Harvard's arts and science faculty votes to post research online – The Boston Globe

Arts, science staff to open 'closed . . . costly system'

By Megan Woolhouse
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Harvard University's arts and science faculty voted unanimously yesterday to post their scholarly articles and research online, where they would be available for free to the public, despite concerns that the move would affect the quality of research.

Hundreds of professors voted unanimously for the change at a faculty meeting that culminated several months of meetings debating the move.

While some say academic research should be widely available to people worldwide, academic journal officials said that bypassing their publications might hurt the peer review process.

Stuart Shieber, a computer science professor who sponsored the motion, said some journals are run like monopolies, charging exorbitant prices for subscriptions. He said the journal Brain Research, for example, charges $21,000 a year.

"This can be the first step in the process of increasing access to Harvard faculty's writings," Shieber said in a phone interview after the meeting. "That's really the goal. It isn't to reduce prices or put journals out of business."

Under the plan, Harvard officials will create an office and repository for professors' finished papers run by the university's library that would instantly make them available on the Internet. It would probably be called the Office for Scholarly Communication.

Academics often sign over the copyright to a journal before publication, and university libraries then buy back the work by subscribing to the publication. Under the new system, academics would retain copyright to their work, allowing the university to post it unless they opt out by filing a waiver. Faculty would then be allowed to publish their work in an academic journal.

Allan Adler, vice president for legal and governmental affairs at the Association of American Publishers, praised the opt-out provision, because it allows authors to continue to seek publication in prestigious journals.

But he expressed concern that the peer review process could be harmed.

Academics voluntarily, and usually at no cost, conduct peer review of work submitted to journals, which ensures a high quality of research. But many
journals have an editing staff that coordinates the process, and that staff needs to be paid, he said.

"This is a vendor-customer dispute over price," Adler said. "It doesn't surprise us that all libraries feel their budgets are far less than desirable, but that's a reality the educational community faces."

Harry Lewis, a computer science professor, said he supported the move because commercial publishers often require university libraries to buy bundled collections of journals at a steep cost. More importantly, he said, the vote is a win for the open-access movement, which seeks to make as much scientific and scholarly research publicly available as possible.

"Harvard is in a unique position to do the right thing in the academic world," he said. "In this case, I think others will be emboldened by Harvard to follow its lead, and the course of collective action will be greater than the course any individual school will take."

In an editorial in the Crimson, Harvard’s student newspaper, Robert Darnton, director of the university library, said the change represents an "opportunity to reshape the landscape of learning" and a "first step in freeing scholarship from the stranglehold of commercial publishers."

"The system would be collective, not coercive," he wrote. "The motion gives Harvard the possibility of setting an example that could spread. In place of a closed, privileged, and costly system, it will help open up the world of learning to everyone who wants to learn."