

Improving Access with Open-Access Publishing Funds

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An open-access (OA) fund is a pool of money set aside by an institution or other research-sponsoring entity to support publication models that enable free, immediate, online distribution of, and access to, scholarly research. In late 2009, OA funds gained prominence when a number of high-profile institutions signed the Compact for Open-Access Publishing Equity (COPE). COPE encouraged universities and research-funding agencies to develop “durable mechanisms for underwriting reasonable publication charges for articles written by its faculty and published in fee-based open-access journals.”¹ As of this writing, 10 North American universities are operating OA funds: University of Calgary; University of California, Berkeley; Columbia University; Cornell University; Harvard University; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; University of Oregon; University of Tennessee; Wake Forest University; and University of Wisconsin–Madison.

There are a number of reasons an institution might consider launching an open-access fund. Each year a smaller percentage of all scholarly publications is available to researchers because of increasing subscription prices and decreasing library budgets, even though the production and quantity of scholarly information is growing exponentially. Faculty members traditionally give away their copyrighted work to publishers and the academy often buys back the content at premium prices. OA funds can potentially improve access to research and accelerate the online availability of peer-reviewed scientific and scholarly journal articles.

According to the institutions that have established open-access funds, the funds’ activities are consistent with a trend toward support of a wide array of OA initiatives in which faculty are increasingly interested. Faculty members are regularly exercising their stake in ensuring both the speed and the reach of research dissemination, by publishing in OA journals, depositing in OA repositories, retaining their copyrights, and pursuing campus-wide policies for OA to institutional research outputs.² The creation of an open-access fund offers

support to faculty members poised to publish in OA journals, and establishes a dialogue between an institution and its authors to better assess their specific interests and concerns, and to direct financial resources appropriately.

SPARC has recently taken a number of visible steps to support further exploration of the open-access fund model. These activities include compiling data from every North American university with a fund and rendering those data accessible for further analysis; creating a practical guide for institutions evaluating the implementation of an OA fund; and publishing an online clearinghouse that includes frequently asked questions, case studies, links to further reading, and a variety of other tools to facilitate greater understanding and evaluation of open-access funds.³

In the event that an institution decides to pursue an open-access fund, SPARC recommends taking a close look at the experiences of other institutions that have already proceeded down this path. It was in this spirit that SPARC created “Campus-Based Open-Access Publishing Funds: A Practical Guide to Design and Implementation,” which is freely available under Creative Commons license.⁴ The issues involved in the creation and management of an open-access fund can be complex. For example, look no further than funding. From where is the money going to come? Will the library support the project out of its general fund? Can dedicated gifts be raised? Will other campus units (e.g., the Office of Research, individual departments) contribute, and, if so, what are their interests and expectations? Another issue is eligibility, both in terms of who within the institution has access to the funds and the types of publications that should be covered. What author charges should the fund cover? Should hybrid journals with open-choice plans be included? Can a journal place any restrictions on article accessibility? Who within the institution will be eligible? Are there any caps on how much the fund will cover per article, per author, or per year? While there may not be a “right” answer to these questions, it is in the best interest of institutions contemplating the creation of an open-access fund to have a full understanding of the range of issues they must address.

Different institutions are experimenting with different implementations based on a variety of issues—motivation behind the fund, amount of money available, faculty understanding of OA issues, and so forth. SPARC is sharing these experiences in both quantitative and qualitative ways via its open-access fund resource page. From a quantitative perspective, the nine North American institutions with active funds as of this writing provided a wealth of data about

the number of articles approved, the number of authors who have used the fund, the number of unique journals in which these articles have been published, and so forth. These data, which SPARC intends to update regularly, are available online as a chart of “Open-Access Funds in Action.”⁵ This chart also contains a wealth of information about the policies and procedures associated with each institution’s fund implementation. Qualitatively, representatives from each of these institutions generously provided insights into their experiences and the lessons they have learned to date. This input informs many of the resources found on the SPARC open-access fund site, including the questions that key actors (administrators, authors, and publishers) typically raise about open-access funds. For a complete list of frequently asked questions, please visit the SPARC Web site.⁶

Open-access funds are a topic of much discussion within the scholarly communication community. The time is right for analysis and investigation of the use of these funds as a potentially valuable tool in expanding access to information. This suite of resources developed by SPARC will facilitate that effort.

¹ For more on the Compact for Open-Access Publishing Equity, see <http://www.oacompany.org/>.

² For more information, see the SPARC Web site <http://www.arl.org/sparc/advocacy/campus/>.

³ Resources about open-access funds are available at <http://www.arl.org/sparc/openaccess/funds/index.shtml>.

⁴ “Campus-Based Open-Access Publishing Funds: A Practical Guide to Design and Implementation,” <http://www.arl.org/sparc/openaccess/funds/guide.shtml>.

⁵ “Open-Access Funds in Action,” <http://www.arl.org/sparc/bm~doc/fundsinaction.pdf>.

⁶ Frequently asked questions about open-access funds, <http://www.arl.org/sparc/openaccess/funds/faq.shtml>.

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