Momentum for Open Access Research

When the Federal Public Research Access Act was proposed this year, scholarly society after scholarly society came out against the legislation, which would require federal agencies to publish their findings, online and free, within six months of their publication elsewhere. The future of academic research was at stake, the societies said, and both their journals and the peer review system could collapse if the legislation passed.

It is increasingly hard, however, to say that those societies reflect the views of academe on the issue. In July, the provosts of 25 research universities came out in favor of the legislation, saying that the current system of research publishing leads to outrageously high journal costs that are harming libraries and making it impossible for people to follow research. Now the presidents of 53 liberal arts colleges — at the behest of their librarians — are issuing a joint letter backing the legislation. And while it is unlikely that the bill will pass this year, the new letter that was released Tuesday is part of a broader effort by open access supporters to place higher education in a new position when the debate is renewed next year.

Nancy S. Dye, president of Oberlin College, where the new letter was organized, said that her interest was in part — but only in part — financial. “All liberal arts colleges are finding it more and more difficult to purchase the materials we need,” she said. But Dye stressed that there is also “a philosophical view” that is spreading: “Knowledge is made to be shared.” And while that may sound idealistic, Dye said there is another “underlying view” that makes sense to her and other presidents. “If this research is being done with federal money, it would only seem right that the people who are paying taxes have access to the research findings.”

In another sign of the shifting debate on open access, the American Chemical Society — a major journal publisher and a strong critic of the open access legislation — announced that it was creating an “author choice” program where authors for its journals could pay a fee to have their articles available online and free should the authors “wish or need” to do so.

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Society officials denied that this was an attempt to compromise, but said that the change was needed because of other shifts in journal publishing. Pushed by the National Institutes of Health, biology journals have been speedier to move toward open access than have chemistry journals, and with more chemistry work these days linked to biology, the move was seen as key to promoting healthy interaction between the disciplines. (The fees would range from $1,000 to $3,000 and would not be discussed until after an article had been accepted, to prevent financial incentives from entering into the peer review process.)

The letter from the liberal arts college presidents is straightforward. It says that their institutions can’t afford rising journal prices, that their faculties and students want more access to journals than the institutions can provide, and that liberal arts colleges play a key role in producing future Ph.D.’s, so their exposure to journals matters. Oberlin is among many liberal arts colleges with unusually high percentages of graduates who go on to earn doctorates.

“Adoption of the Federal Research Public Access Act will democratize access to research information funded by tax dollars,” the letter says. “It will benefit education, research, and the general public.”

Presidents signing the letter come from all over the country. Among them are the heads of Amherst, Barnard, Bowdoin, Coe, Dickinson, Franklin & Marshall, Kalamazoo, Lake Forest, Middlebury, Occidental, Reed, Rhodes, Vassar, Wabash and Whitman Colleges. They were organized by the Oberlin Group, an organization of the libraries of liberal arts colleges.

Ray English, director of libraries at Oberlin, said that the current system is “fundamentally unstable,” adding that “I’ve been looking at these issues for more than a decade now, and it’s clear that there are problems of access to research that are such that we need transformational strategies.”

Diane Graves, university librarian at Trinity University, in Texas, another of the institutions backing the letter, agreed. “The current model is broken so it’s time for new models. Staying with the status quo is unsustainable.”

Graves said that in five years in her position, her library has received “generous” overall budget increases from the university, but that they are never enough to keep up with journal inflation. Dozens of journals have been cut, and she is forced each year to go to each academic department to seek agreement on what to eliminate. What frustrates her the most, she said, is continuing to cut off access to information professors and students want — when the model being pushed by the legislation would provide that knowledge without increasing the college’s costs.

As for the scholarly societies, Graves said that she knew that they did valuable work, but questioned why that work needed to be subsidized by journals. “A lot of societies have relied on journals to fund other activities. But why should libraries at colleges — nonprofit entities within nonprofit entities — fund those activities? Shouldn’t members be funding those activities? We need to have this conversation.”

Barbara Allen, director of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation, which coordinated the letter from university provosts, said she was thrilled to see the liberal arts college presidents joining the effort. “I think administrators are starting to feel emboldened to speak out and to draw their faculty into the conversations,” she said.

Not everyone is happy about the stance that an increasing number of colleges are taking.
Allan Adler, vice president for legal and government affairs of the Association of American Publishers, charged that colleges are looking for short-term financial gain at the expense of journal publishers. “This is all very easy to explain,” he said of the push by liberal arts presidents. “They are looking to obtain for free what they now obtain through subscription. It’s very short-sighted.”

Adler said that the high quality of journals depends on peer review, and that there will not be money to support that under the open access legislation. And while Adler said he supported the right of the chemistry journals to try new models, he questioned where the fees would come from to support open access. He said that they would come from universities or research agencies — eating into research support.

Finally, he rejected the idea that taxpayer financed research should be open to the public, saying that it was in the national interest for it to be restricted to those who could pay subscription fees. “Remember — you’re talking about free online access to the world,” he said. “You are talking about making our competitive research available to foreign governments and corporations.”

Dean Smith, vice president for sales and marketing for the chemical society, also made it clear that while his group is moving a bit in the direction of open access, it doesn’t like the movement. He said that librarians are “being naive” if they think open access will be “a panacea for their budget problems.” He said that many publishers are working to minimize costs, and that it is tough for libraries to balance their budgets, but that they don’t realize how much they depend on peer review for quality control.

Smith acknowledged that some of his members favor open access, but he also said that many chemistry librarians share his skepticism of open access.

Supporters of open access rejected these criticisms. Allen of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation said that the publishers’ arguments were “speculative” and “alarmist,” and that her members didn’t want to destroy peer review. She said that they were committed to keeping peer review viable, and that all kinds of models could support it — once people stop trying to defend the current system at all costs.

And Dye of Oberlin scoffed at the idea that preserving the system was somehow linked to the national interest, noting that any journal available for a fee in the United States is hardly limited to American readership, and that such an approach is antithetical to science. “My goodness, publishers are international,” she said. “This whole business is international and the scientific research is international. I just don’t see any national interest that would be violated.”

— Scott Jaschik

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