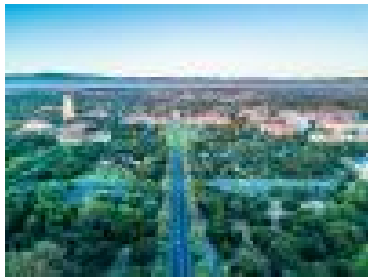
By [David Palumbo-Liu](#) ([/author/david-palumbo-liu](#))

Twitter: [@palumboliu](#) (<http://www.twitter.com/palumboliu>)



As federal and state funding for US higher education has shrunk and colleges scramble to find other revenue streams, there has been persistent talk of the “corporate university”. Stanford University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/stanford-university>)’s recent announcement of a dramatic reduction to its financial support for its in-house press indicates that the transformation may soon be complete – and the corporate university will have turned into just another corporation.

Stanford University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/stanford-university>) Press is one of the oldest and most illustrious presses in the US. It published its first book in 1892, just a year after Stanford was founded. Since then, of course, the university’s wealth has risen astronomically – its current endowment is the third largest in the US, valued in 2018 at \$26.5 billion (£20 billion). Yet Stanford is saying that it cannot afford to support the press to the tune of \$1.7 million dollars a year, a minuscule slice (less than 0.03 per cent) of the institutional budget. It says the press should cover its own costs.



Stanford University Press gets funding reprieve after protests (</news/stanford-university-press-gets-funding-relieve-after-protests>)

(</news/stanford-university-press-gets-funding-relieve-after-protests>)

READ MORE (</NEWS/STANFORD-UNIVERSITY-PRESS-GETS-FUNDING-RELIEVE-AFTER-PROTESTS>)

Only after tremendous public outrage has the university granted a stay of execution. But it still wants the press to downsize to a point where it won’t require any subsidy. This notion is shortsighted and dangerous. It is like reducing a person’s calorific intake to below 900 calories a day in order to lose weight. They will live on, but not for long; the only consolation is that they will be a very slim-looking corpse.

All this talk of downsizing or elimination assumes that the mission of a university press is distinct from that of the university itself. Nothing could be further from the truth. University presses are not meant to produce top-sellers and reap profits. They are meant to disseminate – at affordable

cost to readers – the important ideas and knowledge created in the university. They are, thus, an integral part of the mission of an institution of higher learning, working – alongside our lectures and classes – to give the lie to the stereotype that academics are aloof elites.

One would think that a wealthy university like Stanford would pour money into such an important bridge to the public. By choosing to destroy that bridge, it is sending a terrible message to every other university in the world: that presses are unimportant, peripheral undertakings and can be amputated without any pain to the university.

But can't the public just get the information they need from the internet these days? Actually, no. And this point cuts to the heart of not only education but also a free society.

The modern world is awash with false statements that pass themselves off as true. The political attacks on the media are in essence attacks on the idea of facts, since journalistic ethics demand fact-checking. In the academy, university presses perform the same function. Academic books are rigorously vetted for authenticity and soundness of judgement because that is of a piece with the ethics of education.

Where, if not to university presses, is everyone from policymakers to schoolchildren to turn for reliable and unbiased information on crucial issues such as climate change and poverty, history and politics, culture and the arts? Plainly put, to destroy university presses is to further erode the public's access to truth.

If we allow the market to determine whether we have academic presses, the academy is gone. Presses will publish only profitable books, graduate students will write only profitable dissertations, and tenure will be awarded based only on profitable scholarship. Requiring a university press to become financially solvent is a direct attack on academic freedom and free enquiry. Such reasoning binds us to the trendy rather than the truth.

Any university administration or board that proposes or acquiesces to the dismantling of a university press has reneged on its fiduciary pledge to protect and nurture the university's mission to educate its students and the broader public.

If university presses go, you can eliminate the word "ideas" from "marketplace of ideas", at the same time as you erase the word "university" from "corporate university". The loss will be felt by everyone – just at a time when we need free, well-funded university presses more than ever.

David Palumbo-Liu is the Louise Hewlett Nixon professor and professor of comparative literature at (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/stanford-university>)Stanford University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/stanford-university>).