

## Samuel Cohen

# On Value

In the days after [news](#) broke of the decision by Provost and Oedipa Maas school chum Persis Drell to not renew the subsidy for Stanford University Press, those who value SUP and university press publishing responded by writing on social media, signing petitions, and muttering to themselves in their cars. The decision was [apparently](#) sort of reversed this afternoon. An unintended consequence: the event provided an occasion to examine the differences between the ways people think of university presses.



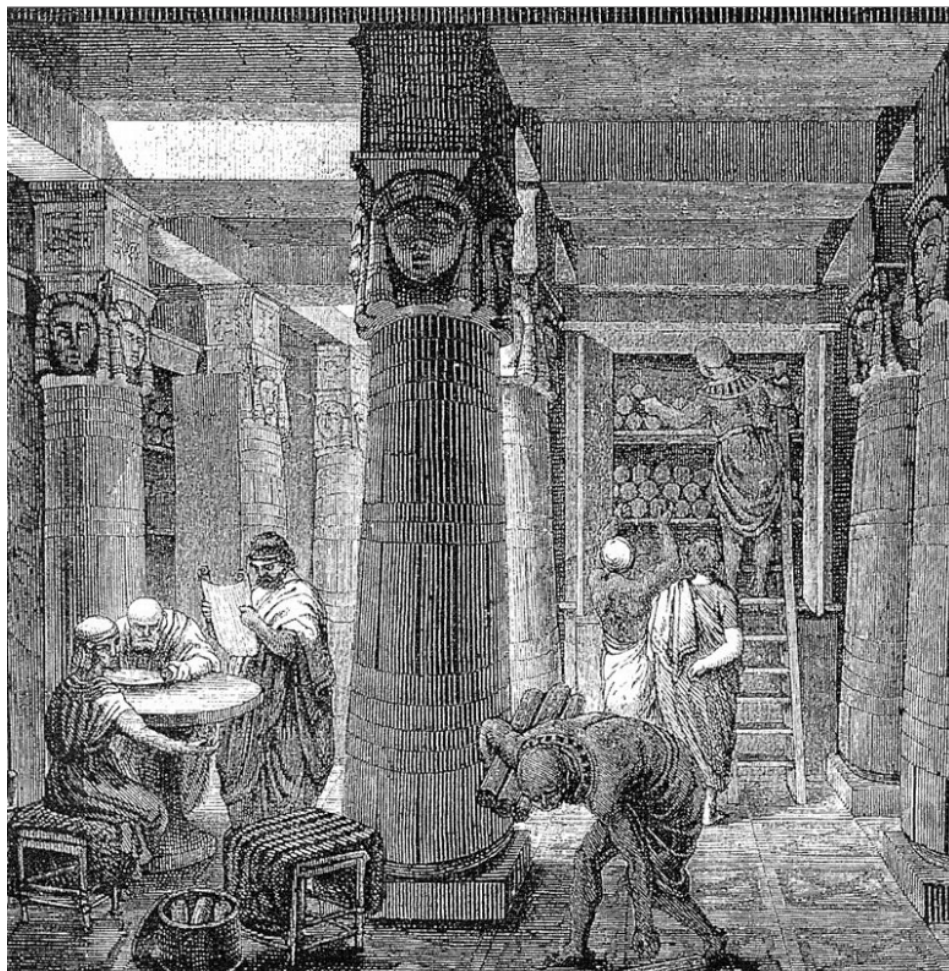
Remedios Varo, “Bordando el Manto Terrestre”

Many people wrote about the importance of university presses to higher learning, so obvious to them but seemingly forgotten or never learned by so many of the people who control the purse strings. But while this message—that the value of university scholarly publishing lies not in its ability to turn a profit or even stay afloat but rather in its ability to enable the creation and sharing of knowledge—was the dominant note in criticisms of the provost’s decision, a few commenters sang a different tune. It’s not that there were (reasonable) people saying Good, shut that thing down; it’s that there were people saying this regrettable situation could be avoided if these presses would just straighten up and make enough money to not require subsidies, the implication being that those who are upset that a university as prestigious and well-endowed as Stanford could decide to no longer fund its press are being emotional rather than realistic.



As Joe Esposito wrote over at [The Scholarly Kitchen](#), “The unfortunate truth is that indignation is not a business strategy.” The rest of Esposito’s argument is two-pronged: university presses need to make enough money to be self-sustaining, and they need to make themselves indispensable by tying themselves to other units, departments, &c., that are priorities for those who draw up the budgets. The title of Esposito’s essay—“Where Does a University Press Sit in its Parent’s Priorities?”—is worth noting here. While I get that

“parent institution” is a term of art, with repetition, the metaphorical weight is hard to ignore: “When university presses work on their strategic plans, that is what they have to do: ask first how to become more important to the parent, and then ask how to become financially independent of the parent.” There’s practical wisdom here, but the underlying assumption is that the university is right to cut you off if you’re still living at home and if it loves your sister more.



O. Von Corven, “The Great Library of Alexandria”

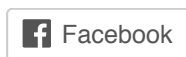
Taking about all of this yesterday, a colleague drew an analogy to the ancient world, where the great libraries were a point of pride for their cities. The libraries required huge investment, of course, but the advances in knowledge made by the scholars attracted to them (knowledge sometimes useful to the rulers who built them) and the prestige accrued were considered to be of great value. The idea that knowledge might be useful for governing might seem quaint these days, and it seems harder than ever in administration buildings to get

non-economic forms of value recognized, but the administrators who run our universities need to be shown that they should see university presses as Ptolemy saw the library in Alexandria: as things of value whose ROI has to be measured differently.

(Also, I learned yesterday that the Great Library of Alexandria was stocked with originals seized from ships that came into port, copied, and kept, the copies given back instead, and I'm now wondering if there's the seed of a business model there.)

It's excellent news that Stanford's provost has at least temporarily reversed herself. It also would be good if the episode reminded people that there are other ways to think about the relationship between universities and their presses than the parental and that presses aren't at fault if they're not profitable. One thing I'm learning about from [writing](#) about the history of university presses is the impressive variety of ways they have tried to reach profitability, move closer to being self-sustaining, or lessen the degree to which they rely on funding from their university or outside benefactors. But it would be good for everyone to remember that university presses exist historically because trade houses wouldn't and couldn't publish monographs, and they still won't. Presses have found many ways to stay afloat, but the core mission of spreading knowledge, without regard to profit, is supposed to be the university's mission too.

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## One thought on “On Value”

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May 1, 2019 at 9:39 am

But now the university’s mission is to make money. The students are the ones most aware of this, as they are in a position to see many signs yet have not said to themselves as often as we have that the mission is something else. We, of course, see even more signs that the mission is just to make money, and it concerns me that we have not even been able to hide this from the students — or perhaps do not care to even try to say education comes first.

