Improving Access with Open-Access Publishing Funds

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A n 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.

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. 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.” 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.

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.

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