

SPEC Kit 353

Funding Article Processing Charges November 2016

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ISBN 1-59407-965-X / 978-1-59407-965-8 print
ISBN 1-59407-966-8 / 978-1-59407-966-5 online

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Survey Results

Executive Summary

Introduction

Libraries and institutions that fund article processing charges (APCs) subsidize authors who publish scholarly articles in open access (OA) journals that require per-article payment.¹ Funding APCs removes barriers to open publishing practices and promotes the value of OA to scholarship, research, and creative output. APC funds align the investment with the core mission and values of libraries. Libraries that offer such programs aspire to provide leadership in promoting the value of OA and proliferating OA practices among academic authors.

When conceptualizing these and other programs, libraries often look to their peer and aspirational institutions, including signatories of the Compact for Open-Access Publishing Equity (COPE) Initiative <http://www.oacompact.org/>, members of the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) <http://sparcopen.org/open-access/>, and members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). The purpose of this survey was to explore the strategies that ARL member institutions are using to address APCs—including how the funds are established and how they are handled (e.g., policies, applications, budgets, administration, outreach activities, etc.), sources of funding, and whether and under what circumstances libraries are partnering with other units (or other libraries) to fund this aspect of open access—and gather related policies and procedures. We asked libraries if their institution had a fund that subsidized APCs, but our focus was on the library's role in the process. We did not attempt to find out about APC funding outside the library, such as grant funding or departmental support.

Overview

The survey was distributed to the 124 ARL member libraries in July 2016. Seventy-seven (62%) responded by the August 1 deadline. Twenty-three of the responding libraries (30%) currently have a fund and six are planning to start one in the near future (8%). Fourteen used to have a fund and 34 have no plans for a fund. The 2012 SPEC survey on scholarly communication services asked a similar question about whether the library administered an open access publishing fund.² Forty-five libraries responded to both surveys. A comparison of their responses in 2012 and 2016 shows movement in both directions. In 2012, 14 of those 45 respondents answered yes. In 2016, seven of them have an APC fund and seven no longer have a fund. Of the 31 respondents whose institutions did not offer a fund in 2012, seven now have an APC fund and two are planning a fund, three used to have a fund, and 19 still have no plans for one.

The addition of nine new respondents who have an APC fund shows a slight increase in the number of libraries that support OA publishing. And while SPARC's surveys of North American institutions also show an increase in the number of funds from nine in 2009 to 51 in 2014,³ it is

noteworthy that the majority of respondents to this survey have either discontinued an APC fund (18%) or have no plans to implement one (44%). The number of APC-supporting institutional funds can also be counted on the Open Access Directory or the websites of OA journals that list funds as a service to authors. For example, Springer Nature lists 69 institutional funds in North America (55 in the U.S. and 14 in Canada; <http://www.nature.com/openresearch/funding/>).

Of the 36 libraries that currently have or formerly had an APC fund, a majority (58%) began with a pilot project. Pilots ran from four months to four years with two years being the most common timeframe. The earliest APC fund began in 2005 and the most recently established fund is less than one year old. Twenty-nine of these funds (81%) were started within the last six years.

An overwhelming majority of respondents (31 or 86%) collect or archive the articles they fund for the institutional repository (typically a requirement of receiving funding). From respondents' comments, it appears that library staff usually follow up to make sure articles are deposited.

Financing APCs

Despite the fact that APC funds have existed for over ten years, libraries struggle to determine appropriate funding models or are still evaluating whether to even establish such a fund. Of the 36 libraries with an existing or discontinued fund, all but one contributed money from the library budget. Over half of these libraries also received some external funding, typically from the provost or research office. Two libraries used gift money to start their funds, and two received seed money from their consortia. In 2014, a global survey of libraries found that 70% were drawing funds from their materials budget, while 24% had some external funding to support APCs.⁴

We asked respondents for their FY16 fund allocation (in USD). For discontinued funds, they reported the allocation for the last fiscal year the fund was in operation. Allocations vary widely—from \$15,000 to over \$260,000. The median fund is \$40,000. Half the libraries responded that funding levels for FY16 are about the same as the previous year. Most libraries with an existing fund have allocated about the same amount for FY17. However, one library increased its allocation by 57%, and one decreased its by 50% due to lack of support from campus partners. None of the reporting libraries are adding staff to handle any increases in APC funding requests. Four libraries submitted position descriptions and half of those specifically mention that a scholarly communication librarian is responsible for managing the OA fund, among other duties.

Respondents reported receiving requests to fund APCs as low as \$74 and as high as \$5200. The libraries did not necessarily cover the entire amount for higher fees, however. The two libraries that reported the highest APCs have a per-article funding cap well below that amount. No library paid more than \$3000 per APC; authors had to make up the balance from other funds. The annual limit on reimbursement to individual authors ranges from \$1000 to \$5000, though all but two of the 27 responding libraries set the cap at \$3000 or less (nine have a cap of \$2000 or less).

Twenty-seven respondents (90%) reported that requests to fund APCs are sometimes denied, most often due to policies or practices that exclude hybrid OA journals or because authors have other sources of funding. Other reasons for denying requests included the article being accepted by what the funding authority deemed to be a “substandard” journal, lack of funds, or because co-authors were at other institutions.

Providing adequate funding for APCs is the biggest challenge for most libraries. Lack of financial resources drove numerous policy changes, including discontinuing the APC fund. A plethora of requests caused 49% of the surveyed institutions to reduce funding for authors, either by reducing the amount paid per article, placing a cap on individual reimbursement, or both. In other cases, funds no longer accepted applications for hybrid journal APCs.

Articles in the sciences have received most of the funding. Half of the commenting libraries specified funding articles in the medical and health sciences fields and 20% specified the life sciences. Funding for social science and arts and humanities articles were mentioned by 30%.

Hybrid OA Journals

Requests for APCs for hybrid journals are not funded at 27 of the reporting libraries (84%) for a variety of reasons. Most frequently (53%) institutions consider paying APCs for articles published in hybrid journals to be “double dipping.” This refers to the institution paying APCs in addition to the full subscription price of the journals. Institutions that fund OA articles in hybrid journals expect sufficient evidence that publishers are actually reducing subscription costs as a result of receiving APCs. Comments revealed that institutions would like the publishers to be more transparent about lowering subscription fees in proportion to the APC received. The percentage of libraries not funding articles in hybrid journals is significantly higher than the approximately 50% rates found in previous studies.⁵

Other reasons for not funding hybrid journals include limited funding and “to incentivize publishing in, and support for, full OA journals.” However, one institution reported that “as part of a special promotion to attract more authors from the humanities, we will pay hybrid journal APCs for authors affiliated with the College of Arts & Humanities.” Institutions that fund APCs in hybrid OA journals do so because they want “to provide as much support as possible to authors publishing in OA journals,” though some do so with a reduced per-article cap.

The most significant advantage of funding hybrid APCs is that it greatly expands the author’s choice of publishing venue, roughly doubling the number of journals in which to publish OA.⁶ There have also been hopes that the hybrid model would help journals transition to full OA. Although some journals have made this transition, we are not aware of evidence showing that this is occurring at a significant scale. Respondents were primarily concerned with the issue of subscription offsetting, or “double dipping,” though hybrid OA suffers from other disadvantages such as higher APCs.⁷ Libraries with a subscription to a hybrid journal expect a direct offset (a credit against the subscription cost), and libraries without a subscription expect a global offset, benefiting all subscribers.⁸ However, these processes lack transparency, and a study of 24 major publishers found that their “no double-dipping” statements were not borne out in reality.⁹ Also, hybrid OA articles sometimes lack a metadata signal showing their access status, so discovery can still be a problem.

Policies and Procedures

Authors almost always apply to the library for APC funding; this stands to reason as the library usually administers the fund and controls the budget. Nearly all respondents (28 or 85%) indicated that they pay the invoices for APCs, however more than half of the libraries require or encourage the author(s) or their departments to pay the invoice before being reimbursed by the library. About one-third directly pay invoices through credit cards or checks. Only six institutions have deposit accounts and two mentioned wire transfers.

Requests for funds are evaluated on a variety of additional criteria. More than two-thirds of the respondents reported denying funding for articles submitted to journals that are not peer-reviewed or not listed in an OA registry like the Directory of Open Access Repositories. In addition, libraries expect funded publishers to adhere to an established code of conduct such as is required for membership in the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA).

Six of 20 respondents (30%) reported that they consider “Beall’s List” (i.e., the formally named Scholarly Open Access blog subtitled “Potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers” at <https://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/>) when evaluating publications for APC funding. Only

one considered the journal impact factor, and another had the author's department chair vet the journals. The request-for-funds forms typically ask whether the authors have other funds available.

While 20 out of 33 libraries responded that all members of their community are eligible to receive funding, comments from some of them reveal that they actually do allow all faculty, staff, and enrolled students to apply. Ten libraries explicitly exclude undergraduate student authors, although one library commented that they probably would consider proposals from undergraduate students. At one institution undergraduate authors must submit a letter of support from their faculty advisors. Some institutions have informal criteria, including "staff assessment of the merit and need of the particular researcher." At another "postdocs and assistant professors were more likely to receive funding than full professors."

Among those institutions that do not distribute or prorate APC awards among multiple authors, two extremes exist. At one extreme, every author from one institution on a multi-authored article is considered fully funded, which discourages collaborations. At the other extreme, every article is considered for funding as if it had only one author. The lack of cost sharing has been noted in the literature, since the primary author typically covers publication costs.¹⁰ Sharing costs with funders, or with other institutions on co-authored papers, would reduce the financial pressure on funds. However, in one study librarians thought such a process would be too inefficient.¹¹

We did not ask about an annual limit on the number of articles an author could get funded. However, comments for the funding caps question indicated that 78% of libraries limited authors to one article per year. Survey comments reveal that some funds discourage authors from applying for APC support more than once, and other libraries evaluate each APC request on its own merit. The literature shows that two funds use a point system to determine or prioritize fund recipients.¹²

Fifteen libraries submitted their APC request forms. All of them ask for the name of the person requesting the funds and that person's email address. The only other common element is the journal title, though 14 ask for the article title. Twelve ask about the status or classification of the author and about co-authors, department affiliations, and whether other funds are available. Twelve also ask about the status of the article, with seven asking if the article has been accepted and six asking about the expected date of publication. Eleven ask the amount of funds being requested and ten ask for the publisher, with only five asking for a link to the OA policies.

Procedures for managing OA funds are highly variable and dependent on internal administrative processes. Policies may fluctuate according to the levels of funding that are available.

Libraries That Do Not Support APCs

The majority of responding libraries (62%) have either discontinued their APC fund or have no plans to start one. The most common reason was lack of funding; many indicated they had exhausted available funds. Several libraries responded that continuing the APC fund was "unsustainable." We interpreted this to mean that funds were insufficient to keep up with the demand. Only four libraries stated that lack of author interest led them to discontinue the APC fund.

At least two libraries commented that they did not view supporting APCs as helping to promote a broader transition to OA initiatives. These comments were echoed by the libraries that have no plans to initiate a fund. Skepticism about how APCs advance the goal of OA was pervasive. According to one respondent, "APCs are not particularly a cost-effective or scalable mechanism for furthering open access." Another library that discontinued APC funding despite positive feedback from authors stated, "[s]ince the purpose of the Fund is to promote a broader transition to OA publishing ...the \$25,000 allocation could be spent more effectively on other initiatives, including memberships and pledges with innovative open access journal and monograph publishers, and library publishing cooperatives."

Another factor contributing to the absence of an APC fund might be lack of direct financial support from the institution's administration. Half of the 14 libraries who discontinued their funds had received supplementary funding to support APCs. Most frequently, this funding came from the provost or office of research. By contrast, a smaller percentage of libraries who have maintained their APC fund indicated receiving external funds specifically earmarked for APCs.

Promoting APC Funds

Promoting awareness of funds is primarily achieved through library liaisons, the library website, word of mouth, and related OA activities. Half the libraries with current APC funds hold events for Open Access Week. To a lesser extent, libraries use email lists, newsletters or flyers, blogs, workshops, outreach through university governance, and journal sites (such as the PLOS list of OA funds). About one-third of libraries formally recognize recipients of APC funds, typically through listings on library websites or documents such as annual or periodic reports. For some libraries, a distinct collection in the institutional repository suffices to recognize authors who receive APC support. APC funds can create awareness of the institutional repository for authors, some of whom subsequently submit non-funded articles.¹³ Given many libraries' comments about APC funds becoming unsustainable and having to impose funding limits, it may be that outreach and promotion resulted in an "excess of interest," which was noted as the cause of one fund's demise.

Fewer than half of the respondents share data from the fund openly. Of these, most provide this data on a website or in a blog, and about a quarter issue it in an annual report. Only one library shares the data in an online spreadsheet. Four comments indicated internal sharing or sharing "upon request." This is somewhat ironic as several libraries bemoaned the fact that publishers are not more transparent about their funding models.

Support for External Initiatives

We also wanted to know how libraries support OA initiatives outside of paying APCs. This includes memberships that support making books or journal articles open to the world, such as SCOAP3, Open Library of humanities, and Knowledge Unlatched. Fifty-eight libraries do provide support in this way, compared with 23 libraries that subsidize APCs. Memberships were the most common form of support (48 of 58 respondents). Three libraries mentioned HathiTrust as an example of support, "since it is OA after the fact." It is also notable that of the 48 libraries that either discontinued their APC fund or have no plans to start one, 32 support other OA initiatives such as the ones mentioned above.

Discussion

The significant growth in the number of APC-funded OA journals and hybrid journals has not been accompanied by a similar growth in the number of ARL libraries funding APCs. For example, between 2013 and 2016, Elsevier increased the number of its APC-funded OA journals from 46 to 550¹⁴, while APC fund growth has been much more gradual. Among existing funds, few support hybrid OA, and libraries with no APC fund or a discontinued fund exhibit significant skepticism of APCs as a sustainable model for funding OA.

There are numerous advantages to library or institutional APC funds. APCs are direct support for an institution's authors, whereas an institution may not have evidence of its authors publishing in a journal it subsidizes. This support is often met with gratitude by authors, and funding APCs expands the role of libraries within their institutions.¹⁵ Many libraries advocate for OA practices, and APC funds remove a barrier to authors for OA publishing. Choice of where to publish is sometimes considered an aspect of academic freedom, and can be part of the rationale for an APC fund.¹⁶ Because APCs are listed on journal sites for all to see, there is a degree of cost transparency that does not exist in the

subscription market. Practices such as caps on per-article funding are a price control with no equivalent in journal subscriptions.

However, the problems of APC funds are just as numerous. Perhaps the largest problem is that there is no easy way to transfer funding from journal subscription budgets, so APC funds become an additional cost to libraries or their institutions. A survey of Canadian libraries found that fluctuations in requests can make budgeting for APC funds difficult.¹⁷ There are also signs that APCs have continued the market concentration in scholarly journals, with one survey finding that 10 publishers received 92% of the APCs.¹⁸ For those funds that exclude grant-funded authors, grant support can be difficult to verify, and there can be problems when articles are accepted after grant funding has ended. Beyond institutional needs, there are wider concerns that APC costs cannot be met by researchers from developing countries or without an institutional affiliation, even though some journals have waiver policies.

One limitation of this survey is that it includes only ARL member institutions. Institutional OA funds for APCs exist around the world, and also include many medium and small North American institutions.¹⁹ A significant limitation of all surveys of central APC funds at institutions is that these funds likely cover only a minority of APCs paid on those campuses. One institution without an APC fund acknowledged this by commenting “...we believe that funding for APCs is going on but in a distributed way outside of library operations.” Evidence from the literature indicates that institutions only account for about a quarter of the APCs paid.²⁰ Research on APC spending is severely hampered because institutions lack comprehensive data on the APCs paid by their authors. Future research would be enabled if APC funds published open data on their expenditures, as institutions in Austria, Germany, and the United Kingdom already are.²¹ This action would improve decision-making and embody the data practices that many ARL libraries are communicating to their researchers. Future research on OA funds would also be aided by libraries with current or discontinued funds recording information on those respective wiki pages at the Open Access Directory.

This survey, as well as the existing literature, suggest numerous avenues for further research:

- How can libraries create budget flexibility to support both subscriptions and OA publishing, including APCs?
- What are author attitudes toward APC funds, and how do the funds affect the relevance of the library to the institution?
- What is the role of consortia in APC funding? Could APCs be included in negotiations with publishers? Could consortia support authors at institutions without a fund?
- Which departments on campus provide APC funding to their authors? What is the fund size and what are their policies?
- What are the outcomes when co-authors from other institutions are not supported? If the APC-based article is published, what source(s) covered the remaining cost?
- How can library or institutional APC funds be assessed? How is success measured? Could OA funds be measured as a percentage of collections budgets? Could the number of articles funded be measured as a percentage of an institution’s total article output?

Conclusion

Most ARL libraries support OA in a variety of ways and are bringing discussions about OA to the forefront not only through APC funds but also by funding external OA initiatives, hosting OA events, and holding conversations with faculty and researchers. Libraries are addressing the challenges of changing publishing models, but since the majority of respondents to this survey have either discontinued support for APCs, or have decided not to start, it is clear the community is not wholeheartedly convinced that paying for APCs is the best way to change the traditional business model.

While a minority of responding libraries (23, or 30%) currently have APC funds, and some of them are struggling with success and demand outweighing funding and/or administrative support, the number of funds appears to be stable or growing slowly. The growth rate does not match the expansion of the model among journals, or its popularity among authors, though. This is likely due to the difficulty of shifting funding from subscriptions to APCs.

Because the theories and practices are evolving rapidly, stakeholders are monitoring trends and opportunities. Where funds do exist, the release of detailed open APC data will enable further research. In addition, libraries will need to gather APC data comprehensively, since central APC funds likely account for a minority of APC spending at their institutions.

This SPEC Kit brings together information that will help institutions that are considering funding APCs, and it documents the current APC landscape in North American research libraries while focusing on one strategy that some ARL member institutions are using to address OA journal funding. With this survey data and analysis, ARL and its members can better understand their place in the evolving arena of OA, review strategies that foster public access to peer-reviewed scholarship, and consider how these activities are transforming the university policies and practices. The survey data document current policies and practices and how they serve the larger academic communities. The data and analysis contribute to understanding the range of considerations for OA funding models. This investigation can also inform the development and assessment of models of scholarly communication and publishing. Finally, it will contribute to a better understanding of how OA funds address the expectations and needs of university communities and how such funds support the library's mission.

Endnotes

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