Di Leo continued on page 33
By 2010, it was determined that there would be no way to recover even the minimal cost of operations. Combine this with slow sales and a fiscal crisis—and the result is a failed experiment.

Rice shut down its all-digital press in the fall of 2010.

However, the decision was not without its detractors.

One of the board members—who wished to remain anonymous—commented that new models of academic publishing are not going to be derived from a sales model. “We’re moving to a different era of scholarly communication where it’s more accessible to more people, and where we don’t have to worry about commercial viability,” said the anonymous board member. Humanities publishing is being killed by placing emphasis on commercial viability—“there is no commercial viability,” added the board member.

No matter what the form and how diligent the work, a university press requires resources. Just as it takes resources to run a successful athletic program, so too does it take an investment to run a university press.

What does it mean when a university press fails?

And comparatively speaking, the costs are negligible: an editor makes less at Mizzou than an athletic trainer, and even the assistant baseball coaches make more than the press director.

Perhaps the solution is not to compare athletic salaries to press salaries but to treat university presses on the same level as athletic programs. Both are auxiliary operations subsidized by the university, and both play an important role in higher education.

Perhaps we need to measure the scholarly impact of the books published by the press in the same way we measure the impact of the gymnastics or baseball team winning a game or their division. Or think of the cultural capital and prestige generated by the press as akin to the bowl victories or NCAA titles.

And just as we don’t scrap athletics if one of our teams loses games or money, we shouldn’t scrap university presses if they don’t generate enough revenue to cover their operation.

While it may not be the most popular decision for the University of California Press to take one type of book off of their list, if it makes their press more viable in some way, it is akin to downsizing or closing down a sport to make an athletics program stronger.

Think of the $200,000 invested by Rice or the $400,000 at Mizzou as the cost of being a strong university—a cost that in the big picture is most likely a fraction of the cost of one athletic coach.

What does it mean when a university press fails?

It means not that its authors are not successful or that its press was not run well. Rather it means that its university has abandoned part of its scholarly mission: namely, supporting the publication of books that are the lifeblood of its faculty—and academia itself.