

Statement by Stanford Graduate Students in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Read by Jason Beckman at Stanford Faculty Senate on June 13th, 2019

Thank you for this opportunity to make a brief, but very urgent statement on behalf of graduate students in the humanities and social sciences. It is addressed in particular to our university trustees, regarding the recent funding decisions on the Stanford University Press.

As graduate students, we view Stanford University Press as linked to our futures as scholars, both practically as a viable publication channel for our own scholarly work—and symbolically, as aligned with the values and knowledge we hope to create and disseminate. A group of us spoke with Provost Drell during office hours on May 2, about how to interpret the standing of the humanities and social sciences at Stanford in the wake of her decision to effectively defund the press. In response, Provost Drell opined on the two types of degrees that she believes will serve our society going forward. First, social science degrees buttressed by data proficiency and computer science skills, and second, humanities degrees, which are the “best equipped” to deal with posthuman concerns in a world of proliferating robotics and artificial intelligence.

Far from assuaging our concerns, such a response only reaffirmed that this institution does indeed marginalize the humanities and social sciences—which seem to have value only insofar as they support STEM fields. A university that stands behind and supports all of its scholars and students, and that values scholarship itself, should not position itself as openly hostile or indifferent to certain kinds of scholarship. We find that bias clearly manifest in the Provost’s initial decision to decline the budget request from SUP, a decision that would devastate the press. We do not feel it is up to administrators to decide on what is worth publishing and what is not, and vagaries of financial sustainability threaten to warp the press’s academic mission. What Stanford University Press, only one year younger in existence than the university itself, and what the scholars at this university—from graduate students to tenured professors—deserve, is a university administration that acts in support of all its faculty and students regardless of their disciplinary orientation and intellectual profile. It deserves leadership that aligns itself with the values of its own academic community in all its diversity and richness, that has the courage to set parameters of success that reflect the true bottom line of our work here: new knowledge of immeasurable value.

Conversely, this decision by Provost Drell has had immediate and negative impacts on our morale, mental well-being, and our perception of our standing at this institution. Precious hours that we might have spent working on our research and writing dissertations have been diverted to worrying about our future prospects and doubting our worth as members of this university. The message that the administration sends through its hostility to SUP undermines any effort it has taken to improve graduate student mental well-being, by weakening our sense of purpose and diminishing the value of the work that we pursue passionately and tirelessly. Do not threaten to impoverish our futures while making overtures of support for our mental health. We see the repeated attempts by the provost and deans to weigh funding for graduate students against funding for the press and categorically reject this logic as a false choice. Make no mistake that we stand firmly with our faculty advisors and the press on this issue, and will not be used as rhetorical human shields for the administration’s myopic stance towards the Press and academic publishing. If this university did in fact value our mental health and well-being, it would consult us in good faith as actual stakeholders on major issues that may profoundly affect the academic fields in which we hope to establish careers.

We, alongside many members of the Stanford faculty, wholeheartedly believe that actions to shutter the SUP will have wide-ranging consequences for our futures as academics and for entire fields across the humanities and social sciences. Lip service to the value of the humanities and social sciences is simply insufficient; the only adequate response to these concerns is substantial action to ensure the continued operation of the press for its next 100 years. The humanities and social science graduate students of Stanford therefore challenge the University President, Provost, and trustees to exhibit true courage and leadership, to heed the recommendations of the faculty resolution in seeking external review and taking the necessary steps to ensure the Press’s future. Thank you.